

**CRITICAL OPPOSITIONS: REALISM, POSTMODERNISM AND  
THE RECEPTION OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how, in terms of academic critical discussion, contemporary American realist writing has become an object of suspicion in the past thirty years or so: it argues that realism is frequently constructed, considered and read in the light of a binary structure which opposes it to the more fashionable postmodernism.

Chapter one argues that this tendency to conceptualize realism in opposition to another literary form has a long history in American literary criticism: by way of illustration, it revisits and samples debates about realism from two earlier moments. The first is the late nineteenth century, where realism was defined and evaluated against romance. The second is the early 1930s where I focus upon literary debates in Communist Party circles, examining how a re-popularized realism was defined and considered in opposition to more experimental forms of writing.

The next part of chapter one adopts a more consistently chronological approach and historicizes the critical opposition which I am most interested in--that between realism and postmodernism--from the sixties onwards, by mapping out some of the literary, theoretical, institutional, political and economic factors commensurate with realism's fading reputation and the construction and ascendancy of postmodernism. The chapter closes by making comparisons with the earlier debates, arguing that the current opposition, based greatly upon the homogenization of realism, has become particularly static, limiting the reading of contemporary realism to a striking degree.

In three of the following author based chapters--those on Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason and Robert Stone--I explore these limitations, summarizing the critical reception of the writer under question and identifying the ways in which it has been influenced by the opposition. I then offer alternative close readings, foregrounding their texts' overlooked sophistication. Chapter two concentrates on short stories by Raymond Carver, particularly "Neighbors" and "Preservation" and considers their negotiation of socio-economic issues; chapter three presents a close reading of Bobby Ann Mason's *Feather Crowns* (1993), highlighting the depth of the text's historical engagement whilst chapter five considers self-reflexivity in Robert Stone's *Outerbridge Reach* (1992). Chapter four proceeds along different lines, weighing up Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), which he packaged and promoted as a novel capable of leading American literature back to social realism. Here I am interested in how Wolfe *himself* receives and recycles the opposition, both in the novel and in the polemicizing which accompanied it. My reading of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* suggests that in contrast to the nuanced realism of Carver, Mason and Stone, the text actually corresponds with Wolfe's monochrome image of realism, and that far from, as he claims, eschewing ideological mediation in favour of a direct reflection of the truth, the text is saturated with distinctly neoconservative concerns and assumptions.



# **PREFACE**

This thesis began its life as an attempt to read a spread of contemporary American realist texts, initially those of Robert Stone and Raymond Carver, in a way which was attentive to their social and political resonances. From early on I was struck by the fact that expressing an interest in contemporary realism was likely to raise eyebrows in fashionable literary studies departments: the challenge, as I saw it, was to explore a rich formation of American writing which had been substantially overshadowed, at least in terms of academic critical attention, by postmodernism.

My research into the critical material available about these writers not only confirmed that they were strikingly under-researched--in contrast to a proliferation of articles and books about postmodernism--but revealed a number of patterns which characterised the work that had been done. Most noticeably, it tended to be conservative in its critical approaches, eschewing the theoretical developments of the last thirty years or so in favour of conventional reading strategies. As part of the same pattern, the realism under scrutiny was often welcomed as a return to the sanity of an earlier tradition after a period of mind-bending postmodern experimentation. And when this fiction did attract the attention of the more theoretically minded, here too the reception seemed to bear the imprint of the opposition between realism and postmodernism: the texts of Raymond Carver, for example, were screened for narrative devices usually associated with postmodernism and reclaimed from realism by the postmodern camp. Collectively, these patterns led me to become *as* interested in the oppositional structure shaping the debate (my own thinking included) as in the literary texts themselves.

In turn this led me to think more carefully about what lay behind those raised eyebrows--how and when the term realism had lost its radical associations and become an occasion for suspicion and also how these factors related to the term postmodernism, which seemed inextricably caught up in this process. Historicizing what lay behind the raised eyebrows took me back to the sixties where I began to trace the literary, theoretical, institutional, political and economic factors commensurate with realism's fading reputation and the construction and ascendancy of postmodernism. Carrying out this research took me back further still. It became obvious that whilst the sixties was the place to start in tracing the critical opposition between realism and postmodernism, the tendency to conceptualize realism in opposition to another literary form was rooted in a residual structure with a much longer history in American literary criticism. From the

earliest debates about American realism in the 1880s it was defined and considered in opposition to romance; during realism's revival in the 1930s it was juxtaposed with the forms of writing which we now call modernism.

The fruits of this research are presented in the first chapter of the thesis, which historicizes the current opposition between realism and postmodernism by revisiting the opening stage in debates about American realism, concentrating on the writing of two of its key players, William Dean Howells and Frank Norris. The section considers the force which this opposition exerts on their descriptions of their own fictions and in turn, upon their reading of a text by Stephen Crane. This section--little more than a snapshot--establishes a pattern of thinking about literary debates contextually--through and not in spite of their surrounding cultural and social contexts--and of thinking about how the terms in which the debates are conducted impact upon the reading of individual texts. The pattern is reproduced in the following section--another snapshot--which provides another example of realism being conceptualized through an oppositional structure. Here I sample debates about realism in Marxist circles in the early 1930s. The point of these sections is not to explore these moments exhaustively, but to illustrate that the current opposition has antecedents to which it can productively be compared. The final section of the first chapter adopts a more consistently chronological approach and historicizes the critical opposition which I am most interested in--that between realism and postmodernism--from the sixties onwards. To do this I consider the changes in American society through these years, paying special attention to the relationship between the American academy, postmodernism and the proliferation of theories which challenge literary realism. I then pressurize the opposition by making comparisons with earlier debates, arguing that whilst critical oppositions are liable to become static, failing to develop in synch with the literary trends they are designed to map out, the current opposition, based greatly upon the homogenization of realism, has become especially static, limiting the reading of contemporary realism to a striking degree.

The remaining four chapters of the thesis put further pressure on the opposition by exploring these limitations. The chapters each concentrate on the work of one contemporary American realist: Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason, Tom Wolfe and Robert Stone. The readings proceed with a double focus. On one hand I summarize the critical reception of the writer under question, identifying the ways in which it has been

influenced by the opposition between realism and postmodernism. On the other hand, I draw attention to contexts, questions, tensions, themes and narrative strategies which have been overlooked in these critical accounts. In the case of Carver, Mason and Stone in particular, I highlight the unsung sophistication of their textuality, arguing that all outstrip the limited constructions of realism which influence their reception. In the case of Tom Wolfe I argue that Wolfe's own fiercely pro-realist position, no less than his own self-proclaimed blueprint "realist" text, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987) actually recycles and reinforces the opposition, perpetuating a homogenized and simplified construction of realism.



# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **CRITICAL OPPOSITIONS**

## "THE TARADIDDLES OF THE HISTORICAL ROMANCERS AND THE FACTS OF THE ODIOS PRESENT":<sup>1</sup> REALISM AND ROMANCE AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY.

"A little while ago", wrote Frank Norris in 1903:

...the charge that we (Americans) did not read was probably true. But there must exist some mysterious fundamental connection between this recent sudden expansion of things American--geographic, commercial and otherwise--and the demand for books. Imperialism, Trade Expansion, the New Prosperity and the Half Million Circulation all came into existence at about the same time...the 70,000,000 have all at once awakened to the fact that there are books to be read.<sup>2</sup>

As Norris detects here, the unprecedented expansion of the American economy during the 1880s and 1890s triggered a corresponding boom in the book market. Prosperity, cheap publishing prices and a new ethos of cultural self improvement all contributed to the popularization of reading as a pass-time.<sup>3</sup> This increased significance of reading in American cultural life in turn raised the stakes of discussion about the merits of the available literature. That famous celebration of American life, the Chicago World Columbian Exposition of 1893, which Henry Adams described as "the first expression of American thought as a unity", put literary matters at centre stage.<sup>4</sup> On 13 July, Hamlin Garland and Mary Hartwell Catherwood were invited to debate the merits of

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<sup>1</sup> William Dean Howells, "The New Historical Romances" (1900), in Ronald Gottesman et. al. ed., *William Dean Howells, Selected Literary Criticism: Volume Three: 1898-1920* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993) p.26.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Norris, "The American Public and Popular Fiction" (1903), in Donald Pizer ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964) p.126.

<sup>3</sup> Magazines, periodicals and newspapers of the period discussed this increase in reading at great length. In his *Harper's* "Editor's Study" column of April 1887 for example, William Dean Howells commented that "novels are...fully accepted by every one pretending to cultivated taste...they really form the whole intellectual life of such immense numbers of people." W.D. Howells, "False and Truthful Fiction: Henry James" (1887) in Donald Pizer, ed., *W.D. Howells, Selected Literary Criticism: Volume II: 1886-1897* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993) p.44.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907) quoted in Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern American Novel*. Second Edition. (1983; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) p.2.

their respective literary forms. Garland put the case for the new realism--a style exemplified by writers such as himself, Mary Wilkins Freeman and Henry Blake Fuller: Catherwood argued for the historical romance, a genre which was regularly topping the best seller list at the time.<sup>5</sup> In setting up this dialogue, the Exposition was showcasing a debate which had been dominating discussions of literature for a number of years. Indeed, Eugene Field, popular columnist for the *Chicago Daily News*, judged that the debate between realism and romance was sufficiently familiar to his readership to warrant a satirical treatment. Field took up an irreverent tone to caricature the earnest egg-heads: "Mr Garland's heroes", he wrote, "sweat and do not wear socks; his heroines eat cold huckleberry pie...Mrs. Catherwood's heroes--and they are heroes we like--are aggressive, courtly, dashing, picturesque fellows, and her heroines are timid, staunch, beautiful women, and they too are our kind of people."<sup>6</sup>

Many prominent thinkers had shaped these debates, ranging from the pro-realist H.H. Boyesen, Professor of German at Columbia, who prefaced his realist novels with anti-romantic polemics, to popular romance writer, F. Marion Crawford, who felt compelled to defend his genre in a book entitled, *The Novel; What It Is*.<sup>7</sup> The most distinguished participant, however, was the realist novelist William Dean Howells, whose thinking about realism and romance had begun long before the Chicago Exposition. His novel, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), like his polemics in his *Harper's Monthly* "Editor's Study" column between 1886 and 1892, not only contributed to the debate, but in many ways set its agenda.

For Howells, the current opposition between romance and realism had an obvious historical antecedent. "At the beginning of this century", he wrote in *Criticism and*

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<sup>5</sup> Books such as *The Prisoner of Zenda* and *When Knighthood was in Flower* sold in the hundreds of thousands. See James D. Hart, *The Popular Book* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950) pp. 180-200, and Frank L. Mott, *Golden Multitudes* (New York: Macmillan, 1947) pp. 183-193.

<sup>6</sup> Larzer Ziff tells this story in his book, *The American 1890's: Life and Times of a Lost Generation* (New York: Viking Press, 1966) p. 104.

<sup>7</sup> In the preface to *Mammon of Unrighteousness* (1891), Boyesen insisted that he had "disregarded all romantic traditions" and written instead with "the logic of reality" in mind. For an example of anti-realist polemic, see Hamilton Wright Mabie's piece, "A Typical Novel", *Andover Review* (4 November 1885) pp. 417-429. For a fuller discussion of the debates, see Vernon Louis Parrington's book, *Main Currents in American Thought: An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginning to 1920*, Volume Three (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1930) pp.179-182.



*Fiction* (1891), "romance was making the same fight against effete classicism which realism is making today against effete romanticism."<sup>8</sup> There was, it seems, nothing new about American literary debate being conducted in a binary framework. In another article he endorsed the romance tradition by historicizing it. "Romanticism", he reasoned, "was the expression of a world mood; it was not merely literary and voluntary; it grew naturally out of the political, social and even economical conditions at the close of the eighteenth century...In its day it was noble and beautiful; it lifted and widened the minds of the people, it afforded them a refuge in an ideal world from the failure and defeat of this." "Romanticism" he concluded, "belonged to a disappointed and bewildered age."<sup>9</sup>

Howells's evaluation of subsequent authors within this tradition vary widely. Edgar Allan Poe is dismissed as an overrated "old fashioned horror monger"<sup>10</sup> whilst Nathaniel Hawthorne is idolized as "one of the most fascinating and important literary men who ever lived."<sup>11</sup> The principle target for his criticism, however, is not the tradition of American romance but its contemporary, book boom manifestation: "nothing has been heard of late", he groaned in 1900, "but the din of arms, the horrid tumult of the swashbuckler swashing on his buckler."<sup>12</sup> And Howells's objections were not only about literary merit. As Jane Johnson observes:

The debate over realism is important in American intellectual history because it indicates that through the post civil war years the national conscience found relief

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<sup>8</sup> This essay, "On Truth in Fiction", from Howells's *Criticism and Fiction* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1891) is collected in George J. Becker, ed., *Documents of Modern Literary Realism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963) pp.129-137.

<sup>9</sup> William Dean Howells, "Modern Romanticism" (1889), in Donald Pizer ed., *William Dean Howells: Selected Literary Criticism, Volume II: 1886-1897* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993) p.124.

<sup>10</sup> William Dean Howells, "Edgar Allan Poe" (1909), in Ronald Gottesman et. al. ed., *Selected Literary Criticism: 1898-1920* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana U.P., 1993) p. 250.

<sup>11</sup> William Dean Howells, "The Personality of Hawthorne" (1903), in Gottesman et. al. ed., *William Dean Howells: Selected Literary Criticism 1898-1920* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana U.P., 1993) p.91.

<sup>12</sup> William Dean Howells, "The New Historical Romances" (1900), in Gottesman ed., *William Dean Howells; Selected Literary Criticism 1898-1920* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana U. P., 1993) p.25.



by attributing social and political errors to the influence of romantic writings.<sup>13</sup>

Like many of his contemporaries, Howells made connections between the medieval milieu of the romance and the recalcitrant feudalism of the South which had allegedly dragged the Union into Civil War.<sup>14</sup> For Howells, romance was fundamentally anachronistic in the forward-looking nineties and he regarded the seemingly bottomless market for historical romance as the symptom of a culture with its head in the sand; one where the "taradiddles of the historical romancers" supplied an anaesthetic against the vertiginous "facts of the odious present".<sup>15</sup> More particularly, Howells worried about the effects of romantic fiction on its individual reader-consumers, and his worries grew in proportion to the novel's burgeoning circulation. Sounding rather like Howells, Mr. Sewell, the minister in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* observes: "I don't think there was a time when they [romantic novels] formed the whole intellectual experience of more people. They do more mischief than ever...those novels with old fashioned heroes and heroines in them...are ruinous".<sup>16</sup> And the plot of Howells's text simultaneously measures the influence of the "false ideal" and "pseudo-heroism" promoted by such novels and distances itself from them, reaching a closure base on realistic good sense rather than romantic self sacrifice.<sup>17</sup> Many of Howells's polemics supplement this critique of contemporary romance: in one essay he divided romance into three sub-categories, carefully computing their pernicious effects.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Jane Johnson, introduction to Hamlin Garland's *Crumbling Idols: Twelve Essays on Art Dealing Chiefly With Literature, Painting and Drama* (1894; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1960) p.xii.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p.xvi. See especially footnotes 9, 10 and 11.

<sup>15</sup> See footnote 1.

<sup>16</sup> William Dean Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) p.197.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p.242. The novel's central scenario involves two sisters, Irene and Penelope Lapham, from a rising middle class family, falling for the same man, the more aristocratic Tom Corey. The Lapham family wrongly assume that Corey is attracted to Irene, the younger sister, when in fact he has fallen in love with Penelope.

The events of Howells novel parallels those of a romantic novel, *Tears, Idle Tears*, which is frequently discussed by characters in the text, and which celebrates the self-sacrifice of one woman who gives up her true love because another cared for him first.

<sup>18</sup> In the first group he placed the novel which "flatters the passions, and exults them above the principles". These, he judged, "may not kill, but will certainly injure". In a second category he placed

Like romance's shortcomings, realism's merits were considered not only literary but social, political and moral. Whereas romance was anachronistic--a throwback to a by-gone era--realism was inherently progressive, anticipating a more promising future. Donald Pizer puts the point well:

Howells and such figures as Hamlin Garland, T.S. Perry, H.H. Boyesen accepted wholeheartedly the central evolutionary premise of much Nineteenth Century thought that loosely joined social, material and intellectual life into a triumphant forward march. The function of literature in this universal progress was to reject the outworn values of the past in favour of those of the present. Or, in more literary terms, the writer was to reject the romantic material and formulas of earlier fiction, as these derived from the limited beliefs and social life of their moment of origin, in favour of a realistic aesthetic which demanded that the subject matter of contemporary life be objectively depicted, no matter how 'unliterary' the product of this aesthetic might seem.<sup>19</sup>

The key document here is "On Truth in Fiction", which crystallized five years of Howells's thinking about realism and romance, and was collected in his *Criticism and Fiction* (1891).<sup>20</sup> Taking his philosophical bearings from John Addington Symonds and Edmund Burke, Howells situates humankind in a science guided progress narrative. Through the development of science, he argues, human beings will become more and more capable of "living in the whole" (p.130) and understanding their place in the world. Howells then considers artistic judgement in the light of this social evolution. Currently, he claims, criticism is over-intellectualized by the professionals who monopolize it. Literature is judged in relation to other literature, rather than in relation to life. This state of affairs intimidates average Americans, making them mistrustful of their own

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"un-moral romance", the novel which "imagines a world where the sins of sense are unvisited by the penalties following". These are fatal--"deadly poison". Finally he grouped together those which tickle our prejudices and "pamper our gross appetite for the marvellous"--these are milder in effect, being labelled merely "innutritious". William Dean Howells, "False and Truthful Fiction" (1887), in D. Pizer et al. ed., *William Dean Howells: Selected Literary Criticism 1886-1897* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana U.P., 1993) p.44.

<sup>19</sup> Donald Pizer's "Introduction" to Pizer ed., *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism, Howells to London* (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995) p.6.

<sup>20</sup> I am using the essay as collected in Becker ed. Further references will be cited in parantheses in the text.



instinctive critical faculties. Yet, claims Howells, as society evolves the instinctual will overrule the learned, and life-likeness--the "simple, the natural and the honest"--will become the touchstone for artistic excellence. As a feature of the same process, elitist critics who "judge purely according to ideals, traditions and musty books" will disappear, and "the common, average man" (p.134) will be emboldened to exercise his innate critical sensibility. Realism then, both anticipates this "communistic era" and is seen to be a crucial force in facilitating its arrival: through its emphasis on simplicity, naturalness and honesty, it foreshadows the way things could be.

But how does Howells define realism? On the one hand, he is defining the realist project against the sterile elitism of the American academy, which treats literature as a self-enclosed, self-referential system severed from life.<sup>21</sup> On the other, he is defining it against a flourishing market for anachronistic, feudal romances. Both of these factors influence Howells' thinking: realism is defined *against* bookishness and *in terms of* contemporary experience. Realism's narrative characteristics therefore receive short shrift, as to discuss the mechanics of literary form is to risk sounding like the alienated academics Howells is tackling. He undoubtedly has a strong *sense* of what realism was, and often listed the writers who practised it.<sup>22</sup> But to talk, as Pizer does, of Howells's "realistic aesthetic" is to imply a rigorous and systematic theory capable of identifying these characteristics and of explaining, in clear terms, exactly what these writers have in common. This is missing from Howells's criticism. Instead of specific analysis we find a rhetoric of beautiful truth, veracity to life, the simple, the natural and the honest; realism is seen as altogether transcending the nitty-gritty of literary form in its fresh transparency. "Do not trouble yourself about standards and ideals", he assures would-be realists in *Criticism and Fiction*, "but try to be faithful and natural; remember, there is no greatness, no beauty, which does not come from the truth of your knowledge to

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<sup>21</sup> In this, Howells's criticism echoes Hamlin Garland's. Garland, who was self-educated at Boston library, took issue with the academy, not simply for fostering Anglophile tastes, but for creating a context in which "blank verse tragedies on Columbus on Washington" won accolade. This bookishness or cultural aping overawed and silenced genuine "native utterance" (p.18). Hamlin Garland, *Crumbling Idols: Twelve Essays on Art Dealing Chiefly With Literature, Painting and Drama* (1894; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1960).

<sup>22</sup> In "American English; W.H. White; Balzac; American Criticism" (1886), Howells lists some of the writers he considers to be realists--"Zola...Tourgueneff and Tolstoi in Russia, Bjornsen in Norway,...Vallera in Spain, Verga in Italy...the unknown Englishman who wrote *Mark Rutherford*." In Pizer et al. ed., *W.D. Howells: Selected Literary Criticism 1886-1897*, p.11.

things".<sup>23</sup> So the means of representation--narrative form--is subordinated to the subject of representation--contemporary life. Howells is apparently unconcerned by the fact that different writers may have a different "knowledge of things" or perspective upon contemporary life. Any problem here is contained by the weighty insistence upon a single, stable, objective truth which is available to the true realist. As the very title of his 1887 essay, "Civilization and Barbarism, Romance and Reality: The Question of Modern Civilization"<sup>24</sup> suggests, realism is not only associated with reality, but is seen to be interchangeable with it--the word "reality" (rather than "realism") is significantly counterposed to barbarous "romance".

After Howells, Frank Norris was the most prolific and influential figure in the opening stage of American debates about realism.<sup>25</sup> More prone to pessimism than Howells, Norris sometimes described the former's "fight" between romance and realism as a losing battle.<sup>26</sup> Norris praised Howells's fiction for having "laid the foundation of a fine, hardy literature, that promised to be our very own", but lamented that the current fad for historical romances built "upon it whole confused congeries of borrowed fake

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<sup>23</sup> W.D. Howells, *Criticism and Fiction*, (1891; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959) p.34.

<sup>24</sup> Edwin H. Cady ed., *W.D. Howells as Critic* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973) pp. 113-119.

<sup>25</sup> As Vernon Louis Parrington put it, "It was Frank Norris who wrote the pronunciamento of the new school, boldly, magnificently, with immense faith in the finality of his own conclusions. *The Responsibilities of the Novelist* was to become the textbook of the young naturalists." (Parrington, p.188).

Like Howells, Norris explored these literary questions in his fiction and polemics alike. His novel *The Octopus* (1901; New York: Signet, 1964), for example, which fictionalizes the events surrounding the bloody conflict between the Pacific and Southwestern railway trust and the Joaquin valley wheat farmers of 1880, also dramatizes a number of issues surrounding literary form and the writer's role in society. The action is focalized through the poet-spectator Presley, who is convalescing in the valley. At the opening of the novel he is determined to build upon his minor literary reputation by writing an epic: "He searched for true romance" we are told, "and, in the end found grain rates and unjust freight tariffs" (p.16). The sentence neatly anticipates Presley's trajectory through the novel--he eventually comes to shun pure romance, recognises that there is an epic unfolding underneath his nose, and pens a poem called "The Toilers". He now sees his task as being: "To range the entire nation, telling all his countrymen of the drama that was working itself out on this fringe of the continent, this ignored and distant Pacific coast...It might do a great deal of good" (p.278). Frustrated that he is not doing enough good, he jettisons verse in favour of prose, then both in favour of oratory and bomb throwing: at the end of the novel, disillusioned and indecisive, he is on his way to Indian exile.

<sup>26</sup> Howells's refers to the "fight" between romance and realism in his obituary, "Emile Zola" (1902) in Gottesman et al. ed., *William Dean Howells: Selected Literary Criticism, 1898-1920*, p.66.



and pilfered romanticisms".<sup>27</sup> More so than Howells, Norris was deeply respectful of the romantic tradition: so for him, the book boom revival of formulaic new romances not only obscured Howells's foundations, but also vulgarized an "admirable school of fiction--the school of Scott". He predicted that "for years to come the tale of historic times will be discredited and many a great story remain unwritten."<sup>28</sup>

Norris's evaluation of Emile Zola, particularly as spelt out in his 1896 *Wave* editorial piece, "Zola as a Romantic Writer", shows just how powerful the realist-romance opposition was at this stage.<sup>29</sup> Zola's texts were currently causing a stir in the States, many being translated and reviewed for the first time. Norris's early familiarity with Zola's work is well-known and well-documented: in this article alone, he mentions five Zola novels, and his brother reports that Norris was "never without a yellow paper-covered novel of Zola in his hand."<sup>30</sup> There can be little doubt that Norris was aware of Zola's own conception of Naturalism, famously expounded in the 1880 polemic, *Le Roman Experimental*, where Zola related the Naturalist or experimental novel to "the scientific evolution of the age."<sup>31</sup> Naturalism, Zola wrote, substitutes the study of the "abstract metaphysical man" for the study of the "natural man subject to physio-chemical laws and determined by the influence of the environment; in a word it is the literature of our scientific age, just as classic and romantic literature correspond to an age of scholasticism and theology."<sup>32</sup> Naturalism is dissociated from classicism and romance and described as a mode of social enquiry underpinned by a determinist sociology and with a specified scientific purpose: it sets out to uncover and illustrate the effects of hereditary and environment on its characters, enabling the amelioration of "social

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<sup>27</sup> Frank Norris, "An American School of Fiction? A Denial" (1902) in Donald Pizer ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964) p.109.

<sup>28</sup> Frank Norris, "The True Reward of the Novelist" (1901) in Pizer ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964) p.84.

<sup>29</sup> Frank Norris, "Zola as a Romantic Writer" (1896) in Pizer ed., pp.71-3. Further references will be cited in parantheses in the text.

<sup>30</sup> Parrington, p.329.

<sup>31</sup> In Becker ed., *Documents of Modern Literary Realism* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1963) pp.161-197.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p.176.

conditions".<sup>33</sup>

Zola's painstakingly theorized Naturalism, with this emphasis on hereditary, environment and social protest, would seem to oblige Norris to widen the terms of the American debate and to move discussion of contemporary writing beyond the realist-romance opposition. But in Norris's account, the opposition continues to set the agenda. For him, realism is synonymous with Howell's realism. And in the wake of Howells's failure to develop a coherent "aesthetic" of realism, the term is synonymous with subject matter. Howell's subject matter is, as Norris unkindly puts it, "small passions, restricted emotions...crises involving cups of tea" (p.71). For Norris then, "realism" implies a narrowness of perspective, or a mere documentation of middle class social life's polite surface. Norris wants to distinguish Zola from such connotations, but in so doing, he rejects Zola's own formulation of Naturalism and instead subsumes Zola and Naturalism into the romance category. Romance is defined as a type of fiction which represents the extraordinary rather than the ordinary. In Zola, Norris writes:

Everything is extraordinary, imaginative, grotesque even, with a vague note of terror quivering throughout...It is all romantic, at times unmistakably so, as in *La Reve* or *Rome*, closely resembling the work of the greatest of all modern romanticists, Hugo...That Zola's work is not purely romantic as was Hugo's, lies chiefly in the choice of Milieu (p.72).

By this reckoning, Naturalism becomes romance brought up-to-date and down-to-earth; it is contemporary romance set in the slums. Zola's texts, according to Norris, are true to the generic conventions of romance rather than (as Zola had hoped) to the social facts of their contemporary milieu. Norris cuts them free from their referents--contemporary life--and empties them of the social protest which Zola set such store by.<sup>34</sup> In the last analysis then, Norris simultaneously trivializes Howells's realism, empties Zola's texts of their social protest and, as part of the same logic, disconnects Naturalism from its

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p.177.

<sup>34</sup> This reading is of particular interest to me. It parallels many readings of contemporary realism, which, under the sway of another forceful opposition (postmodernism and realism rather than romance and realism) proceed by emptying these texts of their social engagement. I will return to this point in the final section of the chapter.



distinctive deterministic social theory.<sup>35</sup> The opposition between realism and romance therefore sets the boundaries of his effort to distinguish Naturalism from "realism", with the result that Naturalism is either to be described as realism or as romance.

This strange account of Zola equips Norris with a literary blueprint for his own ideal fiction, which becomes equivalent to Howell's realism or Hamlin Garland's veritism.<sup>36</sup> Confusingly, he refers to it by different names. Sometimes he calls it "romantic fiction" as in the 1901 essay, "A Plea For Romantic Fiction"<sup>37</sup> and at others he refers to it as naturalism, though as we have seen, his sense of naturalism is different from Zola's.<sup>38</sup> The key criteria for this "naturalism" or "romantic fiction" are: a concern with contemporary experience;<sup>39</sup> a focus on larger than life characters who deviate from

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<sup>35</sup> This imprecise sense of the word "naturalism" has remained in American criticism and lingers on today. For example, in the Introduction his *Cambridge Companion To American Realism and Naturalism, Howells to London* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P, 1995), Donald Pizer sees any text which is interested in "the relationship between a restrictive social and intellectual environment and the consequent impoverishment both of social opportunity and inner life" as naturalism (p.13). Widening the terms this far enables him to define writers as different as Saul Bellow, William Styron, Norman Mailer, Joyce Carol Oates, William Kennedy and Robert Stone as naturalists--"naturalism", according to Pizer, "refuses to die in America" (p.14). Defining the term so loosely surely robs it of critical leverage.

<sup>36</sup> Like Howells and Norris, Hamlin Garland made a substantial contribution to these debates, and he gave the course of discussion an idiosyncratic twist. His key publication was *Crumbling Idols* (1894; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1960). Like Howells's, his prose is inflected with talk of the artist standing "alone before nature and before life" (p.23). But he is less dogmatic about realism and reality being synonymous. This is indicated by Garland's substitution of the word "realism" with "veritism" in his literary manifesto. Even though the type of writing "veritism" describes is consistent with Howells notion of realism, the word registers an awareness that such writing is true to life, rather than actually being life. Garland understood veritism as a type of idealist realism, or a literary impressionism, in short as, "the truthful statement of an individual impression corrected by reference to the fact" (p.xxi). So whilst facts retain an indubitable dependability (in their capacity for faultless correction) the artist is at least situated in a process of negotiation, rather than being depicted as a mere conduit for truth and reality.

<sup>37</sup> Frank Norris, "A Plea for Romantic Fiction" (1901), in Pizer ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, pp.74-78.

<sup>38</sup> In a letter to Isaac Marcossion from 1899, Norris explained that he was "going back definitely to the style of *McTeague*...The Wheat series will be straight naturalism with all the guts I can get into it". Quoted in the introduction to Pizer ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, p.23.

<sup>39</sup> In "The True Reward of the Novelist" (1901), for example, Norris encourages young writers to "get at the life immediately around you, the very life in which you move". In Pizer ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, p.86.

the norm;<sup>40</sup> and a specific regional setting.<sup>41</sup> Norris presents his blueprint as an antidote to both Howells's timid realism and to recent versions of romance obsessed with the "fubsy, musty, worm-eaten, moth-riddled, rust corroded 'Grand Salles' of the Middle Ages and Renaissance."<sup>42</sup>

Like Howells's, Norris's literary prescriptions have a strong political dimension. Romantic fiction is considered more democratic than realism: whereas realism limits its scope to the polite protocols of bourgeois life, romantic fiction is interested in characters of all classes--the emphasis is upon deviation from the norm rather than the quotidian.<sup>43</sup> Elsewhere Norris develops this claim by insisting that "romantic fiction", which can encompass "the vast, the monstrous and the tragic", is more attuned to American tastes than realism--it is the "wind of a new country, a new heaven and a new earth."<sup>44</sup> In its regionality it can depict the breadth of the union, collectively creating a patchwork matching the country's geographical and cultural diversity.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, in its accessibility and popularity it can mirror the democracy which unifies the country.<sup>46</sup> In both its content and reception then, "romantic fiction" is consonant with the values of

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<sup>40</sup> Frank Norris, "A Plea for Romantic Fiction" (1901): "Romance is the type of fiction that takes cognizance of variations from the type of normal life". Pizer ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, p.76.

<sup>41</sup> Norris's *McTeague* (1899) is significantly sub-titled *A Story Of San Francisco*. This illustrates Norris's commitment to specificity of setting. See also his essay, "Great Opportunities for Fiction Writers in San Francisco" (1897), Pizer ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, pp.28-30.

<sup>42</sup> Frank Norris, "A Plea for Romantic Fiction" (1901), in Pizer ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, p.76.

<sup>43</sup> Norris goes even further on occasions, seeing romantic fiction as necessarily depicting the "lower--almost the lowest--classes" and defining it as a "drama of the people, working itself out in blood and ordure". Frank Norris, "Zola as a Romantic Writer" (1896) in Pizer ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, p.72.

<sup>44</sup> Frank Norris, "Novelists of the Future: The Training They Need" (1901) in Pizer ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, p.13.

<sup>45</sup> In "The Great American Novelist" (1903), Norris observes, "The United States is a Union, but not yet a unit, and the life of one part is very, very different from the life of another...It is only possible to make a picture of a single locality." In Pizer ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, p.123.

<sup>46</sup> Here too Norris' claims about "romantic fiction" echo those Garland makes for his veritism. Veritism, which is also regional or "local color" in focus, is championed for its democratic credentials--unlike the feudal romance, it exemplifies the principles which constitute the Union. It recognizes difference, and thus holds out the promise of a patchwork of diverse literatures mirroring America itself.



contemporary America.

Given that Norris's "romantic fiction" or "naturalism" is defined in relation to a particular *literary* tradition rather than, like Howells's realism, in relation to *reality*, one might expect some fairly solid statements about the narrative forms which "romantic fiction" should take. But instead we get grandiose and repetitive rhetoric. In his essay "The Need for a Literary Conscience" Norris sounds uncannily like Howells: "It is life", he claims, that aspiring writers need to make their books, "life, not other people's novels." He invites them to look from the window and see "a whole literature go marching by".<sup>47</sup> Elsewhere he encourages them to jettison "the polish of literary form" and the "curious weaving of words" and take up "Life..the vigorous, real thing".<sup>48</sup>

As with Howells, this anti-book emphasis partly stems from a disdain for formulaic romance and professional critics--both influence Norris's reluctance to introduce discussion of narrative form into the contemporary debates. But in Norris's case, there is an extra factor at work. Describing his ideal "Novelists of the Future" in 1901, he writes:

Of all the arts it is the most virile; of all the arts it will not...flourish indoors...It is not the affair of women and aesthetes, and the muse of American fiction is no chaste, delicate, super-refined mademoiselle of delicate roses and 'elegant' attitudinizing, but a robust, red-armed *bonne-femme*, who rough shoulders her way among men and among affairs, who finds a healthy pleasure in the jostling of the mob and a hearty delight in the honest, rough and tumble, Anglo-Saxon give and take knockabout that for us means life.<sup>49</sup>

The business of novel writing is made explicitly sexual in this passage. The writer is masculine, virile and belongs out-doors--the muse is female, lusty, demotic and earthy. In a piece written less than a month later, Norris continues in a similar vein.<sup>50</sup> Romance

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<sup>47</sup> Frank Norris, "The Need for a Literary Conscience" (1901) in Pizer ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, p.89.

<sup>48</sup> Frank Norris, "An Opening for Novelists: Great Opportunities for Fiction Writers in San Francisco" (1897) in Pizer ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, p.30.

<sup>49</sup> Frank Norris, "Novelists of the Future: The Training They Need" (1901) in Pizer ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, p.13.

<sup>50</sup> Frank Norris, "A Plea for Romantic Fiction" (1901) in Pizer ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, pp.75-78.

is again personified and feminized, this time as a lubricious, irreverent mistress. Furthermore, romance is described in terms which suggest both scalpel and phallus: it is "an instrument, keen, finely tempered, flawless--an instrument with which we may go straight through the clothes and tissues and wrappings of flesh down deep into the red, living heart of things" (p.75).

The key to this purple prose, with its insistence on the wholesome heterosexuality and virility of the writer, lies in the word "aesthetes" which occurs in the first passage. For as Donald Pizer puts it, Norris is not only caught up in the "realism-romance controversy of the nineties", but in "the decade's conflict between a decadent aestheticism and the emerging school of manliness, adventure, and the outdoors."<sup>51</sup> As Pizer reports, Norris had followed the English split between the literary schools of Wilde/Beardsley/Huysman and Henley/ Kipling/Stevenson with some interest. And as Norris saw it, the pronounced tensions between these schools--between a so-called effete aestheticism and a more salubrious literature which reflected life--were beginning to emerge in the States. Pizer describes how Norris detected Wildean effeminacy and decadence in both the New York literati and in the *Les Jeunes* group of San Francisco artist and writers, and how he took particular objection to the latter's magazine *Lark*. In the light of this context, further sense can be made of Norris's reluctance to discuss the style of his "naturalism" or "romantic fiction". He was not only defining his project against contemporary romance, Howells's realism and the Academy, but against an ethos of aestheticism, which, to Norris's mind at least, paid too much attention to the self-enveloping refinements of style and not enough to Life.

These converging contexts, I have been arguing, restrict the realist debate in its initial stage: Howells's realism and Norris's romantic fiction are less *defined* than naturalized and obscured behind a persuasive but critically naive rhetoric of Life, truth, simplicity and honesty. In the following section I think about this initial stage of the debate--its terminology and assumptions--in relation to the reading of a specific text: after all, one of the central subjects of this thesis is the relationship between critical terminology and reading practice.

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<sup>51</sup> Pizer's introduction to the "Life, not Literature" section of Pizer ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, p.20.



## READING STEPHEN CRANE'S *MAGGIE: A GIRL OF THE STREETS* (1893)

Stephen Crane's *Maggie* was first published in 1893, and re-issued three years later, after the success of his second novel, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), had brought the young author to public attention. *Maggie* was reviewed by Howells, Norris and Hamlin Garland--the three main players in the early debate about American realism. In an 1896 piece entitled "New York Low Life", Howells offers some thoughts:

What strikes me most in the story of *Maggie* is that quality of fatal necessity which dominates Greek tragedy...I felt this in Mr. Hardy's 'Jude', where the principle seems to become conscious in the writer; but there is apparently no consciousness of any such motive in the author of 'Maggie'. Another effect is that of an ideal of artistic beauty which is as present in the working out of the poor girl's squalid romance as in any classic fable...My rhetoric scarcely suggests the simple terms the author uses to produce the effect I am trying to report again.<sup>52</sup>

Howells's difficulty in describing Crane's achievement inflects his very syntax: the breezy elegance of his usual essay style gives way here to edgy asides ("but there is apparently no consciousness of any such motive"), stumbling monosyllables ("is that of an"), convoluted phrases ("which is as") and an overriding sense of the inadequacy of his own powers of description ("My rhetoric scarcely suggests", "the effect I am *trying* to report *again*"). Furthermore, the passage is cluttered with literary references and allusions ("Greek tragedy", "Jude", "ideal of artistic beauty", "classic fable") and these fly in the face of Howells's confidence that realism bypasses literary conventions in order to grasp unmediated Life. On the one hand Crane's text is definitive realism--it is clear sighted (p.276), "graphic" (p.276), "faithful" to life (p.278) and draws "aside the thick veil of ignorance which parts the comfortable few from the uncomfortable many" (p.278). On the other hand, the text provokes responses which Howells associates with

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<sup>52</sup> W.D. Howells, "New York Low Life in Fiction" (1896) in Pizer et al. ed., *W.D. Howells, Selected Literary Criticism, 1886-1897* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993) pp.274-278. Further references will be cited in parantheses in the text.



specific literary genres, and therefore thwarts description in non-literary terms. In the last analysis Howells's difficulties with the text measures the limitation of a theory which insists on defining realism in terms of Life and against Books.

Like Howells, Norris detects something "out of the ordinary" in Crane's style. In his review of *Maggie* he writes:

The picture he makes is not a single carefully composed painting, serious, finished, scrupulously studied, but rather scores and scores of tiny flashlight photographs, instantaneous, caught, as it were, on the run. Of a necessity then, the movement of his tale must be rapid, brief, very hurried, hardly more than a glimpse.<sup>53</sup>

Norris's initial sensitivity to Crane's prose is impressive. Unlike Howells, who finds himself thumbing through literary precedents, Norris describes Crane's visual, sequential style by comparing it to photography. But having described Crane's style so effectively, Norris's mistrust of style, and his suspicion of people who talk about style, gets the better of him. This "catching style" (p.165) may have "charm" (p.164), he concedes, but it distracts Crane from his true duty as a novelist, which is to produce "a carefully composed painting, serious, finished, scrupulously studied" (p.164). So whilst Norris brusquely dismisses stylistic self-consciousness, he smuggles his own conservative assumptions about style into the review. More importantly, he sees Crane's style as *mere* style, as technical "habit" (p.164) which comes between the author and his subject. "The downfall of Maggie", he writes, "strikes one as *handled* in a *manner* almost too *flippant* for the seriousness of the subject" (p.165: my italics). Taking up the same theme at the end of the review, he adds, "the reader is apt to feel that the author is writing, as it were, from the outside. There is a certain lack of sympathy present" (p.166). The following passage from *Maggie*, I would suggest, illustrates the limitations of Norris's remarks:

Eventually they [Maggie's brother and father] entered into a dark region where,

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<sup>53</sup> Frank Norris, "Stephen Crane's Stories of Life in the Slums: *Maggie* and *George's Mother*" (1896), in D. Pizer ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964) pp.164-166. Further references will be cited in parentheses in the text.

from a careening building, a dozen gruesome doorways gave up loads of babies to the street and the gutter. A wind of early autumn raised yellow dust from cobbles and swirled it against an hundred windows. Long streamers of garments fluttered from fire-escapes. In all unhandy places there were buckets, brooms, rags and bottles. In the street infants played or fought with other infants or sat stupidly in the way of vehicles. Formidable women, with uncombed hair or disordered dress, gossiped while leaning on railings, or screamed in frantic quarrels. Withered persons, in curious postures of submission to something, sat smoking pipes in obscure corners. A thousand odours of cooking food came forth to the street. The building quivered and creaked from the weight of humanity stamping about in its bowels.<sup>54</sup>

Sentences like "Long streamers of garments fluttered from fire escapes" and "In all unhandy places there were buckets, brooms, rags and bottles" are photographic in the sense which Norris means it--they create sharply focussed, self-contained images which give the passage a documentary feel.<sup>55</sup> Likewise, a sentence such as "Withered persons, in curious postures of submission to something, sat smoking pipes in obscure corners" is photographic in its attention to texture ("withered") and shade ("obscure"), its delineation of outline ("curious postures") and its eye for small detail ("smoking pipes"). But with this sentence in particular, the photographic quality also stems from the relationship between narrative and subject matter. That is, the narrative renounces any claim to have special access to the content of the image--it shares the reader's perspective in that it knows neither the sex of these "withered persons" nor the "something" to which they submit. As we have seen, Norris judges this photographic detachment "flippant" and "unsympathetic". And it is certainly true that this passage, and indeed the whole of *Maggie*, operates without the explicit authoritative, authorial commentary found in the fiction of either Norris or Howells.

I would argue, however, that Crane's seriousness lies precisely in his style, and that Norris's suspicion of style stymies his appreciation of *Maggie*. A phrase like, "a

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<sup>54</sup> Thomas A. Gullason ed., *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893; New York and London: W.W.Norton, 1979) p.6. Further page references will be cited in parentheses in the text.

<sup>55</sup> The first photograph ever reproduced in a New York newspaper was in the *Daily Graphic* in 1880. It is worth noting that photo-journalism turned its attention to slum-life--the milieu of *Maggie*--in the 1890's. Jacob Riis became a minor celebrity as chronicler of life in the tenements, working for the *Sun*. So for Norris, contemporary culture provided a connection between slum life and photography. In his early nineties journalism, Crane himself specialized in documenting New York's underside. For a fuller account of the media and slum life, see chapter four of Alan Trachtenberg's, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).



dozen gruesome doorways gave up loads of babies to the street and gutter" is photographic, capturing a specific intersection of space and event--babies at the tenement doorways. But the combination of ambiguous words also gives the phrase a deeper temporal perspective which is not picked up by Norris, and not conveyed by the comparison to photography. That is, the phrase has strong suggestions of the destiny awaiting these babies. To begin with, the phrase "Loads of babies" reduces these lives to a lumpen mass: the babies are indistinguishable, and hence interchangeable. Moreover, they are also uniform in their passage--"the doorways *gave up* loads of babies to the street and gutter". "Gave up" simultaneously describes a physical movement and a process of yielding--it is as though the doorway reluctantly surrenders the babies to an inevitable fate. The words "street" and "gutter" extend this doubleness. Taken literally, they identify a physical space outside the tenement and hence contribute to the photographic effect. But taken figuratively, they describe social status. "Street" suggests prostitution, as in the novel's title, whilst "gutter" denotes the bottom of society. So whilst the sentence is photographic in the sense that it captures a moment, Crane's active language also ingrains that moment with the future, or rather a sense of futurelessness. The suggestion is that the tenement inevitably delivers these lives to social and moral debasement. Pushing the point further, we could say that through a combination of words and phrases, the sentence overwrites a culturally dominant narrative--worthy individuals transcending lowly beginnings--with a grimly materialistic story which shows an inhospitable environment cruelly conditioning fortunes.

By studying a single photographic phrase then, it becomes clear that there is more to Crane's style than met Frank Norris's eye. But ironically, by focussing on a single phrase, one runs the risk of imitating Norris's reading practice and lending credence to his claim that Crane's fragmented, photographic technique precluded any type of serious commentary or overview. To counter this, it is worth thinking about how a single photographic phrase functions in relation to the surrounding language.

In the passage quoted, the "loads of babies" sentence is the first of four, which, when taken collectively, construct a truncated life story. This narrative opens with babies and closes with the elderly, passing through infancy and adulthood *en-route*. Each stage occupies just a single sentence, and, in Norris's terms, is depicted in a photographic style: "infants" either fight and play, "formidable women", in the prime of life, either gossip



or scream whilst the senescent, like the babies, do not enjoy even the two options facing their offspring: they too are faceless, sexless and uniform, sitting and smoking, bowed beneath the same unnameable "something".

In this sequence then, Crane organizes his snap-shots to tell a ruthlessly abbreviated "life-story" which projects the futurelessness anticipated in the "loads of babies" clause. This, the narrative suggests, is a typical tenement biography, the seven ages of man boiled down into four sentences. Different residents can be substituted for one another--these lives are predetermined with a devastating precision. And where the residents are represented through stills, with a flat, apparently value free prose consistent with this mind-numbing predictability, the tenement takes on an hallucinatory instability--it careens, quivers and creaks. Like a pullulating city, it seems to reproduce itself as the passage unfolds, multiplying erratically from dozens of doorways to hundreds of windows and thousands of odours. And like the hostile early autumn wind which beleaguers the tenement with swirling dust, the building is shown to be more animate, and has more agency, than the people whose lives it cramps. Once again, the seriousness of this narrative barely needs spelling out: to actually say that this passage criticises tenement poverty is to imply a self-conscious, crusading indignation which Crane's writing eschews with such unsettling effects.

Another major criticism of Crane's *Maggie* was levelled at its pessimism. Reviewing the book in 1893, Hamlin Garland writes, "It is only a fragment. It is typical only of the worst elements of the alley. The author should delineate the families living on the next street, who live lives of heroic purity and hopeless hardship."<sup>56</sup> This sentiment, which was voiced by a number of the original reviewers,<sup>57</sup> points to another

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<sup>56</sup> Hamlin Garland, "An Ambitious French Novel and a Modest American Story" (1893). Reprinted in Thomas A. Gullason, ed., *Maggie: A Girl Of the Streets* (New York: Norton, 1979) p.144.

<sup>57</sup> In an unsigned review from the Nashville *Banner*, one critic endorsed *Maggie* as "a magnificent piece of realism" but complained that its "shadows are too deep and its light too faint and evasive, missing, indeed, the highest aim of literature, which is to give some small degree of pleasure, at least, to the world, and to prove itself not a clog, but an aspiration in uplifting the human heart." Reprinted in Richard M. Heatherford ed, *Stephen Crane: The Critical Heritage*, (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973) p.51. See also Edward Bright's scathing 1896 review from *The Illustrated American*, reprinted in Gullason ed., *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, pp.152-4. Having acknowledged the text's "convincing reality", he asserts, "My quarrel with the author begins and ends with his general conception of the slums" (p.153). For Bright too, Crane's sense of life is simply too bleak.

problem in these early discussions about realism which is inextricably linked with reluctance to discuss realism's narrative characteristics. As we have seen, realism was defined against romance, bookishness and in terms of truth to Life. But the degree to which a realist text was true to life (and hence fully realist) depended entirely upon the commentator's sense of life. As such, classification remained particularly impressionistic and analysis quickly reached an impasse, with commentators simply contesting one another's world-views.<sup>58</sup> The way beyond this approach lies in the recognition that "reality" (in this case, slum life) is apprehended by, and experienced through, a set of discursive constructs and that the reality of slum life cannot be discussed independently of these constructs. Taking this on board, texts are regarded as practices constituting or shaping Life, rather than isolated objects reflecting it. So they might be described as sites where struggles for meaning take place. Bearing this in mind, *Maggie* can be read in relation to surrounding texts, such as the depictions of slum life which became increasingly common through the 1890s.<sup>59</sup> For as Walter F. Taylor writes, "In 1890 appeared the key book of the entire anti-slum movement, Jacob Riis's *How the Other*

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<sup>58</sup> This problem marred Howells's reading on a number of occasions. In an essay called "Zola, Tolstoi and the pessimistic" (1888), for example, he compared *La Terre* with Tolstoi's *La Puissance des Tenebres* as representations of the peasantry. On Zola's novel, Howells writes, "the story is a long riot of satyr-lewdness and satyr-violence, of infernal greed that ends in murder, sordid jealousies and cruel hates; and since with all its literary power, its wonderful voice of realization, it cannot remain valuable as literature, but must have other interest as a scientific study of life under the Second Empire, it seems a great pity it should not be fully documented." In D. Pizer et al. ed., *W.D. Howells, Selected Literary Criticism 1886-1897* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993) pp.84-5. For Howells then, Zola's vision is too unblinking. As a result, he sees the book as sloppily referenced historiography rather than fiction. But this moving of the goal-posts clearly contradicts his insistence on realism's objectivity-- if realism were truly supposed to be objective, then Zola's book would surely fit the bill. The problem, of course, lies in Zola and Howells having different perspectives on human nature and reality.

Howells goes on to applaud Tolstoi's book, which attributes a strong moral conscience to the *muzhiks*. But he then reveals that Tolstoi had read sections of the novels to members of the *muzhiks* and that they had found the characters unbelievably righteous. This, of course, suggests that Tolstoi was not objective enough. Howells contains the problem with unpleasant elitism, saying "we may suppose this opinion the effect of restricted observation, and may safely trust the larger and deeper knowledge of the author" (*Ibid*, p.85).

<sup>59</sup> There is not space here to develop such readings, and besides, *Maggie's* relationship to many of these possible contexts--including the anti-slum movement and slum romance respectively--has been explored by other critics. For the former, see Thomas A. Gullason's "Tragedy and Melodrama in Stephen Crane's *Maggie*" and Eric Solomon's "*Maggie* and the parody of popular fiction". For *Maggie* and the anti-slum movements, see Marcus Cunliffe's "Stephen Crane and the American Background of *Maggie*" and Thomas A. Gullason, "A Minister, a Social Reformer and *Maggie*". All of these pieces are collected in Gullason ed., *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*.



*Half Lives*...Thence-forward, and especially for the next five years--the slum was in effect a fresh literary field."<sup>60</sup>

One crop produced from this field was the slum romance, which brought the conventions of sentimental melodrama to bear on a contemporary setting. In books such as Edward Townsend's *A Daughter of the Tenements* (1895), which Crane read, the protagonist transcended her environment and became a celebrity.<sup>61</sup> In other slum romances, chastity shielded the heroine from moral corruption--"I am but a poor shop-girl", insisted one slum maiden, "but over my present life of suffering there extends a rainbow of hope...And you villain ask me to change my present peace for a life of horror with you. No monster, rather may I die at once."<sup>62</sup> As my readings of *Maggie* have suggested, the text empties out these conventions. As part of the same process, it takes issue with the assumptions underpinning them: namely, a belief in the efficacy of the American Dream and a faith in the individual's intrinsic, and hence unassailable virtue. In Crane's text, slum depravation is linked solidly to deprivation: as the author himself put it, the book "tries to show that environment is a tremendous thing in the world and frequently shapes life regardless."<sup>63</sup>

Through looking at these critical responses to *Maggie*, I have tried to show how the assumptions governing the debate about realism stymie the reading of an individual text. As we have seen, defining realism's programme against formulaic, anachronistic romance; an Anglophile, elitist academy; and aestheticism's concern with style creates

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<sup>60</sup> Collected in Gullason ed., p.117. We have already seen how Crane's narrative avoids a heavy-handed, morally outraged tone in representing slum-life. As Frank Bergson puts it, in an essay called "The Framework of *Maggie*", Crane's style "totally lacked the condescension with which crusaders of the time approached the slums." (Gullason ed, pp.230 -234).

Jacob Riis's 1890 book, *How the Other Half Lives* became the anti-slum movement's masthead. His tone could hardly be more different from Crane's: "With...human instincts and cravings, forever unsatisfied, turned into a haunting curse; with appetite ground to keenest edge by a hunger that is never fed" he wrote, "the children of the poor grow up in joyless homes to lives of wearisome toil that claims them at an age when the play of their happier fellows has just begun. Has a yard of turf been laid or a vine been coaxed to grow within their reach, they are banished and barred from it as from a heaven that is not for such as they." Gullason ed., pp.75-84.

<sup>61</sup> See Eric Soloman, "Love and Death in the Slums", in Gullason ed., p.118.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, p.118.

<sup>63</sup> This quotation comes from the inscription written by Crane in Hamlin Garland's copy of *Maggie*. See Gullason ed., p.132.



an emphasis upon realism as Life, naturalness and simplicity. This emphasis rules out scrutiny of realism's relation to the broader culture: as in Garland's response to *Maggie*, a text is judged to be either true to life or not. The emphasis also rules out a discussion of particular narrative strategies--Howells cannot describe Crane's realism without contradicting his own theories of realism whilst Norris's mistrust of style clouds his response to the text. And as the following sections and chapters illustrate, similar problems colour discussions of realism through the twentieth century.

### **"GO LEFT YOUNG WRITERS!"<sup>64</sup>: PROLETARIAN REALISM IN THE EARLY 1930s.**

In his famous 1931 essay, Scott Fitzgerald wrote the obituary of the "Jazz Age", the "ten year period that, as if reluctant to die outmoded in its bed, leaped to a spectacular death in October 1929."<sup>65</sup> When the Wall Street Crash plunged America into the worst depression in its history, the "expensive orgy" of the twenties suddenly seemed very remote.<sup>66</sup> And if Fitzgerald's claim that, "the Jazz Age...had no interest in politics at all" (p.10) is rhetorical rather than accurate, the early thirties was, by contrast, a period of intense and widespread political radicalization--as Fitzgerald goes on to say: "now we are all rummaging around in our trunks wondering where we left the liberty cap". As

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<sup>64</sup> The title of an article written by Mike Gold in *New Masses* (January 1929). The piece is anthologized in Mike Folsom ed., *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology* (New York: International, 1972) pp.187-193.

<sup>65</sup> Scott Fitzgerald, "Echoes of the Jazz Age" (1931), reprinted in *The Crack Up with other pieces and stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) pp.9-20. Further references will be cited in parantheses in the text.

<sup>66</sup> The young communist writer Jack Conroy described the crash in his debut novel, *The Disinherited*. "The market had just crashed to the cellar, leaving a sick and empty feeling in the stomachs of the cockroach capitalists, rolling in unaccustomed wealth and firm in conviction that a perpetual saturnalia was written in America's destiny. Now they were scurrying to cover, perishing beneath the wreckage or jumping from eighteenth story windows...It was the end of an era to some, the stormy sunset of Hoover prosperity." Jack Conroy, *The Disinherited* (1933; New York: Hill and Wang, 1963) p.219.

For an account of the depression's onset see also Richard H. Pells historical survey, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York, Evanston, San Francisco and London: Harper and Row, 1973) pp.43-9.

Malcolm Cowley, who had himself spent much of the twenties immersed in the bohemian sub-cultures of Paris later recalled:

...a new conception of art was replacing the idea that it was something purposeless, useless, wholly individual and forever opposed to the stupid world. The artist and his art once more became part of the world, produced by and perhaps affecting it; they had returned toward their earlier and indispensable task of revealing its values and making it more human.<sup>67</sup>

The American Communist Party (C.P.U.S.A), which boomed as the economic crisis deepened, played a leading role in this leftward movement. Founded in 1919 as a branch of Lenin's Communist International, the Party had always placed a strong emphasis on cultural questions:<sup>68</sup> industrial militancy during the early thirties, when the jobless were organized into unemployed groups and dual Unions created to challenge the American Federation of Labor, was therefore matched by a rash of publications addressing the importance of culture in the revolutionary struggle.<sup>69</sup> As Edmund Wilson

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<sup>67</sup> Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920's* (1934; New York: Viking Press, 1956). Cowley's memoir describes a physical retreat, a displaced or "lost" generation of American writers exiled in Paris, and he sees their geographical migration mirroring their withdrawal into an introspective *L'art pour l'art* ethos. Edmund Wilson's, *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (1931; London and Glasgow: Fontana, 1961) corroborates this view. Wilson's survey tackles European writers, and detects the traces of Symbolism in texts by Yeats, Valery, Eliot, Proust, Joyce and Stein. Like Cowley, he reads these aesthetic, formal and subjectivist preoccupations as a surrender of the artist's social and political commitment. In looking to the present though, like Cowley, he suggests that the sudden transformation of the twenties "Jazz Age" into the thirties depression will precipitate a corresponding shift in literary attitudes and priorities. Wilson appeals for a combination of symbolism's technical innovation with naturalism's social engagement, offering Joyce's *Ulysses* as a solitary prototype.

<sup>68</sup> At the Kharkov conference, held in the Ukraine in 1930, for example, the Comintern established the International Union of Revolutionary Writers (I.U.R.W) and its publication, *International Literature*, both of which had a measurable impact on the C.P.U.S.A. For an account of the relationship between Soviet and C.P.U.S.A. cultural policy in these years, see Barbara Foley's *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993) pp. 63-85.

<sup>69</sup> For an account of labor struggles during the early thirties see chapter three, "Militancy and Combat: Third Period Communism, 1929-1934" in Albert Fried ed., *Communism in America: A History in Documents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). In 1933 the monthly *New Masses* became a weekly, and by 1935 reached a circulation of 25,000, comfortably out-selling *Nation*. The *Partisan Review* began publication in February 1934, edited by Philip Rahv and Wallace Phelps. *Symposium* was launched in 1930 by James Burnham and Philip Wheelwright, and though it was never a party publication, had strong communist leanings by 1932. Communist sympathisers Wilson and Cowley both edited the *New Republic* between 1929 and 1935. In 1934 Philip Rahv described "the present abundance of revolutionary publications" in his article



commented, the early thirties saw the "eruption of the Marxist issues out of the literary circles of the radicals into the field of general criticism."<sup>70</sup>

The issue of "proletarian literature" had been on the Marxist agenda since at least February 1921, when Mike Gold, then editor of the Communist Party journal *Liberator*, had written an article entitled "Towards Proletarian Art."<sup>71</sup> In 1930, when Gold was editing *Liberator's* successor *New Masses*, he was invited to air his views in the mainstream *New Republic*, and shocked its readers with an appeal for a new type of writing which expressed the experiences of the American working class.<sup>72</sup> Realism was central to Gold's theories about proletarian literature--he often referred to the latter as "proletarian realism."<sup>73</sup> A form of writing with a strong track record in social protest, realism was seen as a natural place to turn in defining a proletarian literature capable of consolidating and developing the new mood of class consciousness. Indeed, throughout the depression period, realism was written and discussed with an intensity not seen since the time of Howells, Norris and Crane.<sup>74</sup>

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"Recent Problems in Revolutionary Literature", *Partisan Review* III (June-July 1934) pp.3-11. This quotation is from p.5.

<sup>70</sup> Edmund Wilson, *New Republic* (May 11, 1932) p.14.

<sup>71</sup> "The Russian revolutionaries", he observed, "have been aware that the spiritual cement of literature and art is needed to bind together a society...The *Proletkult* is there conscious effort towards this". "Towards Proletarian Art", *Liberator* (February 1921). Reprinted in Mike Folsom ed., *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology*, (New York: International, 1972) p.69. The basic objective of *proletkult* was to encourage the production of writing which depicted working class experience. For a fuller discussion, see Chapter One of Barbara Foley's *Radical Representations*.

<sup>72</sup> In a savage review of Thornton Wilder's latest book, Gold lambasted Wilder for extending the twenties legacy, and using clever styles to take "refuge in the rootless cosmopolitanism which marks every *emigre* trying to flee the problems of his community". "Where are the modern streets of New York, Chicago and New Orleans in these little novels?" asked Gold, "Where are the stockbroker suicides, the labor racketeers or passion and death of the coal miners?". Mike Gold, "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ", *New Republic* (October 22 1930). Collected in Folsom ed., p.199.

Edmund Wilson, who was editing *New Republic* at the time, was inundated with complaints about Gold's piece. On 26 November he used his editorial to defend the decision to publish the offending article, asking, "Does not the outcry which Mr. Gold has provoked prove the insipidity and pointlessness of most of our criticism?" The following spring he returned to the controversy, observing that after the row, "it became very plain that the economic crisis was going to be accompanied by a literary one." *New Republic* (4 May 1932). For an account of the controversy, see Folsom ed. p.197.

<sup>73</sup> Mike Gold coined this phrase in his influential article of the same name. "Proletarian Realism", *New Masses* (September 1930) Folsom ed., pp.200-207.

<sup>74</sup> "During the Thirties, there was proletarian realism and bourgeois realism, urban realism and rural realism, WASP realism and Dustbowl realism, white realism and black realism. This was a decade when



Whilst many factors had a bearing upon Gold's thinking about realism, particularly the specific culture of the Communist Party during this very militant period, there are some striking parallels with the 1890s debates.<sup>75</sup> Like Howells and Norris, Gold was advocating a politically progressive realism which should break from current literary trends. In Howells's case, this was romance--in Gold's, it was the legacy of what he called "the decade of despair", the experimental writing of the twenties.<sup>76</sup> Just as Howells castigated romance for promoting escape and nostalgia, Gold dismissed those "trying to flee the problems of their community" with a writing which enabled the "parvenu class to forget its lowly origins in American industrialism" by papering over "the barbaric sources of their income, the billions wrung from the American workers and foreign peasants and coolies."<sup>77</sup> And like Frank Norris, who defined his idiosyncratic version of romance against the aesthetic decadence of the *Les Jeunes* group, Gold contrasted proletarian literature to the masturbatory rottenness,<sup>78</sup> "verbal acrobatics" and

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the forms of realism and naturalism once more came to seem the 'natural' or appropriate way to record a changing and troubled society." Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern American Novel*. Second Edition (1983; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) p. 137.

<sup>75</sup> The fact that Gold is writing from within a particular political organisation at a particular time inevitably shapes, or at least sets limits to, his critical writing. Anti-intellectual tendencies in the C.P.U.S.A were almost certainly magnified by the dire economic situation in the early thirties, and the revolutionary impatience which this provoked. Back in 1927 Gold had described anti-intellectualism in the American Labor movement. See "John Reed and the Real Thing", *New Masses* (November 1927). Collected in Folsom ed., pp. 152-157.

Related theoretical problems also restricted Gold's engagement with the concept of realism in his construction of proletarian literature. The *proletkult* literary policy was an imitation of post-revolution literary policy in Russia. The putative success of the policy there, and the high esteem in which Russia was held on the left in this period, perhaps buffered the strategy from close scrutiny in the U.S. Throughout Gold's publications on *proletkult* in the early thirties, there is a striking disparity between the revolutionary zeal with which he tries to write blueprints for these texts and the absence of any serious analysis of the specific ways in which such texts could have a political effect.

Gold's difficulties were heightened by the fact that defining proletarian literature by critically engaging with previous literature necessarily dampened the forceful idea that proletarian literature enacted a total break with this (bourgeois) tradition, and all the values which it encyphers. And the more radical this literary break is, of course, the more promising it appears in terms of forecasting the possibility of equivalent political transformation.

<sup>76</sup> Mike Gold, "Hemingway--White Collar Poet", *New Masses* (March 1928) . Folsom ed., p.157.

<sup>77</sup> Mike Gold, "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ", *New Republic* (22 October 1930) in Folsom ed., p.199.

<sup>78</sup> Gold famously described Proust as "the master-masturbator of bourgeois literature". "Proletarian Realism", *New Masses* (September 1930). Folsom ed. p.206.

"bourgeois idleness" of the twenties "boudoir bards and minor Oscar Wilde's."<sup>79</sup> "New forms without new content", he once said, are "as worthless as walnut shells whose meat the little bugs have gnawed away."<sup>80</sup>

Like his forebears then, Gold was defining his chosen realism from within a staunch opposition: on the one hand lay the decadent, self indulgence of the washed up "aesthetic bores",<sup>81</sup> and on the other an emerging "proletarian realism", written by and about the "basic American Mass."<sup>82</sup> And once again, the fact that the chosen form was being defined *against* a self consciously "literary" trend had a bearing on *how* it was defined. Eager to mark out the maximum distance between the writing of the past and the future, Gold's prescriptions for proletarian literature refused to engage with either the work of previous realists or the "aesthetic" concerns he associated with the twenties. But apart from numbering "swift action, clear form, the direct line" as central "principles of proletarian realism", he had virtually nothing to say about the form which this new "realistic and socially valuable" literature should take.<sup>83</sup> So whilst Gold failed to tackle the work of Howells, Norris and Crane, and even bemoaned the fact that the proletarian realist has "no tradition to work by",<sup>84</sup> he unwittingly followed these earlier writers in defining realism *against* writing rather than *as* writing--life, rather than books, should be the template of proletarian realism. He also adopted a strikingly familiar rhetoric to describe proletarian realism, echoing Norris's imagery of (insistently heterosexual) conquest,<sup>85</sup> and arguing that the new writing should pursue, "a kind of flesh and blood

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<sup>79</sup> Mike Gold, "Proletarian Realism", *New Masses* (September 1930). Folsom ed., pp.203-208.

<sup>80</sup> Mike Gold, "A Letter from a Clam Digger", *New Masses* (November 1929). Folsom ed., p.192.

<sup>81</sup> Mike Gold, "Go Left, Young Writers", *New Masses* (January 1929). Folsom ed., p.189.

<sup>82</sup> Mike Gold, "Proletarian Realism", *New Masses* (September 1930). Folsom ed., p.207.

<sup>83</sup> Mike Gold, "Proletarian Realism", *New Masses* (September 1930). Folsom ed., p.207.

<sup>84</sup> Mike Gold, "Letter From a Clam-Digger", *New Masses* (November 1929). Folsom ed., p.192.

<sup>85</sup> As mentioned above, Norris described his ideal fiction as "an instrument, keen, finely tempered, flawless...which may go straight through the clothes and tissues and wrappings of flesh down deep into the red, living heart of things." Frank Norris, "A Plea For Romantic Fiction" (1901) in Donald Pizer ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964) p.75.



reality, however crude, rather than the smooth perfect thing that is found in books."<sup>86</sup> Gold also took up Norris' sexualized, patriotic pioneer imagery, but nuanced it with the lexicon of labour and capital: "the liberals have presented us writers with a *monopoly* on the basic American Mass. We have a wonderful virgin field to explore, *titanic* opportunities for creative *work*" (my italics).<sup>87</sup> In another article he further spelt out this anti-aesthetic emphasis. Like Howells, who encouraged young writers to shun "ideals, traditions and musty books",<sup>88</sup> or Norris who exhorted them to turn to "life, not other people's novels",<sup>89</sup> Gold reassured his followers not to "worry about style, grammar or syntax."<sup>90</sup> So in his determination to break with the past, to disregard both previous realists and twenties writing, and to drive proletarian realism forward by revolutionary fiat alone, Gold actually rehearsed the earlier generation's failure to think about realism *as* writing.

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Granville Hicks, Gold's Party comrade and his successor as *New Masses* editor, was equally prominent in the literary debates of the early thirties. More scholarly than Gold, Hicks's principle contribution was *The Great Tradition* (1932), a tome which re-appraised American literature with a view to guiding writers to more class conscious approaches to their work.<sup>91</sup> Like Gold's, Hicks's ideas enjoyed a wide readership during the depression. His most influential article, "American Fiction: The Major Trend",

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<sup>86</sup> Mike Gold, "Go Left, Young Writers", *New Masses* (January 1929). Folsom ed., p.190.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, p.191.

<sup>88</sup> William Dean Howells, "On Truth in Fiction" (1891) in George Becker ed., *Documents of Modern Literary Realism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963) pp.129-137.

<sup>89</sup> Frank Norris, "The Need for A Literary Conscience" (1901), in D. Pizer ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris* (Austin: University of Texas Press) p.89.

<sup>90</sup> Mike Gold, "Letter to Workers Art Groups, *New Masses* (September 1929). Folsom ed., p.16.

<sup>91</sup> Granville Hicks, *The Great Tradition* (New York: International, 1933)

crystallized the arguments from his book and was printed by the *New Republic* in April 1933.<sup>92</sup>

In this article, Hicks re-wrote the recent history of American fiction as the progress narrative of what he considered its "major trend": the "realistic tradition" (p.354). For Hicks, this trend, founded by Howells, formed the natural ancestry of a newly emerging class conscious writing. But Howells's realism, for all its strengths, had two key weaknesses: one stemmed from Howells's prudery and the other from the fact that "he had no fundamental clue to the meaning of the struggle...there was no steady light to illuminate his pages" (p.356). The former problem was apparently overcome by subsequent realists, notably Hamlin Garland who "simply swept away, in *Main-Travelled Roads*, the old habits of timidity and mis-representation" (p.356). The latter problem, according to Hicks, continued to dog realism, and his article chronicles the tradition's fruitless struggle to overcome it. The writings of Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis are all hampered by this perspectival or intellectual problem. This created openings for other trends, which drew upon different literary precedents, such as romance or nostalgic local color, and which set themselves up in opposition to realism. This opposition, claimed Hicks, had become especially pronounced in the twenties, when realism's failure "encouraged writers such as Thornton Wilder to work for perfection of form at the expense of all else" (p.359). "Surveying the twenties at their close", Hicks continued, "critics argued, and with much justification, that the Howells tradition had been momentarily, and perhaps permanently submerged" (p.359).

Thankfully this problem was overcome by the writing of John Dos Passos whose work announced the "liberation of American literature from confusion, superficiality and despair" (p.360). Whilst standing "squarely in the major tradition", Dos Passos discovered the Marxist theory of class struggle, or the "key to the labyrinth" of American society (p.359). Reconciling realism with this theory enabled him, in texts such as *Manhattan Transfer* (1919), to "bind together in a literary unit" the "diverse phenomena" of American life (p.359). The following excerpt is from the opening of that novel,

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<sup>92</sup> Granville Hicks, "American Fiction: The Major Trend". First published in *New Republic* LXIIV (12 April, 1933) p.241. Reprinted in Granville Hicks, Joseph North, Michael Gold, Paul Peters, Isodor Schneider, Alan Calmer and Joseph Freeman eds., *Proletarian Literature in the United States* (New York: International, 1936). Further references, which are to this edition, are included in parentheses in the text.



where, written in small type, it takes the form of a vignette preceding the main body of text:

Three gulls wheel above the broken boxes, orangerinds, spoiled cabbage heads that heave between the splintered plank walls, the green waves spume under the round bow as the ferry, skidding on the tide, crashes, gulps the broken water, slides, settles slowly into the slip. Handwinches whirl with jingle of chains. Gates fold upwards, feet step out across the crack, men and women press through the manuresmelling wooden tunnel of the ferryhouse, crushed and jostling like apples fed down a chute into a press.<sup>93</sup>

A number of techniques combine to give the passage a disorientating effect. Whilst the first sentence is quick to give detail, through its sequence of sharply focussed close-ups ("Three gulls", "broken boxes"), it is slow to position these details in relation to a broader setting. Indeed, the *montage* of detail actually postpones the dock-side setting from being established. The use of the present tense, the lack of conjunctions or decisive punctuation, the concatenation of compound nouns into single words ("orangerinds") and the use of nouns for verbs ("gulls wheel", "waves spume") all contribute to the paratactic effect in which the stubborn, material facts of the objects take precedence over their interrelation or significance. And whilst inanimate objects become animate ("cabbage heads heave", the ferry "gulps") human beings are either reduced to body parts ("feet step out") or edited out and replaced by apparently autonomous objects ("handwinches", "chains"), noises ("jingle") and visual impressions ("whirls"). In the final clause of the third sentence, the implicit is, rather heavy-handedly, made explicit: rather than controlling these processes, people are being processed by them.

In these three sentences, Dos Passos establishes some of the concerns which are to dominate his novel, notably the mechanization of life in the modern city. Hicks applauded the predominance of these themes, and encouraged other writers to take them up too, but his diagrammatic account, which reads *Manhattan Transfer* as the natural expression of Marxist theory intersecting with Howells's realism, simplifies the issue. And whilst it is not possible here to explore the whole gamut of intellectual and cultural

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<sup>93</sup> John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer* (1925; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) p.15.

currents which influence Dos Passos' writing, it is sufficient to say that this small passage alone bears the imprint of Dos Passos' well-documented interest in European modernism.<sup>94</sup> Hicks's dismissal of twenties experimentalism partly explains this gaping blindspot in his analysis. But so does the related failure, which he shared with Gold, to think seriously about realism as *writing*, rather than as the artless transcription of subject matter. These limitations prevented Hicks from recognising the complexity of *Manhattan Transfer* and from guiding young writers to build upon its achievement.

ii

The *Partisan Review* was established in February 1934 as the literary journal of the Party's New York City writers' club.<sup>95</sup> Given its centrality to the Party's cultural apparatus, one might expect the magazine's young editors to have followed the lines laid down by the more senior Gold and Hicks on literary matters. But within the space of two issues, Philip Rahv and Wallace Phelps (who sometimes took the pseudonym William Phillips) had shifted the journal away from its original commitment to publish the "best creative work" produced by the club's members<sup>96</sup> and towards a new emphasis on "creative experiment and critical precision"<sup>97</sup>--neither of which matched the priorities of Gold or Hicks. By the turn of the year Rahv and Phelps were implicitly criticizing the Party's mandarins by outlining the lack of "aesthetic theory" in America and insisting

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<sup>94</sup> Malcolm Bradbury identifies *Manhattan Transfer's* debt to Conrad, Joyce, Doblin, Biely and perhaps most obviously in the passage quoted, contemporary cinema. See Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern American Novel*, Second Edition (1983; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) p.107.

<sup>95</sup> The same month as the Wall Street crash, C.P.U.S.A. set-up the first "John Reed Club" in New York City. Named after the American revolutionary hero who famously documented the October Revolution in *Ten Days That Shook the World* (1919; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), the club was established to encourage the production of workers' writing. Within the next five years, thirty sister organizations appeared across the States, numbering a total membership of twelve hundred.

<sup>96</sup> Philip Rahv and William Phelps, Editorial, *Partisan Review* 1, no.1 (February-March 1934) p.1.

<sup>97</sup> Philip Rahv and William Phillips, "Recent Problems of Revolutionary Literature", *Partisan Review* 1, no. 3 (June-July 1934) pp. 3-11. p.9.



that "in literature as in politics Marxism faces the task of fighting 'pragmatism' which familiar historical conditions have produced in the United States."<sup>98</sup>

The young editors' receptivity to Marxist theory is generally well documented,<sup>99</sup> although the enormous significance which Georg Lukács exerted over the young magazine has been surprisingly overlooked.<sup>100</sup> Their immersion in Marxist aesthetics encouraged them to interrogate the specific ways in which literary works might have ideological effects and to consider the roles which genre and form played in this process.<sup>101</sup> This dragged them further out of synch with the itchy footed urgency of mainstream Communist Party cultural politics. To the irritation of their comrades, who accused them of carrying their Marxist scholarship like a "heavy cross",<sup>102</sup> they insisted that proletarian literature needed to define its relationship with the literature of the past: the task of the committed critic was therefore to become "acutely aware of the body of literature as a whole" and to develop critical tools capable of distinguishing between "class alien and usable elements in the literature of the past."<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Wallace Phelps and Philip Rahv, "Criticism", *Partisan Review* II, no. 7 (April-May 1935) pp. 16-17.

<sup>99</sup> Any writings which might challenge "pragmatism" were enthusiastically received by them--in 1934 Rahv used his *Daily Worker* column to thank *International Literature* for "presenting the long-awaited Marx and Engels correspondence with La Salle", adding, "the concrete and profound insights...into the problems of tragedy and the revolutionary point of view in literature will undoubtedly illumine many dark corners in our proletarian criticism". Philip Rahv, "*International Literature* Grows in Popularity among American Workers", cited Foley p.153.

<sup>100</sup> Notably in James Burkhart Gilbert's otherwise informative account, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1968). In the second edition of the magazine, Rahv and Phelps published Lukács' "Propaganda or Partisanship". The word "partisan" in Lukács' title nicely hooked onto that of their own publication, and the piece was printed back to back with a Rahv review entitled "The Novelist as Partisan". This short, pithy article by a critic of Lukács' calibre became something of a mast-head for the new publication, supplying a set of theoretical bearings to orientate the *Partisan Review* through American debates. See Georg Lukács, "Propaganda or Partisanship?", *Partisan Review* 1, no. 2 (April-May 1934) pp.36-46.

<sup>101</sup> Rahv and Phelps succinctly outlined their theoretical position in "Criticism", *Partisan Review* II, no.7 (April-May 1935) pp.16-25.

<sup>102</sup> In a 1936 review of Clifford Odet's play *Paradise Lost*, Gold accused the *Partisan Review* of carrying "their Marxian scholarship as though it were a heavy cross". Quoted in Jack Salzman and Barry Wallenstein eds., *Years of Protest: A Collection of American Writing from the 1930's* (Indianapolis and New York: Pegasus, 1967) p.276.

<sup>103</sup> Rahv and Phelps, "Recent Problems in Revolutionary Literature", *Partisan Review* 1, no.3 (June - July 1934) p.7.

In "Three Generations", Wallace Phelps set this project in motion by situating proletarian writing in relation to both earlier American realism and the experimental writing of the twenties.<sup>104</sup> He began with the group of writers made up of Dreiser, Anderson, Lewis, Robinson and Sandburg, and whilst recognising that "literary generations in America have never been so homogenous or clearly defined as they have been in Europe", he identified an underlying "social interest", "extreme literalism of method" and a shared dedication to "muckraking", "iconoclasm" and "satire" (p.49). Collating details from Wilson's *Axel's Castle* and Cowley's *Exile's Return*, Phelps then discussed the "lost generation" writing, seeing this scene as an extension of Symbolism and "a repudiation of the Dreiser period" which "not only succeeded in introducing new ways of handling new subjects, but also in assimilating many significant ideas of the period" (p.50).<sup>105</sup> So where other Communist party intellectuals either overlooked the lost generation altogether (Hicks) or dismissed it as bourgeois and decadent (Gold), Phelps thought in terms of both the cultural movements which fed into it and of the new intellectual currents which these movements brought into writing. This engagement is then complemented by a discussion of the unfashionable and dissident movement sustained through the twenties by Communists like Joseph Freeman and Mike Gold, which extended the social interest and literalism of Dreiser's generation. The ongoing relevance of this subculture, claimed Phelps, came to light when boom led to bust, the good old days to the bad new ones and "the tempo of revolution" quickened in the thirties (p.51). According to Phelps, it is the polarization of these two literary formations into mutually exclusive camps--the experimental lost generation versus the re-popularized "direct and linear methods" of Dreiser and the revolutionary "pioneers" (p.53)--which stymies discussion of proletarian literature. The solution, Phelps claimed, is to recognize that: "We are more aware of the realists and naturalists than was the last generation. But our approach to them is colored, nonetheless, by the lens of the intervening epoch" (p.53). Critical engagement with both formations is therefore required, and he begins by

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<sup>104</sup> Wallace Phelps, "Three Generations", *Partisan Review* 1, no. 4 (September-October 1934) pp.49-55. Further citations will be given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>105</sup> Phelps continues: "The apparent objectivity of scientific method, the relativity of time to motion, (in fiction, to action), the idealistic denial of immediate realities or their submersion in eternal verities or symbols, the sense of autonomous psychological sequence (as in Freud), are a few of the ideas which, in one way or another, entered into literature." *Ibid*, p.50.



weighing up experimental poetry, particularly that of Eliot and Crane, which might be appropriated by proletarian writers.

Throughout this period, the editors of the *Partisan Review* developed their analysis of recent experimental writing. Articles like "How the Wasteland Became a Flower Garden" and "Criticism" demonstrate a dissatisfaction with the minimal significance the party attributes to theoretical matters; a thirst for alternative Marxist approaches to culture and a remarkably rapid rate of development, where initially crude critical strategies are quickly transformed by uncompromising self-critique.<sup>106</sup> In "How the Wasteland Became a Flower Garden", for example, Rahv reads recent experimentalism as a "partial negation of existing society" (p.42) which fails to "challenge the predatory social order which is the matrix of philistinism" (p.41). But in "Criticism" which comes out just six months later, Rahv and Phelps developed this approach by co-opting Engels's reading of Balzac: they begin to distinguish between authorial ideology (the political opinions held by individual writers) and the ideology articulated by the *forms* of their texts. This distinction facilitates a more exacting analysis, and the notion that texts can produce effects contrary to their authors' intentions heightens Rahv and Phelps' sense of experimentalism's relevance to proletarian literature.

These arguments may sound unspectacular enough, but amount to a significant, if preliminary, breakthrough in the debate by converting assumptions into questions. By firstly, contextualizing the two formations, and by secondly, thinking not only about what writing is like but also about how this affects the things that it does, Rahv and Phelps begin to challenge the ossified opposition between realism and twenties experimentalism which cast such a shadow over party debates. But before this promising critical project could turn its attention to the realist formation, it was swamped by political events. In September 1935 at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International, Dimitrov issued an official call for a Popular Front to combat fascism throughout the world. From this point onwards, the energy of Rahv and Phelps was sapped by party infighting and redirected to more pressing matters. As such, their first tentative attempts

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<sup>106</sup> Philip Rahv, "How the Wasteland Became a Flower Garden", *Partisan Review* 1, no.4 (September - October 1934) pp.37-42 and William Phelps, "Criticism", *Partisan Review* II, no.7 (April-May 1935) pp.16-25. Further references will be cited in parantheses in the text.

at developing a critique of realism capable of grappling with its current complexity and diversity was lost. In an article from April 1938, Rahv summed up the darkening mood of show-trials and rising fascism with the words: "Our days are ceasing to be. We are beginning to live from hour to hour, awaiting the change of headlines. History has seized time in a brutal embrace. We dread the apocalypse."<sup>107</sup>

## **"A NEW AND MORE FABULOUS FICTION":<sup>108</sup> POSTMODERNISM AND REALISM IN THE 1960s AND 1970s.**

"By the early 1960s", wrote Tom Wolfe in 1989:

...the notion of the death of the realistic novel had caught on among young American writers with the force of revelation. This was an extraordinary turnabout. In 1930 Sinclair Lewis, a realistic novelist who used reporting techniques as thorough as Zola's, became the first American writer to win the Nobel Prize... Yet by 1962, when Steinbeck won the Nobel Prize, young writers, and intellectuals generally, regarded him and his approach to the novel as an embarrassment... All serious young writers--*serious* meaning those who aimed for literary prestige--understood such things, and they were dismantling the realistic novel just as fast as they could think of ways to do it. The dividing line was the year 1960. Writers who went to college after 1960...*understood*.<sup>109</sup>

As I will argue in chapter four, Wolfe's depiction of the "dividing line" is blurred by

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<sup>107</sup> Philip Rahv, "Trials of the Mind", *Partisan Review* 4, no.5 (April 1938) p.3. Rahv and Phelps left the Party in 1937. By 1939 Rahv's political pessimism reached its nadir and he published the article "Proletarian Literature: a Political Autopsy", which rubbished the literary projects he had been so prominent in, famously describing proletarian literature as "the literature of the party disguised as the literature of a class." Philip Rahv, "Proletarian Literature: A Political Autopsy", *Southern Review* 4 (Winter 1939) p.12.

<sup>108</sup> Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Urbana, Chicago and London: Illinois University Press, 1979) p.i.

<sup>109</sup> Tom Wolfe, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel", *Harper's Magazine* 279 (November 1989) pp.45-56. p.48.



rhetorical sarcasm and simplification,<sup>110</sup> and reveals as much about his anti-sixties Neoconservative agenda as it does about the actual literary shift under question. Even so, Wolfe *is* right to detect a fundamental change in perceptions of realism since the thirties. Whereas Communist Party critics had assumed that realism would be an integral component in constructing a proletarian aesthetic, confidence in realism's progressive force was eroded in subsequent years. In this section, I begin to explore this erosion by first, tracing the emergence of "postmodernist fiction" and by second, thinking about the ways in which the new writing is *constructed* as a *movement* which frequently defines itself in relation to realism.

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The sixties witnessed a proliferation of fiction which interrogated the chaos of contemporary reality and measured the diminishing purchase which longstanding narrative forms seemed to have upon it. Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* (1961), for example, generated black comedy from the absence of reality's rational order, whilst Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1963) thinks through the need for fictions in such a world.<sup>111</sup> The new fiction often represented reality as defying the logic of those conceptual

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<sup>110</sup> Wolfe exaggerates the suddenness of the change ("dividing line") in order to poke fun at this anti-realist trend. His tone ridicules the whimsy of the about-turn: the dumping of realism is presented as a sixties fad on par with tie die, love beads or sideburns.

Contrary to Wolfe's caricature, things did not actually change over night, and it is worth filling out his elliptical version of events. Anti-realist arguments loom large in seminal literary criticism throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Alfred Kazin's *On Native Grounds* (1942; New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963) would be one example. The "New Realism" of Sherwood Anderson is criticized for taking itself for granted—its cutting edge is said to be blunted precisely because its "photographic exactness" (p.208) puts up so little resistance to the rhythms of experience. "Realism", writes Kazin, had become "familiar and absorbed in the world of familiarity...it had become the normal circuit" (p.207). Richard Chase's 1957 classic, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1957) could be added to this list: in effect, Chase historicizes and revives the realist-romance opposition in order to dissociate, or even rescue, canonized American fiction from a tradition of straight realism. He then re-valorizes this fiction by re-describing it as a hybrid of realism and romance.

<sup>111</sup> Joseph Heller, *Catch 22* (1961; London: Corgi, 1964) and Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* (1963; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965).

systems through which it has previously been apprehended and represented: Thomas Pynchon's *V* (1963) evokes the present through apocalyptic tropes, whilst the historical past is figured as a chaos resisting order: in the words of one commentator, the reader's mind is "held teetering in a condition of mental and historical entropy."<sup>112</sup>

As part of the same process, much of the new fiction scrutinised the procedures and conventions of writing itself. The texts in John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice* (1968) weigh up the implications of their own fictionality in a style reminiscent of Robbe-Grillet, Vladimir Nabokov and Jorge Luis Borges.<sup>113</sup> Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* (1967), in the words of Malcolm Bradbury and Daniel Snowman, "offered to replace the traditional novel or fable with the materials for random collage into which meaning could not be structured."<sup>114</sup> And Ronald Sukenick's *Up* (1968) pushes self-reflexivity one step further; Sukenick not only builds into the text self-consciousness about the processes of its creation, but addresses the publishing industry through which it will be proofread, edited, packaged and circulated: as Jerome Klinkowitz puts it: "Reading *Up* is...like participating in an account of the world of American publishing, from its academic base, through the mechanics of its production, to the physical existence of the book itself."<sup>115</sup>

Whilst the experimental new fiction demonstrated an intense self-reflexivity in terms of its own narrative strategies, the new writers showed a corresponding self-consciousness, frequently describing their books as part of an emergency literary scene performing a break from the past. For all the diversity of the new writing, discussions of it was frequently grounded in realism's putative redundancy. In his 1964 essay, "After Joyce", Donald Barthelme characterized the ethos of the new fiction, saying that in it,

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<sup>112</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *V* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1963). Quotation from Daniel Snowman and Malcolm Bradbury, "The Sixties and Seventies" in Malcolm Bradbury and Howard Temperley eds., *Introduction to American Studies* (1981; New York and London: Longman, 1989) p. 334.

<sup>113</sup> John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice* (1968; New York: Bantam, 1969). For an account of the influences of Nabokov, Borges, Beckett and Grillet on postmodernism, see the first chapter of Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987).

<sup>114</sup> Donald Barthelme, *Snow White* (1967; New York: Atheneum, 1987). Quotation from Bradbury and Temperley eds., p.344.

<sup>115</sup> Ronald Sukenick, *Up* (1968; New York: Dell, 1970). The quotation is from Jerome Klinkowitz, "The Extra-Literary in Contemporary American Fiction", in Malcolm Bradbury and Sigmund Ro eds., *Contemporary American Fiction* (London: Edward Arnold, 1987) p.22.



"the reader is not listening to an authoritative account of the world delivered by an expert...but bumping into something that is *there*, like a rock or a refrigerator."<sup>116</sup> The "authoritative account" presumably refers to an all-seeing, all-knowing narrator--anathema in the mid-sixties, where the watchword was to mistrust authority. And in his influential 1967 essay "The Literature of Exhaustion", John Barth also takes objection to the musty flavour of those contemporary novels still tainted by realism.<sup>117</sup> "A good many current novelists" he says, having just mentioned Saul Bellow's name, "write turn of the century type novels, only in more or less mid-twentieth century language and about contemporary topics or people" (p.30). He goes on to say that the "conventional devices" upon which these narratives rely--"cause and effect, linear anecdote, characterization, authorial selection, arrangement, and interpretation--can be and have long since been objected to as obsolete notions, or metaphors for obsolete notions" (p.33). Barth prefers writers who are "technically contemporary", like Robbe Grillet (p.33) and Jorge Luis Borges (p.30).<sup>118</sup>

Critics, no less than the authors, were quick to detect a new trend in contemporary American writing. In 1963 J. Mitchell Morse had introduced exciting French literary developments to an American audience, lamenting that, "France is the only country where the novel is not merely repeating itself" (p.396).<sup>119</sup> By the late sixties

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<sup>116</sup> Donald Barthelme, "After Joyce", *Location 2* (1964) p.13. Quoted in Richard Walsh, *Novel Arguments: Reading Innovative American Fiction* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995) p.25.

<sup>117</sup> John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion", *The Atlantic* 220, no.2 (August 1967) pp. 29-35. Further references will be cited in parentheses in the text.

<sup>118</sup> Ronald Sukenick also had a few things to say about how "parochial and narrow the accepted literary norm for fiction had become" in America prior to the sixties efflorescence of innovative writing. His key pronouncements on the subject were initially published as a press release for his 1973 novel *Out*, and later adapted in an article for the journal *fiction international* (1974). "The form of fiction that comes down to us through Jane Austen, George Eliot and Hemingway is no longer adequate for our experience", he writes, before ominously warning that the novel "must change, or die" (p.241). Like Barth, he offered a prescription for the direction which fiction must take. The key criteria, which read like blueprints for Sukenick's own writing, include the replacement of "plot" by "ongoing incident", "characterization" by "consciousness struggling with circumstance" and "social realism" by "a sense of situation" (p.243). Page references are to the original source, *fiction international* (1974). Also quoted in Jerome Klinkowitz, "The Extra-Literary in Contemporary American Fiction", in Bradbury and Ro eds., p.22. .

<sup>119</sup> J. Mitchell Morse, "The Choreography of the New Novel", *Hudson Review* 16, no.3 (Autumn 1963) pp. 396-420. Further references will be included in parentheses in the text.

Throughout this chapter we have seen that the emergence of new opinions about realism are often prompted by, amongst other factors, the emergence of new narrative forms, be they naturalism at

and early seventies, books and articles attempting to define and consolidate a correspondingly forward-looking *American* scene were coming off the academic presses in their droves.

The first of these books, Robert Scholes' *The Fabulators* (1967), laboured to demote realism, and defined the new writing as transcending its restrictive boundaries. Scholes likens contemporary realists to "headless chickens unaware of the decapitating axe".<sup>120</sup> Just what the axe represents in the simile is unclear, but the aggression of the rhetoric communicates the importance which Scholes attached to the issues under question. Various strategies are employed to dismiss realism. It is said to be superseded by cinema, because "one picture is worth a thousand words" (p.11). It is also challenged on more theoretical principles: "Realism" writes Scholes "purports--has always purported--to subordinate the words themselves to their referents, the things the words point to. Realism exalts life and Diminishes Art, exalts things and diminishes words" (p.11). In the same vein, realism is charged with both "pseudo-objectivity" (p.12) and anachronism; on the latter count, Scholes quotes Robbe-Grillet to attest that: "the (realist) imitators of Balzac are...formalists because they slavishly copy the forms devised in another era by another sensibility to represent another reality" (p.67). Elsewhere, Scholes relies on attitude and stylistic verve alone: the argument, such as it is, runs: realism is dead because I'm writing its obituary. Consequently he poses the "great question" about life after death, asking where fiction can go after the realistic novel (p.11).

One of the more striking features of *The Fabulators* is that, like Richard Chase's *The American Novel and its Tradition* (1957), it revives the romance-realism opposition

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the turn of the century or experimentalism in the twenties and thirties. At both points the European literary scene plays a part in re-vitalizing American writing and its adjacent debates: Zola's fiction re-energizes American realism in the 1890's, whilst the cross-fertilization produced by Parisian exile helps to shape American modernism. This is also partly true of the sixties context--once again, Continental innovation plays an important role in boosting a tired American scene.

Morse describes how new French fiction had assimilated the modernist innovations of Proust, Kafka, Faulkner and Dos Passos, using the tradition as "the base for further experimentation and the refinement of technique" (p.417): the writings of Marguerite Duras, Michel Butor, and particularly Robbe Grillet and Samuel Beckett, exemplify this refinement by turning away from representation--namely, the imparting of vicarious experience (p.348)--and developing a new aesthetic which foregrounded "the writer's performance as performance" (p.348).

<sup>120</sup> Robert Scholes, *The Fabulators* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967) p.6. Further references will be cited in parantheses in the text.



introduced into American literary criticism eighty years earlier.<sup>121</sup> The structure provides a ready-made framework, which, with a little modification, can map out the new fictional ground. So "fabulation"--which is the word Scholes uses to describe the writing of William Golding, Lawrence Durrell, and Iris Murdoch abroad, and Kurt Vonnegut, Terry Southern, John Hawkes and John Barth in the States--is a latter day "romance" (p.12). Its salient characteristics are pleasure in form, authorial self-consciousness, the creation of "ethically controlled fantasy" (p.11) and interest in ideas and ideals rather than things (p.13). Its function is not to show us how the world is, but to exercise our imagination: after all, as Scholes reminds us, "we need all the imagination we have and we need it exercised and in good condition" (p.30).

Scholes's book is worth singling out for special attention for a number of reasons. It not only recycles the romance-realism opposition (which suggests just how enduring such conceptual frameworks can be) but is also a remarkably swift critical response to a literary scene which was taking shape as Scholes was writing: this gives an indication of how rapidly this "new and more fabulous fiction" was assimilated by academics, and how quickly it was celebrated as an exciting movement which displaced the uniformity of preceding realism. And on the same note, the book emphatically engages with realism--albeit a type of cartoon of realism--in order to clarify fabulation's features and define its objectives. Finally, the book's notion of what these objectives are warrant special mention. Fabulation is deemed to be a progressive and exciting movement. But the drive of the movement is not described as political in the sense of pressurizing ideological structures: the emphasis is more narrowly individual and cultural, advocating a writing which breaks from the literary past and activates sluggish imaginations.

By 1971, new critical studies were appearing and the word "postmodernism" was being applied to the new writing, thanks to Ihab Hassan's groundbreaking book, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodernist Literature*.<sup>122</sup> Robert Alter's

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<sup>121</sup> Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1957).

<sup>122</sup> Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodernist Literature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). The next year, Raymond Olderman's idiosyncratic book, *Beyond the Wasteland: A Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties* (New Haven and London: Yale U.P., 1972) was published. Following in the footsteps of Chase and Scholes, Olderman also counterpoints realism with romance, seeing the new writing as a manifestation of the latter. But whereas

*Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre*<sup>123</sup> stands out from this formation, being more interested in the traditions upon which postmodern writing draws than in the fiction itself. His thesis is that realism, the "intent, verisimilar representation of moral situations in their social contexts" (p.ix), has been unduly privileged in critical discussions: indeed, Alter points out that F.R. Leavis elevates this to the status of the exclusive "Great Tradition" in his book of the same title. This privileging, claims Alter, represses or contains an alternative tradition made up from "the kind of novel that expresses its seriousness through playfulness, that is acutely aware of itself as a structure of words even as it tries to discover ways of going beyond words to the experiences words seek to indicate" (p.ix). Alter's task is to spotlight this shadowed, cosmopolitan tradition, which he does through discussions of Sterne, Diderot, Fielding, Joyce, Proust, Mann, Faulkner, Kafka and Virginia Woolf. Nabokov, the "elder statesman of self-conscious fiction" (p.225) is seen to bridge the modernist and postmodernist manifestations of self-conscious writing, and gets a chapter all to himself. The title of the final chapter turns that of Barth's essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" inside out. Barth was, of course, referring to realism. Alter's "The Inexhaustible Genre" refers to its self-conscious opposite number and situates writers like Barth, Pynchon, Barthelme, Vonnegut and Robert Coover in this distinguished, but critically neglected tradition.

By historicizing postmodernism, Alter's book consolidated critical enthusiasm for the new writing. In 1979, Robert Scholes updated his book, and set about incorporating into it both the critical insights which had become available since 1967 and the work of new authors which had appeared since *The Fabulators* was first written. He opens the new book, *Fabulation and Metafiction* with a retrospective account of the situation

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Scholes explores the interiority of the new fiction--its self-reflexivity and so on--seeing this as a response to the tired naivete of *realism*, Oldermann sees the new fiction more as a response to contemporary *reality*. "In the world of the sixties", he writes, "chaos becomes insanity and there is no accident--all things are malevolently ordered either by the Institution or by widespread Conspiracy. The combination of the fable form with black humour, the wasteland image, and the several themes emerging from a blurring of fact and fiction create a specific configuration which is basic to the novel of the sixties" (p.13). Conspiracy, black humor, the de-stabilization of fact and fiction--by 1972, these have entered critical discussions of the new writing, and quickly become staple to them.

<sup>123</sup> Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley, L.A., London: Univ. California Press, 1975). Further references will be cited in parentheses in the text.



which its predecessor was responding to:<sup>124</sup>

Many readers, teachers and professional critics at that time were possessed by notions of fictional propriety derived from a version of realism that had seen its best days and was being perpetuated in a trivial and often mechanical way; while around us a new and more fabulous fiction was coming into being--a kind of fiction that had much to teach us and many satisfactions to give us (p.i).

Here then, realism is given a new spin. It is located specifically in relation to the Academy ("teachers and professional critics") and more precisely, is described as the cherished property of a fusty old guard. And if one looks back to reviews of *The Fabulators*, Scholes's theory rings true. Bernard Bergonzi originally reviewed the book for *The Hudson Review*, and found both the subject of the book, and Scholes's sympathetic approach to it, "repellent".<sup>125</sup> Bergonzi balked at John Barth's "contempt for humanity" and likened the "dreadful enclosed system" of his novel *Giles Goat Boy* to Auschwitz. John Hawkes's perspective was described as "destructive" to "one's ordinary human commitments" (p.362) and the fiction of Robbe-Grillet was said to arise from a "dehumanizing and totalitarian impulse" (p.362). The Cold War rhetoric (the word "totalitarian" is used again on p.364) articulates Bergonzi's sense of a polarized literary and critical scene, and the whole article bristles with his high dudgeon at being confronted by anti-humanist novelists and a new generation of "sharp, hectoring" upstart critics (p.360).

Given this background, it is not surprising that *Fabulation and Metafiction* is written with a militant gusto. Scholes tells a story about veteran realist John Steinbeck spending the last twelve years of his life vainly trying to write fabulation. "What moved Steinbeck to fabulation?" he asks disingenuously. "What but the same impulse that was moving many younger writers in the same direction--the sense that the positivistic base for traditional realism had been eroded, and that reality, if it could be caught at all, would require a new set of fictional skills" (p.4). Here realism and fabulation are

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<sup>124</sup> Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Urbana, Chicago and London: University of Illinois press, 1979). Further references will be cited in parantheses in the text.

<sup>125</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, "Fiction and Fabulation", *The Hudson Review* XXI, no. 2 (Summer 1968) pp. 355-364. p.360. Further references will be cited in parantheses in the text.

grouped by the chief counter-culture categories of young and old, hip and square.<sup>126</sup> Steinbeck is old, square and an incorrigible realist: fabulation is the *forte* of the young and hip.<sup>127</sup>

So prominent commentators on the new fiction, like its authors, see the movement as progressive, even if notions of what progressive culture's function might be have altered since the thirties. Realism is the past which this new vanguard wants to leave behind. Postmodernist fiction prides itself on simultaneously countering the literary culture of the fifties, and the older (realist) literary traditions which this literary culture is seen to perpetuate.<sup>128</sup> In this regard then, the opposition between realism and postmodernism reflects and articulates broader (counter) cultural tensions as a rebellion against the past in general, and fifties conformism in particular. And there is good reason to think about these tensions in relation to commensurate social and institutional shifts. Not only because universities in the sixties were hot-beds for both the new

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<sup>126</sup> "Generational conflict", wrote Jack Newfield in his grass roots history of the American New Left, "is inevitable when a younger, insurgent generation creates its own movement and ethos. Today such conflict is taking place in the arts...In literature, an under-thirty-five faction of black humorists including Thomas Pynchon and John Barth is in conflict with older, more rationalistic critics." Jack Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority: The American New Left* (1966; London: Anthony Blond, 1967) p.177.

<sup>127</sup> Later in the book, Scholes states that realism, "instead of being simply the truest reflection of the world, was simply a formal device like any other, a tool to be put aside when it had lost its cutting edge" (p.170). This confidence that realism has become toothless emboldens Scholes, who dexterously plots "the major aspects of fabulation as they have manifested themselves in the past decade and a half" (p.4). "The movement" is now categorized into new sub-divisions: romance, modern allegory, metafiction and comedy/grotesque. Furthermore, the counterculture credentials of the movement are further drawn out when Scholes includes a discussion of Bob Dylan's experimental novel *Tarantula* (1971).

Books in a similar vain to Scholes's continued to be produced beyond the hey-day of postmodernist fiction, and well into the eighties. Whilst there is not space here to discuss more of them, one deserves special mention. The very title of John Kuehl's *Alternate Worlds: A Study in Anti-Realistic American Fiction* is in itself telling. The texts under discussion are collectively defined, and thus grouped, in negative ('anti-realistic') terms. Their common denominator is portrayed as an oppositional, if not adversarial, stance towards realism. So whilst some books on postmodernist writing begin to take the tradition on its own terms, and discuss it in isolation--see Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987)--others are persistently shaped by a structure which sets realism against a newer movement, in this case, postmodernism. John Kuehl, *Alternate Worlds: A Study in Anti-Realist American Fiction* (New York : New York University Press, 1989)

<sup>128</sup> "The realistic, the formal and the moral aspects of 'Fifties writing were now challenged, as narrow, limiting, oppressive. Open forms were persistently preferred to closed ones. If the 'Fifties had emphasized the created craft object, the iconic texts, the 'Sixties insisted on spontaneous and open acts of creation and performance, emphasizing the role of chance, randomness, pure confession." Malcolm Bradbury and Daniel Snowman, "The Sixties and Seventies" in Bradbury and Temperley eds., p.335.



writing and the counterculture,<sup>129</sup> but also because, as the previous section shows, critical factions within the Academy were quick to establish a *rapport* with postmodernism, whilst others found the whole business "repellent". In the following section then, I examine the relationship between realism, postmodernism and the Academy further. More specifically, I consider this rapid construction of the new fiction as a movement in relation to *changes* in the Academy. But in order to contextualize these changes, a broader picture of economic life is required.

### **CRITICISM IN CONTEXT: REALISM AND THE CHANGING ACADEMY.**

Between 1945 and 1960, the American population grew by over eighteen per cent--the largest increase since the mass immigrations at the dawn of the century. The Gross National Product rocketed from \$255 billion in 1950 to \$500 billion in 1960 and the average family income rose by fifty per cent.<sup>130</sup> Whilst huge sections of the population enjoyed no such affluence, the proportion of professional Americans leading comfortable middle class lives in the suburbs rose steadily in these years. The children of this burgeoning middle class were destined for university, and the universities were resourced to accommodate them: the American college population more than doubled between  
1950 and 1964,

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<sup>129</sup> In this period, prominent writers increasingly took up posts in the Universities. John Barth was tenured at Buffalo, William Gass at Washington, Donald Barthelme at City College and John Hawkes at Brown. Ronald Sukenick wrote a Phd on Wallace Steven at Brander's, before taking various posts at CCNY, Sarah Lawrence, Irvine, California and Colorado. See Bradbury and Ro eds., pp.22-23 and Frederick Barthelme, "On Being Wrong: Convicted Minimalist Spills Bean", *New York Times Book Review*, Section 7 (3 April 1988) pp.1,25-7.

The absorption of these writers into the expanding academy meant that their books, which were often too esoteric to satisfy mass market publishing, found a dependable outlet in the academic presses--paradoxically, then, this partial institutionalization played a part in consolidating literary experiment. In the words of Mark Shechner, "the laws of taste and value in the academy are opposed to those of the market; they are socialist or ecclesiastical laws, in which value and the languages of value flow from the top down, from investitured taste-makers, the faculty, to captive-taste consumers, students". Mark Shechner, "American Realisms, American Realities", in *Postmodern Studies* 5 (1992) p.34.

<sup>130</sup> The post war boom is discussed further in chapter two. See also chapter four of Daniel Snowman's *America Since 1920* (1968; London: Heinemann, 1978).

rising from 2.3 million to 5 million.<sup>131</sup> In the words of Vincent Leitch, this led to "an increase in the financial resources of literature departments, Universities and foundations, a tremendous numerical expansion of academic posts, journals, conferences and book publications, a relentless drift toward further institutionalization and professionalization of literary study and a diversification of power and prestige."<sup>132</sup>

The discipline of literary studies not only altered quantitatively in this period, but qualitatively too. Between the end of the Second World War and the sixties, literary studies in America had largely remained in the grip of New Criticism. This movement, which had once been eagerly received by the Academy as providing "a convenient pedagogical method of coping with a growing student population", now found *itself* challenged by a generation of academics with a different frame of intellectual reference, a different set of political objectives and often, a more developed sense of the relationship between the two.<sup>133</sup> So, the expansion of the Academy was commensurate with:

an amazing growth of new schools and movements...hermeneutics, reader-response theory, structuralism and semiotics, deconstruction, feminist criticism, Black Aesthetics and leftist criticism. More or less antinomian, all of these movements sought to counter prevailing and dominant modes of critical theory and practice. Within these schools, critics were more or less radical in their efforts to forge new instruments of enquiry and new grounds for analysis. Above all, the new schools had one project in common: to dismantle and discredit New Critical Formalism, which proved to be a highly productive whetstone.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> These figures are from Thodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970) p.28. Between 1920 and 1972 the number of faculty members in American colleges grew from 48,000 to 600,000. One quarter of this growth occurred between 1965 and 1970. See also Peter Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives: The Men Who Are Changing American Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979) p.57.

<sup>132</sup> Vincent Leitch, *American Literary Criticism from the Thirties to the Eighties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) p.33.

<sup>133</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983) p.50. See also chapter four in Richard Ohmann, *English in America* (New York: Random House, 1976).

<sup>134</sup> Leitch, p. 186.



These changes in the discipline of literary studies coincide with the proliferation of postmodernist fiction and its rapid assimilation by the young academics described in the previous section. Awareness of this broader institutional context reinforces the point that postmodern fiction should not simply be seen in isolated "literary" opposition to realism: the opposition is *in itself* a site where broader generational and institutional tensions are played out.<sup>135</sup>

In the next section I summarize some of the key intellectual currents from the continent which found a receptive audience in this "dissenting academy", and which came to justify, consolidate and extend anti-realist arguments and attitudes.<sup>136</sup> These proliferating arguments inform both postmodernist fiction and the commentary it generates, and bear a strong influence upon the academic context in which my four contemporary realist authors are received. Sometimes I approach these arguments through American books which disseminate them: I also refer back to the secondary literature on postmodernism just summarized, pointing out the continental origins of certain ideas. Elsewhere I present my own accounts of the continental theory which informs American discussion of realism, keeping an eye on the date of its translation into English and circulation in the States. Through a combination of these approaches I sample and summarize anti-realist discussion of American fiction, *and* give a general impression of realism's fading critical reputation through these years. In the final section, I outline the various ways in which this distinctive intellectual context sets the tone for the critical reception of my four realist authors.

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<sup>135</sup> This is very clear in Bergonzi's review of *The Fabulators*, which reflects the day's struggle between a more traditionally minded, gentlemanly style of criticism and that of a brash generation with fresh literary heroes and new fangled theories. Bergonzi's conservative seniority compels him to defend realism, whilst this type of response confirms the equation between realism and reaction which the young generation make. As I pointed out, Bergonzi not only objects to the "anti-humanist" subject of the book, but also to Scholes's upstart approach and hectoring tone. Saul Bellow expressed similar sentiments in his 1976 Nobel Prize speech. As Malcolm Bradbury notes, he used it to "challenge the *nouveau roman* and emphasize the moral and humanistic functions of the novel". Bradbury continues: "Gore Vidal had mounted a similar challenge in his *Matters of Fact and Fiction* (1977)" and tells of John Gardner taking issue with "the theory of fiction as mere language". Malcolm Bradbury, "Writing Fiction in the 90's", *Postmodern Studies* 5 (1992) p.21.

<sup>136</sup> Theodore Roszak ed., *The Dissenting Academy* (New York: Pantheon, 1968).

Although first published in 1916, Ferdinand Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* took on the status of a key text in the American academy during the sixties and seventies.<sup>137</sup> Saussure's writing in particular, and the structuralist linguistics which it inaugurated in general, became crucial tools in countering New Criticism. At the same time, Saussure's ideas fuelled the anti-realist drive as they supposedly put paid to the notion that some intrinsic connection existed between language and reality, or between words and the objects to which they referred. Rather, Saussure argued, the relationship between the word and the thing is an arbitrary one. Language is a system based on difference, and meaning is therefore produced by the differences between words.

This severing of words from things puts pressure on realism, which has conventionally described itself in terms of mirrors reflecting reality, or windows through which the reader could survey reality. These descriptions are premised on the idea that language somehow corresponds with reality: once this premise is undermined, such descriptions seem to be metaphors masking over processes rather than accurate accounts of reality being recreated. So whilst realist narrative creates the impression that its constituent words, clauses and sentences correspond with their referents, Saussure's theories disclose that this is in fact an illusion generated by friction between those words which are used and those words which are not. For example, the first sentence of Robert Stone's novel *Dog Soldiers* (1974) reads, "There was only one bench in the shade, and Converse went for it, although it was already occupied."<sup>138</sup> Saussure's theory would refute that this sentence derives its meaning from the fact that words like "bench" or "shade" bear any intrinsic relation to actual wooden seats or penumbras: instead, it would claim, the meaning is produced because these words displace possible alternatives--say tench or trade.

In *Structuralism and Literature: An Introduction* (1974) Robert Scholes--author

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<sup>137</sup> For a fuller discussion of Saussure's influence in the States, see Frank Lentricchia's, *After the New Criticism* (London: Athlone, 1980) pp.112-114.

<sup>138</sup> Robert Stone, *Dog Soldiers* (1974; Harmondworth: Penguin, 1987) p.1.



of *The Fabulators* and *Fabulation and Metafiction*--packages these ideas, alongside those of Roman Jakobson, Levi Strauss, Vladimir Propp, Tzvetan Todorov, Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette, for an American audience.<sup>139</sup> Scholes presents structuralism as a powerful tool capable of simultaneously challenging the arid conventions of literary criticism; endorsing anti-realist arguments; *and*, as part of the same process, pioneering an alternative future for American fiction. So Scholes sees structuralism as promising to substitute the whimsical and pointless New Critical "industry" (which if not "criminal" is "mildly ludicrous") with a new exhaustive and rigorous style of literary analysis which will bring to prose the close attention hitherto reserved for poetry (p.152). Through Saussure, structuralism is also said to spotlight "the great error of the 'realist' in literature": the assumption that the writing is "in touch with some ultimate context" (p.151).<sup>140</sup> And in a final section entitled "The Vision of Structuralism in Contemporary Fiction", Scholes attempts to unite his enthusiasm for structuralism with that for fabulation. He considers that the "existential" view of the world, which shaped the best fiction of the forties and fifties, is being slowly replaced by a structuralist view, which leaves its mark on the best contemporary writing. While Scholes is stronger on pronouncement than detail here, he insists that "structuralist thinking is having a powerful effect on the contemporary novel", and he namechecks John Barth and Robert Coover to support his point (p.193).<sup>141</sup>

If Saussure's arguments accentuated the day's institutional, generational and

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<sup>139</sup> Robert Scholes, *Structuralism and Literature: An Introduction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974). Further references will be cited in parentheses in the text. Other books disseminating structuralist ideas include Jonathon Culler's *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1975) and Frederic Jameson's *The Prison House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972). For a discussion of these books, see Lentricchia, chapter four.

<sup>140</sup> Here we can see Scholes extending his thinking from *The Fabulators*, where he also drew on Saussure: "Realism purports--has always purported--to subordinate the things themselves to their referents". *The Fabulators*, p.11.

<sup>141</sup> It is interesting to compare Scholes's opinions about the relationship between structuralism and postmodernist writing with those of William Gass. Scholes see the insights of Saussure as de-bunking realism and thus liberating fiction from its illusionist constraints. Gass's tone is world-weary by comparison; he speaks stoically of the irksome "arbitrary relationship between symbol sounds and their meanings", adding "no real writer wants it that way". So fictional innovation is actually seen to be necessitated by irresistible--if depressing--linguistic truths. Gass is quoted in Allan Lloyd Smith's article, "Brain Damage: The Word and the World in Postmodernist Writing", Bradbury and Ro eds., p.41.

literary polarizations, the writing of Roland Barthes had a greater impact still.<sup>142</sup> The key publication is *S/Z*, which at once consolidated and developed Barthes's earlier thinking about literature.<sup>143</sup> Published in French in 1971, and translated into English in 1974, *S/Z* interrogates what Barthes called the "classic" or *lisible* text through a microscopically focused reading of Balzac's story "Sarrasine". Whereas Saussure is interested in the relationship between sign and referent, Barthes is interested in the relationship between narrative form and the social order, as represented in the signifying processes through which this order describes itself to itself. Barthes's claim is that the *lisible* (readerly) text colludes with this order by accepting its "ready made" concepts, phrases, frames of reference, and cultural assumptions--in short, the discourses through which the order is articulated. By perpetually recycling the culture's "ready made", the classic readerly text helps to produce a stable economy of signs and meanings. In reverse, by failing to disrupt these "ready made", the classic text helps to stabilize society by perpetuating the idea that the "ready made" are the repository of truth. In the last analysis then, the classic text plays its part in maintaining the status quo by representing an historically constructed culture--in Balzac's case, bourgeois culture--as *nature*.

Barthes not only describes the operations of the *lisible* or classic texts, but contrasts it with another type of writing which he calls *scriptible* (writable) or *moderne*. This opposition, if not the precise terms, was introduced to the American academy before the publication of *S/Z* and developed through the intervening years. In 1966, Barthes presented a paper at a symposium on structuralism.<sup>144</sup> The paper, which was called, "To Write: An Intransitive Verb" applauded "modern literature...for trying, through various experiments, to establish a new status in writing for the agent of writing." Barthes continued, "The meaning of the goal of this effort is to substitute the instance of

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<sup>142</sup> For a discussion of Barthes's development of Saussure's ideas, see Lentricchia, pp.131-145.

<sup>143</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, translated by Richard Miller (1971;New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).

<sup>144</sup> The symposium, which also introduced Jacques Derrida to the American academy, was held at John Hopkins University in Baltimore. The papers were subsequently published in *The Language of Criticism and the Science of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1970). For a brief but informative account of the often misguided uses to which Derrida's ideas were put in discussions of innovative fiction, see Richard Walsh's *Novel Arguments: Reading Innovative American Fiction* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995) pp.6-7.



discourse for the instance of reality (or of the referent), which has been, and still is, a mythical 'alibi' dominating the idea of literature."<sup>145</sup> In other words, Barthes was endorsing a style of writing which meditated on its own textuality and critiquing one which pretended to bypass language and access the real without any consciousness of its medium. These ideas were developed in "Authors and Writers", a short essay collected in *Critical Essays*.<sup>146</sup> Here Barthes introduced an equivalent opposition between the author (*écrivain*) who engages with language, and the writer (*écrivain*) who overlooks it in favour of the world.

By the time of *S/Z* then, Barthes could juxtapose a stunningly sophisticated critique of the "classic" text with a reasonably detailed description of an emerging alternative. The modern text, as opposed to its classic ancestor, was open rather than closed, self-conscious rather than self-effacing, and, in terms of a culture's signifying practices, disruptive rather than obedient. The relevance of *S/Z* to the American context barely needs spelling out. Barthes's book satisfied two sets of needs: as Robert Scholes was quick to point out, it functioned as yet another "blow in a battle not merely between the old and new criticism, but between the old and new literature as well."<sup>147</sup> In terms of the critical or institutional battlelines, Barthes's book was seen to further embarrass the impressionistic efforts of the old school, and quite simply, to show the way. "Barthes's answer" to such criticism enthused Scholes, "is the two hundred page treatment of a thirty page text, which attends specifically to the 'plurality' of the text, its various systems of meaning and interaction. In the hands of a man as learned and lively as Roland Barthes, the method has great value."<sup>148</sup>

In terms of the literary battlelines, Barthes's statements on the modern text were read as theoretical rationales for the emerging American postmodernist fiction: as Richard Walsh puts it, "Although he (Barthes) was doubtless alluding to the *nouveau roman*, his description was couched in terms easily appropriated to the defence of much

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<sup>145</sup> Quoted in Walsh, p.9.

<sup>146</sup> Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, translated by Richard Howard (Evanston: North Western University Press, 1972).

<sup>147</sup> Robert Scholes, *Structuralism and Literature*, p. 151.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid*, p.152.

American innovative fiction".<sup>149</sup> And it was not only that Barthes's terms were ripe for appropriation, but that the oppositional structures in which they were positioned (modern versus classic, open versus closed and so on) reflected the familiar shape of American debates, where the realist text had traditionally been conceptualized in tension with another narrative form, be it romance or twenties experimentalism.

Barthes's ideas seemed almost uncannily familiar--they were a gift horse for both postmodernist authors and for academics sympathetic to postmodernism and opposed to New Criticism. In his retrospective look at the zenith of postmodernism, Frederick Barthelme recalls everybody reading Barthes.<sup>150</sup> And as Allan Lloyd Smith points out, many of William Gass's descriptions of his own fiction echo Barthes.<sup>151</sup> In terms of academics and intellectuals, Barthes's ideas informed a good deal of the secondary literature on postmodernist fiction summarized above. We have already witnessed Scholes's enthusiasm for the ideas, and Robert Alter's *Partial Magic* bears a comparable debt to the Frenchman.<sup>152</sup> Even Susan Sontag, in her notorious 1964 piece, "Against Interpretation", numbers Barthes as one of the few literary critics actually worth reading.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Walsh, p.8.

<sup>150</sup> Frederick Barthelme, "On Being Wrong: Convicted Minimalist Spills Bean", *New York Times Book Review* (3 April 1988) p.23.

<sup>151</sup> Lloyd Smith writes, "In *Anything Can Happen* (1983) Tom Le Clair and Larry McCaffery use the terms invisible and visible art to describe fiction that conceals its illusionary methods as against fiction that calls attention to its creator..William Gass provides an example of the visible artist, claiming that the work 'is filled with only one thing--words and how they work and how they connect' (p.28). These terms (which hold an echo of Roland Barthes's distinction between the *lisible* and *scritible*, loosely, readerly or writerly texts), have the advantage over such categories of metafiction in that the one does not implicitly denigrate the other, as metafiction implies that it transcends or supersedes mere naive fiction". Allan Lloyd Smith, "Brain Damage: The Word and the World in Postmodernist Writing", in Bradbury and Ro, eds., p.39.

<sup>152</sup> Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre*, pp.34, 63, 218, 221.

<sup>153</sup> Susan Sontag "Against Interpretation" (1964), *A Susan Sontag Reader* (1982; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983)



The political implications of Barthes's ideas were explored in an overlapping, and overtly Marxist anti-realist critical formation through the late sixties, seventies and eighties. As the very title of David Paul Funt's article, "Newer Criticism and Revolution" indicates, the article is concerned with uniting the institutional and the political: the suggestion is that the Newer Criticism, which will finally dislodge the New Criticism, will be connected to, if not defined by, commitment to revolutionary goals.<sup>154</sup> But realism is not only associated with the academy in Funt's argument: he prioritizes the profile it has enjoyed in Marxist discussions of politically committed writing. Jean Paul Sartre's *What is Literature* is singled out for special attention. Funt paraphrases Sartre's account of the difference between poetry and prose, describing how for Sartre: "the language of prose is a medium of communication between subjects and objects, the medium itself being ideally transparent, hence invisible" (p.88). Through these instrumentalist ideas about prose, Funt argues, Sartre gives a "theoretical voice to what had already become the aesthetic of revolutionary artists and party officials: a styleless art, an art in which the manner would efface itself to the advantage of the objects being treated" (p.88).

In this sentence, Sartre is being set up as representative of Old Left attitudes: the phrase "party officials" loosely alludes to the Communist Party's socialist realism. The wrongheadedness of this approach, claims Funt, is empirically measurable by the fact that realism is the "accepted mode of writing bestsellers in all capitalist countries" (p.88). Funt then goes on to challenge the notion of politically committed realism from theoretical principles, and does so by drawing upon a number of the structuralist ideas

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<sup>154</sup> David Paul Funt, "Newer Criticism and Revolution", *Hudson Review* XX11, no.1 (Spring 1969) pp.87-96. I have approached New Left discussion of literature through Funt, quite simply, because he talks about realism so directly. Furthermore, the fact that his writing was published in a mainstream journal like *The Hudson Review* indicates the profile which these radical theories enjoyed in the period. Herbert Marcuse--a heavyweight of the New Left--forwards similar arguments in his book *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1977; London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1978). He too wants to move away from an Old Left Marxist doxa which measures commitment in terms of content. "In contrast to orthodox Marxist aesthetics", he writes, "I see the political potential of art in art itself, in the aesthetic form as such" (p.ix). Put more strongly, "The more immediately political the work of art, the more it reduces the power of estrangement, and the radical, transcendent goals of change. In this sense, there may be more subversive potential in the poetry of Baudelaire and Rimbaud than in the didactic plays of Brecht" (p.xiii).

summarized above, as well as the writings of Blanchot and Bataille. It is primarily Barthes, however, who Funt uses: those anti-realist ideas which were mobilized as a rationale for postmodernism by many American thinkers are here appropriated to describe a new revolutionary aesthetic for a New Left.<sup>155</sup> The categories of *écrivain* and *écrivain* are borrowed to construct an opposition between the realist, transparent text which older Marxists have misguidedly promoted, and a new, truly revolutionary one which "takes the language as its object." Echoing *S/Z*, Funt contests that realism simply repeats "a stock of pre-formed concepts which transmit the common values already built into them." As such, realism is described as "the decoy set out by established society to allay change" (p.91). By contrast, the truly radical writer recognizes that "the system of our world is established by our language" (p.93), and that, in order to de-stabilize it, one must subvert and disrupt its language. So whereas the "contemporary 'realist'...reinforces the myths of contemporary society by dissimulating its under-language," the "concerned writer will thus be he who makes language--in the measure that is possible--unspeakable" (p.96).

A range of other intellectual currents fed into this Marxist formation of anti-realism through the seventies and eighties, but Louis Althusser's essay, "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus" warrants special mention.<sup>156</sup> Here Althusser tackles the question of how the bourgeois mode of production, and the principle upon which it

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<sup>155</sup> The "New Left" is a capacious term, and one variously used to encompass: the Students for Democratic Society (S.D.S), the counterculture itself (particularly in its opposition to the Vietnam war) and a group of intellectuals, of whom C. Wright Mills and Herbert Marcuse are the best known, committed to re-thinking Marxism in the context of American consumerism. New Left academics were explicit in their intentions of challenging a stuffy establishment and displacing New Criticism--events like the New University Conference (NUC), and the Socialist Scholars conference were set-up to raise the prestige of radical scholarship and to make connections between the academy and the newly invigorated left. For a witty account of the 1966 Socialist Scholars Convention, see Harvey Swados, "Marx and Shame: Socialism Today" in *The Nation* (10 October 1966), reprinted in his *A Radical at Large: American Essays* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1968). For accounts of the New Left, see Irwin Unger, *The Movement: A History of the American New Left, 1959-1972* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1974), Jack Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority: The American New Left* (1966; London: Anthony Blond, 1967) and Theodore Roszak, *The Making Of A Counter-Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (1969; London: Faber and Faber, 1970).

<sup>156</sup> Louis Althusser, "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus" (1969), in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971) pp.121-177. Page references are included in parentheses in the text.



depends--namely, the extortion of surplus value from the working class--manages its own social reproduction.

In answer, Althusser draws up two categories which he sees as doing this work. The first he calls the Repressive State Apparatus or R.S.A, which includes the police, the army, the prisons, and the judiciary. The second, which is the principle focus of Althusser's essay, he calls the Ideological State Apparatus or I.S.A. Whereas the Repressive State Apparatus deals with members of society who break its rules, the Ideological State Apparatus is responsible for the establishment of the rules in the first place. But that work is not exhausted by fixing rules--rather it creates the very medium through which the individual lives out her or his relation to society. Althusser defines ideology as "the representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (p.153). These representations structure consciousness, with the effect that "men represent their real conditions to themselves in an imaginary form" (p.153). So the I.S.A. is responsible for fixing those values, ideas, norms--even the texture of common sense--which characterize a particular mode of production, and enable its continuation. One crucial task of the "imaginary form" transmitted by the I.S.A is to ensure that we experience ourselves as central, autonomous and free: this is through an "imaginary relationship" which masks the "real conditions of existence." In reality says Althusser, we are functional cogs in a capitalist machine, and as such, entirely interchangeable. Moreover, we are less centred and stable than bourgeois constructions of cohesive individuality suggest. But if we continuously experienced ourselves as either functional, expendable cogs or as the mere sites of libidinal and unconscious drives, the social order would clearly be in trouble. So the Ideological State Apparatus, if it is to effect the reproduction of the status quo, must constitute subjects as individuals, create for them the illusion of autonomy, freedom and centrality.

To describe how the Ideological State Apparatus does its work Althusser draws on the writing of Jacques Lacan, particularly his essay, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience".<sup>157</sup> For Lacan, the mirror stage demarcates the child's watershed from the pre-linguistic, unified Imaginary stage, when there is no separation between self and world, and its entrance into the

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<sup>157</sup> Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Functioning of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" (1949) in *New Left Review* 51 (September-October 1968).

"symbolic order"--the domain of symbolisation and language. Looking into the mirror, the child is supplied with a reassuringly unified image of selfhood. This recognition is in part a *mis*recognition, since the image in the mirror is more unified than the child's disparate experiences of itself. But nevertheless, the mirror image becomes absolutely central in forming the child's selfhood.

In Althusser's account, the relation between the individual and society parallels that between the child and the mirror image. In the latter case, the image equips the child with a satisfyingly integrated picture of her or himself. In the former, society generally, and the Ideological State Apparatus in particular, serves an equivalent function. It too provides an image--one of freedom, centrality, autonomy--which the individual identifies with, and experiences the self through. It too is a partial misrecognition however, because just as the mirror image does not fully reflect the child's selfhood, so these notions do not match up with the reality--the self as de-centred, discontinuous and socially functional.

These ideas about the Ideological State Apparatus, which draw together Marxist and structuralist thought, provided a fresh context in which literature, and especially realism, could be re-considered. Critics drew upon these theories to argue that realism was part of the I.S.A., and culpable of transmitting the values of dominant bourgeois ideology. So realism is attacked for representing characters which conform to, and thus support, bourgeois notions of people as unified, coherent, autonomous and free. The writings of Bertolt Brecht, some of which were being translated into English for the first time in the sixties and seventies, were often cited to support such claims.<sup>158</sup> "The

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<sup>158</sup> Brecht's influence over these debates raises a number of further questions which are beyond the scope of this thesis. A couple of points will have to suffice. In discussions of realism, Brecht's name is frequently invoked in the context of the Brecht-Lukács debate. For Brecht's contribution to this debate, see "Against Georg Lukács" in R. Taylor, ed., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: New Left Books, 1977), pp. 68-86. Discussion of the debate often assume that the exchange took the form of an ongoing dialogue between the two men. This is a mistake. Whilst Brecht wrote his piece in 1938, when he planned to publish it in *Das Wort*, it never actually appeared until 1967, when it was published in *Schriften zur Kunst und Literatur*. The article was not translated until 1974, when it appeared in Britain and the States in the March/April edition of *New Left Review*.

Brecht's writings on the subject were therefore first circulated in a particularly hospitable climate: we have a New Left eagerly receptive to the idea of a (counter) cultural praxis: performance, happenings, mind-altering drugs were promoted, with the objectives of revolutionizing consciousness, liberating repression and precipitating a corresponding transformation in social structures. The yippie Jerry Rubin famously declared that he wanted to see a revolution by theatre without a script.

Moreover, Brecht's article was published in the Cold War climate, and received by a New Left also eager to distinguish itself from a discredited Stalinism. Lukács had become strongly associated with



continuity of the ego is a myth", wrote Brecht, "A man is an atom that perpetually breaks up and forms anew."<sup>159</sup> The critic Leo Bersani took up these arguments in his 1976 book, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature*.<sup>160</sup> He judged that "psychological complexity is tolerated" in realism only "as long as it does not threaten an ideology of the self as a fundamentally intelligible structure unaffected by a history of fragmented, discontinuous desires" (p.56). The central drive of his argument is that "the literary myth of a rigidly ordered self contributes to a pervasive cultural ideology of the self which serves the established social order" (p.56).

Here Bersani is thinking about literary characters in isolation, but realism's representation of their relations to the social world is frequently found to be just as objectionable. "Realism", writes Barbara Foley, "promotes asocial and ahistorical conceptions of personal development by fetishizing character as a function of intrinsic 'traits.'"<sup>161</sup> In realism, it is alleged, "Selfhood is presented not as a product of social relations, but as an emanation of *a priori* identity. The social environment provides either a mere backdrop to personal dilemmas--'setting'--or else a context in *opposition* to which individuals are defined" (p.254). On a similar note, realism is taken to task for privileging personal morality over broader social questions. "Individual moral change", Foley summarizes, "the principal 'development' outlined in most novels, is offered as the key to--or really the substitute for--larger social change" (p.254).

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Stalinism, and his pro-realist, anti-modernist polemics the theoretical rationale for Socialist realism. As his adversary, Brecht's writings were celebrated--they became a rallying point against which distance from Stalinism could be measured--an irony given Brecht's own politics. Barthes was deeply interested in Brecht--see "The Task of Brechtian Criticism" in Eagleton and Milne eds., *Marxist Literary Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) pp. 136-141). Barthes not only rallied around Brecht, but drew upon his writings to make the influential distinction between the "writerly" and "readerly" text. Brecht's writings, unlike what Barthes called the "closed character of Stalinist language" (quoted Foley p. 253) were open, modern and attentive to their own devices. For a fuller discussion of the relationship between Brecht and postmodernism, see Elizabeth Wright's monograph, *Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation* (London: Routledge, 1989).

<sup>159</sup> Bertholt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*. Translated and edited by John Willett ( London: Eyre Methuen, 1964) p.15.

<sup>160</sup> Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (1976; London: Marion Boyers, 1978).

<sup>161</sup> Barabara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993) p.254. Further references will be cited in parentheses in the text.

Other critics of realism sideline character in favour of discourse, or content in favour of the ways in which narrative form operates upon the reader. The "classic realist text" is defined as one in which "there is a hierarchy amongst the discourses which compose the text and this hierarchy is composed in terms of an empirical notion of truth."<sup>162</sup> At the top of this hierarchy is the "narrative prose" or "metalanguage" (p.8) and beneath it lie the voices of the characters. The former, which appears "unwritten" or "unspoken" (p.8) in third person realism, tells the truth, whilst character voices will range in truthfulness--some will approximate the knowledge displayed by the metalanguage whilst others will deviate widely from it. The reader, according to this description of the "classic realist text", is led by the metalanguage, enjoying the position of wisdom which it supplies.

With this breakdown of the "classic realist text" in place, critics then object to its procedures on various counts. "Classic realism" (which slides into any "realism" in many accounts) gives the impression of debate or dialogism in which the reader can fully participate, but is actually monological, and presents only a pseudo-debate. In other words, the charge is that the text incorporates many voices, and thus gives the impression of different perspectives competing in genuine dialogue, but that this is only an impression. In fact, as Barbara Foley puts it, the "ideological dice are loaded", because as we have seen, the metalanguage has a monopoly on the truth.<sup>163</sup> The metalanguage is invulnerable to challenge precisely because it is not written or spoken--it is a disembodied, authorial, authoritative voice broadcasting an account of the way things really are. By the same token, the narrative gives the impression of open-endedness--that anything can happen--but this too is an illusion. Events may seem to unfold under their own momentum, and to obey a causal logic, but in fact they are always destined to a closure which will conclusively confirm the truth-telling superiority of the metalanguage.

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<sup>162</sup> This definition comes from Colin MacCabe's 1974 article "Realism and Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses" *Screen* 15, no.2 (Summer 1974) p.8. MacCabe's thinking about these questions was later included in his book *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (London: Macmillan, 1978). His work reconciled a broadly Althusserian theory of ideology, an attachment to Barthes's rigorous reading strategies and interest in Brecht's writings on both novelistic realism and theatre. It proved widely influential, especially when simplified in Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 1980).

<sup>163</sup> Foley, p.254.



The upshot is that readers feel themselves to be actively participating in the text and making decisions: in fact they are merely "flattered into thinking of themselves as co-conspirators of the author" (p.254). So they might think they are making up their own minds, but are actually having their minds made up for them.<sup>164</sup>

The strength of this formation of criticism measures the extent to which perceptions of realism have altered since the thirties. For the likes of Mike Gold and Granville Hicks, realism was by and large the natural place to begin in constructing a body of writing fit to pressurize the structures of capitalism: for "New Left" thinkers like David Paul Funt and Herbert Marcuse, writing realism has become the surest way of safeguarding them. As we have seen, these changes occur through complex processes. To recap: changes in literature itself are one crucial factor. European writing, and ideas about writing, play a role in the emergence of American postmodernism. This emergence bears an important relationship to what--for want of a better phrase--could be called the countercultural *Zeitgeist*, or the investment of creative energy into a project to leave the past generally, and realism in particular, behind. This mood is reflected in the challenging of New Criticism's hegemony--a challenge which was well oiled by those economic and demographic factors which led to the physical expansion of the academy in these years. The new approaches, disciplines and schools, financed by the boom, were

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<sup>164</sup> So according to the British Marxist Catherine Belsey, the classic realist text does the work of bourgeois ideology on two counts. It does so at the level of character, or "in its representation of a world of consistent subjects who are the origin of meaning, knowledge and action" (p.67). And it does so at the level of narrative procedure through the specific ways in which it positions the reader. Here it "does the work of ideology...in offering the reader, as the position from which the text is most readily intelligible, the position of subject as the origin both of understanding and of action in accordance with that understanding" (p.67). Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (New York and London: Routledge, 1980).

This student friendly book proved enormously influential in anti-realist discussion by supplying a pithy critique of realism upon which the case for an alternative--usually postmodernism--could pivot. Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988) took this approach. Though not written by an American, the book discussed American postmodernist writing, and was read widely in the States. Like Belsey's book, it supplied an accessible guide to often difficult ideas. Hutcheon's book makes an interesting counterpoint to Alison Lee's book *Realism and Power* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990) which used a similar formula to discuss postmodern British fiction.

Barbara Foley provides an illuminating summary of these debates, and the force they exert over contemporary thinking about realism. (See *Radical Representations*, p.253-5). The ongoing popularity of Lennard J. Davies's *Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987) attests to the staying power of this particular strand of anti-realist thought.

the tools with which New Criticism was tackled. Many of these approaches, especially structuralism, structuralist Marxism, the proto-post-structuralism of Barthes's *S/Z* and the more eclectic style of New Left criticism, also provided handy tools to articulate the cultural mood or *Zeitgeist*. They were used to attack realism, and as part of the same process, to construct an alternative, politically progressive aesthetic, which came to be known as postmodernism. Residual conceptual structures--especially the long-lived and particularly American pattern of thinking about realism in relation to emergent narrative forms--facilitated this process. For all these reasons, the transformation of realism's status--and the political associations it carries<sup>165</sup>--are commensurate with, and implicated in, the transformation of the American Academy during these years.

### **THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF CONTEMPORARY REALISM.**

This critical opposition between beleaguered realism and celebrated postmodernism inevitably influences the academic reception of contemporary fiction. As Emory Elliott puts it: "novels are frequently divided into two categories; neorealism and self-reflexive fiction...Most critical books on contemporary fiction of the last five to ten years have been most concerned with theoretical problems which are best illustrated in self-reflexive novels which thereby become the texts celebrated and studied."<sup>166</sup> The ongoing neglect of contemporary realism, in contrast to the careful critical scrutiny of writers considered postmodernist, is certainly striking: according to the MLA International bibliography, for example, between 1990 and 1993 E.L. Doctorow, widely classified as a postmodernist, was the subject of twenty two articles and three book length studies whilst his realist peer Robert Stone numbers only two short articles and one interview.

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<sup>165</sup> Looking at the discussions chronologically, one can detect an increasingly political tone, which develops in tandem with the institutional changes. So whereas the Scholes of *The Fabulators* (1967) sees the new writing as imaginative exercise, the Scholes of *Structuralism in Literature* (1974) is thinking in terms of generational, literary and institutional battlelines. From being an exhausted narrative form in John Barth's 1967 essay, realism becomes a mainstay of bourgeois ideology through the seventies.

<sup>166</sup> Emory Elliott, "History and Will in *Dog Soldiers*, *Sabbatical* and *The Color Purple*", *Arizona Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (1987) pp. 197-217. This quotation is from p. 198. I return to this article in chapter five.



But whilst the neglect of contemporary realism is an important pattern in terms of the effect which the realist-postmodernist opposition has upon the reception of new fiction--and one which subsequent chapters will be returning to--it is by no means the whole story. Realism also continues to be a site where tensions between longstanding and more recent critical paradigms are played out. If, as Elliott claims, realism is widely ignored by theoretically minded critics, it is frequently celebrated by those of a more conventional approach. As I will discuss in chapter three, for a critic such as Fred Hobson, in his book *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World*, Bobbie Ann Mason is not "a postmodern writer" as she "accepts rather than invents" her world; she "is not given to fantasy"; "does not question the whole assumed relationship between narrator and narrative" and "does not question the nature of fiction itself." As such, she "plays by the old rules of the game." For Hobson then, contemporary fiction is divided into two diametrically opposed camps: postmodernism and the "old rules of the game". Mason's apparent rejection of postmodernism invites a correspondingly straightforward style of criticism: his sympathetic account foregrounds "themes" in her work, notably "concerns with place, family, community, religion and the past."<sup>167</sup>

Other critics operating from within the same opposition subscribe to anti-realist theories and try to rescue writers from the realist classification. Rather like Frank Norris, who differentiated Zola's work from Howellsian realism by re-describing it as romance, Arthur Saltzman screens Raymond Carver's texts, which are widely classified as realist, for themes and narrative strategies associated with postmodernism. He cites Carver's mistrust of totalizing vision and "suspicion of the referential adequacy of the word" as evidence that Carver's *oeuvre* forms not an extension of realism but "another postmodern tributary in the multifarious progress of American literary history."<sup>168</sup> Saltzman's reading

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<sup>167</sup> Fred Hobson, *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991) pp. 8-9. Likewise, for D.W. Lehman, Raymond Carver's fiction represents a return to sanity after the metafictional excesses of the sixties and seventies: Carver's "symbolic strategy", claims Lehman, "resolves ambiguity rather than creating it...an exactly contradictory movement to the...experimental non-fiction novels." Unlike the "experiments of the 1960s", Carver's "symbolic facts have fixed referents; their use is consistent and reliable": as such, they reward critical practices which had little purchase on writers like Thomas Pynchon. D.W. Lehmann, "Raymond Carver's Management of Symbol", *Journal of the Short Story in English* 17 (1991) pp. 43-58.

<sup>168</sup> Arthur Saltzman, *Understanding Raymond Carver* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press) p.9.

of Carver is a good example of how the critical opposition can dominate reading, and as I argue in the next chapter, foster a self-enclosed and elliptical critical practice which overlooks a number of pressing issues.

The purpose of this thesis is to pressurize the opposition, and the preceding sections have begun this work by de-naturalizing it: firstly by illustrating that there is a history of conceptualizing fiction through a structure of binary opposition; secondly by tracing the literary, economical, institutional and ideological forces which have helped to shape its current manifestation. The latter parts of the previous section also highlight the degree to which much recent anti-realist theory is based on the *homogenization* of realism: anti-realist arguments are by definition predicated on generalizations--these should be understood in relation to the social and institutional factors which shape them, but they remain generalizations nonetheless. So in adopting Barthes's arguments for his own political purposes, David Paul Funt assumes perfect continuity between Balzac's *Sarassine* and (unspecified) contemporary realist texts. Those readings which see either Barthes "classic" or *lisible* text or MacCabe's "classic realist text" as synonymous with "realism" do the same thing. Likewise, structuralist critiques of realism find all realism to be equally misguided in its belief that it accesses some "ultimate context", and thus find it all equally embarrassed by Saussure's insights.<sup>169</sup> Robert Scholes accounts for the redundancy of realism by referring to its supposedly unchanging philosophical suppositions or "positivistic base".<sup>170</sup> Postmodernist writers, no less than critics, similarly flatten a rich tradition into a broad straw target: Sukenick dismissed Jane Austen, George Eliot and Ernest Hemingway as though their narrative strategies were identical. In all of these examples then, realism is conceptualized in a structure of opposition. More importantly, it functions as the stable component of the opposition, in contrast to a protean form of novel narrative.

Having outlined the shortcomings of homogenizing realism, one cannot, of course, come to realism's defence by formulating pro-realist theories: this would lead to further homogenization and generalization through the construction of an alternative model of

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<sup>169</sup> Robert Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), p.151.

<sup>170</sup> Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1979) p.4.



"Realism". Rather than pressurizing the opposition, this approach is the surest way to reinforce it, and my critique of Tom Wolfe's defence of realism in chapter four measures the limitations of his idiosyncratic pro-realist position.<sup>171</sup> Perhaps a better way of responding to arguments which homogenize realism is to refer back to the diversity of American realisms which even the preceding sections have touched upon. We have seen Howells's deftly self-conscious realism, and the civilizing mission he carved out for it; Frank Norris's hybrid fictions with their stylish distaste for style; Hamlin Garland's veritism, with its local color emphasis; the hallucinatory prose of Stephen Crane; Dos Passos's disorientating parataxis and the politically optimistic proletarian realism, much of which is currently coming back into print for the first time since the thirties.<sup>172</sup> Realism's dynamic responsiveness to changing cultural and political conditions barely needs spelling out.

The preceding section also suggests that whilst there is a long history of thinking about fiction in binary terms, not all such constructs are *equally* static, and not all homogenize realism and stymie reading to the same degree. For Howells realism and romance are oppositional, but not all realisms are the same--shades existed within them, even if the difference lay only in the fact that some realism was polluted by romance elements. The criticism of Granville Hicks also operated from within an oppositional structure: experimentalism was bourgeois and decadent, and realism inherently progressive. But having said this, realism was never uniform. On the contrary, it was seen to contain the potential to articulate a dialectical view of society, and to proceed, often slowly and often unevenly, towards the fulfilment of this potential. And as we have seen, Philip Rahv and Wallace Phelps began to pressurize the same opposition by thinking less about categories and more about how different literary forms might be appropriated for a new type of socially committed writing.

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<sup>171</sup> Raymond Tallis's book, *In Defence of Realism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1988) would be another example of a pro-realist argument which reinforces the opposition it seeks to challenge.

<sup>172</sup> See Foley, p.5, footnote 4.

## FOUR CONTEMPORARY REALISTS.

The following four chapters tackle the opposition from a different angle. Three of them--chapters two, three and five--adopt corresponding strategies. On the one hand, they offer analysis of the ways in which the opposition has impacted upon the reception of individual realists; on the other, they supply alternative close readings of these realisms which illustrate their unsung sophistication, thereby measuring the degree to which the texts outstrip the terms of the current debate. Whilst personal preference has inevitably played a role in the selection, the authors were chosen with two basic criteria in mind: they needed to be widely classified as realists and to be writing in the post sixties period. I also deliberately chose writers from the literary mainstream who enjoyed a wide readership and had a substantial body of work behind them. Unsurprisingly then, all of these three writers have won prestigious prizes. From the shortlist I researched and considered, which included, amongst others, Richard Bausch, Richard Ford, Jayne Anne Phillips, Anne Tyler and Tobias Wolff, I eventually went for Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason and Robert Stone.

Raymond Carver is the subject of chapter two. Born in 1938, he grew up in Washington State and his breakthrough came when his story "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" (1966) was included in *The Best American Short Stories of 1967*--his first collection, which took the same title, appeared in 1976. By the time of his death in 1988, he had published a further three collections and won a spread of prizes including the much coveted Mildred and Harold Strauss Living Award. Perhaps the most widely imitated writer of his generation, he came to be regarded as the doyen of "dirty realism", a term coined by Bill Buford to describe "a new fiction...about the belly-side of contemporary life".<sup>173</sup> In the case of Buford's term, the dirt stuck and the sub-genre of

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<sup>173</sup> Bill Buford coined the phrase in his editorial to *Granta 8, Dirty Realism: New Writing From America* (1983). The edition collected stories by Jayne Anne Phillips, Richard Ford, Raymond Carver, Elizabeth Tallent, Frederick Barthelme, Bobbie Ann Mason and a novella by Tobias Wolff. Differentiating the new writing from both the postmodernism of John Barth, William Gaddis and Thomas Pynchon and the earlier realism of Updike and Styron, Buford described it as, "a fiction of a different scope--devoted to the local details, the nuances, the little disturbances in language and gesture...strange stories: unadorned, unfurnished, low-rent tragedies about people who watch day-time television, read cheap romances or listen to country and western music" (p.4). Three years later, Buford issued a sequel, which added stories by Richard Russo, Ellen Gilchrist, Robert Olmstead, Joy Williams and Louise



"dirty realism" in general, and Carver's writings in particular, unleashed a flurry of critical interest, much of which debated the relationship between the new realism and postmodernism.<sup>174</sup> My chapter argues that this emphasis has obscured the texts' socio-economic context, overlooking and underplaying their engagement with consumer capitalism. Looking at Carver's work in relation to the post war boom's intensification of American consumerism, with its attendant erosion of alternative sources of identity (such as those rooted in region and class), I zoom in on two stories, foregrounding their attention to the disparity between consumer culture's ideologies--of social mobility, of work and affluence measured through consumption--and the incomprehensible realities in which characters find themselves: stuck in a rut, irreversibly unemployed and having their consumer desirables repossessed. I take up this nowhere zone between the way things should be and the way they often are as a space from which Carver's estranging realisms can be considered afresh.

Chapter three turns to another "dirty realist", Kentucky's Bobbie Ann Mason. Born in 1940, Mason was an academic before turning her hand to fiction. Her doctoral thesis was published in 1974 as *Nabokov's Garden: A Nature Guide to Ada*, and the following year she produced *The Girl Sleuth: A Feminist Guide to the Bobbsey Twins, Nancy Drew and their Sisters*.<sup>175</sup> Her first book of fiction, *Shiloh and Other Stories*, came out in 1983, and won the PEN / Hemingway award. It broke the ground for a second collection of stories, *Love Life* (1989), and three novels: *In Country* (1985),

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Erdrich. See Bill Buford ed., *Granta 19, More Dirt: The New American Fiction* (Fall 1986).

<sup>174</sup> For example, as Kim Herzinger describes in "Introduction: On the New Fiction" to the double issue of *Mississippi Review* 40/41 (Winter 1985), the edition was based on a survey of 150 writers, critics and editors, who were invited to air their thoughts on, "the putative 'minimalist' fiction variously associated with writers such as Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, Mary Robison, Alice Adams, Bobbie Ann Mason, James Robison, Andre Dubus, Richard Ford, Tobias Wolff, Elizabeth Tallent, David Leavitt, and dozens of others, work loosely characterized by equanimity of surface, 'ordinary' subjects, recalcitrant narrators and deadpan narratives, slightness of story, and characters who don't think out loud" (p.7). The survey asked, "what links these writers with, or separates them from, the irony, foregrounded language, and reflexivity of the 'postmodernists' of the sixties and early seventies?"

<sup>175</sup> Bobbie Ann Mason, *Nabokov's Garden: A Nature Guide to Ada*, (New York: Ann Arbor, 1974) and *The Girl Sleuth: A Feminist Guide to the Bobbsey Twins, Nancy Drew and their Sisters* (New York: Feminist Press, 1975).

*Spence + Lila* (1988) and *Feather Crowns* (1993).<sup>176</sup> My chapter surveys the reception of Mason's work, tracing the ways in which the opposition shapes and informs it, before focussing on *Feather Crowns*, a novel which widens its scope beyond the contemporary and claustrophobic confines of "dirty realism" to tell the story of quintuplets born to a Kentucky tobacco farmer's wife at the dawn of the twentieth century. I argue that this critically neglected novel, which when discussed at all, is described as narrowly domestic, constitutes a challenging meditation on the American century and the culture's ever-escalating tendency to reify processes into spectacular products.

These two chapters, which address "dirty realists" and their overlapping concerns with commodity culture, form the first half of the author based section. Like the first half, the second half also has an internal symmetry. The fifth and final chapter looks at Robert Stone. Born in Brooklyn in 1937, Stone earned his spurs as a journalist, first as a caption writer for the *New York Daily News* and then as a freelance correspondent in Vietnam. A friend of Ken Kesey, Stone was a prominent member of the Merry Pranksters in the mid sixties, the California based psychedelic community famously chronicled in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*.<sup>177</sup> Stone's debut novel *A Hall of Mirrors* (1967) won the William Faulkner Foundation prize for the year's best first novel and his next book, *Dog Soldiers* (1974) consolidated this success by taking the National Book Award. But in spite of this recognition--Stone has also won the Harold Strauss Living Award, the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize and the John Dos Passos Prize for Literature--as already mentioned, his work has generated little academic interest. My chapter weighs up this neglect before concentrating on *Outerbridge Reach* (1992), the reception of which, I argue, bears the striking imprint of the realist / postmodernist opposition. Typically of Stone's work, the novel is deeply interested in questions about representation. But Stone's reputation as a realist, I argue, seems to invite a type of criticism which edits this subtle self-consciousness out of the account.

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<sup>176</sup> Bobbie Ann Mason: *Shiloh and Other Stories* (1983; London: Flamingo, 1988), *Love Life* (1989; London: Vintage, 1990), *In Country* (1985; London: Flamingo, 1987), *Spence and Lila* (1988; London: Flamingo, 1991) and *Feather Crowns* (1993; London: Vintage, 1994).

<sup>177</sup> Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968; New York: Bantam, 1969). Stone was a source for the account. The "Author's Note" postscript acknowledges, "There were several excellent writers, in addition to Kesey, who were involved in the Prankster saga...Robert Stone told me a great deal about Kesey's fugitive days in Mexico" (p.371).



In the case of *Outerbridge Reach*, the failure to engage with this fundamental dimension of the novel resulted in a string of harsh and, I argue, distorted readings.

Whilst Stone and the subject of my fourth chapter, Tom Wolfe, share a background in journalism and the counterculture, my approach to them is different. Unlike the other three contemporary realists I discuss, Wolfe is keenly interested in *being* a realist and in making a difference to a literary scene which he considers to have yielded to a post sixties "neurasthenic hour" dominated by "Writers in the university creative writing programs" who have "decided that the act of writing words on a page" is "the real thing" and the "so-called real world of America" is the fiction.<sup>178</sup> Wolfe's intervention came in the form of his best-selling blockbuster *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987) which he packaged and tirelessly promoted as the proof of the pudding that, in spite of fashionable theories to the contrary, "the future of the fictional novel would be a highly detailed realism based on reporting, a realism more thorough than any currently being attempted, a realism that would portray the individual in intimate and inextricable relation to the society around him".<sup>179</sup>

Although my chapter does touch upon the critical reception of the novel, this is not the primary focus of the argument here. Instead, I am interested in how Wolfe himself receives and recycles the opposition, both in his polemicizing and in the novel itself. I argue that Wolfe's construction of realism, which he boldly marshals against postmodernism, actually flattens and simplifies realism as deftly as its clumsiest critics. Moreover, I suggest that instead of engaging with the post sixties critiques of realism outlined above, Wolfe actually returns the debate to a much earlier moment. Sounding remarkably like Howells and Norris at times, he describes realism through a rhetoric of truthful, objective reportage, and sees his writing as an unmediated transcription of the way things really are. I also offer a reading of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* which argues first that, in contrast to the nuanced realism of Carver, Mason and Stone, the text actually

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<sup>178</sup> Tom Wolfe, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel", *Harper's Magazine* 279 (November 1989) pp.45-56. This article, which I discuss at greater length in chapter four, re-hashes sections from Wolfe's "Introduction" to Tom Wolfe and E.W. Johnson ed., *The New Journalism* (1973; London: Picador, 1975). These quotations come from p.56 and p.49 respectively.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, p.50. By 1990 "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast" was being printed as the "Introduction" to the paperback edition of the novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987; London: Picador).

corresponds with his monochrome picture of realism; and second that far from eschewing ideological mediation in favour of the truth, the text is saturated with distinctly neoconservative concerns and assumptions.



**CHAPTER TWO**  
**RAYMOND CARVER**

## "IN SEARCH OF A DIFFERENT LIFE AND OUR SHARE OF THE AMERICAN PIE":<sup>1</sup> RAYMOND CARVER IN CONTEXT.

The question of whether Raymond Carver is a realist or postmodernist has dominated the reception of his work and has proved stubbornly contentious. In this debate the critical constructions of realism and postmodernism, and the tension between them mapped out in the previous chapter, bear down upon the categorization and analysis of Carver's fiction. Some critics see Carver as a realist, others define him as a postmodernist, whilst a third, smaller group take issue with the relevance of either term.

Critics in the first group vary in their approaches. A number take Carver's realism as read, and overlook his narrative strategies in favour of dominant themes and issues. The implication of this approach is that Carver's textual strategies are familiar enough, and can be bypassed in discussion: what Carver is saying is deemed more interesting than the way in which he is saying it. As their very titles suggest, Kirk Nessel's article, "'This Word Love': Sexual Politics and Silence in Early Raymond Carver", or Peter J. Donahue's "Alcoholism as Ideology in Raymond Carver's 'Careful' and 'Where I'm Calling From'" belong in this group. The themes are put in the stories by their author, where they wait to be teased out by the critic.<sup>2</sup>

Other commentators from this group are more vocal about Carver's realism, welcoming it as a return to sanity after the mind-bending meta-fiction of the sixties and seventies. Carver is seen as a key player in a back-to-basics movement which restores the recognizable referent and commits itself to accessibility. Ewing Campbell regards Carver as the leading light in "the current revival of American realism", whilst Daniel W. Lehman explores Carver's use of symbols in order to differentiate him from postmodernist writing. Carver's "symbolic strategy", argues Lehman, "resolves ambiguity

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Carver, "John Gardner: The Writer as Teacher", *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories* (London: Picador, 1985) p.40.

<sup>2</sup> Kirk Nessel, "'This Word Love': Sexual Politics and Silence in Early Raymond Carver", *Journal of American Literature* 63, no. 2 (1991) pp.292-313. Peter J. Donahue, "Alcoholism as Ideology in Raymond Carver's 'Careful' and 'Where I'm Calling From'", *Extrapolation* 32, no.1, pp.54-63.



rather than creating it...an exactly contradictory movement to the...experimental non-fiction novels." Unlike either the "experiments of the 1960s" or the "postmodern turf" occupied by Thomas Pynchon, Carver's "symbolic facts have fixed referents; their use is consistent and reliable."<sup>3</sup>

William L. Stull's article, "Beyond Hopelessville: Another Side of Raymond Carver", offers a variation on this pattern.<sup>4</sup> He discerns both traditionally realist and postmodernist phases within Carver's work, labelling the former "humanist realism" and the latter "postmodern or existential realism". For Stull, the postmodern or existential outlook is exemplified in writers as diverse as Robbe-Grillet, Kafka, Sartre and Butor: it is said to "treat reality phenomenologically, agnostically and objectively" (p.7) and corresponds with Carver's early writing. Humanist realism, by contrast, "treats reality metaphysically, theologically and subjectively...The artist's God-like presence illuminates every particle of the world and charges it with meaning" (p.8). In his later work, Carver is said to draw upon and extend this tradition of Tolstoy, Turgenev, Chekhov, Henry James, the young James Joyce and Flannery O'Connor. The trajectory of Carver's career is therefore presented as an uneven but plottable development from a bleak but fashionable existential postmodernism back to an older, more generous tradition of realism.<sup>5</sup>

Arthur Saltzman, who belongs to the second group, disagrees and describes Carver's fiction as "another postmodern tributary in the multifarious progress of American literary history."<sup>6</sup> Carver's preference for fragments over totalizing vision, his "suspicion of the referential adequacy of the word" and "mannered" style are cited as

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<sup>3</sup> Ewing Campbell, *Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne, 1992) p.ix. D.W. Lehman, "Raymond Carver's Management of Symbol", *Journal of the Short Story in English* 17 (1991) p.44 and p.45.

<sup>4</sup> William Stull, "Beyond Hopelessville: Another Side of Raymond Carver", *Philological Quarterly* 64, no.1 (Winter 1985) pp.1-15. Further references will be cited in parentheses in the text.

<sup>5</sup> In opposition, we have a school of thought which castigates "new realism" generally and Carver particularly for displacing a popular wave of postmodernist experiment with a regression to the bad old days of, to quote Angela Carter, "sentimental, petit bourgeois naturalism of which Raymond Carver is the most influential, and most glum, exponent." Angela Carter, *Expletives Deleted: Selected Writings* (1992; London: Vintage, 1993) p.151.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Saltzman, *Understanding Raymond Carver* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988) p.9. Further references will be cited in parentheses in the text.

evidence (p.10). In his book-length study, Randolph Runyon claims that Carver is "a self-reflexive metafictional writer".<sup>7</sup> The basis for this alternative classification is that Carver's collections of stories are "intratextual"--each of the individual texts should not, Runyon warns, be seen in isolation, but in the context of one another. Like the stories that make up John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*, Carver's collections constitute an aesthetic whole.

A third group of critics take issue with the terms in which these debates are conducted, and in so doing, begin to loosen the binary's hold over the reception of Carver. Some use structuralist and reader response tools to analyse those distinctive narrative operations at work in Carver's texts. Marc Chenetier, for example, in his essay, "Living On/Off the Reserve", contests that the writing "feeds on the reader's reaction and filling in" and "operates by subtraction of explicitness and clearly outlined conclusions": as such, it "cannot be said to rely on traditional categories of representation."<sup>8</sup> Like David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips<sup>9</sup>, Kim Herzinger takes on the valuable work of distinguishing *between* realisms: Carver's "new-realism" is illuminated through contrast with another "realism"--the "Movement" of British anti-modernist writers in the fifties.<sup>10</sup> This line of enquiry, I would suggest, produces fresh and challenging readings precisely because it moves beyond the terms dictated by the realist / postmodernist polarization.

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<sup>7</sup> Randolph Runyon, *Reading Raymond Carver* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992) p.4.

<sup>8</sup> Marc Chenetier, 'Living On/Off the "reserve": Performance, Interrogation and Negativity in the works of Raymond Carver' in Chenetier ed., *Critical Angles: European Views on American Literature* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1986) p.188.

<sup>9</sup> In their co-written article, "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?: Voyeurism, Dissociation and the Art of Raymond Carver", Boxer and Phillips compare Carver to "the more 'mannered' writers of the sixties and seventies", namely "Barth, Pynchon and Barthelme." But they neither subsume Carver into this postmodernist formation, nor do they crudely situate him in opposition to it as "a throwback to an earlier era." Instead, they define him as a realist with a "post-modern sensibility." Unfortunately, they do not develop their point. David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips, 'Will You Please Be Quiet, Please: Voyeurism, Dissociation and the Art of Raymond Carver.' *Iowa Review* 10 (Summer 1979) p.81.

<sup>10</sup> Having said this, Herzinger does seem *even* more interested in the relationship between "'minimalism" and postmodernism than between minimalism and other realisms: "Where the 'minimalists' and postmodernists diverge does not seem to me so much in their *attention* to the problems and wonders of language and structure, as it is in their revised sense of language, their use of 'reality', their use of traditional characters and story-lines, and, importantly, their distaste for irony." The opposition continues to set the agenda even when its relevance is being challenged. Kim Herzinger, "Introduction: On The New Fiction", *Mississippi Review* 40/41 (Winter 1985) p.14.



In other words, it gets to grip with the specificity of the text's narrative strategies, rather than simply identifying them as either postmodernist or realist and then reading off those textual effects which correspond with these constructions. The problem with this approach, however, is that it fails to move *beyond* the question of narrative strategies. The domination of the opposition directs analysis towards the business of literary categorization, and away from important questions about the relationship between the texts and those socio-economic conditions from which they are produced and with which they engage. After all, out of the fifty eight stories included in Carver's four major collections (published between 1976 and 1988) fifty five are set in contemporary America.<sup>11</sup>

But having said this, piecing together a picture of those socio-economic conditions upon which alternative readings might be based is not straightforward, as the stories are seldom set in a *specific* time or place. Instead, they simultaneously conform to and subvert the tradition of local color writing discussed in my introductory chapter.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, in keeping with this tradition, the stories are sharply focused depictions of unheroic, "ordinary" people in their everyday world. But on the other hand, the stories empty out this tradition by withholding details of specific locations. Unlike Bobbie Ann Mason's stories, for example, which are almost always set in Western Kentucky and are dateable by fashions, popular culture and current affairs, Carver's are pervaded by a mood of timelessness, placelessness, isolation from politics and historical events--they seem to be happening both nowhere and everywhere.

Whilst this mood might seem to rule out the possibility of socio-economic contextualization, one way forward is to think *about* these silences concerning time,

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<sup>11</sup> These collections are *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? The Stories of Raymond Carver* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1976); *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1981); *Cathedral* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1983) and *Elephant and Other Stories* (London: Collins Harvill, 1988). The latter, posthumous publication was supplemented by a collection of stories from previous volumes, *Where I'm Calling From and Selected Stories* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988).

The stories not set in contemporary America are "The Third Thing That Killed My Father Off" from *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (which describes events before the Second World War), "The Compartment" from *Cathedral* (which follows an American traveller on his railway journey between Milan and Strasbourg) and "Errand" from *Elephant* (where Carver fictionalizes the death of his literary hero, Anton Chekhov).

<sup>12</sup> See chapter 1, pp.19-21.

place and politics and the way in which the stories bleach out local color to represent insular and anonymous lives blighted by economic insecurity, unemployment, family-break-up, bankruptcy and alcoholism in an amorphous, consumer society. In short, one might historicize the *absence* of regional, historical, and political consciousness by thinking about the intensification of American consumerism since the Second World War.

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American consumer culture is by no means a *distinctly* post-war phenomenon. Henry Ford was quick to recognize that the viability of his mass production techniques ultimately depended upon opening up corresponding mass markets: "if we can distribute high wages", he wrote in his autobiography, "then the money is going to be spent and it will serve to make storekeepers and distributors and manufacturers and workers in other lines more prosperous and their prosperity will be reflected in our sales."<sup>13</sup> This democratization of consumption, which was paralysed by the depression and postponed by the war, gathered momentum in the post-war years, when the economy, stabilized by a massive increase in arms spending between 1949 and 1953, boomed.<sup>14</sup> Gross National Product rocketed from \$285 billion to \$500 billion in the fifties, whilst the increase in the domestic market was matched by a quadrupling of overseas trade between 1950 and 1970.<sup>15</sup> Consumer credit increased 800%, largely through the wider availability of hire-purchase and mortgages, whilst the average family income rose by 50% to \$6, 000

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<sup>13</sup> Henry Ford in collaboration with Samuel Crowther, *My Life and Work* (1922; London: Heinemann, 1924) p.124. In 1919, the Boston store magnate Edward A. Filene said that the masses "must learn to behave like human beings in a mass production world...They must achieve, not just mere literacy, but culture." Quoted in Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (London: Abacus, 1980) pp. 136-7.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between arms spending and the fifties boom, see Nigel Harris, *Of Bread and Guns: The World Economy in Crisis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983) pp.30-73.

<sup>15</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991* (1994; London: Abacus, 1995) p.277.



dollars between 1950 and 1960.<sup>16</sup> Forty five million television sets were sold during the fifties, whilst new production techniques transformed the housing market, precipitating a mass exodus from city centres into privately owned, suburban housing.<sup>17</sup>

This boom was mediated by, and commensurate with, an *ideological* shift, if by ideology we mean the stories and representations through which society is experienced. Many stories promoting the "affluent society" enjoyed a new cultural dominance.<sup>18</sup> Older virtues like thrift became distinctly un-American whilst consumption took on the status of noble patriotism. "The government", declared President Eisenhower in 1958, "will never spend money as profitably as an individual tax-payer were he freed from the burden of taxation."<sup>19</sup> Consuming the latest desirable supported the burgeoning economy: civic duty and spending one's disposable income on American goods became synonymous. As part of this process, work underwent a significant re-definition whilst class distinctions were blurred. The emphasis was less upon the dignity of work, and more upon work as a means to an end, or the social standing which wages could buy through commodities. Michael Aglietta puts it well when he describes how through

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<sup>16</sup> Malcolm Bradbury and Howard Temperley, "War and Cold war", in Bradbury and Temperley eds., *Introduction to American Studies* (1981; London and New York: Longman, 1992) pp.289-332.

<sup>17</sup> By 1960, 95% of households owned television sets, whilst the number of registered cars increased from 40 to 60 million in the course of the decade. Daniel Snowman, *America Since 1920* (1968; London: Heinemann, 1978) p.137.

In *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation*, Michel Aglietta argues that the "consumption norm" based upon Fordist production techniques, "is governed by two commodities: the *standardized housing*, that is the privileged side of consumption; and the *automobile* as the means of transport compatible with the separation of home and workplace," These "two basic commodities of the mass consumption process created complementarities which effected a gigantic expansion of commodities." Michel Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The U.S. Experience*, translated by David Fernbach (1976; London: New Left Books, 1979) p.159.

<sup>18</sup> The term was coined by J.K. Galbraith for his 1958 book, *The Affluent Society*. In their essay, "War and Cold War", Bradbury and Temperley define this society as, "egalitarian, other-directed, consumerized, suburbanized, a compound of traditional individualism and Welfareism, with an embourgeoisified working class, a large expansion of service functions, a managerial elite, a corporate order, and large opportunities for personal mobility and opportunity...in short, a prototypical affluent modern mass society by consent." Bradbury and Temperley eds., p.314.

<sup>19</sup> William H. Whyte made the point even more emphatically, declaring that "Thrift is Un-American." Both of these quotations are lifted from Jean Baudrillard's essay, "Consumer Society", which is included in Mark Poster, ed., *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

advertising, "The process of social recognition was externalized and fetishized. Individuals were not initially interpellated as subjects by one another, in accordance with their social position: they were interpellated by an external power, diffusing a robot portrait of the 'consumer'" (p.161). So the puritan ethic equating virtue with conserving financial resources and deferring gratification was undermined, and the American Dream promoting the idea that hard work led inexorably to social advancement was amended: thoroughgoing participation in the consumer culture was increasingly the benchmark of status and success.

One of the dominant sound-bites supporting these changes said that ideology (in the sense of opposing political ideas) itself was at an end. Utopia did not lie beyond capitalism in a socialist future, but was being delivered here and now by a buoyant consumer culture. The bad old days had been banished by good new ones which were here to stay. Public-opinion surveys revealed that fewer Americans expected a major depression than expected a major war; *Fortune* magazine predicted that the boom would continue indefinitely, with "the economic pie" expanding so "enormously" that "almost everybody can get a substantially bigger cut."<sup>20</sup> This sense of a fundamental shift was also presented by dominant intellectual Daniel Bell in his book *The End Of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*,<sup>21</sup> and was famously echoed by Vice-President Nixon at a Moscow trade exhibition in 1959. In the "kitchen debate", Khrushkev and Nixon rehearsed the communism versus capitalism argument whilst standing in a mock-up American home. Nixon's most forceful retort came by simply pointing at the appetizing spread of consumer durables on display--the suggestion was that the availability and desirability of the goods rendered ideological discussion redundant.

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<sup>20</sup> Howard Temperley and Malcolm Bradbury, "War and Cold War", in Bradbury and Temperley eds., pp.312-3.

<sup>21</sup> Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (1960; New York: Free Press, 1962). Ironically Bell was himself, in the words of Eisenhower's special adviser C.D. Jackson, "thoroughly knowledgeable on Communist cold war techniques". The absurdity of writing a book proclaiming the end of ideology whilst knowingly working for publications and committees funded by an organization as determinedly ideological as the CIA barely needs spelling out. For an account of Bell's involvement in American cultural policy during the Cold war see Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid The Piper: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 1999). Jackson's remark about Bell is from p. 152.



But even the hey-day of the fifties boom failed to guarantee such good times for all, and for many Americans social insecurity remained. From 1944 to 1961 the poorest fifth of families received 5% of the National income whilst the richest fifth pocketed 45%.<sup>22</sup> And things only got worse when, in the course of the sixties the boom began to lose momentum. As the economic dominance of the United States waned, the gold-dollar based monetary system broke down.<sup>23</sup> The number of people employed in manufacturing began to decline as machinery improved,<sup>24</sup> and as transnational companies uprooted their production plants to take advantage of cheap labour in the developing world.<sup>25</sup> By the end of the Eisenhower years, white-collar workers out-numbered those in skilled and un-skilled blue-collar jobs,<sup>26</sup> and by 1982, more than twice as many people sold McDonald's hamburgers in the United States as worked in the steel industry.<sup>27</sup> The term "rust-belt" was coined to describe the post-industrial wasteland which spread across the landscape.<sup>28</sup> The population became more transient, as working people moved around to follow receding industry.<sup>29</sup> Average disposable income plummeted from 2.8% in the sixties to *minus* 3.5% between 1973 and 1975.<sup>30</sup> By 1973 inflation and

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<sup>22</sup> Howard Zinn, "A People's War" in *A People's History of the United States* (1980; London: Longman, 1996) p.433.

<sup>23</sup> See Hobsbawm, p.285.

<sup>24</sup> By the early seventies, robots were introduced into car assembly: the Unimate robot, which cost \$40,000 in 1978, worked two eight hour shifts a day for less than \$5 per hour: Assembly workers cost \$15 per hour. General motors proposed to install 1,000 robots per year until 1982, 14, 000 by the end of the eighties. See Harris, p.74.

<sup>25</sup> Hobsbawm, p.302

<sup>26</sup> Snowman, p.133.

<sup>27</sup> Harris, p.47.

<sup>28</sup> Hobsbawm, p.303. The expansion of the service sector--22% of the 17.1 million jobs created in the U.S. between 1972 and 1984 were in restaurants and retailing--was often insecure, poorly unionized and poorly paid--on average the wages were 38% less than those for the jobs lost in manufacturing. Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) p.124.

<sup>29</sup> In the seventies for example, population in the North and North East fell, whilst it grew in the old deep South, especially Texas and Georgia. For a discussion of this pattern, see Harris, pp. 50-55.

<sup>30</sup> Harris, p.78 .

unemployment both reached 10%, and the oil crisis ushered in an economic slump unforeseeable ten years before. The plight of poorer Americans worsened during the first Reagan administration, where tax and welfare cuts cost low-income families \$23 billion. As Mike Davis observed in 1986, "The old charmed circle of the poor getting richer as the rich get richer is being superseded by the trend of poorer poor and richer rich, as the proliferation of low-wage jobs simultaneously enlarges an affluent market of non-producers and bosses."<sup>31</sup>

Born on 25 May 1938, Raymond Carver was a child of the submerged population struggling to make ends meet through the post war boom. In search of a better life, his father had ridden the freight trains from Arkansas up to "The Nation's Fruit Bowl" of Washington State in 1934. After labouring on the Grand Coulee Dam construction programme he eventually settled in Yakima and his family lived without an indoor toilet well into the boom years:<sup>32</sup> as William Stull observes, Carver's poem "Shiftless" (1986) recalls the delicate economic balance of these years, where the family were precariously poised between two worlds: "The people who were better than us were *comfortable*. / They lived in painted houses with flush toilets./ The ones worse off were *sorry* and didn't work./ Their strange cars sat on blocks in dusty yards."<sup>33</sup>

By the time Carver was twenty he was himself married with two children. Looking back on these years in his autobiographical essay "Fires" (1982) he explained how the stress of bringing up a family in poverty "dictated to the fullest possible extent, the forms my writing could take." He wrote poems and stories rather than novels because he had so little time to write: "I had to sit down and write something I could finish now, tonight, or at least tomorrow night, no later, after I got in from work and

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism*, p. 164.

<sup>32</sup> In 1956, he moved to Chester, North California, for a job with better prospects. He was injured at work, suffered a nervous breakdown and worked only sporadically until his death in the mid-sixties. See Carver's essay, "My Father's Life", *Fires* (1985; London: Pan, 1986) pp.13-26.

<sup>33</sup> William Stull, "Raymond Carver: A Biographical Essay" from [http:// people.whitman.edu/~lucetb/ carver/ biography1.html](http://people.whitman.edu/~lucetb/carver/biography1.html). "Shiftless" is collected in Carver's, *In A Marine Light: Selected Poems* (London: Pan, 1988) p.22.



before I lost interest."<sup>34</sup> In an interview two years later, he described how these experiences also influenced the *content* of his stories:

The things that have made an indelible impression on me are the things I saw in lives I witnessed being lived around me, and in the life I lived myself. These were lives when people really *were* scared when someone knocked on the door, day or night, or when the telephone rang; they didn't know how they were going to pay the rent or what they could do if the refrigerator went out...It doesn't seem that, in focussing on this group of people I have really been doing anything different from other writers. Chekhov was writing about a submerged population a hundred years ago.<sup>35</sup>

Carver's fiction, like his autobiographical writing, chronicles these lives, uncovering what he later termed "the dark side of Reagan's America."<sup>36</sup> His characters drift from town to town, wherever their work takes them. The narrator of "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love", for instance, says of his friends, "we lived in Albuquerque then. But we were all from somewhere else,"<sup>37</sup> whilst the main character in "Collectors" is another stranger in limbo, waiting to hear about a job "'up North" (p.81). Jerry, from the story, "Jerry and Molly and Sam" feels "insubstantial" when he re-visits his old house. "Before that", he recalls, "Chico, Red Bluff, Tacoma, Portland--where he'd met Betty--Yakima...Toppenish, where he had been born and went to high school...He wished he could keep driving...stopping when he came to where his mother

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<sup>34</sup> He continues: "In those days I always worked some crap job or another, and my wife did the same...I worked sawmill jobs, janitor jobs, delivery man jobs, service station jobs, stockroom boy jobs--name it, I did it." Raymond Carver, "Fires" (1982) in *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories* (1985; London: Picador, 1986) pp.34-35.

<sup>35</sup> Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, "An Interview with Raymond Carver" in Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull eds., *Conversations with Raymond Carver* (Jackson and London: University of Mississippi Press, 1990) p.112.

<sup>36</sup> In a 1987 interview with Kasia Boddy, Carver said, "I write oftentimes about...the dark side of Reagan's America. So in that regard I suppose the stories can be seen as an indictment." (Gentry and Stull eds., p.201).

In an interview with David Applefield, from the same year, he develops his point: "Every time one looks around, one sees another program being cut. The private sector has to take up the slack. That's what we're told. And we're told that nobody's going to fall through the cracks. People *are* falling through the cracks. Of course I don't like this." (Gentry and Stull, eds, p.212).

<sup>37</sup> Raymond Carver, *The Stories of Raymond Carver* (London: Picador, 1985) p.270. I have used this single volume edition, which collects Carver's first three major books, throughout this chapter. Further references will be cited in parantheses in the text.

lived, and never, never, for any reason ever, ever leave again" (p.119). Places are not experienced as communities but are read off like items on a shopping list. Re-visiting them undermines Jerry's substantiality, perhaps because it reminds him that the current stage in his life is no less ephemeral. Moving on is one of the unavoidable pressures of modern life, and is frequently presented as a relatively recent and even distinctively *generational* necessity. Regional identity is curiously old fashioned--Jerry's mother has not moved about, and Henry Robinson, the narrator of "What Do You Do In San Francisco?" explains, "I've lived in the West all my life, except for a three year stint in the army" (p.87).<sup>38</sup> His identification with his home town, and his familiarity with its other residents serves to single him out from the insular lives of Carver's younger characters. Hamilton, in the story "Bicycles, muscles, cigarets", only has to go to the corner of his street before he is in unknown territory--"he hadn't known of the existence of this street", the narrative reports, "and was sure he would not recognize any of the people who lived there" (p.144). Robinson's attitude to work is equally old-fashioned. He introduces himself by saying, "I'm a postman, a federal civil servant, and have been since 1947" (p.87). His work is secure and central to his identity. He refers to other people through their jobs ("Murchison worked at Simpson Redwood and Gene Grant was a cook", p.88) and has a burning faith in "the value of work--the harder the better" (p.87).

This pride in the intrinsic dignity of labour and the definition of the self through work is also rare in Carver's stories, where jobs are often short-lived and unemployment always looms. Many of Carver's characters have been pushed out of work by mechanization, such as Ross in "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit", who used to work at an aerospace plant. Economic slump also leads to lay-offs: in "Elephant", the narrator's brother is one of two hundred workers made redundant from a fibre-glass insulation plant, and Leo from "What Is It?" seems to have suffered the same fate. Whilst secure, full-time jobs in heavy industry are on the decline, irregular, low-paid work in the service sector has to take up the slack. Carver's stories are peopled by bakers ("The Bath"), hairdressers ("The Bridle"), live-in motel managers ("Gazebo"), door-to-door

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<sup>38</sup> This story dramatizes the contrast between modern rootlessness and an older connection to place and people. Robinson seems to know everybody in Arcata, and even appoints himself as its spokesperson, greeting the new tenants with "Welcome to Arcata" (p.88).



salespeople ("Collectors", "Viewfinder") supermarket workers ("Tell The Women We're Going") and waitresses ("Fat"), a number of which support unemployed husbands, ("Nightschool" and "They're Not Your Husband").

Consumption, rather than region or work is the dominant source of identity here.<sup>39</sup> Social status is expressed through consumer choices--the narrator of "Menudo" for example, refers to "the usual magazines that nice people read"<sup>40</sup>, suggesting that consuming certain publications is an act of self-definition: in the absence of older sources of identity Carver's characters largely experience consumer society through its dominant stories. The narrator of "Vitamins" is typical of the young Carver himself and the people he came to write about--he has faith in the mantra, "Do the right things and the right things will happen" (p.353).<sup>41</sup> These characters are optimistic about getting their slice of the American pie: like the young couple in "Everything Stuck To Him", they are "always talking about the things they were going to do and the places they were going to go" (p.265). But in spite of this faith, they continue to have experiences such as poverty, unemployment, bankruptcy, re-possession or even working hard and getting nowhere which these dominant ideologies never mention. So Carver's world is one

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<sup>39</sup> Carver's autobiographical essays also reflect this shift. In the essay "My Father's Life", for example, he tells how his father responded to Franklin Roosevelt's oration on the completion of the Grand Coulee dam by saying, "He never mentioned those guys who died building that dam." My Father's Life", *Fires: Essays, poems, Stories* (1985; London: Picador, 1986) p.13 This remark expresses a strong sense of class affiliation which might be compared with the many militantly class conscious songs composed by Woody Guthrie whilst he worked on the dam: "Clothes don't make no difference at all / We are workers and fighters all / My uniform's my dirty overhauls", from "My Dirty Overhauls". Guthrie wrote twenty five more songs in his month at the dam, including "Roll On Columbia", "The Grand Coulee Dam", "Jackhammer Blues". See Joe Klein's biography, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, London: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980).

One cannot imagine Carver making such class-conscious remarks. In the "Fires" essay, for instance, he lists the "crap job" he used to work, including "sawmill jobs, janitor jobs, service station jobs, stockroom boy jobs" (*Fires*, p.35) but the jobs are described in terms of individual, isolated misfortune rather than with any sense of shared class exploitation.

<sup>40</sup> Raymond Carver, *Elephant and Other Stories* (London: Collins Harvill, 1988) p.56.

<sup>41</sup> Carver presents his own earlier expectations of life in strikingly similar terms: "For years my wife and I had held to a belief that if we worked hard and tried to do the right things, the right things would happen. It's not such a bad thing to try and build a life on. Hard work, goals, good intentions, loyalty, we believed these were virtues and would some day be rewarded. We dreamt when we had the time for it. But eventually, we realized that hard work and dreams were not enough. Somewhere, in Iowa City maybe, or shortly afterwards, in Sacramento, the dreams began to go bust...We couldn't fully comprehend what had happened". Raymond Carver, "Fires" (1982), in *Fires*, pp.33-34.

where older sources of social identity, such as those rooted in region, work and class have been eroded by the rising tide of consumerism, and yet where economic insecurity remains. If "you are what you buy" then to become unemployed is to lose one's purchasing power and by extension the identity one acquires through consumption: bankruptcy and repossession take on an almost existential resonance. In the story "What Is It?", for example, Toni taunts her unemployed husband by saying "...you don't have any money...and your credit's lousy. You're nothing" (p.152). Although she is "only teasing", her insistence that he is "nothing" anticipates Leo's breakdown in the course of the story. The couple's red sports car is the last point of connection with a by-gone era of work, easy credit and energetic consumption and its disappearance coincides with Leo's disintegration. For Leo, as for many of Carver's characters, reality in consumer culture becomes inexplicable--it contradicts the received expectations and ideas through which it is experienced.

This slippage between ideological expectations and hard socio-economic facts plays an important role in generating Carver's estranged realism, and it is this which I want to draw out in the following readings. Many of Carver's stories engage with socio-economic questions in challenging ways, but to enable substantial textual analysis I have chosen to concentrate on just two stories; "Neighbors", which was first published in June 1971 issue of *Esquire* (also included in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* in 1976), and "Preservation" from the 1983 collection *Cathedral*.<sup>42</sup> Both adopt complex narrative strategies to reflect critically upon consumer culture's dominant stories, and whilst both have been widely discussed by critics, the opposition between realism and postmodernism has tended to dictate the agenda.

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<sup>42</sup> Further stories which would be illuminated by this type of reading include "Nightschool", "Collectors", "Put Yourself In My Shoes", "Jerry and Molly and Sam", "Signals" (from *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*), "Viewfinder", "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit", "Gazebo", "A Serious Talk", "One More Thing" (from *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*) "Chef's House", "Vitamins" and "The Bridle" (from *Cathedral*) and "Boxes", "Elephant" and "Menudo" (from *Elephant*).



...the propaganda of consumption turns alienation itself into a commodity. It addresses itself to the spiritual desolation of modern life and proposes consumption as the cure. It not only promises to palliate all the old unhappiness to which the flesh is heir; it creates and exacerbates new form of unhappiness--personal insecurity, status anxiety...Do you look dowdy next to your neighbors? Do you own a car inferior to theirs?<sup>43</sup>

"Neighbors", which is ostensibly a story about the unpromising subject of house-sitting, has received a great deal of critical attention which has tended to concentrate on sexual politics and the psychology of voyeurism at the expense of socio-economic issues and the text's narrative strategies.<sup>44</sup> But from the very first paragraph, the events are explicitly described in terms of social relations--although the two couples, the Millers and the Stones, live in adjacent apartments, the Stones enjoy a higher social status:

Bill and Arlene Miller were a happy couple. But now and then they felt they alone among their circle had been passed somehow, leaving Bill to attend to his bookkeeping duties and Arlene occupied with secretarial chores. (p.17)

Whilst "felt" reveals that we are being given access to the Miller's private world here, the arhythmic string of monosyllables which opens the second sentence suggests that the prose is also reproducing their idiom, with the language being angled towards the cadences of vernacular speech. This point of view dominates the story and often suggests more than it seems to say. Here it mystifies those social forces which supposedly grant status according to desert, implying that these forces seem elusive to the Millers. So we find euphemism in the almost metaphysical "passed" being further

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<sup>43</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, p.139.

<sup>44</sup> See especially Boxer and Phillips' article, "Will You Please Be Quiet Please?: Voyeurism, Dissociation, and the Art of Raymond Carver", *Iowa Review* 10 (Summer 1979) and Kirk Nessel's "This Word Love: Sexual Politics and Silence in Early Raymond Carver", *Journal of American Literature* 63, no.2 (1991).

obscured behind the opaque "somehow". Through the simplest language, the sentence manages to imply that the Millers are deeply ambivalent about their lot and feel a discrepancy between the way things are and the way they should be. The progression of this sentence neatly re-structures the "natural" sequence which the ideologies of consumer capitalism promote: a course leading inexorably from work to the rewards bestowed by status. And one could add that the rather incongruous fairy-tale word "happy" echoes the famous "pursuit of happiness" clause in the American constitution.

In the Millers' case though, work seems merely to fill the time left open by the absence of reward and to distract Bill and Arlene from the disappointment of unsatisfactory status. The wordplay of the final clause develops this tone of resignation mingled with directionless resentment--"occupied" is juxtaposed with "secretarial chores" and the implication is that Arlene is neither occupied nor rewarded by her chore-like job. So the sentence opens up a disparity between dominant stories and experience, at the same time as communicating that the disparity cannot be fully articulated because Bill and Arlene necessarily see the world *through* these supposedly cohering stories.

The opening sentences set up the status relations which are explored throughout the narrative: Bill makes them absolutely clear further down the same page when he says of the jet-setting Stones "I wish it was us". These social relations are an important factor in the Millers' increasingly bizarre responses to the Stones' apartment and the "fuller and brighter life" which it represents. These responses take a variety of forms. Some seem to be about measuring or explaining the social difference. Bill's systematic search of the apartment in which he examines "the canned goods, the cereals, the packaged foods, the cocktail and wine glasses, the china, the pots and pans" moving "slowly through each room considering everything" (p.19) are examples of this. Part hunt, part inventory of foodstuffs and consumer durables, his survey is comic because whilst thorough, it has no object in mind: we wonder if he would know what he was looking for even if he found it. Scrutinizing the contents of the medicine chest and bedside drawers seem to be about "normalizing" the more glamorous neighbors by confirming that they too have bodily functions, ailments and underclothes. Bill's pilfering of cigarettes, medication and alcohol, by contrast, are less purposeful, and even, perhaps, involuntary: he seems to pocket these things because the Stones can afford it and he can get away with it--they are like an unofficial perk of the job.



The Millers also indulge in activities which are about experiencing the Stones' elevated social status through a type of vicarious consumption. These are less about levelling difference than enjoying a type of opportunistic holiday via the accessories of the "fuller and brighter life"--after all, Arlene herself previously complained, "God knows, we could use a vacation" (p.17). The more up-market apartment becomes a retreat from work-a-day routine--quite literally in Bill's case, when he leaves work early and then phones in sick to spend time there. As if on holiday, he forgets what day it is when he's in the Millers' flat (p.20). It is darker and cooler than their own place and he wonders "if the plants had something to do with the temperature of the air" (p.19). In their own flat time seems to stand still,<sup>45</sup> but in the Stones' it flies by--five minutes feels like an hour for Bill (p.19) and he has to go over and fetch Arlene back, calling, "Are you still there, honey?" (p.20). Contact with the Stones' apartment also arouses a tired sex life, which is unsurprising when we remember that the characters live in a culture whose dominant representations endlessly associate the erotic with the exotic.<sup>46</sup> Conventional gender ascriptions also become available for re-interpretation--Bill spends one afternoon drinking *Chivas Regal* and dressing up first in Jim's holiday-wear and then in Harriet's underwear, blouses and skirts.

In a third type of response, which is represented with a shorter piece of narrative,

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<sup>45</sup> In their own flat, by contrast, time seems to stand still. Consider the following sentence which describes the couple there: "He stood in the kitchen doorway and smoked a cigaret and watched her pick up the key" (p.20). The phrase "smoked a cigaret" lends the sentence a slow-motion effect. On the one hand it means, quite simply, he was smoking a cigaret. But the suggestion is that it takes Bill as long to smoke an entire cigaret as it does for Arlene to pick up the key. The repetition of the word "and" also communicates a sense of Bill's impatience to get into the Stones' flat.

<sup>46</sup> "In the affluent society", writes Theodore Roszak, "we have sex and sex galore--or so we are to believe. But when we look more closely we see that this...wears a special social coloring. It has been assimilated to an income level and a social status available only to our well-heeled junior executives and the jet-set...*Real* sex, we are led to believe, is something that goes with the best scotch, twenty-seven-dollar sunglasses, and platinum tipped shoelaces". Theodore Roszak, *The Making Of A Counter Culture: Reflections on The Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (1968; London: Faber, 1970) p.14.

Through the Stones' apartment the Millers enjoy such glamorous erotics. Both Bill and Arlene lie on the Stones' big bed and masturbate. Bill, "lay for a while with his eyes closed and moved his hand under his belt" (p.20). Arlene emerges from the flat with the "white lint" of the Stones' bedspread clinging to her back, with "the color...high in her cheeks" (p.21). At the beginning of the story Arlene has to force a reluctant Bill to put his arm around her waist. By contrast, each time he returns from the Stones' flat, he initiates sex. Surprised by his new ardor, Arlene asks, "What's gotten into you" (p.18).

the couple begin, albeit tentatively, to think in terms of the dream home materializing into a real home and the temporary vacation being indefinitely prolonged. Arlene admits to finding "some pictures" before divulging her fantasy that their neighbors "won't come back" (p.21). Bill, who has already "wondered if they would ever return" (p.20) hopefully replies that anything can happen. Arlene then begins to project that "maybe they'll come back and" before breaking off (p.21). It is at this crucial moment of mutual confession and conspiratorial murmuring that the Millers realize that the Stones' key is locked inside the flat. Their reaction is strikingly intense--they hold one another as though withstanding the news of a family tragedy--and the prose, both Bill's speech and the narrative discourse, breaks down into short, gasping, portentous sentences.<sup>47</sup> The degree of their shock is disproportionate to the immediate social *faux-pas* and suggests that the locked door is seen as punitive (punishing their aspiration for a work-free social promotion) and represents permanent exclusion from the coveted flat and the social status it represents. In a further twist, the story leaves Bill and Arlene out in the corridor, suspended between the two apartments. Their physical position mirrors their social one--they have turned their backs upon their own niche and have set their hearts on a higher position which is stubbornly, and mysteriously, unavailable to them.

Whilst much of the story is told through a third person style of narrative which uses idiomatic language to summarize Bill Miller's actions and responses, at moments, notably when the Millers indulge in vicarious consumption of their neighbors' apartment, the text is pervaded by a sense of un-reality which sharply contrasts with the surrounding, every day atmosphere. The text brings about this sense of strangeness, I would claim, by invoking the conventions of a very different narrative tradition which has little to do with the everyday, and is not grasped by the categories of realist or postmodernist.

This other type of text might be loosely classified as romantic pastoral, a type of

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<sup>47</sup> The story closes with the ominous prose:

"He tried the knob. It was locked. Then she tried the knob. It would not turn. Her lips were parted and her breathing was hard, expectant. He opened his arms and she moved into them.

'Don't worry,' he said into her ear. 'For God's sake, don't worry.'

They stayed there. They held each other. They leaned into the door as if against a wind, and braced themselves" (pp.21-22).



text which encompasses other-worldly or enchanted spaces which are contrasted to, and provide respite from, the often drab, everyday domains from which the characters escape.<sup>48</sup> The Vanamee-Angelee sub-plot of Frank Norris' novel *The Octopus* (1901) is a typical example. In the course of the novel, the brooding and enigmatic Vanamee, whose lover Angelee was brutally raped sixteen years before, and who died bearing the resulting child, revisits the San Joaquin valley mission garden, the site of his "perished idyll" where he used to meet Angelee for their nocturnal trysts.<sup>49</sup> The garden, where Vanamee is eventually "re-united" with his lover is figured as a place of "infinite repose...a tiny corner of the world, shut off, discreet, distilling romance, a garden of dreams, of enchantments."<sup>50</sup> In its very different spatial tensions (two apartments) and experiential oppositions (the Stones' apartment as a "fuller and brighter" retreat from hum-drum routine) "Neighbors" engages with this tradition. As well as the general structural parallel between "Neighbors" and this type of text, in a number of places Carver's story intersects with its well-known tropes.

Doorways loom large in this tradition, spatially linking and symbolizing the point of entry into alternate worlds. Examples might include Frances Hodgson Burnett's fairy-tale *The Secret Garden*, where a concealed doorway opens into the enchanted realm, or C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, where a wardrobe door leads into magical Narnia.<sup>51</sup> As already mentioned, the door to the Stones' apartment plays a vital

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<sup>48</sup> A great deal has been written about the pastoral tradition and literary recyclings of its basic conventions. Harold Toliver's *Pastoral Forms and Attitudes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971) holds up very well. He defines pastoral as a tradition where, "contrasts between a golden age and the normative world" are exploited to produce "a dialectical, tensive structure" (p.5). See also William Empson's book *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1935).

<sup>49</sup> Frank Norris, *The Octopus* (1901; New York: Signet, 1964) p.268.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p.274.

<sup>51</sup> Fairy tale motifs appear in a number of Carver stories. In "Where I'm Calling From", for example, which is set in a de-tox centre, the narrator listens to his new friend J.P. describe the day he first met his wife. She was a chimney sweep who sported a top hat, and at first sight, "knocked J.P. for a loop" (p.378). For both J.P and the narrator, this other-worldly detail comes to symbolize the stark contrast between a past replete with opportunities and a hum-drum present of alcoholism and marital break-up.

Stock fairy tale devices also shape the story "Fever". After Carlyle's wife leaves him, he hires a baby-sitter called Debbie, who turns out to be a wicked step-mother figure, and who exposes his children to a wolf-like dog "big enough to bite off their hands" (p.397). Mrs. Webster, by contrast, who seems sent by destiny, is like a fairygodmother figure, resolving all of Carlyle's problems. The narrative suggests that a disorientated Carlyle, who reads "Hans Christian Anderson

role in "Neighbors": it not only takes on a symbolic charge at the end of the text, but is the subject of repeated close-ups throughout the narrative.<sup>52</sup> And we have seen how the Millers experience time differently when they enter the Stone's apartment: the same is true for the characters of these intertexts when they step into their enchanted spaces. To the preceding examples we could add the fairy tale "The Poor Miller's Boy and the Cat", where seven years in an enchanted castle passes like seven months, A. Phillipa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden*, where time stands still during Tom's nocturnal sojourns in the Victorian garden, or *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) where days in Oz are revealed to be dreamt by Dorothy in a single night.<sup>53</sup> We have seen how in "Neighbors" Bill "sheds his own clothes" (p.20) and dresses up in Jim's and Harriet's. So too, in the enchanted enclaves of this romantic pastoral tradition, identities are often altered. Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) contains a memorable interlude when little tramp and Gamin find shelter from the mean, depression streets in a cornucopia of consumer desirables--the department store where Chaplin's character had landed a job as night-watchman. Let loose in the toy department, the awkward tramp, with his jerky, comic walk, is temporarily transformed into a graceful roller-skater whilst the grubby urchin Paullette Goodard becomes a sleeping beauty in a king-sized bed and dressing gown. And as in "Neighbors", gender norms are also often reversed in the enchanted zones of this tradition: pantomime, Shakespeare's so-called "festive comedies" (such as *As You Like it* and *Twelfth Night*) and all those texts which re-cycle them would be further examples

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and the Brothers Grimm" (p.400) to his children as bedtime stories, comes to experience his life in their terms. Francis Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden* (1911; Maidenhead: Purnell, 1975) and C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950).

<sup>52</sup> On page 17, Arlene is framed by the Millers' kitchen doorway; on page eighteen, after his first visit, Bill "switched off the lights, slowly closing and checking the door". Further down the same page he "looked at the door across the hall" before entering his own apartment--merely *looking* at the Stone's door seems to arouse him sexually. On page 19, Bill is pinching the Stones's cigarets when "the knock sounded at the door". As we have seen, time seems to stand still in the Millers's own flat whilst it passes unnoticed in the Stones's place (p.20). On page 21, Bill guides Arlene "toward their own door". Realizing that the key is locked in the Stones's apartment, Arlene "gazed at the door...They leaned into the door as if against a wind, and braced themselves" (p.22).

<sup>53</sup> "The Poor Miller's Boy and the Cat" in *Grimm's Fairy Tales* (London: Johnathan Cape, 1962) pp.236-240, A. Phillipa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958) and *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) directed by Victor Fleming and King Vidor. See also Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Trough the Looking Glass* (1865, 1872; London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1971). For a discussion of the *Alice* books as pastoral, see William Empson's *Some Version of Pastoral*, pp.253-295.



here.

The principle difference between these and Carver's text, however, lies in the *degree* of the spatial and structural oppositions. The tradition I have cited encompasses extreme contrasts, and the narrative tension is generated by the difference between the two opposing spaces. So on the one side we have a world which is oppressive, tediously regimented, monochrome or drably mundane and on the other an anarchic or utopian space where norms are overturned and freedom can flourish. But in "Neighbors" these antithetical zones are situated under the same roof, on the same floor of the same apartment block. The enchanted space is not technicolor Oz, enchanted Wonderland or the saturnalian Forest of Arden but the flat across the hallway, the property of the people next door. In Carver's text, the difference is thus deeply subjective--it exists in the Millers' experience of the two places. They experience what is actually a minor difference (after all, the two couples are in the same "circle" and live in neighboring apartments) as vast. And the text suggests why. This difference--albeit small--flies in the face of society's dominant story that dedicated work leads inevitably and democratically to status, which is measured by the consumption of a particular lifestyle. For the Millers, for many of Carver's characters, and for the author himself, economic reality, which is represented here as white-collar jobs (bookkeeping and secretarial work) does not produce an adequate wage packet to buy the desired social status. The strangeness of the Stones' flat is conjured from the dislocation between how things are supposed to be and how they really are. So although the social gap depicted in the text appears small enough, it is experienced as inconceivably vast because it contradicts society's dominant stories and, in the absence of alternative stories, defies comprehension. Furthermore, through its domestication of the pastoral, the text eloquently attests to consumer culture's absorption of any outside or utopian space in which energizing anarchy might be conceived or located.<sup>54</sup> Utopia, in line with

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<sup>54</sup> Many classic American texts re-shape this tension between alternate worlds in terms of a distinctly American experience, when a wild, natural frontier is constructed as the alternative space into which characters plunge themselves. Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River" sequence, where Nick Adams retreats into the natural world to contain the trauma of war or (from *In Our Time*, 1926; collected in *The Essential Hemingway*, London: Grafton, 1977, pp.340-358) Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854; Oxford and New York: World's Classics, 1997) being very obvious examples.

In a story like "Chef's House", Carver draws upon this tradition. The narrator and her estranged, heavy drinking husband, spend an idyllic summer together, living close to nature, in a borrowed house overlooking the ocean. Eating the fish they catch and paying almost no rent, both

consumer capitalism's own ideology, no longer exists *outside* consumption, but *through* it.

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The story "Preservation", from *Cathedral and Other Stories* (1983) is often cited as an example of the Carver's "deliberately undersuggestive prose": in his review, Michael Gorra complains that too much is held back from the reader, and that the story simply does not work.<sup>55</sup> Other critics consider Carver's mysteriousness as evidence of a postmodernist *afflatus*: as D.W. Lehman summarizes, some "find in Carver's minimal style evidence of postmodern distress, the refusal of the artist to bring pattern-making vision to the debris of contemporary life...Chenetier speaks of Carver's 'refusal of metaphor'...Saltzman contends that Carver's fiction 'parallels the notorious distrust of totalization' observed by Mas'ud Zavarzadeh and evident throughout the terrain of postmodern fiction."<sup>56</sup>

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are freed from work. But their bubble is burst when they learn that their retreat home is to be taken from them. At once, old habits reappear and the couple begin to argue. The suggestion is that their relationship will not withstand a return to the everyday world of rent and work.

Carver also engages with, and empties out, this version of pastoral in an early story, which was ironically called "Pastoral" (published in *Western Humanities Review*, 1963), before being re-titled "The Cabin" (*Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories*, pp.145-157). Far from being re-juvenated by his ostensibly Hemingwayesque retreat, Carver's protagonist finds the great outdoors absorbed into a theme park. In the words of Graham Clarke, Nature is scaled down to a business venture which, "seeks to create a lost America through fantasy and dream; it exists as a minor (and run-down) version of Disneyland and Disneyworld." Unlike Nick Adams, Carver's Mr. Harrold is quickly heading for home. For an excellent reading of "The Cabin", see Clarke's essay, "Investing the Glimpse: Raymond Carver and the Syntax of Silence" in Clarke ed., *The New American Writing: Essays on American Literature Since 1970* (New York: Vision Press, 1990) p.110, pp.99-122.

One might detect a discrete allusion to this tradition of Nature pastoral in "Neighbors". Bill notices that the air in the Stones' apartment "seemed cooler than his apartment, and darker too. He wondered if the plants had something to do with the temperature of the air" (p.19). Here then, nature is not turned into a theme park but reduced to a couple of houseplants.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Gorra, "Laughter and Bloodshed", review of *Cathedral and Other Stories*, *Hudson Review* 37, no. 1 (1984) p.156.

<sup>56</sup> These critics are Marc Chenetier, Norman German, Jack Bedell and Arthur Saltzman. D.W. Lehman, "Raymond Carver's Management of Symbol", *Journal of the Short Story in English*, no.17, (1991) pp.43-44. Further references will be cited in parantheses in the text.



Lehman himself takes objection to this line, detecting a more familiar reader-friendly aesthetic at work in Carver's realism. He insists that Carver *does* "endow the facts and events in his fiction with underlying significance" (p.43); that the "symbolic structure in 'Preservation' is unambiguous and carefully developed"; and that the author "expects his ideal reader to make sense of these symbols" (p.45). But whilst he is right to take issue with these postmodernist accounts which bypass reading in favour of citing distinctly postmodernist features, his rather bullish confidence in the fact that "symbolic facts have fixed referents" and that their use is "consistently reliable" in developing the story's theme of "swamp and entropy" (p.45) actually results in a corresponding under-engagement with this highly ambiguous and nuanced story.

Like "They're Not Your Husband", "Preservation" begins with unemployment, but whereas Earl Ober, the character from the earlier story was "between jobs as a salesman" (p.27), the redundant roofer in "Preservation" seems to be at the end of work. Caught up in economic slump, with the building trade at a standstill, he goes to the state office only to discover that "there were no jobs in his line of work, or in any other line of work" (p.313). The possibility of more work preserved Earl, who continued to define himself by his last job's title and treated his wife as merchandise to sell; but the roofer passes beyond identity.<sup>57</sup> As Barbara Henning notes, the narrative spells out this anonymity by leaving him nameless throughout the text.<sup>58</sup> Cut loose from the cohering narrative of earning and consuming, he rapidly loses any sense of what he should be doing. In the first paragraph, for example, he returns from work and breaks the news of his redundancy, adding, "hey, what do you think's gonna happen to us now?" (p.313). And further down the same page, Sandy observes that her husband spends most of his time lying on the sofa, "as if, she thought, it was the thing he was supposed to do now

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<sup>57</sup> Earl's unemployment is central to the story, as the attendant loss of identity and control over his life prompts him to manage his wife's life and to put her on a starvation diet: the loss of merchandise to sell leads him to 'sell' her over the counter at the coffee bar where she works as if a commodity. The text's grim humour stems from a contradiction between the relationship we would expect him to retain and the one he actually retains. The identity endowed by work--being a salesman--comfortably trumps being his wife's husband. "They're Not Your Husband" is from *Will You Please be Quiet, Please?* (1976).

<sup>58</sup> Barbara Henning, "Minimalism and the American Dream: 'Shiloh' by Bobbie Ann Mason and 'Preservation' by Raymond Carver", *Modern Fiction Studies* 15, no. 4 (1989) p.694.

that he no longer had any work". "Supposed" here posits some external authority, whilst the phrase "as if" indicates its absence. This disappearance of secure order crops up again on the next page with: "They'd hold their cups and drink their coffee *as if* they were normal people" (p.314). When the ready-made identity of the working, earning, consuming family is pulled away, they are left beyond a context of meaning. Actions seem baffling and of arbitrary value--"Whoever said anything about us buying an ice-box from an auction?" (p.319) Sandy's husband later asks, lamenting the fact that their actions are no longer prescribed or described by a prevailing structure.

Sandy's job provides a residue of normality--the narrative repeatedly defines the roofer in relation to his working wife ("Sandy's husband") and he continues the routine of getting up with her and dressing for work, even though he has nowhere to go to. When Sandy returns in the evening, they talk about "her day" (p.314). And whilst Sandy is "thankful to have her job", she does not "know what was going to happen to them or to anybody else in the world" (p.314). She can find no precedent for what has happened, and no way to comprehend it.<sup>59</sup> Likewise, her husband is at a loss--his purposeful reading, both of the daily newspaper which he reads "right down to the obituary section" (p.314) and of a single page in the *Mysteries of the Past* coffee table book (a leftover from by-gone days of mail-order shopping) suggests that he too is looking for an alternative explanation or identity to counter or substitute for the loss of work.<sup>60</sup>

Events in the story present two such possibilities, which take the form of

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<sup>59</sup> Sandy reflects, "If her husband had been wounded or was ill, or had been hurt in a car accident, that'd be different. She could understand that. If something like that happened, she knew she could bear it. Then if he had to live on the sofa, and she had to bring him his food out there, maybe carry the spoon up to his mouth--there was even something like romance in that kind of thing. But for her husband, a young and otherwise healthy man, to take to the sofa in this way and not want to get up except to go to the bathroom or turn on the T.V. in the morning or off at night, this was different. It made her ashamed."(p.313).

Sandy knows that she could be the attentive, nursing wife--that is a distinctive, constructed role, pervaded with pathos and the heroism of self-sacrifice. But no precedent exists for the actual situation in which she finds herself. Rather than conforming to an available story, it is embarrassing because it runs counter to the dominant ethos of working hard and consuming hard.

<sup>60</sup> As we have seen, unemployment plays a huge part in Carver's writing, often precipitating the episodes being described ("They're Not Your Husband", "Jerry and Molly and Sam", "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit", "Nightschool"). In the late story "Elephant", as in "Preservation", job loss has the effect of erasing the script through which the characters' live their lives. The narrator says of his mother, who is unable to settle in any one place, "She started moving years ago, after my Dad lost his job. When that happened, when he was laid off, they sold their home, *as if this were what they should do*" (*Elephant*, p.16. My italics).



overlapping configurations of objects and details which function metaphorically. At different points in the text, each of these configurations describe the situation in which the characters find themselves. The first configuration centres on the body, the possibility of preservation over the threat of decomposition and finds its central manifestation in the *Mysteries of the Past* story of the exhumed, preserved, peat-bog man which Sandy's husband is "drawn in by" (p.313) and keeps "within easy reach" (p.314). The second centres on food and its preservation, finding its key symbol in the broken fridge. Both configurations are opened up in the very first paragraph, and emerge from familiar expressions about unemployment:

Sandy's husband had been on the sofa ever since he'd been terminated three months ago. That day, three months ago, he'd come home looking pale and scared and with all his work things in a box. 'Happy Valentine's Day', he said to Sandy and put a heart shaped box of candy and a bottle of Jim Beam on the kitchen table. He took off his cap and laid that on the table too. 'I got canned today. Hey, what do you think's going to happen to us now?' (p 313).

The first configuration originates from the word "terminated", a clinical boardroom term which paradoxically underscores the fundamentality of work (by suggesting that its loss is equivalent to the abortion of life) at the same time as emptying that loss of any human or emotional charge. By naturalizing unemployment (making it as natural and inevitable as death itself), the phrase implies the absolution of company responsibility. But it is particularly apt here as it threatens to be unusually accurate in the case of Sandy's terminal husband. The word's implications are developed in the next sentence, first with "pale" and then with the phrase "work things in a box". The word pale is often associated with death--an association ossified in the phrase "deathly pale". So the use of the word "pale" in close proximity to the word "terminated" evokes these deathly associations. And a less likely association also arises between "work things in a box" and corpse and coffin. If losing a job is equivalent to losing life (being terminated), then to be jobless is to be dead. The association between Sandy's husband and somebody who is dead is compounded by this further association: "work things in a box" following both "terminated" and "pale" pictorially suggests a corpse and a coffin--the encasement of the tools, which metonymically imply working life, in a box (coffin) from which they will never be fetched out. These two sentences implement a

metaphorical configuration which talks about death, corpses and the threat of decay. And it is worth adding that the sophisticated, connotative textual strategies at work here--which allow complex associations to swim in and out of focus and which fly in the face of the prose's apparent simplicity--sit uneasily with Lehman's diagrammatic notions of metaphor, where authorial intention is said to nominate particular objects to function in a straightforward and unambiguous metaphorical framework for the ideal reader.

The second configuration also has its roots in a familiar expression, but this time it is not from the boardroom but the factory floor. The initial word is "canned", which like "terminated" has a brutality made good by the situation being described. On one level, the word suggests discarded--Sandy later drops the rotten yoghurt in "the garbage can" (p.316). But it also implies being packaged or canned for consumption--in redundancy, it is saying, the worker is objectified, "canned" and passed from the production line as though interchangeable with the goods manufactured. Like "terminated", the word "'canned" opens a configuration of metaphors--this time centring around food, people as food and the question of *its* "preservation". These two configurations, which revolve around death and food respectively, are at once distinguishable and closely interrelated. In the third sentence of this opening paragraph for example, the correspondence between them is brought into sharp focus when in adjacent sentences they take shape in figurally similar forms--the box of redundant tools (coffin and corpse) and the heart shaped box of *candy* (package and food product). The contiguity of the two here anticipates their eventual convergence at the end of the story: "preservation", the process described by the story's title, also bears an obvious relevance to both.

The food sequence, as I have said, finds its most focussed expression in the broken fridge. After coming home from work, Sandy:

put her purse on the table and went over to the fridge to get herself some yoghurt. But when she opened the door, boxed-in air came out at her. She couldn't believe the mess inside. The ice cream from the freezer had melted and run down the leftover fish sticks and cole slaw. Ice cream had gotten into the bowl of Spanish rice and pooled on the bottom of the fridge. Ice cream was everywhere. She opened the door to the freezer compartment. An awful smell puffed out at her and made her want to gag. Ice cream covered the bottom of the



compartment and puddled around a three-pound package of hamburger. She pressed her finger into the cellophane wrapper covering the meat, and her finger sank into the package. The pork chops had thawed too. Everything had thawed. She closed the door to the freezer and reached into the fridge for her carton of yoghurt. She raised the lid on the yoghurt and sniffed. That's when she yelled at her husband. (p. 315).

On one level, the breakdown of the fridge is metaphorically charged because it mirrors, for the reader, the breakdown of the couple's working identities and routines. Unemployment not only results in the loss of a cohering narrative and financial security, but also the loss of structure--that is, it disrupts a series of stabilizing norms and routines which used to orientate the characters. One is the layout of living space and the way in which particular rooms accommodate specific activities, thereby providing a set of bearings. These compartments are collapsed by Sandy's husband camping on the sofa in the living room. Familiar space is thus estranged: "That Goddam sofa!" thinks Sandy, "As far as she was concerned, she didn't even want to sit on it again. She couldn't imagine them ever having lain down there in the past to make love" (p.314). So the room is colonized by torpor and its reassuring associations wiped away. And norms are not only overturned in a spatial sense, but also temporally. Because Sandy's husband rests so much, clear distinctions between night and day, waking and sleeping are lost: returning from work, "She couldn't tell whether he had been asleep all this time..." (p.316). So are distinctions between youth and age and health and sickness--Sandy is "ashamed" that her fit, thirty-one-year old husband behaves like a convalescing old man (p. 315). Conventional gender norms are also reversed by unemployment--Sandy's (house) husband makes the coffee in the morning and awaits his wife's return from work.<sup>61</sup>

This kind of reading, which corresponds with Lehman's reader-centred approach to Carver's metaphors, is adequate up to a point but fails to register the characters' own perspectives. The prose in the excerpt *explicitly* represents Sandy's viewpoint, peering over her shoulder into the fridge. The meticulous, almost obsessive, documentation of individual details through this long string of bewildering close-ups postpones any

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<sup>61</sup> Again, this reversal is common in Carver's stories. In "One More Thing", for example, Maxine says to her unemployed husband L.D., "I'm paying the rent here, and I'm saying go. Now." (p.283).

diagnostic comment, that is, any recognition that the "mess" is caused by the fridge breaking down. And a number of phrases--such as "ice cream *had gotten* into the bowl of Spanish rice", "boxed in air *came out at her*" and "an awful smell *puffed out at her* that made her want to gag"--cast Sandy as passive victim and the fridge as active perpetrator. Clearly the narrative is not simply representing the ruined contents of a domestic appliance for the benefit of the symbol-hunting reader, but is measuring out the psychological shock they impart to Sandy. The fridge breaking down is obviously worrying on a financial level--Sandy's husband points out that new fridges "don't grow on trees" (p.317) whilst Sandy is worried that the food is "going to spoil" (p.316).<sup>62</sup> Having no fridge also brings home the question of backsliding in lifestyle and social status--Sandy comments, "Maybe we can keep our perishables on the window-sill like people in tenements do" (p.317). But more than this is happening here. With the loss of the narrative supplied by work and consumption, everything is defamiliarized, provoking superstitious dread and becoming a potential source of meaning. The narrative emphasizes that *for Sandy*, the coagulated food is *experienced* as a type of microcosmic representation of their lives--the melted food thrusts upon her an alternative story of their lives, which she manages to keep at bay. Sandy's husband is also shocked, panicked and more inclined to see the fridge in terms of message than malfunction. His relief on discovering the reason for the thawing is measured by the number of times he repeats the word "Freon". It is as though isolating the source of mechanical fault overrules the possibility of symbolic significance, reducing the odds of him and his wife suffering the fate which is augured by the fridge's insides. So for him too, in the absence of coherent narratives and stable identities, reality becomes menacingly symbolic.

Understandably then, the story which the fridge seems to tell--breakdown, melting, structurelessness and putrescence--is too bleak to be embraced consciously by

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<sup>62</sup> Carver himself once spelt out the significance of the couple's over-stretched finances: "Anatole Broyard tries to criticize my story 'Preservation' by saying, 'So the refrigerator breaks--why don't they just call a repairman and get it fixed?' That kind of remark is dumb. You bring a repairman out to fix your refrigerator and it's sixty bucks to *fix* it, and who knows how much if the thing is completely broken? Well, Broyard may not be aware of it, but some people can't afford to bring in a repairman if it's going to cost them sixty bucks, just like they don't get to a doctor if they don't have insurance, and their teeth go bad because they can't afford to go to a dentist when they need one. That kind of situation doesn't seem unrealistic or artificial to me." Raymond Carver in interview with Larry McCaffery and Sindra Gregory, 1984, in Gentry and Stull eds., p.112.



either of the characters. But as I have said, the "terminated" configuration functions as a counterpoint to the food one, and centres upon the coffee-table picture book entitled *Mysteries of the Past*.<sup>63</sup> Sandy's husband is preoccupied with this book, although he makes no "progress" (p.313) through it, sticking instead on a single page in the second chapter. With photograph and text, his page tells:

about a man who had been discovered after spending two thousand years in a peat bog in the Netherlands. A photograph appeared on one page. The man's brow was furrowed, but there was a serene expression to his face. The man's head and feet were shrivelled, but otherwise he didn't look so awful (pp.313-314).

Bearing in mind that Sandy's husband is also "terminated"--in his case severed from the cohering narrative of work--it is unsurprising that he is "drawn in" (p.313) by a story describing how stillness and insularity enabled long term preservation after death. Whether this book informs or merely consolidates his own strategy for posthumous survival--which involves staying indoors and resting on the sofa--is unclear, but either way overwhelming similarities remain. So unlike the food configuration, which thrusts its unwanted parallels upon the couple when the fridge breaks down, the "terminated" sequence is harboured by Sandy's husband. He keeps the book within "easy reach" (p.314) and it provides a sanctuary when the fridge breaks down and the auction beckons: Sandy watches him "sit down on the sofa and take up his book. He opened it to his place" (p.319).

The narrative also substantiates this parallel between Sandy's husband and the peat bog man for the reader: both are anonymous; both wear caps<sup>64</sup> and both are depicted through the same style of representation--rather than being described as a whole they are

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<sup>63</sup> The termination configuration also reappears in the husband's other reading material, the newspaper. I have already commented that he pores over the newspaper, and that the narrative discourse conspicuously namechecks the obituary section, the business news section and the section listing the temperatures in major cities. It would be fair to say that this juxtaposition of death and economics recalls the word "terminated" for the attentive reader, and that the fixation with temperature signals to both the title, the food configuration and the peat bog man--where temperatures rise, the conditions required for preservation are endangered.

<sup>64</sup> Sandy's husband wore a cap for work, which he lays on the kitchen table on p.313. The peat bog man wears a "leather cap" (p.314). Like Sandy's husband through most of the story, the peat bog man is lying down on his side.

dissected into a sum of body parts through a sequence of photographic close ups.<sup>65</sup> And this style of representation not only twins the men with one another, but also connects them to the food configuration, which, as we have just seen, is also represented in the same distinctive manner. Individual words, like this narrative style, serve a similar function, enabling the two configurations to leak into one another. So the fact that Sandy's husband "didn't *stir*" (my italics; p.315) anticipates her fry-up, whilst the ruined lettuce is described in bodily terms as a "head" (p.317). Both words serve to collate food and the body rather like the "heart shaped box of candy" in the first paragraph.<sup>66</sup> Through narrative style then, and through the use of specific words and images which cut across both the food and terminated configurations the two are repeatedly connected. This overlapping indicates that they are not as separate and self-contained as Sandy's husband might hope, repeatedly prefiguring their eventual convergence.

After the fridge breaks down, Sandy decides to go to an auction and buy a second-hand replacement. In the meantime, she cooks up some of the thawing food for a meal. She fries the pork chops while her husband sleeps on the sofa, calling him when everything is ready :

She used her spatula to raise one of the pork chops. Then she lifted it onto a plate. The meat didn't look like meat. It looked like a part of an old shoulder blade, or a digging instrument. But she knew it was a pork chop, and she took the other one out of the pan and put that on a plate, too.

In a minute her husband came into the kitchen. He looked at the fridge once more, which was standing there with its door open. And then his eyes took in the pork chops. His mouth dropped open, but he didn't say anything. She waited for him to say something, anything, but he didn't. (p. 320).

Once again for Sandy, everyday reality is metaphorically charged. The

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<sup>65</sup> Compare: "The (peat bog) man's brow was furrowed but there was a serene expression on his face. He wore a leather cap and lay on his side. The man's hands and feet had shriveled but otherwise he didn't look so awful." (p.314) with "Her husband's bare feet stuck out from one end of the sofa. At the other end, on a pillow which lay across the arm of the sofa, she could see the crown of his head. He didn't stir." (p.315).

<sup>66</sup> At the beginning of the story, Sandy's husband visits the unemployment office: "His face began to sweat as he tried to describe to Sandy the milling crowd of men and women down there. That evening he got back on the sofa" (p.313). This sweating at the prospect of unemployment anticipates the melting food in the fridge.



misshapen meat looks like a "digging instrument" or a "part of an old shoulder blade". Both of these items suggest the peat bog man, with the former recalling him in two ways, both as the type of tool he may have used, and through the process by which he was exhumed. "Shoulder blade" links the food with the man *and* with Sandy's husband, for as we have just seen, all three are depicted through close-ups--furthermore, the word "shoulder" is used in relation to Sandy's husband two pages previously when he "He put his shoulder against it (the fridge) and pushed and jerked the appliance a few inches out into the kitchen" (p.316). So through a combination of simile and association, the food is connected to the dead body of the peat bog man and to Sandy's husband. But no interpretative comment is added--instead Sandy determinedly expels any metaphorical meaning through recourse to the empirical ("she knew it was a pork chop") and the practical ("she took the other one out too"). So again, the representation of Sandy's response contains a tension between her experiencing reality metaphorically and standing her ground by refusing to de-cypher it.

For Sandy's husband on the other hand, the meat has an epiphanic force--the symbolism is experienced too directly and instantaneously for either repression or empiricism to be available as options. As we have seen, for him the story of the peat bog man is grasped as a type of emergency narrative in the absence of work, precisely because it seems to promise the possibility of preservation. But here, that narrative is absorbed into foodstuff, and the two configurations are brought conclusively together. The convergence of his emergency narrative with the melting food spells out the inevitability of the fate which he is hoping to avoid. This fate is of course the opposite of preservation, whether thawing and putrefaction (along the "food" configuration) or decomposition and disappearance (along the "terminated" one). And the impact of this epiphany--which has exposed the inadequacy of his preservation narrative given the severity of his conditions--seems to precipitate the very dissolution his narrative was initially adopted to keep at bay:

Sandy cleared the newspaper away and shoved the food to the far side of the table. 'Sit down', she said to her husband once more. He moved his plate from one hand to the other. But he kept standing there. It was then she saw puddles of water on the table. She heard water too. It was dripping off the table onto the linoleum.

She looked down at her husband's bare feet. She stared at his feet next to the

pool of water. She knew she'd never again in her life see anything so unusual. But she didn't know what to make of it yet. She thought she'd better put on some lipstick, get her coat, and go ahead to the auction. But she couldn't take her eyes off her husband's feet. She put her plate on the table and watched until the feet left the kitchen and went back into the living room. (pp. 320-321)

In the previous excerpt both configurations converged on the pork chop: now they meet in Sandy's husband. He is like the peat bog man because his feet are objectified. But unlike him, Sandy's husband is becoming *unpreserved*--in this respect he is like the food, into which he appears to be turning and melting. So the "canned" or food configuration supplants the one centred on the peat bog man and is shown to figure the situation most accurately in spite of Sandy's husband's hopes to the contrary. It is this which finally dispels hope of the character being preserved. Once again, Sandy registers the metaphorical overtones, but thinks practically ("she'd better put on some lipstick") and refuses to decode them--presumably for the sake of her own preservation. Even so, the narrative suggests that his retreat into the living room is futile: for him, it seems, the writing is on the wall.

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Certain right-wing critics don't like my writing, in particular, people associated with Hilton Kramer's *The New Criterion*. They want me to put a happy face on America. They say that the stories of mine that are going out into the world are not showing America in its best light, and if there are people like this, the ones I depict, the dispossessed, well, they deserve what they get; and the implication is that I'm rather un-American for bringing these stories to public attention...<sup>67</sup>

The political implications of Raymond Carver's fiction have been fiercely disputed. Whilst some commentators, like the ones Carver mentions here, have taken issue with the gloominess of his social commentary, others have found the work indulgently insular

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<sup>67</sup> Raymond Carver in interview with David Applefield in Gentry and Stull eds., *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, p.212.



and saturated by a mood of "discontented acquiescence".<sup>68</sup> Robert Dunn, for example, compares the stories unfavourably with the work of Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon, Donald Barthelme and John Barth, complaining that whilst these "most public" writers "broke with convention, invented possibilities and shaped political consciousness" Carver's stories "hold no large vision of society, history or intellectual struggle" and "fail to engage the expansive possibilities of our lives."<sup>69</sup> Charles Newman reads the stories as further symptoms of the malaise they seek to address, by exemplifying "the classic conservative response to inflation--under utilisation of capacity, reduction of inventory and verbal joblessness."<sup>70</sup>

Whilst these remarks smack of journalistic bravado and appear to be more informed by generalisation than careful attention to the texts in question, the academic critical reception of Carver has done little to facilitate a more rigorous debate about the politics articulated by his texts. Instead, as we have seen, the prevailing opposition between realism and postmodernism has directed analysis away from socio-economic and political questions and towards literary classification. For a critic like Kim Herzinger then, Carver's writing in particular, and "dirty realism" in general, is congratulated for "creating literary constructs as formally rigorous and linguistically savvy as their Postmodern predecessors." Whereas (unspecified) traditional "realists", the argument continues, "had a world and used a complex of ideas and emotions--done up in language--to describe it", the dirty realists, like the postmodernists, "have a complex of ideas and emotions--done up in language--which they use the world to describe."<sup>71</sup> In other words, the particular socio-economic situations being described exist as mere secondary subject matter which can be called upon to embody ideas which

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<sup>68</sup> Angela Carter again: "The vogue during the Reagan years has been for the sentimental, petit bourgeois naturalism of which Raymond Carver is the most influential, and glum, exponent. The sensibility is grey, the mood one of discontented acquiescence." (Angela Carter, *Expletive Deleted: Selected Writings*, p.151)

<sup>69</sup> Robert Dunn, "Fiction that Shrinks From Life", *New York Times Book Review* (30 June 1985) pp. 1, 24-5.

<sup>70</sup> Charles Newman, "The Postmodern Aura", quoted by Kasia Boddy in Gentry and Stull eds., p.201.

<sup>71</sup> Kim Herzinger, "Introduction: On the New Fiction", *Mississippi Review* 40/41 (Winter 1985) p.20.

exist prior to, and independently of, such conditions. By situating Carver's stories in post war America, at the same time as attending to the complexity and specificity of their narrative operations, I hope to have resisted this trend towards the de-contextualization and abstraction of a writer who presents a forceful engagement with contemporary society through deceptively simple story telling.



**CHAPTER THREE**  
**BOBBIE ANN MASON**

**"BORN RIGHT AT THE DAWN OF A NEW AGE OF MIRACLES"<sup>1</sup>: A READING OF BOBBIE ANN MASON'S *FEATHER CROWNS* (1993).**

*Shiloh* (1983), Bobbie Ann Mason's first collection of short stories, not only took the prestigious PEN / Hemingway Award but, in the words of critic John Ditsky, immediately won Mason a place in the "survey course anthologies where permanent reputations are supposed to be made".<sup>2</sup> Over the next decade this reputation was substantiated by three novels and one more collection of stories. Mason's debut novel *In Country* (1985), explored the legacy of the Vietnam war through the eyes of a Kentucky teenager: in 1989 it became a successful Hollywood movie directed by Norman Jewison, starring Bruce Willis and Emily Lloyd. The next novel *Spence + Lila* (1988), like *Shiloh* and the other collection of stories, *Love Life* (1988), chronicled the diverse lives of a West Kentucky community poised uncertainly between a rapidly changing world of burgeoning consumerism and mass media and the residues of Southern rural traditions.<sup>3</sup> Over this period, Mason received a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, a Pennsylvania Arts Council Grant and a Guggenheim fellowship. Her most recent novel, *Feather Crowns* (1993) won the Southern Book Award.

In terms of critical reception, Mason's first collection was briefly caught up in the "dirty realism" debate discussed in the previous chapter: like Carver, Mason was included in Bill Buford's influential *Granta* anthology, *Dirty Realism: New Writing from America*, and her work was discussed in this context by critics in Kim Herzinger's double issue of the *Mississippi Review*.<sup>4</sup> But whilst these debates about "dirty realism" (like

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<sup>1</sup> Bobbie Ann Mason, *Feather Crowns* (1993; London: Vintage, 1994) p.422. Further quotations from the novel will be cited in parantheses in the text.

<sup>2</sup> John Ditsky, "'Following a Serpentine Brick Path:' The Fiction of Bobbie Ann Mason", *The Hollins Critic* XXXIII, no.4 (October 1996) p.15.

<sup>3</sup> Bobbie Ann Mason, *Shiloh and Other Stories* (1982; London: Flamingo, 1988); *In Country* (1985; London: Flamingo, 1987); *Spence + Lila* (1988; London: Vintage, 1991); *Love Life and Other Stories* (1989; London: Vintage, 1990). *In Country* the movie was made in 1989 by Warner Brothers, directed by Norman Jewison and produced by Jackson DeGovia.

<sup>4</sup> Bill Buford ed, *Granta 8, Dirty Realism: New Writing From America* (1983). See Kim Herzinger's "Introduction: On the New Fiction" in *Mississippi Review* 40/41 (Winter 1985). In her



those about Raymond Carver's work) were dominated by the question of how the new writing related to postmodernism, most critical accounts of Mason's work have taken her realism as read.

For the distinguished critic Fred Hobson, Mason is *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World*<sup>5</sup>--she belongs to a regional tradition in a world overrun by global postmodernism:

The contemporary southern writer...lives in a postmodern world, a world in which order, structure, and meaning--including narrative order, structure and meaning--are constantly called into question...however, the southern writer in a postmodern world is not necessarily, is not usually, a *postmodern writer*. That is to say, the contemporary southern writer essentially *accepts*, rather than invents his world, is not given to fantasy, does not *in his fiction* question the whole assumed relationship between narrator and narrative, does not question the nature of fiction itself. The contemporary Southern fiction writer...usually plays by the old rules of the game.<sup>6</sup>

Hobson sees contemporary writing in two diametrically opposed camps. Postmodernist writing invents worlds, fantasizes and interrogates the very notion of fiction: its opposite number accepts the world, resists fancy and spurns metafictional enquiry. So playing "by the old rules of the game" is to reject postmodernism--this act of rejection is read as expressing a spirit of caution or a suspicion of the new, which for Hobson, dominates contemporary southern fiction.

In Hobson's case, this more straightforward type of narrative invites a correspondingly straightforward style of criticism: he proceeds to situate Mason in the southern tradition by foregrounding distinctly southern "themes" in her work, most notably, "concerns with place, family, community, religion and the past" (p.8) His analysis unfolds without any consideration of textuality; the materiality of Mason's prose

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article "Minimalism and the American Dream: 'Shiloh' by Bobbie Ann Mason and 'Preservation' by Raymond Carver", Barbara Henning reads a Mason story in relation to constructions of minimalist fiction. The second footnote of her piece acknowledges the *Mississippi Review* edition. See also *Postmodern Studies 5: Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction* (1992).

<sup>5</sup> Fred Hobson, *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991). For Hobson's discussion of Mason, see Chapter Two, "A Question of Culture--and History: Bobbie Ann Mason, Lee Smith and Barry Hannah". The Mason section runs from page 11 to 23.

<sup>6</sup> Hobson, p.9.

is overlooked. Merely describing a writer as "playing by the old rules of the game" is seen to exhaust discussion of her narrative strategies. The assumption is that the phrase, "playing by the old rules of the game" describes a stable tradition, and that the characteristics of this tradition are self evident.

Other critics make rather more of Mason's realism. In "Realism, Verisimilitude, and the Depiction of Vietnam Veterans in *In Country*", Matthew C. Stewart applauds Mason's "serious realism" and the fact that her text "shuns the formalist pyrotechnics of much modernist and postmodernist fiction, preferring to concentrate on old fashioned story-telling."<sup>7</sup> Stewart goes on to deduce Mason's intentions from the novel's realistic style; the project of *In Country* is, he claims, to enable American society "to come to terms with the Vietnam War...its basic raison d'etre is to examine the Vietnam War's legacy" (pp.168-9). So the solid, "old-fashioned" narrative style of the text is here seen to encode its project--a commitment to represent reality and to "tell it how it really is". Good realism, for Stewart, is the felicitous transcription of the world "out there". And he argues that whilst Mason's text fulfills its obligation to reality in its early part, it departs from "the simple language that has heretofore been inseparable from its goal as a realistic work" (p.175) and lapses into "unanchored symbols" and "highly abstracted metaphors" in its closing section. Mason, he argues, has "failed to finish the story properly. She simply wills it to an end, apparently succumbing to 'literary fancy' or to an 'expression of her desires'...The stuff of hard edged realism", he finally asserts, "cannot be instantly and carelessly yoked to the sort of pat ending typical of a television movie" (pp.176-7). So unlike postmodernist or modernist narrative, realism is characterised by "simple language", and has a special access to reality, or to "the familiar patterns of actual experience" (p.168). And this special access brings with it heavy responsibilities, which ultimately, Mason does not honour.

Whereas these critics see Mason's strength in her "old fashioned story-telling" and playing by "the old rules of the game"--to them the texts offer welcome relief from more fashionable literary trends--Barbara T. Ryan approaches Mason from the other side of the

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew C. Stewart, "Realism, Verisimilitude, and the Depiction of Vietnam in *In Country*" in Philip K. Jason ed, *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature* (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 1991) p.169, p.168. Further references will be cited in parantheses in the text.



theoretical divide, and is evidently more troubled by Mason's apparent realism. Her article "Decentered authority in Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*" is an attempt to rescue Mason's novel from the status of mere realism. It opens:

Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* is "realistic" in its conception of character, temporality, and causality and in its use of a detached third-person narrator. At the same time, the protagonist's actions lead her to a realization of the poststructuralist, or decentered, authority at the heart of the world.<sup>8</sup>

Ryan's definition of *In Country* as realistic is set up in order to be knocked down. It may *appear* to be realistic, she says, but actually conceals a poststructuralist subtext which problematizes this definition. Ryan proceeds to read *In Country* as a rite of passage novel which traces the protagonist's development from naively searching for the Logos to discovering, "a postmodern authority based upon a shifting center, an authority that signals the dissolution of the self / other dichotomy" (p.200). The novel's closure, Ryan argues, comes when Sam's "dyadic philosophical presuppositions" (p.207) are eradicated and her "semiotic skills" mature into poststructuralist understanding (p.208). So although the novel might not appear to be shaped by a postmodernist aesthetic (being apparently "realistic"), it is, Ryan argues, actually informed by, and available for a reading strategy based upon the recent postmodern and poststructuralist theoretical trends which have discredited realism.<sup>9</sup> For Ryan, this is the source of the novel's strength which transforms it from the type of "straightforward" realism applauded by Hobson and Stewart into an ironic realism enlightened by postmodernist thought.

Rigid constructions of realism and postmodernism, and more particularly, the force-field between them, exert pressure over all three of these articles, and in all three assumptions about both constructions feed into the reading practices. For Stewart, Mason's realism gives away the author's intention to "tell it how it really is" and solicits a critical approach which reduces the text to either a true or false reflection of reality; in this, his response to the text is reminiscent of Hamlin Garland's reading of Stephen

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<sup>8</sup> Barbara T. Ryan, "Decentred Authority in Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 31, no.3 (1990) pp.199-212. Further references will be cited in parentheses in the text.

<sup>9</sup> In using the terms "postmodernism" and "poststructuralism" interchangeably, I am consciously following Ryan's lead.

Crane's *Maggie* discussed in chapter one.<sup>10</sup> For Ryan, "realism" carries negative connotations, and her article labours to appropriate Mason for postmodernism. But rather than reading the text, Ryan simply transposes it into a disquisition on fashionable literary theory. In doing so, like some of Carver's critics discussed in the previous chapter, she abstracts the text from its historical and political context and empties it of any social engagement. In Hobson's work the opposition between realism and postmodernism makes itself felt in rather less obvious ways. For him, as for the majority of Mason's critics, the realism is reassuringly familiar and transparent, inviting an approach which by-passes textuality altogether, dwelling upon "themes" without any serious consideration of the narrative devices articulating them. Robert Brinkmeyer's article, "Finding One's History: Bobbie Ann Mason and Contemporary Southern Literature" is shaped by similar assumptions. Here too Mason's narrative strategies escape even cursory consideration. Like Hobson, Brinkmeyer concentrates on Mason's sense of the past, comparing *In Country* with Allen Tate's poem "Ode to the Confederate Dead", claiming that "the two works share some striking similarities in terms of theme and message."<sup>11</sup> The same is true of Albert E. Wilhelm's extensive work on Mason,

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<sup>10</sup> Garland's response to *Maggie* centred on Crane's pessimism--he complained that Crane had distorted reality and should have "delineated the families living on the next street, who live lives of heroic purity and hopeless hardship." Having deduced that Crane's intention was to reveal the truth, Garland's criticism becomes less a matter of reading than of challenging the author's world view. Hamlin Garland, "An Ambitious French Novel and a Modest American Story" (1893), discussed in this thesis, chapter one, pp.27-30.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Brinkmeyer: "Finding One's History: Bobbie Ann Mason and Contemporary Southern Literature", *Southern Literary Journal* 19 (1987) p.31.

Similar assumptions inform G.O. Morphew's article, "Downhome Feminists in *Shiloh and other Stories*" which also overlooks Mason's narrative strategies. The article describes the lives of the women in this collection before summarizing, "Bobbie Ann Mason has an uncanny ability to capture the state of mind of the women of rural Western Kentucky in the 1970's." But the article contains no analysis of these lives and states of mind, be it through surveys, interviews, autobiographies or whatever. Mason's realism is thus presented as an unmediated slice of "reality"--or at least sociological data. G.O. Morphew, "Downhome Feminists in *Shiloh and Other Stories*", *Southern Literary Journal* 21 (Spring 1989) pp.41-49.

Textual issues are also subordinated to thematic ones in Ellen A. Blais's "Gender Issues in Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*", *Southern Atlantic Review* 56 (1991) pp.107-118 and in Sandra Bonilla Durham's "Women and War: Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*", *Southern Literary Journal* 22 (Spring 1990) pp.45-52. A striking exception to this trend--of overlooking the materiality of Mason's texts and sifting through "themes"--can be found in Joanna Price's excellent article, "Remembering Vietnam: Subjectivity and Mourning in American New Realist Writing", *Journal of American Studies* 27, no.2 (1993) pp.173-186. Rather than taking Mason's realism as a stable given and treating her prose as a window onto the world, Price argues that Mason, like Jayne Anne Phillips, is "striving to create a new form of realism which will be adequate to the representation of identity in



which explores the theme of "cultural dislocation" or "the effects on ordinary people of rapid social change" and the "inadequate or improvised rituals" which they marshal against it.<sup>12</sup>

Mason's third novel, *Feather Crowns* (1993), which is the main focus of this chapter, has received comparatively little critical attention, being discussed in just a handful of academic articles.<sup>13</sup> This is perhaps particularly surprising as the text represents a bold departure from Mason's earlier fiction, being much more substantial (four hundred and fifty closely printed pages compared with *In Country's* two hundred and fifty or *Spence + Lila's* one hundred and seventy five) and set squarely in the past. As the novel's disclaimer states, it is "a work of fiction...inspired by an actual event". In an autobiographical essay, Mason embellishes and describes this event:

...back in 1896, across the field in front of our houses, an amazing thing happened. Mrs Elizabeth Lyon gave birth to quintuplets. For a brief time,

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consumer culture--an identity underscored by a network of losses. The dominant narratives, in particular those of 'history', gender, and of home and community are present in these texts, but they are accompanied by an ironic reflexivity: the only tenable consensus is as to the common ephemera which constitute the self at the convergence of small-town and postmodern culture" (p.174).

<sup>12</sup> Albert E. Wilhelm, "Private Rituals: Coping with Change in the Fiction of Bobbie Ann Mason", *Midwest Quarterly* 28 (Winter 1987). These quotations are from p.272, p.271 and p.281 respectively.

See also his "Making Over or Making Off: The Problem of Identity in Bobbie Ann Mason's Short Fiction", *Southern Literary Journal* 18 (Spring 1986) pp.76-82. His book-length study, *Bobbie Ann Mason: Searching for Home* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), which is the first monograph about Mason, shares the same emphasis and proceeds along similar lines.

<sup>13</sup> Disky devotes just three pages to the novel in his "Following a Serpentine Brick Path"; Wilhelm pays surprisingly little attention to the novel in his *Bobbie Ann Mason: Searching for Home*. The two exceptions where the novel is discussed more fully are Harriet Pollack's "From *Shiloh* to *In Country* to *Feather Crowns*: Bobbie Ann Mason, Women's History and Southern Fiction", *Southern Literary Journal* 28, no.2 (1996) pp.95-116 and Kathryn B Mckee's "Doubling Back: Finding Bobbie Ann Mason's Present in Her Past", *Southern Literary Journal* 31, no.1 (Fall 1998) pp.35-50.

See also the briefer review articles, Judith Hatchett's "Making Life Mean: Bobbie Ann Mason's *Feather Crowns*", *Kentucky Philological Review* 4 (1994) pp.12-15 and Alan Davis's account in "Fiction Chronicle", *Hudson Review* 47 (Spring 1994) pp.141-2.

Whilst there has been little academic research about the novel, it was widely reviewed in the press on both sides of the Atlantic. See for example Jill McCorkie's "The Sensational Babies", *New York Times Book Review*, Section 7, 26 September 1993, p.7; Hermione Lee's "Famous Five Freakshow", *Independent on Sunday*, Review Section, 31 October 1993, p.45 and Liz Heron's untitled review in the *Times Educational Supplement*, Section 2, 14 January 1994, p.12.

they were world famous, until curiosity seekers handled the babies to death. The quintuplets' house stood right beside the railroad track, and passengers from the train stopped to ogle. They were five boys--Matthew, Mark, Luke John, and Paul. The names had come to Mrs Lyon in a dream. President Grover Cleveland and Queen Victoria sent congratulations on the babies.<sup>14</sup>

The novel, which was informed by consultation with specialists in Kentucky's history and which drew on original source materials, moves the births forward to the second month of the twentieth century. This turn of the century setting, in which, as I will argue, the narrative strikingly revisits and invokes the earlier moment of American fiction discussed in chapter one, indicates the novel's centennial mood--like texts such as Kevin Baker's *Dreamland* (1999) or E. Annie Proulx's *Accordion Crimes* (1996), it offers a retrospective meditation on the American century from the perspective of its final decade.<sup>15</sup>

In terms of critical reception, the novel is particularly suitable for this thesis for a number of reasons. On one hand, as I have just mentioned, it was largely overlooked--perhaps another indication of realism's unfashionable status amongst academics. Likewise, its narrative strategies, which I will argue are varied, subtly complex, quietly allusive and inseparable from its social engagement, have received no attention. Finally, as with Carver, these social, political and historical resonances have been played down in the minimal critical attention which the text has attracted. For Ditsky, the novel is a "slowly resolving tapestry of an individual...whose act of giving birth to quintuplets in 1900...sets her on a lengthy path through a long life and into the spans of our own."<sup>16</sup> This tendency to concentrate on the personal at the expense of the historical and to see the text in terms of an opposition between dynamic foreground and static background (between character and setting) and describe it as a biography, *bildungsroman* or a story of quintuplets almost coincidentally set at the turn of the century appeared in a number

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<sup>14</sup> Bobbie Ann Mason, "The Chicken Tower", an autobiographical essay published in *The New Yorker*, 16 October 1995, pp.85-97. This quotation is from p.88.

<sup>15</sup> Kevin Baker, *Dreamland* (London: Granta, 1999) and E. Annie Proulx, *Accordion Crimes* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996). Both novels explore American life through the eyes of hopeful immigrants who arrived in the opening years of the century.

<sup>16</sup> Ditsky, p.12.



of guises.<sup>17</sup> In his review of the novel, David Montrose went one step further and argued that the text was needlessly *cluttered* with social details:<sup>18</sup> just as Mason's previous novella, *Spence + Lila* (1989) prioritized evidence of "economic change" over "its main thread", so *Feather Crowns* included too much incidental detail at the expense of the quintuplets, its "central phenomena." For Montrose then, social detail is a unpicturesque backdrop which gets out of hand and smothers the human story.

i

*Feather Crowns* opens:

Christianna Wheeler, big as a wash-tub and confined to bed all winter with the heaviness of her unusual pregnancy, heard the mid-night train whistling up from Memphis. James was out there somewhere. He would have to halt the horse and wait in the darkness for the hazy lights of the passenger cars to jerk past, before he could fly across the track and up the road toward town. He was riding his Uncle Wad's saddle horse, Dark Fire.

The train roared closer, until it was just beyond the bare tobacco patch. Its deafening clatter slammed along the track like a deadly twister. Christie felt her belly clench. She counted to eight. The pain released. The noise of the train faded. Then the whistle sounded again as the train slowed down near town, a mile away. The contractions were closer together now. The creature inside her

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<sup>17</sup> In its reception the text was often described as an epic documenting Christie's growth from "farm-wife into a thoughtful proto-feminist." See for example Alan Davis' piece, *Hudson Review* 47 (Spring 1994) p.141.

Summarizing postmodernist constructions of realism, Barbara Foley writes: "Realism promotes asocial and ahistorical concepts of personal development by fetishizing character as a function of intrinsic 'traits'. Selfhood is presented not as a product of social relations, but as an emanation of *a priori* identity. The social environment provides either a mere social backdrop to personal dilemmas--'setting' or else a context *in opposition to which* individuals are defined." Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham and London: Duke University press, 1993) p.249.

Ditsky, Davis and Montrose all respond to the novel as though it were organized around the background--foreground model which often attributed to realism, even though, as I will argue, the text offers a searching critique of dominant aspects of the twentieth century consumer culture by tracing how the babies are constructed as commodities and reified into a spectacle. Rather than broader society being a mere backdrop to the narrative, in Mason's text it is diffracted through and inscribed into the story of the quintuplets.

<sup>18</sup> David Montrose, "Signs and Wonders", *Times Literary Supplement*, October 15, 1993, p.20.

was arriving faster than she had expected. The first pain had been light, and it awakened her only slightly. She was so tired. She dreamed along, thinking it might be no more than the stir and rumble she had felt for months--or perhaps indigestion from the supper James's Aunt Alma had brought her. (p.4)

A number of idioms inflect the very first sentence here. The full formality of the name "Christianna Wheeler" (Mason's mother is also called Christianna) suggests the opening of a conventional biographical novel, whilst "big as a wash-tub" shows the narrative impersonating the speech patterns of the tobacco farming homestead, where the repeated use of homely similes suggests a self-enclosed world where different things are experienced as being related to, and comparable with, one another. Next Christie's own voice is introduced, emphasising the frustration of long-term immobilization--"*confined to bed all winter*"--before a more clipped, official or medical voice comes in, internalized by Christie, but regarding her as an "unusual" phenomenon. Her husband James is then figured in a soft, romantic light; he is "out there somewhere" and eager to "fly across the track and up the road toward town". But the train's uncompromising bulk blocks his heroic journey, forcing him to halt and wait. In a striking juxtaposition it roars by "*just beyond the bare tobacco patch*." And in Christie's delirium the train is even more invasive. Distinctions between body and landscape, inside and outside, the pain and the train are lost in the run of sentences: "Christie felt her belly clench. She counted to eight. The pain released. The noise of the train faded. Then the whistle sounded as the train slowed down near town, a mile away. The contractions were close together now. The creature inside was arriving faster than she expected." The first three sentences are describing just Christie's labour, and yet the regulation of the syntax into short, single clause summons the train's clattering rhythm. The abrupt change in subject matter, within this stylistic continuity, suggests that the labour and the train's passing have become part of the same process: the "deafening clatter" of the train seems to prompt her "belly" to "clench". This suggestion is reinforced by the use of a blatantly causal word like "then", which implies that the acceleration of the contractions is somehow dependent on the train stopping. This sequence of short sentences is broken with a change of rhythm, and a corresponding switch of the relations between the train and labour to something more like a metaphor: the "creature inside her" is "arriving" *like* a train, rather than somehow being caught up in its motion.



In the space of these two short paragraphs then, the Wheelers and their world move through a number of relations to the train: it encroaches "just beyond the bare tobacco patch"; it hinders James's emergency journey, bringing his flight down to earth; it regulates even Christie's birth contractions; and it supplies metaphors, as in "the creature inside her was *arriving*" and "she dreamed *along*". In this sense, the opening anticipates the complex role which the train will play in the Wheelers' lives. The train is present at the very moment of their quintuplets' conception: as Christie and James "plow"(ed) or had sex, the "the train whistle sounded, merging with the long, slow release of desire" (p.59).<sup>19</sup> So this fertile sexual climax--described in terms of the farm's natural or seasonal rhythms--is fused with the train's mechanical noises. The train continues to punctuate the narrative of the babies' lives, demarcating each turning point. So when the first of the babies falls sick, the narrative reports that "his crying merged with the train whistle, and Christie did not realize at first that she was hearing one of her babies" (p.132)--the whistle "merges" with Wheeler's lives once again, this time creating an interference which momentarily disconnects child from mother. After the death of the last born quintuplet, Minnie Sophia, Christie feels "'chills of fear roll(ed) through her like a train" (p.220). Here Christie's fear is likened to the train: the implication is that for the character herself the pattern of intersection between the babies and the train has become such a norm that the train's presence is summoned in its (unusual) absence. In the section describing the death of the remaining babies the train actually reappears, releasing "three long mournful notes" before passing by (p.247).

Alongside, and often embedded in, details about both the train and babies, is another narrative pattern; a seismic or even apocalyptic configuration. The train roars, deafens, and slams "like a deadly twister". Christie's belly is said to "stir and rumble"--two pages later it is a potentially explosive "globe of the world" (p.5). And in the second paragraph, as well as throughout the narration of her fraught pregnancy, the undetected

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<sup>19</sup> Christie also recollects the babies' conception on page 7. "'And now her time *had* come, the full time since the heat of last June when she and James had lain in the steamy night without cover, their bodies slippery as foaming horses, while the children slept out on the porch. She recalled that the midnight train had gone by then, too, and that she had imagined they were on the train, riding the locomotive, charging wildly into the night" (p.7). Here the train suggests freedom and alternative possibilities.

quintuplets are described as an intrusive "creature" waiting to arrive; as a "wild and violent" "thing" (p.5); as a "storm" (p7); and as "something foreign which had entered her body and set up a business of a violent and noisy nature" (p.7).<sup>20</sup>

As the narrative unfolds, the reason *why* Christie's labour and the relentless passage of the train are described with the same highly specific diction of seismic imagery becomes clearer. Both are regarded as manifestations of the apocalyptic *Zeitgeist* at large in the text's milieu. As already mentioned, the text is not vaguely set around the turn of the twentieth century, but is explicitly anchored in the second month of its first year, with at least three quarters of the novels four hundred and fifty pages focussing on that single year. Apocalyptic and seismic images are used to describe Christie's experiences because in the text, Methodism, the religion which describes the world to the Wheelers, finds a narrative for this end of century mood in the story of the earthquake. Congregations are told that the quake which shook Kentucky in 1812, forming the Reelfoot lake, is due to recur, halting history before a new century gets underway.<sup>21</sup> The train, as a curiously new-fangled manifestation, is quickly incorporated into this centennial story, and so is Christie's "unusual pregnancy"; both are intrusive, monstrous, cataclysmically violent and bursting with auguries of doom. And whilst these feelings momentarily abate after the birth, when Christie delivers five tiny babies rather than one centennial monster, they soon re-appear when it becomes apparent just how rare quintuplets are. So the messages which the earthquake were seen to contain are re-applied by the disappointed community to the quintuplets, and this type of response continues throughout the babies' short lives: both Christie and her best friend Amanda compare them to the earthquake whilst they are repeatedly considered a

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<sup>20</sup> This image, which collates a trope of violation--"entered her body"--with one of commerce--"set up a business"--is particularly resonant in terms of the forthcoming appropriation and commodification of Christie and the babies.

<sup>21</sup> In chapter five, Christie and Amanda attend a camp-meeting at Reelfoot lake: on the way there, Christie muses:"Reelfoot lake had been formed by the dreadful earthquakes of 1811 and 1812, and multitudes of the faithful were drawn to the site now--sure that another earthquake was coming, soon after Christmas. Christie didn't imagine the world would end just because it was the end of the century, as some said, but Amanda believed it might" (p.62).

At the meeting, they repeatedly hear that "The end is at hand!" (p.73).



"wonder of the world" (p.171) and a "miracle" (p. 178).<sup>22</sup>

Through deceptively simple prose then, the narrative establishes complex relations of connection, association, allusion and analogy between the centennial *Zeitgeist*, the menacing modernity manifested in the train and the birth of the quintuplets. Rather than flattening these relations into "historical background" and "human foreground", as some critics did, the challenge is to provide a reading which responds to this complexity--to do this we need a more developed picture of the social context into which the babies are born.

ii

James and Christie Wheeler live on a tobacco farm, near the fictional Hopewell, western Kentucky, which also provides the setting for *In Country*. Their community includes just the members of a large family, living and working in close proximity. The farm's pecking order is determined by gender and generation; as a man with the most land and the most farming experience, James's Uncle Wad is the leader of the Wheelers. The division of labour is decided along the same lines--the men oversee the birth and slaughter of livestock and tend the tobacco crop. They come from the land to eat meals and to sleep. The women cook, clean, care for the children, the sick and elderly, and for one another during childbirth--they also contribute to the farm economy by sustaining an emphasis on self-sufficiency. Their gardening, cooking and sewing also provide the wares for a system of exchange, which takes the form of giving gifts to neighbours as an expression of gratitude, congratulation or commiseration. So unlike Doctor Foote,

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<sup>22</sup> Prior to the birth, Christie thinks, "The fuss over the earthquake prediction had affected her pregnancy, too. So many people she knew believed babies could be influenced in the womb by outside happenings...For virtually the entire nine months her womb had rumbled and roared like the earth about to split open" (p.57). At the beginning of chapter nine, she remembers that Brother Jones had "said that the babies' birth was a miracle, like the birth of Jesus...Other preachers had said the same thing about the expected earthquake" (p.141).

After the birth, Amanda comments on the intrusions which the babies seem to invite:"we'll feel like we've been through that earthquake after all. We'll think it happened right here" (p.239).

who Christie fears may charge "five times" (p.99) his regular cash fee for delivering the quints, the local midwife Hattie Hurt would be pleased with a "ham" (p.95).

As already mentioned, connectedness is one of the key tropes in Mason's depiction of this world; a point underlined by the name Wheeler, with its suggestion of unbroken circularity. Many things are seen to be alike, being governed by the same natural rhythms, and this sense of connection is not only apparent through earthy similes, but also in local superstition and ritual. Christie's sister-in-law Amanda predicts the weather by examining persimmon seeds--"look at that little tiny fork" she tells the farm children, "That means a hard, hard winter's a-comin!" (p.10). Here then, the patterns of the whole are seen to be etched into its tiniest part. This sense of oneness is also shown through disconcertingly un-sentimental detail. After the birth of the quintuplets, for example, Wad's sister Alma goes out to bury the afterbirth to "keep the dogs from getting it" (p.33)--a grim reminder that even the Wheeler's own bodies are not beyond the reach of the voracious farmyard food chain in motion outside the back door.

Equally unsentimental, perhaps, is Mason's attention to economic realities. Far from representing an organic idyll, as one critic complained, the Wheeler homestead is a place where money talks.<sup>23</sup> The romantic sounding "dark fire", after which Uncle Wad's horse is named, turns out to be the market term for the tobacco cash crop. The tobacco is sold annually, and because the farm keeps its overheads low--buying just seed, sugar, flour and fabric (p. 164)--the proceeds are ploughed back into the farm, expanding its money-making capacity.<sup>24</sup> And this emphasis on the cash crop is not thrust onto the rustic Wheelers by the inexorable march of American capital, but is promoted by their religion--in this case, as we have seen, a God-fearing strain of Methodism owing a strong debt to Calvinist Puritanism. Money is eagerly incorporated by the Methodist narrative

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<sup>23</sup> "In *Feather Crowns*, Bobbie Ann Mason's slowly measured round of planting and quilting, fried chicken and apple pie lovingly recreates a rural Kentucky of wholesome community and neighbourliness so apparently lacking in irony that it conjures the shade of the celluloid musical and the hayseed caricature". Liz Heron, review of *Feather Crowns*, *Times Educational Supplement*, Section 2, 14 January 1994, p.12.

<sup>24</sup> James and Christie's finances yield a further example of the overlap between older and newer ways. The couple owe Uncle Wad \$1,000 for the fifty acres purchased to supplement the twenty James inherited and they owe a local mill owner a further \$50 for the lumber used to make their furniture (p.58): in conjunction with older traditions of distribution (bequeathment) we also find financial investment, whereas the surviving tradition of hand-crafting the family furniture is now dependent upon a monetary credit system.



through which the Wheeler's experience their lives--as Wad points out, the business of generating cash, in conjunction with self-sufficiency, and with a view to expand, certainly seems to satisfy the religion's imperative for hard work and the thrifty capitalization of resources.<sup>25</sup> And the text also makes it clear that this compatibility between Godliness and profiteering finds widespread expression throughout the region: official business promotes itself through iconographic images of Jesus standing in front of a tobacco warehouse whilst local church sermons are not above pressing *Deuteronomy* into service to explain market fluctuations.<sup>26</sup>

Bearing down upon this way of life is "the dawn of the new century" (p.57)--"the dawn of a new age of miracles" (p.422). Historically, the years between the end of the civil war and the first world witnessed unprecedented American development: the gross national product trebled, opening the young nation to the world market. Capital from manufacturing industries rose from \$2.7 billion dollars in 1879 to \$192 billion in 1914. Electricity powered the burgeoning economy--Edison perfected a cheap light bulb in October 1879, and by 1893 electricity was being used to illuminate the Chicago World's Fair.<sup>27</sup> By 1900 the American steel industry was outproducing Germany and Britain combined, whilst the value of consumer durables increased 600% between 1879 and 1915. The period also saw both a massive explosion in print media, with magazines like *Ladies' Home Journal*, *McClure's*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Munsey's Magazine* appearing through the 1880s,<sup>28</sup> and unprecedented urbanization--in 1880, 20% of Americans lived in urban areas: by 1910, 44% did so, with Chicago doubling its population between 1880

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<sup>25</sup> Wad later argues that the quintuplets should be displayed, insisting, "if you've got five babies instead of one, you make them work for you. That's the principle of thrift and it's in the bible...if people will pay to see 'em, then I say it's like putting 'em to work" (p.172).

<sup>26</sup> Amanda buys a fan bearing this design (p.63). It is the preacher who initially suggests charging sight-seers a fee to see the quintuplets (p.164). Christie recalls Brother Jones's economically savvy sermonizing on p.373.

<sup>27</sup> See William Miller's, *A New History of the United States* (1958; London: Paladin, 1970) p.263.

<sup>28</sup> See Alan Trachtenburg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (1982; New York: Hill and Wang, 1995) p. 123.

and 1890.<sup>29</sup> The railroad, which Karl Marx described as the "couronnement de l'oeuvre" of capitalist industrialization,<sup>30</sup> both doubled in length and doubled its number of passengers between 1880 and 1913, stimulating and servicing this colossal expansion in economic infrastructure: as Alan Trachtenberg observes in *The Incorporation of America*, "It is not difficult to account for the prominence of the railroad as the age's symbol of mechanization and of economic and political change."<sup>31</sup>

By 1900, of course, the railroad already had a long history as such a symbol--Leo Marx's book *The Machine in The Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* traces it through the writings of, amongst others, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.<sup>32</sup> Later realist and naturalist novels re-inscribed the symbol in the light of these more recent social, economic and political changes and it is their uses of the symbol, in texts published around the time of *Feather Crowns's* setting, to which Mason's novel most obviously alludes. The description of the train in the opening paragraph of the novel, for example, with its seismic imagery and apocalyptic overtones, bears some striking resemblances to Frank Norris's often quoted description of "the galloping monster, the terror of steel and steam with its single eye, cyclopean, red, shooting from horizon to horizon...flinging the echo of its thunder over the reaches

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<sup>29</sup> See Brian Lee and Robert Reinders, "The Loss of Innocence: 1880-1914", in Bradbury and Temperley eds., *Introduction to American Studies* (1981; London and New York: Longman, 1989) pp.211-216.

<sup>30</sup> As Marx put it in 1879: "I call them the "couronnement de l'oeuvre" not only in the sense that they were at last (together with the steamships for oceanic intercourse and the telegraphs) *the means of communication* adequate to the modern means of production, but also in so far as...they gave in one word an impetus never before suspected to the *concentration* of capital, thus embracing the whole world in a network of financial swindling and mutual *indebtedness*, the capitalistic form of "international" brotherhood". Karl Marx, Letter to N.F. Danielson, 10 April 1879, in S Ryazanskaya ed., *Marx Engels: Selected Correspondence*, translated by I. Lasker (1955; Moscow: Progress, 1965) p.317.

<sup>31</sup> In 1880, the United States already had the world's longest railroad. It grew from 115,547 miles of track in 1880 to 394,944 in 1915, with the number of passengers doubling between 1890 and 1912. Railroads quickly became the earliest giant corporations. See Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982) chapter 2. The quotation is from p.57.

<sup>32</sup> Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Idea in America* (1964; New York: Oxford University Press, 1967). For Marx's discussion of Hawthorne and Emerson see chapter one, "Sleepy Hollow 1844". For Thoreau, see pp.242-265.



of the valley" from the first chapter of *The Octopus* (1901).<sup>33</sup>

And the train not only looms large on the borders of the Wheeler's farm, but also provides a link with the rapidly changing world beyond. As in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), the railroad promotes a longing for escape. For Caroline Meeber it both enables and symbolizes the breaking of "the threads which bound her so lightly to girlhood and home"<sup>34</sup>--likewise Christie's sister-in-law Amanda can dream, "I think I'd just get on the train as far as it went and never come back" (p.231).

The new media serves a similar function in levelling distinctions between the near and far. Trachtenberg describes how:

the most common, if most subtle, implication of transformed human relations appeared in the steady emergence of new modes of *experience*. In technologies of communication, vicarious experience began to erode direct physical experience of the world. Viewing and looking at representations, words and images...people found themselves addressed more often as passive spectators than as active participants, consumers of images and sensations produced by others.<sup>35</sup>

Wad's brother Boone is preoccupied with the giddy social changes taking place beyond the farm's boundaries, and spends his time devouring *The Hopewell Chronicle*, seeking

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<sup>33</sup> "Again and again, at rapid intervals in its flying course, it whistled for road crossings, for sharp curves, for trestles; ominous notes, hoarse, bellowing, ringing with the accents of menace and defiance...the galloping monster, the terror of steel and steam with its single eye, cyclopean, red, shooting from horizon to horizon...the symbol of a vast power, huge, terrible, flinging the echo of its thunder over the reaches of the valley, leaving blood and destruction in its path; the leviathan with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless force, the ironhearted power, the monster, the colossus, the octopus." (*The Octopus*, 1901; New York: Signet, 1984, p.42).

Norris used the train as a symbol of the mis-used power of the railroad trusts, an economic force which brooked no competition and crushed the enterprising individual. In a passage even more strikingly reminiscent of *Feather Crowns's* opening, the human scale is eclipsed by the roaring train: "...as Hilma still debated the idea of bathing her feet in the creek, a train did actually thunder past overhead--the regular evening Overland...It stormed by with a deafening clamour and a swirl of smoke, in a long succession of way coaches and chocolate colored Pullman's...The thunder of wheels drowned all sound of the flowing of the creek, and also the noise of the buckskin mare's hoofs descending from the trail...so that Hilma, turning about after the passing of the train, saw Annixtere close at hand with the abruptness of a vision" (p.231).

<sup>34</sup> Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (1900; New York: Norton, 191) p.1. In Jack London's 1907 novel, *The Iron Heel*, Avis Everhard boards a train reputed to be the world's fastest--it is aptly called "The Twentieth Century". Jack London, *The Iron Heel* (1907; London: Journeyman Press, 1990) p.199.

<sup>35</sup> Trachtenberg, p.122.

out details of distinctly modern events like the Memphis Exposition. Just as importantly, the new methods of printing and distributing media breaks ground for a burgeoning consumer culture always seeking to engulf markets beyond its pullulating metropolitan centres.<sup>36</sup> Whereas the written press dishes up anecdotes and curious ways of living, advertising catalogues take a pushier stance, actively selling its readers more exotic and glamorous lifestyles. These well-thumbed brochures (aptly dubbed "wish books") create more of a stir on the farm than the newspapers by presenting a glitzy spectacle celebrating all that money can buy. By feasting on the fantastic images they offer, whilst speculating who can afford such decadent finery, the Wheeler women engage in a vicarious form of consumer pleasure.<sup>37</sup>

These carefully documented social changes are shown to disrupt the Wheelers's community by pulling it two ways, creating disaffection and splitting marriages. Wad's sister Alma is the stubborn defender of older ways--to her money is no more than "a heap of dimes and nickels" and "too nasty to have in a clean house" (p.200). But her husband Thomas has long rejected the farming ways and taken to the (rail) road as a travelling salesman or drummer, first selling seeds before graduating to sheet music and lingerie.<sup>38</sup> With the progressive independence, shop-bought clothes and the blithe spirit of the self-made man, he conforms to the stereotype of the drummer which populated naturalist novels produced around the time of the text's setting.<sup>39</sup> Unlike his wife, he applauds their daughter's marriage to the son of a local businessman from the thriving commercial centre of Hopewell--he sees the marriage as rescuing his daughter "from some farm boy who couldn't spell his way out of a buttermilk jug and thought chess was just a kind of

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<sup>36</sup> "The lessons learned by manufacturers in the most efficient modes of rural distribution just after the war paved the way for the great mail-order and chain-store invasion of the countryside in the later 1880's and 1890's, the hey-day of Sears Roebuck, Montgomery Ward and Woolworth's." Trachtenberg, p.115.

<sup>37</sup> "'We got a new wish book," Amanda said. "And little Bunch wants to cut the dolls out...It's got some of the new fashions. You can't imagine who would wear them. The dresses look too hard to sew, and you could never buy them--some of them cost seven or eight dollars"' (p.102)

<sup>38</sup> Alma despairs of Thomas's "bumfuzzled" ways (p.142). She tells Amanda, "He'll take the train back up when he gets through his rounds for that spring line of women's drawers. I wish he'd go back to seeds instead of women's underclothes. It ain't nice" (p.138).

<sup>39</sup> Such as Drouet from Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), who is described as "a type of the travelling canvasser for a manufacturing house--a class which at that time was first being dubbed by the slang of the day 'drummers'" (p.3).



pie" (p.286). He brings the farm children "pretty doodads--all kinds of samples" from the city (p.138). And both Thomas, and the modern ways he embodies, intervene between his some time lover Amanda and her husband Wad Wheeler.<sup>40</sup> Amanda, who is also eager to escape the farm's horizons, earns the contempt of the more traditionally minded by frittering money on a mail-order cuckoo clock (p.81)--an indication of her desire to participate in the burgeoning consumer culture.

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The main body of *Feather Crowns* explores how the Wheeler quintuplets are caught up in these tensions between the farm's hard-nosed traditions and a ubiquitous consumerism celebrating transformation. At the beginning of their lives, they are repeatedly described in terms borrowed from the homestead. So Wad likens Christie to a sow who has "dropped a litter" and the babies to "a gang of little pigs" (p.35). Elsewhere they have "butterfly hands", "wet mouths like dewdrops" and "cries...like cricket chirps" (p.87). At the level of language then, the babies are effortlessly enveloped by the farm's vernacular and absorbed into its world: Christie's naming of the babies is a good example--each baby reminds her of a feature of the farm's world and is given a name to catch its atmosphere. And the babies are also inserted into a *family* line or narrative, being named after their predecessors. So the name "James Lake" articulates continuity by collating his father's and grandfather's names.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> At one point Christie sees Thomas and Amanda emerge from the smoke house, and though "she couldn't be sure the two had been in there together", since that day, "Amanda and Thomas had been paired in her mind like the swirls of colors in a candy stick" (p.106). Significantly then, these two people, who are both dissatisfied with farm life and curious about the transformations taking place beyond it, are figured through an image borrowed from this new world--"candy stick" (p.106).

<sup>41</sup> "James Lake was the oldest, the one with the large full mouth that made her see the red-pink of a rooster's comb. James for her husband, Lake for her papa.  
Emily Sue, from the feel of her, was stout, with wisps of brown hair...Emily for one sister, Susan for the other.

John Wilburn, the one who made her think of the blue sky behind winter trees, had James's nose.  
Mollie Lee, with the blond on top, made her think of hot biscuits breaking in half. Mollie, the yellow of sunlight and corn.

And Minnie Sophia, so still, a gray cloud thinning into air" (p.89)

Whilst these descriptions and namings are faithful to tradition and continuity, Christie's unusual pregnancy has already demanded that aspects of this tradition are broken. And as we have seen, the births of the quintuplets are not overseen by a sisterhood of family women under the supervision of friend and neighbour Hattie Hurt but by the expensive and male Dr. Foote. Foote cuts a conspicuous figure in the homestead issuing from the booming commercial centre of Hopewell. His involvement pre-figures the course of the babies lives; almost from their conception they provoke repeated interruptions to longstanding family traditions. Again, this occurs at the level of language. As in the text's opening sentence, Foote's medical jargon is shown to come between Christie and her own thoughts. But the narrative also suggests that the Wheelers' responses to the babies as features of the farm's world--expressed through these "natural similes"--are contested by responses and images lifted from the realm of consumer culture. During her labour, Christie tries to distract herself from the pain by "naming every item she had seen in the drugstore"--rather than counting sheep, she runs through brand names and items she saw in the drugstore above Dr. Foote's surgery: "Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, the Wine of Cardui" and imagines the "tall, glass fronted cabinets, filled with hair tonics, worm medications, liver pills, syrups and salves and potions" (p.22). Immediately after the births she thinks she hears James say "How would you pick which ones to keep" whilst arguing with the doctor's grim prediction that "They won't all last" (p.87). After the birth, Christie likens each baby to a "store package" wrapped "without the string" (p.33). For the Wheelers, the realm of shop windows, glass cabinets and picture brochures is synonymous with novelty and abundance--as such it supplies a powerful analogy for the babies, or the spectacle of fivefold reproduction which they seem to present. This mode of mediation between viewer and the babies proves to be commonly experienced, repeatedly transforming the newborns into "a mesmerizing row" inviting "gazes" (p.164) and "baby dolls" (p.143). And before long, this experience is realized by an actual intervention from the world of the print media. By applying the word "quintuplets" to the babies, *The Hopewell Chronicle* transforms them from a surprise into a phenomenon, compounding the viewer's sense of their difference into a knowledge of their uniqueness. So the phenomenon of the "Hopewell quintuplets" is constructed by the press, rather than simply reported by it. This is demonstrated when Boone, who is prouder of the



newspaper than of the mother and babies themselves, comes to see them--he is the first curiosity seeker and introduces himself as such, telling Christie, "I had to read about you in the paper before I even laid eyes on these babies" (p.124). So the babies are quickly flattened into an illustration of their own story. He too compares them to "doll-babies" (p.125) and responds to the display as a judge, who like any consumer, is compelled to make a choice and "pick the best" (p.125).<sup>42</sup>

This oblique commodification of the babies--through their names, images and gathering reputation--produce the demand for their actual display: as we have seen, it is the farm's Methodist ethos which grasps these money-making prospects. With an unflinching economic realism, Wad weighs the babies' earning capacity against falling tobacco prices, cites the principle of thrift and proposes first a donation, then a ten cents admission fee for visitors to see the babies (p.164). James and Christie's financial plight, heightened by the prospect of having five more mouths to feed, leaves little room for scruples. The train, which is travelling back up North from the Memphis Exposition--a centennial celebration of modern technology demonstrating "every kind of wonder pertaining to science and industry" (p.207)--is chartered to stop at the Wheeler's farm, thereby incorporating this bonus exhibit, the eighth "wonder of the world", into the travel itinerary. The significance of this is not lost on Amanda--when asked by Dr. Foote whether the train stopped, she replies, "Yes Sir. We just about had the World Fair out here" (p.178).

At this point the courses of the babies and the train intersect *literally*. Rather than being an uncanny presence in the babies lives, the train (and those modern forces which

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<sup>42</sup> This commodification quickly gathers momentum--newspapers as far as St.Louis boost their sale by updating the popular story which in turn produces enough correspondence to keep Boone occupied with a new scrap-book. The Louisville *Courier-Journal* attempts to out-do its rival when it sends a telegram requesting that the babies should be re-named in a readers' competition (p.176)--a striking example of the babies being appropriated by, and re-inscribed in terms of, this newer consumer culture.

"Howell's Drugs and Sundries" are keen to both corner the Hopewell quintuplets baby accessory market and to capitalize on their advertising potential. They send Christie a parcel of diapers and bottles, with a note reading "*Congratulations on your new family! We hope we may be of service in supplying all your baby needs*" (p.125). Rumors quickly gather that local businesses are to send a wagon-load of gifts for the babies: "Christie couldn't believe it. It was a dream--the stores coming to her, with a wagonload of things she could never have afforded. Fancy goods, novelties like those in the wishbook" (p.150). The presents never arrive.

it represents) comes face to face with the babies. The reversal of inside and outside, anticipated in the delirium of Christie's labour, actually occurs here--Wad opens her bedroom and shouts "All aboard!"--the room is now part of the train and the exposition: it belongs to the same world of modern spectacle (p.196). Christie later describes the train stopping for the first time as being the turning point in her life (p.165):

Christie felt paralyzed. The crowd filled her house. There must be fifty people in her front room. They were dressed in such a fine variety of fine clothes that Christie felt ashamed of her small, plain house. Could it be seen as a 'humble three-bedroom abode'? The wall-paper, though new, looked suddenly shabby, the handmade furniture too modest, the place too small. It was suffused with the smells of cooking and babies and close human habitation. She shrank from the newcomers. She felt naked, like a picked chicken. And she was speechless. But the people supplied the talk. The rush of excitement propelled their words. They couldn't contain their glee at finding the eighth wonder they had heard about (p.166).

The intrusion of consumer relations reify Christie's surroundings, freezing them into objects to be viewed. So a living space hitherto experienced through connection--evinced in the lingering smells--is suddenly petrified into an authentically shabby consumer spectacle. The shock--which manifests itself in Christie's paralysis and silence--is registered through fractured syntax and a disorientating switch to the present tense--a tense frequently used in Mason's short stories about life in modern day Kentucky.<sup>43</sup> Christie's sense of herself and of her surroundings are de-familiarized or even de-realized. The walls move in, the new wall-paper decays before her eyes and the hand-made furniture suddenly advertises that it is not "shop bought". Again different modes of language--like the newspaper article which previously described her house as "a humble three-bedroom abode"--challenge or disconfirm the way Christie might describe herself to herself. Rather than the proud mother of five babies she feels naked

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<sup>43</sup> In interview, Mason once commented on the popularity of the present tense with herself and her contemporaries: "I think the uncertainty of the present tense said a lot about what we were making of the late twentieth century, or were unable to make of it", "An Interview with Bobbie Ann Mason Conducted by Bonnie Lyons and Bill Oliver", *Contemporary Literature* 32, no. 4 (1991) p.460. To her it demarcates a lack of authority, both in terms of the author and the character--the loss of reference points with which experience can be measured and evaluated. In this sense, the shift into the present tense here suggests that Christie is experiencing a powerfully modern type of alienation. For a discussion of the present tense in contemporary American fiction see Ben Yagoda, "No Tense Like the Present", *New York Times Book Review*, Section 7, 10 April 1986, p.30.



in a way that the word "naked" cannot communicate: she is "picked" in the sense of being selected for consumption, but also in the sense of being picked over or half-eaten--she later describes how eager spectators will "just eat you alive" (p.447). Feelings of intrusion and rejection mingle with one another ("too modest, too small"). Against the simile "picked chicken", which is itself like a grotesque left-over from the farm's more "natural" idiom, the viewers are "newcomers" from a different world, and bear the imprint of the more mechanized world they inhabit. They "supply" talk rather than talking, and excitement "propels" their words just as new forms of power drive the turbines of futuristic machinery they have seen in Memphis. The babies appear to become less and less real in response to this more direct form of commodification: "one woman in a fruit topped straw hat said that they looked too tiny to be real" (p.196). Just as the positioning of fruit on her hat suggests that it is not real fruit, so the size of the babies and their appearance within this spectacle suggests that they too might be reproductions. This estranging process even operates on the babies' father, who later picks them up "to check they were still alive and hadn't turned into anything else" (p.172).

The death of the first quintuplet ushers in a new, more macabre stage in the commodification of the Wheeler babies. Mrs Blankenship, wife of the mill owner and pillar of the Hopewell bourgeoisie, presses the services of Mr. Mullins onto the bereaved Wheelers. Mullins is introduced as "one of our most upstanding citizens", and for Christie, he embodies the modern man--he is proprietor of "one of those new fangled funeral parlors" (p.223). Like Dr. Foote, he wears "dark, formal clothing" and seems alien on the farm--she cannot imagine him either working in the fields or touching the dirt during burials (p.225). Being "well versed in sympathy" (speaking in polite euphemism), he seems at odds with the nitty-gritty of death, and conspicuous on a farm where connections go unconcealed. Like Dr. Foote, then, he introduces an estranging style of speech, and cryptically gestures towards "what we can provide you" (p.226). As a representative of the nascent service sector he "makes it his business to help people" (p.223) and supplants the funeral rituals of a community who usually pool their resources

and then "dig a hole" (p.225).<sup>44</sup> And by removing the body he disconnects the baby from the farm's world (into which Christie anticipated planting her "like a seed", p.244); from a tradition of burying family members on farmland consecrated for the purpose (p.225); and finally, from the ritual of keeping vigil, where the body functions as a conclusive and uncompromising signifier of death.

In short, Mullins is typical of the babies' new audience in that he responds to them as a media event--as "The Hopewell Quintuplets." The death of one of the babies does not jeopardize their popular construction, but simply creates an opening for his professional services--he tells Christie, "You've done this town proud, and the loss of your baby doesn't detract from this honor" (p.226). Anticipating the death of the remaining quintuplets, he offers to deploy "remarkable new techniques" and preserve the dead baby, so that, "if it should happen that one or more of the others should not last, but are called to join their little sister, then we could have them together...We could keep them in such a way that you could see the precious babies perfectly preserved, for always" (p.226). As Mullins's language betrays, the remaining babies are not experienced as living beings in danger of dying but as valuable spectacles which threaten to disappear from view: as such, dying (not living) and decomposing (not lasting) become synonymous. In keeping with this logic, preserving the dead babies is equivalent with keeping them alive: as Christie observes, "People still wanted to say they had seen the babies--dead or alive, it seemed not to matter" (p.260).

The rapid death of the remaining babies enables them to be literally commodified--their physical reality and popular construction coalesce when Mullins transforms them into five doll-like babies displayed in a portable glass case--"objects, painted pink, in identical dresses" (p.259).<sup>45</sup> At their funeral they are tantalizingly illuminated with the electric lighting which played such a significant role in shaping

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<sup>44</sup> Alarmed by this intrusion into private family rituals, James describes how, "When my Daddy died, the women took care of the body, and Mack Pritchard's daddy built Daddy's coffin, and old Mrs. Culpepper fixed his clothes and helped Mammy line his coffin with sheets" (p.258).

<sup>45</sup> As we have seen, the babies are compared to dolls when alive and are transformed into dolls on their death--"Their hair was lacquered like the simulated hair on a bisque doll...Christie thought of Nannie lining up her clothes pin dolls" (p.262). They are reproduced as souvenir dolls for sale at the funeral (p.289), and in the travelling show (p.366).



consumer culture at the turn of the century:<sup>46</sup> "When those electric lights flickered on, Christie had had the impression that the deaths of her children were a grand show at an opera house" (p.265). In a grimly predictable turn of events, they become such a show, when a consortium of influential progressives--comprising the undertaker himself, the Blankenships, *The Hopewell Chronicle* editor Mr. Redmon and Greenberry McCain, tour organizer for Fair Day Exhibition series--deliver a proposal to the Wheelers. As before, a mixture of profiteering Methodism, economic hardship and the clout which these people bring--supplemented here by Christie's desire to travel beyond the farm's horizons--serves to dispel a nagging uneasiness (p.300). So James and Christie indulge in some mail order consumption--James buys a ready-made Sears and Roebuck suit (p.429)--and leave the "natural rhythms" and "seasons of work in the fields" in favour of the "routine clanking of wheels and the thunder roll of train engines" (p.339). They take the dead babies on a tour of the South which is co-ordinated by McCain's organization and is billed as "an educational series of lectures and diversions, for the purpose of educating the genuinely curious and concerned public about the Hopewell Quintuplets" (p.303). The babies become a travelling exhibition, packaged in glass, illuminated by electricity and billed as a modern educational matter--they take their place in the "Fair Day Company's" lecture schedule alongside topics such as "The Nation's Capital" and "the wonders of science--electricity, the telephone and the talking gramophone" (p.327). The first show, which follows the same procedures as the spectacular funeral, is at the Nashville opera house.

As mentioned above, the novel's opening section was rooted in Christie's perspective, which was dominated by the idea of connectedness but increasingly challenged by images lifted from the new consumer culture. As the narrative unfolds,

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<sup>46</sup> Rachel Bowlby describes how technological advances oiled the wheels of the new consumer culture:

"The grand buildings of the Universal Expositions, which took place in different cities of Europe and the United States every few years after Crystal Palace, bear a striking architectural resemblance to some more everyday 'palaces of consumption'. Department stores developed over the same period. Like the exhibition palaces, they utilized new inventions in glass technology, making possible large expanses of transparent display windows. Visibility inside was improved both by the increase in window area and by better forms of artificial lighting, culminating in electricity which was available from the 1880s. Glass and lighting also created a spectacular effect, a sense of theatrical excess coexisting with the simple availability of the items for purchase." Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (New York: Methuen, 1985) p.2.

this world gains a stronger grip over Christie's consciousness. Her doubts about feeding the quintuplets cows milk, for example, is overturned by the arrival of manufactured baby bottles sent by the Hopewell store: "If the drugstore's selling these" she concludes, "then the sweet milk must be alright" (p.125). The do's and don'ts of baby-rearing aside, the official, commodity form of the bottle presents a powerful endorsement forceful enough to cancel doubts and override longstanding practice. The same thing happens with regard to the preservation of the babies and their display at the theatrical funeral. Mullins' ability *to* show-case them--to deploy technology in this way--seems to make it acceptable for him to do so.

In terms of the narrative, this often results in an unsettling text with a sharp discrepancy between the bizarre and grotesque turn of events being taken--the ethically outrageous--and the largely accepting, ploddingly linear discourse through which they are described. In contradictory moments, however, notably in Christie's highly charged confrontations with her audience, the prose takes on a hallucinatory quality. So the narrative is punctuated with phrases like, "people's faces seemed like clock faces with stuck hands" (p.210) or, "Mrs. Blankenship left, gliding across the floor like a person on wheels, travelling backward in her flowing skirts, waving her way out" (p.145). In both instances people become momentarily de-humanized, transmogrifying into modern automata, whilst experience freezes into unsettling stills.<sup>47</sup>

On a broader level, events are increasingly mediated to the reader less through Christie's consciousness and more through these new channels of information. Details of the planned tour, for example, are related via the *Hopewell Chronicle* rather than through Christie herself (p.302-305). On one hand, this is another example of the text echoing the concerns and strategies of turn of the century realism and naturalism;<sup>48</sup> on

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<sup>47</sup> It is worth adding that stopping the clocks was a way of marking respect for the dead on the Wheelers' farm (see p.259, where the clocks are stopped after the babies' deaths). So the visitors not only appear mechanized--personifications of lives governed by scheduled time--but as gloomy portents of the babies' deaths.

<sup>48</sup> Newspapers and the explosion of print media loomed very large in a range of realist and naturalist texts produced around the time of *Feather Crowns's* setting. William Dean Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) explores the burgeoning market for literary journalism. His earlier novel, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885; London: Penguin, 1983) opens with Lapham being interviewed by a journalist from *The Events*--the press later take some satisfaction in the burning down of Lapham's house (p.315). Here too, as in *Mason*, comedy is generated by the disparity between the novel's version of events provided in



the other, the device measures Christie's diminishing control over the babies' fate, which is more and more determined by the profit motive. Just as importantly, the reader is confronted directly with the new media's own version of events; for example, the newspaper report edits out the fact that the *dead babies* are being taken on the tour. So once again, the narrative unfolds on a particularly disturbing frequency: there is a gruesome disparity between the events being narrated--the outrageousness of preserving dead babies and showing them for money--and the sanitized, jocular reportage in the press.

Throughout the course of the babies lives, the world of the freak show, the circus and the travelling fair has ghosted events, functioning as a grotesque but familiar counterpoint through which the Wheelers can apprehend and describe the quintuplets' transformation into a more modern-day spectacle. When considering her own role as an additional exhibit enroute home from the Memphis exposition, for instance, Christie recalls "the snake lady who was as scaly as a perch fish and shed her skin in the spring like a snake" before reflecting, "now it seemed that with these babies she had become an oddity" (p.213). James compares the babies to "something in the circus...like Siamese twins" (p.251) whilst the first show of the dead babies at the Nashville opera house reminds Christie of "the Amazing Frog-Girl from a carnival back in Dundee when she was a child" (p.324).

In the final stage of their tour, James, Christie and the babies become just such an exhibit, as they journey deeper South into the poorer, more rural and war torn regions of Arkansas and Mississippi. McCain, always on the look out for a seasonal market with minimal overheads, ditches any educational pretensions and the babies take their place as a commodity oddity in the travelling shows alongside "The Snake Woman from

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Howells's account and those supplied by the press.

The close relationship between Stephen Crane's fiction and reportage are well-documented--see for example, Trachtenberg pp.125-127.

Frank Norris' novel *The Octopus* both protests, and in some ways defines its own project against the fact that the "story of the fight" between the railroad and the league of wheat farmers "was to be told to San Francisco and the outside world by S. Behrman, Ruggles and the local P. and S.W. agents" (Norris, p.381).

As we shall see in the next chapter, Tom Wolfe's ideas about the novelist outdoing the journalist with thorough reportage are absolutely central to his policy of "getting back to" social realism.

Borneo", "The Fat Lady" and "Half Man Half Woman' Charlie Lou Pickles" (p.364). So just as the death and preservation of the babies made them identical with their media construction--a lifeless spectacle--this turn of events both extends their commodification and strips the relations between the dead babies and their previous audience to its essence--a brutal, profit driven voyeurism. And by juxtaposing the glitzy, commodified exhibition and the older ways of the freak show and the country fair, the text suggests that the emergent culture has deep historical roots. In this respect, Mason's narrative implies just what Robert Bogdan's well-known book, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (1988), documents--that the relationship between these two worlds are even more overt than one might imagine--more like different sides of the same coin.<sup>49</sup>

As well as retroactively de-familiarizing the previous section, this phase also re-introduces, and works through, those apocalyptic overtones which dominated the beginning of the text. Back when Christie was fending off intrusive spectators and nursing the ailing Minnie, it occurred to her that "the monster she had thought was inside her after the camp meeting did in fact exist--in the spectacle the babies had generated" (p.213). Now she recognises that this is the case and that "It wasn't why it happened--that couldn't be known; it was what the world made of it that was at issue" (p.417). So

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<sup>49</sup> See Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988). As Bogdan explains, the continuity between the old American way of the freak show and the modern world of the Exposition is neatly illustrated in the biography of P.T. Barnum. Barnum was a famous freak show entrepreneur who gradually became officially respectable. He launched his "American Museum" in 1841 and was briefly president of the "Association for the Exhibition of the Industry of all Nations" in the early 1850s. In 1853 he organized a fair in New York which foreshadowed the famous 1876 World Fair and subsequent Expositions. As Bogdan describes, "Included in the exhibition were Native American's and other 'exotic' people from around the world. Although they were not displayed as a paid sideshow, as they had been in the dime museums and circus, the line between 'scientific' ethnological displays of the world's people and sensational exploitation of the exotic was blurred at Philadelphia" (p.48). He adds that in 1876, "Fair organizers fought to keep the main exhibition grounds free from the influence of what they considered to be the darker side of American culture--the independent showmen, vendors and various entrepreneurs of the entertainment and amusement world. But outside the fairgrounds, especially on Elm Avenue, just across from the exposition's main building, small businesses proliferated" (p.48). The famous 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition", described by Henry Adams as "the first expression of American thought as unity" (see this thesis, p.1) also included "amusement concessions as a financial necessity"--so much so that the *New York Times* crowed, "P.T. Barnum should have lived to see the day" (p.50). One might say that in Mason's *Feather Crowns*, the babies are displayed on both sides of the official gate.



the babies might bear a privileged or charged relation to the apocalyptic *Zeitgeist*, but not as some menacing divine manifestation of it. Instead of being "inside her" the monster resides in society's response to the babies--in its transformation of the babies into a modern spectacle.

At this point in the text, the story of the babies' ongoing commodification is seemingly halted by its intersection with what Hermione Lee called "the novel's heroic story which turns it from a tragedy into a celebration", namely "Christie's development from the passive, exploited mother to a person full of strength, scepticism and anger".<sup>50</sup> One key moment in this development occurs when Christie indulges her own voyeuristic curiosity, surreptitiously stealing a glimpse at "half-man, half woman" Charlie Lou Pickles (p.364). But having done so, she immediately recognizes a series of parallels between Pickles' own situation and her own. Both are the objects of an "exchange" which involves being flattened into an "it", and like Christie's babies, the aptly named Pickles is frozen into an oddity.<sup>51</sup> Catching herself as viewer has an almost epiphanic force for Christie, reinforcing her conviction that the "monster" is neither a divine manifestation nor the off-spring of isolated, wicked individuals but is instead the product of an emerging cultural mood. Her heightening understanding of this mood results in a hitherto fragmented, mediated and ultimately compliant perspective hardening into a critical voice. She ponders:

Back when the babies were alive and had been throbbing with life it had been natural for her to open up and share them with the world. She shouldn't have done that. But she could never change what had happened. Nor would she be able to punish the world for the wrong done to her. There was no point trying.

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<sup>50</sup> Hermione Lee, "Famous Five Freakshow", *Independent on Sunday*, Review Section, 31 October 1993, p.45. Alan Davis refers to Christie's "growth from a farm wife into a thoughtful proto-feminist", "Fiction Chronicle", Review of *Feather Crowns*, *Hudson Review* 47 (Spring 1994) p.141.

<sup>51</sup> This identification between Pickles' commodification and that of the quintuplets is anticipated by the narrative in a remarkable exchange much earlier in the text. Minnie Sophia has just died and Mullin's proposal of preserving the corpse has been offered. He has taken it to Hopewell and the family are thus holding a vigil without the corpse. The notion of preservation ghosts the characters' speech:

"I brought down these pickles you give me last year, Christie' said Amanda. 'Christie did up these pickles', she said to the rest of the family.

'Is that right, to take her own pickles on a day like this?' asked Mary Anne, Joseph's wife.

'What difference does it make?' said Lena, who had been moody lately.

'They're good pickles, if I do say myself,' said Christie." (p.232).

The wrong was much bigger--and deeper--than she had thought. She remembered the camp meeting at Reelfoot. These sideshows and medicine men and pitchmen reminded her of those preachers standing behind their stumps and screeching and squawking like jay-birds, ranting about the earthquake that never came. The preachers were medicine men, hawking their concoction for saving the soul from damnation..She and James sat side by side in the sweltering tent with their gruesome display (p.368).

This "bigger and deeper" "wrong" spans the culture from the farm to the freak show, from Arkansas to Memphis, even encompassing the Methodist meeting where no money is actually being exchanged. Buying, looking and selling have become paradigms for interaction--awareness of this compels Christie to remove the quintuplets from the realm of the spectacle. Having witnessed the remorseless drive of commodification, she fears that simply burying the babies back in Hopewell would not be enough--they would be dug-up, re-packaged and "put in a freak show" (p.394). Depositing the babies at Washington's Institute of Man seems to offer a solution. For one, the couple are "giving them away free" (p.399), thereby removing them from the sphere of monetary exchange. They are also removing them from consumer relations or the public gaze, be it in "public entertainment" or a "lurid sideshow", and instead committing them to the "advancement of science" (p.411), and indirectly, to the national good, as symbolized by the "white spire of the Washington Monument" (p.416). Sexually reconciled after the estranging and alienating experience of being on tour (p.396), and satisfyingly unburdened of their "gruesome display" (p.368), the couple re-board the train and return to the "work to be done" on the farm (p.417).

This return to the rhythms of farm life marks the end of the novel's main section, the five parts and four hundred and seventeen pages, which, except for one brief flashback describing James and Christie's courtship (pp.39-85), are all set within the year of 1900. And this long narrative unit--with its specifically dated setting, tight biographical focus on Christie, stylistic continuity and ongoing allusiveness to an earlier moment in American fiction--is brought to a seemingly conventional closure with the deposit of the babies in Washington. That is, as we have just seen, the decision demarcates the end of both a physical and experiential journey at which point Christie, with her deepened understanding and rejuvenated marriage rejects "the new and the



strange" (p.434) in favour of the older and more familiar ways of the farm. She looks forward to "hilling up turnips and cabbages, teaching Nannie her ABC's" (p.417) and generally getting back to the type of life she enjoyed before the quintuplets were born.

This apparently tidy and conventional closure, however, is not the end of the novel, but is followed by two short bulletins which catch up with Christie in 1937 and 1963. And rather than confirming the earlier closure, in different ways, these two sections problematize it. The 1937 section, where Christie is sponsored by Hopewell to visit the world famous Dionne quintuplets in Ontario, calls into question her earlier decision to deposit the babies in Washington. Christie's faith in the Washington monument and all that it represents has been challenged by the experience of the first world war in which her son Clint was killed. Whilst "She was told she gave him for her country" she "wondered how many times in history mothers had been told that...A person could sacrifice all she held dear for a land that didn't return the favour" (p.425). Likewise, the experience of seeing the Dionne quintuplets prompts her to doubt the objectivity of science and its apparent separateness from commerce and commodities.<sup>52</sup> After all, here science becomes a key dimension of the consumer spectacle--in the name of science the babies are rescued from the primitivism of their parents' farm house, made wards of state and put into a purpose built sanitarium which doubles as an "observation building" (p.436). Their lives, which are painstakingly chronicled on wall-charts (p.438), become an extended experiment designed to showcase the sophistication of contemporary medical technology. As Christie puts it in 1963, "The things they done to those little girls just wasn't right...It made me wonder if James and me had done the right thing, leaving our babies up there in Washington to be studied by science" (p.446).

Doubts about whether or not donating the quintuplets to science can protect them from ongoing commodification are further developed by these two short sections. In spite of their distinctive narrative styles which set them apart from the 1900 narrative--

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<sup>52</sup> One might recall the words of Edward Bellamy, the novelist who visited the famous Chicago World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. Rejecting the official line--that the exposition was a celebration of scientific advancement and modern industrialism--Bellamy observed, 'The underlying motive of the whole exhibition, under a sham of pretense of patriotism, is business, advertising with a view to individual money-making'. Quoted in Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern American Novel* (1983; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) p.2. Note the way in which Bellam's syntax implies that business and advertising are nowadays synonymous.

the 1937 section, perhaps in a gesture to more modernist narrative techniques, adopts a more fluid, sophisticated representation of a consciousness moving backwards and forwards through time and memory whilst 1963 brings us into the age of "electric voices" with the narrative "playing back" a recording of Christie's voice--these two bulletins suggest that business proceeds as usual. Like the Wheeler quintuplets, thirty seven years later the Dionnes become a media event; *Life* magazine celebrates this new "world wonder" in its cover story (p.422, p.430). Like the Wheelers, the Dionnes transform their sleepy home town into a major tourist attraction where "souveneir stands" selling baby dolls line the streets (p.437). And like them the Dionnes attract crowds, who appear to be waiting for "a picture show theatre" (p.436) and who leave behind the day trip detritus--"the lunch wrappings, the cigarette stubs, the orange peels"--which prompts Christie to think, "it had been just the same in 1900" (p.436).

This emphasis on continuity rather than change is reinforced in the 1963 section when, on the eve of Christie's ninetieth birthday, the "big dudes" of Hopewell--who Christie describes as seeming "just like the same bunch" that visited her in 1900 (p.445)--recognize that there might be life yet in the Hopewell quintuplets. Even if they don't actually manage to "bring the babies back here and have them buried proper" (p.453) as they would like, this consortium, led by the mayor and the newspaper editor, recognizes that the quintuplets can be re-packaged without the babies' remains and revived for the sake of "Hopewell Quintuplets Day" (p.445) where Christie, alongside Elvis Presley, would ride "around the square at the head of a parade in a cadillac convertible" (p.445).

The implication is that the novel's earlier closure--Christie leaving the babies' remains at The Institute of Man--has not even quarantined *them* against further commodification: this gesture was no match for the social processes which the novel has been exploring. Unlike the earthquake or the apocalypse, the "new and strange" modes of consumption dramatized by the 1900 story appear to have gathered momentum through the century, being even more virulent on the eve of the Kennedy assassination, when Christie wonders at the invention of television and anticipates the moon landing, than they were in Callandar at the time of the Neutrality Legislation or in rural Kentucky at the dawn of the century.



Far from being a promising domestic story ruined by social detail then, or indeed a straightforward type of modern day *Bildungsroman* charting the development of Christie from, in the words of Alan Davis, "a farm wife into a thoughtful proto-feminist", *Feather Crowns* comprises a challenging meditation on the direction of the American century.<sup>53</sup> And far from exemplifying Mason's "straightforward" realism, its range of narrative devices, which evokes an earlier type of narrative and explores the interrelation between the individual consciousness and new modes of experience, is of course, integral to this meditation and its social and political resonances. In short, through its combination of nuanced, allusive prose, careful research and panoramic scope, *Feather Crowns* offers an historical perspective on the bewildering, spectacular novelty of consumer society which confronts the characters in the present day settings of Mason's better known short stories.

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<sup>53</sup> Davis p.141.

**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**TOM WOLFE**



**"A COLLISION WITH THE REAL WORLD":<sup>1</sup> NEOCONSERVATISM AND  
*THE BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES* (1987).**

Two years after the publication of Tom Wolfe's bestselling debut novel, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), *Harper's Magazine* printed the author's latest offering. "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel" was a feisty polemic where Wolfe, developing ideas outlined in earlier articles, bemoaned the disappearance of American social realism and railed against the post sixties literary scene which had displaced it.<sup>2</sup> He also charted the genesis of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, describing how the text was born from his frustration with the state of contemporary writing, and predicted that the future of the American novel lay in "a highly detailed realism based on reporting" (*SB*, p.50). With characteristic chutzpah, he nominated *The Bonfire of the Vanities* as a candidate capable of leading the way forward.

The piece, which by 1990 was being published as the preface to the Picador paperback edition of the novel, enjoyed immediate and widespread publicity, generating discussion about the state of American fiction, the relevance of realism and the literary worth of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. Literary heavy-weights Walker Percy and Philip Roth both responded to Wolfe's argument, and debate spilled over into the mainstream media; Wolfe himself appeared on "Bookmark" and ABC News' "Nightline". The *New York Times* published an article entitled "The Flap Over Tom Wolfe: How Real is the

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987; London: Picador, 1990) p.459. Hereafter cited as *BV*. References will be included in parentheses in the text.

<sup>2</sup> The article duplicates passages from Wolfe's 1973 Introduction to the *New Journalism* anthology (1973; London: Picador, 1975); incorporates observations from journalistic pieces such as "The Intelligent Coeds Guide to America", "The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening" and "Funky Chic", which are all collected in *Mauve Gloves and Madmen, Clutter and Vine* (1976; London: Picador, 1990); and re-iterates points made in Joe David Bellamy's book, *The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974). Tom Wolfe, "Stalking the Billion Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel," *Harper's Magazine* 279 (November 1989). Hereafter cited as *SB*. The *New Journalism* will be hereafter cited as *NJ*--references to both will be included in parentheses in the text..

Retreat from Realism?" in which Robert Towers declared that he could not "recall an article in a small magazine making a bigger splash in the literary pool."<sup>3</sup> Academics, like writers and journalists, picked up the gauntlet thrown down by Wolfe. The *Journal of American Culture* ran a special Tom Wolfe edition in the Fall of 1991, where some articles offered readings of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* whilst others took issue with "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast".<sup>4</sup> In the same year there was an international conference on "Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction" at Gent University, where a number of papers engaged with Wolfe's writing.<sup>5</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, who presented a paper at that conference, published an updated edition of his book, *The Modern American Novel* the following year, and the new chapter on the eighties opened with a lengthy discussion of Wolfe's claims.<sup>6</sup>

Wolfe's provocations, then, initiated a new phase in American debates about realism, and opened a new stage in the intellectual history summarized in chapter one. In keeping with the broad method of this thesis, where literary debates have been read in relation to their surrounding social and political contexts, the first section of this chapter maps out Wolfe's context: Reagan's America and the ideas of neoconservative thinkers which played such a significant role in shaping it. The second section considers Wolfe's theories about his favoured "journalistic novel" (*NJ*, p.50) or "highly detailed realism based on reporting" (*SB*, p.50) in the light of this context by examining both his polemical pieces and the novel itself, which thematizes a number of Wolfe's ideas about reporting and representation. The remaining sections develop the reading of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, and argue that, in spite of Wolfe's rhetoric about his "journalistic

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Towers, "The Flap Over Tom Wolfe: How Real is the Retreat from Realism?", *New York Times*, Section 7, 28 January 1990, p.15.

<sup>4</sup> *Journal of American Culture* 14 (Fall 1991). See especially James Card's "Tom Wolfe and the 'Experimental Novel'" (pp.31-35); Jerry A. Varsava's "Tom Wolfe's Defense of the New (Old) Social Novel: Or, The Perils of the Great White-Suited Hunter" (pp.35-43); and James F. Smith's "Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*: A Dreiser Novel for the 1980s" (pp.43-51).

<sup>5</sup> Papers from the conference are collected in *Postmodern Studies* 5 (1991). See especially Kristiaan Versluys' "Introduction" (pp.7-12); Malcolm Bradbury's "Writing Fiction in the 90s" (pp.13-25); Mark Shechner's "American Realisms, American Realities" (pp.27-50); and Winfried Fluck's "Surface and Depth: Postmodernist and Neo-Realist Fiction" (pp.65-85).

<sup>6</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern American Novel* (1983; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) pp.260-268.



novel" providing an unmediated reflection of the way things really are, the text is saturated with neoconservative assumptions and obsessions.

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In 1964 Barry Goldwater ran for the U.S. presidency on a radical right-wing ticket. Adopting a zealous anti-communist rhetoric, he opposed the civil-rights bill, criticised the New Deal (particularly increases in the role played by federal government) and proposed to reduce the powers of the Supreme Court. Despite the support of movie-star Ronald Reagan, Goldwater was never a serious contender: his opponent Lyndon Johnson took the presidency in a landslide victory. In 1980 however, Reagan, who cut his political teeth in the Goldwater campaign, won 50.7% of the vote when he made his bid for the Whitehouse with a comparable anti-communist, anti-big government policy agenda. And in January 1989, when he retired from office after a second term, polls showed him enjoying the support of 60% of the electorate, ranking him alongside Dwight Eisenhower as one of the most popular post-war presidents.

This crude contrast between the electoral implausibility of Goldwater and the ongoing popularity of Reagan gives a very rough indication of the change in American political culture between the mid-sixties and eighties. Countless factors contributed to this rightward shift, including the oil crisis slump of the early seventies and the unpopularity of President Carter. But one important factor was the emergence of the neoconservatives, a group of intellectuals including Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Norman Podhoretz, Irving Kristol and Senator Daniel P. Moynihan, who clustered around the same institutions, published in the same journals, and found themselves collectively disaffected with the direction taken by the Democratic Party in the sixties and seventies.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> By the mid seventies, the term neoconservatism had, according to the movement's first historian Peter Steinfels, "gained a certain degree of currency." Peter Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives: The Men Who Are Changing American Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979) p.20.

In 1977, *Newsweek* ran an unsigned article, describing how: "In intellectual circles, the social thinkers who were once the driving force of Democratic Liberalism--men like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and John Kenneth Galbraith--have been upstaged by a group of 'Neoconservative' academics, many of them refugees from the liberal left, including Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Irving Kristol, James Q. Wilson,

Whilst there were many differences between the thinking of individual neoconservatives, they shared a commitment to subjecting liberal assumptions to rigorous scrutiny. In this venture, they reclaimed the intellectual initiative for right-of-centre ideas: as such, they both helped to make America receptive to Reagan, and informed a number of his key policies.

In an article written for *Newsweek* in January 1976, high profile neoconservative Irving Kristol attempted to define the "vague consensus" of views constituting neoconservatism as a political current. Whilst the piece does not offer a wholly comprehensive account--being short, partisan, and written whilst the movement was still developing--it does provide a useful starting point from which some of neoconservatism's key preoccupations can be outlined.<sup>8</sup>

"Neoconservatism", writes Kristol:

is respectful of traditional values and institutions: religion, the family, the "high culture" of Western civilization. If there is any one thing that neoconservatives are unanimous about, it is their dislike of the "counterculture" that has played so remarkable a role in American life over the past fifteen years.

Neoconservatives frequently invoke "traditional values" and older ways, and often represent the sixties as their arch enemy. Sixties culture is a frequent target. For Daniel Bell, the counterculture was a "counterfeit culture" which rudely elbowed aside the "complexity, irony and ambiguity" of fifties art with a new attitude which was "loud,

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Edward Banfield, Seymour Martin Lipset and Senator Daniel P. Moynihan of New York." *Newsweek*, 7 November, 1977, p.34.

Attitudes to the term varied. Some so-called "neoconservatives" rejected it, whilst others, notably Irving Kristol, in the title of his 1983 memoir *Reflections of a Neoconservative: Looking Back, Looking Ahead* (New York: Basic Books, 1983) appropriated it.

Many prominent neoconservatives worked at either the Aspen Institute, the Institute for Contemporary Studies in San Francisco, the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies and the American Enterprise Institute. For a full description of the relationship between individual neoconservatives and these centres, see Gillian Peele, *Revival and Reaction: The Right in Contemporary America* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) p.11. The two most important forums for neoconservative debate were the New York based publications, *The Public Interest*, founded in 1965 by Irving Kristol and Daniel Bell, and *Commentary*, which was edited by leading neoconservative Norman Podhoretz through the late seventies.

<sup>8</sup> Irving Kristol, "What is a Neoconservative?", *Newsweek*, January 19, 1976, p.78. As the article is contained on a single page, all further references to "What is a Neoconservative" refer to p.78.



imprecatory" and prone to obscenity."<sup>9</sup> Likewise, neoconservatives lamented the changes which had befallen the decently liberal Academy in the "rubbish decade": there was a shared belief that unrepresentative radical intellectuals, or "guerillas with tenure" in Irving Howe's memorable phrase, had hijacked key institutions, and were promoting values inimical to American democracy.<sup>10</sup> And as this radicalization of the Academy in the latter half of the sixties coincided with its rapid expansion,<sup>11</sup> many neoconservatives argued that the baby-boom generation, which passed through higher education at this time, had become a "new class", well-schooled in the anti-establishment canon which Richard Hofstadter termed "adversary culture."<sup>12</sup> This "new class" worked largely in the "knowledge industry". According to Michael Novak, writing in 1976, this industry accounted for 35% of the GNP, and included:

federal and local government workers, researchers, lawyers, planners, consultants, educators, information system operatives, journalists, social workers and others...Most of the workers in this industry depend for their livelihood on expanding...government expenditure (with its attendant corruptions). Most are Democrats.

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel Bell, "The Sensibility of the Sixties", in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976) p.121. The chapter was originally printed, with the same title, as an article in *Commentary* (June 1971).

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Epstein, "The Party's Over", review of *Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*, by Tom Wolfe, *Commentary* (March 1971) p.102. For a swingeing parody of this new type of academic, see Dorothy Rabinowitz, "The Radicalized Professor", *Commentary* (July 1972) p.64. Nathan Glazer discusses the interface between the changing academy and radical student politics in "On Being Deradicalized", *Commentary* (October 1970) pp.74-80.

<sup>11</sup> Between 1965 and 1970 the number of faculty members in American colleges increased by almost 150,000. See Everett Carl Ladd, Jr., and Seymour Martin Lipset, *The Divided Academy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975) pp.1-2. See also chapter one of this thesis.

<sup>12</sup> In 1967, Hofstadter wrote, "Perhaps we are really confronted with two cultures...whose spheres are increasingly independent and more likely to be conflicting than to be benignly convergent: a massive adversary culture on one side, and the realm of socially responsible criticism on the other.

Is it not quite possible that the responsible society will get no nourishment from modern literature, but will have to draw mainly on history, journalism, economics, sociological commentary?" Richard Hofstadter, "Two Cultures: Adversary and/or Responsible", *Public Interest* (Winter 1967) p.74.

The phrase "adversary culture", which was borrowed from Lionel Trilling, quickly became common currency in neoconservative discussion. Like "new class", it was used in different ways, sometimes a synonym for the counterculture, and sometimes for the expanding "knowledge industry" ("university-government-media") which was to employ many of the counterculture generation. As Steinfels puts it, it was "half analytic concept, half polemic device" (Steinfels, p.57).

They are, Novak continues, "Know-Everythings...affluent professionals, secular in their values and tastes and initiatives, indifferent to or hostile to the family, equipped with postgraduate degrees and economic security and cultural power." For Novak, the "cultural nihilism" of this dangerous sixties generation estranged it from "most Americans" who cherished the "traditional values of honesty, decency, hard work, competitive advancement and religious faith."<sup>13</sup>

This overarching antipathy to the sixties bears upon the remaining points listed by Kristol. "Neoconservatism", he claims, "is not at all hostile to the welfare state, but it is critical of the Great Society version." The "Great Society" referred to here is Lyndon Johnson's 1964-8 drive to eliminate poverty by expanding federal government and its expenditure; the "welfare state" refers to Roosevelt's New Deal, which Kristol preferred to its sixties equivalent.<sup>14</sup> And when Kristol describes the threat posed to American liberty by an egalitarianism which insists on "everyone end[ing] up with equal shares of everything", he is gesturing towards affirmative action, another recurring issue in neoconservative thought. This programme, which was part of the "Great Society" package, was widely conceived by neoconservatives to replace a healthy American emphasis upon equal opportunity with an alien, and even communistic, insistence on equality of outcome.<sup>15</sup> Many neoconservatives were themselves from immigrant families, and, in the words of Gillian Peele, "believed that the Democratic party of the 1960's, in

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Novak, "Make Room for Family Democrats", *Washington Star*, August 29, 1976. Quoted in Steinfels, p.57.

<sup>14</sup> Aaron Wildavsky echoes this view in "Government and the People", *Commentary* (August 1973) p.32. Steinfels argues that the article is based upon a falsification of the New Deal. Steinfels, p.221.

Other neoconservatives disagreed with this endorsement of the New Deal. For thinkers like Charles Murray and George Gilder, welfare created a dependency culture. According to Murray, attempts to help the poor through welfare actually worsened the situation by making it, "profitable for the poor to behave in the short term in ways destructive in the long term" The solution was to ditch "the entire federal welfare and income support structure for working persons," leaving those able to work, "no recourse except the job market." Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984) p.9, p. 227. George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty* (1981; London: Buchan and Enright, 1982).

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Moynihan notoriously compared the implementation of quotas for teachers in New York schools to Hitler's Nuremberg Statutes. See Steinfels, p.225. See also Nathan Glazer's *Affirmative Discrimination: Ethnic Inequality and Public Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1975). Irving Kristol lambasted those who "prize equality more than liberty", before predicting that, "the kind of liberal egalitarianism so casually popular today will, if it is permitted to gather momentum, surely destroy the liberal society." Quoted in Steinfels, p.214.



adopting policies geared towards minority politics, had neglected the interests of second and third generation white ethnics who were upwardly mobile and whose moral values were conservative."<sup>16</sup> Just as importantly, affirmative action was seen to exacerbate what Daniel Moynihan termed "social mistrust" by taking responsibility for the fairness of "social outcomes" (in this case racial equality) and then failing to deliver them: neoconservatives maintained that the shortfall between lofty government intention and actual social reality fostered rather than eased social resentment, as the government found itself "increasingly held to account for failures in areas where no government could reasonably promise success."<sup>17</sup> Underpinning this critique of an overbearing, paternalistic state was an unshakeable and distinctively neoconservative trust in the "traditional values" of most Americans.

Kristol's final point was that "in foreign policy, neoconservatism believes that American democracy is not likely to survive for long in a world that is overwhelmingly hostile to American values...So neoconservatives are critical of the post-Vietnam isolationism now so popular in Congress, and many are suspicious of '*detente*' as well."<sup>18</sup> And as with many issues championed by the neoconservatives, this critique of current foreign policy is also underpinned by a familiar anti-sixties feeling which Kristol omits from his account. For many neoconservatives, Carter's pusillanimous foreign policy reflected a national malaise, or an American culture *itself* increasingly hostile to American values.<sup>19</sup> Some dominant neoconservatives argued that during the Second

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<sup>16</sup> Gillian Peele, "Culture, Religion and Public Morality", in Andrew Adonis and Tim Hames eds., *A Conservative Revolution? The Thatcher-Reagan Decade in Perspective*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994) p.79.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel P. Moynihan, *The Politics of a Guaranteed Income* (New York: Random House, 1973) p.53.

<sup>18</sup> According to Norman Podhoretz, President Carter had ditched "the mainstream democratic tradition in foreign policy" or the principle of containing the Soviet threat. Norman Podhoretz, "The Reagan Road to *Détente*", *Foreign Affairs* 63, no. 2 (1984) p.448. Fellow neoconservative Jeane Kirkpatrick became a vehement critic of Carter prioritizing human rights above National interest. See Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorship and Double Stands", *Commentary* (November 1979). See also Kristol's piece, "The Human Rights Muddle" in his *Reflections*, pp.266-70.

<sup>19</sup> Irving Kristol comments that "Imperial powers need social cohesion at home if they are to act effectively in the world", Irving Kristol, *On the Democratic Idea in America* (New York: Harper, Row and Torchbook, 1972) p.87. Synthesising the thinking of a number of neoconservatives, Steinfels summarizes that, "neoconservatives are undoubtedly sincere in their anxiety over international affairs, at the same time as the essential source of that anxiety is not military or political or to be found overseas at all; it is domestic and cultural and ideological. The neoconservative vision of the strong society is one

World War internal issues such as Communist Party activity and labor strikes had rightly been subordinated to the Popular Front and national interest. By contrast, as Gary Wills summarizes, "In a time of equal present danger, against a foe as implacable, the neoconservatives saw the social movements of recent years--from civil rights to women's rights to gay rights--as distractions from, if not downright treasonous disregard of, the country's peril."<sup>20</sup> George Gilder and Phyllis Schlafly became outspoken critics of the women's movement,<sup>21</sup> whilst Podhoretz accused the gay movement of emasculating the nation.<sup>22</sup> And as Wills continues, for neoconservatives, "The civil rights movement had gone too far when it lionized people like Muhammed Ali, a draft dodger": affirmative action was castigated as "just another word for quotas, for divorcing rewards from performance, at the very time when the nation must perform at peak efficiency against the present danger."<sup>23</sup>

Whilst it has often been suggested that as a lapsed democrat, Reagan might himself be regarded as a prototypical "neoconservative",<sup>24</sup> this surely overstates the case: Reagan's political success depended precisely upon his ability to reconcile the interests of numerous groups and philosophies into a broad, Republican coalition.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless,

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resembling the United States in the Cold War era." Steinfels, p.69.

<sup>20</sup> Garry Wills, *Reagan's America: Innocents at Home* (New York: Doubleday, 1987) p.339.

<sup>21</sup> George Gilder, *Sexual Suicide* (New York: Quadrangle, 1973). Irving Kristol took a similar line, arguing that women's liberation had emasculated the U.S. army: "There are certainly many parts of the armed forces where women can contribute to our military efficiency" he conceded, before adding, "but mainly at home and nowhere near a possible combat zone." See "A letter to the Pentagon", in *Reflections of a Neoconservative: Looking Back, Looking Ahead* (New York: Basic Books, 1983) p.259.

<sup>22</sup> Norman Podhoretz, "The Culture of Appeasement", *Harper's* (October 1977). See also Midge Decter, "The Boys on the Beach", *Commentary* (September 1980). Wills quotes Podhoretz on the question of medical funding for AIDS research. Supplying more resources, he said, would be "a kind of Aids in the moral and spiritual realm, allow[ing] them [gay men] to resume buggering each other with complete medical impunity." Wills, p.443.

<sup>23</sup> Wills, p.340.

<sup>24</sup> Jeane Kirkpatrick, who was appointed as Permanent Representative to the United Nations after Reagan's election, suggested this in, "The Reagan Phenomenon and the Liberal Tradition" in *The Reagan Phenomenon and other Speeches on Foreign Policy* (Washington and London: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1982) p.10.

<sup>25</sup> The Reagan administration encompassed many factions and interest groups including supply-side economists, neoconservatives, more traditional Republicans and the evangelical right.



it *is* true that he shared a number of preoccupations with the neoconservatives, and that with his election, many neoconservative ideas struck a chord with, and began to exert a force upon, both his political rhetoric and his administration's policy making.<sup>26</sup> Like the neoconservatives, for example, Reagan vehemently advocated the return to an "older American Vision": the phrase "traditional family values" became a key sound-bite for promoting his policies on child abuse, drug abuse, opposition to government funded abortion and the reintroduction of prayer into schools.<sup>27</sup> And like the neoconservatives, he harboured a deep antipathy for the social, political and cultural changes of the sixties.<sup>28</sup> When in his inaugural address Reagan vowed to protect the "freedom and originality of the individual" against "the unnecessary and excessive growth in government", he was clearly referring to public policy trends initiated during Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" programme. In the Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981, Reagan followed this up, slashing taxation by 25%, depriving the treasury of \$750 billion over a five year period: this was funded by a corresponding reduction in schemes introduced during The "Great Society" war on poverty.<sup>29</sup> Affirmative action initiatives also came under fire. In 1980,

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<sup>26</sup> Many neoconservatives influenced the Reagan presidency in direct, measurable ways. Both George Gilder's book *Wealth and Poverty* and Jeane Kirkpatrick's essay "Dictatorships and Doublestands" played major roles in shaping Reagan's thinking and policies. And like Kirkpatrick, many neoconservatives went on to serve the Reagan administration, where they enjoyed particular sway over foreign policy. The highly critical and widely respected Committee of the Present Danger was set up by neoconservatives during the Carter administration (though it imitated an earlier group of the same name, which was established in the fifties). When Reagan took office, an estimated 32 of its members were given jobs in foreign policy or defence. See Peele, p.172.

It is also true, however, that many neoconservatives took a critical line on aspects of Reagan's policies. For Daniel Moynihan, the administration's dismantling of welfare measures went too far. Others, like Michael Novak, claimed they did not go far enough. Podhoretz, who initially admired Reagan's determination to "get the country moving again", became highly critical of Reagan's foreign policy in the mid eighties. See "The Reagan Road to *Détente*" in *Foreign Affairs* 63, no. 3 (1984) p.460. Jeane Kirkpatrick took a similar line after leaving office, comparing Reagan's timidity to Jimmy Carter's. See "Reagan's Puzzling Strategy" in *Chicago Tribune*, 19 January 1986, p.7.

<sup>27</sup> These soundbites are lifted from a speech Reagan gave in August 1980. Quoted in Nigel Ashford, "The Conservative Agenda and the Reagan Presidency" in Joseph Hogan ed., *The Reagan Years: The Record in Presidential Leadership* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990) p.208.

<sup>28</sup> In this, he resembled his political kindred spirit, Margaret Thatcher. "We are reaping what was sown in the sixties", she once said, describing the challenge faced by her government: "the fashionable theories and permissive claptrap set the scene for a society in which the old virtues of discipline and self-restraint were denigrated." Quoted in Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents: Meanings, Myths and Modern Sexualities* (1985: London: Routledge, 1993) p.18.

<sup>29</sup> \$2 billion dollars were cut from the Food Stamps programmes, \$2 billion from the Guaranteed Student Loans programmes, \$1.7 billion from child nutrition assistance whilst the Neighbourhood Self

Attorney-General William French Smith had stated that the Justice Department would no longer support the use of quotas, and the following year Reagan's Secretary of Labor endorsed this by reducing the affirmative action steps required of companies seeking federal contracts.<sup>30</sup> In 1983, Reagan dismissed three members of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, and axed its budget by \$4.3 million.

If the economic rationale behind these measures derived from supply side theorists, the moral justification was furnished by neoconservative attacks on both the efficacy of "Great Society" welfare measures and the politics of affirmative action. Far from concealing these cuts, Reagan's aides flaunted them, drumming home the fact that this administration had decisively broken free from the sixties ideology of the "the liberal coalition" in favour of a sensible social policy agenda which reflected the concerns and priorities of the majority of hard-working Americans.<sup>31</sup> As a result of the rhetorical citation, political implementation and electoral popularity of this neoconservative thinking, the ideas themselves entered everyday currency during the Reagan era; they became an enduring, populist ideology and rapidly took on the inscrutable status of common-sense.

I went up to the twenty-fifth anniversary party of the *National Review*, and a reporter

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Help and Planning Assistance Programmes were shut down. While these cuts were being implemented, Reagan was also setting about the "re-masculinisation" of the United States. As well as talking tough on Communism he replenished the American arsenals, spending \$1.6 trillion over a five year period. See Manning Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990* (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1991) p.181.

<sup>30</sup> Under President Carter, firms with federal contracts had to demonstrate their affirmative action credentials if they had more than 50 employees or a contract of \$50,000 or above. Under Reagan, only firms with over 250 staff or a contract worth more than \$1 million had to comply.

<sup>31</sup> In her speech "The Reagan Phenomenon and the Liberal Tradition", Jeane Kirkpatrick asserted that, "the passage of the budget resolution required the defeat of the liberal coalition." She described Reagan's election as demarcating "the end of the Vietnam epoch". In *The Reagan Phenomenon and Other Speeches*, p. 9 and p.11.



came up to me and said, 'Is this a clan meeting of the neoconservatives?'...I looked around the room and said that as far as I could tell, most of those in attendance had not seen each other before but all in one way or other had thumbed their noses at the prevailing intellectual orthodoxy over the last quarter of a century. That's the sort of position I see myself in and I'm comfortable with that. (Tom Wolfe in interview with Alvin.P. Sanoff, *U.S. News and World Report*, 23 November 1987, p.57).

In "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast", Wolfe relates how American fiction, like public policy, lost its way in the sixties.<sup>32</sup> Throughout that decade, he explains, elitist theories which had been proclaiming the death of the novel and the death of realism since the late forties really took hold when they were consolidated by the Academy: "the dividing line was 1960. Writers who went to college after 1960...*understood*" (*SB*, p.48).

As in much neoconservative writing, "the sixties" functions here as a highly charged rhetorical construct to which contemporary ills can dependably be traced. As I argued in chapter one, the changes in academic attitudes to realism which Wolfe summarizes actually began in the mid sixties, peaking in the late seventies. Here though, they are pushed back into the early sixties, apparently beginning as soon as the decade got underway and being neatly commensurate with it. In short, Wolfe depends on the association between changes in attitudes to realism and "the sixties" to stigmatise these changes: his strategy hinges upon historical simplification by flattening the complex processes which actually produced intellectual and cultural change into a string of causes and effects. The sixties Academy--that adversarial anathema to neoconservatism and a frequent target of Wolfe's own satire--is cast as the key player.<sup>33</sup> Using its considerable authority, it apparently conspired to rubbish realism by translating contentious theories into received wisdom.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Wolfe ridicules the Federal Government's 'War on Poverty', particularly the Community Action Programs and Poverty Centres. *SB*, p.46.

<sup>33</sup> In "The Intelligent Coeds Guide to America" Wolfe describes an academic conference he attended in the mid-'sixties, and lampoons the fashionable paranoia and pessimism of the delegates. Tom Wolfe, *Mauve Gloves and Madmen, Clutter and Vine*, pp. 94 -110.

<sup>34</sup> On a similar note, Wolfe claims that a whole generation of writers were led away from realism by drawing the wrong conclusions from a Philip Roth article. In "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast" Wolfe describes how an unnamed 1961 Philip Roth essay (presumably "On Writing American Fiction") had "a terrific impact" on "a generation of serious young writers" who learned from it that it was time to "avert their eye" from the world and eschew realism in favour of metafiction (p.48). At the end of his polemic

These simplifications mask Wolfe's failure to engage seriously with the phenomena he describes. Paraphrasing the attitudes of "young writers and intellectuals" towards older realists such as John Steinbeck or Sinclair Lewis for example, Wolfe writes: "They...actually thought you could take real life and spread it across the pages of a book. They never comprehended the fact that the novel is a sublime literary game" (*SB*, p.48). As my introductory chapter described, the increased theoretical momentum which pressurized realist narrative in the late sixties and seventies was partly powered by developments in linguistics, and particularly by the arrival of structuralism on American shores. Wolfe is alluding to such changes here, or more specifically, to the new conceptual apparatus which disclosed an arbitrary relationship between words and things. But his effort to mimic the fashionable spiel falls flat in the phrase "sublime literary game." The word "sublime" in particular is anathema to structuralist discourse, which bristles with technical and scientific, rather than metaphysical, phraseology. Wolfe, whose ear for laughable jargon is usually impeccable, hits a false note here, raising a question mark over his familiarity with the object of his satire.<sup>35</sup>

This apparent lack of serious engagement is mirrored in Wolfe's discussion of realism's usurpers, or fiction's "new breed", who allegedly shun American traditions for "gods...from abroad" (*SB*, p.49). He catalogues these new writers as Absurdists, Radical Disjunctionists, Puppet-Master Novelists, Neo-Fabulists and Minimalists. Other critics have rightly taken issue with Wolfe's misrepresentation of this writing, particularly his assertion that it is devoid of social comment.<sup>36</sup> More relevantly here, the

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Wolfe returns to Roth, saying "Philip Roth was absolutely right. The imagination of the novelist is powerless before what he knows he is going to read in tomorrow morning's newspapers. But a generation of American writers has drawn precisely the wrong conclusion from this perfectly valid observation" (p.55).

<sup>35</sup> Wolfe offers a similarly inaccurate description of structuralism in a 1983 interview, when he sees all structuralism as avowedly Marxist, thereby overlooking its foundational linguistic concepts: "One of the nuttiest expressions of mannerist Marxism is the vogue that has swept through most of our major universities--structuralism, which now dominates both philosophy and English...The premise of structuralism is that the structure of the language is the baggage of capitalism...The whole notion of being an academic of prestige, an intellectual, has become more and more dependent on the art of separating yourself from the bourgeoisie and other influences to ensure your semi-divine status". "Geo Conversation: Tom Wolfe", *Geo* 5 (October 1983). Collected in Dorothy Scura ed., *Conversations with Tom Wolfe* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1991) pp.192-3.

<sup>36</sup> See Jerry A. Varsava, "Tom Wolfe's Defense of the New (Old) Social Novel: Or, The Perils of the Great White Suited Hunter", *Journal of American Culture* 14 (Fall 1991) pp.35-43. See also Towers, p.15.



misrepresentation articulates a distinctly neoconservative attitude hostile to both the post-sixties academy, and the elitist, cosmopolitan culture which it supposedly promotes.<sup>37</sup> And it does so *through* a pattern we have seen throughout debates upon realism. That is, Wolfe accepts the binary structure which opposes realism to another form of writing, takes a position on one side, and mis-reads the alternative. By flattening the types of writing commonly termed postmodernist into a broad straw target, and by entrenching himself in a pro-realist position then, Wolfe unknowingly reproduces the either / or mentality which dominated the anti-realist arguments he is supposedly tackling--those of the Academy in the sixties.<sup>38</sup>

Wolfe wants to re-energize American literature by excavating and reviving an older tradition of realism from the detritus of post-sixties writing. In this too he shares a retrospective sensibility with both Reagan and the neoconservatives. All invoke a lost movement or moment, be it Wolfe's realism, the historically nebulous realm of Reagan's "traditional values", or, in the case of the neoconservatives, the New Deal democratic tradition and the National unity of the post war period.<sup>39</sup> All tend to simplify the historical picture, often collapsing complex processes into simple cause and effects, in order to produce the lost era. And as part of the same process, all demonize those social and cultural changes of the sixties which have allegedly erased them.

So Wolfe defines realism against "this weak, pale, tabescent moment in the history of American literature" (*SB*, p.55) and in terms of an older tradition exemplified in writers as diverse as Dickens, Thackeray, Zola, Balzac, Pearl Buck, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, James Jones, Norman Mailer, Irwin Shaw, William

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<sup>37</sup> In "The Adversary Culture of Intellectuals", for example, Irving Kristol describes the convergence of a European, modernist based culture and the expansion of the American Academy in the post war period. For Kristol, this adversarial culture becomes *the* chosen culture of a new class of college educated baby-boomers, who are estranged from ordinary Americans, but who wield considerable power. Kristol, "The Adversary Culture of Intellectuals", in *Reflections of a Neoconservative*, pp.27-43.

<sup>38</sup> Note that Wolfe sees "Minimalism"--by which he alludes to "dirty realists" like Carver and Mason--as opposed to realism. In this he duplicates one of the patterns critiqued in chapter two.

<sup>39</sup> Milton and Rose Friedman display an equivalent retrospective sensibility in harking back to the supposedly halcyon days of nineteenth century free-market capitalism. In a striking piece of historical simplification, the Friedmans casually brush slavery aside in their glowing account of the previous century's economic boom, where Adam Smith's "hidden hand" could do its work unhindered by state intervention: "Unquestionably" they write, "the main source of the agricultural revolution was private initiative operating in a free market open to all--the shame of slavery only excepted." Milton and Rose Friedman, *Free to Choose: A Personal Statement* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1980) p.3.

Styron, Calder Willingham and Robert Stone. Unlike post-sixties fiction which barricades itself in the ivory tower, Wolfe's favoured realism reports back from "the real world" (*N.J.*, p.16). And reporting is absolutely central to Wolfe's realism; it is, he claims "the most valuable and least understood resource available to any writer" (*S.B.*, p.52) and has its own "esthetic dimension" (*N.J.*, p.24). In this respect, Wolfe's realism has far more in common with journalism, particularly new journalism, than with post-sixties fiction: this is very clear when his statements about new journalism from the early seventies are compared with those about realism from the late eighties. The two genres are described in interchangeable terms--one is feature journalism infused with novelistic narrative devices and the other fiction informed by journalistic reportage. Both are figured with the same distinctive rhetoric, which casts the realist-reporter as an indomitable hunter, eager to "capture" (*N.J.*, p.43) or "wrestle" with that "obnoxious beast" material and "bring it to terms" (*S.B.*, p.53). Extending the same line of imagery, the realist reporter is also depicted as undaunted frontier hero: the new journalist reporter delves into new "terrain" (*N.J.*, p.43) whilst the novelist reporter must "head out into this wild, bizarre, unpredictable, Hogstomping country of ours" and "reclaim it" (*S.B.*, p.55) from those journalists who colonized it whilst the trendy, contemporary novel shied away from the real world.<sup>40</sup> These two--the new journalist and the novelist reporter--are

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<sup>40</sup> Presumably unintentionally, Wolfe's use of hunter and frontier imagery to figure realism's project strikingly echoes the language of Howells, Norris, and Mike Gold, which I commented on in my first chapter. Norris saw his fiction as adequate to the challenge of "the wind of a new country, a new heaven, a new earth" [Frank Norris, "Novelists of the Future: The Training They Need" (1901) in Donald Pizer ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964) p.76] and Gold described proletarian realism as having "wonderful virgin fields to explore" [Mike Gold, "Go Left, Young Writers", *New Masses* (January 1929) in Mike Folsom ed., *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology* (New York: International, 1972) p.190]. Like these earlier theorists of realism, Wolfe also alludes to the sexual potency of such a character, who cannot "resist..plunging' into the fray" (*SB*, p.50). But whereas Howells compared a virile realism fighting "effete romanticism" (p.3), Norris the probing realist with the self-enveloping aesthete, and Gold the worker-realist against "boudoir bards" and Proustian "masturbators" (p.27-8) Wolfe defines his project by deriding the bookish, tenured intellectuals who monopolized writing in the sixties, and who are responsible for this "'weak, pale tabescent moment in the history of American literature.'" (*SB*, p.55)

Like his predecessors, then, Wolfe is operating in terms of binary opposites, with realism being defined against another, more self-conscious and fashionable form. Like them, Wolfe concentrates on what realism is about (i.e. its subject matter) rather than the ways in which it is about that subject matter. And Wolfe indulges in strikingly familiar fantasies of mastery to describe realism's remit--the writer plunging into, and transcribing, unmediated spaces which await representation. Furthermore, the fact that Wolfe can defend realism without tackling the whole question of its status as discourse indicates just how unfamiliar he is with the charges levelled against realism in the sixties and seventies. Rather than contributing to the debate, he actually returns it to a previous, but long forgotten moment. I say more about these issues in the conclusion to this chapter.



twinned so closely in Wolfe's mind that *The Bonfire of the Vanities* was originally conceived as a nonfiction novel in the vein of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, his 1968 account of Ken Kesey's "Merry Pranksters". In "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the new Social Novel", he describes how he simply switched from non-fiction to fiction, "in order to fulfill a prediction...made in the introduction to *The New Journalism* in 1973; namely, that the future of the fictional novel would be in a highly detailed realism based on reporting, a realism more thorough than any currently being attempted" (SB, p.50).<sup>41</sup> So just as New Journalism challenged the sixties literary scene, Wolfe anticipates his brand of journalistic realism, as exemplified in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, shaking up the current "neurasthenic hour" of American letters.<sup>42</sup>

Whilst Wolfe defines "the new social novel" against contemporary fiction in his polemics, his fiction self-consciously measures itself against the corruptions of current journalism, and repeatedly dramatizes the need for precisely the kind of novel that he is writing. In the novel's earliest published form the main character was himself a journalist, and although the protagonist is transformed into a bond salesman in the book version, journalism remains absolutely central to the text. On a single page, for example, the narrative namechecks *The Daily News*, *The New York Times*, the *Post* and the fictional *The City Light* (BV, p.154). The text is especially interested in the relationship between reality and reportage in New York, and offers numerous instances where reportage constructs reality rather than reflecting it. Facts invented by journalists become lived reality for the characters, whilst catchy tabloid headlines rapidly enter

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<sup>41</sup> Wolfe's deliberation about whether the book which eventually became *The Bonfire of the Vanities* should be fiction or non-fiction stretched back into the early seventies. In an interview with Joe David Bellamy, Wolfe said, "I want to do a big book that performs something of the same function of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, and I am weighing up whether it should be fiction or non-fiction, because everything in it is going to be based on a journalistic reality." Joe David Bellamy, ed., *The New Fiction: Interviews With Innovative American Writers*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974) p.83.

<sup>42</sup> *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, it is worth remembering, originally appeared via journalism--it was serialized in *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1984 and 1985. The serialization rights to Wolfe's next novel, which is due out in book form some time next year (1999), have just been secured by *Rolling Stone* for the record sum of \$600,000. See Joanna Coles' front page piece, "Wolfe's Vanity Deal Ignites Media Bonfire", *The Guardian*, 29 April, 1998.

common parlance.<sup>43</sup> For some characters, "there's no real world" but "only what's on T.V" (*BV*, p.415).

*The Bonfire of the Vanities'* critique of contemporary journalism revolves around Peter Fallow, the English journalist who works for the tabloid *The City Light*, and through whose eyes some of the story is told. On one level, of course, Fallow is a tool for satire, and his aristocratic British affectations make him especially useful for defamiliarizing American lifestyles: to him, Americans are "hopeless children whom providence had perversely provided with this great swollen fat fowl of a continent" (*BV*, p.188). He is also a farcical figure, a rakish, impoverished, heavy-drinking incompetent who blunders his way through the city. But at the same time, there is a strong degree of identification with Fallow, who like Wolfe himself, anticipates moving from reporting into fiction: Fallow sees journalism as "a cup of tea on the way to his eventual triumph as a novelist." (*BV*, p.191). And Fallow's boss, *The City Light* owner and "enlightened baron of British publishing", Sir Gerald Steiner (*BV*, p.285) initially appointed Fallow to build "a nice toasty bonfire under all the nobs who had looked down on him" (*BV*, p.192). Here then, the reader is invited to make comparisons between Fallow's journalistic project and the fictional bonfire building described by the novel's own title. This invitation is backed up by a number of often heavy-handed authorial interjections, where a (distinctly Wolfean) voice, experienced in media matters, interrupts the narrative to decode Fallow's progress for the more innocent reader. When Fallow is first introduced to the Henry Lamb story, for example, he experiences, "the emotion, never commented upon by the poets, enjoyed by those who feel that, for once, they are earning their pay" (*BV*, p.241). Unlike these poets, the more street-wise Wolfe *does* underline this emotion for the reader. Elsewhere Fallow apparently behaves like "most journalists who are handed a story" (*BV*, p.434) and enjoys "a feeling that most journalists live for...a neural event, as palpable as any recorded by the senses" (*BV*, p.639).

Through these devices the text firmly nudges the reader to make connections and comparisons between Fallow's and Wolfe's projects. But as well as identifying with

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<sup>43</sup> For example, the narrative shows *The City Light* journalist Peter Fallow manipulating the truth in order to cast hit and run victim Henry Lamb as an "honours student" (p.251). This becomes received wisdom, and Lamb is inevitably referred to in these terms throughout the rest of the book.

A phrase like, "he hit, she ran", which is coined by Fallow in *The City Light* (p.539) quickly enters common speech (p.648).



Fallow's perspective, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* energetically lambasts contemporary journalism, deriding its pretenses of objective reporting and unmasking the whole media edifice as a pawn in the game of corporate and political power. The aptly named Fallow is spoon-fed the Lamb story by Albert Vogel, the left-wing lawyer who is in cahoots with Reverend Reginald Bacon, the African-American community leader. Bacon and Vogel expertly manipulate Fallow in their carefully orchestrated media campaign, and *The City Light* is an ideal vehicle, having earned a financially damaging reputation for racial prejudice which it is eager to correct: Steiner tells Fallow, "We have to alter some perceptions and I think this hit and run case is a good place to start" (*BV*, p.285). Like Vogel, Irv Stone, producer at *Channel One News*, is typical of the "new-class" defined and berated by the neoconservatives--he is a counterculture veteran who sees Bacon as a "romantic leader of the people" (*BV*, p.333) and secures prime-time coverage for the latter's campaign. *The Daily News* reporter, Neil Flannagan, uses his column inches to do repay favours to old friends, notably the lawyer Thomas Killian, a fellow-Irishman (*BV*, p.588). And it is not only adversarial ideologies and financial calculations which compromise good journalism, but poor reporting. Unlike new journalism, which according to Wolfe, brought an unprecedented thoroughness to reporting, or unlike Dickens, Balzac and Dostoevsky, who did more reporting than their contemporary newspapermen (*NJ*, p.66), the journalists in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* work largely from their armchairs. Fallow observes that American photographers endlessly discussed their "displeasure at being asked to leave their office and take pictures" (*BV*, p.330), and even when they do, the events they depict are pseudo-events staged for the media rather than being reported by it.<sup>44</sup> And far from breaking into "new terrain" and "wrestling" with "the beast, material", Fallow himself prefers to invent it, as with the story of his visit to the South Bronx housing project (*BV*, p.285). Wolfe, however, as he relates in "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast", *did* head straight for the South Bronx's "terrae incognitae" when he began researching for *The Bonfire of the Vanities* in 1981 (*SB*, p.53), and particularly for the court house, where, as he says in the novel, "the press never showed up" (*BV*, p.125).

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<sup>44</sup> See the chapter 13, "Day-Glo Eel", where Bacon's followers hold a demonstration for the Channel One news, or *The City Light's* managing editor's story about "The Laughing Vandals" (*BV*, p.287).

Like "reporting", the "city" is central to Wolfe's definition of realism, and *The Bonfire of the Vanities* was conceived and packaged as "a novel of the city in the sense that Balzac had written novels of Paris and Dickens and Thackeray had written novels of London." (*SB*, p.46). Whilst these writers had chronicled one "great era of the metropolis", Wolfe was eager to grasp, "the Rome, the Paris, the London of the twentieth century" (*BV*, p.91) the billion-footed beast of "New York in the 1980's" (*SB*, p.53). The challenge was to uncover "the new face of the city" (*SB*, p.55), and to reflect, "what truly presses upon the individual, white or non-white, living in the metropolis" (*SB*, p.52) without either the ideological distortions of Irv Stone or the hidden commercial agenda of *The City Light*.

As Wolfe explained in "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast", New York was "undergoing a profound change" in this period: "The fourth great wave of immigrants--from Asia, North Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean" (*SB*, p.52)--had apparently transformed the metropolis. According to Wolfe, one distinctive feature of the new "beast" was "overt racial conflict". One manifestation of this was the troubled anticipation amongst those whites still holding public office. They feared for their posts, expecting that "within ten years political power in most American Cities" would have "passed to the non-white majorities" (*SB*, p.52).<sup>45</sup> Another form of racial conflict which Wolfe seeks to address is the eighties upsurge in African-American militancy after the comparative quietism of the mid and late seventies. Reagan's economic policy had hit the community especially hard. Manning Marable reports that in Reagan's first year alone, the "real median income of all black families declined by 5.2%", whilst the

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<sup>45</sup> The eighties indeed witnessed significant changes in the spread of power: African Americans Harold Washington and David Dinkins became mayors of Chicago and New York respectively, whilst Doug Wilder secured the governorship of Virginia. See Marable, p.ix. This sense of political limbo is one distinctive feature of New York life in the eighties which Wolfe's novel seeks to address. In the prologue, for example, the harassed Major of New York inwardly harangues the apathetic white population with: "Do you really think its your city any longer. It's the third world down there" (*BV*, p.13). The Bronx District Attorney, another Democrat, is being challenged by a Puerto Rican candidate in the forthcoming elections (*BV*, p.213). The black assemblyman, Joseph Leonard, already wields considerable political power (*BV*, p.212).



proportion of families living below the poverty line increased by 2%.<sup>46</sup> The administration's resistance to affirmative action also left its mark, and between 1980 and 1986 the number of African-American students entering college fell by almost 100,000.<sup>47</sup> Political disaffection was compounded by Reagan's second election victory in 1984. His policy of "constructive engagement" with the South African government proved especially provocative.<sup>48</sup> Protest took a number of forms. The ballot box was one outlet for frustration: African-Americans Harold Washington and David Dinkins became mayors of Chicago and New York respectively, whilst Andrew Young and Kurt Schmole were elected in Atlanta and Baltimore. Jesse Jackson took 3.5 million votes in his presidential campaign of 1984, winning several state primaries and caucuses, and his share of the poll doubled in 1988.<sup>49</sup> The decade also saw a sharp rise in campus protests, with students demonstrating against university involvement with firms who traded in South Africa. Activists also took to the streets, targeting the South African embassy in November 1984. As Marable reports, "Racial tensions in cities such as New York culminated in a series of massive public demonstrations by both African-Americans and whites, each accusing the other of 'racism'".<sup>50</sup>

Wolfe's text casts its protagonist, Sherman McCoy, into the forcefield of New York's political and racial tensions, and its central scenario becomes, in the words of the Mayor's assistant, "one of those touchstone issues in the black community...like divestiture or South Africa" (*BV*, p.625). McCoy is a thirty eight year old WASP reaping the fruits of the eighties boom, earning \$980,000 as one of Wall Street's leading bond salesmen. But his world (which comprises a \$2.6 million Park Avenue apartment, an ailing marriage and an eight year old daughter he adores) is imperilled when, having

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<sup>46</sup> One critic from the *New York Times* stated that inside a single year, "Much of the progress that had been made against poverty in the 1960s and 1970s had been wiped away". (Marable, p.183).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.186.

<sup>48</sup> In 1982, Reagan "authorized the opening of new honorary consulates in three U.S. cities, Seattle, Denver and Cleveland, for the *apartheid* regime" (*Ibid* p.182). Also, Reagan's government "had supported the extension of international monetary funds to the regime, had established offices in Johannesburg to promote U.S investment inside the country, and had even sent apartheid police 2,500 shock batons which were used to torture prisoners" (*Ibid.* p.214).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p.215.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.186.

collected his mistress Maria Ruskin from Kennedy airport, he takes the wrong turning off Triborough bridge and gets lost in the South Bronx. Trying to discover a route back to Manhattan, McCoy and Maria find the exit road blocked by a car wheel. When McCoy gets out of the Mercedes to move the obstacle, he is approached by two young black men offering help. Assuming a robbery attempt, McCoy throws the wheel at one of them, whilst Maria climbs into the driver's seat. One of the men, an eighteen year old called Henry Lamb, is hit by the car as McCoy and Maria speed away. Worried about their respective reputations (Maria is married to the billionaire entrepreneur Arthur Ruskin) the couple decide not to report the incident. Meanwhile, Lamb slips into a seemingly irreversible coma.

The remaining six hundred and thirty pages of the novel chart the convergence of various forces which collectively transform the accident into a "touchstone issue" in the city's fraught race relations. Harlem's Reverend Reginald Bacon, an African-American community leader, co-ordinates a media and protest campaign to ensure that the case is given full police attention, and is taken as seriously as it would have been had Lamb run McCoy down on Park Avenue. As already mentioned, *The City Light* tabloid newspaper, which had formerly been criticised for racist tendencies, throws its weight behind Bacon's efforts in an attempt to rectify its reputation. The Bronx District Attorney Abe Weiss, who like the Mayor of the city faces elections in the near future, also uses the incident to assert his non-racist credentials in a constituency which is 70% black and Hispanic. His Assistant D.A, Larry Kramer, another Jewish liberal, becomes a champion of Lamb's cause: for him, McCoy is that semi-mythical creature in the Bronx criminal system, "The Great White Defendant" (BV, p.121). Prosecuting McCoy, who is tracked down by the police and assumed to have been driving the car, becomes imperative as a means to soothing a conscience troubled by constantly prosecuting only black and hispanic defendants. At the close of the novel, the "reckless endangerment" charge against McCoy is thrown out by the Supreme Court Judge. But the epilogue, which takes the form of a *New York Times* article published one year later, reveals that Lamb has died and that a manslaughter charge is now being pressed. Maria, who has since parted company with McCoy, is corroborating the prosecutor's story, which denies any robbery attempt and has McCoy driving the car.



As this brief synopsis suggests, Reverend Reginald Bacon is a mover and shaker in terms of the novel's plot, co-ordinating the various forces which encircle McCoy. As soon as Henry Lamb's mother reports the accident to Bacon, he puts pressure on Bronx District Attorney Abe Weiss to conduct an aggressive investigation; he feeds the story to Peter Fallow at *The City Light*; he organizes a street demonstration and, through Irv Stone, secures prime time television news coverage for it. He then consolidates the campaign with further demonstrations, and, with the assistance of the left wing lawyer Albert Vogel, presses a civil law suit against McCoy on behalf of Lamb's Mother.

But as well as being a key figure in terms of plotting, Bacon is also absolutely central to Wolfe's project of unmasking the "new face of the city" (*SB*, p.55) and reflecting "what truly presses upon the individual, white or non-white, living in the metropolis" (*SB*, p.52). After all, Bacon is the only African-American character given more than a cameo role and he is also almost exclusively representative of the revival in political activism, which, according to Wolfe, is integral to the story of contemporary metropolitan life. So Bacon is more or less single-handedly representative of all those "non-white" New Yorkers mobilized to activism by a sense of racial injustice in the mid to late eighties.

Bacon is first mentioned in the novel's prologue, where the white Mayor of New York is being heckled ferociously at a Harlem public meeting. Eventually it "dawns on him" that his tormenters are "Bacon's people." Immediately confident of his suspicions, the Mayor concludes, "Bacon did this...Bacon got his people in here" (*BV*, p.11). Who Bacon is, why he should have "people" at all, and why they should be at this meeting, remains an enigma for one hundred and fifty pages. But when Bacon is finally re-introduced the initial puzzle over his political motivation is instantly supplemented by another. In the section immediately prior to Bacon's appearance, Sherman McCoy ponders the exorbitant price of living in New York city, and how one million dollars would scarcely buy a three bed-room apartment. When the narrative turns to Bacon, the question is not so much, "who is Bacon and what motivates his political activities?", but

"how can he afford the plush Harlem mansion where he resides?" How can the baron of this mock-colonial property, with its lavishly described "Beaux Arts salon full of high-grained oak architraves" be "a middle-aged *black* man" (*BV*, p.159: my italics)?

The reader is prompted to assume that this question is answered by the situation itself. The narrative has tracked Edward Fiske III, the Community Outreach Director of the Episcopal Diocese of New York, to Harlem, where he ineffectually quizzes Bacon over the whereabouts of \$350,000--a sum granted to Bacon as seed money for the Little Shepherd Day Care Centre, a project which has bafflingly failed to materialize. The implication is, of course, that the money has either been absorbed into Bacon's considerable home furnishing budget, or has been re-directed into one of his more favoured political organizations. So whilst Fiske's "profound intellectual liberalism" (*B.V.* p.162) prevents him from seeing the matter clearly, the narrative repeatedly prompts the reader to put two and two together. The fresh faced Fiske, no less than the wily Bacon, is the butt of the joke here.

Other characters, however, are more suspicious. In a parallel scene thirty pages later, Bacon is again visited in his Harlem mansion, this time by assistant district attorney Larry Kramer, and two hard-nosed NYPD detectives, Martin and Goldberg. According to Golberg, Bacon "don't lift a finger except to steal" (*BV*, p.213). Martin adds that Bacon's "Open Gates Employment Coalition", which pickets businesses in order to persuade the management to take on more employees from ethnic minorities, is only motivated by "money" (*BV*, p.214), and that the same is true of his "Third World Anti-Defamation League" which challenges racial stereotyping in the media (*BV*, p.214).

Although these judgements initially sound cynical, they are solidly confirmed by later plot developments. So when Fiske later returns to Bacon's mansion, their meeting, like the first, is punctuated by Bacon taking a series of phone calls. One is from Albert Vogel, the celebrated left wing lawyer, and concerns the Lamb civil suit. Vogel and Bacon coolly tot up McCoy's assets, and even seem to speculate upon precisely when Lamb is most likely to die. Immediately after the call, Fiske notices that Bacon "shook his head sadly, but then he looked up with a gleam in his eye and just a trace of a smile" (*BV*, p.579). The source of this irrepressible and uncharacteristic relish are then made clear: Bacon admits that he is going to "help Mrs. Lamb file a hundred-million dollar law-suit against Sherman McCoy" (*BV*, p.5792). This financial question crops up again



in the text's newspaper article epilogue, which summarizes events as they stand one year after the close of the main narrative when the suit has been filed and won. Bacon however, who is ever-present through the text and a seasoned media-manager, is conspicuously absent. Instead, "a spokesman for Reverend Bacon's 'All People's Solidarity'" is interviewed to supply the anti-establishment sound-bite (*BV*, p.730). The suggestion is that Bacon's passionate advocacy on behalf of Henry Lamb is proportionate to the possibility of financial gain, and that once the gain has been drawn, the case is relegated to the back burner and delegated to the helpers. In the last analysis, the only significant ambiguity surrounding Bacon concerns the degree to which his political objectives are prompted by financial ones--are the politics important to him at all, or are they a mere vehicle for his lucrative enterprising?

In this lambasting of both naive liberalism and unscrupulous resistance politics, the text is squarely in line with neoconservative thought on "new-class" militancy and "adversary" culture. And the narrative's repeated efforts to associate eighties political protest with the sixties generally is even more reminiscent of neoconservative texts. As already mentioned, in the rhetoric of Reagan, the neoconservatives and Wolfe himself, "the sixties" becomes a synonym for mindless protest and anti-social behaviour as the decade was widely conceived as the source of most contemporary ills. Bacon's speech--which is "the rhetoric of the Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s" (*BV*, p.574)--like his comradeship with both Vogel and the left-wing T.V. producer Irv Stone, link him with the counterculture.<sup>51</sup> This link--which serves to further discredit the political

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<sup>51</sup> Bacon's speech is peppered with phrases from Malcolm X ("by any means necessary", *BV* p.169) Marcusean Marxism ("that is the twisted mind of the Power Structure", p.575) and black power ("People think the fire has gone out...They don't know it's only been bottled up. It's when the steam is tapped, you find out what it can do", p. 576).

Irv Stone is Bacon's contact at Channel One news. Robert Corso, a colleague of Stone's, describes him as "one of those old bastards who was a campus radical back in the 1960s, when they were having the antiwar demonstrations and everything. He thinks Bacon's this romantic leader of the people." (*BV*, p.333)

Vogel is a famous radical lawyer who defended pacifists and radicals in the sixties and seventies, when he was "popular enough with the press and intellectuals", if not with "ordinary people" (*BV*, p.623). By contrast, the "1980s had not been kind to him" (*BV*, p.232). Summarizing Fallow's perspective, the narrative explains: "In the 1980s not even the press and intellectuals had any patience for the sort of irascible, seething, foul-humored, misery-loving, popped vein clientele he specialized in" (*BV*, p.232). Times, unlike Vogel, have changed. Given the slightest opportunity, he retreats into the past, indulging himself in saccharine nostalgia for the by-gone radicalism of the sixties campus, when "the Movement was going strong." He even gives lecture tours on the subject (*BV*, p.235). And in a

impetus which he represents by suggesting that it *is* anachronistic--is reinforced by specific references and allusions. Take, for instance, the passage where Vogel describes his first meeting with Bacon:

You wanna know where I first met him? In this gigantic duplex apartment on Park Avenue, Peggy Fryskamp's apartment, back when she was interested in the Geronimo Brotherhood. She gave a fund raising party there. This must've been the late sixties, early seventies. There was this guy Flying Deer. He gave the soul talk, we used to call it. There was always the soul talk and the money talk...he threw up all over the eighty-thousand-dollar Duncan Phyfe piano Peggy had, all over the keys and the strings and the hammers and everything...And you wanna know who really gave him hell? Reverend Bacon. Yeah. He was getting ready to ask Peggy to support some of the things he had going...(BV, p.236-7).

At this point, the text temporarily lapses into the *roman a clef*. For as Wolfe explains in "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast", his satirical piece "Radical Chic" recounted a party held by Leonard Bernstein and his wife Felicia, in a Park Avenue duplex apartment with two grand pianos, in January 1970. The party's purpose was to raise bail and legal funds for the fourteen Black Panthers jailed in connection with a sequence of bombings in New York the previous year. Wolfe's piece, which minted the phrase "radical chic", excoriated the Bernsteins and their guests for their political naivete. It was especially well received by neoconservative reviewers.<sup>52</sup>

Through Vogel's recollection then, Bacon is twinned not only with the sixties and the counterculture generally but with the "geronimo brotherhood" or Black Panthers. For both Wolfe and many neoconservatives, the Black Panthers had a special place in their demonology of the sixties left. In *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Daniel

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move strikingly reminiscent of that neoconservative discourse which equates the sixties with the emasculation of America and the blurring of gender roles, the narrative here figures Vogel, who derives his whole identity from the sixties, as effeminate. To Fallow he "looked like someone's grandmother", having "tiny hands" and "delicate' skin" (BV, p.234).

<sup>52</sup> The piece was published alongside "Mau-Mauing the Flak-Catchers" as a book in the fall of 1970. Dorothy Rabinowitz congratulated Wolfe for having "effected social change" by embarrassing the liberal culturati into apology and silence. Dorothy Rabinowitz, "Satire and Beyond", review of *Mauve Gloves and Madmen, Clutters and Vine* by Tom Wolfe, *Commentary* (May 1977) pp. 76-8. Joseph Epstein praised Wolfe for identifying a counter-culture *Zeitgeist* of *nostalgie de la boue*, which expressed itself through the prevalence of "whoring after and generally romanticizing the primitive lower classes." Epstein considered that this "runs much lower down the social scale than the Leonard Bensteins of Park Avenue" also infecting "radical professors", "closet revolutionaries" and "upper-middle class students in search of political high." Joseph Epstein, review of *Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers* by Tom Wolfe, *Commentary* (March 1972) p.102.



Bell explains that:

One of the astonishing effects of the Kennedy (and Johnson) 'War on Poverty' was to facilitate the growth of a movement which would, in part, mount political pressure, if not a political war, on the administration itself...Both Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, the founders of the Black Panthers Party, were employed in the poverty program and wrote the party's manifestos, and conducted their early activities, while on the government payroll.<sup>53</sup>

Wolfe had himself brought this to public attention in "Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers" (1970). He repeats his point in "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast":

In the Sixties, the federal government had created the War on Poverty, at the heart of which were not alms for the poor but setups called CAPs: Community Action Programs. CAPs were something new in the history of political science. They were official invitations from the government for people in the slums to improve their lot by rising up and rebelling against the establishment, including the government itself...It was not by mere coincidence that the most violent of the Sixties confrontation groups, the Black Panther Party of America, drew up its ten-point program in the North Oakland poverty center. That was what the poverty centre was there for (*SB*, p.46).

On the one hand then, the Black Panthers represent the extreme wing of sixties protest culture. On the other, their growth was "facilitated" or "invited" by that other bugbear of neoconservatism, the "Great Society", "War on Poverty" or "Community Action Programs". Both the hand that fed them, and their eagerness to bite it, are scorned by Bell and Wolfe alike. And Wolfe's narrative further connects Bacon, and the type of eighties racial politics he represents, to this vilified type of organization. Towards the end of the novel, Fiske takes yet another trip to Harlem in a final attempt to prize the missing \$350,000 from Bacon's clutches. On the previous visit he had vowed to discover precisely what Bacon's "Urban Guaranty Investments" scheme was (*BV*, p.179). This is now cleared up:

The truth about Urban Guaranty Investments, as Fiske had in fact learned from Linwood Talley, was that the federal government had recently given the firm \$250,000 as a 'minority underwriter' for a \$7 billion issue of federally backed municipal bonds. The so-called set aside law required that there be minority

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<sup>53</sup> Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976) p.179.

investment in the selling of such bonds, and Urban Guaranty Investments had been created to help satisfy that requirement of the law. There was no requirement that the minority firm actually see any of the bonds or even receive them...Participate was broadly defined. In most cases--Urban Guaranty Investments was but one of many such firms across the country--participation meant receiving a check for the fee from the federal government and depositing it, and not much more. (*BV*, p.577).

Just as the "War on Poverty" furnished the Black Panthers with resources for their activities, those residues of affirmative action policy which linger into the eighties fill Bacon's coffers. Once again, the satire cuts in two directions: it simultaneously registers the irony of Bacon militating against a system which looks after him so handsomely *and* critiques that system for being susceptible to such abuse. So it brings a neoconservative disdain for affirmative action and paternalistic Federal Government to bear on Reagan's America, where neoconservative thinking had not, it seems, been pushed far enough.

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As we have seen, a variety of circumstances collude to sustain Bacon's campaign. To re-cap: New York Mayor and Bronx District Attorney Abe Weiss are being challenged in looming elections; they are eager to send the electorate "the right signals" by demonstrating that "justice really is blind" (*BV*, p.543) and have no scruples about putting "the wasp to the wall" (*BV*, p.626) and making a fall-guy of McCoy. Assistant District Attorney Larry Kramer (who like Weiss and the Mayor is depicted as a stereotypical Jewish liberal) is desperate to assuage his conscience by prosecuting a *white* defendant for a change. And the financial interests of the struggling tabloid, *The City Light*, like the left-wing sympathies of Irv Stone, ensure that the case has ongoing media coverage.

But between Bacon and these opportunistic elements lies another group of characters made up of police detectives, Homicide Bureau workers and members of the legal profession. Unlike Weiss, Bacon and Stone, these characters have no overtly



political interest in the case. The group is largely Irish,<sup>54</sup> being made up of Detectives Martin and Goldberg, Homicide Bureau chief Bernie Fitzgibbon, Judge Myron Kovitsky, lawyer Thomas Killian and his private investigator Ed Quigley. In terms of the novel's plotting, these characters occupy a special position, acting as a common-sense buffer in the ideological forcefield between Weiss's prosecuting zeal and Bacon's campaigning. And whereas many of the male characters in the novel are undergoing crises in their masculinity, this group is unflaggingly macho, and their machismo is crucial to the role they play in upholding common-sense justice in a city rent with racial tension.<sup>55</sup> Whilst the Mayor and Weiss survey the city through office windows, television, and poll-

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<sup>54</sup> As we have seen, the upward mobility of white ethnic groups played a key role in neoconservative arguments against affirmative action and quotas. By using this stoic, successful and down to earth group of white ethnic characters as a foil to Bacon, one could read the narrative as thematizing this logic. Goldberg is Jewish, but, as Kramer observes, "being Martin's partner" he had "turned Irish too" (*BV*, p.212) and Kramer affectionately dubs him, the "Jewish Shamrock" (*BV*, p.219, 226). By this, Kramer means that he takes on the "Irish" characteristics of stubborn bravery and loyalty (*BV*, p.402). Kovitsky is not Irish, but belongs firmly in this *milieu*. He has a good rapport with Killian and Quigley. Early in the text he challenges a van-load of abusive prisoners who taunt him (*BV*, p.53). Throwing out McCoy's indictment, he is shown to prioritize common sense justice over popular opinion.

<sup>55</sup> Kramer endlessly worries about his wasting muscles, baldness and he idolizes Irish machismo. These anxieties about his fading prowess prompt him to begin an affair with juror Shelley Thomas. When the affair is exposed, he is ignominiously removed from the McCoy case.

And one could read the entire novel in terms of the ebb and flow of McCoy's manhood. Liam Kennedy's excellent article, "It's the Third World Down There!: Urban Decline and (Post) National Mythologies in *Bonfire of the Vanities*" in *Modern Fiction Studies* 43, no.1, (Spring 1997) pp.93-111, traces this trajectory. To simplify: McCoy begins the novel bloated with notions of his own potency as a "Master of the Universe" who can make \$50,000 from a single phone call in the bond market. His masculinity is thrown into crisis when the hit and run expose severs him from this world. But in the course of his descent into the criminal justice underworld, he re-discovers what it is like to be a man in a more primitive sense. He arrives at a position where he can literally fight his corner in the detention pens and show macho self-reliance in refusing treatment for the wounds received (*BV*, p.728). In the words of Killian, he learns to fight for himself, and so is "turning Irish" (*BV*, p.595). Acquiring "Irishness" is thus synonymous with re-masculinization, or learning how to survive like a man in the urban jungle. As Kennedy observes: "It is one of the striking ironies of Wolfe's treatment of white masculinity that what begins as a critique of the imperial vanities of a capitalist 'Master of the Universe' ends up as a celebration of a precapitalist model of masculinity that is no less imperial in its ideological foundations. *Bonfire* may parody the imperial individualism of white American manhood, but the novel does not negate it; rather Wolfe retells the story of the making of this manhood as a morality tale for a racially divided, postnational America." (p.107).

In focussing on emasculation, and in showing how emasculation can be remedied by a return to more conventional construction of masculinity, Wolfe's text again bears the imprint of neoconservative thinking. In his journalism, like many neoconservatives, Wolfe is an outspoken critique of "womens' libbers" and the damage they inflict upon the nuclear family. See especially section 7, 'Only One Life' of "The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening", which is anthologized in *Mauve Gloves and Madmen, Clutter and Vine*, pp.111-151.



ratings, and Bacon and Stone see it through the distorting lens of New Left ideology, this group are "tough undeluded Motherfuckers" (*BV*, p.403) who have acquired their hard-nosed street-wisdom through hands-on experience. Larry Kramer pays "silent homage" to "that most mysterious and coveted of male attributes, Irish machismo" (*BV*, p.323) and aspires to be one of those "real men" who tackle "the stark dramas of the billion-footed city" who "wrestle" and "bridle" the "desperadoes" (*BV*, p.145). Like Wolfe's early mentor, the Irish journalist Jimmy Breslin (who was derisively nick-named as the "cop who writes" by the literary establishment)<sup>56</sup> and like Wolfe's ideal realist-journalist, this group of characters actually gets out there and wrestles with the billion-footed beast. And like the realist-journalist, they "are not only willing to wrestle with the beast" but "actually love the battle" (*SB*, p.56).<sup>57</sup> Unlike Fallow, the detectives from this distinctive group of characters repeatedly behave like model realist-reporters. Detectives Martin and Goldberg, for example, arrive at Bacon's first demonstration scene long "before the main event" (and long before the press in the novel) to gather the necessary information (*BV*, p.321): like good reporters, they have no scruples about "moving in" on the lives of total strangers, asking questions they have "no natural right to suspect answers to" and seeing things they "weren't supposed to see" (*NJ*, p.67).<sup>58</sup>

These common-sense characters are also endowed with uncanny perspicacity and judgement. Few characters have as full a picture of McCoy's fateful accident as the reader. So in terms of knowledge about the contested hit and run, the narrative places the reader in a comfortable position, whilst characters are inevitably judged on their ability to arrive at an accurate picture of the accident. Kramer's determination to

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<sup>56</sup> In "New Journalism", Wolfe fondly remembers Breslin, with his "great wrestler's gut" who "sat down at his typewriter and hunched himself over into a shape like a bowling ball" (*NJ*, p.26). Note how Wolfe's imagery is drawn from conventionally masculine sporting rituals. Note also the word "wrestle" which, as we have seen, is a key trope in Wolfe's prescription of the reporter's job.

<sup>57</sup> At a number of points the phrase, "love the battle" is echoed by or about these characters. Killian tells McCoy: "We are the best. And I'll fight for you. I love a fight. I'm as Irish as Quigley" (*BV*, p. 566). The Irish domination over the Police Department and the Homicide Bureau is described in some detail: "all the cops turned Irish, the Jewish cops, like Goldberg, but also the Italian cops, the Latin cops, the black cops...the Irish stamp was on the Police Department and on the Homicide Bureau of the DA's Office, and it would probably be there forever...To deal with them you had to be willing to fight also, and not that many people on this poor globe were willing to fight." (*BV*, p.403).

<sup>58</sup> See Martin's bullying questioning of the "gangling teenage" prior to the demonstration (*BV*, p.322) or Goldberg and Marty's interview with McCoy (*BV*, p.449 ff) where Martin irreverently sits on McCoy's desk.



prosecute McCoy impairs his judgement of the case whilst Weiss is blinded by electoral considerations. Bacon and Vogel, who are shown to apprehend events through their pre-determined political ideologies and agendas, are always comically wide of the mark, and the more they militate on the basis of their inaccurate assumptions, the more comic their behaviour becomes. In stark contrast, this group of characters have an unnerving ability to reach the right conclusions and to approximate the reader's understanding. Bernie Fitzgibbon, the Irish Homicide Bureau Chief who Wolfe once described as "the real voice of law in the book",<sup>59</sup> is immediately suspicious of Bacon's version of the story, which has Lamb knocked down on a busy boulevard and omits any mention of a robbery attempt: he rightly insists that "there's certain things that don't make sense", particularly why Henry Lamb, "a kinda good-doing kid" and Roland Auburn, "a fucking lowlife drug dealer" were together on the night of the accident (*BV*, p.455).<sup>60</sup> His well-founded doubts inform his resistance to Weiss's eagerness, and are eventually born out by the theory that Auburn *forced* Lamb to accompany him (*BV*, p.646).

As well as undercutting both Weiss and Kramer's "liberal" theories and Bacon's militant perspective, these astute characters often voice more general, political statements. When, for example, Martin and Goldberg attend the Bronx protest, they lampoon the demonstrators, dismissing them as "gaybos and lesbos" and "fucking communists" (*BV*, p.326). And when discussing Lamb's mother, Martin comments:

A woman like that, she shouldn't even be living in the project, f'r Chrissake. She was all right. She was straight...She works, don't take welfare, sends the kid to church, keeps him in school--she's all right. Halfa these people, you know, something happens, and you talk to them, and they spend so much time blaming the fucking world for what happened, you can't halfway find out what the fuck happened in the first place. But this one, she was straight. Too bad she's stuck

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<sup>59</sup> Wolfe in T.V interview with Bill Moyers on *Bill Moyers World of Ideas*, 27 October 1988. Quoted in Scura ed., p.277.

<sup>60</sup> Like Marty and Goldberg, Thomas Killain functions as a foil to Bacon, de-coding his activities in assertions which initially sound cynical, but which are subsequently verified. At one point McCoy asks Killain precisely what Bacon hopes to gain from Mrs. Lamb's civil law-suit. "Millions" replies Killain, before explaining: "Whatever the Lambs get in a lawsuit, Vogel gets at least a third a that, and you can be sure he splits it with Bacon" (*BV*, p.585). Further examples of Irish perception abound. But Ed. Quigley surpasses even the reader's knowledge in the remarkable piece of detection by which he discovers a voice activated tape, recorded by the landlord of Maria and McCoy's "rent controlled love-nest", on which Maria concedes that she has been driving the car at the time of the accident. The tape becomes McCoy's trump card at the trial. (*BV*, p.689).

in the project, but you know...there's a lotta decent people in the projects, people who show up for work.'

Goldberg nodded sagely and said, 'You'd never know it now, but that's what the fucking places were built for, working people. And now you find somebody in 'eh who goes to work and tries to do the right thing, it breaks your fucking heart.'  
(*BV*, p.227)

"Traditional values" like the family, church-going and hard-work are applauded, whilst blaming the world and claiming welfare are scorned: the implication is that the majority of the people on the projects are responsible for their own poverty--they are not "straight", and choose not to work. Such people, Goldberg's remark suggests, benefit from the deterioration of public policy: the projects were built to help ordinary working people, but have since been colonized by those encouraged to lead a life of state assisted idleness.<sup>61</sup>

vi

In Wolfe's tireless promotion of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (which included the decision to preface the paperback edition of the novel with a polemic outlining his artistic intentions) the book was self-consciously presented as a timely *intervention*. The novel was a satire upon, and an alternative to, corrupt and weak journalism. At the same time, it was an attempt to reverse recent trends in American fiction, which had, according to Wolfe, seen fiction recede from the social domain into myth, fable and self-enveloping intellectualism. *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, by contrast, offered observation instead of speculation and truthful reflection instead of ideology. As already mentioned, it vowed to wrestle with the billion-footed beast, or late twentieth century metropolis, mirroring "the new face of the city" (*SB*, p.55) and disclosing "what truly presses upon

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<sup>61</sup> Neoconservative critics had applauded the depiction of "ordinary people" in Wolfe's earlier work. Reviewing *Mauve Gloves and Madmen, Clutter and Vine*, Dorothy Rabonowitz writes: "More so than any other American writer one can think of...Wolfe's is an affirmative view of ordinary people". She compares Wolfe's representation of their no-nonsense wisdom with his "unyielding contempt" for "the hypocrisies of the intellectual left". Dorothy Rabinowitz, review of *Mauve Gloves and Madmen, Clutter and Vine*, in *Commentary* (May 1977) pp.76, 78.

Martin and Goldberg both express a distinctly neoconservative faith in the "commonsense wisdom" and "traditional morality" of the "ordinary" working people.



the heart of the individual, white or nonwhite" living there (*SB*, p.52).

As the preceding reading has suggested, these are disingenuous claims. Wolfe's emphasis upon unmediated reportage, neutrality and objectivity, paper over the politics articulated by the text. In spite of claiming to reveal the hearts of whites and nonwhites alike, the story is told from the perspectives of five white men. Moreover, its anti-sixties, anti-counterculture, anti-New Deal drive; its representation of African-American protest as singularly corrupt and its privileging of white ethnics, masculinity and the "ordinary" nuclear family all thematize mainstays of neoconservative thinking. Far from eschewing ideology in favour of straight realism, the novel is ghost-written by neoconservatism: as reviewer Guy Davenport remarked, Wolfe's repeated insistence, in the *eighth year* of Reagan's presidency, that his thinking constituted a "bold departure from current orthodoxy" is hard to take seriously.<sup>62</sup> And it is tempting to speculate that the novel's prodigious popularity (it enjoyed widespread critical acclaim<sup>63</sup> and sold 700,000 copies in hardback, several million in paperback and spent over a year on the hardback bestseller list) owed something to its political palatability. The neoconservative ideology which saturated the text was both familiar and popular when the book was published.

Like these neoconservative ideas, Wolfe's thinking about realism, as crystallized

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<sup>62</sup> Guy Davenport, "Urban Fiction Today", *Sewanee Review* 96 (Fall 1988) p.702.

<sup>63</sup> A number of American reviewers praised the novel in conspicuously Wolfian terms. In *Christian Science Monitor*, for example, James Andrews congratulated Wolfe for "providing a richly textured, contemporary novel whose epicentre is situated in the social concerns that so much of today's minimalist, self-absorbed fiction ignores", James Andrews, "What the Dickens: Tom Wolfe has written a New York Novel", *Christian Science Monitor*, (3 November 1987) p.3. Thomas Mallon's review in *The American Spectator* took a similar line, applauding Wolfe for shunning a tired minimalism in favour of Victorian exuberance. Both reviews flatteringly compared Wolfe to his own literary heroes, notably Balzac and Dickens. Thomas Mallon, "The Bonfire of the Vainities", *The American Spectator*, (January 1988) p.185. Whilst it is possible that these reviewers accurately deduced Wolfe's artistic intentions from the novel, it seems more likely that their responses were swayed by Wolfe's own tireless promotional pitch. Nicholas Lehmann's review in *Atlantic Monthly* actually quoted a sample of Wolfe's statements about "social realism based on reporting" from the *New Journalism* essay, and concluded that Wolfe had fulfilled his project. Nicholas Lehmann, "New York in the Eighties", *Atlantic Monthly* 260 (December 1987) p.104. On the whole, such literary concerns monopolized the reception of the text. None of the reviews in major American publication took issue with the text's racial politics.

British reviewers were harsher on the novel than their Stateside counterparts. In "Mugged by Reality", his piece for the *Times Literary Supplement*, Christopher Hitchens remarked that "Reading Wolfe, you could suppose that New York City over the last decade had seen the victimization of the rich by the poor, the white by the black", Christopher Hitchens, "Mugged by Reality", *Times Literary Supplement*, (March 18-24 1988), p.302.

in "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast", played an important role in shaping the text. Wolfe's account by turns caricatures or ignores recent critiques of realism, with their attention to textual matters. Instead, it emphasises realism's subject matter, and elevates "reporting" into its defining principle. This forecloses any consideration of realism's textuality--that is, of its language, its narrative viewpoints, the intellectual currents it draws upon and its relation to surrounding culture.<sup>64</sup> So rather than developing the debate about realism, as we have seen, Wolfe returns it to the subject-matter centred terms used by Frank Norris and William Dean Howells. And Wolfe's own contribution to the realist canon in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* corresponds strikingly with his construction of realism in "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast". Like his theoretical model, the novel itself undervalues textual matters--what Robert Towers calls "aesthetic dimensions"--at the expense of subject matter.<sup>65</sup> So the text has far more in common with this misrecognition of realism than with *either* the writing of the realists he names *or* with those discussed in this thesis. That is, Wolfe's "realist" language precludes the nuanced suggestiveness we have seen in the writings of Carver and Mason. And one can only speculate, but his failure to satisfy his own intentions and to portray what "presses on the hearts" of non-white individuals may owe something to the fact that he overlooks the complexity of many realist narratives and tells his story in a past tense, third person form, which is restricted to the perspective of five *white* characters, as well as to neoconservative politics. To over-schematize the matter, one might say that if Wolfe's neoconservative politics inform the text, his sense of realism may de-limit it.

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<sup>64</sup> That is, adopting reporting as realism's cohering principle enables Wolfe to edit out historical, national, and political differences between realisms. Anthony Trollope, Charles Dickens, Emile Zola, Honore de Balzac, Sinclair Lewis, Pearl Buck, John Updike, Robert Stone and even William Faulkner are discussed as though more or less interchangeable. So as we have seen, any sense of realism's textuality is lost, along with any recognition of realism varying across national boundaries and changing or developing through time. Likewise, any sense of individual realisms contesting political norms and received wisdom by subverting the discourses through which such norms are circulated, as Crane does in *Maggie*, disappear. And so does any sense of realists drawing upon and extending the day's radical intellectual currents, as Zola does with Claude Bernard's determinism or Sinclair Lewis with the thought of H.G. Wells or H.L. Mencken. In the final analysis, realism's dynamism, diversity and complexity are here frozen into a static, solitary and banal principle by the extension of rigidly oppositional thinking in the climate of a retrospective neoconservatism.

<sup>65</sup> "It is Mr. Wolfe's indifference to the aesthetic and imaginative dimensions of good fiction that finally reduces his manifesto to a lively--and indeed provocative--exercise in philistinism." Robert Towers, "The Flap Over Tom Wolfe: How Real is the Retreat from Realism", *New York Times Book Review*, January 28 1990, p.16.



Unsurprisingly then, Wolfe's self-appointment as realism's champion damaged rather than improved its credibility with those challenging it. This was demonstrated in the debate which those claims provoked, and particularly in a conference presentation given by celebrated critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha.<sup>66</sup> Bhabha weighs Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* against Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* as different examples of the "metropolitan novel", and prefers the latter's celebration of "the hybrid hodgepodge of the postmodern world" (p.62). Significantly though, Bhabha seems to deduce from the failure of Wolfe's novel the bankruptcy of what he calls "the linear and liberal traditions of realism" (p.62). In doing so, he both homogenizes realism anew (why is realism inescapably liberal or linear?) *and* obediently sees realism as synonymous with Wolfe's quirky construction of it. In a further twist then, instead of getting to grips with Wolfe's argument, Bhabha duplicates it, by subscribing to the same either / or logic and simply substituting one opposition for another: whereas Wolfe contrasts a world-shy postmodernism with a dauntless, pioneering realism, Bhabha opposes realism's liberal linearity, as apparently exemplified by Wolfe's novel, to progressive postmodernist plurality, as represented by Rushdie's.

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<sup>66</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, untitled conference presentation in Philomena Mariana ed., *Critical Fictions: The Politics of Imaginative Writing* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991) pp.62-65. Further references will be cited in parentheses in the text.

**CHAPTER FIVE**

**ROBERT STONE**



## "THINGS THE WAY THEY REALLY LOOK":<sup>1</sup> A READING OF ROBERT STONE'S *OUTERBRIDGE REACH* (1992).

Robert Stone's literary reputation, which was firmly established when his debut novel *A Hall of Mirrors* (1967) won the Faulkner Award, has been steadily consolidated over the last thirty years through a further five novels, two screenplays, one collection of short stories and a substantial body of journalism.<sup>2</sup> But as with Bobbie Ann Mason, Stone's profile in terms of winning awards and media exposure has not been matched by academic scrutiny.<sup>3</sup> Robert Solatoroff, who produced the first and so far only book-length monograph of Stone in 1994, comments that there are "surprisingly few articles", adding, "most of the best criticism...has appeared in reviews."<sup>4</sup>

In one of the few articles about Stone, Emory Elliott offers an explanation for this oversight in terms which echo the main tenet of this thesis: "novels are frequently divided into two categories; neorealism and self-reflexive fiction...Most critical books on contemporary fiction of the last five to ten years have been most concerned with theoretical problems which are best illustrated in self-reflexive novels which thereby

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Stone, *Outerbridge Reach* (1992; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993) p.255. Page references to this edition will be cited hereafter in parantheses in the text, where necessary in the form of (*OR*, p.255).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Stone, *A Hall of Mirrors* (1967; London: Picador, 1987). This was followed by *Dog Soldiers* (1974; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987); *A Flag for Sunrise* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1981); *Children of Light* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1986); *Outerbridge Reach* (1992; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993); and *Damascus Gate* (London: Picador, 1998). Stone's first collection of stories, which draws together pieces from his whole career, was published as *Bear and His Daughter* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998). His non-fiction has appeared in a wide range of publications including the *New York Times*, the *New York Review of Books*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Harper's*, the *Guardian* and *Atlantic*. See for example, his diatribe against "Oliver Stone's USA", *New York Review of Books*, 17 February 1994, pp.22-4, or his review of Tobias Wolff's *The Night in Question*, "Finding Mercy in A God Fosaken World", *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 November, 1996, p.23.

<sup>3</sup> Since Stone's third novel, *A Flag For Sunrise* (1981), his books have consistently received front page notices in the *New York Times Book Review*. See for example, Michael Wood's piece about that novel, "A Novel of Lost Americans", *NYTBR*, 18 October 1981, p.1, p.34-6; Jean Strouse's review of *Children of Light*, "The Heebiejeebieville Express", *NYTBR*, 16 March 1986, p.1, p.22-4 or William Pritchard's review of *Outerbridge Reach*, "Sailing over the Edge", *NYTBR*, 23 February 1992, p.1, 21-22. Stone has also won the *Los Angeles Times* book prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship and an award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Solotaroff, *Robert Stone* (New York: Twayne, 1994) p.235.

become the texts celebrated and studied."<sup>5</sup> In Elliott's view, Stone's widespread reputation as a realist has played a part in repelling sustained critical engagement,<sup>6</sup> and whilst ultimately the reasons behind this critical silence remain a matter for speculation, the small body of work written about Stone *is* open for more grounded interpretation. The primary question here concerns the degree to which Stone's apparent realism bears an influence on the reception of his texts.

To explore these issues I have concentrated on *Outerbridge Reach* (1992), which was chosen for two sets of reasons. On the one hand, the reception of this text was particularly off-centre, and as I argue in the next section, this seemed to be connected to expectations about Stone being a "straight-forward" realist writer--in the conclusion to the chapter I suggest that this slippage between *Outerbridge Reach* and its reception, whilst especially striking, is also broadly representative of wider trends. On the other hand, *Outerbridge Reach* is another novel about New York in the eighties, and whilst I don't pursue comparisons with *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (or indeed with earlier texts such as *Maggie* or *Manhattan Transfer*), Stone's novel nevertheless functions as a counterpoint to these different manifestations of metropolitan realism.

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<sup>5</sup> Emory Elliott, "History and Will in *Dog Soldiers*, *Sabbatical* and *The Color Purple*", *Arizona Quarterly* 43, no.3, (1987) pp.197-217. This quotation is from p.198. Mark Shechner supports this view of the academy's priorities from personal experience, explaining how, whilst "rooting around in the thickets of ficto-journalism" he "found an extraordinary fecundity, precisely where, in our profession, we are least likely to look for it: among our realists...I have found among writers like Robert Stone...a bounty of American writing that has sprung up and become major without those of us in the academy either knowing or caring." Mark Shechner, "American Realisms, American Realities", *Neo Realism in Contemporary American Fiction: Postmodern Studies* 5 (1992) pp.27-50. This quotation is from p.29.

<sup>6</sup> Elliott goes on to describe Stone's fiction as "traditional in narrative and in its representation of the relationship between text and historical context" (Elliott, p.200). My research into the reception of Stone supports the view that he is widely classified as either a realist or as somebody writing "conventional" or "straight-forward" narratives. As we saw in the last chapter Tom Wolfe numbers Stone as somebody who "went to college before 1960" and therefore "found it hard to give up realism", Tom Wolfe, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel", *Harper's* 279 (November 1989) p.48. Elsewhere Stone has been described as writing "psychological realism" and "updating the nineteenth century novel of ideas", Jean Strouse, "Heebiejeebieville Express", *NYTBR*, 16 March 1986, p.1; "contained within the convention of realism", Clive Jordan, "The Vietnam Connection", *Encounter* 45 (September 1975) p.71; "a nineteenth century moralist, as eager as George Eliot to make the precise judgement required to judge the choices made by an individual", Roger Sale, "Bring the News", review of *Dog Soldiers*, *NYTBR*, 3 April 1975, p.9; and "a naturalist of the moral life", John G. Parks, "Unfit survivors: the failed and lost pilgrims in the fiction of Robert Stone", *CEA Critic* 53, no.1 (1990) p.57.



*Outerbridge Reach* (1992) adopts what John Sutherland calls Stone's "recurrent" device of the "dual hero scheme", where the story is told from two characters' perspectives, "one who acts and one who watches".<sup>7</sup> In this case the "doer" is Owen Browne, a Vietnam veteran turned middle class suburbanite who embarks on a solo round-the-world yacht race in order to restore a sense of honour and purpose to his hum-drum routine. The watcher is Ronald Strickland, a documentary film-maker commissioned to chart Browne's progress. The novel is divided into sixty eight chapters: twenty seven take Browne's point of view, twenty three take Strickland's, and the remainder are dominated by Browne's wife Anne, who has an affair with Strickland while her husband is at sea.

In spite of this even-handed distribution of narrative sections between the two main characters, critics consistently privilege the "doing" over the "watching" in their accounts of the novel. William H. Pritchard's review, "Sailing Over the Edge" deals with Strickland in one brief paragraph;<sup>8</sup> Robert Adams sidelines the film-maker to describe the novel as "basically an action story", and like Robert Phillips, devotes less than two sentences to him,<sup>9</sup> whilst Solotaroff's monograph gives Strickland proportionately short shrift, spending thirty four pages on Stone's "fifth and best novel" but only six pages on the film-maker.<sup>10</sup>

This under-reading of the Strickland sections featured in and fuelled the controversy which greeted the British publication of *Outerbridge Reach*. In his review of the novel, John Sutherland set the ball rolling:

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<sup>7</sup> John Sutherland, "In Dangerous Waters", review of *OR*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 May 1992, p.28.

<sup>8</sup> William H. Pritchard, "Sailing Over the Edge", review of *OR*, *New York Times Book Review*, 23 February, 1992, p.1.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Phillips, "Fiction Review", *Hudson Review* (Autumn 1992) pp.491-2. Robert Adams, "Fall of Valor", *New York Review of Books* 39, no.6 (26 March 1992) p.29.

<sup>10</sup> Solotaroff concedes this: "so much of my available space has been devoted to offering an explanation of what Browne is about that a good deal very much worth discussing has been scanted." Solotaroff, p.172.

In its narrative outline and in many of its details, *Outerbridge Reach* matches exactly the voyage and death of Donald Crowhurst...The story of Crowhurst's failure, deception and death was the outcome of brilliant detective work by two *Sunday Times* journalists, Nicholas Tomalin and Ron Hall. Their discovery (much of which remains hypothetical) was published as *The Strange Voyage of Donald Crowhurst* (1970). For Stone not to mention Crowhurst is understandable; but not to credit the book which ingeniously reconstructed Crowhurst's story--a book which Stone exclusively draws from for the main matter of the novel--is churlish to say the least. Stone's failure to credit his sources is the more surprising since he seems to have woven elements of Tomalin's professional career (notably his scathing anti-Vietnam article, "The General Goes Zapping Charlie Cong") into the conception of Ron Strickland.<sup>11</sup>

Donald Crowhurst was an English sailor who entered a solo circumnavigation race in October 1968, but found both his ability and boat inadequate for the job. Suffering delusions he started to fake his positions, presumably with the intention of claiming first prize without having completed the distance, but never actually made it home, taking his own life at sea. Whether or not Stone was sufficiently clear in acknowledging his obvious debt to the Crowhurst story need not concern us here--he himself answered the charges in subsequent correspondence to the *TLS*.<sup>12</sup> But what is striking is Sutherland's description of the "doing" or Browne at sea sections--the sections said to be based on Crowhurst's story--as "the main matter" of the novel. Sutherland's lack of engagement with the "watcher" in the "dual hero scheme" which he himself identifies is neatly illustrated by the wild and unsupported claim that Strickland is somehow modelled on

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<sup>11</sup> John Sutherland, "In Dangerous Waters", *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 May, 1992, p.28.

<sup>12</sup> Stone replied to Sutherland's charges a fortnight later, with a piece entitled "The Genesis of *Outerbridge Reach*", *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 June 1992, p.13. He describes his debt to the Crowhurst story but asserts that it was acknowledged in both the preface to the novel and in interviews he gave. He adds that whilst the "plot had a Crowhurst like fakery in it" the novel contained "much more, since three quarters of it take place ashore and the hero doesn't set sail until page 211." Ron Hall entered the fray with a letter in the next edition, where he said that "Mr. Stone's much-doctored (though still recognizable) use of the Crowhurst story infringes no copyright and doesn't need my imprimatur", "Outerbridge Reach", Letter to the *TLS*, 21 June 1992, p.15. John Sutherland added a letter, largely to re-assert his initial charge, *TLS*, 19 June 1992, p.15, which Stone in turn responded to the following week, recognising that "The work Tomalin and Hall did on the Crowhurst story stands as one of the great achievements of contemporary journalism" before insisting that "information published by journalists becomes the public record, a traditional and proper source for fiction", *TLS*, 26 June 1992, p.15.



Tomalin.<sup>13</sup> The distorted reading, which fails to consider the *use* to which Stone put the Crowland material, inflates the charge of "derivativeness" by suggesting that Stone has somehow hinged the entire "narrative outline" upon an unacknowledged source.

Whilst these critics gloss over the Strickland narrative, others actually contest its relevance to the book. Francis King argues that the Strickland story amounts to a "technical misjudgement" on Stone's part, as it detracts from "the book's true theme", which is Browne's voyage or "the tragedy of what Melville...called a 'valour-ruined man.'"<sup>14</sup> Robert Adams, who is no less perturbed by the Strickland narrative, takes Stone to task by invoking the real world, or Stone's responsibility to reality, and challenging the inclusion of Strickland on the grounds of plausibility. It is, Adams argues, highly improbable that Strickland would have been hired to make the film as: "the only cinematic interest of a solo yacht race" is a "limitless expanse of water" and besides, "If the sailor has to be at the same time navigator, housekeeper, radio operator, and movie maker, what kind of movie can he be expected to produce...what will be the box-office appeal of what is essentially a home movie?"<sup>15</sup>

Gordon Burn also regards the Strickland narrative as an overblown "secondary plot", and goes on to suggest that it is "devised by Stone as a way of rehearsing some of his characteristic stylistic riffs."<sup>16</sup> Like Adams, Burns accuses Stone of welshing on his responsibility to reality, although in this case, it is not Strickland's plausibility that rancours, but the fact that Stone, who Burns measures against Tom Wolfe's highly problematic definition of "social realism" discussed in the previous chapter, has skimmed on "dedicated pavement pounding and on-the-spot legwork".<sup>17</sup> Instead of heading out

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<sup>13</sup> Stone himself was non-plussed by this unsupported charge, and flatly replied: "I never met Tomalin and know little of his biography." "The Genesis of Outerbridge Reach", *TLS*, 5 June 1992, p.13.

<sup>14</sup> Francis King, "The Tragedy of a Valour-Ruined Man", *The Spectator*, 23 May 1992, p.15.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Adams, "Fall of Valor", review of *OR*, *New York Review of Books* 39, no.6 (26 March 1992) pp.29-30.

<sup>16</sup> Gordon Burn, "Where Mine is At", review of *OR*, *London Review of Books*, 28 May 1992, pp. 19-21.

<sup>17</sup> Burn opens his review by spelling out the biographical connection between Stone and Wolfe--Stone was closely associated with Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters, and was both interviewed for, and featured in, Wolfe's celebrated account of those years, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968). Burn apparently

into "this wild, bizarre, Hogstomping Baroque country" and "plunging" into the fray, as Wolfe prescribed for true social realists, Stone has contented himself with armchair research (Burns reiterates the charges of "unfair appropriation" of *The Strange Case of Donald Crowhurst*). For Burn then, the "unfair appropriation" is doubly serious in that it exposes Stone as a lazy realist--an unworthy recruit in the "brigade of Zolas" which Wolfe calls upon to re-vitalize American letters.

On the whole, this general lack of engagement with the "watching" half of the book is just as striking as the over-arching academic neglect of Stone's work: like that larger pattern, it seems too pronounced to be dismissed as the short-fallings of individual critics. It seems that Stone's books, which as Elliott observed, are widely categorised as realist rather than self-reflexive, are expected to concern themselves with doing rather than watching: they are considered "conventional" and somehow not expected to be raising questions about representation. In the next section, I argue that *Outerbridge Reach* presents problems for readings grounded, however unconsciously, in these expectations, precisely because the novel is so obsessed with questions about representation. I argue that far from being a broken-backed novel, made up from a solid plot about "doing" and an extraneous sub-plot concerned with "watching", the novel is carefully integrated, and the two main characters twinned through a shared interest in the problems and implications of representation in the context of contemporary society.

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Like Stone's previous novels, *Outerbridge Reach* is set in a specific time and place: here it is the thoroughly disorientating New York of the late 1980s.<sup>18</sup> The novel's opening

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holds Wolfe's "Stalking the Billion Footed-Beast: A Literary Manifesto For The New Social Novel" in high-esteem and promptly measures Stone against its prescriptions.

<sup>18</sup> Numerous details date the novel. In the first chapter Browne anticipates the twentieth anniversary of his 1968 graduation from Annapolis Naval Academy, which dates the opening of the novel to February 1988. The wild fluctuations of the stock-market throughout the novel prompt comparisons to the crash of 1987 (p.40), whilst the general mood of bills from the excessive eighties coming up for



paragraph sets the queasy mood: "That winter was the warmest in a hundred years. There were uneasy jokes about the ozone layer and the greenhouse effect. The ambiguity of the weather made time seem slack and the year spineless" (*OR*, p.3). The climate, which traditionally functions as a bottom line measuring out time and providing bearings, has been compromised into unreliable "ambiguity". The "vertiginous confusion" (p.96) which this strange weather induces in the Brownes, is reinforced by the new, impersonal urban architecture: Anne Browne's father's dockland real estate company, Campbell and Olson, has moved from a nineteenth century building on the corner of Broadway into the ninety-first floor of the 1974 built World Trade Centre: "Whereas the old offices had been filled with ship models, company pennants and brass nameplates, the new place, as Anne still thought of it, might have been a bank in some shopping mall in space" (p.202). And if the new space resists decoration, concealing the character of the resident business beneath corporate anonymity, its dizzy altitude further estranges the changing landscape beneath, flattening the gentrified district into a "conceptual rendering of itself" (p.202). Anne's husband also bemoans the disappearance of the old "soaring, triumphant towers of Manhattan" behind amorphous "square, brutal buildings" (p.123) and laments the passing of the old Penn Station (p.11).<sup>19</sup>

Ideological and economic boundaries, no less than the meteorological and architectural ones, are also being blurred. In the first chapter, Owen Browne discusses the impending demise of the Cold War with a seasoned Cold Warrior, his ex-Naval Academy classmate Teddy Federov, the son of a Kulak who has spent "most of his adult life in scholarly contemplation of the Soviet Navy" (p.7).<sup>20</sup> "Our enemies are confounded", Federov observes, "That's the good news. The bad news? So are we" (p.9). For the gloomy Federov, any relish in Cold War triumph is ruined by the state of American society where not to care about money is to risk being thought insane. Like Federov, the young Scot Oglivie, who works for Pepsico, can muster little enthusiasm

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payment--"the spirit of recreation had somewhat folded her wings" (p.65) and people are desperately selling boats (p.39) and second homes (p.334)--conveys the mood of the decade's close. "The age of Reagan" is also mentioned (p.151).

<sup>19</sup> From the vantage point of his boat, Browne notices: "From Nona's deck, the city looked utterly impregnable, thrusting up its walls against them, every building monstrous and brutal" (p.165).

<sup>20</sup> Later in the novel, Campbell and Olson celebrate the fact by hosting a display of marine oil paintings by a "Soviet seaman who had succeeded in escaping to the States" (p.267).

for an economy where the decline in manufacturing is balanced by the ascendancy of what he calls "spec-ulation" (p.40) and where the emphasis is less upon production than the proliferation of information and representation. As if to confirm these suspicions that, as Federov puts it, "the heroic age of the bourgeoisie is over" (p.10), all of the three main characters work in this line: Strickland makes documentaries, Owen Browne is a salesman who writes copy and makes promotional videos and Anne works for *Underway*, a yachting magazine servicing the boom time craze for leisure boating.

The tension between older traditions of American capitalism and the brash new yuppie individualism of the eighties looms large in the novel, and is emblemized in the very leadership of the Hylan corporation, the parent company of Browne's employers, Altan Marine Corporation. The owner, Matthew Hylan, is described as "forty-four and supremely rich...a millionaire vulgarian in the contemporary mode" who had diverted the profits from his inherited mortuary business into "a late-century colossus of fun services and real estate" (p.47). Harry Thorne, by contrast, the corporation's vice-president and veteran of the Boston construction wars, functions as a sober straight man, and deplors the decade's excesses, warning: "Younger people should understand...that private commerce does not have to mean selfishness" (p.172).

This morass of instability is the setting for Owen Browne's mid-life crisis. The son of English immigrants who worked in service on a prominent Long Island estate, Browne attended Fessenden school to please his father's employer and Annapolis Naval Academy in 1964 to please his father (p.179). Described as one of "the last good children of their time" (p.9), Browne is a child of fifties conformism rather than sixties rebellion, shaped by the Cold War rather than the counterculture. Groomed for combat and military honour (Solotaraoff says he "bought the heroism narrative as a boy")<sup>21</sup> and to believe in "a homeland that could function as both a community and a cause" (p.44), he spent four years in Vietnam, where he faced some combat in his assignment as Tactical Air Control squadron; he remembers the war with guilty affection, commenting to his wife: "We had some of our best times then. We knew the difference" (p.188).

If the war represents an era of clear vision, when Browne was acting out the role

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<sup>21</sup> Solotaroff, p.145.



he had been trained to fill, the intervening years have been, in his own words, "fucking pedestrian and dishonourable" (p.154). The late eighties find him working at Altan Corporation as the "local brokerage divisions second-senior man and its chief literary figure" and fearing for his job (p.39). A keen amateur sailor since boyhood, Browne resents, but is financially dependent upon, the boom-time yuppie intrusion into "the salty world of big boats" (p.39) and its attendant "spirit of No Can Do", which he describes as "poisoning life and the country" (p.70). He reads Melville and commands a "serious and elegant" prose style but is "consigned to filling blocks of type in colour brochures" (p.62) to sell mass produced boats. And whilst stock market fever grips his colleagues and family--even his fifteen year old daughter watches *The Nightly Business Report* (p.41)--he struggles to "bring to bear the emotions appropriate to disappointed speculation" (p.42) and is slow to recognise the severity of Hylan's financial plight.

Browne's big chance comes when Matty Hylan, faced with the bankruptcy of his corporate network and possible criminal proceedings, absconds from America. Harry Thorne is eager to retain both an "appearance of normalcy" (p.53) and the substantial sums already invested in Matty's participation in the forthcoming Eglantine solo circumnavigation race, and considers fielding a substitute. Despite his limitations as a sailor, Browne seizes the chance to sail in Hylan's place, seeing the race as an escape route from "the wrong life" he inhabits (p.99). The race promises to compensate Browne for his feelings of post-Cold War redundancy by supplying that missing cause he had been moulded to fulfill: "It was a good fight or the right war--something that eased the burden of self and made breath possible" (p.45).

Although more attuned to financial practicalities than her husband--she anticipates Altan rewarding Owen with a dealership and him producing a book and video about the race (p.204)--Anne Browne also subscribes to this symbolic view of the race as a way to purge suburban mediocrity and to re-vitalise that sense of "honour, duty and risk" (p.101) which the Vietnam war had once held out.<sup>22</sup> But whilst both Brownes

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<sup>22</sup> Like Owen, Anne remembers the war with affection. Her memories of working at the Vietnam Veteran's Hospital in Bristol are "more pleasant than otherwise" although "drowned in nostalgia" (p.218). Even more overtly than Owen, she experiences the race as an opportunity to revisit the mood of the war time, when the Brownes were a young couple, "proud in the teeth of the world" (p.279) serving their country. When Owen first radios from sea, she dresses up in her late sixties clothes to receive the call, acting out this fantasy (p.219). The race also presents an opportunity to improve upon the war time experience, as victory is possible. Thinking of the race, she decides: "Winning was all...It was the only

experience and describe the race through stories which transcend the contemporary malaise--in terms of cleanliness and simplicity,<sup>23</sup> as a "situation of ultimate self-reliance" (p.139), as an extension of "American seamanship" (p139) and as a struggle of culture against nature<sup>24</sup>--from the outset it is mired in all the confusions and contradictions which they wish to leave behind.

Stone's narrative exploits the tension between these notions about the race (a romance at sea) and its reality (a public relations exercise to serve a sinking business) for ironic comedy.<sup>25</sup> But the relationship between representation and reality is something which increasingly dominates Browne's own thoughts at sea, and again, this is a dimension of the novel which critics frequently overlooked by mapping Browne's psychological journey as a straight-forward decline into insanity.<sup>26</sup> From early in his voyage, Browne dwells upon the difficulties of documenting his own experiences, whether it is through Strickland's camcorder or in his own log books. Even while he is

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revenge of life. Other people wanted reassurance in their own misery and mediocrity. She required victory" (p.208).

<sup>23</sup> Anne Justifies Owen's decision to sail to her father, saying: "It's something he needs to do. For himself and for us...He loves the sea. Those are clean, simple things." Jack Campbell replies,"Romance at the sea? Christ, the ocean is a fucking desert. You don't find Americans out there anymore because we have come beyond that" (p.207).

<sup>24</sup> Browne invokes lofty frontier myth rhetoric to describe the race, saying: "Long ago we had to fight the forces of nature. They were unforgiving of our mistakes...I'm not ashamed to prevail" (p.140).

<sup>25</sup> Unbeknown to the Brownes, for example, it is Joe Duffy, Hylan's public relations expert, and a man proud of knowing nothing about sailboats except that "the wind makes them go" (p.67) who first nominates Owen for the race. Browne's ideas about the race presenting "a situation of ultimate self-reliance" are comically compromised by both Duffy's efforts in "hyping...to the limit" (p.178) and by the modern technology of navigation. Browne's instinct as a sailor is to "watch the luff and feel for the wind" (p.164), but his boat is quickly freighted with "automated wizardry" (p.163) which he recognizes as "more than he could handle" (p.188).

<sup>26</sup> Pearl K. Bell determinedly personalizes Browne's discontent, insisting that it is a "private matter" which bears little relation to "society at large". Likewise, his madness is solely attributed to "water-borne solitude", Pearl K. Bell, "Fiction Review", review of *OR*, *Partisan Review* 59 (February 1992) pp.282-295. Robert Adams says that Browne's "core personality" disintegrates at sea and that he "slips round the bend", but does not engage with Browne's thoughts and preoccupations en-route (Adams, p.30). Gordon Burn simply asserts that Browne "suffers an extended period of delusional torment before turning himself over to the sharks" (Burn, p.20). Francis King talks of Browne being "half-crazed by isolation" and rates Browne's "descent into madness and death" as the novel's "most absorbing sections" (King, p.15), but like John Leonard's review for *The Nation*, which extravagantly describes Browne's seafaring as being "as dazzling as anything in American literature", the critical focus is upon the richness of literary allusions (Melville, Conrad, Hemingway) rather than the way in which Browne's thoughts at sea pick over his life on land. John Leonard, "Leviathan", *The Nation*, 13 April 1992, pp.489-494.



filming an iceberg, he "knew that he had failed to record the ice's mystical, Shackletonian quality", or its accumulated associations, and is left with the flatness of "banal observation" (p.283). He reads the memoirs of solitary sailors, to re-familiarize himself with a narrative tradition he plans to add to, but discovers that "even books that had kept him reading through the night ashore seemed to lose pertinence at sea. The authors all sounded alike. He suspected them of cribbing from each other. The style was that of naval history, British and high-hearted" (p.248). He plans to shun such "humorously tough-minded prose", which is loyal to the forms of a particular narrative tradition rather than truthful to the situations being described, and to "record the reality of things, matched with the thoughts and impressions it brought forth. To find the edge on which the interior met the exterior space" (p.249). He immediately discovers, however, that he cannot shed the "voices from the false sea stories" and replace them with a pure, "appropriate language" to record the reality (p.250): the stories are now *part* of his experience of the situation.

These rather abstract conclusions about the slippage between reality and its representation are hammered home when Browne's boat begins to make ominous noises. The sound reminds him of all the things he had hoped to leave behind, it is the noise of "the continent, with its frantic egoism, millions of ravenous wills" rather than "the sea, serene and unforgiving" (p.217): "It sounded like the gutter, like an obscene threat, a New York objection. Plastic...Its whine suggested loud vulgar language and cheap macho menace. Bad workmanship and sharp practice" (p.300). When Browne ventures down into the cabin to investigate the noise, the first thing he finds is the copy he had written to sell the boat, advertising "A seasoned winner in the newest design! All the elements of the precision-designed racer - attainable! Affordable" (p.300). It is here that Browne, confronted with a "decomposing" boat, recognises that he has been his own "best customer", and that the copy he had written owed more to his need to believe in cherished notions like craftsmanship and value for money, than to the actual boats, which one of his Altan colleagues described as "South Korean fuckup" (p.5). In a striking image, Browne imagines himself as a "little tin soldier in a paper boat...headed for the drain" (p.300). Any lingering romance is stripped from the voyage: not only has the boat turned out to be inadequate, but there is a tacit recognition that it has been freighted with the baggage of Browne's own discontent and coerced into compensating him for the

feeling that "he had been preparing all his life for something he would never live to see" (p.45).<sup>27</sup>

This bitter disenchantment combines with hallucinations, delusions and discoveries about the difficulties of recording the truth to produce a more relativistic view of the world: temporarily, the word "game" supplants the word "truth" in Browne's thoughts. "Games", he decides, "were all that made things serious or gave them form. To be a serious person, it was necessary to embrace one" (p.308). He makes a "game of calculating where he might have been if the winds had held, if the boat had hung together, if the world had been different from what it was" (p.332) and develops it to its conclusion: "As a game, Browne began to put himself in the position of a man given to subterfuge, a man who might fake his positions all the way round...A not so stern and steady man who might not sail around the world but say he did" (p.334).

This new view of the world, in which Browne recognises that "Everyone had to believe his informing story" (p.334) and in which he sees the "truth" as simply the most powerful and convincing story rather than the repository of some ultimate authority, is reinforced by his game of subterfuge. He is surprised by the "ease with which he worked out false angles" and the "fluency with which he was able to invent convincing details for the imaginary future days he was constructing. It was much easier than attempting to record even the roughest outline of truth. He felt as though he had happened upon a principle of existence" (p.346). The ease of producing false narratives which masquerade as the truth further unravels Browne's faith in the reliability of his own "informing stories"--notably the responsibility to serve his country--and in particular, his justifications over the Vietnam war, which are so central to that story.<sup>28</sup> But whilst on an intellectual level Browne adopts a more relativistic view of the world, at a more basic one he remains utterly dependent upon the stories which have shaped him. He continues

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<sup>27</sup> Later Browne lapses back into seeing the race as a suitable substitute for military honour, when he muses: "...it might have been good to have won. To have served himself and his country, to have done a decent, simple thing well" (p.333).

<sup>28</sup> Browne was a public affairs officer for the Naval Advisory Committee in Vietnam, and, as Stone explains in an interview, in press briefings he would have "had to misrepresent things" (Quoted Solotaroff, p.150). After the war, Browne keeps up the official line to justify American strategy in terms of "Rules of Engagement", as he does when he quarrels with the pacifist boat joiner (p.126). At sea, however, he concedes: "The order of battle, the hamlet evaluation reports, the Rules of Engagements, were dreams. Truth had been a barely recognisable shimmer." (p.383).



to quote Melville, to experience an "overpowering nostalgia for innocence and truth" (p.368) and to resent the fact that he never inherited the "vanished world" of his "boyhood hero" Shackleton, but instead one of "rebellion" (p.341). Whilst he eventually recognises that "Everything is relative" he also realizes that the conditioning is too strong, that truth is his "bride", his "first and greatest love" and that he "could no more take a prize by subterfuge than he could sail to the white port city of his dreams" (p.383). Impaled on the impossible contradiction of being both disillusioned and dependent upon illusions, he chooses death by water as the way to "resolve the real and apparent aspects of things" (p.384).

iii

Prior to setting sail, Browne described the ocean as "the bottom line", the place "to find out what we're made of" (p.139). In his case, the sea literally becomes the bottom line and resting place, having exposed the unsustainability of his ingrained need to know the truth. But if Browne is committed to knowing the truth--shaped by it and reliant on it--his fellow middle-aged New Yorker Ronald Strickland, who is hired to make a documentary about the Altan entrant in the race, is equally committed to uncovering the truth and representing it to others: "My problem is the bottom line" he says early in the novel, "the difference between what people say they're doing and what's really going on" (p.19).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the narrative makes a subtle link between Browne's macro belief systems, notably his dependency on "a homeland that could function as both community and cause" (p.44) and the type of micro-narrative which Strickland makes for a living. Chapter two traces Strickland's progress in Nicaragua, where he is making a film about the Sandinista revolution; chapter four catches up with him back at home, avidly watching and cutting the footage shot there. Chapter five shows a depressed Browne going about his hum-drum business, but at the end of the chapter he retires to bed and watches a "documentary on public television about Cuba" (p.43). Regardless of the "liberal humility and left-wing bias"--Strickland later describes his Nicaragua film as having a "left-liberal coloration" (p.113)--the documentary strikes a chord with Browne, who ponders that his own country had failed him by not being the homeland and cause he had believed it to be. This in turn leads him to imagine freedom, which at this stage remains abstract as "a bright expanse, an effort, a victory" (p.45) but which, as we have seen, comes to take the form of the race.

In a subtle way then, the narrative shows a film like Strickland's feeding into Browne's alienated world view.

Like Browne, Strickland uses the word "truth" a great deal--he adopts "truth is right" as his motto (p.29), and "I work in the service of truth" as his job description (p.22). As already mentioned, in Browne's case this emphasis upon serving truth has been intensified in the current social and political climate, rendering him an anachronistic figure. The end of the Cold War and spread of yuppie individualism heightens his dependence on the formative sources of identity which he inscribes into the boat race. Strickland, who cut his teeth making *L/Z Bravo*, a critical film about the Vietnam war, has also seen his milieu--in his case a political, left wing, counterculture scene--eroded in the post Cold War boom. He laments the fact that "there are no more politics" which prompts Anne Browne to describe him as "the last bolshevik" (p.267): the PBS producer who buys his film about the Nicaraguan revolution applauds his "Un-American" vision, adding, "You're political Mr. Strickland. That's against the temper of the times" (p.325). But as with Browne, the changing times produce a "wavering confidence" (p.83) and a redoubled insistence on his obligation to "home truths" (p.113) and "the pungent odour of the real thing" (p.29).

Strickland's intense concern with his own documentary veracity is matched by Stone's novel, which is obsessively interested in the process of film-making. The narrative doggedly tracks Strickland as he goes about his business, and devotes long sections to him imagining, discussing, shooting, watching, editing, entitling and selling his films. As well as following Strickland's work on the Hylan film, the novel charts the progress of his previous Nicaraguan feature from the close of shooting in Central America to its sale in a Massachusetts studio, and also provides cameo roles for characters from Strickland's back-catalogue, notably Pamela Koester, the "suburban soubrette turned occasional prostitute" from *Under The Life* (p.31).

The narrative's concern with the business of filmic representation is evident in the very texture of its prose, as the Strickland sections often have a distinctly documentary feel to them, being filtered through the consciousness of a man who cannot even listen to the radio news without imagining the scenes on film (p.158) and who constantly frames and sequences reality into expressive shots. In chapter four, for example, Strickland is visited by Pamela. She delivers his marijuana and immediately excuses herself to go to the bathroom:



He could imagine her fingers prowling his medicine cabinet. When she came out they sat down in Strickland's office. Behind his desk was an enormous round window into which the instrument manufacturer's corporate coat of arms had been leaded. There was a similar window in the bedroom. Over the rooftops of Clinton and Chelsea they could see the towers of the World Trade Centre and even a few faint winter stars (p.326).

Prior to Pamela's arrival, Strickland has been editing his Nicaraguan footage, but his mind continues to frame and cut after she arrives. In this fairly typical excerpt, the narrative ascends in a sequence of single sentence "shots", from spying close-up, through atmospheric detail to panoramic view.<sup>30</sup>

Elsewhere the organisation of the narrative flatters Strickland's insight, as his hunches and predictions are born out by subsequent events.<sup>31</sup> In places, this *rapport* between the narrative voice and Strickland, where the film-maker plays an almost choric role, functioning as both a character in the novel and a collaborator in shaping it, is consummated in pithy one liners which could equally belong to either Strickland or the narrating voice. In chapter three, for example, Strickland is in Nicaragua, where he has just finished filming and has returned to the hotel to pay off the crew. He is lampooning the pious revolutionary fervour of his colleague Biaggio when, "As the marimba orchestra took up a song of the people, a party of Americans entered the garden. Their overalls and metal-rimmed spectacles served to identify them as internationalists" (p.16). The tone here, which balances a carefully observed context (the band starting up, as if to announce their arrival), a wry detachment ("song of the people"), pointedly ambiguous language ("a party" of Americans, the word implying tourism and enjoyment) and a

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<sup>30</sup> Strickland constantly *experiences* reality in cinematic turns. In chapter nine, for example, he is talking to Freya Blume, his agent, whilst looking out of her fourth floor window. The conversation is intercut with Strickland's perceptions of street life: "On the street below, the wayward individual to whom he had given his cordobas and lempiras was attempting to beg from a Greek hot dog vendor. The vendor showed his teeth. Two Sisters of Charity in knit sweaters and saris walked by" (p.77). Elsewhere Strickland imagines himself embroiled in a noirish thriller, and believing himself followed, concludes, "there was no more sinister sight in all of the hemisphere than two tall Latinos in a Ford Falcon" (p.25).

<sup>31</sup> When Anne describes the challenges of the race to Strickland, he rightly detects envy in her voice, and tells her, "You'd like to do it yourself, wouldn't you?" (p.113). His insight is proved right by later events, when, after Owen's death, she decides to enter the race herself. Later on, he picks up on the Brownes' embarrassment when they are asked what winning the race would mean to them. He correctly suspects that the issue had been contentious. As the reader already knows, the Brownes have argued about whether being obsessed with victory is "morally suspect" in the previous chapter (p.131).

mocking, slightly weary irony which punctures self importance and mocks po-faced jargon ("served to identify them as internationalists") is vintage Stone, and yet here, it is identical to Strickland's own point of view.<sup>32</sup>

Strickland's fierce self-perception as a servant of the truth leads him into frequent meditation and conversation about the principles behind his work. He sees himself as an uncompromising "witness" (p.277) whose "camera never lies" (p.79).<sup>33</sup> But although they enjoy a large profile in the novel, from very early on Strickland's descriptions of his own artistic principles begin to sound fraught. On his return from Nicaragua, for example, Strickland and his apprentice Hersey eagerly watch the footage shot there, and pay particular attention to the interviews. On seeing an "American diplomat attempting to explain himself", Hersey congratulates Strickland with, "you really open them up", who then replies, "I get them to spread":

'They're so urgent,' Hersey said admiringly. 'And they always blow it. How do you do that?'

Strickland rounded on him.

'You don't understand, do you? Do you really think it's me getting them to look bad? On the contrary, they piss all over themselves. Half the time I have to clean up their act.'

Hersey was chastened. He took off his thick-lensed glasses and wiped them on a Sight Saver.

'It's hard to tell the good guys from the bad guys.'

'Hey, I decide who the good guys are, Hersey. When you learn how to cut film, you'll decide' (p.30).

This dialogue plays out the contradiction between Strickland's rhetoric of impartial documentation--reflecting reality--and the undeniable fact of his own agency--

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<sup>32</sup> Similar overlappings, where Strickland appears as both a character in the narrative and collaborator in constructing it, are very common, particularly in the first half of the novel. See for example, Strickland's first visit to the Hylan corporation headquarters in chapter six, where again, he is constantly imagining shots, or his trip to Finland in chapter eleven.

<sup>33</sup> Sometimes he presents his role as a passive or invisible listener, or a fly-on-the-wall, catching the truth when defences are down. He boasts that his "camera never lies" (p.79) and is not averse to a little surreptitious filming in the service of the truth. Sometimes his quest of the truth is presented in more aggressive or sexual terms. He describes wanting to "nail down" a certain mannerism (p.37), and regards the subjects of his films as "quarry" (p.330) awaiting "penetration" (p.37). Elsewhere he describes his approach as a lethal combination of passivity and predation, observing, "There were those who trusted him for his stammer...and there were those, the stupider ones, who patronised him as a half wit. His infirmity seemed to encourage people toward boasting and indiscretion...It was they who came to him and impaled themselves" (p83).



interpreting it.<sup>34</sup> In the space of half a page, Strickland in turn acknowledges his own agency ("I get them to spread"), denies it ("Do you really think its me getting them to look bad") and celebrates it ("I decide who the good guys are"). Elsewhere Hersey picks away at Strickland's putative objectivity towards his subjects by reminding him that he does decide who the bad guys are, asking questions like, "How we gonna fuck 'em?"(p.134).<sup>35</sup>

From the outset, then, the aesthetic which is so fundamental to Strickland's self-perception,<sup>36</sup> and which is granted so much air-time in Stone's narrative, is dogged by the contradictions implicit in his words, "We want things the way they really look" which he says to Anne during filming (p.255). "Really" implies that there is some essential truth which Strickland hopes to expose--elsewhere he describes his art cutting through appearance to essence, as when he says of Browne, "There's a way things are. There's a way he is...That's what I'm after" (p.183). But here "really" is not followed by the concrete "are", as we might expect ("We want things the way they really are") but by the much less assured, more slippery, contingent and subjective word "look", which belongs in the realm of appearance rather than essence. And the phrase "really look", which would seem to betray Strickland's anxiety that he is simply recording appearance rather than uncovering essences, takes on extra resonance when Anne immediately asks him, "Is there such a thing...A way they really look". This challenge to the idea that there is even a stable, objective appearance, not to mention an available essence, calls into question Strickland's theories about working in the service of the truth. His reply, "there

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<sup>34</sup> This dominant idea of his documentaries as witnesses to reality corresponds with Strickland's later description of the completed Nicaraguan film as one which "reflects the reality of the situation there" (p.324). But this description, with its suggestion of neutrality, is contradicted by other remarks where Strickland asserts that his own ideological agenda plays a part: he says that he is a "man of the left" and that the film will reflect that (p.15) and observes that the film has a "left-liberal coloration" justifying a title borrowed from Pablo Neruda's verse (p.113).

<sup>35</sup> He also picks away at this contradiction in chapter 26, in the guise of reassuring Strickland that, in terms of the developing documentary, he has Browne "fucked". Strickland angrily retorts that he is not interested in "fucking" but in "the truth about this guy" (p.183).

<sup>36</sup> As already mentioned, Strickland repeatedly describes himself as working in "the service of the truth" (p.22) and the "business" of "perception" (p.20). His firm identity as a servant of the truth is emblemized in the tiny Mayan ornament worn on his necklace, which represents, in his words: "a guy tied to a stake. A captive. There's a vulture on the stake and it's eating his eye" (p.305). For Strickland the figure symbolizes the plight of the "truthful witness" (p.338) who pays a martyr's price for the clarity of his vision. It reinforces his mantra, adopted during the making of *L Z Bravo*, which is: "Follow truth too close by the heels, it kicks you in the teeth" (p.261).

will be" (p.255), which suggests that his film is constructing a real appearance, rather than documenting one, merely emphasises the confusion.

These contradictions are steadily prized open as the narrative unfolds. On the one hand, for example, Strickland insists that he is totally in control of his films, silently orchestrating the action: "When I'm filming people" he explains at one point, "I see it this way: They're the town, I'm the clock" (p.161). But on the other hand, he concedes that sometimes his films take on meanings independently of his intentions; when Pamela insists that there is "always an *it* to get" in his films, he replies that he doesn't always know what it is (p.159), and when he plays back his Nicaraguan reels he "could not account for all the footage of birds he saw" (p.30) but is immediately struck by their "mythic and heraldic notions" which "proclaimed the country" (p.30). Intuition, rather than conscious intention has directed his filming here. And in spite of his rhetoric about serving the truth, Strickland is not above using his films to serve his own frustration and to settle his own scores, as when he vows to make Captain Riggs-Bowen "regret his own willingness to appear" in the film (p.119).

This disparity between what Strickland says he is doing and what's really going on widens out still further as the new film gets underway. One key player in a film about a round-the-world yacht race is sure to be the boat itself. But in a fashion strikingly reminiscent of Browne, who is duped by his own desperate need to believe in the boat's "high quality" (p.66), Strickland is spectacularly blind to its significance and repeatedly fails to investigate it. Whilst flattering himself on the fact that "he had little to learn about the field of folk" (p.79) and bemoaning that he is "fast to his perception like some flying creature to its paralyzed wings" (p.83), he ignores repeated tip-offs that the boat is not the hand-made Finnish prototype Matty Hylan was due to sail, but a mass-produced "stock-boat" (p.121) and no better than a "piece of shit" (p.176). By the time that Strickland decides to interview people in the boat industry, Browne's vessel *Nona* has already disintegrated.

These discrepancies and contradictions are magnified into absurd proportions when Strickland begins his affair with Anne Browne, and he becomes a protagonist in the Brownes' story as well as its director. Earlier in the novel, whilst jealously observing Harry Thorne's overtures to Anne, Strickland decided that if Thorne seduced her, "he would have to find a way to get it in the film" (p.172). But in spite of this commitment



to "what's really going on", Strickland is less perturbed than Anne by the new turn of events and their implications for his film. "What will we do?" she asks him in a post coital moment, "Will we go on filming?":

'Sure,' he said. 'That's what we do. That's how we make our way through life.'  
'Everyone's going to see it.'  
'See what?'  
'You and me,' she said. Strickland looked thoughtful. He shrugged. There was something on his mind. 'It will come out in the film,' she insisted.  
'Not unless I want it there, Anne.'  
'People will see it.'  
'They'll see what we want them to see.'  
'They'll see us.'  
'What are you,' Strickland demanded, 'a fucking mystic? You think the camera never lies?'  
'I think it will be apparent,' Anne said.  
Strickland only laughed. 'Don't get so French about it. It'll just be a movie (p.307).

This flippant concession that his film's construct rather than record a sequence of events is momentary; Strickland's insistent rhetoric that he is a "truthful witness" (p.338) who could never be accused of "trimming" or compromising the truth, and who had "never changed a frame to suit a soul" (p.326), actually increases as its plausibility plummets. And whilst Strickland's protestations of artistic integrity become louder and more frequent, the narrative itself quietly suggests that his credibility has been overstretched. The *rapport* between Strickland and the narrative voice, which was so solid in the earlier sections of the novel, fades as the novel develops,<sup>37</sup> and Strickland is gradually demoted from a collaborator framing events and supplying a detached, terse commentary to a more regular character, implicated in the story he was hired to tell: indeed, the narrative structure suggests that his old fear, that he would become, "just another fellow like his patron and quarry, the average asshole in the street" is slowly born out (p.330).

Like Browne then, Strickland is a figure whose dependency on the availability of truth is exacerbated by the instability of contemporary society; as with Browne, the events of Stone's novel assault, interrogate and expose this dependency. But far from

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<sup>37</sup> The narrative takes Strickland's perspective in fourteen out of twenty nine chapters in part one and eight out of thirty eight in the latter part.

being a distraction from what Francis King called "the book's true theme", or from what Gordon Burn considered an unruly sub-plot "devised by Stone as a way of rehearsing some of his characteristic stylistic riffs", the narrative's concern with Strickland and his film-making is thoroughly integrated into the narrative, and by turns anticipates, mirrors, intersects with and undercuts the events and themes governing Browne's journey through the novel. Whilst there are obvious biographical parallels linking the two men--their New York backgrounds, Vietnam years, mid-life crises and shared affection for the same woman--these connections are strongest of all in their very different preoccupations with truth, meaning, representation and the relationship between them. Far from being a side show in *Outerbridge Reach*, these issues, which were so underplayed in the novel's reception, are central to it, and loom large in its diagnosis of society's ills.

iv

In a refreshingly balanced review-article about *Outerbridge Reach*, Mark Edmundson observed that:

Strickland is pivotal to an understanding of this book not only because his perceptions are more intense and provocative than the other characters', but also because he shares more with Robert Stone than his initials. The two are drawn to similar subject matter: Strickland's film on Vietnam, *LZ Bravo*, brings *Dog Soldiers* to mind, just as his work in progress on Central America recalls *A Flag For Sunrise*. Strickland also shares some biographical data with Stone. Both the character and his creator grew up as only children in intense communion with itinerant, educated, possibly deranged mothers, and both have strong associations with New York.<sup>38</sup>

Having spelt out this connection, Edmundson goes on to build his reading around it.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Mark Edmundson, "America at Sea", review of *OR*, *New Republic*, 20 April 1992, pp.42-5. This quotation is lifted from p.43. Further references will be cited in parentheses in the text.

<sup>39</sup> The parallels between Stone and Strickland are indeed striking--they also share a penchant for drugs and depicting noirish low-life, as in Strickland's *Under The Life* and Stone's interest in characters on the margins of society like Rheinhardt in *A Hall of Mirrors*, the corrupt feds in *Dog Soldiers* and Pablo in *A Flag For Sunrise*. Solotaroff also notices the similarities, referring to Strickland as the author's "limited cousin" (Solotaroff, p.163).



Strickland, he argues, has a limited "idea of truth": "He is an instinctive proponent of the view that the worst truth about someone is the most central truth" (p.42). He continues:

What's at stake here in the resemblance is the stature of Stone's own work, throughout his career, but chiefly here, in *Outerbridge Reach*. Is this book, like Strickland's films, a product of a reductive fallacy? Does it ungenerously reduce its characters to their most pitiable or repugnant qualities, and thereby give its audience a facile sense of superiority. (p.43)

Having set up this comparison between the work of character and creator, Edmundson finds Stone guilty as charged. He argues that by choosing the Brownes, and particularly Owen, "to represent the middle class", Stone makes things too easy for himself and thus emulates Strickland "with a reduction of his own" (p.45). Edmundson concludes: "Moment to moment, *Outerbridge Reach* surpasses the film-maker in subtlety and tact, but in its overall design, it is the work of someone satisfied with setting up a large target and then blowing it away" (p.45).

On one hand, by recognising the similarities between Strickland and Stone and using them to generate his reading, Edmundson greatly widens the terms of discussion which prevailed in the novel's reception. But on the other hand, this new opening is immediately sealed off when Edmundson indulges in a reductive fallacy of his own and boils Strickland's film-making down to his cynicism, or the fact that he is an "instinctive proponent of the view that the worst truth about some person or thing is the most central truth" (p.43). To justify this reduction of Strickland's film-making to an unpleasant personality trait, Edmundson cites a snippet from the exchange quoted above, where Hersey congratulates the film-maker for "opening up" the American diplomats in the Nicaraguan footage, which in turn prompts Strickland to congratulate himself for "making them spread" (p.30). But rather than illustrating the point that Strickland equates unpleasant characteristics with fundamental truth, as we saw, the exchange actually draws Strickland into a string of contradictory statements, problematizing the truth-seeking aesthetic which he invests so much into. In other words, Edmundson's reductive equation of Strickland with pure cynicism, enables a hasty, punchy critique of Stone, but only at the expense of by-passing the novel's substantial interest in the processes and principles behind Strickland's art.

Taken collectively, the solid similarities between Stone and Strickland; the *rapport* between narrative voice and film-maker; the amount of air-time given to the principles and processes of Strickland's film-making; the way in which the narrative assaults and interrogates this film-making, uncovering "the bottom line" or difference between what Strickland says he is doing and "what's really going on", would suggest that Edmundson is right to see the narrative as constructing a special relationship between the author and character. But these details would also suggest that there is more at stake here than degrees of cynicism. Through its rigorous engagement with the character of Strickland, the narrative also engages with the approach to representation which is inseparable from that character. In the following excerpt, where Strickland is thinking through the possibility of making a single-subject documentary featuring Pamela alone, he rehearses the project's basic challenges:

How to penetrate that busy swarm of verbiage and gesture and find the shiny animal within? How to bring it stunned and dripping into light? But what a worthy lesson for the world to glimpse what thrived in the airless inner life of just one particular whore (p.36).

In many ways, this reverie encapsulates the core assumptions behind Strickland's aesthetic. It contrasts a universally available but deceptive appearance--"the busy swarm of verbiage and gesture" which is "routinely visible to the average asshole in the street" (p.326)--with an essence or truth which is the exclusive domain of the film-maker. Any notion that subjective factors might come into play in the perception and representation of this essence are contained by a rhetoric of directness and immediacy which jumbles tropes of sexual penetration, medical incision, and hunting.

This approach, and the way it is described through visceral, aggressive terms which suppress subjective factors and processes of mediation, are strikingly reminiscent of some of the more naive theories of representation discussed in chapter one of this thesis. Frank Norris described his variant of romance in terms which suggested both scalpel and phallus, as "an instrument, keen, finely tempered, flawless...with which we may go straight through the clothes and wrappings of flesh down deep into the red,



living heart of things."<sup>40</sup> Mike Gold suggested "a kind of flesh and blood reality" as the ideal subject matter for young proletarian realists whilst Tom Wolfe, in his appeal for "the new social novel", invoked frontier and hunting rhetoric, imploring "a battalion, a brigade of Zolas" to "plung(e) into the fray" and "wrestle the beast" of "the life around us" and "bring it to terms".<sup>41</sup>

Following this line of thought through, it is possible to read the narrative's ambivalent and changing attitude to Strickland and his documentary aesthetic (which moves from *rapport* to exposure) as a subtly self-conscious thematization of attitudes towards representation. Like Strickland, Stone sometimes identifies with and is drawn to a rhetoric of directness and truth to describe his work: in one essay he presents a prickly defence of John Keats' mantra equating beauty with truth against William Gass' charge that it was a "fatuous little motto".<sup>42</sup> But unlike Strickland, who Stone's narrative eventually demotes from collaborator to character (and unlike these more naive theories of "realism" which Strickland's approach resembles) Stone also displays a highly nuanced sense of representation: in this he is more like Browne at sea, recognising the slippage between words and reality and between experience and the narrative forms

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<sup>40</sup> Frank Norris, "Novelists of the Future: The Training They Need" (1901) in Donald Pizer ed., *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964) p.13; quoted in this thesis, p.22.

<sup>41</sup> Mike Gold, "Go Left, Young Writers" (1929), in Mike Folsom ed., *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology* (New York: International, 1972) p.190; quoted in this thesis, p.35. Tom Wolfe, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel" (1989), *Harper's* (November 1989) pp.45-56; this is discussed at length in chapter four.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Stone, "We Are Not Excused" in William Zinsser ed., *Paths of Resistance: The Art and Craft of the Political Novel* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989) pp.19-36.

considered adequate to representing it.<sup>43</sup> And although widely considered a realist,<sup>44</sup> his strongest word on the matter flies in the face of this classification. He describes how he began *A Hall of Mirrors* as a "realistic novel":

...but my life changed and the world changed and when I thought about it I realized that "realism" was a fallacy. It's simply not tenable. You have to write a poem about what your describing. You can't render, can't dissect. Zola was deluded...Realism as a theory of literature is meaningless. I can start with it as a mode precisely because I don't believe in it. I *know* it's all a world of words-- what else could it be.<sup>45</sup>

Here Stone is explicitly distancing himself from direct, un-mediated, truthful realism based on "that peculiar drudgery that Zola called documentation"<sup>46</sup>: a construction of realism which the critic Gordon Burn, in his review of *Outerbridge Reach*, explicitly challenged Stone for lapsing from. And in an extra irony of course (as the first section of this chapter argued) the fact that many critics made an *implicit* association between Stone and this type of realism (or at least between Stone and an unspecified type of realism more interested in "doing" rather than "watching") played a significant role in their overlooking and under-reading the sections of the novel in which the narrative differentiates itself from this type of representation.

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<sup>43</sup> In interview with Zinsser, Stone recalled how: "Most journalists who worked in Vietnam during the war were oppressed by the extreme difficulty of translating what they saw into words. It wasn't necessarily that it was uniquely horrible; it was that the brutality and confusion one experienced seemed to lose something when rendered into language. Somehow, in describing the situation so that it could be set up into columns of type, one always seemed to be cleaning it up." (Stone in Zinsser ed., p.28).

Stone is also interested in the resonances and connotative levels of language: "I'm interested in precise meaning and in reverberation, in associative levels...You choose words that open up deeper and deeper levels of existence by sustaining a sound which perfectly serves the narrative and which at the same time relates through a series of associations to larger questions." Stone in interview with William Crawford Woods, "The Art of Fiction XC: Robert Stone", *Paris Review* 27,no.2 (Winter 1985) pp.26-57. This quotation is from p.31.

<sup>44</sup> Although widely classified as a realist, Stone's comments on subjectivity and the chaos and contingency of personality, like his fictional characterizations themselves, pressurize those theoretical constructions of realism which see it as helplessly dependent upon stable, autonomous characters, and which I summarized in the first chapter of this thesis (see pp.49-51). "We know" says Stone, in terms which suggest that he is familiar with these debates, "that the rationally discoursing self doesn't quite do justice to reality. In fact, experienced reality consists of something rather different from the rationally discoursing self." "American Fiction: A Panel With Marilynne Robinson, Robert Stone, Russell Banks and David Rieff", *Salmagundi*, Number 93 (Winter 1992) pp. 61-78. This quotation is from p. 76.

<sup>45</sup> Crawford Woods, p.42.

<sup>46</sup> Tom Wolfe, "Stalking the Billion Footed Beast", p.55.



In spite of its putative straightforwardness then, *Outerbridge Reach* displays a subtle self-consciousness in the form of a loop connecting character and author through a shared concern with representation.<sup>47</sup> The degree to which the novel's own procedures successfully distance it from Strickland's film-making is ultimately a question beyond the scope of this chapter: the challenge here has been to draw attention to the thematic significance of representation and to emphasise the fact that the text folds itself back into one of its key concerns and invites consideration of the relationship between itself and those acts of representation which it dramatizes and explores.

In terms of Stone's six novels, *Outerbridge Reach* is by no means unique in this respect. Like this text, the other five novels eschew self-reflexivity in the postmodernist sense, but all contain central characters who are, for want of a better phrase, cultural producers of some kind, be it musicians and disc-jockeys in *A Hall of Mirrors* (1967), playwrights, anthropologists, and tabloid newspaper editors in *Dog Soldiers* (1974), theologians and sociologists in *A Flag for Sunrise* (1981), actors, screen-writers and novelists in *Children of Light* (1986) or journalists in *Damascus Gate* (1998).<sup>48</sup> And

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<sup>47</sup> As previously mentioned, Robert Adams described the text as: "basically an action story" (Adams, p.29). Pearl K. Bell applauded the fact that Stone used *Outerbridge Reach* to showcase "his vibrant skill as a story-teller" and had ditched the "political undercurrent" which for her, had disfigured *Dog Soldiers*. Like the readings of *Feather Crowns* discussed in chapter three, here the novel is de-contextualized and de-politicized through a narrow emphasis on the personal. "The malaise that claws Owen Browne", claims Bell, "is a matter of private 'rages and regrets', not a disenchantment indictment of society at large." As argued above, Browne's malaise is, in fact, carefully contextualized in relation to society at large. Pearl K. Bell, "Fiction Review", *Partisan Review* 59 (February 1992) pp.293-295. This quotation is from p.294.

<sup>48</sup> As with Strickland, there is a strong identification between Stone and some of these key-players. Stone once said of Rheinhardt, the talented, hard-drinking drifter from *A Hall Of Mirrors*: "In the case of my protagonist Rheinhardt, there's a lot about him that represents the shadow part of my life...he was literally my scape goat; he was a kind of alter ego." Charles Ruas, *Conversations With American Writers* (New York: Knopf, 1985) p.271. In the same interview, when asked, "What is your concept of history?", in relation to *A Flag For Sunrise*, Stone again asserted his identification with the protagonist and replied, "It's a bitter and ironic reflection that Holliwell has from his experiences" (p.293).

This pattern is even more pronounced in *Children Of Light*, a novel about the making of a Hollywood adaptation of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). Stone's novel vacillates between psychological drama and satire on tinsel town, and the parallels between Stone and Gordon Walker are again, very striking. Both are counter culture veterans, classical actors (Walker has recently played the

whilst the degree of identification between Ronald Strickland and Robert Stone, coupled with the strikingly asymmetrical reception, makes *Outerbridge Reach* a suitable choice for this chapter, all of the texts contain important but critically neglected self-conscious elements which, to varying degrees, set up dialogues between the acts of cultural production being described and the one being performed by the text itself.<sup>49</sup>

There is, of course, nothing new in this device. The first chapter of this thesis opened with a summary of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century debate addressing the relative merits of realism and romance. The key players in that debate, William Dean Howells and Frank Norris, both dramatized their opinions on these matters in their fiction: so Howells' novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) invokes, subverts and defines itself against current forms of romance whilst Norris' *The Octopus* (1901) follows the young writer Presley in his search for the literary form best-suited to depicting the bitter struggles between the San Joaquin wheat farmers and the railroad monopoly. Robert Stone's extension of this device in his fiction is similarly suggestive in terms of drawing attention to, and problematizing the status of, its own intervention. And the fact that Stone's fiction in general, and this dimension of his work in particular, are so frequently overlooked further illustrates the pervasiveness of the critical problem which this thesis has been challenging.

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lead in *King Lear*; in 1982 Stone played Kent in a professional production of the play), and screen-writers (Stone co-wrote the screen-plays for Hollywood adaptations of *A Hall of Mirrors* and *Dog Soldiers*).

<sup>49</sup> *Dog Soldiers* (1974) in particular lends itself to a reading addressing questions about representation. Through a range of characters, the novel dramatizes the difficulty of producing oppositional or challenging representation in a culture awash with drugs, violence and mass media. Two of the three main characters have given up careers in cultural production: Marge Converse is an ex-left wing academic turned porn-cinema usherette whilst her husband, who once wrote an award winning play, tries his hand at tabloid journalism, producing headlines like "Housewife Impaled by Skydiving Rapist" (p.129) before renouncing his literary efforts in favour of heroin smuggling from Vietnam: "if the world is going to contain elements pursued by flying men", he reasons, referring to the infamous massacre of elements suspected of carrying Viet Cong weapons, "people are just naturally going to want to get high" (p.42).

Apart from Mark Edmundson, only two critics have addressed this dimension of Stone's writing. In his review of *Children of Light*, Frank Rich reads the novel as Stone settling scores with Hollywood for their spectacular maulings of his first two novels. Frank Rich, "Screenwriter's Revenge", *New Republic* (28 April 1986) pp.32-34. James D. Bloom concentrates on the same text in his article, "Cultural Capital and Contrarian Investing: Robert Stone, Thom Jones and Others" in *Contemporary Literature* 36, no.3 (1995) pp.490 - 507.



## CONCLUSION

In the preface to *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981), Frederic Jameson explains that his book:

...turns on the dynamics of the act of interpretation and presupposes, as its organizational fiction, that we never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or--if the text is brand-new--through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretative traditions.<sup>1</sup>

The first chapter of this thesis historicized and scrutinized aspects of "the act of interpretation" in the post sixties period, drawing attention to the sedimented oppositional categories through which realism is constructed (in opposition to postmodernism).<sup>2</sup> The four author based chapters took issue with "sedimented reading habits" as they manifested themselves in the reception of four contemporary realists--in Wolfe's case, chapter four claimed, the habits were internalized by the author himself, governing his own thinking and his presentation of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* as a template for a new social realism. Chapters two, three and five argued that "sedimented reading habits" also dominated the reception of Carver, Mason and Stone, producing non-reading, partial readings and mis-readings of texts which evaded and outstripped the critical practices frequently used to discuss them.

As I argued in the closing section of chapter one, my readings of these realists have implications beyond their immediate literary reputations; these cases, I would claim, are representative in a double sense. On the one hand, the low-intensity reception

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<sup>1</sup> Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981; London: Routledge, 1989) p.9.

<sup>2</sup> Through its broad historical scope, and sampling of debates about realism from the 1880s and 1930s, the thesis has also hinted towards another story, overlapping but distinct, which concerns the institutionalization of serious criticism in recent times. This complex story, a separate thesis in itself, raises questions about whether or not discussion of realism has become particularly static and sedimented since its incorporation into the expanding academy. As we saw in chapter one, Howells and Norris practised the "act of interpretation" as novelists and journalists and Gold, Hicks, Rahv and Phelps as party activists. But in its sixties expansion, the Academy increasingly encompassed creative writing (see pp.43-53) radical politics (pp.58-66) and even independent literary magazines; in the early sixties the *Partisan Review* left New York and set up at Rutgers University, where William Phillips took up a professorship. Discussion about realism became a more or less exclusively academic affair in the sixties, in contrast to earlier moments in the debate. For an account of the *Partisan Review's* fortunes through the Cold War years, see chapter eleven of Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid The Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 1999).



of their work is representative of the critical neglect of realism and a symptom of the larger critical problem which this thesis has been tackling. On the other, their work itself represents the diversity, richness and complexity of much contemporary American writing considered realist. And if Robert Stone is right in his recent observation that we are currently witnessing "the resurgence of realism",<sup>3</sup> the prospects are promising for the continued critical under-engagement with large swathes of contemporary American fiction.

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<sup>3</sup> As a judge in *Granta* magazine's 1996 "Best of Young American Novelists" competition, Robert Stone observed that whilst the final selection of twenty young writers, reflected "a number of things which have taken place in American writing over the past twenty or thirty years" he singled out "the resurgence of realism" as the most striking trend--a judgement which Stone's co-judge, Ian Jack, considered as "the nub of the matter about new American fiction". The competition, which was modelled on the British Book Marketing Council's 1983 "Best of Young British Novelists", was judged by *Granta* editor Ian Jack, Robert Stone, Anne Tyler and Tobias Wolff. The only rubric for entry was that the authors had to be US citizens under forty who had published at least one novel or short story collection by 31 May 1995. The twenty winners included Sherman Alexie, Elizabeth McCracken and Kate Wheeler; their work was published in Ian Jack ed., *Best of Young American Novelists: Granta 54* (Summer 1986).

Stone's remarks were quoted in Ian Jack's editorial, p.13. Stone dates the current "resurgence of realism" back to the "late sixties" when a new "social realism" apparently "seemed to overcome the postmodernist experiments of writers like John Barth, John Hawkes, Albert Guerard, the Barthelmes etc." Once again then, realism is here defined in opposition to postmodernism.

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