

**Deserting Society:  
Fiction and Travel in the Shadow of the Bomb,  
1945–91**

Matthew McCann

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## **Abstract**

This thesis looks at literary responses to the Bomb as the greatest threat to humanity, examining English-language texts written between the destruction of Hiroshima and the break-up of the Soviet Union. Specifically, it investigates the representation of nuclear paranoia and the desert as a site of Cold War experience.

The Cold War security-state used discourse about the threat of the Bomb to inspire conformist paranoia among its citizens. However, excessive paranoia can lead to dissociation and non-conformity. Those in dissociative states commonly display pre-emptive tendencies, desiring to make their environment conform to their world-view. Accordingly, the Cold War citizen might wish for the Bomb to drop in order to escape their paranoia.

Since the Bomb turns society into a wasteland, flight to the archetypal wasteland of the Sahara effectively precipitates nuclear-apocalypse. Free from the shadow of the Bomb, the desert can become the site of a society free of fear.

By travelling from Jean Baudrillard's 'desert of the real' to the real desert, however, these citizens move from a place of paranoia to the birthplace of the Bomb. Their perception of the desert as a space outside society shows that they have not escaped society's constructs. The desert's disruption of these constructs, however, offers a perspective on their cultural formation and so a new narrative by which to live.

The thesis examines texts which feature Westerners travelling to the African desert by Paul Bowles, Saul Bellow, Thomas Pynchon, Lawrence Durrell, Penelope Lively and Michael Ondaatje. It argues that the Bomb lurks in the unconsciousness of the writers and their protagonists, inducing the individual to travel. With this in mind, it investigates whether the age-old idea of flight to the desert can resolve the stand-off within the individual between the narratives imposed by society and those constructed through personal experience.

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## **Introduction.**

### **Deserting Society:**

### **Fiction and Travel in the Shadow of the Bomb, 1945–91**

This thesis looks at literary responses to the Bomb as the greatest threat to humanity. To do so, it analyses fiction as part of the public discourse about the Bomb, and what Arthur Redding has called both a mechanism of and a threat to the hegemonic narrative of consensus in the first years of the atomic age.<sup>1</sup>

Specifically, it examines English-language works featuring Westerners travelling to the African desert written between the first use of the Bomb in aggression, the attack on Hiroshima in 1945, and the break-up of the Soviet Union, completed in 1991. After this event, the two ideological adversaries of the Cold War stepped back from their threats of mutual obliteration and, it can be argued, the Bomb lost its status as the principal danger to society (even if, as Jonathan Schell has pointed out, this shift in attitude is entirely mistaken).<sup>2</sup>

### **The subject of this thesis**

The Bomb loomed over the collective and individual consciousness as the principal danger to the world throughout the second half of the twentieth century. When topical events pushed it off the front pages, it continued to hang in the air overhead, at the edge of one's peripheral vision, a Fat Man behaving like a black dog (of war). Even during the years of détente between the Free World and the communist bloc following the brinkmanship over Cuba in 1962,

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1 Arthur Redding, *Turncoats, Traitors and Fellow Travelers: Culture and Politics of the Early Cold War* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2008), p. 6.

2 'It's not until 1994 that we truly saw how fear of the Bomb had declined. Four years after the fall of the USSR, James Cameron exploded a nuke just in the background of *True Lies* [...] It is a moment that shocks for its casualness.' It seems that, for popular culture, an apocalyptic end is so over. See Samira Ahmed, 'How the Bomb Changed Everything', *BBC Worldwide* <[www.bbc.com/culture/story/20150702-how-the-bomb-changed-everything](http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20150702-how-the-bomb-changed-everything)> [accessed 13AUG15]

when headlines in the West were more concerned with the Civil Rights movement in America and the UK's bid for membership of the EEC, not to mention Vietnam and decolonisation, Frank Kermode still believed that 'the paradigms of apocalypse continue to lie under our ways of making sense of the world'.<sup>3</sup> While Albert Einstein said the year after the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that '[t]he unleashed power of the atom has changed everything, save our modes of thinking, and thus we drift towards unparalleled disaster',<sup>4</sup> it can be argued that it *did* change precisely these things. After all, the awareness of humanity's ability to destroy itself and the accompanying anxiety and paranoia have ricocheted around the chambers of our brains like radioactive shrapnel ever since. This is one of the central concerns of this thesis.

Although tensions rose and fell throughout the forty-odd years of the stand-off, the narratives which the atomic-superpowers broadcast to their societies consistently maintained a stark binary so value-laden that all choice was effectively removed. Media-projections, such as images of the mushroom cloud which came to emblematised both the atomic-threat and the State's atomic-protection, fixed the world reductively, desiring to deny citizens the interpretative agency to arrive at their own understanding of the ideological confrontation. As Guy Debord says, such propaganda is the material form by reference of which ideology gains force and, in the words of Alan Nadel, the Cold War demonstrates 'the power of large cultural narratives to unify, codify, and contain – perhaps intimidate is the best word – the personal narratives of its population'.<sup>5</sup> This diffusion of information throughout society replicated and exceeded, in both material and psychological terms, the proliferation of missiles on the front-line of the conflict which it was primarily intended to justify. The

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3 Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1967), p. 28.

4 Quoted in Joseph Dewey, *In a Dark Time: The Apocalyptic Temper in the American Novel of the Nuclear Age* (West Lafayette: Purdue Research Foundation, 1990), p. 7.

5 Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), p. 4. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1994), chapter 9 (sections 212–21).

Cold War enlisted not so much the sword of Damocles as the armour of El Cid.

Living under this cloud – the threat of annihilation and their own powerlessness in the face of it – citizens were both obliged to trust in the State's protection from its Cold War enemy and aware of the danger of being associated with that political power. This strange love of the security-state demanded, in Robert Jay Lifton's words, 'a suppression of terror that preserves the illusion of normality',<sup>6</sup> a bipolar mindset to fit the bipolar world which both feared and loved the Bomb, a paranoia synonymous with patriotism and which was accordingly 'reposition[ed] from a psychological malady to a social condition'.<sup>7</sup> This produced in the West, to use Frances Stonor Saunders' phrase, 'freedomism': 'where people think they are acting freely, where in fact they are bound to forces over which they have not control',<sup>8</sup> the homeland become ideological reservation.

However, such an attempt at psychological containment was one war-game whose eventualities could not be predicted by simulated projections. While paranoia can be said to have induced citizens to conform to the State's project of defeating its enemy (to the extent that, Daniel Cordle proposes, it 'defines the period'),<sup>9</sup> another effect of paranoia is dissociation. The dissociated individual rejects their ties to society,<sup>10</sup> inhabiting a fantasy world in which an alternative reality is possible. In effect, then, paranoia can inspire political dissidence.<sup>11</sup> Even if the State could control the dissemination and interpretation of

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6 Quoted in Daniel Cordle, *States of Suspense: The Nuclear Age, Postmodernism and United States Fiction and Prose* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2008), p. 66.

7 Alan Nadel, 'Fiction and the Cold War', in *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction After 1945*, ed. by John N. Duvall (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), pp. 167–80 (p. 178).

8 Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 1999), p. 5.

9 Cordle, p. 2.

10 Sam Vaknin, *Mental Health and Psychology Dictionary*  
<<http://samvak.tripod.com/mentalhealthdictionary.html>> [accessed 13 September 2015]

11 This thinking is based on ideas about trauma in Jessica Dubow, 'A Therapeutics of Exile: Isaiah Berlin, Liberal Pluralism and the Psyche of Assimilation', *Environment and Planning A*, 44 (2012), 2463–76 (p. 2470).



information in society,<sup>12</sup> therefore, the very tensions by which it seeks to achieve its goals could undermine its campaign. Overwhelmed by paranoia, the citizen can reject the narrative necessitating the fight imposed by the State in favour of the individual impulse for flight. In *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1929), Sigmund Freud's argument suggests that the desire to travel is the expression of tension with one's home-society,<sup>13</sup> and this thesis contends that the instances of travel which it examines can be read as the articulation and negotiation of such nuclear-paranoia.

As the period under discussion witnessed, those disillusioned with the narrative of the political hegemony turned their backs on mainstream society. Arguably, this occurred most obviously in the United States during the 1960s and '70s, when 'the globalizing rhetoric of containing communism could no longer sustain the contradiction between democratic professions of US anti-imperialism, US extension of the colonialist-racialist legacy of France, and the unleashing of a US military steeped in the traditions of expansionist nationalism'.<sup>14</sup> Many of those for whom the Cold War was effectively a civil war

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12 These are equally impossible. The brain cannot accept propaganda passively, since any stimulus acquires meaning only by being fragmented and reconstituted within the cerebral cortex. When images hit civilian retinas, these representations of lethal rods in metal cones smash into rod and cone photoreceptor cells, fragmenting through bipolar cells to ganglion cells which shoot them down the optic nerve into the cerebral cortex. As with any sensory stimulus, the information is replicated throughout different parts of the cortex which specialise in understanding different aspects of that information. See Michael O'Shea, *The Brain: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), pp. 67ff.

Effectively, the brain deconstructs the world in order to construct meaning, thereby working against the intentions of the authority which disseminates propaganda (which, according to Baudrillard, has no meaning behind it). Like travel, therefore, the brain is subversive, even if it might well be biased towards the cultural influences which shape its perceptual framework.

13 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. by Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth Press, 1972). 'The liberty of the individual is no gift of civilization [...] The development of civilization imposes restrictions on it, and justice demands that no one shall escape those restrictions [...] a desire for freedom may [...] spring from the remains of their original personality, which is still untamed by civilization and may thus become the basis in them of hostility to civilization. The urge for freedom, therefore, is directed against particular forms and demands of civilization or against civilization altogether. It does not seem as though any influence could induce a man to change his nature into a termite's' (pp. 32–33).

14 Nikhil Pal Singh, 'Cold War Redux: On the "New Totalitarianism"', *Radical History Review*, 85 (2003), 171–81 (p. 175).

'within the selfsame western modernity'<sup>15</sup> effected a physical distance from society, the canvas of the State's projections, to complement their ideological departure.<sup>16</sup> As Roderick Nash writes, '[w]ilderness appealed to those bored or disgusted with man and his works'.<sup>17</sup> Some opted for self-exile within the familiar world in an attempt to construct a counter-narrative which better spoke for them, such as Ken Kesey. Others sought to expose themselves to alternative ways of making sense of the world by travelling to non-aligned states which suggested a parity with their own non-aligned states. As Redding writes, the bid to secure freedom 'came to be seen as the defining and increasingly global struggle of the age',<sup>18</sup> and not only outside the Free World.

While it was hardly unprecedented for individuals to travel to other parts of the world in search of that which they felt their own society denied them, this practice accorded with the increasingly international experience of the average Western, particularly American, individual during the first decades of the atomic age. This shift occurred on account of not only the West's involvement in the overseas military campaigns of the Second World War and regional 'hot' wars (such as in Korea and Vietnam) and the advent of mass-tourism in the 1970s but also, closer to home, the proliferation of television from the 1950s onwards.<sup>19</sup>

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15 Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010), p. 24, quoted in Steven Belletto and Daniel Grausam, 'Introduction: Culture and Cold Conflict', in *American Literature and Culture in an Age of Cold War: A Critical Reassessment*, ed. by Steven Belletto and Daniel Grausam (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2012), pp. 1–14 (p. 7).

16 The paradox of the Cold War security-state is materialised at the border between the two hemispheres of the brain. The dissociated citizen's tensions are manifested physically in the hippocampus, which is the site of paranoia, navigation and the narratives which create our sense of self and the world. Paranoia is associated with a smaller-than-average hippocampus, while the hippocampus of someone who travels a lot and is adept at navigation is larger than average. See Simon Garfield, *On the Map: Why the World Looks the Way It Does* (London: Profile, 2012), pp. 411–12.

17 Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2001), p. 47.

18 Redding, p. 9.

19 Of course, television was also an important medium for the dissemination of conformist messages. In a world of replication (of images, missiles) and the manipulation of language for political ends (see Ann Douglas, 'Periodizing the American Century: Modernism, Postmodernism, and Postcolonialism in the Cold War Context', *Modernism/Modernity*, 5 (1998), 71–98 (p. 81); and Nadel, *Containment*, p. 38 and p. 168), the compulsive replication of

Of the destinations which attracted those disillusioned with Western society, the desert exerted a particular pull. Needless to say, the desert has long been identified as a place of escape from society. Regarded as an empty quarter of the planet, it is a space which is up for grabs; in Zygmunt Bauman's words, 'the desert [is] nothingness waiting to become something'.<sup>20</sup> It is the polar opposite of society with its aspirations for rationalism: a place of death, of madness, where people find gods, where mirages abound and confound. In *Man in the Landscape: A Historical View of the Esthetics of Nature*, Paul Shepard describes it thus:

[t]he desert is the environment of revelation, genetically and physiologically alien, sensorily austere, esthetically abstract, historically inimical [...] To the desert go prophets and hermits; through deserts go pilgrims and exiles. Here the leaders of the great religions have sought the therapeutic and spiritual values of retreat, not to escape but to find reality.<sup>21</sup>

In short, it is a place of ambiguity, disrupting unitary definitions and so binary oppositions, all certainties found to be written in sand. Inevitably, as reflected in a shared etymological root – the Latin *ambigere* – it is a place of wandering.

Its reputation as a site of 'revolutionary' ideas of stateless nomadism and cathartic retreat is signalled during this era by the countercultural and artistic communities of Westerners which set down roots of greater or lesser robustness in one or another desert-space. To restrict an illustrative selection to well-known English-language writers who visited North Africa in the years immediately following the Second World War, Paul and Jane Bowles, William S. Burroughs, Truman Capote, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Joe Orton and Tennessee

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behaviours and neologisms observed in states of dissociative paranoia such as bipolar and borderline disorders and schizophrenia (see Vaknin, n.p.) can appear understandable counter-strategies. As Alan Nadel has written, paranoia is produced by a surfeit of narrative ('Paranoia, Terrorism, and the Fictional Condition of Knowledge', *Contemporary Literature*, 43 (2002), 406–21 (p. 421)) and, in light of this, such tendencies can be seen as defensive mechanisms on the part of the individual to replace the confusion which arises from living in society with a coherent narrative of their own.

20 Zygmunt Bauman, 'From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity', in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 1996), pp. 18–36 (p. 21).

21 Paul Shepard, *Man in the Landscape: A Historical View of the Esthetics of Nature* (College Station: Texas A&M UP, 1991), pp. 43–44.

Williams spring readily to mind. The Sahara in which these individuals based themselves for anything between a couple of months and over fifty years is the archetypal desert in the Western imaginary, arguably on account of its historical significance to Europe combined with its exoticism, as well as its size, being the world's largest save for the frozen wastes of Antarctica with their quite distinct cultural associations. During the Cold War, all these factors tied in with the region's largely non-aligned status to cast it as a space outside the East–West bipolarity.

Travel to the desert is thus an ideal expression of ideological disidentification. Its perceived emptiness is the perfect alternative to a society over-inscribed with totalising Cold War projections (be they capitalist, communist or even countercultural). However, I would argue that this is only part of the significance of the desert for the disillusioned citizens of the atomic era.

Those in dissociative states commonly try to make their environment conform to their desires. These can include the desire to bring about that which is feared, since this would endorse the sufferer's sense of the world. Summarising the psychoanalyst Franz Alexander's article, 'The Bomb and the Human Psyche' (1949), Paul Boyer writes: 'Having contrived the means of his destruction, Alexander speculated, man might find irresistible the temptation to escape forever the stresses of the atomic age and subconsciously conclude that “a painless end” was preferable to “endless pain”'.<sup>22</sup> In other words, those who disidentify with Cold War society on account of the tensions it generates might wish for the Bomb to drop.

As Jacques Derrida says, until it occurs, nuclear-apocalypse exists only in being written or talked about, invented, for all the reality of the weaponry and dread it inspires,<sup>23</sup> and so our imagination is the present battleground of the

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<sup>22</sup> Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill and London: U of North Carolina P, 1994), p. 342.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)',

atomic confrontation between one state and another and between State and individual. In the same way that, as Michel Foucault maintains, discourse is a fundamental tool of control, 'narrative [i]s a technology of sanity'.<sup>24</sup> While the individual cannot prevent the Bomb being launched or its effects, they have agency with regards to the effect of the Bomb before that moment, their sense of self and the world and thus how they live their life. By rejecting the hegemonic narrative of atomic antagonism, the individual sheds the double-consciousness – that one has to get on with everyday life while being aware that the Bomb could fall at any moment – which creates not so much what Robert Lifton identified as the 'double life' of Cold War experience as an atomic half-life of the split-self held hostage by the nuclear-state.<sup>25</sup> By constructing an alternative narrative of their own, they can escape their paranoia, stop waiting for death and start to live.<sup>26</sup> This ambition is the central interest of the thesis which follows.

While the paranoid Cold War state might contemplate launching a pre-emptive strike in order to vanquish the enemy, therefore, the dissociative Cold War citizen might imaginatively launch a pre-emptive strike of their own in order to beat the Bomb. While Franz Alexander imagined humanity's drive for pre-emption leading to destruction, Erich Fromm advocated thus '[d]eveloping one's imagination, not as an escape from intolerable circumstances but as the anticipation of real possibilities, as a means to do away with intolerable circumstances'.<sup>27</sup> By unconsciously calling down the apocalypse, the individual is able to imagine the unimaginable and assuage the anxiety which has arisen from

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trans. by Catherine Porter and Philip Lewis, *Diacritics*, 14 (1984), 20–31 (pp. 23–24).

24 Daniel Grausam, "It is Only a Statement of the Power of What Comes After": Atomic Nostalgia and the Ends of Postmodernism', *American Literary History*, 24 (2012), 308–36 (p. 323).

25 Robert Jay Lifton and Richard A. Falk, *Indefensible Weapons: The Political and Psychological Case Against Nuclearism* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), p. 52.

26 Jonathan Schell writes that such a feeling of well-being is based on a denial of the reality of the nuclear-threat, and so is a kind of psychological sickness. However, since – in Bryan Taylor's words – "realistic" nuclear discourses enforce passivity and inhibit reflexivity', it can be said that this denial signals a refusal to accept one's imposed fate. See Schell, *The Fate of the Earth and The Abolition* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), p. 8, and Bryan C. Taylor, 'Nuclear Pictures and Metapictures', *American Literary History*, 9 (1997), 567–97 (p. 593).

27 Erich Fromm, *To Have or to Be?* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978), p. 171.

the constant anticipation of annihilation. This impulse for simulation mirrors the reason Stanley Kubrick gave for making *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964): 'It was very important to deal with this problem [nuclear war] dramatically because it's the only social problem where there's absolutely no chance for people to learn anything from experience'.<sup>28</sup>

Just as the desert was a test-site for the atomic scientists, so it is for the dissenter: a crucible of experimentation in which to forge a new narrative to make the Bomb actual, confrontable and so psychologically containable and fuse the split-self into a whole. The Bomb can turn society into a desert, transmuting the Manhattan Project to New Mexico, and transforming Japanese cities into wastelands. Jonathan Schell registered the same correlation: 'Now we are on our way to work, walking through the city streets, but in a moment we may be standing on an empty plain under a darkened sky looking for the charred remnants of our children'.<sup>29</sup> In response, the dissident, sensible to the decay of their half-life in what the philosopher Jean Baudrillard in 1981 called 'the desert of the real'<sup>30</sup> – society over-inscribed with and indeed constructed by propagandic projections – might flee their unclear (sic) Cold War state (in both senses), unconsciously desiring to turn the desert into a society.

Of course, the fact that the Sahara became increasingly non-aligned over the course of the period on account of decolonisation did not remove it from the Cold War contest, but quite the opposite. Not only was it vulnerable to fallout in the event of conflict, it was where the Bomb was tested when the French joined the club in 1960. Not only was it beholden to the atomic narratives broadcast by the superpowers, it had the potential to become the Ground Zero of their ideological confrontation, as demonstrated by the regions engulfed in its 'hot' wars. The further that the individual travelled from the Iron Curtain, the more

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1991), p. 219.

<sup>29</sup> Schell, p. 182.

<sup>30</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994), p. 1.

they might find themselves wrapped up in it, as the race for the moon confirmed.<sup>31</sup>

In truth, the Sahara was located outside the ideological stand-off by the Western narrative of the desert. In a sense, then, those travellers who were disgruntled with the status quo were simply turning to older cultural constructs. This chimes with Baudrillard's view that the individual is contained within their socially constructed perceptual framework and lacks the agency to resist ideology and to arrive at alternative meanings. As the cultural geographer Graham Huggan writes, '[a] simulacrum of the world (or part of it) is produced through the participation of the intellect in the abstract reorganization of its "natural object": the external environment. But this participation is never neutral' on account of 'the anterior presence of the West'.<sup>32</sup> Contamination – cultural as much as radioactive – penetrates even the Sahara. Much of Baudrillard's work accordingly examines how protest and resistance is authorised, incorporated and co-opted by the symbolic system of capitalism and, in this way, the contradictions of Cold War society are contained. Paul Kubalek suggests that those who travel seek not difference but equivalence to the

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31 In the West, Russia was equated with the inscrutable, dangerous Orient. See *Memoirs, 1925–50* (1967) by George Kennan, the director of Secretary of State George Marshall's policy-planning staff during Truman's presidency (referenced in Nadel, *Containment Culture*, p. 31).

Ultimately, the fantasy is society's narrative of itself as a site of certainties and of its Other (whether the communist state or the desert) as a place of hardship and madness in its effort to neutralise the possibility of its citizens defecting to the other side. As William Pietz states, '[t]he idea of totalitarianism is the theoretical anchor of cold war discourse' ('The "Postcolonialism" of Cold War Discourse', *Social Text*, 19/20 (1988), 55–75 (p. 55)). While the Western propaganda refers to fascist and communist totalitarianism, the Western security-state can feel analogous for the individual citizen: it is similarly 'a lying world order' which similarly 'fabricate[s] reality' (Hannah Arendt, 'On the Nature of Totalitarianism', in *Arendt: Essays in Understanding 1930–1954 – Uncollected and Unpublished Works by Hannah Arendt*, ed. by Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1994), pp. 328–60 (p. 354)). Arendt writes that totalitarian tyranny turns the world into a 'desert of isolation and atomization' (p. 349), although '[t]he desert [of the real] in which these individual, fearfully atomized men move retains an image [of the real desert], though a distorted one, of that space which human freedom needs' (p. 344).

32 Graham Huggan, 'Decolonizing the Map: Postcolonialism, Poststructuralism and the Cartographic Connection', in *Interdisciplinary Measures: Literature and the Future of Postcolonial Studies*, by Graham Huggan (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2008), pp. 21–33 (p. 25).

familiar, that is, their home-society's narrative of difference.<sup>33</sup>

However, the encountered desert cannot be directly equivalent to this expectation since no narrative can comprehensively contain experience. As Daniel Grausam points out, no one-sided model can ever effectively simulate the world.<sup>34</sup> The desert – both fantasy and real – *is* different to Western society and so the narratives it can produce. (Indeed, Jonathan Schell notes that, for all the association between desert-spaces and the Bomb, in the event of a nuclear-exchange America's deserts would not be targeted since they are uninhabited.)<sup>35</sup> Here, therefore, the West's rules are obliterated. The desert is not understandable and so it is undesirable: it is an empty space, a site of death. The simulation of wilderness in society results in the stimulation of bewilderment beyond it. As Edward Abbey says, it is a space of unconscious fear.<sup>36</sup> It is a Baudrillardian singularity, that which lies outside the system brought within, but continuing to elude containment since it can never be definitively determined.<sup>37</sup> Even if this reality is found to be lacking when weighed against one's cultural preconceptions and so dismissed,<sup>38</sup> it disrupts the individual's

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33 Paul Kubalek, 'The Tourist Gaze', Chelsea College of Arts and Design MA Graphic Design Communications 2008, 1 <[www.kubalek.at/download/KubalekPaul-MAGDC-TheTouristGazeEssay\\_end.pdf](http://www.kubalek.at/download/KubalekPaul-MAGDC-TheTouristGazeEssay_end.pdf)> [accessed 30 May 2012]

34 Daniel Grausam, 'Games People Play: Metafiction, Defense Strategy, and the Cultures of Simulation', *ELH*, 78 (2011), 507–32 (pp. 517ff).

35 Schell, p. 59.

36 Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), p. 191.

37 Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2001), pp. 130–31. For a concise explanation of this idea, see Paul Hegarty, *Jean Baudrillard: Live Theory* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 161–63. In this sense it is a counterpart to the Bomb, an idea I will return to later in the thesis.

38 For example, the desert might appear as not authentically exotic (that is, disappointing when compared to the fantasy) or threatening (that is, simply too different). Such symbols of exotic difference are purveyed by the Western fantasy and so identified as authentic. Significantly, 'authenticity' derives from the Latin *authenticus*, meaning 'coming from the author'. Of course, a narrative's author can be hidden – as Rem Koolhaas says, the authorless is authoritarian ('Junkspace', *October*, 100 (2002), 175–90 (p. 185)) – and this is how it derives its authority. Relevant here are two dominant theories behind the motive to travel, John Urry's one of difference and Dean MacCannell's of authenticity, the search in others' lives for the real denied by one's own society. See Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (London: Sage, 1990) and MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (London: Macmillan, 1976). MacCannell writes that the modernist mindset seeks authenticity or reality elsewhere (p. 3), a scenario which is



interpretive passivity, the social narrative's authority. By thus defying conceptual frameworks, it throws into relief their constructed nature and the culturally informed interpretative process they construct which strives to contain the individual. In the face of the inflexible authoritarianism of hegemonic projections, therefore, the desert can all the more expose the certainties of Fortress America as mere Castles Bravos<sup>39</sup> built on sand and inspire a dialogic construction of meaning better able to negotiate multiplicitous reality.

Therefore, even while Baudrillard does not believe that travel can take us beyond the system, it is not correct to say that it does not have a value. Even before the Westerner arrives there, the desert is a meeting-place of the different cultures which abut and cross it, a space in which different ways of making sense of the world converge. Far from being empty or dead, it is full and alive, a space of alternative truths.<sup>40</sup> Travel thus both facilitates and imbeds dissociation, creating a perspective with which the individual can more easily test society's projections of meaning against others (since it is not possible to test them against the world, given that experience is always mediated). 'When the system is imposed on cultures perceptibly different from that of the dominant', Huggan writes, inconsistencies 'are brought to light'.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, in the words of Peter Osborne, travel can produce 'a more emphatic apprehension of the world's independence, its physical otherness that culture never entirely absorbs – the strangeness and ecstasy of things'.<sup>42</sup>

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played out in the first two texts examined in this thesis; the protagonists of the others instead engage with their own constructedness, recognising the the real is subjective.

39 After the test-accident at this site in 1954, the idea of limited and survivable nuclear war gave way to the notion of nuclear war meaning the end of civilisation.

40 As T. E. Lawrence writes, in the desert 'the madness was very near, as I believe it would be near the man who could see things through the veils at once of two customs, two educations, two environments'. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (New York: Vintage, 2008), p. 30.

41 Huggan, discussing Said, p. 22.

42 Peter D. Osborne, *Travelling Light: Photography, Travel and Visual Culture* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000), p. 190.

Faced with this singularity, the prospect it affords (like the Bomb) of the horizon of system, the dissident has the same choice as all travellers: they can either run from or run towards. Neither direction will take them to a reality or truth, since these are constructs of narrative. Each leads only to ambiguity. (It is worth noting that even the individual who chooses to retreat to the familiarity of social constructs is still affected by their experience of the desert, just as the Western metropole was influenced by its neo-colonial project.)<sup>43</sup>

For Baudrillard, ambiguity has the potential to bring us to ourselves; in fact, it is the only means to do so. As the literary theorist Louis Montrose writes,

the very process of subjectively *living* the confrontations or contradictions *within* or *among* ideological formations makes it possible for us to experience facets of our own subjection at shifting internal distances – to read [...] one fragment of our ideological inscription by means of another.<sup>44</sup>

The experience of ambiguity makes clear that we have a choice of two falsities, (hegemonic) simulation or (personal) illusion.<sup>45</sup> The latter is an illusion of truth which counters the insubstantiality and hopelessness of a world of simulation; an illusion, but which includes the option of vital illusion, which is aware of its fictitious nature. This does not, in Baudrillard's view, give the individual agency to contest the system. Indeed, he is pessimistic about even the individual's ability to depart from the interpretive schema imposed by the hegemony. However, it is possible to draw an analogy between vital illusion and the cultural geographer Erik Cohen's concept of existential authenticity, which refers to the traveller's self-determination through a passage of conscious continual negotiation among different social narratives.<sup>46</sup> These words of Denchu Jose Decino are instructive in this matter: 'Authenticity defines itself as lacking any

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43 Douglas, p. 78.

44 Louis Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theatre* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1996), p. 16 (emphasis in original).

45 Hegarty, p. 88.

46 Erik Cohen, "Authenticity" in *Tourism Studies: Après la Lutte*, in *Critical Debates in Tourism*, ed. by Tej Vir Singh (Bristol, Buffalo and Toronto: Channel View Publications, 2012), pp. 250–61 (p. 258).

definition. It is a pathos of incessant change, as opposed to a passive subordination to one particular ethic'.<sup>47</sup> Such an approach sketches what might be seen as a common ground between Baudrillard's pessimism and a more Gramscian relationship between the individual and ideology, and during its investigations this thesis is open to the possibility that one can thus step out from under the shadow of one's cultural preconceptions. After all, even within society, the individual's interpretation is not determined by mainstream culture, since they encounter alternative narratives and counter-cultures.

Either way, the Baudrillardian scholar Paul Hegarty argues that the hope inspired by our perceiving that there is an outside to the system and a self to which we can be brought which, the philosopher contends, is as much as we can aim for, is worth aiming for as an end in itself.<sup>48</sup> This goal chimes with the interest of this thesis in the possibility of escaping nuclear-paranoia. In *Letter Bomb: Nuclear Holocaust and the Exploding Word*, Peter Schwenger calls hope 'the prime instrument of change', without which 'the material world will never even enter into negotiation with human desire'.<sup>49</sup> Reviewing Schwenger's work, Clair James expands on this point:

With hope, even the destructive potential of nuclear weapons does not present a dead future for humans; rather, realization of these weapons' destructive potential acts like an explosion in our imaginations, presenting us with the impossibility of the future as we have imagined and created it in the present. This blockage leads to imagining new and different futures, and thus, to the possibility of a future at all.<sup>50</sup>

In this way, the ambiguous space of the desert might prove a stable foundation. As Grausam says, the atomic narrative cuts the individual off from the future.<sup>51</sup>

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47 Denchu Jose Decino, 'Brief Overview of the Sartrean Notion of Authenticity', in *Sartre Online* <[www.oocities.org/sartresite/articles\\_ethics\\_1.html](http://www.oocities.org/sartresite/articles_ethics_1.html)> [accessed 14 September 2015]

48 Hegarty, p. 88.

49 Peter Schwenger, *Letter Bomb: Nuclear Holocaust and the Exploding Word* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1992), p. 143.

50 Clair James, 'Book Reviews', *Configurations*, 2 (1994), 367–71 (p. 370).

51 See Daniel Grausam, *On Endings: American Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2011).

By pre-empting the Bomb, the individual rejects the atomic-death of society, which can only be anticipated since it will happen too quickly to be experienced and will leave no one behind to bear witness to it, and gives death a narrative, thereby gaining authorship over their lives. They create a future despite the cultural edict that there is none. As Cordle suggests, such an alternative projection of the world can destabilise and momentarily negate the real life of nuclear apprehension.<sup>52</sup> In this way, the paranoid Cold War citizen might transform their distressing 'surfeit of narrative'<sup>53</sup> into a harmonious synthesis. Unlike the pre-emptive strategies of the nuclear state, therefore, those of the dissatisfied citizen are not necessarily suicidal. By deserting society, they might find a place in which to cultivate a new life.



This thesis argues that the state-sponsored nuclear threat and the accompanying demands on the individual which are associated with, but not restricted to, the Cold War lurk in the consciousness and unconsciousness of the writers and their protagonists as a tension with society which induces the individual to travel. No less than the Cold War's 'hot' wars, therefore, or flight to the desert, fiction can be '[a]n exercise in geographic and psychological displacement'<sup>54</sup> to negotiate one's tensions. By examining this conflict in works of fiction, the thesis acknowledges another layer of tension in an era when narrative was the battleground. Not only do the tensions within and without the texts reflect and influence the other, but the narrative strategies which authors employed in response to the society in which they lived can be seen to mirror political discourse and atomic reality.

With this in mind, the thesis investigates whether these representations suggest that travel to the desert is a means to resolve the stand-off which exists within the individual – namely, the conflict between their cultural construction

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<sup>52</sup> Cordle, p. 71.

<sup>53</sup> Nadel, 'Paranoia', p. 421.

<sup>54</sup> Douglas, p. 77.

and their sentiments of dissent – by writing a new narrative. Conceived in this way, the desert embodies

[t]he notion of a 'Third Way' – or of a left-leaning, non-materialist politics that challenged Western capitalism without succumbing to the iniquities of Stalinism – [which] was a common pursuit of Western and Eastern bloc literatures. Stephen Spender's assertion [in *The God that Failed*], in 1949, 'that neither great power had the solution to the world's problems' was a direct assault on the choice between the two 'alternative ways of life' proposed by the Truman doctrine, and one that would have struck a chord with many writers around the world.<sup>55</sup>

The novels examined do not necessarily deal explicitly with the Bomb. Nevertheless, I argue, in its absence it is present. As Derrida wrote in 1984, 'the hypothesis of a total nuclear war, [...] or, if you prefer, [...] a fantasy, [...] conditions every discourse and all strategies'.<sup>56</sup> The paranoid narrative can be hidden underground. In the same way, these texts do not necessarily reference the ideological confrontation in which the Bomb was deployed and which threatened total nuclear war, but were written in its shadow and so are read for the existential and psychological effect of the Bomb's potential for annihilation on the individual. Fundamentally, the thesis contends that the protagonists of the texts are trapped in the instant of the Bomb; even at the moment of victory over Japan, the American public knew that it was only a matter of time before another power acquired the technology to build a Bomb which could be dropped on them.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, this research concerns itself primarily with the perennial conflict between the individual and society, and how this conflict is informed and complicated by underlying cultural constructs. These constructs – ideas of individual autonomy, society and its outside – are, of course, shaped by the historical moment in which they are referenced, negotiated and contested.

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55 Andrew Hammond, 'From Rhetoric to Rollback: Introductory Thoughts on Cold War Writing', in *Cold War Literature: Writing the Global Conflict*, ed. by Andrew Hammond (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1–14 (p. 11).

56 Derrida, p. 23. The English translation was published before the French edition (see *Futures: Of Jacques Derrida*, ed. by Richard Rand (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001), p. 251 note 61).

57 Boyer, pp. 14–16.

The politics and strategies which produced and mushroomed around the Bomb are necessary to understand the tensions.

Accordingly, Cold War scholarship provides a framework to talk about the tensions in the examined literature, and is supplemented by other influential thinking of the era, primarily that of Baudrillard. In this way, this research produces an investigation of a specific instance of the individual trying to carve freedom in the face of the State arrogating control while at the same time having application beyond its period of historical concern.

## **Methodology and theoretical perspectives**

The thesis draws on a range of theoretical and critical perspectives in order to support my analysis of the nuclear-paranoia and deserts of the five novels. These include leading theorists in cultural geography and tourism studies on account of the experience of travel portrayed in the texts, and ideas from neuroscience which help explore the relationship between narrative and experience (or, more precisely, narrative which is imposed on the individual and narrative generated by the individual). I also apply Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of 'becoming' as a resistance to the fixed identity dictated by the social hegemony.

The common concern of these different approaches is the stand-off between different projections of meaning which is played out across the individual. As is evident from the setting out of the field of study above, the work of Jean Baudrillard decisively informs the thesis' reading of the novels which follows. His most useful ideas in this regard date from the 1980s onwards, when he turned his attention from an explicit critique of Marxism to investigating the system of symbols and media which capitalism uses to preserve and extend itself.

Central to this line of thinking is his hypothesis of simulacra outlined in his essay 'The Precession of Simulacra', which first appeared in French in 1981.

Baudrillard argues that the experienced world is now merely simulation, that is, a succession of images (of threats and difference, protection and conformity). There is no tangible reality or meaning behind them and so simulation is a system purely of forces and tensions, namely indeterminate structures and binaries<sup>58</sup> which evade any attempts at assessment or valuation, without any centre which the individual can oppose. This is the 'desert of the real', experience dissociated from meaning.<sup>59</sup> This dissociation in itself does not undermine the system, since the system is always indeterminate. Similarly, while the individual can try to resist this 'perfect crime', their resistance can be co-opted by the system to reinforce its dominance, in accordance with ideas which Baudrillard first developed in the 1970s when dismantling Marxism and structuralism.

Bound up in the system's arrogation of interpretive agency is its exclusion of death – he deemed the United States effectively a death-free society<sup>60</sup> – and consequent command over the individual's life and death which was at the heart of Cold War experience. Baudrillard writes that '[t]he nuclear is the apotheosis of simulation'.<sup>61</sup> The Cold War constructed a reality it was simultaneously determined to prevent, its theory of deterrence maintaining that the very possibility of nuclear strikes made them impossible.<sup>62</sup> The State imposes its command by promising to protect the individual from the threat of nuclear-attack (which, of course, itself comes from the State), making the individual unavoidably indebted to the State. As Baudrillard states, the undetonated Bomb radiates a system of control.<sup>63</sup> However, the individual can deprive the State of this power by mimicking the system's indeterminacy through effectively taking

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58 Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. by Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993), p. 57.

59 Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, p. 1.

60 Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London and New York: Verso, 1988), pp. 43–44.

61 Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, p. 32. (This phrasing, which I feel is more effective, actually comes from the translation of this essay in *Simulations*, trans. by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), pp. 1–79 (p. 58).)

62 Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, pp. 32–33.

63 Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, p. 42.

their own life,<sup>64</sup> such as by pre-empting nuclear-apocalypse as I suggest occurs in the texts examined. This opposition is not absorbed by the system to becoming the Other by which it justifies itself, since the individual is rejecting the system's control not to reclaim life but throw it away. This does not push back against the system but undermines it, exposing the State's claims to protect as mere simulation, and not attempting to gain anything more. However, since the symbolic economy in which the relations between State and individual operate dictates that 'power [...] resides in the act of giving without being given',<sup>65</sup> to regain dominance the State must repay the individual in kind and destroy itself.

Unsurprisingly, the system will not do this, and so reveals itself as untenable. The death which it (or, indeed, every closed system or fixed meaning) excludes remains at its heart.<sup>66</sup> The Cold War system is ultimately undermined by the Bomb on which it founds itself, hence its instabilities inspire the individual's dissent. For Baudrillard, this glimpse of the limits of the system is enough. Since, as Derrida says, the Bomb which the individual fears is purely speculative, a propaganda of paranoia, I argue that this narrative of the system's shortcomings is a means to escape one's paranoia. My readings equate this horizon of the system, the site of death, with the desert. Baudrillard believes that the individual cannot escape the system of simulation; experience is always mediated by narrative-constructs (precluding 'Truth' or 'reality') and, accordingly, the thesis does not ask whether the individual can escape to the 'real' desert but whether they can escape their cultural preconceptions to an alternative narrative.

## **Influential Cold War criticism**

Published in 2012, Steven Belletto and Daniel Grausam's *American Literature*

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64 Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, p. 5.

65 Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, p. 40.

66 Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, p. 4.



*and Culture in an Age of Cold War: A Critical Reassessment* begins with one of the best overviews of the development of Cold War literary studies and its recent areas and approaches of investigation. The authors duly credit Thomas Hill Schaub and Alan Nadel with the major works which established the field, agreeing with Adam Piette that Schaub's *American Fiction in the Cold War* (1991) 'really launched Cold War literary criticism'.<sup>67</sup>

This work demonstrates how fiction and criticism in the first decades following the Second World War reshaped and extended the liberal narrative in the light of the recently experienced horrors and the uncertainties then confronting America, as registered in the shift from positivist morality to sceptical ambiguity. Through close-readings, Schaub shows how the ahistorical individualism championed at the time ultimately reinforced Cold War polarities and conformism.<sup>68</sup> Nadel provides a bedrock for my own project by examining how the containment strategy of this beleaguered Left, determined to counter the spread of communism around the world, pervaded American society and culture in an attempt to manufacture public consensus for anti-Soviet policies, as set out in *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism and the Atomic Age* (1995). He details how, while books and films were enlisted in support of the hegemonic narrative, others engaged with it critically, and argues that the postmodernist ambiguity and irony of the 1960s was a reflection of the fragmentation of consensus around containment ideology in the face of its increasingly evident contradictions.

As Belletto and Grausam argue, these two studies have proved so influential that the perception of Cold War culture generally to be a culture of containment has coloured much subsequent work in the field.<sup>69</sup> Strictly speaking, the idea of containment held sway only during the long 1950s (c.1946–

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<sup>67</sup> Belletto and Grausam, pp. 4–6. Adam Piette, *The Literary Cold War: 1945 to Vietnam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009), p. 6.

<sup>68</sup> For example, see Thomas Hill Schaub, *American Fiction in the Cold War* (Madison and London: U of Wisconsin P, 1991), pp. 22–23 and p. 81 respectively.

<sup>69</sup> Belletto and Grausam, p. 5.

c.1964) and, even then, as Douglas Field notes in his study of that period, its Manichaeic worldview 'was increasingly adopted at [the] time when the very divisions were constantly threatening to collapse'.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, Belletto and Grausam identify two alternative conceptualisations of Cold War culture informing scholarship since the turn of the millennium, namely a model of international integration, which regards the world as a potential network of alliances and opportunities, and the 'three worlds' concept which informed J.F.K.'s exhortation to win the hearts and minds of the non-aligned world in the place of the bipolar neo-imperialism of containment.<sup>71</sup> The authors point out that original and interesting contributions to the field have recently been produced by flexibly drawing on elements of one or more of these frameworks.<sup>72</sup> One example is Adam Piette's *The Literary Cold War* (2009), which employs everything from psychiatry to genetics to dig into the ways in which British and American writers negotiated the antagonisms which penetrated the furthest corners of the planet.

While the texts I analyse provide an insight into the thoughts of their protagonists, in my attempt to delve further into the cultural formation which frames their ideas and experiences, I draw on a number of other studies of Cold War experience. Jonathan Schell's comprehensive and admonitory *The Fate of the Earth* (1982) is a useful re-immersion in the consciousness of ever-present MADness, while Robert Jay Lifton's insights over three decades into the psychological shadow of the Bomb help forge numerous and, it is hoped, fruitful connections.

Additionally, given the central concern with the power of imposed narratives, studies of the meanings of the mushroom cloud by Peggy Rosenthal and Peter Hales, Bryan Taylor's exploration of the relationship between images

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<sup>70</sup> Douglas Field, 'Introduction', in *American Cold War Culture*, ed. by Douglas Field (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2005), pp. 1–13 (p. 4).

<sup>71</sup> Belletto and Grausam. pp. 6–7.

<sup>72</sup> Belletto and Grausam, p. 8.

and experience, and Paul Boyer's study of the influence of the Bomb in American public consciousness, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (1985), are also recurring touchstones. As a consequence, I use the term 'simulation' alternately in both the pure Baudrillardian sense and the more-common meaning of a representation or reproduction which, mirroring the counterculture's mission to collapse ostensible distinctions, creates new ways of thinking.

The research I present complements two studies published in 2008, extending some of the lines of thought they pursue. Arthur Redding's *Turncoats, Traitors and Fellow Travelers: Culture and Politics of the Early Cold War* looks at British and American writing and film of the long 1950s in a global context, asking how they 'variously accommodated, refused, refigured, or interrupted' the consensus narrative of freedom, founded on a binary opposition to communism framed in the language of containment.<sup>73</sup> My thesis expands Redding's period of investigation to the end of the Cold War, and broadens the field from writers who considered their work to be politically and socially engaged in postwar America and the wider world (and so either tried to accommodate hegemonic discourses or formed what he calls a 'fugitive culture' of exile within or outside the West)<sup>74</sup> to feature those who regarded themselves as apolitical and so constitute a circle of covert cultural containment further removed from the epicentre of the Bomb. While all are nomads after a fashion at the time of writing or before (two expats, a son of immigrants, a stint of military service, two colonial upbringings), I approach their texts as the principal expressions of the flight compelled by their tensions with Western society.

My work also follows Daniel Cordle's *States of Suspense: The Nuclear Age, Postmodernism and United States Fiction and Prose*. This study looks at a range of American and British texts, with Cordle pointing out that this is only appropriate given the importance of Atlanticism in the period. His central idea

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<sup>73</sup> Redding, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> Redding, pp. 4–5.

is that, while previous Cold War literary criticism has examined fictional representations of nuclear armageddon, it has overlooked the portrayal of the 'extended anticipation' of disaster<sup>75</sup> which manifests as a 'subtly felt anxiety [which] permeates consciousness and culture, making itself felt unevenly and indirectly',<sup>76</sup> which he considers defines the era.

With this in mind, Cordle rereads texts dealing with nuclear catastrophe for their depiction of anticipatory suspense, but also looks at texts which do not explicitly deal with the threat for 'the signatures of the nuclear presence in everyday life'.<sup>77</sup> Accordingly, his work becomes an analysis of the political/personal duality of Cold War experience which casts a pall of meaninglessness over everyday life and, more broadly, the relationship between the hegemony and the individual in this historical moment and how, in the absence of nuclear abolition or annihilation, the individual can find a way to live. It is in this regard that the present project most closely aligns with his.

Where it differs, as in relation to Redding's book, is that it engages with novels in which the atomic spectre is arguably more covert, the writers' and protagonists' psychological displacement decidedly long-haul. Cordle observes that, while nature can be the site of annihilation, it also holds the promise of a future. My extended study of this trope consolidates the implication that nature can be a more constructive option than the domestic sphere<sup>78</sup> for those wishing to escape the propaganda of paranoia. Furthermore, it suggests that the idea of flight to the desert, even if it is found to be ultimately flawed, has an advantage over the illusory comfort of the domestic-shelter of the readers' own experience on account of the hope which attends such aspirations, while being more tangible than the fanciful wish-fulfilment which is the portrayal of nuclear explosions.<sup>79</sup>

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75 Cordle, p. 2.

76 Cordle, p. 116.

77 Cordle, p. 1.

78 Cordle, pp. 33–34.

79 Cordle, pp. 126–27.

My focus on the desert also allows me to approach the subject chronologically, whereas Cordle organises his study in terms of scale (home, city, planet). This enables him to make many interesting connections and lead his reader down unexpected paths, but I feel that the chronological progression I trace can contribute a dimension to his exploration by uncovering and analysing the evolution (or lack thereof) in the doubts and dilemmas concerning their relationship with official discourse and the threat of obliteration with which the dissident Western individual is confronted over the course of the Cold War.

Like other recent contributions to literary criticism on the atomic age, the current project employs different interpretive frameworks where they are of use without being beholden to any one of them. Most evidently, it draws on ideas associated with containment culture in its analysis of texts published even long after it was disrupted by public-awareness of its designs. This is because the focus is on the Western protagonist and their struggle to escape their cultural preconceptions of the world, and such cultural containment is a phenomenon which did not come to an end in the early 1960s, just as nuclear paranoia continued to exist throughout the period and, indeed, beyond. At its most basic level, the political policy's implication for the Westerner was, as Redding describes, 'a persistent and ubiquitous [on an increasingly global scale] psychopolitical apparatus [...] designed to disarm, swallow up, and, most remarkably, render complicit oppositional discourses via a persuasive either/or logic' which 'decisively pitted an abstract and often nebulous "freedom" against a demonized "totalitarian tyranny"'.<sup>80</sup> Seen in cultural terms, containment underpins subsequent Cold War normative discourses which could equally be internalised by the individual, irrespective of the level of dissident dissonance to which they were also exposed. In the same way, nuances of the 1950s' 'three worlds' paradigm can be applied in a study of those seeking an alternative to the world they reject (which, in this historical instance, unconvincingly insisted that it comprised two distinct worlds in itself).

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<sup>80</sup> Redding, p. 3.

## Summary of chapters

The first section looks at the 1940s and 1950s, the period between the Bombing of Hiroshima and the first major anti-nuclear protests in the United States. At this time, the idea of conformity was promoted in American society as a domestic-front of the national project to counter the further spread of communism.

Following Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1929), the desire to travel can be seen as anti-social, while Foucault demonstrates in *Madness and Civilisation* (1961) that societies define certain anti-social elements as insane: to defect makes one defective. Like paranoia, with which it shares an Ancient Greek root, the cultural construct of madness is the product and producer of social consensus, and one which was particularly codified and reinforced in the United States over these decades. Furthermore, the age-old Western cultural imagining of the desert identifies it, by way of Old Testament ascetics, as a site of madness, and it is this idea which informs these two chapters' analysis of the Sahara encountered by the protagonists of two American texts.

The opening chapter examines Paul Bowles' first novel, *The Sheltering Sky* (1949), which begins with the New Yorker Port Moresby arriving in Algeria. Port consciously identifies himself as a non-conformist and wishes to escape American society. He does not define which aspects of American society he rejects and only expresses an opposition to the 'mechanized age', which I relate to the atomic age then emerging through America's accomplishment. Once in North Africa, however, Port finds that the local people and the Sahara itself refuse to conform to his preconceptions of the desert and so prevent him from accessing his anticipated, but again undefined, life there. I read his tensions in this Saharan world as the result of the clash between his formative Western constructions (such as his maps and cultural expectations of the desert) and the actual North African environment which articulates alternative ways of making sense of the world. Ultimately, this conflict forces him to acknowledge the

American world-view he has always strived to reject but which nevertheless contains him.

Port's wife, Kit, has always handled her tensions with American atomic society in other ways. The experience of the Sahara conversely leads her to reject all social constructs, so articulating a more-definitive non-conformity which society would designate as insanity, and with equally problematic results. Reading the novel in the context of Bowles' own self-exile in North Africa, I argue that it is a call for individuals to synthesise their society's imposed cultural, specifically atomic narratives and their own experiences in order to construct a world-view by which they can live.

I then turn to Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* (1958), whose eponymous protagonist is striving against a postwar America in his bid for spiritual fulfilment. Feeling under assault by materialist society, Eugene Henderson recognises the certainty of death all too clearly, but the consequent uncertainty of life deprives him of any perspective with which he might establish a meaning by which to live. He articulates the split-selfhood of the archetypal Cold War subject by regarding his non-conformity to pervading values through the framework of those values, and considers himself insane.

Like Port Moresby, he seeks an uncontaminated life in the deserts of Africa. While the (fictional) desert he finds is very much a Westerner's fantasy of archetypal savagery, the diverse ideas he encounters there broaden his perspective on life. Among the first tribe he visits, the Arnewi, Henderson learns that Western social constructs are not universal and that other ways of living are possible. The second tribe, the Wariri, reflect the Freudian interests informing 1950s American society, believing that mind and body shape one another, thereby undermining totalising contemporary social narratives constructed on unitary values and binary oppositions. By dint of this philosophy, Henderson is encouraged to pre-empt the possibility of death by internalising the perspective of a lion, a strategy which anticipates the thinking outlined in Deleuze and

Guattari's project to undermine the capitalist state, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). This idealism founders, however, but teaches him the need to discerningly appraise the bewildering range of competing world-views to which his dissatisfaction with mainstream American mass-culture has exposed him. Accordingly, he recognises what Bowles' characters do not.

My analysis demonstrates that the novel's narrative unevenness, which previous critics have regarded as a flaw, performs Henderson's journey to revelation. Through my reading, this aspect of the text signals *Henderson's* concern with the politics of living in 1950s America and an attendant atomic significance which has been overlooked. The novel appeared at a time when, on account of Soviet repression in Eastern Europe, the communist threat was palpable but, simultaneously, the individual might experience tensions with the dictates of the Free World. By giving its readers an experience analogous to that of the self-questioning, questing hero, I suggest that the novel presents them with an isolated, observable and, consequently, instructive model of their own everyday struggles against Cold War society.

Bellow's first-person narrative serves as a bridge between the desert of *The Sheltering Sky* and that of the three works which follow. In Bowles' novel, the disembodied narrator allows the Sahara to exist as an external, objective world which the protagonists experience. It is an account of experience as it unfolds, as is *Henderson*, but in the latter the desert is clearly a product of its Western protagonist's psyche. The subsequent works examined in this thesis similarly present Saharas of the imagination: in *V.*, it is an outright fantasy (since Stencil has never been there), while in *The Avignon Quintet* and *Moon Tiger* it is a construct based on memory.

This change in the nature of the desert reflects a shift in its role between the first section (1945–60) and the following sections (1961–84 and 1985–91). In the first section, the novels examine the individual's conflict with a seemingly monolithic social conformity to dictates; in the remaining sections, the texts'



thematic concern is the individual's negotiation of now-spurious political certainties. These later texts are metafictional, drawing attention to the constructed nature of fiction, which equally applies to society's dominant narratives, meaning and reality. As a result of the novelistic duplicities and tricks by which Cold War discourse sustained itself, and the consequent disruptions to that discourse, 'the act of literary fiction making became laden with political significance', as Steven Belletto has pointed out.<sup>81</sup> These last three novels all deal explicitly with the Second World War, although not necessarily with the Bomb. While the increasing distance from the event might be one reason why these later works engage with the war, I would argue that the developing maturity of the atomic age, and particularly the growing disillusionment regarding this state of conflict which was potentially more terrible than that of 1939–45, required articulation through metaphor and found one in an era in which a grand narrative of right and wrong could still be perceived, for all the ambiguities of personal experience.

The second section concerns the decades between the rise of the American counterculture in the 1960s and Gorbachev's accession to the leadership of the Soviet Communist Party in 1985. The long-established Western cultural association of the desert as a place of death resonates through the texts examined here. After all, the prospect of annihilation dominated the popular imagination during the stand-off over Cuba at the beginning of this period. When the superpowers stepped back from the brink of atomic-war with the Partial Test Ban of 1963, death was merely removed to the Third World, where it flourished in the proliferation of hot wars. These hostilities helped usher in another death, namely that of Western, particularly American, public idealism and the narrative of capitalist liberalism's unambiguous moral superiority over communism. This disillusionment can be read in the following two novels which both concern individuals who negotiate the evidently fictitious nature of

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<sup>81</sup> Steven Belletto, *No Accident, Comrade: Chance and Design in Cold War American Narratives* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), p. 12.

hegemonic ideological certainties by constructing alternative, subversive narratives of their own.

In Thomas Pynchon's *V.* (1963), the sense that the 'mechanized age' increasingly dehumanises people is metaphorised explicitly in the form of cyborg-monstrosities. The novel balances this state of affairs by showing that, while the protagonists of previous texts seek that which Cold War society denies them by travelling to the desert, the individual can equally escape their paranoia through metaphor. While the paranoid-schizoid-nomad Herbert Stencil's 'memory' of nineteenth-century Egypt is unavoidably a product of atomic American society, it successfully indicates an outside to the overarching Cold War system. Alexandria and Cairo are Western constructs filled with European intrigue, but are being invaded by the desert, the site of a death counter to that written into the social contract of 1960s America. Here, the Sahara is the expression of Stencil's sub-state death-drive which he habitually articulates by dissociatively referring to himself in the third-person, acknowledging his obliteration through imposed subjecthood and pre-empting his annihilation by the Bomb. In his fantasy-desert, the political subject, unambiguously defined by the hegemony, becomes a multifaceted self through the succession of identities by which he inhabits his romance. Stencil's cast of characters might ultimately be contained by Western conventions but, like the embodied ambivalence that is *V.* herself, in performing Cold War strategies of control, it undermines the era's political certainties. By contrasting Stencil's modus operandi with that of the other principal character, Benny Profane, this chapter contends that, like *Henderson*, Pynchon's novel challenges the reader to construct fusion from confusion. In this way, it suggests that Stencil's desert-fantasy functions as a synecdoche of the text as a whole, a concentrated thematic load which explodes across the rest of the text, irradiating it with explicitly atomic significance.

At the heart of Lawrence Durrell's *The Avignon Quintet* (1974–85) is an Egyptian gnostic sect which attracts a group of Westerners who have become

disillusioned with the world they know as it engulfs itself in the Second World War. At this time of limbo for the powerless individual, the secret society fights a Manichaean war outside the official system and thereby vouchsafes and restores coherent meaning to the world. The members choose to live under the shadow of certain death, which will be delivered by one of their own. In this way, they defy orthodox society, which arrogates to itself the right to bestow and recall life, not least by the Bomb with which one of the brothers is involved in developing.

Although gnosticism's inherent uncertainty distinguishes it from the hegemonic narratives of political certainty, like Pynchon's eponymous paradox it can become a creed which blinds the believer to its limitations in negotiating 'the flying multiplicity of the real'. Throughout the work, Durrell presents various systems of interpreting the world (political, scientific, artistic) and the danger of retreating to any one such narrative. Most dramatically, he does this by concluding the first volume of the *Quintet* with the revelation that the 'reality' he has presented until now has been a fiction written by Aubrey Blanford, one of the characters who is disillusioned with the West. In the subsequent volumes, this character turns his back on Europe as it descends into war and travels to the Sahara, where he becomes the victim of a bomb dropped by the military powers claiming to protect him.

My analysis of the text argues that the Bomb pervades this story of the Second World War and that Durrell is using the horror of a past holocaust to negotiate the fears of a future one which, evidence shows, haunted him even in the years of détente between the signing of the Partial Test Ban and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. By articulating non-Western ideas through a Western narrative-form, the *Quintet* takes the subject of this thesis beyond the American counterculture. Through this work, Durrell is attempting to fuse art and science in a humanist projection of quantum mechanics. Indeed, his characters can be seen to mimic matter and antimatter by crossing from one plain of existence to another. The presence of 'fictional' characters in the 'real'

world both replicates the self's struggle against the subjecthood imposed by society and underlines the need for the individual to fuse the different narratives with which the world tries to inscribe them in order to find harmony.

The final section concerns the years between *glasnost* and the end of the Soviet Union. At this time of thaw between the West and the Eastern bloc which ushered in the so-called 'end of history', the novel under examination contests the origins of the Cold War era, forcing a rewriting of its atomic foundations from the standpoint of personal experience which undermines received rational-universalist explanations of the status quo. A desert-heresy challenges the religion of history which author(ise)s the godlike power to destroy the world, demonstrating that no account of the past is unquestionable and that all such assertions are ultimately just written in sand.

Claudia Hampton, the protagonist of Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger* (1987), travels to the Sahara of the Second World War not to escape British society, but to understand it. There, she falls in love, only for Tom to be killed at the Front. Claudia falls into a state of emotional limbo between life and death, which mirrors the stasis of the nascent Cold War, before her innate non-conformity eventually evolves into activism against nuclear-proliferation. The reader encounters her on her deathbed as she composes a tumultuous personal history which subverts orderly hegemonic accounts, emphasising '[t]he confection of fact and fantasy [which] is how we know the world'. Her fear of the Bomb irradiates her memories of the desert campaign but, rather than this undermining her project, Claudia uses the ambiguities of her experiences to dismantle the certainties of the postwar narrative which has strived to contain her ever since. While her own chronicle necessarily imposes her perspective on the people she has known, through it she demonstrates the importance of alternatives to official records. Her story, constituted by public history (related in the first-person) and personal experience (related in the third), enables her to live free of the imposed identities (wife, mother, bereaved) which make the world

meaningless to her.

Departing from existing readings of the novel, this chapter contends that all the characters' voices in the novel are Claudia's creation. Consequently, Tom's desert-diary, which serves as her anchor in the uncertain world of the atomic age, is her own active resistance to imposed narratives. I read the final scene of the novel as Claudia's authoring of her own death, to pre-empt being 'appallingly misrepresented' by others and effectively annihilated, as was Tom. By so doing, I argue, Claudia demonstrates that, while history might come to an end, life can nevertheless continue.



This thesis sets out an investigation of nuclear paranoia and the desert as a site of Cold War experience and, on a broader level, the tension between narratives of self and society and between narrative and experience. It is original in the selection of texts it examines in relation to these themes as well as, when instructive, one another. Additionally, it comprises an extended study of the literary representation of the desert as an archetypal space simultaneously outside society and at the centre of the atomic age. By thus presenting a foil to the 'desert of the real' perceived by Baudrillard, the project's analysis looks beyond the media-images and consumerism which are most readily implicated in the philosopher's hypotheses to more fundamental ways of human meaning-making.

My work contributes to knowledge by expanding the remit of existing studies of literature of the atomic age and its negotiation of paranoia, both in terms of the historical period of interest and with regard to the texts which fall under the shadow of the Bomb. In this sense and, given its focus on experience at an individual level, the thesis might more accurately be considered a study of atomic literature rather than a work of Cold War literary criticism. Beyond the concerns of that field of study, I suggest that this approach to texts which are not obviously irradiated by an atomic presence draws out hitherto overlooked

elements and qualities, and not solely those which respond to the threat of the Bomb. In this way, the project will ideally prompt a reassessment of certain texts previously considered insubstantial or unsuccessful which shines new light on their intentions and achievements.

Lastly, the thesis contributes a practical application beyond its historical and atomic scope. By exploring how these texts express specific covert social tensions, it provides an example of how other tensions might be embedded in, and accordingly exhumed from texts which similarly might not be considered significant engagements with social discourse. Furthermore, since experience is constructed through narrative, this study of narrative is instructive beyond strictly literary concerns with regard to how individuals articulate their tensions with hegemony in times of terror.

**Section 1.**  
**Insanity in the Sahara, 1945–60**

## Chapter 1.

### **Shunning Society While Craving Containment: Paul Bowles' *The Sheltering Sky* (1949)**

In 1947, the Truman Doctrine outlined Washington's plans to contain the threat of communism influencing non-aligned states around the world. That same year, the USSR rejected American proposals for the UN to oversee the production of atomic-energy, establishing the conditions for the Cold War's arms-race. Thus began a period of American public apathy or uneasy acquiescence towards the Bomb (on humanitarian grounds or because a Soviet Bomb was inevitable)<sup>1</sup> while conformity was valorised,<sup>2</sup> creating a sense of consensus in support of the national cause.

As his country assumed the role of superpower in the post-war narrative, Paul Bowles left New York, never to regard it as home again. His wanderlust expressed misgivings about the America being shaped by the global situation and, equally, the global situation which America was helping to shape. A former member of the Communist Party, Bowles had become disillusioned with that doctrine too and, immersing himself in Morocco (with which he had fallen in love before the Second World War) and neighbouring Algeria, as well as the pages which would become his first novel, he sought to penetrate a space outside the bipolar world of the Cold War.

*The Sheltering Sky* was published in 1949, when the USSR's atomic ambitions were realised and NATO was founded. It continued to be a best-seller into 1950 as the alphabet of annihilation advanced with Truman's call for the H-bomb and the two superpowers went to war over Korea. Evidently, this story of an American couple similarly turning their backs on the United States for the

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1 Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill and London: U of North Carolina P, 1994), p. 352.

2 Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), p. 4.



Sahara spoke to the American public at this time.

## Port

Bowles' character, Port Moresby, sees North Africa as a place where he can escape 'the mechanized age'<sup>3</sup> which has seen the Second World War and (as his wife, Kit, understands it) a cultural indistinctiveness imposed on the globe. While their landfall, the Algerian port of Oran, exhibits signs of the conflict, Port is confident that the Sahara to the south will 'withstand the malady longer' than the places they are leaving behind (12).

In fleeing this containment and/or annihilation, Port displays the narcissism which American psychiatrists increasingly reported in the years after 1945,<sup>4</sup> for example in borderline personality disorder which they regarded as 'symptomatic of a widespread masculine crisis of identity'<sup>5</sup> and is identified with his sense of uniqueness and drive to pursue his dreams, his lack of empathy towards Kit and inability to commit while needing her affirmation, as well as his feelings of persecution.<sup>6</sup> The first page notes Port's conscious wish not 'to ascertain his position in time and space' (9), and this desire to break out of conventional spatial and temporal orderings is expressed through night-time explorations of the back-streets in the towns through which he travels. He hopes to penetrate a space beyond the mechanised age and find a different way of ordering the world: in short, a new world-order. Dissociative symptoms associated with narcissism are evoked by the text itself, not least the opening line ('He awoke, opened his eyes' (9)) and unremarked jumps-in-time (such as on page 145, which does not even coincide with a paragraph break) by which a

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3 Paul Bowles, *The Sheltering Sky* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 11. All subsequent references to the novel will appear in the text in parentheses.

4 Boyer, p. xx.

5 Ann Douglas, 'Periodizing the American Century: Modernism, Postmodernism, and Postcolonialism in the Cold War Context', *Modernism/Modernity*, 5 (1998), 71–98 (note 40).

6 Sam Vaknin, *Mental Health and Psychology Dictionary*  
<<http://samvak.tripod.com/mentalhealthdictionary.html>> [accessed 13 September 2015]

nothingness is silenced, undermining Western constructions of reality.

Port consciously sets himself in opposition to the tourist, whom he sees as one who 'accepts his own civilization without question; not so the traveller, who compares it with the others, and rejects those elements he finds not to his liking' (11). This tourist is personified by the Lyles, two Australians with a distinctly colonial spirit and a 'great collection of maps, military and otherwise' (46) by which they follow an itinerary well trodden by European imperialists. Consequently, the guidebook Mrs Lyle is writing cannot but be a transcription of the symbols on her maps which construct her preconceptions of the Sahara as alternately 'wretched' (41) and 'picturesque' (69).

In truth, Port is not so very different, because he is trying to plot his escape by using the constructs of the world he is fleeing. The first time he is described, he is identified as an American 'folding up some large multicoloured maps he had spread out on the table a moment ago' (10). The significance of this introduction can be illustrated by the map most commonly used in American textbooks and newspapers at the time Bowles was writing and so the 'standard' image of the world in the US (Figure 1). Although Port consciously rejects this world-order, such totalising constructions so underpin experience that they may not be recognised as cultural.

Arguably, the most noticeable feature of the world across which Port is travelling is that North America is huge relative to the other landmasses. The African continent, while positioned centrally (in keeping with Eurocentric cartographic convention), is consequently diminished in importance. Furthermore, its latitudinal foreshortening privileges the Saharan region over the south, thus presenting the continent as principally deserted. Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen argue that this projection, which was disseminated throughout the non-aligned world after the war, reflects and reinforces Western, particularly American, triumphalism.<sup>7</sup> As Jean Baudrillard theorises, the model

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<sup>7</sup> Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography*

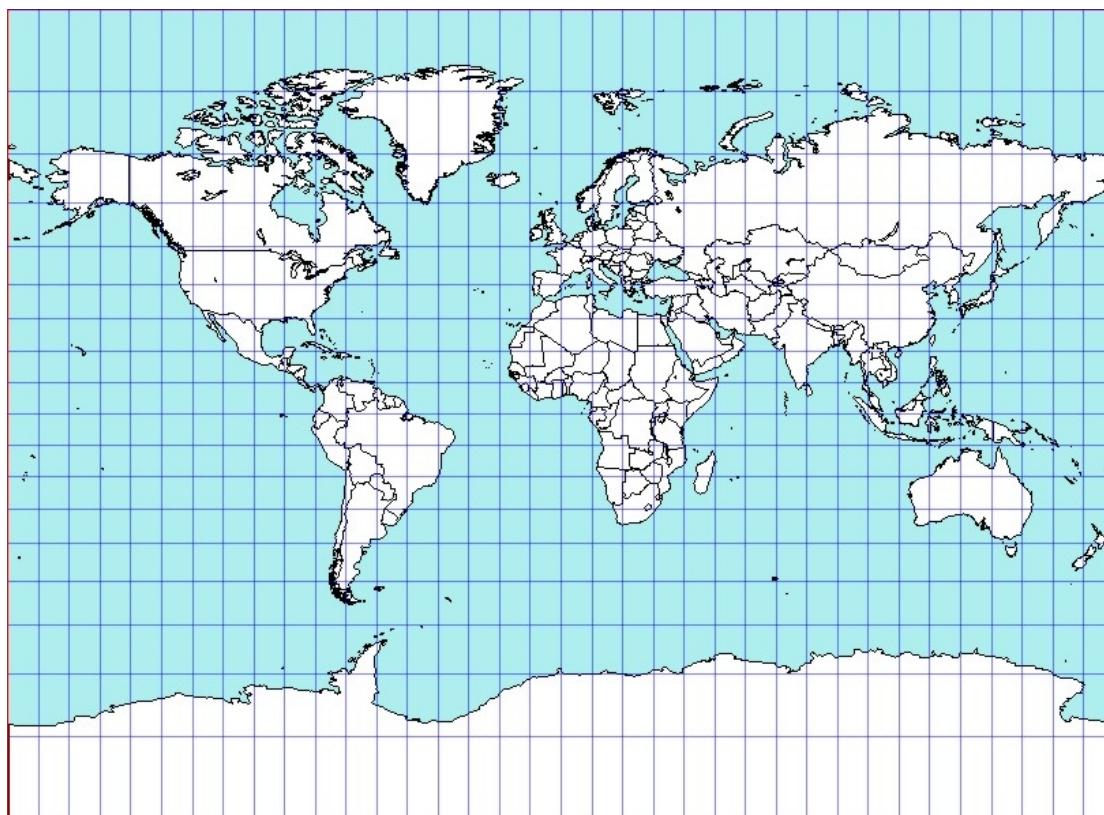


Figure 1: The Miller Cylindrical projection.<sup>8</sup>

generates the real.<sup>9</sup> In his analysis of Borges' 'On Exactitude in Science', Baudrillard argues that the map is not simulation, since it is an attempt to represent reality rather than replace it.<sup>10</sup> However, a map is a political device to create a new reality, and so a simulation. Maps impose consensus which in turn legitimises them.<sup>11</sup> They impose themselves on the world, containing it.

The maps Port follows in Algeria would be topographical projections,

(Oakland: U of California P, 1997), pp. 189–190.

8 Source: Aquarius.net – Next Generation Mapping

<[www.mgaqua.net/AquaDoc/Projections/img/Miller%20Cylindrical.jpg](http://www.mgaqua.net/AquaDoc/Projections/img/Miller%20Cylindrical.jpg)> [accessed 10 February 2012]

9 When Bowles first arrived in Morocco, the Ministry of Information advised him against travelling around the country, and to ask the Ministry what he wanted to know about it. (Oleg Kerensky, 'Aspects of Self: A Bowles Collage', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 32 (1986), 259–300 (p. 266)).

10 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994), p. 1.

11 In the introduction to *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard finds fault with Jürgen Habermas' argument that, after the death of metanarrative, legitimacy now lies in consensus obtained through discussion in society. 'Such consensus,' Lyotard believes, 'does

which are primarily drawn up for military purposes.<sup>12</sup> It can thus be said that, without realising it, he is following in the footsteps of the first major American ground-offensive of the Second World War, the 1942–43 North African campaign. Port might think he is going off-grid but, in truth, he is still thinking inside the boxes by which the Western superpower divides and rules the world. He is equally contained by the temporal axis of the mechanised age, since his flight necessarily conforms to the local bus schedules. He might regard Algeria's desert and people as existing outside time (141) but he is here thanks to the mechanised age and is necessarily contained by its world-order. His journey repeatedly coincides with that of the Lyles who, owning a car, are freer than he. Consequently, Port is all the more eager to travel south to find an untouched Sahara, a simulacrum of the Cold War world's polar-opposite.

Port imagines he can access this desert through the local women, primarily a Berber called Marhnia he encounters soon after his arrival in Algeria and an unnamed dancer later in his journey. As Marhnia serves tea, she tells Port a tale of three dancing-girls who dream of having tea in the Sahara. They are guided by desire alone, without external reference-points, and die in the attempt. It appears that she is warning Port of his own idealism, and the disappointment or worse which awaits him. However, Port cannot understand her words, dismissing them as 'expressionless sounds' (26). Bowles' transliterations of Arabic terms to describe the landscape ('The wind, straight from the south, blew across the barren mountains that were invisible ahead of him, over the vast flat sebkha to the edges of the town' (19)) reference the other world-order of the Sahara, opening up the potential for new relations with it and a new

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violence to the heterogeneity of language games' (Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984), p. xxv). Similarly, the consensus on maps' legitimacy does violence to the heterogeneity of semiotic constructs, of which cartographic symbols are examples.

12 Daniel Dorling and David Fairbairn, *Mapping: Ways of Representing the World* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 1997), p. 99.

understanding of America,<sup>13</sup> but Port regards language as an impediment to accessing Marhnia's essence: he 'was intrigued by the girl, but the language barrier annoyed him' (28). He thus silences her agency, containing her competing world-order within Orientalist fantasy. Furthermore, 'he was even more irritated by the fact that [the translator] Smaïl and she could converse together in his presence' (28): this local man is an obstacle even harder to dismiss. Smaïl's eventual departure indeed silences Marhnia, but she now tries to steal Port's wallet, attacking the system which identifies him with power, and he flees.

Such experiences hint that Port's cultural preconceptions do not fit the desert and are as dependent on one's location as are the familiar constellations which adorn its night-sky. Indeed, at one point he senses this fact as a spatial construct of the heavens:

'You know,' said Port, and his voice sounded unreal, as voices are likely to do after a long pause in an utterly silent spot, 'the sky here's very strange. I often have the sensation when I look at it that it's a solid thing up there, protecting us from what's behind.'

Kit shuddered slightly as she said: 'From what's behind?'

'Yes.'

'But what is behind?' Her voice was very small.

'Nothing, I suppose. Just darkness. Absolute night.' (79)

The metaphor is apt since, at this time, the sky *did* shelter Americans such as Port: the United States alone had command of it in the dawning atomic age and this protection enables Port to travel. This sky is another of his maps, a projection of Western signs to contain the void of understanding that is the Saharan Other. It is similarly insubstantial, its solidity undermined by his perception, acquired in Algeria, of what lies beyond (but it would be equally undermined for Bowles' readers by the inevitability of a Soviet Bomb).

Consequently, '[s]ince the day he and Kit had [contemplated the sky] he

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<sup>13</sup> Brian T. Edwards, 'Sheltering Screens: Paul Bowles and Foreign Relations', *American Literary History*, 17 (2005), 307–34 (p. 318).

had felt a definite desire to strengthen the sentimental bonds between them. Slowly it was assuming an enormous importance to him [...] here in this distant and unconnected part of the world, the longing for closer ties with her was proving stronger than the fear [of emotional responsibility]' (82). The nothingness tearing the map in which he has wrapped himself is thus analogous to the outside of the system theorised by Baudrillard, fear of which the system uses to bolster its own legitimacy. While Port rejects conventional signs of conformity to the American world-order, his similarly troubled relationship with Kit (her femininity associated with the domestic frontier of the Cold War) extends it over him as he travels. When he explores the night-time back-streets of Oran, he grounds himself by constructing the shelter of her gaze:

a faint vision began to haunt his mind. It was Kit, seated by the open window, filing her nails and looking out over the town [...] unconsciously he felt himself the protagonist, Kit the spectator. The validity of his existence at that moment was predicated on the assumption that she had not moved (18).

In reality, their wish to reconcile is frequently contained behind the doors of their separate hotel rooms as much as their fears. While Algeria provides a space free of American social impositions which encourage conformity, the void of familiar cultural constructs means the couple have nowhere to place themselves in relation to one another. Shifting desert sands destabilise Western identity: their marital status is questioned (179) at the moment that they dare to chart a path out of their conjugal desert, just as the Lyles are repeatedly identified as English. Equally, neither Port nor Kit commands the agency to reconcile. In this undefined space, each necessarily uses the other as the binary-opposite by which to define the self, mirroring 'the close intimacy and secret yearning structuring the relations between the two superpowers'.<sup>14</sup> Port's non-conformity is constructed in opposition to Kit's conformity, her Sartrean being to his nothingness. When Port betrays Kit with Marhnia, 'he found himself imagining that Kit was a silent onlooker' (31). The non-aligned world becomes the site of

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14 Adam Piette, *The Literary Cold War: 1945 to Vietnam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009), p. 144.

confrontation by which each side defines itself. They frequently question the other's sanity ('You think my complaint is mental' (130); 'have you lost your mind?' (138)) in order to establish a rational hegemony of the self, but simultaneously evoke the Mutually Assured Destruction of their relationship.

Throughout the novel, binaries are disrupted by third parties: the husband-and-wife dynamic is always disrupted by Tunner or the environment; Kit and Belqassim by other Touaregs; and the American and Australian pleasure-seekers by French officers and colonised Algerians. Such explosion of dualities – their collapse or fragmentation into trios – undermines the United States' singularity of purpose in the Cold War.<sup>15</sup>

As Johannes Bertens writes, Bowles' stories were concerned with 'attempts to belong, to find meaning in relationships with others. They usually pivot on the tension that arises when an attempt to make serious contact meets with resistance, offered either by those with whom the protagonist wants to belong or, paradoxically, by the protagonist himself'.<sup>16</sup> Port resists his marriage because its capacity to provide shelter is infused with the annihilation of the self and so his ambivalence regarding his identification with the marital-unit echoes his relationship with the atomic-hegemony he seeks to leave behind which demands the subsumation of the self to a group-identity.<sup>17</sup> Port is prepared to countenance only a superficial association with each: 'We've never managed, either one of us, to get all the way into life', he tells Kit. 'We're hanging on to the outside for all we're worth, convinced we're going to fall off at the next bump' (79).

The next significant opportunity Port has to penetrate the Saharan world-

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15 See Alan Nadel, 'Fiction and the Cold War', in *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction After 1945*, ed. by John N. Duvall (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), pp. 167–80 (p. 178).

16 Johannes Willem Bertens, *The Fiction of Paul Bowles* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1979), p. 192, quoted in Linda W. Wagner, 'Paul Bowles and the Characterization of Women', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 27 (1985), 15–24 (p. 15).

17 Robert Jay Lifton notes that this ambivalence is displayed by individuals diagnosed with certain psychiatric problems. See Robert Jay Lifton, 'The Image of "The End of the World": A Psychohistorical View', *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 24 (1985), 70–90 (pp. 80–81).

order is when he encounters a dancer in Aïn Krorfa. Her silence means that, unlike Marhnia, she does not speak back to the world-order which protects him. Her strange bearing and beauty further reduces her agency by making her less 'workaday' and 'present' than other women he has encountered (including Kit and Marhnia) (107). As she performs, Port's gaze maps her, defining her comprehensively:

In front of the musicians in the middle of the floor a girl was dancing, if indeed the motions she made could properly be called a dance. She held a cane in her two hands, behind her head, and her movements were confined to her agile neck and shoulders. The motions, graceful and of an impudence verging on the comic, were a perfect translation into visual terms of the strident and wily sounds of the music. What moved him [Port], however, was not the dance itself so much as the strangely detached, somnambulistic expression of the girl. Her smile was fixed, and, one might have added, her mind as well, as if upon some subject so remote that only she knew of its existence. There was a supremely impersonal disdain in the unseeing eyes and the curve of the placid lips. The longer he watched, the more fascinating the face became; it was a mask of perfect proportions, whose beauty accrued less from the configuration of features than from the meaning that was implicit in their expression – meaning or the withholding of it. For what emotion lay behind the face it was impossible to tell. It was as if she were saying: 'A dance is being done. I do not dance because I am not here. But it is my dance.' When the piece drew to its conclusion and the music had stopped, she stood still for a moment, then slowly lowered the cane from behind her head, and tapping vaguely on the floor a few times, turned and spoke to one of the musicians. Her remarkable expression had not changed in any respect (108).

The dancer, however, then disrupts Port's strategy of containment: 'all at once the realization came to him that the girl was blind. The knowledge hit him like an electric shock; he felt his heart leap ahead and his head grow suddenly hot' (108). Rather than being threatening, however, this further authenticates her Otherness, since Port identifies it as a weakness, allowing him to contain her as a 'prisoner' who would be 'grateful to him' (110–11). He identifies the meaning he perceives behind her surface-expression as the essence he seeks, which he now calls 'love itself' (110) but, by labelling her face a mask (108), he makes it a blank



sheet on which to map his own desire. It is Ground Zero, emptied of humanity by Western logic. Simultaneously, it becomes a screen behind which the unnamed woman can shelter herself akin to her performance: she is indeed not present, and so not obliged to negotiate her identity in the (mechanised) world. Her indifference resists containment – to her, Port's words would be 'expressionless sounds', her blindness would blank any visual signs he might give – even before she disappears into the night. Again, his fantasy is disrupted.

However, as Book Two begins, the breakdown of his desert-simulation, as well as the fact that he is culturally contained by the West, impose increasingly on his portrayal and, ultimately, his consciousness. He has previously rejected the sign of his socially imposed identity ('I'm not going to carry a passport to existence around with me, to prove I have the right to be here!' (74)) but, when the narrative now shifts to the concerns of a French colonial officer, Port enters this hegemonic space as 'the American' reporting that he has lost his identity-document, and worse: 'ever since I discovered that my passport was gone, I've felt only half alive [...] it's a very depressing thing in a place like this to have no proof of who you are' (126–27). Port's sense of self is shot through, in the manner of a stick of rock, with the world-order he finds so unpalatable. His model degenerates on exposure to the real when the officer convinces Port that his suspicion of the hotel-owner is wrong (127). Port's identity has been stolen by the degenerate Westerner Eric Lyle, and is rescued by Tunner, who emblematises American nationality as emphatically as does the passport.

For all that the officer represents the Western world-order, Port realises that he engages more dialogically with the desert and its people than he himself does. Port tries to blank the local French military presence and so Algeria's contingency with global politics, which is analogous to 'the "state of self-enclosed delusion" by which Americans were collectively blotting out the atomic-reality, [about which Lewis Mumford] wrote in 1950, [concluding] that if it appeared in a

single individual it would demand psychiatric treatment'.<sup>18</sup> The grounding which Kit provides, on which he has relied since perceiving the fragility of the sheltering sky, is revealed to be as insubstantial as that construct; after all, it is an outlier of the same hegemony, merely dressed in the fatigues of a freedom-fighter. Now that Port cannot contain his experiences in clichés (which, as Adam Piette writes, are a form of cultural propaganda),<sup>19</sup> the workings of the Western conventions which order them are exposed. He has not noticed that his desert is contained by a Western framework because he is also inside that frame. Furthermore, he has brought that frame with him. He consequently contains any challenge he could present to the status quo. Taking his leave of the officer, Port heads back to his hotel:

As he walked along the hot road to the walls of Bou Noura he kept his head down, seeing nothing but the dust and the thousands of small sharp stones. He did not look up because he knew how senseless the landscape would appear. It takes energy to invest life with meaning, and at present this energy was lacking. He knew how things could stand bare, their essence having retreated on all sides to beyond the horizon, as if impelled by a sinister centrifugal force. He did not want to face the intense sky, too blue to be real, above his head, the ribbed pink canyon walls that lay on all sides in the distance, the pyramidal town itself on its rocks, or the dark spots of oasis below. They were there, and they should have pleased his eye, but he did not have the strength to relate them, either to each other or to himself; he could not bring them into any focus beyond the visual. So he would not look at them (127).

Port is unable to relate to the desert because he cannot understand it. Effectively, he has not left the map, but this map is now being torn by the desert's stones like Borges' simulation. Bereft of the grounding of the desert and rejecting that of his nation-state, Port is the archetypal Cold War subject as identified by Alan Nadel as one with a perverse inability to speak truthfully their orientation about anything.<sup>20</sup> Port concludes: 'I always imagine that somehow I'll

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<sup>18</sup> Boyer, p. 282.

<sup>19</sup> Adam Piette, *Imagination at War: British Fiction and Poetry 1939–1945* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 11–12.

<sup>20</sup> Nadel, *Containment Culture*, p. 88.

be able to penetrate to the interior of somewhere. Usually I get just about to the suburbs and get lost. I don't think there *is* any interior to get to any more' (133, emphasis in original). Rather than denying North Africa agency or legitimacy, Port is acknowledging that he himself has none. Perhaps surprisingly, this aligns him with President Truman's logic that Otherness cannot be penetrated, only contained.<sup>21</sup> No dialogue with the Other is possible. Without a totalising hegemonic narrative to follow, Port is in a position of weakness. Truth is a product of social consensus, which Port flees. By believing in an Orientalist narrative ostensibly transcending the system, Port cannot relate to the world.

The landscape was there, and more than ever he felt he could not reach it. The rocks and the sky were everywhere, ready to absolve him, but as always he carried the obstacle within him. He would have said that as he looked at them, the rocks and the sky ceased being themselves, that in the act of passing into his unconsciousness, they became impure (134).

While his narcissism has previously contained the world ('my world's not humanity's world. It's the world as I see it' (74)), Port comes to realise that it and he are different, and he will not find the untouched desert he seeks.<sup>22</sup>

This desert is never defined except that it is not the mechanised world he knows. Port has travelled the world (10) looking for his 'preconceived idea' (134) made real. This essence or authenticity, which Dean MacCannell argues is the drive behind leisure-travel<sup>23</sup> is necessarily constructed through the identification of (comprehensible) signs and the absence of others. Port does not seek Otherness, therefore, but equivalence to Orientalist fantasy,<sup>24</sup> a complementary

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21 Douglas, note 11.

22 Effectively, his map has worn through. As Grausam points out, no one-sided model can ever successfully simulate reality (Daniel Grausam, 'Games People Play: Metafiction, Defense Strategy, and the Cultures of Simulation', *ELH*, 78 (2011), 507–32 (p. 521)). For the struggle between the physical desert and Port's imaginative projections on to it, see also Alexa Weik von Mossner, 'Encountering the Sahara: Embodiment, Emotion and Material Agency in Paul Bowles' *The Sheltering Sky*', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 20 (2013), 219–38.

23 See Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (London: Macmillan, 1976).

24 See Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Perceptions of the Orient* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2001).

opposite to atomic-society contained within it. This constructed authenticity<sup>25</sup> is thus difference from everyday experience, which is what John Urry's seminal work *The Tourist Gaze* contends is the prime motive for travel.<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, when the desirable is located elsewhere, it is often indeterminate:

Port spent the next two days trying assiduously to gather information about El Ga'a [the next town]. It was astonishing how little the people of Bou Noura knew about the place. Everyone seemed in agreement that it was a large city – always it was spoken of with a certain respect – that it was far away, that the climate was warmer, that the prices high. Beyond this, no one appeared able to give any description of it, not even the men who had been there (134).

Port realises 'that he really wanted to know nothing about El Ga'a beyond the fact that it was isolated and unfrequented [...] He determined not to mention the town to the Lieutenant, for fear of losing his preconceived idea of it' (134). He wants to protect his model from the real. (However, his misgiving about the officer is itself a model, and is undermined when the soldier provides a suitably exotic portrait of the town (136).) Eventually, Port and Kit arrive in El Ga'a:

Outside in the dust was the disorder of Africa, but for the first time without any visible sign of European influence, so that the scene had a purity which had been lacking in the other towns, an unexpected quality of being complete which dissipated the feeling of chaos. Even Port [who is sick at the time] noticed the unified aspect of the place. "It's wonderful here," he said [...] (149).

However, he blanks the local man helping them, denying him agency. In the same way as his maps, Port upholds his world-order by imposing 'a reductionist control that strips contact with the web of life from the experience of place',<sup>27</sup> painting the landscape as familiar friend or familiar foe, silencing threats and filling conceptual blank spaces. Entering a tea-house, he notes '[i]t looked festive, and it exhilarated him to see it; certainly he had no feeling that it was a vicious

<sup>25</sup> This term comes from Erik Cohen, "Authenticity" in *Tourism Studies: Après la Lutte*, in *Critical Debates in Tourism*, ed. by Tej Vir Singh (Bristol, Buffalo and Toronto: Channel View Publications, 2012), pp. 250–61 (pp. 255–56).

<sup>26</sup> John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (London: Sage, 1990), p. 10.

<sup>27</sup> This evocative phrase comes from Doug Aberley's *Boundaries of Home: Mapping for Local Empowerment* (Vancouver: New Society, 1993), p. 1, quoted in Dorling and Fairbairn, p. 141.

place, even though at first he tried hard to see it as such' (106).

The cultural cartographer Brian Harley calls the blank spaces on a map 'silent spaces' to emphasise that the lack of information is not a result of insufficient data but a conscious omission by the map-making authority. These are 'silences which arise from deliberate policies of secrecy and censorship' as well as

more indeterminate silences rooted in often hidden procedures or rules. These rules, it can be argued, are a sort of subconscious *mentalité* that mediates the knowledge contained in maps in order to maintain the political status quo and the power of the state.<sup>28</sup>

Consequently, 'silences should be regarded as positive statements and not as merely passive gaps in the flow of language. [They are] something more than the mere absence of something else [...] silence should be seen as an “active human performance”. Silence can reveal as much as it conceals'.<sup>29</sup> Port has silenced the Sahara because he fears its silence, that is, the void in his understanding it comprises.

Contrary to maps' totalising dictates, Marhnia's tale aspires to inspire individual agency in the form of dialogue, negotiation, to reach a more comprehensive understanding of experience and the Other. Port is blind to this, seeking the security of certainties. As Michael Hofmann writes in his introduction, the novel 'is not a confrontation between two civilizations or two ways of being [but] incomprehension, the impossibility of communication'.<sup>30</sup> Baudrillard argues that we should keep the Other as Other rather than try to relate them to the self through degrees of difference.<sup>31</sup> The desert is outside the hegemonic Cold War order which enables Port to be in Algeria. In order to

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28 J. B. Harley, 'Silences and Secrecy: The Hidden Agenda of Cartography in Early Modern Europe', *Imago Mundi*, 40 (1988), 57–76 (p. 57); italics in original.

29 Harley, p. 58.

30 Michael Hofmann, 'Introduction', in *The Sheltering Sky*, by Paul Bowles (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. vii–xiv (pp. xii–xiii).

31 Paul Hegarty, *Jean Baudrillard: Live Theory* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 119.

communicate with the locals, Port and Kit use French, a third language but not a third linguistic space: like Washington, they are extending French colonial policy. There is no space on his maps for the real desert, or to meet its people as equals. Port measures the desert against the Western narrative about it, and finds the reality lacking. Hegemonic constructs shape his experience, hence his opposition of 'the absurd trivialities which filled the day and the serious business of putting words on paper' (159): the model generates the real.

The maps which help to construct this order select elements of experience and deselect others, and Port's self-identification as a traveller suggests he is no different. He compares his civilisation with others and rejects elements not to his liking, thereby dismissing undesirable elements of American society but not acquiring benefits from elsewhere. This is not the experiment in cultural comparison that Brian Edwards suggests<sup>32</sup> but a strategy of deterrence. Port is running from the United States without running towards anywhere else.

As Adam Piette writes, '[d]eviance from this normative pressure is itself psychologically controlled by being labelled as neurotic; or more specifically as conspiratorial paranoia'.<sup>33</sup> Following Baudrillard, it can be said that labelling Port in this way contains any threat he presents.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the year *The Sheltering Sky* appeared also saw the sixth edition of the World Health Organization's International Statistical Classification of Diseases, which included mental disorders for the first time. At this time, borderline disorder was called psychopathy, 'an admittedly imprecise term used to designate a person beyond the reach of society's values, one who failed to internalise the norms of social behavior'.<sup>35</sup> A common symptom was the tendency to blame 'the world' for one's misfortunes and so try to preempt (real or imaginary) threats by

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32 Edwards, pp. 316–17.

33 Piette, *Cold War*, p. 15.

34 Douglas Kellner, 'Some Reflections on Baudrillard's "On Disappearance"', in *Baudrillard Now: Current Perspectives in Baudrillard Studies*, ed. by Ryan Bishop (Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2009), pp. 154–58 (p. 155).

35 Douglas, p. 80.

making the environment conform to one's needs.<sup>36</sup>

For Port, the trip to the Sahara is a defence against mechanised American society. The Bomb exists and so apocalypse is already playing out in the imagination to inspire a bunker-mentality such as he exhibits. In this artificial environment he hopes to create a new life, a personal reality to counter toxic Cold War unreality.

Simultaneously, his expedition is a socially conformist simulation projecting the American world-order on to non-aligned Algeria, a space ostensibly free of the impositions of the mechanised age.<sup>37</sup> After all, Port seeks to escape the horrors of mechanised warfare in the North African arena. Equally, they travel here on the proviso that 'it was near Spain and Italy, and they could always cross over if it failed to work out' (11). In this way, while Port thinks he is cleansing himself of the taint of society, he is decontaminating society of his own noxious self.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, Orientalist preconceptions contain all three Americans from the Sahara's true Otherness (Port, Kit and Tunner all feel they exist in a different world to the locals: see pages 17, 65 and 206 respectively). The wanderlust is a deterrence-strategy to prevent conflict. Ultimately, Port and American society are fighting on the same side. The fact that he wants to forget the mechanised age means that he has not forgotten it. He is a part of it, and vice versa but, as Nadel points out, individuals always considers themselves Other in the face of cultural narratives.<sup>39</sup> When he sets up the opposition between his 'own poor hopelessly isolated self' and the rest of humanity, he is expressing the tenets of American exceptionalism. However, Tunner's conflicting assertion

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36 Vaknin, n.p.

37 Port is anxious for hegemonic protection, wondering whether he should heed travel-warnings on the radio (84). His trip is a simulation, like the Cold War, projecting a situation which cannot come about (see Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth and The Abolition* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), p. 202).

38 Cleansing society of oneself in line with an internalised ideology is discussed in Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. by Richard Howard (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

39 Nadel makes this point throughout *Containment Culture*; see also his conclusion, pp. 297ff.

('humanity *is* you') parallels the belief that the world desires to be Free like the West (74, emphasis in original). Whatever he does, Port remains within the system.

Tellingly, the only time that Port acknowledges the recent war's presence in Algeria is when he approvingly notes that it has destroyed any tourist-infrastructure (84). His desire for freedom is an American value much older than the fearful valorisation of conformity of the late 1940s. His flight makes him all the more American, as hinted by references to the desert as wilderness (128, 201) and to his ancestors who were pioneers (84). Such evocations of the American Frontier introduce certainty to a time of uncertainty: as Edwards says, the American public would be attracted to a new frontier against communism, a new myth to forge national identity.<sup>40</sup> Port is trying to access a (Western myth of the) past here but, since, as Paul Boyer writes, the Bomb bisected history,<sup>41</sup> his retreat only brings him up against the moment of the Bomb's becoming. While being a founding myth of the nation, the frontier was also the destination of those unwilling to conform to the status quo and so mirrors the geographic and psychological displacement of Cold War tensions to the margins,<sup>42</sup> as would soon be witnessed in Korea. Port's flight to a better world anticipates the diaspora of the Point Four program announced the year the novel was published, the neocolonialism which the American public largely supported which replaced the United States' support for French colonialism which was largely unpopular.<sup>43</sup> Like Port, the businessmen taking part in this 'soft' counter-offensive to communist influence sought to make the world more like the American self. As the epigraph to Book One says, '[e]ach man's destiny is personal only insofar as it may happen to resemble what is already in his memory'.

Port flees before he can be reunited with his identity-papers by Tunner, so

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40 Edwards, p. 316.

41 Boyer, p. 280.

42 Douglas, p. 77.

43 Edwards, p. 321.



closely identified with protective American society, and contracts typhoid which threatens the only thing he has left, his physical self. He is taken to a room in Sbâ under the auspices of the local French officer. However, the sheet stretched across its window is little protection from a desert which does not conform to the hegemonic world-order (161). Bedridden, Port consciously tries to find his way back to Kit (172), his source of comfort from the first page ('he could hear his wife [...] and this sound now comforted him' (9)). He tells her: 'All these years I've been living for you. I didn't know it, and now I do' (173). His non-conformity is predicated on, and so essentially for, his grounded wife. He knows that she cannot protect him from the nothingness, but he must hold on to something. Any port in a storm. As the novel opens, the waking Port feels that he has come back from 'non-being' to somewhere 'in time and space', and so an identity and the attendant 'infinite sadness at the core of his consciousness' (9). This journey is, terrifyingly, inverted on his deathbed.

His delirious decline is narrated in four sections, the first of which conveys the key elements of his belated realisation:

Sometimes he spoke aloud but [...] it seemed rather to hold back the natural development of the ideas [...] he was never sure whether they had been resolved in the right words. Words were much more alive and more difficult to handle, now [...] Less and less he used them in his thinking [...] There was [...] always new territory and the peril increased constantly. Slowly, pitilessly, the number of dimensions was lessening. There were fewer directions in which to move. It was not a clear process, there was nothing definite about it so that he could say: 'Now up is gone.' Yet he had witnessed occasions when two different dimensions had deliberately, spitefully, merged their identities (177–78).

Port dismisses semantic models of protection from the void imposed by the system he rejects and finds only uncertainty, a dangerous fusion of binary-distinctions. Words are arbitrary, akin to the cartographic symbols which can impose a frontier on the desert, but without language he is lost.

In the manner of the dancers, he charts his course by desire alone, without external reference-points, and loses his way in the world. In their final

conversation, Port tells Kit that he is alone and afraid (173). His solitary and drawn-out death-throes contrast with the unwitnessed mass-annihilation promised by the system he has left behind, but which equally provides a place in the world.<sup>44</sup>

[T]he centre! Sometimes it was gigantic, painful, raw and false, it extended from one side of creation to the other, there was no telling where it was; it was everywhere. And sometimes it would disappear, and the other centre, the true one, the tiny burning black point, would be there in its place [...] distant. And each centre he called 'That'. He knew one from the other, and which was the true [...] even though he hated them both – and he knew that the one which was only *there* was the true one, while the other was wrong, wrong, wrong (177–78, emphasis in original).

As the French officer says, in the desert, 'all your philosophic systems crumble' (201): all distinctions depend on where one stands. Port recognises that the American and Saharan systems of meaning are separate to him ('that' rather than 'this'). The individual is always Other in the face of cultural narratives ('It was an existence of exile from the world' (178)) and this Otherness has always been Port's totalising doctrine. There are no definite distinctions between atomic-energy and atomic-weapons,<sup>45</sup> so he has rejected them all. However, he needs to identify with a system of meaning and knows that the former better fits his self, culturally influenced as it is. The very cultural contingency of the States' Cold War certainties makes them essential for the American he is. Contained as he is by this world-order, he can never break through to the desert's Otherness. Without an over-arching narrative, Port floats away. There is a stand-off between his imagined desert and the real Sahara, and the only thing that can break it is the Bomb, which defies containment because, while the outside of the system cannot be articulated through social constructs, the Bomb is merely a construct and also the end of constructs.<sup>46</sup> Model and real, system and outside, death and

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44 See Grausam's comments on the community-spirit 'of mass and instantaneous death', Daniel Grausam, "It is Only a Statement of the Power of What Comes After": Atomic Nostalgia and the Ends of Postmodernism', *American Literary History*, 24 (2012), 308–36 (p. 310).

45 Nadel, *Containment Culture*, p. 23.

46 '[W]hile the potential consequences of nuclear weapons defy discourse, it is only through discourse that the weapons acquire their value and utility' (Taylor, p. 568).

life fuse into the living-death which is the lot of the Cold War subject and which cannot be escaped, so acceptance of which can bring a peace of sorts. Port realises this at the moment of his death:

The supreme moment, high about the desert, when the two elements, blood and excrement, long kept apart, merge. A black star appears, a point of darkness in the night sky's clarity. Point of darkness and gateway to repose. Reach out, pierce the fine fabric of the sheltering sky, take repose (188).

## **Kit**

The first thing the reader learns about Kit is that she is not interested in looking at Port's maps and, when the conversation turns to his recent dream, she does not want to discuss that either (10–11). This reluctance is contextualised by the novel's introductory portrait of her, which paints a dependent paranoiac bombarded by omens and ever-afraid of 'vengeance from above' (34).<sup>47</sup> She is Nadel's archetypal citizen of the age; when someone endorses her fears, '[l]ogically she should not have found [it] reassuring, but the fact that he agreed with her she found deliciously comforting' (169). Kit has failed to find a sense of safety in the contemporary national project of 'extensive "domestic revival" [...] with [which] women's return to homemaking and housework [was] discursively linked – at a time of communist infiltration, nuclear contamination and civil defence planning – with the act of securing the family from the outside world'<sup>48</sup> and so looks to her nomadic husband to provide a mobile security for her. '[T]he war between reason and atavism' which rages within her (34) compels her to avoid his maps and unconscious, since to engage with them would risk revealing the constructs of and, indeed, deconstructing the protection in which she places her faith. Indeed, while Port deselects those elements of the world he finds

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47 Vaknin, n.p.

48 Andrew Hammond, 'From Rhetoric to Rollback: Introductory Thoughts on Cold War Writing', in *Cold War Literature: Writing the Global Conflict*, ed. by Andrew Hammond (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1–14 (p. 10).

undesirable, she says: 'I'm not sure I don't feel that it's wrong to try to escape [them]' (77).

While he is her port of safety, she provides a mobile grounding to the egocentric cause of this man who problematises the idea of home so important to American society (10). As she says in Bou Noura, 'It'd be abnormal if I were to adapt myself too quickly to all this. After all, I'm still an American' (128). Cultural distinctions are crucial to her peace-of-mind (12); indeed, she would have preferred to visit 'any small country with boundaries' over the Sahara (140), and was persuaded only by Port's careful selection of images (84). Socially conformist, it is apt that, when she betrays Port, it is with the all-American Tunner on a train, a mechanised projectile akin to the all-American Bomb. This moment of weakness aside, she identifies with her protector ('her sense of guilt expressed itself in allegiance; she could not go out into the street because Tunner was there and she would appear to be choosing sides. Suddenly she, too, wished Tunner were not with them. She would feel much freer in expressing her own preferences' (89)). When she is alone with Port, however, she gives her tensions free-rein (105) and so mirrors his different relationships with the atomic-hegemony when in the States and abroad.

When Port is gravely ill, Kit becomes terrified of leaving the present behind:

there was never any knowing or any certitude; the time to come always had more than one possible direction. One could not even give up hope. The wind would blow, the sand would settle, and in some as yet unforeseen manner time would bring about a change which could only be terrifying, since it would not be a continuation of the present (165).

With her shelter obliterated, she desires what Daniel Grausam calls the 'compressed presentness' of the Cold War subject.<sup>49</sup> She lives the fixed temporality of a map which can only shatter on contact with the world. Kit feels a 'ghastly dread' at 'having attained a new depth of solitude' (174) and considers

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49 Grausam, 'Atomic Nostalgia', p. 315.

giving Tunner command of her life ('What delight, not to be responsible [...] She realized the absurdity of still hoping to attain such a state permanently, but the hope would not leave her' (185)). However, immediately after discovering her husband's corpse, 'deeper than the empty region which was her consciousness, in an obscure and innermost part of her mind, an idea must already have been in gestation' to escape the impotent world-order he superseded, now represented by Tunner and the French colonial apparatus (190).

The 'startling narrative rupture'<sup>50</sup> of Port's death shatters Kit's shelter, and so the domesticity which defines her. It collapses the binary underpinning nuclear-family-values and threatens a melancholic fusion which could destroy society. Without his non-conformity, her complementary conformity is revealed as her performance of an imposed containment. She feels conventional temporal orderings fall away (189). Her first display of agency expresses not a support to society but a threat.

Kit flees with the help of a shopkeeper who, being Jewish, similarly evades identification with a nation-state. Alone at the margins of the town, she feels she enters a timeless space. She dismisses her disciplinarian superego as mere habit and strips off her clothes, rejecting society's rational economy of signs and value, to become her unidentified self akin to the symbolic<sup>51</sup> which, being ambivalent, resists value, enabling her to access a joy lying 'just behind things' (199). Baudrillard argues that the symbolic is pure loss,<sup>52</sup> which is what Judith Butler theorises is the basis of identity:

the self only becomes a self on the condition that it has suffered [...] a loss which is suspended and provisionally resolved through a melancholic incorporation of some 'Other'. That 'Other' installed in the self thus establishes the permanent incapacity of the 'self' to achieve self-identity; [...] the disruption of the Other at the heart of the self is the

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50 Edwards, p. 325.

51 Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. by Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993), p. 95. For a discussion of these ideas, see Hegarty, p. 36.

52 Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. by Charles Levin (St Louis: Telos, 1981), p. 161. See also Hegarty, p. 37.

very condition of the self's possibility.<sup>53</sup>

This Other is the hegemonic system which imposes its protection on the self. The model generates the real: society projects its signs on to her self in order to construct the Kit which others perceive. By undressing and bathing, she rejects this identification.

Becoming symbolic (that is, performing symbolic exchange) can at most only indicate the horizon of the outside of the system,<sup>54</sup> but it shows that Kit is not her social identity. She thus exceeds Port's project of being a traveller, an identity constructed on selective memory or containment of his consciousness. It can be imagined that this rejection of society comes more easily to her, since society has always contained her with a submissive identity, whereas Port, being a man, was able to believe that he was independent. Her act corresponds to Bowles' own experience of being in the Sahara, where

even memory disappears; nothing is left but your own breathing and the sound of your heart beating. A strange, and by no means pleasant, process of reintegration begins inside you, and you have the choice of fighting against it, and insisting on remaining the person you have always been, or letting it take its course. For no one who has stayed in the Sahara for a while is quite the same as when he came.<sup>55</sup>

Whereas Port seeks to escape the world by deselecting his experiences of it, she does so by silencing its narrative about her.

When Kit wakes in the desert at the opening of Book Three, she suppresses her memory of Port's death. This fits Port's archetypal American who rejects suffering (17), but she simultaneously rejects the social protection from her anxieties. However, while she has defected from Western society, Kit still needs protection from the world and demands it of a passing Touareg caravan

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53 Judith Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. by Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale and David M. Halperin (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 307–20 (pp. 316–17).

54 Hegarty, p. 33.

55 Paul Bowles, 'Baptism of Solitude', in *Their Heads are Green and Their Hands are Blue: Scenes from the Non-Christian World*, by Paul Bowles (New York and London: HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 133–48 (p. 134).

(216).

The Touareg resist the nation-state model of such importance in the post-war world, specifically Algerian society being contested by Westernising America and Arabising Egypt.<sup>56</sup> This indifference undermines Cold War identity.<sup>57</sup> Their culture cannot be translated into the Western economy of signs and values. For all that she has tried to strip herself of social signs, Kit cannot rid herself of her white body and the incongruity is arguably enhanced when the trader, Belqassim, buries her disruptive Western clothes in the sand and dresses her as a Touareg. The excess of signs which she thus displays means that she performs across social distinctions, undermining them in an act of Baudrillardian seduction.<sup>58</sup> Like symbolic exchange, seduction cannot escape the system but, Paul Hegarty argues, provides a more effective challenge.<sup>59</sup>

The small society of the caravan – Kit, Belqassim and another trader – necessitates that she be socially identified: she becomes Belqassim's woman (much as Port ultimately identified himself as her man), winning his protection in return for her exotic white body. That this shelter is different to that of Port is evident in the predominantly sexual nature of the relationship. This, in turn, suggests the vulnerability of the American world-order to external influences, most obviously communism, the national project to contain which was equated with the containment of not only gender roles but also sexuality.<sup>60</sup> This dynamic transforms the 'African' Other from a wilderness to be conquered or a resource to be mined (such as for raw material for the Bomb)<sup>61</sup> into a viable alternative world-order, a competing system, which simultaneously destabilises the Western self.

Kit does not bother to learn Belqassim's language, since language's total

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<sup>56</sup> Edwards, p. 308.

<sup>57</sup> Edwards, pp. 319ff.

<sup>58</sup> Hegarty, pp. 72ff.

<sup>59</sup> Hegarty, p. 70.

<sup>60</sup> Nadel, *Containment Culture*, p. 6.

<sup>61</sup> See Douglas, pp. 77–78.

signification is antithetical to the symbolic.<sup>62</sup> Since language results from a lack (and creates one, since something is always left out), to speak would be to countenance a lack which the symbolic's resistance to value does not recognise. All sign-systems are simulations of reality; all certainties, the maps which project them and the nation-states they create, are castles built on sand. Not only are words insubstantial, but the conceptual structures they build are culturally contingent, making dialogue with the Other impossible ('even had they had a language in common, he never could understand her' (220)).

On arrival in Belqassim's home-town, Kit's incongruity can only be contained by regendering her as a man and identifying her as insane (225). Even then, her need for protection is undermined by Belqassim's social obligations of work and his wives. She learns, as in America, to ask no questions, this time with the help of soporific drugs. When her female body betrays her (230), she realises she is being poisoned: again, a protective order has failed her and she flees. Disillusioned, 'she ha[s] no feeling of being anywhere, of being anyone' (242). Be that as it may, passers-by (mis)identify her on the basis of her Touareg dress. These fit her as badly as did the nation-states which the later independence movements mapped on to the Touaregs' desert, and she disrupts the identity they impose by her inability to speak Arabic (243). The crowd tries to read her confused cultural markers and mistake her for a French colonial in disguise. Out of context, signs are as worthless as the thousand franc note in her hand, but she is nonetheless contained: seduction remains within the system.

Since she cannot but interact with the world on the level of her body, Kit seeks another local man's protection by sleeping with him (250). When this fails, she is, like Port, instinctively drawn to the protective order which identifies her white-bodied self least problematically: that of the West. She sends a telegram, presumably to Tunner, but immediately regrets it. Silence, the rejection of any culture's signs is her strategy to escape containment. 'Now that she had betrayed

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<sup>62</sup> Baudrillard, *For a Critique*, p. 161. See also Hegarty, p. 37.



herself, established contact with the other side, [she must flee]. They would spare no effort in seeking her out, they would pry open the wall she had built and force her to look at what she had buried there' (246). For all that she tells herself that the Touareg life she has fled is only a 'ridiculous game' (238), she is unmoored (in more senses than one). She deserts the valise containing her American identity-papers and make-up (with which she performs her Western social identity, and which she treasured while in Touareg society).

However, as the consular-official says, 'nothing really ever gets lost' in the Sahara (254), and she is claimed for the United States. Kit, in contrast, feels that '[e]verything's lost' (254); having rejected social distinctions she soils herself (252). When she responds to his queries, '[t]he sound of such a sentence coming from her own lips struck her as unbelievably ridiculous, and she began to laugh' (250). Away from American society and the impositions by which it creates consensus, Kit sees the contingency on which words' authority rests.<sup>63</sup> Non-conformity is defined by the system as deviancy, such as insanity. Therefore, while 'Cold war-speak, like cold war military activity, was a form of extreme displacement, language split off from visible reality', someone who 'apparently met no inner resistance in the act of uttering and maintaining what the world held to be untruth' can be identified as psychopathic.<sup>64</sup> The *American Handbook of Psychiatry* describes a psychopath as 'an instance of linguistic asphasia or "semantic personality disorder," able to speak fluently and coherently but emotionally so cut off from what he says that "speech in this disorder, however well formulated, has no meaning and is not language at all"'.<sup>65</sup> Cold War language establishes distinctions which shatter on contact with the world, exposing the difference between narrative and experience, model and real. Accordingly, Kit rejects them. However, if she had learned the Touareg language she might have

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63 See Nadel, *Containment Culture*, p. 167. This authority is exposed as a Barthean myth, having no referent, but functioning as if it did in order to preserve the status quo.

64 Douglas, p. 81.

65 Douglas, note 40, quoting Hervey M. Cleckley, *American Handbook of Psychiatry*, 2 vols (New York: Basic Books, 1959), I, p. 585.

appreciated that, in the Sahara where linguistic borders are porous, individuals like Belqassim synthesise the different identities available to him in the service of the self.<sup>66</sup>

Significantly, the official thinks that she looks like a 'partially Europeanized' local (253), which implies an imposed identity rather than an integral self. Escorted back to Oran, Kit does not 'know definitely whether or not she had been here before' (255): in the same way as Heraclitus' river-crosser, she cannot revisit the city since she is now different.

From Port's sense of uncontained existence with which it opens, the novel deposits its reader at the limitations of the restrictive West and in the character of Kit, dis-illusioned to the myth of protective authority, the dream is brought into the harsh light of day. The bedlam of rush-hour shows the incongruity of the Western world-order imposed on North Africa. Like all colonial hybrids in the text, it is corrupted and corrupting. Having come to question one hegemonic narrative, Kit is unconvinced by any, her need for total security preventing her from practising the double-think essential to the Cold War citizen. Rejecting the shelter of social containment, she fragments; shedding the burden of social responsibility, she is without external reference-points, unanchored. The novel ends with: 'At the edge of the Arab quarter the car, still loaded with people, made a wide U-turn and stopped; it was the end of the line' (256). For the Western world-order, beyond lies nothing ('[t]he Sahara's a small place, really' (255)). The tram-line maps Oran as a coherent entity, defining the city (and so also the

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66 Like a national border, language connects but also divides people. Its usefulness is undermined repeatedly in the novel (Arabic and Port's native English are equally useless since he cannot use either). Words and thought are patterned, restricted, not True (17). At one point, a local man uses Arabic when he does not know the French, turning facts into nonsense (132). Words and people mutually shape one another and, while words create a place to stand in the world, people must be careful of the weight they put on them. Simultaneously, silence destabilises, as evidenced by the 'famous silence of the Sahara' (161, 201). Ultimately, the world is slippery (locals see things, but refuse to believe them (201)). Like the three dancing-girls (30) trying to see Targuis' house, Port is aimless, lacking a reference-point. The individual needs reference-points such as language or maps (despite locals' misgivings, the towns which the Americans have found on their maps appear out of the desert in the end (83, 134)), irrespective of how slippery these are, too.

desert), screening the uncontainable beyond. This official 'line' is undermined by Kit's experience standing there, which reveals the indigenous settlement existing outside the colonial system. Here, she steps off the map. By escaping society's interpreting and appropriating gaze, Kit cleanses herself of signs and turns her whiteness into blankness. Just as she feels that the Otherness of typhoid obliterates Port's humanity (that is, his identity) (171), the Ground Zero of the desert annihilates her own. In this way, she becomes a singularity, which alone exceeds societies' process of stripping the self of self-being.<sup>67</sup> Whereas the symbolic is a loss which (like the seductive) challenges the system to contain it, singularity is a nothing (that which lies outside the system) within simulation but eluding it because it can never be identified, that is, real-ise its becoming. Unlike Port, when Kit awakes she knows immediately where she is, but feels that it is 'good merely to lie there, to exist and ask no questions' (215); she is content with 'the mere certitude of being alive' (9). Port always seeks to fulfil his desire, mirroring the atomic-state's pursuit of its goals and simulation's drive for total control; fulfilment, however, precludes further becoming, and so is death.<sup>68</sup> In contrast, singularity is reducible only to itself<sup>69</sup> and, unable to be related to anything else, without external reference-points, must be accepted on its own terms. It is, in short, a show-stopper and, indeed, Kit now stops the novel.

In this way, she becomes the equal of the desert which haunts the Western imaginary, itself a singularity in the wild threat it presents, the sublime clash between reason and fantasy it inspires. On encountering an Orientalist tableau of fierce-looking veiled men on camels, Kit thrills at the fact that the desert

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67 Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2001), p. 131.

See also Hegarty, pp. 161–63. Arthur Redding discusses the 'process of becoming' to which Port and Kit are subjected and by which they are unavoidably open to the 'potentially productive or destructive' randomness of the universe which undermines notions of fixed identity (*Turncoats, Traitors and Fellow Travelers: Culture and Politics of the Early Cold War* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2008), p. 122).

68 Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*, trans. by Chris Turner (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p. 212. This is discussed in John Phillips, 'Humanity's End', in *Baudrillard Now: Current Perspectives in Baudrillard Studies*, ed. by Ryan Bishop (Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2009), pp. 159–71 (p. 159).

69 Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, p. 130.

brings her into contact with 'such people in the Atomic Age' (147). By extension, she becomes the equal of the Bomb – also a singularity in that it is always becoming, its threat always forming – and so can counter the fears which contain her.<sup>70</sup> Just as Port, despite his resistance to the American system, ultimately realises that the system's contingency on its reception by the Free World does not undermine its necessity, Kit, for all her submission, comes to perceive that its necessity does not refute its contingency.

## **The Potential of a Marriage**

*The Sheltering Sky* emerged from a crucial moment before what Edwards considers America's supremacist attitudes were consolidated.<sup>71</sup> Not only does it disrupt the binary constructs of the Cold War, it rejects the neocolonial/anti-imperial polarity<sup>72</sup> which would similarly contain it within the system. In this way, it suggests the possibility for engagement across cultural distinctions which offers a 'counterpoint to the forms of containment being consolidated on the home front'.<sup>73</sup>

Bowles recognised that a totalising world-order does not fit the world. Accordingly, the reference-points he chose were mobile: the people around him, whose cultures he accessed through a dialogic synthesis of Moghrebi, Spanish and French to avoid their being contained through neocolonial Arabic.<sup>74</sup> He established himself in Tangier, an international zone which disrupted a bipolar

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70 '[I]t is only through discourse that the weapons acquire their value and utility' (Taylor, p. 568), meaning that 'by continual de-construction of the word [we will] avoid the destruction of the world' (David Dowling, *Fictions of Nuclear Disaster* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1987), p. 208, quoted in Taylor, p. 569). In this sense, while Port is destroyed by the Bomb, Kit destroys the Bomb, that is, the nuclear-paranoia by which the Cold War hegemony contains her. By discarding language, however, she loses her agency and self: evidently, beyond providing the nomenclature, the Bomb is a necessary feature of life in the atomic age.

71 Edwards, p. 307.

72 Edwards, pp. 307–08.

73 Edwards, p. 309.

74 See Jeffrey Bailey, 'The Art of Fiction LXVII: Paul Bowles', in *Conversations with Paul Bowles*, ed. by Gena Dagal Caponi (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1993), pp. 111–34 (p. 133).

world-view and, Edwards contends, challenged the idea of national identity.<sup>75</sup> It remained as such until 1961 but, even in 1992, Iain Finlayson opens his biography of the city with the perception that 'Morocco is not Africa [...] Tangier is not Morocco'.<sup>76</sup> In this in-between 'place of diasporic convergences',<sup>77</sup> Bowles found a third-space, in which he could set his cultural preconceptions and experiences in dialogue with the world-orders of North Africa.

Distinct from the other, unmechanised space which Port seeks, this space is anticipated by the Jewish shopkeeper who pragmatically accommodates local culture while retaining his identity and, arguably, by Tunner when he forsakes his useless DDT-cannister (96) and wraps himself in a burnous to find Kit (184). Similarly, the Touareg negotiate the desert, navigating by the sun and stars, adjusting their hours of travel according to the changing circumstances. They draw on the benefits of Algerian society, such as its trading opportunities, without allowing it to dictate their relationship to the Sahara. They live by the belief, 'kiss the hand you cannot sever', wisdom from which Port could have benefited. Just as Port and Kit comprise one another's Other, so do they stand in opposition to Bowles, and so it is perhaps inevitable that they should not survive the novel. The lack of closure might be read as analogous to deterrence-ideology's denial of death. Like Port, the Cold War subject might conform without knowing it; like Kit, they might be dead without realising. Both decontaminate society of their potential threat, defusing it in the desert which is, of course, an atomic test-site. However, the (non-)ending can also be read as marking the limits of narrative: as the tram pulls up at the edge of the Western world-order and the reader prepares to step off, back into the world which perhaps now appears unsatisfactory, Bowles simply sounds the alarm of too extreme a reaction either way.

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<sup>75</sup> Edwards, p. 314.

<sup>76</sup> Iain Finlayson, *Tangier: City of the Dream* (London: Flamingo, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>77</sup> Edwards, p. 308.

Bowles asserted that '[s]ecurity is a false concept';<sup>78</sup> as Andrew Martino says, his work concerns the fear not of the Other but of the loss of the self.<sup>79</sup> This self is preserved only through split-subjecthood and negotiation with the world. Home will always be hazardous, as Kit senses (33), but not having one is more so. Shifting individuals in a shifting world, with only insubstantial signs at their disposal, must accept some restrictions (such as national identity) in order to have the security of a system which provides them with a place to stand. It is only through being contained that the self can interact with the world.

The individual is unavoidably a fusion of hegemonic narrative and personal experience, but is also Other in the face of official narratives. Outside one's formative society, its constructs are disrupted, their contingency exposed, offering the chance to edge closer to the other centre which Port perceives on his deathbed. Accordingly, Bowles hoped to construct a personal reality that was more real than the unreality of Cold War America within Tangier's unreality.<sup>80</sup> The city had been 'touched by fewer of the negative aspects of contemporary [mechanised] civilization than most cities of its size'; it was unpredictable and did not conform to the familiar order.<sup>81</sup> For Bowles, it was always 'a magic place'<sup>82</sup> which kept people's minds in a state of healthy, personalised anarchy,<sup>83</sup> that is, uncontained.

While Port desires to draw a line to separate the mechanised world of the American and Soviet Bombs and himself, as on a map, this third-space is necessarily an internal construct. Bowles critiqued American politics and

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78 Daniel Halpern, 'Interview with Paul Bowles', in *Conversations with Paul Bowles*, ed. by Gena Dagal Caponi (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1993), pp. 86–101 (p. 91).

79 Andrew Martino, 'The Vanishing Point: The Dis-Integration of Female Identity in Paul Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky*', *South Atlantic Review*, 71 (2006), 87–114 (p. 92).

80 Gary M. Cuiba, 'Review of *An Invisible Spectator: A Biography of Paul Bowles* by Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno', *American Literature*, 62 (1990), 358–59 (p. 359).

81 Quoted in Kerensky, p. 269.

82 Michael Spindler, 'The Prism of Estrangement: Placing the Fiction of Paul Bowles', *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, 8 (1989), 35–45 (p. 35).

83 John Bernard Myers, 'Aspects of Self: A Bowles Collage', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 32 (1986), 284–86 (p. 285).

culture, but not the United States itself,<sup>84</sup> always careful not to burn any bridges in case he ever wanted to return (indeed, for many years he lived in an apartment, always full of Moroccan writers and musicians, located opposite the United States' embassy). He said:

I did not choose to live in Tangier permanently; it happened [...] I grew lazy and put off departure [...] Thus if I am here now, it is only because I was still here when I realized to what an extent the world had worsened, and that I no longer wanted to travel.<sup>85</sup>

He was aware of his Western cultural construction: 'The interested observer, remarked Bowles, required "a strong streak of infantilism" in his nature to come even partly to terms with the fascination of Tangier which partially consisted in "an element of make-believe in the native life as seen from without (which is the only viewpoint from which we can ever see it, no matter how many years we may remain)"'.<sup>86</sup> The writer Iain Finlayson, who knew Bowles, argues that, for the novelist, Tangier was a window through which he could perceive another actuality without fully participating in it – total exposure would be destructive, but the observer could remain relatively intact while being moved and touched by the unfamiliar.<sup>87</sup> This archetypal outsider said he did not know if he was running from or running to.<sup>88</sup> Perhaps it was rather the case that he was doing neither. In this third-space, Bowles found a place in which to stand. Remaining stationary did not mean that he had succumbed to the state of simply being which enticed Port, because the world he established around him was constantly changing. In this way, away from America but in a position to keep an eye on it,

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84 Edwards, p. 310.

85 Finlayson, pp. 178–79. Bowles never ruled out the idea of moving elsewhere (including back to the States) but, in the event, it was to be his home until his death in the final year of the century.

86 Finlayson, p. 10. Similarly, Bowles' friend, Richard H. Goldstone, notes that 'while no American can truly and fully penetrate the Arab world, he can, at the very least, be enveloped by it' ('Aspects of Self: A Bowles Collage', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 32 (1986), 274–79 (p. 279)). The writer was also conscious that his continued residency was dependent on the whims of the Moroccan state; see Paul Bowles, 'Bowles et Choukri: Le Temps de la Polémique', *Les Nouvelles du Nord*, 28 February 1997, pp. 6–7, quoted in Edwards, p. 312.

87 Finlayson, p. 161.

88 Regina Weinreich, 'Aspects of Self: A Bowles Collage', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 32 (1986), 267–74 (p. 270).

Bowles was able to construct his own shelter.



## Chapter 2.

### Self-Sovereignty and the Containment of Death: Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* (1958)

On 22nd May 1957, at the time Saul Bellow was working on *Henderson the Rain King*, an American B-36 accidentally dropped an H-Bomb on farmland near Albuquerque. Needless to say, the device did not detonate and the incident was successfully kept from public attention by official omission and misinformation until 1986. Nevertheless, this event underlines the fact that the Bomb, with its indivisible protection and threat, was even closer to the heart of American society than its citizens knew.

Critics tend to read *Henderson* in the context of the consumerist culture of 1950s America,<sup>1</sup> and as an expression of the anti-rationalistic thinking of the 'Freudian Fifties'.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, it is seen as a bildungsroman about a man in middle-age straining against a materialist society which fails to provide him with spiritual fulfilment. It is generally considered an uneven work which does not number among the author's best. Robert Kiernan and Bruce Michelson,<sup>3</sup> however, argue that the book's unevenness is an integral part of its design, since it mirrors the title character's experience. This present examination will contend that it can be further recuperated when read in relation to the political duplicity which dominated much government activity in these years. Accordingly, it will draw on ideas developed in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's tract to undermine the capitalist state, *A Thousand Plateaus*,<sup>4</sup> to link

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- 1 See Orville Prescott, 'Books of the Times', *New York Times*, 23 February 1959 <[www.nytimes.com/books/97/05/25/reviews/bellow-henderson.html](http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/05/25/reviews/bellow-henderson.html)> [accessed 20 July 2012]; and Daina Miniotaite, 'Human Quest in Saul Bellow's Novels *Henderson the Rain King* and *The Adventures of Augie March*', *Eger Journal of English Studies*, 5 (2005), 111–19 (p. 113).
  - 2 See, particularly, Robert F. Kiernan, *Saul Bellow* (New York: Continuum, 1989).
  - 3 Bruce Michelson, 'The Idea of Henderson', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 27 (1981), 209–24 (pp. 315ff).
  - 4 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004).

the novel's concerns about US domestic consumerist superficiality with the story's implications about Washington's political and cultural penetration of the non-aligned world. The writers' thinking about the interrelations between human and animal is explicitly relevant to Henderson's key experience of Otherness during his African tour and contributes to a more compelling interpretation of Bellow's work.

## Conformity

As the Wariri king, Dahfu, tells the title character of the novel, '[f]ear is a ruler of mankind'.<sup>5</sup> *Henderson* was written at a time when the US was fearful not only of the Soviet Union and its spreading influence around the world but also of a communist infiltration of American society. While it can be argued that this paranoia had reached its peak in the early years of the decade, the fear (and damage) of association was far from forgotten<sup>6</sup> and the desire to be seen as promoting 'American' values stronger than ever, not least in the nation's cultural spheres. Writers avoided engaging with the central political issues of the day, such as the Bomb and, like the rest of the populace, looked to established authority for guidance.<sup>7</sup> As Alan Nadel notes, Bellow drew on Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) for his fish-out-of-water tale.<sup>8</sup>

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5 Saul Bellow, *Henderson the Rain King* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1959), p. 258. All subsequent references to the novel will appear in the text in parentheses.

6 'America would struggle to exorcize the demons McCarthy had raised for years to come', Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 1999), p. 211. See also Douglas Field, 'Introduction', in *American Cold War Culture*, ed. by Douglas Field (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2005), pp. 1–13 (p. 7) regarding Truman's Loyalty Program of the 1950s which made it possible for American citizens to be disloyal not only through membership of communist organisations but also through association with members.

7 See, for example, Stonor Saunders, p. 410.

8 Alan Nadel, 'Fiction and the Cold War', in *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction After 1945*, ed. by John N. Duvall (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), pp. 167–80 (p. 169). Speaking more broadly, the novel harks back to fundamental quest-tales. In his *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell draws on Jung to argue that, after the individual has devoted the first half of their life to establishing themselves in society, they must then turn to realising their inner potential and find a fusion between this self and the world if they are to

Propaganda packaged conformity in easy-to-swallow pieces: such-and-such small act in one's everyday life would ultimately enable victory over communism. However, this in itself produced a sense of unease, as the homogeneity inspired by the Nifty Fifties' nascent mass-culture could be equated in the equally Freudian Fifties with the uniformity of communism.<sup>9</sup> It was a society simultaneously at ease and unable to take its eye off itself for a moment.<sup>10</sup>

As David Stevenson says, Henderson's bid for individual agency is undermined by the materialist and conformist forces of 1950s American society.<sup>11</sup> However, it can be argued that it is negated more specifically by the Bomb. While Bellow's protagonist recognises that death is a lone certainty in an absurd world, the uncertain nature of his life until then robs him of any standpoint he can take towards it. After the horrors of the Second World War and now the ever-present threat of the Bomb, Norman Mailer wrote that 'our psyche itself was subjected to the intolerable anxiety that death being causeless, life was causeless as well'.<sup>12</sup> Henderson's narrative reflects this erosion of cause and effect, the first chapters repeatedly promising to explain his reasons for going to Africa, but being diverted along other narrative paths. His picaresque, helter-skelter consciousness is a home-made bomb which explodes the causal logic at the foundation of the State's rationally constructed narrative of the nation's rationally constructed life.

This uncertainty and the perverse inability to speak truthfully one's

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be fulfilled. After the decay of his half-life, as detailed in his bodily breakdown beneath the African sun, Henderson's experiences 'initiat[e] the start of (adult) life', as Baudrillard contends (Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. by Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993), pp. 131–32; phrasing comes from Paul Hegarty, *Jean Baudrillard: Live Theory* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 43). See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1968).

9 See Stonor Saunders, p. 249; Thomas Hill Schaub, *American Fiction in the Cold War* (Madison and London: U of Wisconsin P, 1991), p. 17.

10 Stonor Saunders, pp. 191–92.

11 David. L. Stevenson, 'The Activists', *Daedalus*, 92 (1963), 238–49 (p. 240).

12 Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (New York: G. P. Putnam's and Sons, 1959), p. 338, quoted in Nadel, 'Fiction', p. 170.

orientation about anything are elemental conditions of the atomic-subject.<sup>13</sup> In this way, Henderson, rather than the conformists around him, embodies the true dynamics of the age. This ambivalence or split-selfhood is captured in his desire, voiced silently as 'I want'. Such volition is based on the ability to choose between the meaningless and the meaningful, but Nadel writes that such distinctions were razed in the Hiroshima blast as safety collapsed into danger and survival became random not causal.<sup>14</sup> It is because of this that Henderson's inner-mantra, as simple as it is, is also unappeasable. Consequently, he decides that he must be mad (25) and unfit to live in society:

I could just hear people back home saying, as at a party for instance, '*The big Henderson finally got his. What, didn't you hear? He went to Africa and disappeared in the interior. He probably bullied some natives and they stabbed him. Good riddance to bad rubbish [...]* I guess he knew he was a lunatic and despised people for letting him get away with murder' (196, italics in original).

His journey to Africa can be seen as a Foucauldian purging of society of the taint of the self. As Nadel points out, 'sanity merely indicates conformity to a set of norms'.<sup>15</sup> Henderson's predicament is that, again in Nadel's words, he is torn between the desire for inner identity and the demands of social identification.<sup>16</sup> He consolidates the former by his flight from American society (to Africa), but this then means that it is an identity of the weak, or at least the ineffective fantasist.

The containment culture of 1950s America worked to turn individuals' spirited opposition into an apathetic sense of powerlessness, directing their attention and tension towards other targets.<sup>17</sup> At home, Henderson takes his frustration out on his tenants' cat, the timber he cuts, his father's violin and his

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13 Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), p. 88.

14 Nadel, *Containment Culture*, pp. 58–59.

15 Nadel, *Containment Culture*, p. 71.

16 Nadel, 'Fiction', p. 170.

17 Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill and London: U of North Carolina P, 1994), pp. 338ff.

wife, which are mere proxies for this lack of focus or meaning at the core of his being. According to Jean Baudrillard, the unconsciousness is always structured around and predicated on a lack, which he identifies as death.<sup>18</sup> However, the Bomb substitutes for this lack, the simulation of 1950s society packaging the threat of death as something which can be countered, but only by absolute trust in and loyalty to the State. In this way, death and desire are contained within the hegemonic system and so, rather than threatening it, actively work to promote the status quo. As Henderson realises,

the grown man mainly dreads [the world]. And why? Because of death. So he arranges to have himself abducted like a child. So what happens will not be his fault. And who is this kidnapper – this gypsy? It is the strangeness of life – a thing that makes death more remote, as in childhood (84).

Consequently, while he feels that his only access to reality is death ('We hate death, we fear death, but when you get right down to cases, there's nothing like it' (89)), Henderson's reaction to his neighbour's prone corpse is both reverent and reticent: '[n]ot knowing what else to do, I wrote a note DO NOT DISTURB and pinned it to the old lady's skirt' (39). Immured by the popular commodity-culture authorised by the Cold War state as he is, any rare glimpses of reality he catches are both sacrosanct and scary. As Arthur Schlesinger says, '[t]he eternal awareness of choice can drive the weak to the point where the simplest decision becomes a nightmare. Most men prefer to flee choice, to flee anxiety, to flee freedom'.<sup>19</sup>

While Henderson is incapable of action, he is equally incapable of the requisite faith in the State. After all, he fought in the Second World War in the belief that the Germans were the enemy and the Soviets were his allies. Now his government impresses upon him the reverse, along with a new material comfort as if to bolster the moral rightness of the new dynamic. As Henderson

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<sup>18</sup> Hegarty, p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), p. 52, quoted in Schaub, p. 187.

acknowledges, 'ideas make people untruthful. Yes, they frequently lead them into lies' (245). He is dispossessed by all the possessions which are his burdensome birthright as well as his cultural claim, having also inherited a spirit which does not fit this materialistic society. (His dentures, for example, are a commodity at odds with the spirit which drives him into situations where they break.) At this time, Erich Fromm's observation of his adopted home's consumerist culture led him to develop his idea of the 'marketing character' and the ultimatum 'to have or to be'.<sup>20</sup> Henderson is aware of the lack of a lack: he wants to want:

when I tried to suppress [the voice] it got even stronger. It only said one thing, *I want, I want!*

And I would ask, 'What do you want?'

But this was all it would ever tell me. It never said a thing except *I want, I want, I want!* (24, emphasis in original).

He is also incapable of faith in the religious sense, which became bound up with the lot of the Free World at this time when a 1954 act of Congress incorporated the words 'under God' into US citizens' pledge of allegiance to their country.<sup>21</sup> Two years later, 'in God we trust' became the nation's official motto,<sup>22</sup> but Henderson was hardly the only person decrying the primacy of the material over the spiritual in the US.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, to stay in this fraudulent society will destroy him, whether the Bomb drops or not. 'Death will annihilate you and nothing will remain, and there will be nothing left but junk. Because nothing will have been and so nothing will be left. While something still is – *now!* For the sake of all, get out' (40). Drawing on Baudrillardian theory, Paul Hegarty argues that '[t]hose who hope to leave commercialization behind are so alienated they

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20 Erich Fromm, *To Have or to Be?* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978), p. 148.

21 Nadel, 'Fiction', p. 168.

22 Stonor Saunders, p. 280. On the penny, this motto arcs over Abraham Lincoln's head in a rainbow-trajectory. While Honest Abe the Liberator broke down the differences between black and white, 'Liberty' is here behind him, as if he has moved past that possibility, facing a future of uncertainty. This lifeblood of the American nation is thus marked with hope, but simultaneously disseminates a sense of paranoia (hence the need to trust in God).

23 For example, Dwight Macdonald, 'America! America!', *Dissent*, 5 (1958), 313–23, as cited in Stonor Saunders, p. 316.

think an authentic world exists that would be better than the spectacle (which has lost its autonomous existence).<sup>24</sup> Indeed, it is the superpower's culture of simulation which provides Henderson with the opportunity to flee. Before this, however, Henderson's domestic circumstances also express the tensions of Cold War America.

### **Domestic discontent**

Henderson has been a soldier (and, as far as the reader can tell, a good one), but this mentality forged by society ill fits civil-society: it now seems absurd, which perhaps explains why Henderson's recollections of active-service always return, self-demeaningly, to an incident when he was publicly stripped naked and deloused. '[M]ilitary service had dictated conformity to a set of social conditions almost antithetical to those in postwar American, which valorized the nuclear family [...] and promoted assemblyline workers and middle-management employees as the appropriate models for manhood'.<sup>25</sup> Several texts during and about the 1950s, Nadel notes, posit a male-identity antithetical to domesticity and only fully expressed through escape.<sup>26</sup> For him, the conflict between male-identity and social identification across a gendered spectrum thus located the female firmly in the home. However, this rigid heteronormativity is undermined by Henderson's relationship with his second wife, Lily.

Lily adheres to the social dictates of being a home-maker and mother in complete financial dependence on her husband, yet within the framework of that outward conformity she succeeds in disrupting his masculine identity by fighting with him and frequently having her own way in the face of his threats of physical violence to reassert his domestic supremacy. She is a woman in need of a protector while clearly able to stand on her own two feet, the wife of multiple

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<sup>24</sup> Hegarty, p. 78.

<sup>25</sup> Nadel, 'Fiction', p. 171.

<sup>26</sup> Nadel, 'Fiction', p. 170.

marriages. She is also, apparently, the daughter of a mother simultaneously alive and dead (which, in the light of the Bomb, can be seen as a truth which holds for them all), a spectre resurrected only in speech like the Bomb. These lies cut through the lie of unproblematic atomic-protection disseminated by the hegemony. The inversion of this gendered culture by his wife's nature forces the inwardly sensitive Henderson to occupy a conventional masculinity: it is in his relations to her that he most closely conforms to social expectations of his gender.

Nadel argues that such instabilities at the foundation of the gendered narrative of postwar life undermine the authority of both American men and women.<sup>27</sup> However, the first-person perspective on this conflict reveals the falsity of the domestic harmony which was to be the basis for the Free World's victory over the Soviet bloc. In this way, the narrative's demonstration of how Henderson's subjecthood can be split between male and masculine and the fusion of female and forceful in Lily reveals the instability underlying normative society. People are more than one-dimensional canvases waiting to be filled with the propagandic ideals promulgated by the State. Individuals can exceed their social roles, can be non-aligned to the profiles in which the State tries to capture them by the flash of an A-Bomb. Equally, just as conventional ideas of masculine and feminine are compromised in the marriage, the social roles of daughter and mother collapse around their child who steals a baby and hides it in a wardrobe, while Henderson's other children merge into one another in his mind, thereby undermining the stability of the 1950s nuclear-family.

As discussed above, Henderson represents the patriarchal norm in order to drive Lily back to the position of the feminine Other. The political and personal contradictions being simultaneously nurtured and neutralised in the marital stand-off exposes tensions around the identification of reality (36). For example, he contrasts what he considers to be her naïve notions of goodness and

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<sup>27</sup> Nadel, *Containment Culture*, p. 6.



reality with the reality of death he encounters in Africa (150). Reality, as Jacques Derrida writes, is 'the encompassing institution of the nuclear age, constructed by the fable, on the basis of an event that has never happened'.<sup>28</sup> For Henderson, as already discussed, the only reality in a shadowy life of commodified domesticity lived out beneath the Bomb is the reality of death. By opposing Lily, however, he is forcing himself to support the system which denies death but, incapable as he is of doing so, is left stranded and, in his own words, insane ('in an age of madness, to expect to be untouched by madness is a form of madness. But the pursuit of sanity can be a form of madness, too' (25)). It is from within his insanity that he tries to reason with Lily, a woman constructing herself from contradictions. Ultimately, therefore, neither husband nor wife are on sufficiently solid ground to be the last one standing since, now that the reality of death has mutated into the death of reality, any appeal to truth 'presumes truth as something arrived at through the interaction of social and rhetorical contract',<sup>29</sup> and so is reliant entirely on norms and consensus ('few people are sane [...] slavery has never really been abolished [...] what do I fight for? Hell, for the truth' (124)). Consequently, by going to Africa, Henderson is not only escaping *from*, he is also travelling *to*. I will discuss the African desert which Henderson first enters is a socially authorised fantasy of socially constructed clichés. However, in removing himself from a situation of confrontation between the State's propagandic projection of meaning and his desire for significance, there arises the possibility of calming his angst and exposing him to other political projections of meaning, which might allow him to engage with the world in a new way.

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28 Jacques Derrida, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)', trans. by Catherine Porter and Philip Lewis, *Diacritics*, 14 (1984), 20–31 (p. 23).

29 Nadel, *Containment Culture*, p. 83.

## 'Africa'

Although Henderson seeks the reality which superficial American society denies him, the 'Africa' he experiences is a stereotypical projection of the savage Dark Continent, its desert a clichéd fantasy of his cultural formation and its attendant desire for difference (which is itself a product of the West).<sup>30</sup> As Eusebio Rodrigues details, Bellow draws on a wide range of material to create his 'Africa' and the societies Henderson encounters there.<sup>31</sup> While the few indications of the location of the Hinchagara plateau suggest that it is in East Africa (the sea being accessed through Kenyan ports and the route to Europe lying through Khartoum), Bellow built up his fantasy with details and events from places as far away as West Africa in order to create the archetypal primitivist 'Africa' such as might be formulated by a resident of 1950s America: an unforgiving desert-world dotted with the straw huts of naked black people. For Henderson, 'Africa' is the site of knowledge (54) and simple happiness, where people are happy with their lot when in their home-society even though he was not happy in his ('We can't allow ourselves to lie down [...] But [the Arnewi queen] had given up such notions, there was no anxious care in her, and she was sustained' (79)). *Henderson* is thus an appropriate subject for this thesis; indeed, since its 'Africa' is so subjective, it provides a particularly clear expression of the themes being examined.

Henderson's fantasy-Africa is a site of antiquity ('I felt I was entering the past – the real past, no history or junk like that. The prehuman past' (46)). While this is a common trope for the cradle of humanity, this temporal distinction expresses the US' image of itself at the time. Having won the Second World War, it saw itself in a position to shape the world to its own desires. The first nation to develop the Bomb, it was at the vanguard of human achievement and, accordingly, those parts of the globe which did not align themselves with either

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30 See Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Perceptions of the Orient* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2001) and John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (London: Sage, 1990).

31 Eusebio L. Rodrigues, 'Bellow's Africa', *American Literature*, 43 (1971), 242–56.

side of the atomic-binary and which in 1956 had begun to call themselves the Third World were relegated to the past. Non-America was history; Hiroshima resembled an ancient ruin as if, at the event of the Bomb, Progress had turned tail and sought safety in the stone age. For those like Henderson who had discovered that the uncertainties of freedom have 'brought with it frustration rather than fulfillment' (sic),<sup>32</sup> this was a past which promised to be free of the tensions which had arisen out of America's stratospheric progress, Bowles' 'mechanized age'. (Significantly, Henderson recalls a time in his youth when, in conflict with his father, he expended his anger by cutting up old motor-cars at a scrap-yard (337).)

The opportunity to travel to Africa comes courtesy of Henderson's fellow-millionaire, Charlie. He has packaged the continent as a honeymoon-experience, during which time he will film the wildlife, thereby technologically and socially containing Africa for the West while effectively remaining safely contained within American society himself: 'The expedition that Charlie organized had all new equipment and was modern in every respect. We had a portable generator, a shower, and hot water' (42). In this way, Charlie embodies the hunter-spirit, now armed with twentieth-century corporate-backing. Hunting, which Henderson considers 'a strange way to relate to nature' (94), is an acquisitive drive predicated on the rational containment of the globe for one's colonial interests ('geography [...] it's one of those bossy ideas according to which, if you locate a place, there's nothing more to be said about it' (55)). Even after Henderson leaves his friend in order to see the 'real Africa', his perceptions still clearly remain on the far side of the Atlantic, picturing himself travelling among 'in the farthest African mountains – damn it, they couldn't be much farther!' (87). Africa is a backdrop ('isn't that a picture?' (47)) to his centre-stage American protagonist: he understands it through references to the West (the Bible (116) and Gordon's last stand at Khartoum (118)). This is not surprising, since his dreams of exotic adventure are based on the courageous feats of Arctic explorers he has read

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<sup>32</sup> Schlesinger, p. 52, quoted in Schaub, p. 187.

about at home, which perpetuate the pioneer-myth of taking nature in hand and so support the status quo as surely as the pilgrims' village does in *Moon Tiger*. The upshot, however, is that Henderson considers that his troubled self is more fantastic than the wilderness around him (114).

Nevertheless, the strangeness of his environment ('The mountains were naked, and often snakelike in their forms [while the thatch] seemed like feathers, and yet heavy – like heavy feathers' (46–47)) augments its difference and suggests he is in a place where familiar rules do not apply. Swaddled in this new illusion of exoticism which replaces the artificiality of American society, Henderson's inner-voice of desire is at last silenced. He is thus travelling away from society's impositions ('my object in coming here was to leave certain things behind' (45)) but, in doing so, is falling back on his cultural formation, for all that he sheds many of his social signifiers (44) and, with them, he believes, the fierceness which characterised his relations with society (49). This is evident in his outrage that the indignities he faces are being visited on an American citizen ('I react to police questioning. Especially as an American citizen. In this primitive place. It made my hackles go up' (131)). Baudrillard argues, and *The Sheltering Sky* suggests, that there is no way outside one's cultural preconceptions and, in the same vein, Henderson's attempts to understand his environment and hosts are but simulations of an authenticity authenticated by its difference to American society. This difference, Baudrillard maintains, is purely a means to contain true alterity within the binary world-view of the self,<sup>33</sup> that is, casting alterity as an oppositional Other to the self and thereby aligned through degrees of similarity. In this way, while the construct of self/Other imposes difference (such as the gender norms on which the 1950s nuclear-family is founded), it also implies sameness where none might exist.

While Henderson is disappointed that the Arnewi prince, Itelo, speaks English, since this taints the exoticism of the tribe to the Westerner (even

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33 Hegarty, pp. 117ff.

though, without it, the tribe would be wholly alterous, outside the binary of self/not-self predicated on difference, and he would not have any means to access the alternative it might offer him), he still regards the US overseas education programme which instructed Itelo as purely benevolent. The American's reaction implies he believes that any ills which result are the product of the natives' misappropriation of it:

I had long ago realized how much American education was spread through the Middle East. The Young Turks, and Enver Pasha himself, if I am not mistaken, studied in American schools – though how they got from 'The Village Blacksmith' and 'sweet Alice and laughing Allegra' to wars and plots and massacres would make an interesting topic (63).

For all his conscious opposition to American society, Henderson has internalised the double-think by which Cold War America's activities are maintained. He does not see the parallels between the natives' perversion of Western policy and the Arnewis' unique world-view which suggest that cultural influence, whether Western or communist, radiates through societies in ways which can never be predicted or controlled.

Henderson's first reaction when faced with the Other is the same as when he is confronted by Lily: he occupies a position of orthodoxy. When he arrives at the Arnewi court his offerings are trivial commodities (73) representative of the mass-produced culture he describes as a pestilence (40, 280), thereby making explicit the analogy between the perceived ills of his society and the plague of frogs being visited on his hosts which their traditions forbid them from eradicating. Henderson complains that '[m]y soul is like a pawn shop' (81) and yet fails to appreciate the true worth of the dowry which the besotted Princess Mtalba offers him. This wealth, while no less comprised of material possessions, derives its value from how the clothes and jewels augment her royal being: the dowry is a means to make her person more prized (97). Henderson rejects the display even though, he says, 'I realised as the night and the dancing wore on that this was enchantment. This was poetry, which I should allow to reach me, to

penetrate the practical task of demolishing the frogs in the cistern' (98). On one level he understands that, rather than compartmentalising it from his mission as he does, he should allow the spirit of the moment to inform his outlook on the world and so his resolve to purge life of its afflictions. However, this does not penetrate his mentality, and proves his undoing when his next host proposes a wager and Henderson overlooks the significance of the immaterial prize at stake and, on losing the bet, he is obliged to extend his stay with the tribe.

The Arnewi present a tableau of pitiable helplessness beseeching American intervention, to which he responds by playing to the full the part he has reluctantly inherited, as if his geographical and cultural displacement has displaced his own sense of self. He asserts that the US is technologically superior to the tribe but that he is a poor representative of it:

I felt singularly ashamed of not being a doctor – or maybe it was a shame at coming all this way and then having so little to contribute. All the ingenuity and development and coordination that it takes to bring a fellow so quickly and so deep into the African interior! And then – he is the wrong fellow! (77–78)

This tension is also evident when he first encounters Itelo: 'I thought he might be looking for trouble, sizing me up as if I were some kind of human mushroom, imposing in size but not hard to knock over' (52). Not only is he highlighting the difference between the power of the culture he unavoidably represents and his individual self; he also expresses his own disdain for the fungal emblem with which that culture has come to identify itself.<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, the American believes that he can help the Arnewi. In return for his service, as 'one of those mutual-aid deals' (87), he hopes that they will help him find meaning in life but also teach him how to whistle with his fingers in the corners of his mouth. While he does not seek the material gain which drives Western society, a whistle can be a means to command, and so his desire mirrors the US' neo-imperialist motivation when distributing aid and

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<sup>34</sup> See Peggy Rosenthal, 'The Nuclear Mushroom Cloud as Cultural Image', *American Literary History*, 3 (1991), 63–92.

expertise throughout the Third World, as it had under the Point Four program. The tribe's servility elicits his altruism, for which he expects further service.

His notion that Africa is the site of superior knowledge is undermined by the tribe's behaviour regarding the frogs but his totalising preconceptions contain the discrepancy, and enforces his hosts' exotic difference and neediness ('I figured that these Arnewi, no exception to the rules, had developed unevenly; they might have the wisdom of life, but when it came to frogs they were helpless' (87)). In truth, the Arnewi, as docile as their beloved cows, are no less effective against the world as Henderson is in his own home-place. This shows that the problem with which he grapples is not exclusive to 1950s America, but instead concerns people's relationships with their societies' norms: 'the world, the world as a whole, the entire world, had set itself against life and was opposed to it' (132). While Henderson recognises this on one level ('Society is what beats me' (49)), he thinks at this stage that the solution is to flee his society into a fantasy of its construction.

In leaving his home and confronting the superstitions and foundational problems of the Third World, therefore, Henderson is spreading America's values more diligently than he realises. He builds the bomb which he will use against the frogs from the casing of his flash-light (an appropriate weapon against the dark places of the earth) and the gunpowder from his Magnum, which he bought after having read about the model in '*Life* or *Look*' (94). The workings of the device are based on plans reproduced in an article about a foiled terrorist attack which 'appeared in the *News* or *Mirror*' (102). In helping the 'Africans', Henderson is taking his cue from the US media which not only disseminates Washington's Cold War ideology, but actively constructs the world which demands the nation's overseas intervention. By printing the bomb-designs of the would-be terrorist (a man, like Henderson, in conflict with society, being a 'fellow who had quarreled with the electric company and was bent on revenge' (102)), the press have commodified his power, simultaneously containing and diffusing it, usurping

the primacy of the original. In this way, the State's monopoly on death is preserved while society's fear of death, and so its propensity to be harnessed, is augmented.

Nevertheless, Henderson champions his lone-pioneer status ('I thought then I could have made a better bomb at home but of course I had the advantage on my side of officers' training in the infantry school where there had been a certain amount of guerilla instruction. However, even a factory-made grenade might have failed' (103)), tapping into the founding American myth without realising it has been colonised by the military-industrial complex. At the moment of its execution, his bomb becomes 'the torch of liberty in New York harbour' (107). The subsequent explosion 'might not have been Hiroshima, but it was enough of a gush for me' (108). This is an apt by-word for his achievement, as the jubilation is swiftly replaced by the horror of what he has unleashed, much as the celebratory mood of the American public at the war's end was quickly overtaken by the fear of an atomic-future (as detailed by Paul Boyer).<sup>35</sup> The unravelling of Henderson's self-directed assault on this new frontier suggests not only that attempts to influence the global scene can be disastrous but that the American gung-ho spirit has now been comprehensively co-opted by the State. The expression of this self has become monopolised by Washington with its death-dealing, mass-produced Bomb and any individualistic examples of the bravura which won the West and was hoped would win the war against communism, such as is born of Henderson's frustration, is directed away from it. In the African desert, however, events are free from the propagandic narrative by which the State directs interpretation of them (as anticipated by the tribe's term 'Bittahness' (75), a linguistic false-friend since it is a form of respect). Consequently, Henderson's intervention, which unwittingly destroys the tribe's water-source, is an unmediated disaster demonstrating that, firstly, Western rational constructs and the reality they create do not hold universally (thereby upending the principles behind American foreign policy) and that, secondly,

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<sup>35</sup> Boyer, pp. 14–16.



effect is inarguably related to cause (thereby undermining the narrative which justifies all Cold War strategising).

Like Port in *The Sheltering Sky*, Henderson unavoidably proliferates American ideals. He needs to be aware of his preconceptions if he is to resist effectively the American norms which deny him happiness. While he later says 'travel is advisable. And believe me, the world is a mind. Travel is mental travel. I had always suspected this. What we call reality is nothing but pedantry' (167), this is insufficient: now that 'Africa' has disappointed him by refusing to fit his desires, his inner-voice returns. After his failure with the frogs, he wishes that he had turned back into the desert when he had first met the Arnewi (49). However, wandering in the wilderness would not help him, since he would only be circling his own subjectivity. Henderson needs a different society to challenge him and give him a perspective which will allow him to distinguish his cultural conditioning from his personal values.

His preconceptions are further undermined when he enters the land of the Wariri, who are markedly less subservient than the Arnewi, and so it is here that Henderson can truly begin to change. This tribe's relationship with its gods disrupts the material/spiritual binary which holds true elsewhere (even though the Arnewis' attitude to nature, as represented by their cattle, is the antithesis of America's, they are just as enslaved by their worldly wealth as are Henderson's neighbours). The idols are the possessions of the tribe, but simultaneously watch over it, which mirrors the purported relationship between the State and the American citizen. Witnessing the tribesmen fail to move the idol which represents the goddess Mummah in the rain-making ceremony, Henderson feels compelled to step forward and accomplish the feat, thus shouldering the burden of both social ritual and material possessions in his impulsive desire to act on the world: 'So inflamed was my wish to *do* something. For I saw something I could do. Let these Wariri whom so far [...] I didn't care for – let them be worse than the sons of Sodom and Gomorrah combined, I still couldn't pass up this

opportunity to *do*, to distinguish myself' (186). The ability to act implies the rightness of the act. However, the American's strength is commodified by the Africans, inverting the neo-imperialist reality.

## **Becoming Deleuzian**

Since the assertive Wariri contravene Henderson's self/Other preconceptions of Africa, he can either try to exoticise them (thereby installing them within a bipolar view of the world) or seek a connection with them: 'I thought his wrinkled stare, the stern vein of his forehead, and those complex fields of skin about his eyes must signify (even here, where all Africa was burning like oceans of green oil under the absolute and extended sky) what they would have signified back in New York, namely, deep thought' (251). His entry-point into Wariri society is King Dahfu, whose Western education makes him accessible, less a truly alterous Other than an African elder brother. Both men are philosophically on the margins of their respective societies, evading expectations, resisting their respective containment cultures. As Deleuze and Guattari write, 'the man of war [...] is external to families and States, insofar as he upsets filiations and classifications. The war machine is always exterior to the State, even when the State uses it, appropriates it'.<sup>36</sup> They are not fixed by the definitions of subjecthood which society seeks to impose but instead define themselves through shifting connections which go against the grain; they 'break with identity, which is always the identity of the majority, in favor of difference as yet unactualized'.<sup>37</sup> The king accepts the incompatibilities which the world contains ('it is not up to me [...] to make the world consistent' (208)), the different economies of meaning-making as exemplified by the Western scientific-literature he reads co-existing with his tribe's maggot–lion–king dynamic which governs his life. He does not seek a master-narrative by which to understand the world,

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<sup>36</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, pp. 267–68.

<sup>37</sup> Todd May, *Gilles Deleuze: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), p. 150.

but instead seeks to form a workable consensus of ostensible contradictions. Consequently, he is a hybrid who threatens his society's foundation of binary difference, fusing the totalising aspect of Western science with the equally totalising traditions maintained by the Wariri court in order to create a new energy.

The African king thus complements Henderson in a way not dissimilar to Lily. Likewise, the women in Africa do not represent a strict alterity. While, in Orientalist fashion, Henderson is simultaneously fascinated and unnerved by Dahfu's many wives, they constitute not an unimaginable alterity but a danger he imagines all too well. He baulks at the idea of assuming the king's domestic role, not from fear of miscegenation but because he doubts that he could meet their demands. It is the parity of the not-self rather than the strangeness of alterity which confounds the Western gaze. The manner in which they are both attractive and threatening thus enacts a Cold War rather than an Orientalist dynamic.

Consequently, Henderson only approaches alterity through his encounters with the lioness Atti which Dahfu keeps beneath the palace.<sup>38</sup> Away from the incessant impositions of meaning on which the Cold War state operates, Henderson can voluntarily consider a new philosophy: 'Yes, I thought, I believed I could change; I was willing to overcome my old self; yes, to do that a man had to adopt some new standard; he must even force himself into a part; maybe he must deceive himself a while, until it begins to take' (297–98). By accepting the danger of entering the lioness' cell in the hope that he will walk out a stronger man, he is pre-empting death and thereby enacts the central interest of this thesis, that is, the protagonists' desire to travel to the desert to unconsciously pre-empt nuclear-annihilation and reclaim their life. It is in the

<sup>38</sup> His pact with Atti is predicated on an alliance with Dahfu, a fellow-outsider for all that he is king: 'In order to produce werewolves in your own family it is not enough to resemble a wolf, or to live like a wolf: the pact with the Devil must be coupled with an alliance with another family [...] There is an entire politics of becomings-animal [...] which is elaborated in [...] minoritarian groups, or groups that are oppressed, prohibited, in revolt, or always on the fringe of recognized institutions' (Deleuze and Guattari, p. 272).

presence of the deadly animal that he experiences the death of a part of himself, forcing his ego to open up. Through the wilderness, the most inhuman and extreme form of the Other is experienced.<sup>39</sup>

His preconceptions begin to fall away and Henderson believes he can access reality. Whereas the previous, fleeting encounter with the reality of death bewildered him, now he is forced to contemplate it and honour his conviction: 'So what if reality may be terrible? It's better than what we've got' (105). His exposure to Atti, which so jars with his formation in a culture which so diligently contains and excludes death, inspires him to consider whether 'every guy has his own Africa.' He continues, '[t]his is not to say, however, that I think the world exists for my sake. No, I really believe in reality. That's a known fact' (275–76): he still holds to an objective, external reality.

Dahfu's training programme is built on the idea that experience of the lioness can change a person on a fundamental level. This is because, he argues, imagination and body shape one another, with 'the flesh influencing the mind, the mind influencing the flesh, back again to the mind, back once more to the flesh' (236). Indeed, experiences alter the brain's pattern of gene-expression.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, '[h]e told me, over and over again, that the cortex not only received impressions from the extremities and the senses but sent back orders and directives' (238). The cerebral cortex, rather than being a passive recipient of external stimuli conveyed through the senses, fuses them with existing understanding in order to construct an interpretation of the present moment. The surgeon and journalist Atul Gawande has noted that only twenty percent of the fibres leading to the brain's primary visual cortex come from the retina, with the other eighty percent coming from other parts of the brain, such as those which govern memory. He cites the leading British neuropsychologist Richard

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<sup>39</sup> This idea is based on a point made in Yeo Sun Park, 'Modernity and the Politics of Place-Experience in D. H. Lawrence's Novels With Parallel Readings of Arnold Bennett, Giovanni Verga, Patrick White and Gregorio López y Fuentes' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sheffield, 2012), p. 92.

<sup>40</sup> Michael O'Shea, *The Brain: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), p. 98.

Gregory when he suggests that this might mean that visual perception is comprised of over ninety percent memory and less than ten percent sensory nerve-signals.<sup>41</sup> Put another way, the optic nerve does not have anything like enough bandwidth to carry all the information that a person 'sees', so vision must primarily come from within. In short, the brain conflates the culturally constructed binary of nature and nurture to create something aligned to neither and to change the individual in defiance of imposed oppositional definitions. 'Body and face are secretly painted by the spirit of man, working though the cortex and brain ventricles three and four, which direct the flow of vital energy all over' (268). Narratives of cause and effect are thus disrupted. This is not contradicted by the idea that everything originates in the brain (237) since, while experience always precedes interpretation, it is also necessarily predicated on it, too.

Society suppresses the fact that the individual and their environment enact a two-way influence, championing cultural constructs at the expense of stimuli. This can be seen in the attempts of the king's uncle, Horko, to contain the tradition of the royal lion within totemism. It is also why Henderson has always sought a meaning for his life in his father's books (where, ironically, he finds only money) and in his violin, outside of himself, thereby allowing himself to be dictated by social authority. 'When I started to read something about France, I realized I didn't know anything about Rome, which came first, and then Greece, and then Egypt, going backward all the time to the primitive abyss. As a matter of fact, I didn't know enough to read one single book' (244). The only books he is able to read are medical texts which focus on the self, the necessary basis for one's world-view from a phenomenological perspective. Under Dahfu's tutelage, Henderson struggles with the (Western) scientific literature he is given, but does again find some interest in medical tracts: 'Most of these articles had to do with the relation between body and brain, and they especially emphasized

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41 Atul Gawande, 'The Itch', *New Yorker*, 30 June 2008, n.p.  
<[www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/06/30/the-itch](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/06/30/the-itch)> [accessed 23 July 2013]

posture, confusions between right and left, and various exaggerations and deformities of sensation', which can be equated respectively with how one positions oneself with regards society, one's politics and fear or paranoia. 'Thus', he continues, 'a fellow with a normal leg might be convinced that he had the leg of an elephant' (246): suggestive influence (such as propaganda) is everything, since values dictate reality, the model generates the real.

Henderson is encouraged to internalise the perspective of Atti the lioness: 'try to distinguish the states that are given and the states that are made. Observe that Atti is all lion. Does not take issue with the inherent. Is one hundred percent within the given' (263). This is the foundation of an alternative to the external, purportedly objective truth of the one nation under God; as Dahfu says, '[w]hat a Christian might feel in Saint Sophia's church [...] I absorb from lion' (260). Dahfu's philosophy is a means to 'transcend external resemblances to arrive at *internal homologies*', which is how Deleuze and Guattari outline their concept of becoming-animal in *A Thousand Plateaus*.<sup>42</sup> Becoming-animal involves dialogue with nature, learning from it and adapting oneself to what it offers. This contrasts with, on the one hand, Cold Warriors' desire to harness nature for their own ends and Henderson's commoditisation of his pigs and, on the other, the Arnewis' subservience to their cows. By refusing to pit nature against culture, becoming-animal undermines the Cold War's 'reversal of evolutionary modes by which intellectual prowess replaces brute force'<sup>43</sup> – becoming-animal works across the system, since opposition can be incorporated into the status quo as its legitimating Other – allowing for alterity free from the reductiveness of binary opposition. One does not slip over to the other side of a binary but positions oneself in no-man's-land, a betrayal of one's socially constructed sense of self rather than a defection.<sup>44</sup> 'Becoming is not to imitate or

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<sup>42</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, p. 260, italics in original.

<sup>43</sup> Nadel, *Containment Culture*, p. 55.

<sup>44</sup> This is analogous to Baudrillard's idea of symbolic exchange, also operating in the divide, but Deleuze and Guattari's thinking seems more apt here given my use of their idea of becoming-animal.

identify with something or someone [...] becoming is to extract particles between which one establishes the relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness that are *closest* to what one is becoming, and through which one becomes'.<sup>45</sup> It collapses the binary into the divide to reveal 'a proximity "that makes it impossible to say where the boundary between the human and the animal lies"'.<sup>46</sup> While the duplicity of the Cold War state, emblematised by the Bomb which is a source of both hope and horror, is consciously contradictory in order to conceal certain truths and create others, becoming-animal is a revelatory fusion of all.

Becoming-other offers Henderson a means to improve his lot which society denies him.<sup>47</sup> The patriarchal status quo has granted him a position of power which he cannot refuse but is equally unable to inhabit. Lily, on the other hand, flits between the various social personae (the damsel-in-distress, the firebrand) which are projected on to her (but which fail to contain her) in order to get what she wants from society. Thus through Baudrillardian seduction she can express her social excess, and as a result the marriage exposes the meaninglessness of society's constructed gender-differences. Similarly, Henderson's guide Romilayu always uses the pronoun 'him', even when he is talking about a female, and the fact that this does not hinder his meaning demonstrates how these social signifiers are unconnected to the individuals they

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45 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 300, italics in original.

46 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 301. 'The painter and musician do not imitate the animal, they become-animal at the same time as the animal becomes what they willed' (Deleuze and Guattari, p. 336).

47 This mirrors the idea of the Cold War as the opportunity to create an integrated network of cooperation between countries, rather than a situation demanding hegemonic containment. See Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–61* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2003), p. 41, cited in Steven Belletto and Daniel Grausam, 'Introduction: Culture and Cold Conflict', in *American Literature and Culture in an Age of Cold War: A Critical Reassessment*, ed. by Steven Belletto and Daniel Grausam (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2012), pp. 1–14 (p. 6). Eric Strand writes that the creative possibilities of such a globalised approach after the Second World War enabled an attack on conformist mores at the height of the Cold War (Eric Strand, 'Lighting Out For the Global Territory: Postwar Revisions of Cultural Anthropology and Jewish American Identity in Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*', *ELH*, 80 (2013), 287–316).

try to contain in (and thereby erase from) discourse. Henderson associates English with the containment of emotions ('I would never have thought that people who spoke English would have been capable of carrying on so emotionally' (51)) and animals (the Arnewi 'have more than fifty terms just to describe the various shapes of the horns [...] hundreds of words for the facial expressions of cattle and a whole language of cow behavior [while] a pig [such as Henderson keeps] is basically a career animal [...] and therefore doesn't require a separate vocabulary' (56)). This is why the first exercise in becoming-animal centres on him learning to roar.

By changing his name to Leo Henderson, he articulates the way in which he exceeds the role which society expects him to play (and in this way becoming-animal is analogous to Baudrillard's symbolic exchange). After all, he wants to live at peace with and in American society. As Deleuze and Guattari write, 'the self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities',<sup>48</sup> which contrasts with Cold War ideology which denies change or external realities. This constant becoming is the reality of the self and produces nothing but itself.<sup>49</sup> It is a question of being true to one's values, and Dahfu identifies Henderson's guiding values when he tells him that suffering is the closest he has got to worship (303–04). Given that Henderson is 'monstrously proud' of his capacity for suffering, it can be interpreted as his form of celebration of or communion with the world. This is his challenge to society: it achieves nothing beyond the challenge of being Other to the suffering demanded by the State (as codified in Cold War dictates, propaganda and civil drills).

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48 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 275.

49 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 262



## Dahfu's defeat and Henderson's homecoming

The Wariri king, Dahfu, has to capture the lion which is the reincarnation of his father in order to consolidate his right-to-rule.<sup>50</sup> When it is reported that the lion in question is close to the village, he sets out to contain it in a corral in order to bring it back to the palace dungeon on which his power is literally founded. Henderson accompanies him and, his fear compounded by his long-standing tropical fever, says that 'I had a feeling that I had found, in midair, a changing point between matter and light' (301). This is his personal fission, triggering an alchemical transformation within his understanding of the world. At this moment, the advancing reality of the deadly lion explodes the socially constructed reality he has always maintained. He sees, even if he does not understand, that reality exceeds one's values. Nature is not unequivocally good or bad and these values are imposed on it by the culture of those who try to control it, whether they be Cold Warriors wielding the Bomb or African tribesmen harrying a bestial embodiment of kingship.<sup>51</sup>

Consequently, it is Henderson's values which create his two epiphanies in the novel. Vexed as he is when he encounters the octopus in the French aquarium (19), it becomes a multi-armed figure of death. Similarly, he watches the dawn light creep up the wall of an Arnewi hut (100ff) when he is full of optimism, which accordingly transforms it into a beacon of hope.

However, for all his talk of embracing reality, in the heat of the hunt Henderson seeks safety in familiar social constructions. He relates that 'within the rising blare of the horns and the constant running of the drums [...] I said,

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<sup>50</sup> Contrary to the atomic-society of the West, 'death can no longer establish itself as end or agency' (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, p. 131).

<sup>51</sup> Later, Henderson wonders,

Perhaps I had learned from lions after all, and not the grace and power of movement that Dahfu had got out of his rearing among them, but the more cruel aspect of the lion, according to my shorter and shallower experience (316).

Henderson has questioned why mankind would want to learn from a ferocious lion (307), but its benefit is evident in his snarl as he launches his pre-emptive strike on his enemies (324). For a discussion of how the symbolic must be submitted to, rather than controlled, see Hegarty, p. 33.

“Your Highness, did I ever show you these pictures of my wife and children?” I started to look for them in the bulky wallet' (302). Although he claims that he does this to comfort his friend, it is clear from his nervousness that he is trying to distract himself from the coming danger; despite his atheism, he even prays (307). However, these illusions are inadequate to protect him from reality:

I then tried to tell myself because of the clearness of those enraged eyes that only visions ever got to be so hyperactual. But it was no vision. The snarling of this animal was indeed the voice of death. And I thought how I had boasted to my dear Lily how I loved reality. 'I love it more than you do,' I had said. But oh, unreality! Unreality, unreality! That has been my scheme for a troubled but eternal life. But now I was blasted away from this practice by the throat of the lion (307).

The ferocious quarry they finally corner is a 'real' lion, not the former-king-as-simulation, and Dahfu is exposed to the reality of death. As he dies, he reveals that Henderson, being the tribe's rain king, will automatically ascend to the throne and that he engineered the American's investiture in that role precisely so that his successor would continue to resist the ambitions of the court-faction led by his uncle. The king has previously explained how he believes suffering is perpetuated in the world – in a manner evoking the Cold War mindset ('man cannot keep still under the blows [...] All wish to rid themselves and free themselves and cast the blow upon others. And this I conceive of as the earthly dominion' (213)) – but that noble individuals must strive not to pass on their fear to others. Now it is clear that he has fallen short of his ideals or, rather, that his philosophy has failed to accommodate political realities. Once again, the problems of Henderson's hosts show that the cause and solution of the individual's frustration do not lie with any particular society but with one's relations to social systems.

Henderson laments the worldly corruption of his friend and believes that, because of this, '[i]t could be time we were blown off this earth' (316). Ultimately, Dahfu's deceit is more insidious to the American than is Horko's overt manoeuvring, just as a communist fifth-column within the US was more feared

than Soviet-gains in the Third World. Nadel outlines the scenario that, in order to win the Cold War, one side must relinquish its traits and become like the Other in order to make that Other the same as itself.<sup>52</sup> Such thinking upholds binary opposites, for all the porosity which betrays their constructed nature. Dahfu adheres to this axiom in that he seeks unalloyed freedom: for all its emphasis on fusion, his philosophy is totalising rather than dialogic. The tribal infighting is thus a confrontation between two authoritarian yet interdependent powers, each unsure of the other's strength. In attempting mastery over the Other, Dahfu succeeds only in a betrayal of the self. His admission of political machination reveals him to be more different to Henderson than the American had believed. Paradoxically, Henderson thus realises that the Wariri are less different to American society than he had thought.

At the start of the novel, Henderson regards 1950s American society to be as incompatible with his sense of self as is nuclear war. He believes that his state of non-alignment can only be realised through self-containment, and so flees from society. This, however, is as impossible as Dahfu's conviction that he can be non-aligned by embracing everything is deluded. The world is incoherent and self-contradictory and, as a result, any attempts to fuse its different elements can be dangerous. Since it is not rational, the world – and particularly the Cold War world – in its entirety cannot be rationally accepted. In trying to harmonise competing systems of understanding the world, Dahfu, like Conrad's Kurtz, comes effectively to believe anything, which means that he ultimately believes nothing. This is the far end of the spectrum from the American consumer's inability to choose, as described by Schlesinger above, and yet equally removes one's agency. Additionally, rationalism has led to communism. The true, pioneer-spirited American Way must involve finding a means to live in the world which is true to one's self.

Dahfu argued that everything originates in the brain – thought it could

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<sup>52</sup> Nadel, *Containment Culture*, p. 159.

encompass all – which perhaps was the reason he ignored the dangers of the court, to his peril. However, the fact that everything begins in the brain emphasises rather than overrules the fact that the individual is always informed by understanding of past experience. Looking back on his life, Henderson realises that, at every instance, '[s]omething deep already was inscribed on me. In the end, I wonder if Dahfu would have found this out for himself' (339). In short, as he says, '[w]hen you get right down to it, a fellow can't predict what he will pick up in the form of influence' (316).

When we first meet Henderson, he feels himself to be Other in the face of America's cultural narrative, thus destroying its East–West binary. He is his own worst enemy: the self is not Other but alterous. The citizen is never fixed, instead being always a processual merging of the myths designated self and Other, between which good and bad are not divided cleanly. Nuclear-society demands that it be homogeneous, that it is natural only for like to be with like. It removes ambiguity, such as that surrounding the Bomb. However, the 'unnatural act' of fission on which the nuclear-state is founded necessarily involves dissimilar elements, and so the myth founders. Henderson comes to accept that he is unavoidably contaminated by society; it has had a founding influence in the formation of his self, and so he cannot reject it.

It is impossible to be pure lion, that is, to achieve the pure potential of social desubjectification. However, Deleuze and Guattari stress that its impossibility is an integral part of authentic becoming-animal. In this failure, one attains awareness of one's excess to social definitions.<sup>53</sup> Consequently, while cultural preconceptions are unavoidable, they need not be an obstacle provided one discerns cultural consensus from personal truths. The immanence of failure to becoming-animal does not make it mere simulation, however. Becoming-animal is more than mere totemism, which is what the Wariri elite hope to reduce it to by installing Henderson as a puppet-king and recuperating his

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<sup>53</sup> This is paralleled in Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2001), pp. 61–62 and p. 83, and discussed in Hegarty, p. 88.

threatening marginality within their system.<sup>54</sup> It is real in the sense that it effects a change in Henderson. Becoming-animal is what Baudrillard calls a radical illusion, that is, an originary illusion which provides the individual with a foundation for living (with Truth recognised to be impossible, truths become possible). Radical illusions, occurring within simulation, cannot access the reality which lies outside society's constructs but, by existing in the divide, allude to it and thus bring it within one's awareness.<sup>55</sup>

Henderson now realises that, if a man can be lion while maintaining the outward appearance of a man, it is possible for him to live in society while remaining non-conformist to it. He must cultivate a cautious approach to life which takes into account both the spiritual and the worldly, the individual and the collective. As he earlier realised, but did not heed:

The world of facts is real, all right, and not to be altered. The physical is all there, and it belongs to science. But then there is the noumenal department, and there we create and create and create. As we tread our overanxious ways, we think we know what is real. And I was telling the truth [about reality] to Lily after a fashion. I knew it better, all right, but I knew it because it was mine – filled, flowing, and floating with my own resemblances; as hers was with *her* resemblances. Oh, what a revelation! Truth spoke to me (167, emphasis in original).

He must therefore weigh up the competing meanings of the world he encounters but, furthermore and crucially, he must also weigh up his own meaning-making system – to appraise his very appraisal – in order to be truly dialogic. In the past, he weighed up the competing ideologies of the American Way and communism, rejecting the latter, but then turned to the Western value-system through which he had viewed this choice and also found it lacking. This was not a third way but a politics as totalising as those he rejected because it left him with nothing, and this is not the answer ('I prayed and I prayed, "Oh, you...Something," I said, "you

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<sup>54</sup> See Hegarty, p. 32. As Deleuze and Guattari write, '[t]he Church has always [...] reintegrated anchorites into the toned-down image of a series of saints whose only remaining relation to animals is strangely familiar, domestic' (Deleuze and Guattari, p. 273).

<sup>55</sup> Hegarty, p. 33. For a concise explanation of radical illusion, see Hegarty, p. 46 note 10.

Something because of whom there is not Nothing” (253)). In contrast to the binaries of Nadel's premise, Frances Stonor Saunders quotes Harold Rosenberg's feeling that 'revolutions in the twentieth century are for freedom *and* socialism [...] a realistic politics is essential, a politics which would get rid once and for all of the fraud of freedom versus socialism'.<sup>56</sup> Henderson must fuse nature and nurture at every level of his interpretation of the world; as he says, 'Reality is *you*' (123, emphasis in original).

He has previously felt frustrated by the sense that his potential is unfulfilled and that he is still in the process of becoming complete: 'Being people have all the breaks. Becoming people are very unlucky, always in a tizzy [...] Enough! Enough! Time to have Become. Time to Be! Burst the spirit's sleep. Wake up, America!' (160). Now he realises that being is not the arrival at a state of passive completeness but of always learning. As he says, '[e]verybody changes. Change is ordained. Changes must come' (270). His ambivalence towards 1950s American society is not a cause for anguish but a legitimate philosophy of life.<sup>57</sup> 'What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes'.<sup>58</sup> This is why the corpse with which Henderson and Romilayu are billeted on their first night in the Wariri village, for all that it embodies reality, is so unimpressive: 'the dead man in his silence sen[t] a message to me such as, “Here, man, is your being, which you think so terrific.” And just as silently I replied, “Oh, be quiet, dead man, for Christ's sake”' (137).<sup>59</sup> In the attempt there is failing, but in failing there is hope: 'This is the sense in which becoming is the process of desire',<sup>60</sup> which is how it

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56 Stonor Saunders, p. 414; italics in original.

57 Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. by Charles Levin (St Louis: Telos, 1981), pp. 150 – 54. See also Hegarty, p. 27.

58 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 262.

59 On Baudrillard's argument that 'being' is death, see *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*, trans. by Chris Turner (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p. 212. For a discussion, see John Phillips, 'Humanity's End', in *Baudrillard Now: Current Perspectives in Baudrillard Studies*, ed. by Ryan Bishop (Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2009), pp. 159–71 (p. 159).

60 Deleuze and Guattari, pp. 300–01. For an explanation of the value which Baudrillard ascribes to hope, see Hegarty, p. 88.

will answer Henderson's inner-voice calling 'I want'. In this way, Henderson's understanding comes to correspond with the phrase in his father's library which so stirred him: 'The forgiveness of sins is perpetual and righteousness first is not required' (3).

Rather than constantly rejecting or passively accepting his lot, like Paul Bowles he must actively create a home for himself. Since 'it's love that makes reality reality' (286), providing as it does a stable sense of self, contentment and self-possession, he figures that 'I therefore might as well be at home where my wife loves me. And even if she only seemed to love me, that too was better than nothing. Either way, I had tender feelings toward her' (328–29) which are something he can grasp and build a life on. This is the radical illusion which he needs. His desire to live ('I want') has been insufficient, because it is purely internal to him and so has left him with a lack. He has required something external to himself, which is why he will find happiness not in *his* 'Africa' but back home in alienating, self-contradictory American society. People are happy in their home-society, as he appreciated when at the Arnewi court, but only on the condition that they are not comprehensively contained by it. By choosing to build his life around Lily and her possibly illusory love for him, Henderson 'presumes an external authority for truth'.<sup>61</sup>

They make us think we crave more and more illusions. Why, I don't crave illusions at all. They say, Think big. Well, that's boloney of course, another business slogan. But greatness! That's another thing altogether [...] I don't mean pride or throwing your weight around. But the universe itself being put into us, it calls out for scope. The eternal is bonded onto us. It calls out for its share. This is why guys can't bear to be so cheap (318).

Such recourse to transcendent Truth was the strategy of American liberals now forsaking rationalism, with its associations with communism,<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Nadel, *Containment Culture*, p. 83.

<sup>62</sup> Schaub, pp. 21–22; see also Stonor Saunders, pp. 247–48. Stonor Saunders quotes a 1972 *New Yorker* article by Senator William Fulbright: 'Like medieval theologians, we had a philosophy that explained everything to us in advance, and everything that did not fit could be readily identified as a fraud or a lie or an illusion' (p. 212).

exchanging the idealistic humanism embodied by *The Sheltering Sky's* Port for Henderson's pragmatism, thereby relieving them of their responsibility for a global moral-crusade. Henderson with his Establishment, essentially conservative, ancestry but disillusioned with what society has become, embodies the ambivalence of the new liberalism of the postwar years.

Seen in this light, the novel's unevenness replicates Henderson's experience of having to weigh up diverse components in order to discern meaning. As Kiernan and Michelson believe, its form complements its purpose. By negotiating conflicting information by means of double-think, constructing fusion from confusion, the reader enacts the daily duty of the citizen of 1950s America having to contend with official misinformation. The Cold War's propaganda campaign (bolstered by the co-optation of popular writers) obliged the individual to contain authorised contradictions and satisfy their need for truth when none was forthcoming. As Derek Maus says, since 'the extreme propagandization of language during the cold war drastically destabilized [even] the semantic and semiotic values of words',<sup>63</sup> it was necessary to construct one's own narrative of life.

Through the radical illusion of domestic stability, Henderson can construct a coherent alternative for himself in the face of nuclear-society's rampant materialism. The novel's form evokes this through its use of first-person narrative. This device creates form for formlessness, as Thomas Hill Schaub says,<sup>64</sup> and so a hero of Henderson. However, Schaub argues that the first-person's 'dialectic of consciousness' merely gives the illusion of preserving an individual's 'inside otherness' amidst social-conformity, and that it ultimately amounts to political acquiescence.<sup>65</sup> This thesis, on the other hand, argues that it is in fact impossible to escape the nuclear age and accordingly concerns itself

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63 Derek C. Maus, *Unvarnishing Reality: Subversive Russian and American Cold War Satire* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2011), p. 2.

64 Schaub, p. 73.

65 Schaub, p. 81.



with the possibility of escaping nuclear-paranoia. Given that the threat of the Bomb to American society is a fantasy,<sup>66</sup> it asserts that the first-person voice is a (vital) illusion against illusion: supple, pragmatic dialogue versus ungainly, idealistic totalitarianism.<sup>67</sup> In this way, the first-person 'illusion' is effectively subversive in conformist society: it refuses to pass its fear on to others.

Furthermore, Henderson does not believe that he is alone on this matter:

All the major tasks and the big conquests were done before my time. That left the biggest problem of all, which was to encounter death [...] Millions of Americans have gone forth since the war to redeem the present and discover the future [...] there are guys exactly like me in India and in China and South America and all over the place [...] And it's the destiny of my generation of Americans to go out in the world and try to find the wisdom of life [...] I wouldn't agree to the death of my soul (276–77).

He baulks against the denial of the spiritual which American society effects, and goes out in search of the death which his culture strives to contain. As Baudrillard writes,

Initiation takes the form of symbolic death, acceptance of and into the realm of the dead [...] on the one hand, he has been with the dead, and is now back; on the other, this means that the dead are accessible, and have a vital role in initiating the start of (adult) life.<sup>68</sup>

While the African desert he first enters *is* a socially authorised pressure-valve for his frustration, his initiation into a realm beyond such cultural constructs enables him to find what he seeks. This death is not rationalised and remains ambivalent. Much like the octopus in the French aquarium, or the Krishna whom Oppenheimer recalled while witnessing the Trinity test, Henderson now embodies death, the destroyer of worlds or, at least, societies.

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<sup>66</sup> See, for example, Derrida, p. 24.

<sup>67</sup> According to Baudrillard, a vital illusion is an individual's philosophy for living which acknowledges that there is more to the world than it can encompass. The opposite is an objective illusion, such as the totalising dictates of the paranoid nuclear-state. A succinct explanation appears in Hegarty, pp. 83–84.

<sup>68</sup> Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, p. 132; for a lucid discussion, see Hegarty, p. 43.

In *The Sheltering Sky*, Port was confronted with one atomic-superpower, and so sought to oppose it, only to realise on his deathbed that his opposition served to reinforce the ideological monolith. Henderson the 1950s citizen, on the other hand, is witness to the competing monopolistic doctrines of equally deadly atomic-adversaries, and recognises that truth is a product of ideology. Consequently, while he challenges the US nuclear-deterrent's promise of ideological immortality ('the absence of death alone permits our exchange of values'),<sup>69</sup> it is a challenge which asks for nothing more than its own existence. Henderson notes that '[a] fellow may do many a crazy thing, and as long as he has no theory about it we forgive him. But if there happens to be a theory behind his actions everybody is down on him' (276). As a result, whereas Port was destroyed, Henderson is permitted to return home. By dint of its own existence within him, his challenge betrays the fact that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in the State's philosophy. It recalls the process which initiated the hegemonic system<sup>70</sup> by affirming the alterous reality of death, and thereby wrestles back the narrative of death from the nuclear-armed State. The truth he constructs for himself, his radical illusion, creates a coherency for his life. His perception of the meaninglessness of American society is then contained within form and given a meaning: what he took to be a lack of meaning is in fact unfixed, self-contradictory meaning, which complements his own state. (After all, even great figures of Western science such as Curie and Kepler entertained irrational beliefs – heresies in the post-Enlightenment world – alongside their celebrated research (269).)

The bomb which Henderson threw at the frogs is thus the first stage in a chain reaction which explodes his cultural preconceptions. From the moment that he destroys the Arnewis' reservoir and, with it, the illusion of the universal application of Western constructions of reality, a maelstrom has engulfed his self. After Dahfu's death, as Romilayu and he flee across the desert, Henderson is

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69 Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, p. 154; again, see Hegarty p. 43.

70 Hegarty, p. 41.

delirious with fever and so not of sane mind, unconscious and so not rational. 'All so-called initiatory journeys include [...] thresholds and doors where becoming itself becomes'.<sup>71</sup> Bearing in mind Heidegger's idea of the threshold as the drawing together of two (permanently) discrete elements, this transitional episode can be seen as the process of Henderson's self finding an equilibrium between all that he now knows in order to remain true to himself once he is back in American society. As he recovers, Henderson keeps the African lion cub he is taking back to the US alongside his American passport and dollars within his helmet (327). This has been his constant protection against the tropical sun, the carapace within which he has preserved himself intact against the ravages of Africa. It has now become the crucible in which his Western social attributes can fuse with his fledgling African influences.

The fact that the reality he has experienced exceeds Western cultural constructions is evident in Henderson's incoherent letter to Lily about his time in Africa (280ff). Once again, the form is complemented by the content: he sees the contingency of the cultural values which creates the world for each person: 'Here they don't know what tourists are, and therefore I'm not a tourist. There was a woman who told her friend, "Last year we went around the world. This year I think we're going somewhere else"' (282).

Henderson now has confidence in his own experience and understanding of the world, rather than looking to cultural constructs for guidance. Accordingly, he writes to his wife that "I am giving up the violin. I guess I will never reach my objective through it," *to raise my spirit from the earth, to leave the body of this death*' (284, italics in original). His preconceptions and his perceptions have now become distinct, and he is able to see the world free of the meanings which American society imposes on it. People are like the clouds he passes over on his flight back to the US, 'not abiding realities' (333), ambivalent, not liable to be boxed into neat definitions as the State would like. He observes

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<sup>71</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, p. 274.

that the '[o]ther passengers were reading. Personally, I can't see that. How can you sit in a plane and be so indifferent? Of course, they weren't coming from mid-Africa like me; they weren't discontinuous with civilization' (333). Equally, he is not drawn to the birthplaces of Western civilisation – Athens, Rome – or the vanguard of European culture – Paris, London – through which his journey takes him.

When the aeroplane lands in Newfoundland to refuel, Henderson has finally reached the setting of his childhood dreams inspired by books of Arctic exploration which shaped his desire for escape. While he wrote to Lily that '*I don't think I would have found what I was looking for there*' (282, italics in original), his situation is now different as he carries what he seeks within himself. Whereas the Pole would formerly have been a blank canvas on to which he would have unwittingly projected his cultural preconceptions, the tundra around him is a clean slate. The sense of new beginnings is reinforced by the presence of his young companion, an orphaned American who has grown up in Persia. He is thus the product of mechanised, petrochemical imperialism, but he 'doesn't speak English at all' (335), and so, for all that he is informed by past experience ('Two smoothly gray eyes moved at me, greatly expanded into the whites – new to life altogether. They had that new luster. With it they had ancient power, too. You could never convince me that *this was for the first time*' (339, emphasis in original)), represents the potential of being oneself free of social impositions. The two of them rush out on to the virgin snow, on their own terms, much to Henderson's relish.

## **Conclusion**

Viewing the novel in relation to Cold War containment not only confirms it as a key text in this current investigation but also gives it a resonance which previous critics have found lacking. While Boyer suggests that writers – naming

Bellow in particular – remained silent on the matter of the Bomb because it could not be described,<sup>72</sup> this chapter suggests that the author did address this issue hidden at the heart of American life at that time in a correspondingly (if arguably unfortunate, though understandable) covert manner.<sup>73</sup> With this in mind, the Twain story which Bellow uses for inspiration appears less as an established model to which to conform as a solid base firmly embedded in US culture from which to launch a critique.

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<sup>72</sup> Boyer, pp. 250ff.

<sup>73</sup> Of course, at the same time as Henderson's trip overseas in order to find a means to express himself, American writers were being forced abroad, for example to Mexico, because of blacklisting.

**Section 2.**  
**Mortality in the Sahara, 1961–84**

## Chapter 3.

### Decolonising the Metaphor: Thomas Pynchon's *V.* (1963)

Arguably, the most significant political events in the twentieth century were not battles between liberal democracy and totalitarianism but the decolonisation associated primarily with the 1960s. In the face of this, and the declaration of political non-alignment at the 1956 Bandung Convention by those now identifying themselves as the Third World, the West and the Soviet Union sought to ensure their influence over these states to prevent them falling to the other side.

Concurrent with these events, the American public enjoyed unprecedented improvements in their living-standards as rising disposable-income was serviced by technological advances which provided an ever-increasing range of commodities. The fact that this consumerism, in addition to augmenting individual comfort, comprised a home-front in the fight against communism only implicated it more tightly in the success of the American Century.

However, from the 1950s, contention stemming from political conservatism threatened this brave new world. Coddled with commodities – Guy Debord's ideology become material – citizens were expected to consume the national narrative rather than appropriate the signifying potential of these playthings of progress to produce meanings of their own. They were colonised by the hegemonic narrative of freedom. As James Baldwin said in 1963, the year Thomas Pynchon's *V.* was published, '[a]ll of the western nations [are] caught in a lie, the lie of their pretended humanism; this means that their history has no moral justification, and the west has no moral authority'.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, many technological advances which benefited society were the product of military initiatives. Among the ranks of mass-produced commodities,

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1 James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (New York: Dial Press, 1972), p. 85.

therefore, the Bomb was the ultimate, their origin and final line of defence if they failed to hold off the Red Threat.<sup>2</sup> As with civilian-technology, so with its psychology: Oppenheimer's toy colonised the brain with not only fear of radiation (which led to the ban on above-ground atomic-tests in 1963) but apocalypse: as Daniel Ellsberg says, like an unfired gun, the Bomb is constantly in use.<sup>3</sup> This is what Paul Boyer calls 'nuclear-consciousness'. This 'myth [of the Bomb] has become a physical part of everyone's brain and is now acting as a strong unifying force'.<sup>4</sup> It colonises the brain, mutating its understanding of the world, mass-producing Cold War citizens.

The diverse strains of disillusionment came to be seen in the early 1960s as a counterculture<sup>5</sup> whose ideological dissent was Port Moresby's fears and Eugene Henderson's dissatisfaction made prevalent. At this time, Pynchon was combining a number of his early short stories in his writing of *V*, a novel of unreliable narratives, voids of meaning and the sinister face of Cold War technoculture.

*V*'s two narrative-threads each follow a Westerner, Benny Profane and Herbert Stencil, denied a voice by a colonising narrative of total contentment. This hegemonic discourse has usurped virtue (that is, interpersonal

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2 Through their purchases, the mass-produced consumer-citizen extends agency over the communist-Other-as-object while conceding agency to the objects they buy. For how mass-culture is associated with totalitarianism, see Thomas Hill Schaub, *American Fiction in the Cold War* (Madison and London: U of Wisconsin P, 1991), p. 17. Erich Fromm argues that the West's remnant of democracy is doomed to yield to technocratic fascism in a society of well-fed, unthinking robots: precisely what it fears when it speaks of communism and which, dehumanised, will not balk at using the Bomb (*To Have or To Be?* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978), pp. 180–81 and p. 197). The Bomb makes objects of us all and, as Fausto in *V* points out, the inanimate is subject to the law of physics (Thomas Pynchon, *V*. (London: Picador, 1975), p. 321. All subsequent references to the novel will appear in the main text in parentheses).

3 Quoted in Noam Chomsky, 'Why National Security Has Nothing to Do With Security', *TomDispatch.com*, 5 August 2014 <[www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175877](http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175877)> [accessed 15 February 2015]

4 J. O. Tate, 'A Note on "Convergence"', *Pynchon Notes*, 15 (1984), 80–82 (p. 80) <[www.ham.miamioh.edu/krafftjm/pn/pn015.pdf](http://www.ham.miamioh.edu/krafftjm/pn/pn015.pdf)> [accessed 10 November 2014]

5 Consciousness of a broad movement arguably formed in the wake of the crack-down on student-protesters outside a HUAC session in San Francisco in May 1960 and with the Women Strike for Peace march in November 1961.



communication) as the producer of meaning and so, being consuming-subalterns inevitably non-aligned with it, they find their world of 1956 to be meaningless. Profane acknowledges only the physical or profane and sees the world as subject to chaos, while Stencil believes in an underlying reason for the world being as it is which, once found, will assuage his torment. Both have internalised the colonising narrative which objectifies people. However, both experience the tensions resulting from their natures being excessive to normative dictates, and express this wariness of the self as paranoia of the Other (whether animate or inanimate). They insulate themselves from the world with what Jean Baudrillard calls objective (that is, totalising) illusion in their autocratic 'white halls [of the brain]' (53), which empties their universes of meaning. They might expose the falsities of the world but, like Vheissu, the sovereignty they carve out is a hermit-state as untenable as the felucca which Sidney's skipper recalls being painted even as it was sinking (460).

The conformist Stencil begins with a stencil (derivative of hegemonic discourse) and fills the space within his universe with narrative which, thus determined, cannot but lead to the Bomb. If the world is ultimately chaotic, as he fears, self-restraint means nothing and the Bomb will be used; he exists in a depopulated desert-narrative where meaning-making collisions are impossible, which is both refuge from and the result of this reality. Profane, conversely, begins with himself and works outwards, demarcating the limits of his universe by the edges of the objects which oppress him. He thus holes himself up in a bunker to protect himself from collisions.

Both avoid relationships, Stencil to avoid the Bomb which would destroy the meaning he is constructing and Profane to avoid anything meaningful which the Bomb could destroy. In this way, both are 'schizoid', Robert Lifton noting that schizophrenics are ambivalent towards relationships since they are infused with the threat of annihilation. Thus cut off, however, psychic death is

ubiquitous.<sup>6</sup> Erich Fromm's term for schizoid is 'marketing character' and he defines it as a person without an authentic self whose relations with Others are so insubstantial that they flee both self and Other to exist in their own universes, apathetic about threats to society such as nuclear war.<sup>7</sup>

My discussion will focus primarily on Stencil, since he metaphorises the void in which he lives as a literal desert as a challenge to the colonising narrative of the Cold War state, and so more clearly exemplifies the central concerns of this thesis.

### **Stencil, his mother and V.**

It can be inferred that Stencil's 'schizoid' mindset is a result of his never having known his mother, either first-hand or as communicated by his (now-deceased) father, the British spy Sidney (52). Without this virtue, Stencil lacks a stable foundational identity. He pores over his father's diaries and the testimonies of Sidney's associates, convinced their words speak of a coherent force beyond the arbitrary personal and political affairs of a past age: an international conspiracy behind everyday experience, central to which is V. whom, it is inferred, is his mother. By piecing together these references, Stencil hopes to excavate a foundational narrative for himself.<sup>8</sup> Memory (including constructed memory) is radioactive, lingering long after the material experience, encoding our identities at an essential level.

Sidney also contemplates the maternal, musing after the First World War that, following the absolute monarchy of the age of the Father and the mob-rule of that of the Son, the coming age of the Holy Spirit might be that of the mother

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6 Robert Jay Lifton, 'The Image of "The End of the World": A Psychohistorical View', *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 24 (1985), 70–90 (pp. 81–82).

7 Fromm, *To Have*, p. 151 and pp. 148–49.

8 V. is what Baudrillard calls a 'radical illusion', an originary illusion which, in hindsight, is seen to grant the possibility of truth (Paul Hegarty, *Jean Baudrillard: Life Theory* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 46 note 10). Such a narrative creates 'facts' – which Baudrillard terms 'theories' – and so replicates simulation without being it.

(472). '[E]mbodiment of a feminine principle' (209), it is an age of fusion: of the Left and Right ('[t]he street and the hothouse [...] in V. were resolved' (487)), and of atoms. It defies the unitary classifications on which reason is constructed. Baudrillard writes that the real (man/life) is always haunted by the imaginary (woman/death) which lies outside the system. The symbolic resolves these separate events in the social act of exchange,<sup>9</sup> but such exchange is prevented by capitalism, which is why Stencil is obliged to find his own means of expression.

The empirical certainties which replaced alternative narratives are shown to be founded on 'a sub-atomic realm where laws are mocked [and the] search for [truth] seems to demonstrate how perilously empiricism verges on magic'.<sup>10</sup> As Jacques Derrida notes, the Bomb fuses science and belief, as there is no truth. *The New York Times* summarises the thoughts of Derrick de Kerkhove, the acting director of the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology in 1984, thus: 'the bomb has become a modern myth, holding a power over the culture's thinking previously held by religion'.<sup>11</sup> As the Bad Priest of 1940s Malta whose clerical garb conceals a technological marvel, V. is a false faith arisen (over the New Mexico desert) in the absence of any true belief (Fausto says that the world, or rather the West, would have to be exorcised in order to free Stencil of V. (450–51)). Similarly, Victoria's perversion of Catholicism, by which the men she seduces become substitutes for the absent Christ (167), illustrates the danger of distorting others in the service of a self-serving supposedly external narrative.

The Bomb breaks down binary-oppositions such as those between the meaningful and meaningless, safety and danger, a house and a thoroughfare, as

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9 Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. by Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993), p. 133.

10 John Updike, 'The Talk of the Town', *New Yorker*, 9 December 1967, p. 51, quoted in Jon Michaud, 'Updike, J.F.K., and the Umbrella Man', *New Yorker*, 22 November 2011 <[www.newyorker.com/books/double-take/updike-j-f-k-and-the-umbrella-man](http://www.newyorker.com/books/double-take/updike-j-f-k-and-the-umbrella-man)> [accessed 30 August 2014]

11 Tate, p. 80. Jacques Derrida, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)', trans. by Catherine Porter and Philip Lewis, *Diacritics*, 14 (1984), 20–31 (p. 6).

Nadel details.<sup>12</sup> V. similarly collapses distinctions on which society grounds itself, merging nature and techno-culture, blurring good and evil, destroying the logic of cause and effect. The nuclear-gaze prohibits ambiguity for the sake of national security, but the difference between atomic-fuel and atomic-weapons is invisible.<sup>13</sup> The journalist Dwight Macdonald writes: 'Atomic Fission is something in which Good and Evil are so closely intertwined that it is hard to see how the Good can be extracted and the Evil thrown away'.<sup>14</sup> As Jonathan Schell writes at the start of his book, modern physics' violation of common sense ushers in the postmodern era of ontological uncertainty.<sup>15</sup> The shift from the epistemological uncertainty of the modernist era to the ontological uncertainty of the postmodern is evident in the different attitudes of Stencil père and fils: the former believes that '[n]ow and again events would fall into ominous patterns' (480), whereas the latter feels that '[e]vents seem to be ordered into an ominous logic' (449). The son is of a generation forced to deal with the death of Victoria and Victorian certainties, as well as the problems which both these certainties and their death create. Sidney, living in the transition between the two eras, knows that a spy must always feel at home (481), but the sense of home eludes him (476). The old certainties are now dead, but the technology which supported them endure (hence the unrest at the Maltese docks (467)).

This age depends on the paradox that the Bomb both is and is not being used simultaneously as decreed by MAD, analogous to superposition in quantum physics, when a particle both does and does not exist.<sup>16</sup> The Cold War everyday is

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12 Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), p. 59.

13 Nadel, pp. 23–24.

14 Quoted in Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill and London: U of North Carolina P, 1994), p. 234.

15 Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth and The Abolition* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), pp. 9–10.

16 The Cold War is an age of simulation, built as it is against the eventuality of an event which must not be allowed to occur. In a 'daisy chain of victimizers and victims' (49), V. is both, as is the State and the dissident Westerner who travels to the Third World, or Mondaugen who leaves the corrupt society in which he is complicit for the desert (278–79).

founded on the irrational; after all, on witnessing his creation, the father of the Bomb sought to ground himself by evoking ancient Eastern gods. Stencil believes that the world is the result of either conspiracy or chaos, but does not consider it being both.

The age of the mother, thus demanding dialogic negotiation, is the age of metaphor. Metaphors are less restrictive than nouns while being more tangible than narratives, having more potential than either and foregrounding the distinction between sign and signifier, making the consumer the producer of meaning. Nouns (even proper nouns) are ultimately abstract labels<sup>17</sup> and only live and acquire morality in narrative. Conversely, narrative reshapes and subsumes facts (that is, relabels nouns) to make experience meaningful.<sup>18</sup> In *V.*, people are defined as things which absorb X-rays (284), demonstrating how an object-noun can be colonised by narrative. Totalising hegemonic discourse attempts to root '[t]he rationality of the sign [...] in its exclusion and annihilation of all symbolic ambivalence on behalf of a fixed and equational structure'.<sup>19</sup> Metaphors such as the Bomb and *V.* are object-nouns invested with an inherent narrative of the narratively uncontainable, the real outside the system which is also at the heart of everyday life, this fusion creating energy which is both life-giving and destructive, flicking a V-sign at hegemonic dictates. Metaphor enables the Cold War citizen's split-subjectivity by which they live everyday life even as the Bomb hangs over them.<sup>20</sup>

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17 The dead Mélanie is merely a chaos of objects, without meaning (414).

18 For example, in the Florence episode, young Godolphin is rechristened by the authorities as Gadrulfi, the name of a revolutionary, to tie him to their suspicion that he is involved in subversive activities. Godolphin in turn displays 'the honest concern and bewilderment of any English tourist confronted with a happening outside the ken of his Baedeker' (190).

19 Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. by Charles Levin (St Louis: Telos, 1981), p. 149.

20 For all its totalising dictates, the hegemony harnesses the ambivalence of the Bomb: Khrushchev claimed that it was not an offensive weapon (Elie Abel, *The Missiles of October: The Story of the Cuban Missile Crisis 1962* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1966), p. 166). Equally, the US conducted a military-exercise (Philbriglex-62) in the Caribbean in October 1962 against a dictator called Ortsac (Abel, p. 97), an inversion of and metaphor for 'Castro' constructed from familiar elemental particles knocked out of order, demonstrating how strange the world becomes with a shift in perspective. See Baudrillard's discussion of the power of anagrams in

V. speaks in many tongues, with snatches of French, German, Italian and Spanish making their appearance. 'Yo-yo' – the image used to evoke Profane's wanderings up and down the east coast, but equally descriptive of Stencil's quest through time and space – might thus be a pun on the Spanish pronunciation of the first-person singular, representing the condition of the split-self,<sup>21</sup> each self set at an oblique angle to the other in a V. V is the degree to which an individual can sway to align with the world and still retain their integrity ('Above all,' Robert Lifton writes, 'we all live a double life').<sup>22</sup> The confusable pronunciation of the letters V and B in standard Spanish places the Bomb front-and-centre of the novel, the eponymous full-stop signalling the abbreviation. After all, the V-2 was the direct ancestor of the missile which carries the nuclear-load (Tate, p. 81); since simulation inverts model and copy (and the Bomb destroys causality), V(-2) is indeed the product of the Bomb. We cannot speak of it and must find new ways to approach and contain it: rather than the Bomb, Pynchon speaks of V., the floating signifier<sup>23</sup> of the ultimate referent (the annihilation which, Derrida writes, lies behind all expression), to expose the constructed nature of its certainties. Of course, this strategy simultaneously avoids it, mirroring Stencil's ambivalence towards finding V.

Stencil is a conformist, seeking meaning in causal narrative. Other protagonists examined in this thesis internalise the hegemonic narrative, but Stencil alone identifies with it. As Alan Nadel notes, from the end of the Second World War until the burgeoning of the counterculture, conformity was generally regarded as a positive trait in American society.<sup>24</sup> Stencil's myth has been cultivated over this period and so weathered the turbulence of the 1950s to

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chapter 6 of *Symbolic Exchange and Death*.

21 Adam Piette, conversation.

22 Robert Jay Lifton and Peter A. Falk, *Indefensible Weapons: The Political and Psychological Case Against Nuclearism* (New York: Basic Books), p. 52.

23 Timothy Gilmore, "How Pleasant to Watch Nothing": Narrativity and Desire in V', *Orbit: Writing Around Pynchon*, 1 (2012), 1–27 (p. 19) <[www.pynchon.net/owap/article/view/14](http://www.pynchon.net/owap/article/view/14)> [accessed 20 August 2014]

24 Nadel, p. 4.

which the hegemony responded by demanding of its public rational objectivity. The concept of truth which Stencil seeks is itself ideological and so reinforces Cold War dictates.<sup>25</sup> Fromm argues that the twentieth-century Westerner is naturally inclined to conservatism since consumption encourages passivity and the victory of liberalism has produced individuals anxious at the prospect of freedom, as exemplified by their uncertainty when confronted by the mass of commodities available.<sup>26</sup> Stencil's construction of a conspiracy articulates a denial of reality common among Cold War citizens which, Schell posits, extends from the Bomb outwards to all lesser ills encountered (an attitude which is perhaps emblematised in V.'s glass eye).<sup>27</sup> However, his personal narrative oscillates situationally between identification with and alienation from the hegemonic order, hence his tensions.

Stencil seeks comfort in the Establishment of his father's era but, like the latter, finds its narrative at odds with experience. Abandoning it would leave him with nothing, however, so he naturalises his ambivalence by appropriating the cloak-and-dagger element of that Establishment (62).

Uncertainty is the state of the Cold War citizen,<sup>28</sup> which is why the enriched core of Stencil's narrative-of-self is a metaphor, V. Metaphor

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25 Schaub, pp. 22–23.

26 Fromm, *To Have*, p. 177; see also his *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1941). In *Fatal Strategies* (London: Pluto, 1999), Baudrillard discusses the triumph of the object through the uncontrolled, irrational growth of production. In the face of this 'cool' catastrophe, people succumb to inertia (see Douglas Kellner, 'Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007): A Critical Overview', in *Baudrillard Now: Current Perspectives in Baudrillard Studies*, ed. by Ryan Bishop (Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2009), pp. 17–27 (pp. 21–22)). Mondaugen, living under a siege analogous to the Cold War, feels desperation 'but without any clear reason, for here after all was abundance not depression, luxury not a daily struggle for life' (250). The horror of the Bomb forced passivity (and comfort-consumption) on the public: they flopped rather than flipped (293). As for freedom, the Florence intrigue poses a twisted form of Liberty incarnate (211) which might be equated with V. The Free World compromised its professed values through its avowed willingness to use the Bomb, and so effectively perished without even pressing the button.

27 See Schell, p. 152. '[I]f atomic fear were sustained long enough, people would simply stop confronting it by dimming their capacity to respond to the evidence of their senses' (Boyer, p. 282).

28 Nadel, p. 88.

foregrounds the floating-nature of all signifiers and consequent inadequacy of any narrative to contain the world, and is witness to possibility and uncertainty. Hegemonic attempts to fix a unitary value to metaphor are like so many metal stakes being driven through living tissue: the flesh tears, the metal corrodes, and an unyielding monstrosity results.<sup>29</sup>

Stencil's search propels him imaginatively and physically between the US, the Old World and the cradle of humanity, from a space choking on mass-produced repetitions of the present to a place overdetermined by countless layers of history. This narrative-thread predominantly comprises historical episodes of global political-brinkmanship from the twilight of the Victorian epoch to the height of the Second World War which witness apparent manifestations of V., scenarios which always rehearse the loss of virtue. As John Updike wrote regarding the theories which blossomed after the Kennedy assassination in the year of V.'s publication:

We wonder whether a genuine mystery is being concealed here or whether any similar scrutiny of a minute section of time and space would yield similar strangenesses – gaps, inconsistencies, warps, and bubbles in the surface of circumstance. Perhaps, as with the elements of matter, investigation passes a threshold of common sense and enters a subatomic realm where laws are mocked, [...] and where a rough kind of averaging out must substitute for absolute truth. The [...] search for [truth] seems to demonstrate how perilously empiricism verges on magic.<sup>30</sup>

Stencil's compulsion to chronicle repeatedly these dynamics and tensions resembles the affliction among survivors of trauma who 'find themselves forced to relive it over and over again', which psychiatrists Warren Kinston and Rachel Rosser term 'tormenting memory'. Referencing Robert Lifton's work on the survivors of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they note that such people must 'absorb the losses and "sacrifice with a sense of special mission"' and

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29 Which, like the increasingly robotic V., is the opposite of Deleuze's image of complete potential, the body without organs. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004), for example, p. 34.

30 John Updike, quoted in Michaud.



consequently often perceive clandestine larger forces operating through the event.<sup>31</sup>

Thus Stencil, deprived of his mother and, by extension, meaning, strives to perceive a reason for her absence. The fact his quest began in 1945 (54) equates it with the melancholia which forms the Cold War state (in both senses of the word). Conformist, he has faith in hegemonic narrative but, because meaning is fused with his mother, he cannot accept her loss and cure his melancholia, so flees to a past where both exist. Fleeing from the horizon of meaning, his mindset is a (nuclear-)wasteland inhospitable to the communication which would otherwise cultivate it: the Bomb breaks the thread which connects one person's gaze to another's (94), the yo-yo string which chapter 13's title declares a state of mind. Like one of the Florentine conspirators, outside the world's communion Stencil finds 'the soil arid, or the sun unfriendly, the air tainted' (203).

Stencil is marked by, in Lifton's words,

an indelible imprint of death immersion which has formed the basis of a permanent encounter with death, a fear of annihilation of Self and individual identity along with the sense of having virtually experienced the annihilation; the destruction of the [...] context of one's existence and so of one's being-in-the-world, and replacement of the natural order of living and dying with an unnatural order of death-dominated life.<sup>32</sup>

This melancholia is evinced by not only the hegemonic projection of the absent-Other (in the self's own unlikeness)<sup>33</sup> on to the receptive surface of the Iron Curtain, but also the political posturing which follows a script written in a

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31 Warren Kinston and Rachel Rosser, 'Disaster: Effects on Mental and Physical State', *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 18 (1974), 437–56 (p. 433, p. 448 and p. 443 respectively).

32 Quoted in Kinston and Rosser, p. 447.

33 In Gilmore's words, V.'s radical alterity (p. 19). The mother is not other to the infant before the mirror-stage; now absent, she is made other by the myth of V. which Stencil sets up as a reflection of himself and by which he acknowledges his own Otherness in relation to hegemonic dictates. The alligator with the apparent death-wish (146) and the crash-test dummies which can sustain increasingly serious wounds (285–86) are also canvases for the self's projection of the death-drive inherent in the Cold War Other, as is Victoria's belief that people have doubles (199) through some form of fission or quantum entanglement since the double affects the original.

bygone era. Conscious that his youthful self failed to communicate with his father (63), Stencil obsessively recalls the values of the past he has failed to honour; tormenting memory compels sufferers to 'submit to [their dead relatives'] moral arbitration'.<sup>34</sup> The Cold War world is no less an orphan than he, since the Bomb severed history,<sup>35</sup> exploding established organising narratives, disinheriting the individual of the values which orientate the sense of self, leaving them a yo-yo without yarn. The real is over,<sup>36</sup> and the origins of the consequent personal and geopolitical malaises alike can be traced back to the colonial twilight of the Victorian age: for Stencil, the maternal void and his remaining source of virtue running dry; for the Cold War, the schism between the political left and right. '[T]he 1890s were, in a number of respects, a starting point for reigns and events that were to have a crucial bearing on the twentieth century'.<sup>37</sup> History does not represent but create, nostalgic for meaning (that is, authentic lived-experience) and the real.

### **The Egyptian episode: deserts, dissidents and death**

In chapter 3, Stencil narrativises a detail in his father's diaries concerning an intrigue among European agents in colonial Egypt. Structurally and thematically, this chapter is a synecdoche for the novel. Of all Stencil's temporal

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34 Kinston and Rosser, p. 447.

35 See Boyer, p. 133 and p. 280.

36 Ann Douglas argues that, from 1945 until the early 1960s, there was an outside to the system, a place where protest against the Cold War hegemony was meaningful and consequential (Ann Douglas, 'Periodizing the American Century: Modernism, Postmodernism, and Postcolonialism in the Cold War Context', *Modernism/Modernity*, 5 (1998), 71–98 (p. 84)). However, with the evaporation of the Red Scare by the early sixties (Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991), p. 237) which had gone a long way to encouraging conformity, and the mass-decolonisation of the sixties and seventies which brought not independence but neocolonialism, the possibility of resistance radically reduced. Anthony Appiah calls the period from the mid-1960s one of "post-optimism" when, in Masao Miyoshi's words, "the return to 'authenticity' [was] a closed route" (Douglas, p. 84). To Whitfield it seems that the American public was now more keen to uphold capitalism than democracy (Whitfield, pp. 237–38).

37 Robert Wolfson and John Laver, *Years of Change: Europe 1890–1945* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996), p. 2.

yo-yoing, this first takes the reader farthest from the present moment, to the Orient of 1898, and demands most of them to keep pace with the narratorial point-of-view as Stencil disperses it among a number of perspectives on the margins of the event, individuals who are denied a voice by the Western hegemony. In these ways, the chapter evokes an overt sense of the dislocation felt by all the characters in the face of Cold War dictates.

### Stencil and the Sahara

Just as he articulates the distance between 'Stencil' and self by his self-relegation to the third-person, Stencil removes the Otherness of Western society to the strangeness of the East. In this chapter, Stencil metaphorises the void of virtue within him, the nuclear-desert of the real created by the ultimate referent and cornerstone of the age and, in keeping with Cold War simulation, inverts it into an equally inhospitable desert around him. This desert is the space of death (84) and, voiceless (83), the negation of the subject. It is also, however, the domain of Truth (85) and so is the realm of the real. The desert presents us with that which the system denies, because metaphors always contain an absence. The Saharan sun burns through the surface-narrative of Western constructions of meaning to expose the destabilising real within, the nothingness which undermines the rational basis of hegemonic-control and which was extant at Hiroshima's Ground Zero after the exothermic blast of Western logic had displaced humanity.<sup>38</sup> As one of the characters, Gebrail, says, '[t]he desert was prophesy enough of the Last Day' and is associated with the Mahdi (84), a messenger of divine will and so a counterpart to the Bomb. Gebrail also believes that the angel Asrafil will kill the human race and bring it back to life, suggesting a real-world disconnect in pursuit of paradise which mirrors the Cold War logic that the

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<sup>38</sup> In *Civilisation and its Discontents*, Freud makes the case that the balance between man's animal-instincts and his reason has tipped in favour of the latter, revealing it to be the more dangerous. While instinct has a sense of self-preservation, reason can entertain thoughts of self-extinction (Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. by Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth Press, 1972)). See Schell's particularly relevant reading of this, pp. 155–56.

Bomb can solve the State's problems, albeit by killing everyone in the process.

The desert thus represents more than that which the prescribed daily life of the Cold War citizen admits. The debased interpersonal communication evident here is a result of the shadow of annihilation: Schell argues that relationships during the Cold War were unstable because people demanded each moment to produce more experience than it otherwise would<sup>39</sup> as if civil-society really was benefiting from the promise of nuclear-fusion. This parallels people's expectations of travel as an access to heightened existence which, while a symptom of the capitalist nature of modern travel, expresses the desire to gorge oneself on life in the face of death.

Within the desert lie Alexandria and Cairo, hybrid supranational enclaves (71), dialogic spaces of alternative narratives which cannot but interact with the invading desert-emptiness and colonising European intrigue alike. This is why the subalterns can regard themselves as the 'automata' (70) of the touristic tableau. Of course, this self-reflexivity might alternatively reflect that they are Stencil's creations; for the question of whether he colonises their viewpoints, see the next section of this chapter. In addition to using the Third World as the site of their hot wars, the superpowers sought to co-opt it and re-establish the binary-division by which the self constructs itself which the non-aligned states undermined. Similarly, in *V. Vheissu's* globe-spanning infrastructure is in danger of being harnessed to serve hegemonic interests (the post-war world cannot afford to allow *Vheissu* free-rein, that is, political dissent (248–49)). The secret-state's underground potential mirrors the sewers which shelter New York's insane pacifists (120). Beyond the novel, the empty spaces beneath the desert which have always provided refuge for those fleeing society became in 1963 sites where society's most powerful weapon was perfected, the cradle of resistance mutating, in the radioactive atmosphere of inversion, into the crucible of control. The US' interest in certain African states was primarily because of their

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39 Schell, p. 159.

minerals, such as the Congo's uranium which was the main source of the Bombs dropped on Japan, but Douglas argues that American's neocolonial acquisitions and global links also influenced the homeland.<sup>40</sup>

Within these cities in turn is the fifth-column, Victoria (promoting the inhumanity of the hegemonic discourse, and also being Catholic (72)): each space or narrative contains destabilising elements, since, as Markus Peterseil says, the problem with knowledge is that it always relies on other knowledge.<sup>41</sup> One's understanding of the world is thus like a series of Russian dolls. Pynchon notes in the Paris chapter that the West on the eve of the First World War associated Russia with the Orient on account of her suspected desire to 'overthrow Western civilization' (412). 'V.'s natural habitat [is] the state of siege' (62) and she embodies therefore the dangerous artifice of hegemonic discourse *and* the challenge to it.<sup>42</sup> She is like the Bomb whose existence justifies the Cold War state while undermining it, since MAD dictates it will never be used: both one thing and its opposite, like a quantum-superposition.

The cosmopolitan cafés, embassy and train-line shield Stencil's imagined Westerners from the alternative narrative of the Egyptian delta and the death-drive of the desert (78). They are the means with which the colonised individual, identifying with techno-culture, projects a veneer of order ('the surface, the dream-street' (147)) on to the nothingness at the heart of hegemonic constructs. This plane is as much as one can know: the point of contact between the individual and the world, the surface of the self, as meagre as the membranes of the balloons so adored by Yusef.<sup>43</sup> With nothing behind it, this surface can only reflect. It is the mirror Slavoj Žižek identifies as the surface which presents to us

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40 Douglas, pp. 77–78.

41 Markus Peterseil, 'A Game Theoretical Approach to the Early Fiction of Thomas R. Pynchon' (unpublished MA dissertation, University of Vienna, 2010), p.93. This is evident in the fact that the meaning of the radio-signals Mondaugen receives is ultimately meaningless (278).

42 Marcel Cornis-Pope, *Narrative Innovation and Cultural Rewriting in the Cold War and After* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 116.

43 Of course, this is equally true of Stencil's narrative, which cannot contain the desert. The cities' spaces and the train are the point-of-contact with the vast alterity. Rubbing up against one another, the Vs of desert and delta are mutually defining.

the simulacra of hyperreality,<sup>44</sup> confronting the individual with the Lacanian Imaginary of the shiny metallic casing of the annihilation which constructs the Cold War subject (the casing is curved and so the reflected self distorted: the self-as-Other), on to which one projects the paranoid awareness of this nothingness, one's dissidence, one's Otherness. Just as Mélanie fetishises herself in mirrors to see herself through the frame of another's desire (chapter 14), the individual who identifies with the reflection is complicit in their colonisation by hegemonic discourse. If one does not follow this line, one is out-of-line. However, this line is also a life-line since, without it, one is adrift in either a chaos of object-nouns cut out of their context (Profane's earthy paranoia of tangibility) or conspiracy-narratives disregarding their constituent parts (Stencil's light-headed paranoia of abstraction). Stencil's historical recreations are a counter-hyperreality, which is why they articulate Cold War concerns: politics, paranoia, and machines pursuing apocalyptic ends.<sup>45</sup> This is why Bongo-Shaftsbury is revealed to be a robot *on the train*, the border of virtu and dictate. The intrigue in which the spies entangle themselves is just one more puny plot staked out against the hulking meaninglessness, a yarn along which atomic-shuttles fly to weave isolated fragments (commodity-objects, objectified people, nouns) into a sheltering narrative to hold back the void.

A recurrent example of just such a sheltering narrative is the Baedeker guide. The novel references the epitomic title on Egypt, the country which hosted the first commodified experience of the cultural Other and so was foundational for the West's perception of the rest. It 'does not admit of private

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44 '[W]here does that empty surface come from, that cold, neutral screen which opens up the space for possible projections? That is to say, if men are to project on to the mirror their narcissistic ideal, the mute mirror-surface must already be there. This surface functions as a kind of "black hole" in reality, as a limit whose Beyond is inaccessible', Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Women and Causality* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), p. 91. This limit is, on the one side, the nothingness or barrier of the desert in the Western imagination. On the other, it is the limit of the Bomb. Where the two meet is the event-horizon where the individual can escape nuclear-paranoia.

45 Boyer notes that, from the 1960s onwards, the nuclear-deterrence strategy's complex, esoteric nature was comforting to the public (Boyer, p. 358), so it is understandable that Stencil would wish to emulate it.

interpretation' (408–09) and so suppresses the multiplicitous potential – the dissenting narratives – of Westerners and non-Westerners alike, imposing preconceptions, determining routes and interpretations, precluding dialogic engagement between them. It encourages voyeuristic disassociation, which objectifies the Other, and prevents de Certeauian play, far less any glimpse of the Baudrillardian outside of the system.<sup>46</sup> Seen in this light, it is hardly surprising that Eugene Fodor was in the OSS, the wartime precursor to CIA and CIA agents posed as writers for his publication during the Cold War.<sup>47</sup> With a guide, travel is a socially endorsed pressure-valve for the individual's tensions with the hegemony.<sup>48</sup>

Two characters, however, succeed in travelling beyond such colonising narratives and gaining the horizon of the familiar where they can grasp the limits of the hegemonic simulation and peel it back (in a V) to look beyond. In chapter 7, the Venezuelan revolutionary known as the Gaucho is dismissive of a painting in the Uffizi, '[t]he whole surface of [which] seemed to move, to be flooded with colour and motion' (209), which obsesses his associates. He muses that '[p]erhaps [political struggle] is all a mockery, and the only condition we can ever bring to men a mockery of liberty, of dignity' (211). After all, as another character notes, there is no *via del Paradiso* (201), suggesting that the only paradise is the canvas, which is ultimately 'a dream of annihilation' (210).<sup>49</sup>

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46 Stencil's fantasy is not a space outside the system but a socially endorsed outlet for dissenting tensions. The third impersonation, Max, passes himself off as a tourist hampered by a 'malfunction in Cook's machinery' (71). His targets see him as part of the automata of the tourist-experience, but allow themselves to be used in turn like a machine. The tourist's seeming transgression of social norms is the opposite: by helping the con-man, they are in the service of not *virtu* but its opposite, since Max is an example of the decay of humanity. One can be a different person, here; 'Baedeker land' is a space of socially authorised multiplicity. The superficiality of the tourist is itself an authenticity since there is no surface/interior dichotomy. The spies, in disguise, lack this authenticity: Max perceives that they are *posing* as tourists (74), meaning that they have depth and so duplicity.

47 Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 1999), p. 35 and p. 247.

48 Similarly, the children's emulation of Davy Crockett's desire for the Frontier which Winsome witnesses (219) constitutes not an escape from but an enforcement of social dictates.

49 As Walter Benjamin says in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction': 'the adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited

While the South American subversive is prepared to stare this dream in the face, in the same chapter it is the dream which confronts another character. Having encountered Victoria, the cartographer Godolphin recounts his flight from his paranoia of life's meaninglessness, glimpsed in the lost world of Vheissu. He initially tries to escape despair by organising the world into 'neat hollow squares' (171).<sup>50</sup> As Tony Tanner says,

[i]t is one of the most enduring of all human dreams (or needs) to feel that we live among geometry. Rather than confront shapeless space we introduce lines and angles into it. Surrounded by the desert, man builds a pyramid. That would be another way of saying what V. is all about.<sup>51</sup>

On to the hegemony's uncompromising binary of sand and sky (as Baudrillard argues, monopolistic power is bipolar), Man stencils an artful wedge of living-expression which acknowledges and so pre-empts death. The inversion of this pyramid is V.<sup>52</sup>

Godolphin then travels to the South Pole for a moment of motionless away from the bombardment of colonising discourse (205). With society's protective shield burned away, he finds himself exposed to 'a dream of annihilation' (206). The sight of a Vheissuvian spider-monkey under the ice suggests a network of

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scope' (*Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 2007), pp. 217–51 (p223).

50 Contrary to Baudrillard's analysis of Borges' 'On Exactitude in Science', the map *is* simulation, since it is not an attempt to represent reality but a political device to replace it (just because reality is always mediated, reality and the map are not one and the same). Consequently, the hegemony is going to war over mere fictions. Jean-François Lyotard maintains that the fixation on surface results from the uncertainty whether anything more profound, such as ethics, is any longer possible: society has abnegated its responsibilities to itself, having perfected missiles at the expense of missives. In the postmodern age, we are all tourists who desire to range wide rather than deep (184). See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994), p. 1, and Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984), p. xvii.

51 Tony Tanner, 'Patterns and Paranoia or Caries and Cabals', *Salmagundi*, 15 (1971), 78–99 (p. 95).

52 On the subject of pyramids, as J. Kerry Grant notes, the Petrie whom Bongo-Shaftsbury mentions began his research into the origins of the units of measurement in 1880 (J. Kerry Grant, *A Companion to V.* (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 2001), p. 49). The year of V.'s birth, therefore, marked the start of a project to quantify, contain and demythologise the foundations of an ancient power which presented a rival to the current hegemony. For the bipolar nature of monopoly, see Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, pp. 68–69.



passages which literally undermine the British imperial-project of constructing cultural divisions.<sup>53</sup> The monkey is 'rainbow-coloured' (205–06), and so reflects the whole spectrum: it is only surface, a manifestation of absence. Indeed, it is not even necessary for it to exist ('it was not what I saw or believed I saw that in the end is important. It is what I thought. What truth I came to' (206)), since it has been scampering through the 'network of white halls in his own brain' (53) for years. The frozen wastes of the motionless Pole reflect the stasis of the Cold War in which two competing totalising-discourses make certainty impossible and, in the face of which, the individual cannot but be a dissenter (in Godolphin's words, '[e]veryone has an Antarctic' (249)). Without an insulating narrative, the individual will freeze beneath the starless night-sky of the desert – tropical or polar – which, Gebrail believes, betrays the 'great lie' that is civilisation (85).

### Subaltern voices

The dusty death of the desert is countered by water, similarly shifting, ambiguous and destructive to the mechanics of power. It is as malleable as metaphor, uncontainable as consciousness. In *V.*, water operates in a way similar to music, which is equally soaring but structured, transcendent yet technical (for example, 195). At the climax of the Paris episode, the opera's closing crescendo is 'like fragments of a Bomb [as it] blasted out [then] hung, subsided' (414), forming a musical mushroom cloud. Its recurring appearance in *V.* signals the significance of subjectivity and the battle between alternative narratives and hegemonic discourse.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Cornis-Pope, p. 113.

<sup>54</sup> Rains marks Sidney's landfall on Malta which proves so fateful and fatal (456), even if the civil-unrest there which threatens a chain reaction of political crises is dampened by a downpour (478). The Venezuelan vice-consul to Florence notes approaching rain-clouds while fretting over revolutionary elements seeking to overthrow the status quo (177) while, in the Paris chapter, the storm whose approach has been repeatedly referenced finally breaks 'in Mélanie's rainy eyes' just as she abandons her subjectivity for good and becomes the inanimate object she has simulated (413).

Early in chapter 3, rain falls on Alexandria: 'Low places in the square filled, the usual random sets of criss-crossing concentric circles moved across them' (66). Timothy Gilmore draws on Jacques Lacan's immixture of subjects to interpret this image as representing individuals' 'universes' of awareness.<sup>55</sup> He also relates the description of the rain with Sidney's first-principles: '[He] had decided long ago that no Situation had any objective reality: it only existed in the minds of those who happened to be in on it at any specific moment' (189). The spy understands that each individual lives in their simulation or metaphor of reality and that their organising-narrative is inadequate to the consequent multiplicity of the world.<sup>56</sup> Gilmore argues that meaning is only produced in the collisions between individual universes, while Peter Abernethy equates the chaos of the world in Pynchon with the uniformity of the hegemonic narrative.<sup>57</sup> Given this uniformity, these universes cannot be subject to Newtonian laws

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Most inventively, the Florence episode connects the awareness of selfhood more closely to the circles on the water: the choreography of Victoria's umbrella when encountering Godolphin père and fils betrays a constant play of proffering and concealment of her knowledge in order to elicit information and manipulate others. When she asks old Godolphin about his faith, '[s]he was gazing at the rim of her parasol' (169), with an eye on the limits of her subjectivity; when he replies candidly, '[s]he had been gazing at him. The parasol leaned against the bench, its handle hidden in the wet grass' (170), concealing the centre of her subjecthood, suggesting her duplicity and the fact that this interpersonal communication will not save Godolphin. Sensing he has betrayed himself, he flings his cigar – the flame of selfhood – into the wet grass (172) before fleeing the police and 'the pool of light they'd trapped him in' (185). His son is arrested and loses his broolly along with his agency (175) while, when Victoria moves to seduce the younger man, it is noted that she 'dug the point of her parasol into the ground' (200) to anchor herself and take control of the situation. In contrast to all this self-assertion, Profane follows the flow of water through New York's sewer-system with characteristic randomness (chapter 5), while Stencil's discovery of V.'s death is an 'accident to shatter the surface of this stagnant pool and send all the mosquitoes of hope zinging away to the exterior night' (345).

55 Gilmore, p. 11.

56 The Cold War was an age of simulation since both the détente and the continued existence of mankind was based on a scenario which could not be allowed to happen. See Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, p. 34 for Baudrillard's reading of deterrence as a simulation of war. It should be noted that simulation has not taken over from a real, because the real is how things appear and so has always been a product of mediation (which is, for a man like Sidney, the source of one's potential). See John Phillips, 'Humanity's End', in *Baudrillard Now: Current Perspectives in Baudrillard Studies*, ed. by Ryan Bishop (Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2009), pp. 159–71 (p. 165).

57 Gilmore, p. 11. Peter L. Abernethy, 'Entropy in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*', *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction*, 14 (1972), 18–33 (p. 19).

which dictate that bodies move from areas of high density to areas of low, but rather the chance of quantum physics. (Of course, as Paul Hegarty points out, chance is a construct which absolves us of responsibility).<sup>58</sup> Thus is selfhood one's foundation and foil.<sup>59</sup> We cannot experience another's universe,<sup>60</sup> but we can acknowledge it. Stencil, deprived of a source of foundational virtue, is uncertain of the nature and limits of his universe and cannot distinguish self and non-self, perceiving only a uniform third-personhood: the desert that is his life is empty even of himself and, consequently, no meaning is possible. Self-relegation to third-personhood makes him always absent: he is not 'Stencil', but neither is he any of the alternatives he adopts ("Stencil" appear[s] as only one among a repertoire of identities' (62), the State-constructed subject projected on the State-denied individual).<sup>61</sup> He has no place to stand and express his multiplicity, so practises Baudrillardian impossible exchange on himself by fragmenting it (naturalising it for his conformist mindset which holds to the unitary values of hegemonic discourse) across the impersonations of chapter 3, allowing him to size himself up against an Other and so construct a sense of self.<sup>62</sup>

His nonconformity is thus removed to socially and politically marginal figures. In this way, what the hegemony disregards as objects (Baudrillard's label

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58 Hegarty, p. 79.

59 The sinister cyborg Bongo-Shaftsbury says: 'The moment you forget yourself enough to admit another's humanity [you have lowered your guard]' (81). As Pynchon writes, the act of love and death are one (410). The US nuclear-weapons complex is a 'closed system'; the nuclear-state proliferates inanimate culture but does not allow the influence to pass in the other direction (see Brian C. Taylor, 'Nuclear Pictures and Metapictures', *American Literary History*, 9 (1997), 567–97 (p. 575)).

60 For example, even though Mondaugen is privy to the small circle of the Bondel's song (279), its meaning is impenetrable.

61 Pynchon references 'Sartre's thesis that we are all impersonating an identity' in a conversation among his New York drop-outs (130). When the action moves to the office of his dentist-philosopher, he describes the tooth, with its inanimate enamel protecting the living pulp (153), in a manner which evokes the ego and Self but also the paraphernalia of consumer-culture with which individuals separate themselves from others.

62 For Stencil's conformist mindset, the impersonations are a means of escape but, since they are dissident, also put him in the position of being caught. This is expressed by the events in the Uffizi's 'ritratti diversi' (literally, 'different portraits') gallery in the Florence chapter (210).

for subalterns) become subjects, consumers of meaning producers. Spoken for by hegemonic discourse, they exist outside it, as what Baudrillard calls the symbolic. The hegemony's system of binary values recuperates their ambivalence as a negative, but their resistance appears in 'gaps, inconsistencies, warps' in its narrative.<sup>63</sup> Since, as discomfort concerning Hiroshima and Nagasaki receded from public-consciousness, scientists' roles shifted from 'prophets of doom coming out of the desert' to the cornerstones of society,<sup>64</sup> the associates of the desert to whom Stencil gives agency also relocate to the centre, bearing the shape of the symbolic, alluding to the unrepresentable, making its horizon perceptible.<sup>65</sup> This is the disruption of symbolic exchange: if 'this "always lost" aspect [of the symbolic] takes primacy over the possible revolutionary use value, then we can approach symbolic exchange as being precisely *in* the divide, *in* the relation, a non-place that is not "outside" as part of a binary distinction, and therefore capable of disruption'.<sup>66</sup> In this way, the individual can escape the logic of capitalism, production, rationality.<sup>67</sup> This is the danger inherent to colonisers' attempts to remake the Other as the self, which Stencil emulates for his own ends by drawing on familiar representations of the Orient.<sup>68</sup>

Ronald Cooley argues that these impersonations are a form of colonisation and, indeed, it can be said that, by creating this semblance of multiplicity, Stencil enforces his perspective, just as Cold War America sought to

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63 'NSC 68, the top-secret document adopted by President Truman's National Security Council in 1950 and not declassified until the 1970s, contained the plan for the stepped-up militarization of the cold war that would be used to justify the Korean and Vietnam wars. NSC 68 became, in the words of one historian, the "most famous unread paper of its era", intensely interpreted in the Soviet Union as well as the United States. The unseen document was teased out of the events it engendered, then used to read them. Figuring out what you don't see by what you do see, or almost see, calculating events by what could, but doesn't, happen, was integral to the the early nuclear era's doctrine of (over) preparedness' (Douglas, p. 76).

64 J. Robert Oppenheimer, quoted in Boyer, p. 74.

65 Lyotard, p. 81.

66 Hegarty, p. 33, emphasis in original.

67 Kellner, p. 20.

68 'Attempts in the cold war to replicate the quintessential colonialist move – that of making the Other the Same – had to be performed in the name of *anti*-imperialism (or "democracy")', Nadel, p. 202, emphasis in original.

spread its influence by installing democracies around the world.<sup>69</sup> Colonised by the hegemony, Stencil has internalised its narrative of progress: we come from the past, the site of foundational meaning, but our true home is the future, making the past the preserve of the perverse non-Westerner or childish proto-Westerner. As Nadel says, difference is eliminated when the Westerner ostensibly rejects Western values and masters those of the East in order to make the East like the West.<sup>70</sup>

However, Cooley's argument does not take into account the fact that the coloniser does not try to become the colonised. Indeed, the second impersonation, Yusuf, espouses an anarchic philosophy in opposition to Stencil's own need for order. For all his conformist desire, Stencil is – among his many facets – 'clownish' (61) with an aptitude for a carnivalesque inversion of supposedly integral and discrete values (within the safety of his storytelling). Overlooked by the hegemony, these subalterns share his orphanhood but, equally, he experiences their colonised status. As Henry Adams says, history is man's constructing the world to suit his values and, in the desert, Stencil creates a society of his own choosing not in the interests of control but in a misguided attempt at virtue. Furthermore, while Cooley cautions that, for all that these colonised-Others appear humanised, they are merely Stencil's riffs on imperialist clichés,<sup>71</sup> their rounded characterisation and interiority relative to Stencil and Profane<sup>72</sup> exposes their artificiality. Stencil's intention is to humanise not his fantasies but their creator. He plays within hegemonic social constructions, after Michel de Certeau. Stencil applies the hegemonic stencil to his desires, but fills it with colours of his own choosing.

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69 Nadel, p. 7; see also p. 202. For Cooley's interpretation, see Ronald W. Cooley, 'The Hothouse or the Street: Imperialism and Narrative in Pynchon's *V.*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 39 (1993), 307–25 (p. 317).

70 Nadel, p. 159.

71 Cooley, p. 312.

72 '[T]he contemporary episodes are full of characters that have succumbed to the tourist mentality of contentment with the skin and, thus, to the insulated life of post-WWII capitalism, protected within illusion from the real' (Gilmore, p. 10).

An individual's consciousness is less a circle, as suggested by the rain in Alexandria, than the wedge of what they can see in front of them, the limits of torchlight, a sweep of a radar. This is an empty V, suggesting that an individual's perspective ultimately reveals nothing on its own. Narrative forms the rest, shaping the universe which surrounds them and effectively separating them from other people. The circle of their claimed universe is thus not the reach of their consciousness but the range of their missiles, and the expanding ring on the water the blast which is produced when they mistake their subjectivity for objectivity. The flip-side is that the expanding circle also resembles the prospect of the missile falling on the citizen's head, which delimits their universe. However, if they step aside and so break free from the confines of their static perspective, this same circle becomes a V (the tip of the ICBM in profile). This allows the object-noun of the missile to create a new narrative: that is to say, it acquires the potential of a metaphor.

In an attempt to break out of his subjective view during his fictionalised Egyptian episode, Stencil resorts to a multiplicity of subjectivity: eight wedges which together form a complete circle of consciousness (as Baudrillard argues, simulation cannot be fought with truth and must be exceeded). Crucially, even then he acknowledges that there is more to the world beyond his own horizons. For example, the fifth perspective, Gebrail, is a farmer driven into Cairo by the encroaching desert and lives on a street 'not on any guidebook's map' (83). It is underground; being excluded from hegemonic narrative, it is fiction and – '[s]ince fiction is creation, as opposed to history's recreation, its vision is undistorted' – hence true.<sup>73</sup> This detail does not romanticise the unmapped

<sup>73</sup> Quote comes from Peterseil, p. 87. Secretary of State Dean Acheson maintained that it was necessary to 'bludgeon the mass mind [with something] clearer than truth' (Douglas, p. 76). Douglas records that, '[i]n 1953, in yet another top secret document, a group of defense advisers urged Eisenhower to adopt "a national program of deception and concealment from the American public"' (Douglas, pp. 76–77). Taylor notes that, because of this secrecy, information would reach the public by unofficial means and knowledge would be based on representations, metaphors, simulacra replacing the unobtainable original, none totally trustworthy but valuable for the very fact of their duplicity (their doubling of the secret which allowed that secret to be known of, if not known). Accordingly, hearsay becomes history, that is, 'truth' (Taylor, p. 584). As Derrida says in 'No Apocalypse, Not Now', "[r]eality", let's say the

spaces of an inscrutable Orient but acknowledges that there is a world beyond Western eyes and minds and narratives. Gilmore writes that narrative 'contains the real'<sup>74</sup> and, indeed, it does: it includes and restricts. Gebrail's 'street is so narrow hardly a man's shadow can pass' (83), thereby forcing the individual to be aware of their subjectivity, obliging them to be dialogic with the Other and their own Otherness. The former farmer associates himself on account of his name with the desert which destroyed his livelihood (83)<sup>75</sup> and, fittingly, he regards the people he taxis through Cairo with an inhuman eye, seeing only fares (84). A bitter outsider, he is shut out of the life of the city<sup>76</sup> and so for him it 'is only the desert [...] in disguise' (83). For him, there is 'no hostility in the desert' (82): being totalising, it can only be amoral. In contrast, he sees Islam (that is, a social consensus on meaning) as nothingness (83); by pronouncing the death of narrative, he declares the death of his own ability to construct meaning in society's eyes.

Even when Stencil acknowledges that there is more to the world than he can know, 'a rough kind of averaging out must [as Updike says] substitute for absolute truth': a unitary perspective on a situation is as impossible as the mind-bending vistas of Escher.<sup>77</sup> To appear natural, it must be cunningly constructed; to seem trustworthy, it must cheat. Indeed, while hegemonic dictates authorise a stable objective perspective, such a view is impossible because the brain arrives

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encompassing institution of the nuclear age, is constructed by the fable, on the basis of an event that has never happened (except in fantasy, and that is not nothing at all)' (Derrida, p. 5).

74 Gilmore, p. 8.

75 Although, as Pynchon has since noted, his wordplay between Gebrail and 'gebel' is based on a mistranslation from Arabic. Albert Rolls, 'The Two V.s of Thomas Pynchon, Or From Lippincott to Jonathan Cape and Beyond', *Orbit: Writing Around Pynchon*, 1 (2012) <[www.pynchon.net/articles/10.7766/orbit.v1.1.33](http://www.pynchon.net/articles/10.7766/orbit.v1.1.33)> [accessed 18 August 2014]

76 It is ironic that the hegemony's totalising discourse omits him since, by association with his Biblical and Quranic namesake, Gebrail is a source of totalising testimony. Totalising and dialogic discourse, or what Baudrillard calls objective and vital illusion, can be equated with Nadel's notion of spiritual and forensic testimony: spiritual testimony presumes an external authority for truth, while forensic presumes truth as something arrived at through the interaction of social and rhetorical contract (Nadel, p. 83).

77 M. C. Escher was born the year of Stencil's Egyptian escapade and so is an equally fitting emblem for the impossible world-view of totalising twentieth-century political discourse.

at meaning through dialogic processes. Not only does the distance between a person's eyes oblige one to synthesise two different streams of information but, once this information has passed along the optic-nerve, the visual cortex does not passively receive it but actively constructs meaning from it. We see a metaphor or narrative, not the experience of tangible objects or nouns. Accordingly, chapter 3's final impersonation is a disembodied gaze. Stencil's exercise of drawing on personal accounts for authority, which simulates the construction of hegemonic narrative, thus exposes its artifice. It is simultaneously 'history' for the reader and sifts through their fingers.

However, perhaps he should not be criticised for failing to cross the horizon of the system. Not only is this for Baudrillard the best that one can hope for but, if Stencil were to cross it, he would then contain the outside within narrative, defining the Other in relation to the self, objectifying them as Other rather than acknowledging their discrete difference.<sup>78</sup> Ann Douglas writes that, '[b]y cold war logic, the unknowable can only be contained, never penetrated, an attitude that was itself a precursor to postmodernism proper'. Elizabeth Campbell regards the impersonations as one more example of Stencil's strategy of approach-and-avoid.<sup>79</sup> However, since Stencil (and, presumably, his father) was not there, a subjective account is more honest, that is, truthful. By approaching and avoiding this crucial event, Stencil preserves it.

### A space outside, within Stencil's narrative

Other protagonists examined in this thesis travel to the real desert in search of a symbolic one which enables them to pre-empt metaphorically the apocalypse

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<sup>78</sup> Hegarty, p. 119. As Baudrillard says, naming something converts it into a concept, and so removes it ('On Disappearance', in *Jean Baudrillard: Fatal Theories*, ed. by David B. Clarke, Marcus A. Doel, William Merrin and Richard G. Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 24–29 (p. 25)).

<sup>79</sup> Douglas, note 11. Elizabeth A. Campbell, 'Metaphor and V.: Metaphysics in the Mirror', *Pynchon Notes*, 22–23 (1988), 57–69 (p. 63) <[www.ham.miamioh.edu/krafftjm/pn/pn022.pdf](http://www.ham.miamioh.edu/krafftjm/pn/pn022.pdf)> [accessed 10 November 2014]



and reclaim their lives. Paul Bowles believed that the idea of a displaced person arose only following the Second World War.<sup>80</sup> This casts the concept as a reaction by the Cold War mindset, with its need for clear compartmentalisation, to the ambiguous reality of the world expressed by Caravaggio in *The English Patient*: 'The trouble with all of us is we are where we shouldn't be'.<sup>81</sup> In chapter 3, Max imagines a nightmarish crowd of such displaced people, surrounding him in concentric rings (72), this fallout bringing to mind the destruction of a Bomb-blast:

every beggar, vagrant, exile-by-choice and peregrine-at-large in Alex [...] This whole hard-up population might soon begin to drift in [...] It would go on, into tomorrow, the next day, the next: they would keep calling for waiters in the same cheery voices to bring more chairs [...] every chair in the Fink would be in use, spreading out from this table in rings, like a tree trunk or rain puddle. And when the Fink's chairs ran out the harassed waiters would have to begin bringing more in from next door and down the street and then the next block, the next quarter; the seated beggars would overflow into the street, it would swell and swell [...] How would it end? How could it? (71–72)

Indeed, the Cold War's desire for things to be in their place is ironic given the age was founded on the physics which recognised the unmoored qualities of quantum particles.

In contrast, Stencil is already living in a metaphorical desert and travels to the real desert in his imagination, likewise to contemplate death explicitly. The absence which is V. exposes the meaninglessness of the hegemonic narrative, including the death which is supposedly in the service of ideological victory. V.'s ungraspable death-drive runs counter to that written into the social contract of 1960s America, the Other or outside of the system which so attracts it. Stencil's myth of V., including the lack which is exposed through Gebrail's perspective, is what Baudrillard calls the challenge of the counter-gift, which takes the form of death since only through a voluntary 'immediate death of sacrifice' can the '*slow*

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80 Irving Malin, 'Aspects of Self: A Bowles Collage', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 32 (1986), 293–300 (p. 298).

81 Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), p. 122.

*death*' of labour meted out by the system be overcome.<sup>82</sup> By bringing death back into society, society crumbles because 'it has been *systematically* excluded in order to found the unitary logic that is the attribution of value and binary opposition'.<sup>83</sup>

Through his historical recreations, Stencil experiences, without actually dying, a meaningful death, a symbolic act which rids death of the indifferent negativity ascribed to it by capitalist society. Society's material comfort removes death and so also life.<sup>84</sup> The individual death of V. inspires virtu (awakening Fausto from his lethargy to bestow the last rites) and her dismantling signals the destruction of the false faith. In line with Ryan Bishop's thinking, this death can perhaps save us from the living-death of constantly imminent global nuclear-obliteration.<sup>85</sup>

Stencil's extra-systemic death-drive is also expressed through his self-relegation to third-personhood. As Michael Ondaatje says in *The English Patient*, 'death means you are in the third person'. Stencil is, in R. D. Laing's words, 'becoming dead in order not to die'. He splits into self and Other; as Lifton says, schizophrenics see themselves as dead inhabitants of a lifeless world and so this can be seen as a pre-emptive strategy against the fear of nuclear-annihilation. For Stencil, the Bomb at the heart of the political system destroys all meaning, and he inhabits the magic realism of the colonised subject grappling with the surreal demands of an alien authority. Third-personhood reiterates and subverts hegemonic discourse: the hegemony infantilises him, denies him a voice, so he behaves like an infant, denying the coherent authority claimed by the first-

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82 Baudrillard, *Symbolic Death*, pp. 36–40; italics in original.

83 Hegarty's words (p. 42, emphasis in original) summarising Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, p. 133.

84 See, Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London and New York: Verso, 1988), p. 43. For a discussion, see Ryan Bishop, 'Baudrillard, Death and Cold War Theory', in *Baudrillard Now: Current Perspectives in Baudrillard Studies*, ed. by Ryan Bishop (Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2009), pp. 47–71 (p. 69). We merely survive, mindlessly consuming like the shopping-mall zombies in George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (Laurel Group, 1978).

85 Bishop, p. 69.

person point-of-view.<sup>86</sup> He teases apart the social dictates and personal self-construction in a V, exposing the myth of individual freedom, that the sign and self are one, resisting hegemonic desire to fix consciousness into a form. He denotes his erasure by imposed subjecthood and expresses his socio-political disassociation: 'Stencil' is as much a floating signifier as, for example, 'Red'. Stencil's use of the third-person is duplicitous and so the enemy of American society, but his split-subjecthood is the product of official Western duplicity. Simultaneously, of course, this 'dislocation of identity' (62) contributes to the dehumanisation of discourse. It is a means 'to involve himself less in the chase, to put off some part of the pain' (62), to exploit the distance between signifier and referent and abnegate his authorship of V., mirroring the State's strategy to relegate the nuclear-threat to the natural order. For example, as Peter Hales says, through its dissemination of images of the mushroom cloud, the State 'bridged a previous gap between what was human and what was natural – the atom bomb became a man-made marvel of nature, and thereby the question of responsibility for the effects of the explosion became slippery'.<sup>87</sup>

Additionally, Stencil naturalises his non-conformism to his conformist self by displacing his actions on to his father: becoming dead is better than going Red.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, a sufferer of tormenting memory feels that 'by living as if dead, I take the place of the dead and give them life',<sup>89</sup> and so Stencil escapes to the past. While the hegemony objectifies the individual, denying their interiority, he objectifies himself to distance himself from his unconscious, where the ever-present threat of annihilation lies. The fact that everyone whom Stencil

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86 Schaub, p. 86. Ondaatje, p. 247. Robert Lifton examines R. D. Laing's work on schizophrenia in 'Image', pp. 80–82. The quote from Laing comes from *The Divided Self* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1965), p.23, and appears in Lifton, 'Image', p. 80.

87 Peter B. Hales, 'The Atomic Sublime', *American Studies*, 32 (1991), 5–31 (p. 10). In chapter 9, Mondaugen comes across a mechanical model of the solar-system (239) which suggests that it is part of the natural order for daily existence to be constructed on subaltern-labour. Of course, Updike's words can be read both ways, suggesting that the West's control is founded precariously on an 'irrational' native workforce.

88 Schell, p. xxxvii.

89 Robert Lifton, quoted in Kinston and Rosser, p. 447.

encounters accepts this practice is testimony to the general recognition of the untrustworthy age. After all, during the Cold War, a declared state-of-war did not seem like war but, equally, the assured state-of-safety did not feel safe.

The spy-games of chapter 3 also bring death within the system. Lepsius' instructions to the barmaid Hanna foster a collision of universes, disrupting her own narrative (89). In the tourist-simulation of the bierhalle where surface is authentic identity (a colleague 'was finally let go because she didn't look German enough' (88)), Hanna begins to see in a new way and the world as corrupt ('Was it a change in the light, or were the skins of the others actually beginning to show the blotches of disease?' (90)). Most significantly, she perceives an irremovable stain on the plate she holds (90). This mark is the opposite of the iridescent monkey (since it absorbs everything) and the mirror which presents to us simulacra: it is the real, the nothingness which swallows the surface-illusion of the system, the radioactive decay whose symbol she sees: 'Roughly triangular, it extended from an apex near the center to a base an inch or so from the edge [...] the stain disappeared [and then] flickered twice in and out of existence'(90). This thrice-appearing V recalls the sign for radiation, with the eponymous full-stop transferred to the centre:

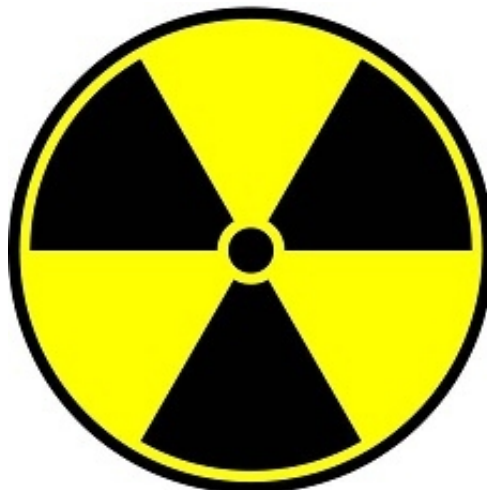


Figure 2: International radioactive trefoil symbol.<sup>90</sup>

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90 Source: Paul Sherman, 'Radioactive Symbol Page', WPclipart  
<[www.wpclipart.com/page\\_frames/full\\_page\\_signs/radioactive\\_symbol\\_page.png.html](http://www.wpclipart.com/page_frames/full_page_signs/radioactive_symbol_page.png.html)>

What Hanna imagines are Pentecostal tongues hovering over her clientele (92) does not facilitate interpersonal communication but misunderstanding and war, and so is really a nuclear-firestorm raining down on the conspiratorial crowd.

The predilection of Mildred, Victoria's younger sister, with the inanimate world of fossils (68) suggests that virtue is acquired through social-nurture to adulthood and so is unnatural. After all, in Lacan's mirror the child sees not themselves but a separate object, meaning that decadence is a return to this natural state. A lack of humanity is the cause and result of the world's problems. The infantilised Cold War subject and the ultimate object meet in V., and the fact that their natures are interchangeable results in her fragmentation.

If objectification of others is natural, the British agent Porpentine's humanity is not: his sunburnt skin manifests his perversity which, it is suggested, reaches his core ('The sun hadn't stopped with this poor fellow's face, it had gone on into the brain' (87)). Being a metaphor like V., it works both ways, also showing how damaged Porpentine is by the world: his fragmenting skin falls like ash (86) as if he were a victim of the Bomb. While the decadence against which he strives is a falling-away from the human (405),<sup>91</sup> his desire for interpersonal connection is melancholic and so a 'falling apart'<sup>92</sup> expressed by not only his skin but also his plummet when attempting to straddle the corner (that is, two prospects) of the hotel to construct an overarching perspective (86). His futile battle against an inhumane world is underlined by the climax to his story playing out in a theatre, a space of surfaces and simulation. By this stage, his sunburnt face is unrecognisable, so changed is he from his former identity as a duplicitous spy. At the moment of his fatal encounter with his Other, he is

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[accessed 10 November 2014] The symbol was devised at the University of California Radiation Laboratory in Berkeley in 1946. Nels Garden, the head of the Health Chemistry Group there, said that it was 'supposed to represent activity radiating from an atom'. In this way, it represents the unseen reality behind the everyday which Hanna comes to perceive. See Paul Frame, 'Radiation Warning Symbol (Trefoil)', Oak Ridge Associated Universities <[www.ornl.gov/ptp/articlesstories/radwarnsymbstory.htm](http://www.ornl.gov/ptp/articlesstories/radwarnsymbstory.htm)> [accessed 20 December 2015]

91 See Fromm, *To Have*, p. 177 for how consumption leads not only to a passive, fragmented life but compels the individual to flee from themselves and other people.

92 Lifton, 'Image', p. 79.

overtaken by harsh reality as epitomised by the Bomb's destructiveness and exemplified by V., here adorned with aestheticised, trivialised fire-balls of inverted annihilation: 'Light from outside [...] falls through a single window [...] a monochrome orange. Shadows become more opaque. The air between seems to thicken with an indeterminate color, though it is probably orange. Then a girl in a flowered dress comes down the hall' (93–94). Bongo-Shaftsbury, the mechanised assassin, attacks him with 'flames [which] are colored a brighter orange than the sun' (93), while the sinister Lepsius (whose slightness signals a new order of warfare not dependent on brute physicality) loses the spectacles (94) which resemble those worn by the developers and casual spectators of atomic-tests, suggesting that this conflict will leave no victors. David Cowart points out that the opera being performed, *Manon Lescaut*, features an act of misguided chivalry, which fact reinforces Porpentine's own fate<sup>93</sup> but equally demonstrates how individuals are influenced by narratives (just as Victoria was raised on 'wonderful yarns' of colonial objectification (73)).<sup>94</sup>

Death annihilates at the physical as well as psychological level<sup>95</sup> and Stencil resists this by incorporating objects into V.'s body. However, objects cannot compensate for his absent mother, since the two are not interchangeable, factory-line products and V.'s mutation expresses metonymically techno-narrative's colonisation of humanity (in both senses).<sup>96</sup> The Bomb is the technological ultimate and, through the 'nuclear-consciousness' (Boyer) it manufactures (evident in Updike's words), the ultimate referent. As a result, the

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93 David Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1980), p. 68, quoted in Grant, *Companion*, p. 60.

94 In *V.*, culture is seen to imbue us with 'phony nostalgia' (156), and it becomes difficult to distinguish between hegemonic and individual narratives. In his youth, Sidney perceived social-progress because he was enjoying personal advancement: the individual is a fusion of social and personal narratives (460–61).

95 Kinston and Rosser, p. 448.

96 That said, V. is both the Western colonising mindset and the challenge to it, and so her becoming-machine eliminates the difference between animate and inanimate when she rejects human-values and masters those of machines: only when she makes herself machine can she make machine human. This logic is based on Nadel, p. 159.

personal and global melancholia converge, as in the V which signifies them. The manifest-absence of the mother in an age of perceived meaninglessness – inverted to the elusive-presence of the robotic V. in an era of perceived meaning – is testimony to the covert-existence of the Bomb.

The more the twentieth century plays out, the more V.'s artificiality manifests physically, mirroring the 'unnatural acts' necessary in engineering atomic-fission,<sup>97</sup> reflecting the ever-greater reliance on technology of an increasingly dehumanised society. The designers of the precursors to ICBMs, the V-1 and V-2, incorporated as many components of a human pilot as were needed for the missiles to guide themselves.<sup>98</sup> Conversely, Hiroshima-survivor Michihiko Hachiya recalls observing her fellow-citizens moving like automatons amid the desolation. Between the two, Lifton records schizophrenics referring to themselves as mechanical toys. This ambivalence concerning machines, our simultaneous saviours and slayers, is reflected by V.'s ambiguity.<sup>99</sup> Chapter 3 anticipates V.'s robotic-nature in the imperial-agent Bongo-Shaftsbury working to promote a narrative which objectifies the Other while himself being a slave to discourse (80), the hegemony colonising his person.<sup>100</sup> Such technological advances in turn make the hegemony more effective, and so machine-code replaces interpersonal communication, the explosion of the inanimate rewiring the brain, rewriting relations between people.

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97 Nadel, p. 23.

98 Kenneth Kupsch, 'Finding V.', *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal*, 44 (1998), 428–46 (p. 438).

99 The two world wars shattered the Enlightenment's belief in reason and progress. After Hiroshima, science is still the means to perfection, but there is ambivalence towards it (see Schell, p. 10). Schell refers to Hachiya's account on pp. 42–43, and the Lifton comes from Lifton, 'Image', pp. 79–80.

100 Baudrillard writes that '[f]or the system of political economy, the ideal type of body is the *robot*. The robot is the accomplished model of the functional "liberation" of the body as labour power' (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, p. 114, emphasis in original). The subject is completely determined by the system, becoming, effectively, a simulation of the State's ideal subject. The hegemony strives to contain nature with culture: in chapter 14, Mélanie is 'a chaos of flesh' who must be clothed in order to fit into a narrative of desire, and this clothing ultimately screws her (see also 400).

Just as a 'fetish enables the male to "re-create" the missing phallus of the woman, the lack of which grounds his fear of castration',<sup>101</sup> the Bomb enables the West to re-create the Soviet-Other in its own image, easing its fears. This Bomb destroys the logic of cause and effect and so its victim becomes the aggressor, that is, a bipolar complement. While the female might then choose to perform the male's fetish across herself, trying to become the inanimate object which the male desires<sup>102</sup> – the fetish becoming the means of communication in exchange bereft of virtue<sup>103</sup> – the USSR arms itself, thus identifying with the Bomb to attract the West's attention. The fetish replaces the Other, leaving them out in the cold and, since one loves the double of oneself, one must also be an object.<sup>104</sup> There are no more people, only the Bomb, making war acceptable (the 'Kingdom of Death is served by fetish-constructions' (411)).<sup>105</sup>

## A succession of apocalypses

The Egyptian tale, *V.*'s first historical episode, is driven by the imperialist stand-off at Fashoda in 1898 'which will spread in all directions to engulf the world' (85). In his introduction to *Slow Learner*, Pynchon writes that such instances of 'apocalyptic showdown' reference '[o]ur common nightmare The Bomb [...] There was never anything subliminal about [this]', he continues, since nuclear-paranoia 'was bad enough in '59 and is much worse now [1985], as the level of

101 Sigmund Freud, 'Fetishism (1927)', *Miscellaneous Papers, 1888–1938*, 5 vols (London: Hogarth, 1950), V, pp. 198–204 (p. 199)

<<http://portfolio.newschool.edu/thisisnotanobject/files/2015/03/Freud-Fetishism-1927-2b52v1u.pdf>> [accessed 7 June 2015]. For a discussion of this, see Hanjo Berressem, 'V. in Love – From the "Other Scene" to the "New Scene"', *Pynchon Notes*, 18–19 (1986), 5–28 (p. 8) <[www.ham.miamioh.edu/krafftjm/pn/pn018.pdf](http://www.ham.miamioh.edu/krafftjm/pn/pn018.pdf)> [accessed 10 November 2014]

102 Jacques Lacan, 'The Signification of the Phallus', in *Écrits*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York and London: Norton, 2006), pp. 582–83. See Berressem, p. 10.

103 Here, politics is for men what marriage is for women (88–89), that is, a means of virtue. Porpentine discusses these subjects with Victoria before he goes to his death (93).

104 Berressem, p. 14.

105 On account of the Bomb, war becomes impossible, but simulation (that is, narrative) makes violence more likely, as evident in the proliferation of hot wars (Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, pp. 32–33).



danger has continued to grow'.<sup>106</sup> The Fashoda crisis is V.'s coming-of-age, since Victoria was born in 1880. When Stencil attains his own maturity in 1919, his father dies, as does the 'cultural arrogance and imperialist confidence'<sup>107</sup> which were casualties of the First World War. Pynchon himself turned eighteen in 1955, which is the year the novel opens and is portrayed as overrun with materialistic decadence.<sup>108</sup> Each of these personal milestones bequeaths a loss of humanity which leads to the brink of nuclear-armageddon on which the novel ends.

The Fashoda incident mirrors the Suez Crisis of Stencil's day, which comes to the fore in the final chapters. As discussed above, Stencil's account reflects and amplifies his own non-alignment with hegemonic dictates. While the reader knows that the world survived these 'foretastes of Armageddon' (155), the crises are always elsewhere and unresolved and so perhaps cannot be contained by narrative. Suez did not bring apocalypse but, consequently, is just yet another metaphor for it. Apocalypse, like the desert and the real, remains uncontained. We survived, only to come up against the nothingness behind the sheltering sky of our (my, your, the State's, Pynchon's) stories, beyond the domain of myths such as those protective ICBMs, the reflected projections of ourselves we wish to believe are real. As Nadel says, all history is mere rhetoric apart from the event of nuclear-apocalypse, which cannot be experienced beforehand and so is unavoidably rhetorical while pushing the individual up against the real.<sup>109</sup> Fashoda and Suez are simulacra of one another, two facing mirrors presenting an endless atomic assembly-line of crises which produces not reassurance of our perpetuity but the inescapability of our perversity.

The two mirrors meet – the tormenting memory of past trauma collides

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106 Thomas Pynchon, *Slow Learner: Early Stories* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985), p. 18.

107 Gilmore, p. 17.

108 As said above, the circles on the water resemble an ICBM falling on one's head, but if the individual flees their position in society in order to gain a new perspective the missile appears as a V. The same two forms can be ascribed the breast-shaped beer-taps in the Sailor's Grave which equate the servicemen with children (12) and so also the dreams of annihilation of the (rational) Self that are drunkenness and infantilisation.

109 Nadel, p. 46.

with the paranoia of nuclear-apocalypse – forming a mould (or stencil) for the Cold War subject. This is why the clues about V. proliferate in sync with technology, and why Stencil is effectively alone in the world: there is no space for him to stand and see the reflection<sup>110</sup> which would allow him to construct an Other. After all, since the world is now comprised of abstractions (such as screens) which collapse the distance necessary to distinguish subject from object, neither any longer exist, leaving only death.<sup>111</sup> This can be seen as a good thing, since America's post-war social contract of material comfort has threatened the existence of even death itself. Schell goes on to argue that death, now reflected, threatens itself: since the Bomb kills all life, it also kills death.<sup>112</sup> Whatever the case, Stencil's tormenting memory, projected into the future, lays down a narrative for him to follow. Seeking a post-apocalyptic future, the dissenter truly desires a pre-atomic past. This is why the Westerner – modernist (Stencil) or postmodernist (the counterculture) – explores the non-West, where 'olden days' are imagined to persist.<sup>113</sup>

Stencil constructs meaning through repetition, not only in the historical scenarios which replay the same themes, but by writing a seemingly pregnant phrase over and over (449). Cooley argues that repetition is degeneration, echoing Baudrillard's thoughts on simulation. Indeed, Stencil's revival of his father's spy-craft for his own ends (62) – turning its objects into tools for mean tasks – mirrors how the promise of atomic-power was undermined<sup>114</sup> and so the atomic-decay on which the Cold War West is founded. Just as Stencil replays the

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110 '[T]he excess of destructive power abolishes both "any space for warfare" and "the possibility of spectacle" (because there would be no vantage point from which to view a nuclear war)'; Daniel Cordle discussing Baudrillard's *Fatal Strategies* ('Beyond the Apocalypse of Closure: Nuclear Anxiety in Postmodern Literature of the United States', in *Cold War Literature: Writing the Global Conflict*, ed. by Andrew Hammond (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 63–77 (p. 65)).

111 Bishop, p. 56.

112 Schell, pp. 113ff.

113 Kjell Olsen, 'Staged Authenticity: A Grande Idée?', in *Critical Debates in Tourism*, ed. by Tej Vir Singh (Bristol, Buffalo and Toronto: Channel View Publications, 2012), pp. 261–65 (p. 262).

114 The flip-side of this is the justification of wrongdoing in the service of an ultimate good, such as the use of the Bomb or, in chapter 3, Goodfellow's plan to bomb the Irish embassy (91).

past to connect with his parents, the melancholic nuclear-hegemony repeats the folly of historical stand-offs and skirmishes (in hot wars) in its attempt to connect with its Other (namely, the citizens it rushes to protect, as well as the Soviets). In *Slow Learner*, Pynchon describes what Stencil attempts through his myth of V.:

[e]xcept for that succession of the criminally insane who have enjoyed power since 1945, including the power to do something about it, most of the rest of us poor sheep have always been stuck with simple, standard fear. I think we have all tried to deal with this slow escalation of our helplessness and terror in the few ways open to us, from not thinking about it to going crazy from it. Somewhere on this spectrum of impotence is writing fiction about it – occasionally, as here, offset to a more colorful time and place.<sup>115</sup>

However, this is itself only a Cold War way of thinking; the authority upon which national narratives depend derives not from a substantive body of reasons but, like any form of cliché, from mechanical and mindless repetition.<sup>116</sup> It is repetition of *hegemonic* narrative (ultimately as meaningful as the sferics which Mondaugen pursues across the African plains in chapter 9) which is degenerative, a narrative which includes the apocalyptic-threat of every new crisis. After all, the fact we have achieved the ability to destroy ourselves is mad: that we have attempted to do so not once, but repeatedly, perhaps infers a logic, but not sense. As Schell writes, conformity to logic can be inhuman, as evinced by the extremes of totalitarianism, including communism.<sup>117</sup>

This idea is evinced in the structure, content and significance of the historical chapters. If, for a moment, we buck Pynchon's project by regarding them in chronological order, these chapters demonstrate a trend towards increasingly detached, and so increasingly easy, murder: in 1898, the victim is shot from the length of a corridor; the following year witnesses the violence of the mob; in 1913, the individual is killed by machine and in 1922 the colonial-machine commits genocide from afar (attracting sight-seers as did the Bomb-

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<sup>115</sup> Pynchon, *Slow Learner*, pp. 18–19.

<sup>116</sup> Nadel, p. 173.

<sup>117</sup> Schell, p. xxvi.

tests (276)); all of which culminates in the fully mechanised war of 1943's aerial-bombardments. As Raymond Olderman writes, 'V. is the essential nature of our century, pointing always toward our haunting communal "dream of annihilation"'.<sup>118</sup> V. indicates where mankind is heading: down. We rise but, like the sea-spout which V. seems to harness for her homicidal ends on the final page, the peak of our achievements marks the point at which we have the farthest to fall. In this way we are all like Benny Profane (a combination of a benzedrine-high and the humble earth).<sup>119</sup> The mushroom cloud falls in on itself to sterile wastes below. Accordingly, the first expression of Stencil's paranoid melancholia takes place safely removed from his Western life, but in cities dangerously encroached by the archetypal desert of the Western imagination.

On the individual level, while tormenting memory is distressing, 'it seems often to be curative in that the feelings of extreme distress associated with the event are gradually extinguished'.<sup>120</sup> While Stencil's historical reconstructions provide him with 'little information or power that can be put to constructive use',<sup>121</sup> their non-chronological ordering in the face of progressive history in which ends justify means<sup>122</sup> suggests that new criteria should be adopted to appraise them. After all, given his mindset, Stencil cannot improve his lot; attaining his goal would be a falling-back into inanimation. He can only avoid his paranoia. The quest is the destination he seeks, his search for identity is identity itself (he is 'He Who Looks for V.' (226)). Tormenting memory is a constructive means of approaching and avoiding death. It causes Stencil to acknowledge, if not collide with, other universes such as those of Gebrail and Fausto.

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118 Raymond M. Olderman, *Beyond the Waste Land: A Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1972), p. 128.

119 Peterseil, p. 72.

120 Kinston and Rosser, p. 433.

121 Peterseil, p. 44.

122 As Michel de Certeau writes, 'chronology becomes [...] a way of banishing from the realm of knowledge the principle of death or of passing (or of metaphor)' (Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1986) p. 216, quoted in Nadel, p. 42).

As Tanner says, Stencil acquires animation, not life<sup>123</sup> because, colonised by the hegemony, he objectifies himself and so denies himself interiority (imperialism and its attendant decadence being a psychiatric disorder (461)). He is totalising – dictatorial, not dialogic – and so animation, rather than life, is as much as he can attain. As Peterseil writes, '[i]n each of the episodes the result is the same. But through the quest Stencil moves away from inertia and sleep; and through the quest he gains personality, *a* personality, if only by first giving himself [that is, the subjecthood imposed by his time and place] up altogether'.<sup>124</sup> Movement through pursuit of V. and the resultant collisions with others (real or imagined) grants him glimpses of the horizon of the hegemonic system (even if it abuts only his own (hyper-)reality) which, according to Baudrillard, is the most one can hope for in the present day.<sup>125</sup> Stencil's historical yo-yoing powers a dynamo which drags him out of his sleep ('Before 1945 he had been slothful, accepting sleep as one of life's major blessings [...] He didn't particularly care to wake; but realized that if he didn't he would soon be sleeping alone' (54)). Egypt is the first of his flights into self-creation: he is fragmented and reborn, like Osiris, in the desert. Just as the Bomb lies behind social narrative,<sup>126</sup> chapter 3 lies behind Stencil's own. This exemplary narrative is the most unstable of Stencil's historical fantasies but, by exposing its own unreliability, is the most reliable (replicating the practice of those who sought to bolster their credentials for honesty in the eyes of the HUAC by detailing their past dishonesty) and so the most virtu-ous. In this way, Stencil resists totalising discourse and, while no subsequent historical chapter achieves this, chapter 3 informs our understanding of all which follows. If the fact that his resistance is entirely in

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123 Tony Tanner, 'V. and V-2', in *Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), pp. 16–55 (p. 55).

124 Peterseil, p. 80; emphasis in original.

125 'The very definition of the real is *that of which it is possible to provide an equivalent reproduction* [...] the real is not only that which can be reproduced, but *that which is always already reproduced*: the hyper-real.' (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, p. 73; emphasis in original).

126 The grotesque deformities presented at Schoenmaker's plastic-surgery clinic (102) could be the ailments of radiation-victims.

his head suggests it is ineffective (a myth, in Barthes' definition, being an empty sign and so merely an assurance of truthfulness),<sup>127</sup> our evaluative criteria are wrong.

With his own narrative to follow, Stencil can ignore the hegemonic discourse which both has created the Bomb and promises protection from it. His history does not attack the system directly, because then it would be subsumed within the system as the Other, but recalls the narrative on which the facts of discourse are founded, and so stresses the possibility of it not existing.<sup>128</sup> He appropriates and plays with the tools of hegemonic discourse, shifting the focus from the ultimate object to individuals.

Events of importance occur in the individual's everyday life, not on the field of apocalyptic showdown, as foregrounded by each historical episode. As Victoria's name suggests, the personal is political and vice versa. Egypt, the site of encounter between Porpentine's empathy and budding inhumanity, the reader and V. (if not the imperial powers), is witness to the initiation of the chain reaction of annihilation which today creates the desert of the real enfolding Stencil and Profane. A sense of dislocation results only if the individual allows themselves to be colonised by hegemonic narrative. Alternative narratives construct different criteria of meaning ('[t]ruth or falsity don't apply' to the folklore of the sewers beneath the conventional New York (120)). It is a new myth, not 'born from fear of thunder, dreams, astonishment at how the crops kept dying after harvest and coming up again every spring' (142), a metaphor for 'something which should have existed but did not' (158). People can play.

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127 See Nadel, p. 78. For his discussion of testifying before HUAC, see p.82.

128 Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, pp. 36ff.

## **From Apocalypse to revelation: Stencil and existential authenticity**

Even if the hegemonic discourse does not accommodate his animate, multiplicitous nature, Stencil places more faith in narrative than experience. He consequently devotes himself to the idea of a secret plot which makes life meaningful, even when the facts suggest otherwise. Experience makes inescapable the awareness (445) that his own narrative equally fails to fit the world<sup>129</sup> but, simultaneously, he cannot allow himself to acknowledge this. This tension produces his habitual strategy of approach-and-avoid<sup>130</sup> which becomes both the consequence and cause of his living in a metaphorical empty desert. The Cold War citizen practises a dual-subjectivity through double-think, which constantly shuttles back and forth between hegemonic discourse and personal experience in order to live everyday life while aware that the Bomb might drop. In this way, the individual produces a dialogic-narrative which is ambivalent about both; in other words, as McClintic advises, they 'keep cool, but care' (366). Stencil, in contrast, must limit his yo-yoing to the domain of narrative, that is, within his universe. He moves ever towards and away from V., believing that this yo-yoing reference-point is leading him through life but, in truth, reeling it in and out himself and thereby constructing a space in which to live.<sup>131</sup> He tells his stories to himself alone and so they inspire no dialogue: he dictates his world, behaving like the hegemony which harvests its subjects' narratives to give

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129 Profane also has moments of awareness that his self-narrative of persecution is not the whole story: he tells Rachel that he is incapable of love, but in a phony voice so as to undermine himself (370). Like Stencil, he realises that his and the world's substance lie beyond everyday codes: 'Anything you have to talk about isn't real' (383).

130 Douglas writes that Freudian 'proponents or examples of self-scrutiny and the darkness such scrutiny reveals, were at their peak of popularity in the US in the first two decades of the cold war. I have come to see this vogue [...] as a symptom of a final reluctance among Americans at this time either fully to undertake the task of self-knowledge or to abandon it once and for all' (Douglas, p. 81). On a broader level, the description that the book opens in '55 and more or less peacetime' (218) reflects that the Cold War was an age of approach-and-avoid, to be appraised by criteria different from the unitary values proclaimed by the hegemony.

131 The ostensible randomness of a yo-yo is betrayed by the business-operation built on it evinced by the company-name Yoyodyne, which produces 'toys' and 'gadgets' (227), nicknames for the Bomb.

authority to its own,<sup>132</sup> like the weapons-complex instigating a one-way flow of raw materials in pursuit of its policy.

Stencil's myth of V. is analogous to the Cold War's Other or the Victorian imperialists' savage. Such totalising, unyielding narratives function like objects. For example, Foppl's experiences in colonial south-west Africa reveal how past ideologies decay into logic, mere codes of the system (273).<sup>133</sup> These constructions (such as adopted by Bongo-Shaftsbury and Max) become prosthetic identifying-signs, no less than Esther's nose, and weigh down the individual and fix them into inanimation. V., like the counterculture around it, makes it evident that we are cyborgs, amalgams of nature and technology, the narratives constructed by ourselves and others. We are metaphors, multiplicitous, ambivalent, both natural and unnatural, real and intangible, reassuring and restrictive, and by incorporating such fixed elements we do ourselves damage. (After all, V. is an amalgam of earlier stories, but they have been greatly revised in order to fit the whole.) All are dictatorial constructs of alterity to define the self ('correction – along all dimensions: social, political, emotional – entails retreat to a diametric opposite rather than any reasonable search for a golden mean' (103)).<sup>134</sup> Since he seeks a secret narrative, Stencil disregards Updike's distinction between the logical everyday and hidden illogical and is concerned with only a hidden logic. For example, when he sees a newspaper, Stencil reads only the headlines (387) and does not engage with the detail. As Pynchon writes, '[p]eople read what news they wanted to and each accordingly built his own rathouse of history's rags and straws' (while in the case of people of influence, '[d]oubtless their private version

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132 Nadel, p. 3 and p. 38.

133 For an overview of the links between German colonialism in South West Africa and the neo-liberal hegemony of the Cold War, with reference to the thinking of Hannah Arendt, see Nikhil Pal Singh, 'Cold War Redux: On the "New Totalitarianism"', *Radical History Review*, 85 (2003), 171–81 (p. 174).

134 Consequently, the Gaucho's revolution, even though it is founded on seemingly tangible nouns, is fated to be undermined by the narrative they bear ('The conflict was simple: we wanted liberty, the didn't want us to have it. Liberty or slavery, [...] two words only. It needed none of your extra phrases, your tracts, none of your moralizing, no essays on political justice. We knew where we stood' (162)).



of history showed up in action') (225). Indeed, given the choice between considered accounts and extempore remarks, 'Stencil would rather depend on the imperfect vision of humans for his history. Somehow government reports, bar graphs, mass movements are too treacherous' (388), being (ironically) too fixed for his wishes, which in this case are to construct his own narrative of V. On Malta he does not heed even the headlines, so completely does he need to avoid the world (448).

This falling-away or retreat from the world is decadence (405). While Robert Golden writes that '[d]ecadence is to be seen for what it is, but decadence is better than its alternative – death',<sup>135</sup> being a self-contained universe, a vacuum of virtue, decadence is a form of death, too. Simulation makes violence more likely,<sup>136</sup> and such a metaphorical depopulated-wasteland makes a literal one all the more likely. This is why Fausto argues that the individual needs to 'retreat from retreat' (317).

Stencil has had a 'long suspicion' that his V.-narrative 'add[s] up only to the recurrence of an initial and a few dead objects' (445). It cannot be meaningful, because meaning comes from communication (as Fausto points out (318)) and, he is thus surrounded only by objects. As he himself postulates, '[i]t may be that Stencil has been lonely and needs something for company' (55). It is therefore unsurprising that he seeks company but, self-confined to his universe, must necessarily create a society, evident in the impersonations of chapter 3. They are ultimately inanimate and his narrative remains non-dialogic irrespective of Gebrail's presence, since allusion to another's universe does not constitute collision. His society is actually just a mob which acts without engaging, 'like tourism' (471). These shortcomings compel Stencil to draft in the disembodied eighth viewpoint in order to pretend that his story references an authority external to his subjectivity (Nadel's 'spiritual' authority).

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<sup>135</sup> Robert E. Golden, 'Mass Man and Modernism: Violence in Pynchon's *V.*', *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction*, 14 (1972), 5–17 (p. 10).

<sup>136</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, pp. 32–33.

Stencil's policy of self-delusion encounters its greatest challenge in Malta, the site of his father's death and the last contact with V. and so the frightening, dark truth which he strives to avoid (62). Here, the apocalyptic 'imagery of breakdown, revenge, bitterness and continuous strife'<sup>137</sup> which afflicts the sufferer of tormenting memory and challenges their quest to find meaning comes to a head. The island is described as 'Fortune's wheel. Spin as it might the basic arrangement was constant. Stroboscopic effects could change the apparent number of spokes; direction could change; but the hub still held the spokes in place and the meeting-place of the spokes still defined the hub' (338). Whereas chapter 3's impersonations invest Stencil's universe with V-vistas, giving him a make-believe objectivity, Malta's V-spokes bombard him with multiple truths ('[n]o history, all history at once...' (484)) and so preclude any. Malta is 'alienated from any history in which cause precedes effect' (489), a space of chance with no overarching narrative.

Stencil realises he has approached V.'s death too closely to avoid the probability that she is no longer possibility: the fact of her demise disrupts his fiction, her noun his narrative, for all his sustained efforts at keeping it beyond the horizon of his universe. The effect is similar to the Bomb, until now unused and so effectively metaphorical (although no less ensuring peace) being used, becoming real and thus exploding the double-think on which the citizen constructs their daily life. To collide with his Other (dead or alive) would destroy his sense-of-self. He would no longer be 'He Who Looks for V.' and, presumably, fall back into inanimate lethargy. As Baudrillard says, 'the human race owes its becoming (and perhaps even its survival) entirely to the fact that it had no end in itself, and certainly not that of becoming what it is (of fulfilling itself, identifying with itself)'.<sup>138</sup> By identifying as 'He Who Looks for V.', existing always in the present tense, Stencil is forever becoming, thus exposing and disrupting

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<sup>137</sup> Kinston and Rosser, p. 448.

<sup>138</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*, trans. by Chris Turner (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p. 212.

the nuclear-state's drive for completion of its Manichaeian simulation and so total control.<sup>139</sup> His continuing storytelling is a counter-gift, ensuring exchange and circulation counter to capitalism and its consumer-products which tear through society like shrapnel of the Bomb from which they originate. By always searching for fulfilment, Stencil remains uncontained, indeterminate potential. His shuttling is a dynamo which keeps him from being inanimate.<sup>140</sup> The fearsome alterity of the goal which falls within his grasp on Malta propels him to prolong his quest, just as the threat of nuclear war prolongs peace. Stencil's consequent pursuit of something which 'will do for the frayed end of another clue' (451–52) at the end of the novel embodies 'the rationality of irrationality', his adherence to a logic without reason echoing the mindset which Herman Kahn proposed the Cold Warrior needed to feign in order to pursue the narrative of nuclear-brinkmanship founded on the possibility of launching a nuclear-attack.<sup>141</sup>

Stencil's quest is thus cyclical and insulates him against the meaninglessness to which Godolphin was exposed. It is a rhythmic mantra which inspires thinking of a different order (like the sferics which so obsess Mondaugen and keep him above the moral decay of the villa) and asks that success is measured by criteria other than the rational values of the hegemony.

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139 Phillips, p. 170.

140 Similarly, J.F.K.'s authority was dependent on managing just a distance from the Bay of Pigs. When it came to the failed operation, he had to be both involved and not involved, like a quantum particle which is simultaneously present and absent. He had to relate to it rhizomatically, constantly approaching and avoiding the matter. As Nadel says, his continuing authority over the country following the fiasco rested on his not having authority over the operation (Nadel, p. 191). This is an example of how double-think was demanded by the hegemony of its citizens and was not simply an individual, subversive strategy for daily survival. Pynchon replicates this mental-contortionism in the story of the Bad Priest so that Paola can be identified as V.'s daughter (341): either she is the priest's child, as implied, in which case she is not V.'s, or she is V.'s child, in which case her parentage would not be known or relevant to this episode. The clergyman is not the female principle, and yet they are associated, meaning that we both know and do not know that Paola is V.'s daughter and tie these crucial strands of the novel together through double-think. Like mother, like daughter, like lineage: when Paola abandons a disguise, Rooney asks her: 'Is that what you are, something we can look at and see whatever we want?' (350).

141 Schell, p. 204.

Stencil thus approaches and avoids both the meaning and meaninglessness of words, what Derrida considers 'the inevitable play of absence and presence that establishes and undermines the apparent solidity of the "proper" (*propre*), this being identity in the shape of the self, the same or the truth'.<sup>142</sup> Baudrillard makes the point that only ambiguity has the potential to bring us to ourselves, and awareness of this makes it clear that we have a choice of two falsities, (hegemonic) simulation or (personal) illusion.<sup>143</sup> However, this includes the option of vital illusion, which is aware of its fictitious nature. Given that the aim is to escape paranoia (since one cannot escape the Bomb), this achieves the goal. In this way, Stencil finds an organising-narrative which accommodates his multiplicity.

Significantly, Pynchon's example of an organising-narrative in the Baedeker undermines the notion of unquestionable authority which the hegemony claims for itself. While the publication was a crucial aid to the touristic mobilisation of the middle classes which might be regarded as the pinnacle of the imperial project, the Egyptian episode, as Gilmore notes, takes place at a time when it could be predicted that England would lose her colonies.<sup>144</sup> Furthermore, being a tourist guidebook it is inescapably a site where notions of truth are contested. Early debates in tourism studies (inspired particularly by the 1960s' counterculture's prominent appropriation of non-Western philosophies, and Western ideas of such), such as pursued by Dean McCannell in *The Tourist*, ask whether tourists seek authenticity (as opposed to, for example, novelty), and whether it is attainable. Recent interventions start from the principle that the individual constructs a postmodern 'emergent' (Tej Vir Singh) or 'existential authenticity' (Erik Cohen), an identity which is assumed temporarily (and perhaps concurrently with others) and fosters connections to the group or groups with which the individual wishes at that

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<sup>142</sup> Hegarty, p. 75, italics in original.

<sup>143</sup> Hegarty, p. 88.

<sup>144</sup> Gilmore, p. 17.

moment to associate.<sup>145</sup> This makes them 'merely' tourists of experience, but the discipline stresses their self-reflexivity with regard to their construction of subjectivity and dialogic-negotiation with organising narratives. In other words, they have the depth which Max lacks but the spies around him possess.

Existential authenticity acknowledges that its reference-point is a myth, that is, nothing 'very permanent, only a temporary interest, a spur-of-the-moment tumescence, [...] rickety and transient' (142), shuttling between alternative discourses, colliding with others and, in this way, steering a course through life. It avoids the rigidity of a hegemonic stencil and allows the animate (the self excessive to normative dictates) to breathe; the traveller might carry a Baedeker, but dips in and out of it at will. By recognising that any narrative is only a metaphor for the world,<sup>146</sup> it embraces both Updike's orderly everyday and the hidden chaos since, after all, the latter (experience) does not disrupt the former but is its foundation, and the former (narrative) is only surface. These personal myths ensure that the citizen is not an object authenticated by totalising dictates, but a self-constructing individual.

### **From Apocalypse to revelation: Profane, the poet Fausto and Pentecost**

Profane, on the other hand, has been successfully colonised by the hegemony. For all that he sets himself against Cold War America's obsession with (controllable) objects, he objectifies himself through the label 'schlemihl' (147), thereby claiming a fixed nature, and so his victimhood is total. His perception of 'a world of things that had to be watched out for' (384) freezes him in stasis,

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145 See Tej Vir Singh, 'Introduction', in *Critical Debates in Tourism*, ed. by Tej Vir Singh (Bristol, Buffalo and Toronto: Channel View Publications, 2012), pp. 1–26 (p. 18) and Erik Cohen, 'Authenticity and Commodization in Tourism', *Annals of Tourism Research*, 15 (1988), 371–86. Also Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (London: Macmillan, 1976).

146 Fausto describes the Maltese children's war-game as a metaphor to veil the world. He makes the point that everyone knows its fictitious nature, but that it nevertheless helps the children cope with reality (331).

inanimate for all his geographic yo-yoing. This static literalisation replaces the symbolic flow of any meaning-making narrative and is symptomatic of schizophrenics:<sup>147</sup> lacking a binding meaning, he feels disassembled, which only adds to the erosion of meaning since he is not a machine (40). Little wonder then that, when he adopts an alias ('Sfacimento'), he identifies with decay (140). The self-effacing Profane ultimately sets more store in an unperceived narrative than his own experience, which is why he believes that he has learned nothing from life (454), and so equally he has no space to exist: he 'wondered if he had a compulsion to suicide. It seemed sometimes that he put himself deliberately in the way of hostile objects, as if he were looking to get schlimazzeled out of existence' (24).

Stefan Mattessich argues that Profane's 'nomadism' – his interest in objects (analogous to Stencil's interest in 'peripheral history') – prevents him from being colonised by hegemonic simulation.<sup>148</sup> On the social, practical level, this is verbiage, and an example of the Cold War mentality described by Boyer which turns any potential opposition into an apathetic sense of powerlessness, causing individuals to suppress their anxiety and focus on more-controllable superfluities.<sup>149</sup> On the personal level – which is the concern here since, while one cannot escape the Bomb, one can try to escape one's paranoia – Profane's obsession is a narrative which creates a space to breath within official dictates.

In the face of the apocalyptic threats which he is expected to get exercised about, therefore, Profane's apathy becomes a Baudrillardian source of hope.<sup>150</sup> Stencil's strategy of dwelling on history makes him faithful to the dead but, since his historical episodes replace history, his narrative is likewise 'a way of

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147 Lifton, 'Image', p. 86.

148 Stefan Mattessich, *Lines of Flight: Discursive Time and Countercultural Desire in the Work of Thomas Pynchon* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2002), p. 40.

149 Boyer, pp. 338ff.

150 See Baudrillard, *America*, p. 44 and, for a discussion of this idea, Bishop, p. 69. Just as Stencil observes Gebrail from afar, as a passive spectator Profane hopes that the people around him find meaning in one another (214).

forgetting'.<sup>151</sup> Through his historical narrative, he accesses meaning which, being exclusive to an ostensibly more-meaningful past, enables him to live.<sup>152</sup> Ultimately, he is yo-yoing between the death which is inherent to the system and that which is excluded from it and, in this way, his chosen illusion trumps hegemonic simulation. Their similarity is expressed by the fraternal care they both exhibit for V.'s daughter.

In the gauntlet of Cold War dictates which foster nuclear-paranoia, Profane ducks the level at which the unreliable hegemonic narrative operates and grounds himself on solid objects, while Stencil leaps over the mass of objects with which the hegemony bombards him in search of an overarching control. Both are colonised by hegemonic discourse because it is flexible, like a metaphor, containing both the objects and the overarching narrative. The space in which they play is contained within the hegemonic discourse, and so their freedom is (only) that celebrated by the slave-logic of de Certeau.

Both strategies aid day-to-day existence, therefore, but both, in their intransigence, cause tension. After all, just as Stencil's totalising plot is meaningless (meaning everything, it means nothing), the meaninglessness which Profane professes is ultimately no less a plot. Both are V.'s sons, promoting design and chance respectively, converging and diverging in a V, at different angles of self-absorption. They each separately represent what Tanner calls 'the two extreme and intolerable possibilities', plot (narrative) and chaos (experience).<sup>153</sup>

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151 Lyotard, p. xii.

152 '[O]n the one hand, he has been with the dead, and is now back; on the other, this means that the dead are accessible, and have a vital role in initiating the start of (adult) life'; this is Hegarty's summarising of Baudrillard's ideas in the section 'The Exchange of Death in the Primitive Order' (*Symbolic Exchange*, pp. 131–32; Hegarty, p. 43).

153 Tony Tanner, *Thomas Pynchon* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), p. 47. Fromm writes of the common division between the cerebral and emotional in people (and names Einstein, Szilard and Oppenheimer as examples of remarkable individuals who have overcome this binary). It might be argued that Profane is an example of the latter, while it is clear that Stencil represents the emotionally stunted, naïve former who is easily taken in by conspiracy theories (Fromm, *To Have*, p. 150).

That said, there is a qualitative distinction between the two, because Stencil alone consciously seizes on a narrative by which to live, even if he is not conscious that he is constructing it. Profane's unfocused nomadism is a socially endorsed pressure-valve, like that adopted by Cook's tourists, while Stencil's organising-narrative is closer to existential authenticity (although not as close as Fausto's, discussed below).

The individual needs to constantly shuttle between narrative and experience, and so double-thinking rather than embracing one or trying to encompass both simultaneously in an 'intolerable double vision' (468). Rather than focussing on either objects or narrative, they must take both and turn them into metaphors. In this way they can construct a myth which heeds the hegemony but is not beholden to it. In this way they can explode the ostensible singularity of purposes and beliefs espoused by Cold War dictates and live.<sup>154</sup>

Fausto recognises the tensions resultant from such strategies. He is a poet and so by definition one who questions hegemonic dictates, plays with them, and treats them for the metaphors they are. He writes that 'in dream there are two worlds: the street and under the street. One is the kingdom of death and one of life. And how can a poet live without exploring the other kingdom, even if only as a kind of tourist?' (325). For him, the street is the space of the death-drive (330) and life occurs below the surface. He recognises the need to yo-yo between the alternatives and harness the 'dynamic uncertainty' which is *V.* (278). Stencil is a tourist in chapter 3 when he observes in the sketch of Gebrail that there is more to the world than his construct of meaning but does not engage with it.<sup>155</sup> For

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154 The schizo-ethic, such as described by Deleuze and Guattari, is not revolutionary but a way to survive under capitalism; similar to this is Lyotard's idea of 'the dissolution of the self into a host of networks and relations, of contradictory codes and interfering messages' (Lyotard, pp. xviii–xix).

155 This lack of engagement is crucial. Depending on how *V.* is read, Sidney's thoughts might also be Stencil's creation. In this case, the older man's perception that the Situation is a fiction is simply another means for Stencil to express his ambivalence to totalising discourse. However, if the insights contained in Fausto's diaries are also Stencil's work, the reader would have to ask why Stencil would remain so stubbornly self-deluding. This lack of engagement means that Stencil is just a passive tourist, observing alternative ways of meaning-making which are



Fausto, this is better than nothing and, for Baudrillard, the most for which we can hope.

For Fausto, there is no harm in being inspired by such illusion as Stencil's stories (or art (209) or the belief in invincibility, 'on the strength of [which] delusion Malta survived' the Second World War (325)). Indeed, he understands that the poet has 'the task of living in a universe of things which simply are, and cloaking that innate mindlessness with comfortable and pious metaphor so that the "practical" half of humanity may continue in the Great Lie' (326) that those objects combine into a narrative of meaning. However, to truly live, it is necessary to recognise illusion for what it is.<sup>156</sup> To accept illusion as total – to be beholden to one's Baedeker – is to succumb to comforting immersion in unconsciousness, as of a machine. Thus asleep on its watch, mankind is in danger of slumping on to the nuclear-button. The individual must shuttle rhizomatically between narratives (and between these and experience), to make these metaphors their own, that is, (vital) illusion rather than simulation. Such dialogue results in true virtue: when Fausto offers the last rites to save V.'s soul, he moves from inanimation to animation, much as Stencil has done through his myth, but Fausto's subsequent life has the benefit of self-awareness of his constructions. He identifies his construct of the self as fiction and acknowledges the limits of his wedge-of-consciousness and so the need for dialogue with what

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for him unacceptably lacking in certainty.

One factor which suggests that Fausto's confession is another of Stencil's impersonations is the discrepancy of its dating. It is noted that Paola has been silent for eight months about Sidney's involvement with her family, which she must have learned from Fausto's account (345). However, the confession is dated August 1956, which is when Stencil reads it. It appears that the confession is a narrative Stencil has constructed to accommodate the noun that is Paola.

<sup>156</sup> Stencil wants a narrative which accommodates V.'s organic and robotic elements alike. The Maltese children steal V.'s inanimate parts only (Campbell, p. 61), that is, the artificial, constructed, the symbolic, leaving the real. They know the reality of war (that is, the code of the system), but still practise virtue, not plunder, valuing interpersonal relations, tactile for playthings, able to hope for a better world. Their make-believe thus echoes the spy-games of Sidney's era: they double-think truths, which is necessary to live in the world. As Max perceives in chapter 3, pretending (that is, vital illusion) implies depth; Stencil lacks this: his circle of awareness is horizontal (a 'stagnant pool' (345)).

lies beyond it. As Foppl recognises, '[c]ommunity may have been the only solution possible against such an assertion of the Inanimate' (272).

This self-aware openness and flexibility is existential authenticity: when Fausto says that the meaning he took from V.'s death-cries was not merely the meaning he wanted to hear (344), he is choosing what is meaningful, and believing it to be authentic. By recognising hegemonic discourse to be a floating metaphor, the individual can choose to make it an alternative narrative which accommodates their multiplicity, a shock-absorber to experience, the means to escape their paranoia.

The hegemonic narrative that is the 'great lie' tries to permit certain things and prevent others; it creates the protection, and so threat, of the Bomb, but alternative narratives are the means to annihilate and escape this threat.<sup>157</sup> Just as Stencil creates his own in his conspiracy-theory (and Profane in his literalisation), so does Pynchon in *V*. Equally, just as Stencil's stories approach and avoid the truth about V., Pynchon approaches and avoids the conclusion of his own story (that we need to practise a balance between Profane and Stencil) by shuttling between the two story-lines, keeping ambivalence alive, the reader awake, the conclusion always in the process of becoming.<sup>158</sup>

There is a danger in shuttling between the two extreme possibilities in dialogic double-think, as evinced by Godolphin who cannot heed the gap without succumbing to paralysis and falling in. As Tanner says, 'Apocalypse does not *guarantee* Pentecost':<sup>159</sup> to travel outside the space of the hegemony, to put the Baedeker aside, is to give oneself up to ambivalence and both the possibility and uncertainty this entails. As Kit in *The Sheltering Sky* finds, once you disbelieve

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157 David Dowling: 'The power of the bomb is ruled by the power of the word, and only by continual de-construction of the word will we avoid the destruction of the world' (*Fictions of Nuclear Disaster* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1987), p. 208).

158 This was equally central to political-brinkmanship. The year before *V*'s publication, Khrushchev sent technology to Cuba, but baulked risking US-engagement which would oblige him to respond with an escalated retaliation and so ordered his ships to stand off short of the blockade.

159 Tanner, *Thomas Pynchon*, p. 54; emphasis in original.

society's illusions, you are in danger of not believing your own. However, Tanner's caution – about, essentially, going to the desert, the true home of V., the space which reveals all signs' floating nature and so bestows revelation or insanity – overlooks the point that the individual can, if they choose, decide what constitutes revelation or insanity by choosing the criteria by which to define them. The real ultimatum revolves around not revelation or insanity, then, but whether the individual chooses this flexibility. Fausto does, but Profane and Stencil overlook this opportunity, which is hardly surprising since volition is dependent on the ability to differentiate the meaningful from the meaningless, which distinction was exploded at Hiroshima.<sup>160</sup> Consequently, it is left to a robot to ask: 'Has it occurred to you there may be no more standards for crazy or sane[...]?' (295). As Nadel writes, 'sanity merely indicates conformity to a set of norms'<sup>161</sup> yet, in the words of Nietzsche which Kinston uses for an epigraph: 'Things can be so bad that to be sane is insane'.

The gap into which Godolphin falls actually aids the poet-citizen to construct their own myth and live an existentially authentic life. Gilmore notes that chapter 3 offers the reader no choice but to side with the narrative while being denied any agency<sup>162</sup> and in this way it replicates the position of the Cold War citizen. However, the switches and gaps (which both replicate hegemonic narrative and express Stencil's multiplicity) in the narrative destabilise it, forcing the reader to engage dialogically in order to construct an acceptable meaning. In this way, chapter 3 functions in the manner of the desert, and is a synecdoche for the novel. Campbell says that V.'s significance is constructed by the voyeuristic reader,<sup>163</sup> assembling the objects presented (the different viewpoints, V.'s manifestations) into a narrative. This includes threading the historical chapters, presented in non-chronological order, into a meaningful

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160 Nadel, p. 59.

161 Nadel, p. 71.

162 Gilmore, p. 9.

163 Campbell, p. 65.

narrative. The reader must forsake the conventional stencil and use criteria other than linearity (the Bomb destroys causality and 'alters our understanding of time and space, cause and effect').<sup>164</sup> Similarly, Fausto's history has '[n]o continuity. No logic' (331) and he sees life as perhaps 'a successive rejection of personalities' (306) which are co-opted by hegemonic narrative into 'the fiction of continuity, the fiction of cause and effect, the fiction of humanized history endowed with "reason"' (306). He understands that life is largely accident (320–21) without any coherent meaning to it. This pulling-together is, and constructs, V. Since the reader is necessarily active, Campbell's choice of adjective is questionable; the reader is voyeuristic only in the sense that a spy is voyeuristic. The reader must be a poet, constructing a metaphor to make the world meaningful. Just as Stencil constructs his myth of V. from details in his father's diaries, the reader must construct the meaning of V.

The physical desert is constantly shifting, making its meaning unstable, while the objects which comprise it can turn out to be mirages. It foregrounds the fact that narrative and the world are unconnected, and that signs are just metaphors. Like the desert, the citizen must be an outsider within.

<sup>164</sup> Nadel, p. 54.

## Chapter 4.

### Suicide of the Citizen As the Death of the System: Lawrence Durrell's *The Avignon Quintet* (1974–85)

Mortality was arguably Lawrence Durrell's most abiding interest, a theme he returned to again and again. Throughout his life, he asserted that people were dying without having lived and it was necessary to kill oneself in order to be reborn into freedom.<sup>1</sup> He wanted to write a novel about these ideas since at least 1944 and this finally came to fruition in *The Avignon Quintet*.<sup>2</sup> As this chapter will show, the Cold War's atomic stand-off provided a context in which his beliefs gained credible shape, even if he looked to the preceding war in order to narrativise them. The work explores death as the node in the relationship between the individual and authority and this, inevitably, encompasses the death of the individual in war waged by authority, whether as combatant or civilian casualty. Additionally, it examines the suicide of the individual as a response to that authority. By arguing that suicide reflects Westerners' fear of the Bomb and the collective-suicide of the Cold War,<sup>3</sup> I want to suggest how the text is much more of a response to the global political situation of the time than has been considered.

When Durrell began writing *Monsieur or The Prince of Darkness* in late 1972,<sup>4</sup> the Bomb had for some years arguably receded from the forefront of the

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1 Gordon Bowker, *Through the Dark Labyrinth: A Biography of Lawrence Durrell* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p. 78 and p. 88.

2 Bowker, p. 165. *The Avignon Quintet* is:  
*Monsieur or The Prince of Darkness* (1974)  
*Livia or Buried Alive* (1978)  
*Constance or Solitary Pleasures* (1982)  
*Sebastian or Ruling Passions* (1983)  
*Quinx or The Ripper's Tale* (1985).

3 For a broad-ranging discussion on related ideas, see Daniel Grausam, *On Endings: American Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2011), particularly the introduction.

4 Bowker, p. 349.

Western consciousness. Following the confrontation over Cuba, the Partial Test Ban Treaty of 1963 had seen a relaxation of tensions between East and West which initiated the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty at the end of that decade. That said, atomic war and the effects of atomic-testing<sup>5</sup> remained on Durrell's mind, as suggested by his nickname for the cleaning-lady who tidied around the manuscript with speed and efficacy: 'la bombe atomique'.<sup>6</sup> Simultaneously, the New Left movement in Western Europe questioned, increasingly vociferously, the stand-off and its consequent hot wars around the globe. As the erosion of the moral certainties underpinning the East–West confrontation progressed, states were obliged to develop new strategies to legitimise their actions in the eyes of their peoples.

The many suicides in the *Quintet* are either active or reactive in response to the ideologies by which authority tries to govern the individual. In this sense, they are all political acts and all might be termed acts of mental illness by society. The text's instances of self-slaughter, as emotive as that label suggests, and irrespective of any logic behind them, are reactive. Occasions of what I shall call suicide-by-proxy, contrastingly, are rationalised auto-euthanasia and, I will suggest, tie in with the central interest of this thesis.

My examination largely follows the course of the novels but privileges their thematic concerns over their progression from first page to last. As it is, the text is structured as a non-linear continuum of mutually balancing poetic associations rather than a chronological work, its five-novel structure (conceived only after Durrell had begun *Monsieur*) inspired by his studies into gnostic and Eastern philosophies.<sup>7</sup> The *Quintet* is five discrete constituents and so is

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5 Bowker, p. 172 and p. 306. Tellingly, while cancer is not one of the maladies which Durrell commonly prescribes his characters, the close of the *Quintet* sees Sabine – arguably the most dissident of the characters, not so much because she is an aristocratic Oxbridge scholar who has embraced gipsy-society and its wisdom, but because her transgression between the different levels of reality in the work is alone never acknowledged – is riddled with the disease (1352).

6 Bowker, p. 354.

7 Bowker, p. 352. This is notwithstanding the fact that, as Bowker notes, the overall form was devised after the completion of *Monsieur* (Bowker, p. 409). Durrell long pre-empted the

sufficiently 'various that it can afford to be contradictory even as regards itself'.<sup>8</sup> Its poetic structure belongs to the realm of unreason, where ideas are related by way of what Durrell considered a higher plane of reality<sup>9</sup> and signals his ever-greater immersion into such interests in the years after he had written *The Alexandria Quartet* which, while steeped in esoteric wisdom, was structured around the three spatial and one temporal dimensions upon which Western empirical understanding is founded. Even more so than in his *Quartet*, the *Quintet* is peopled not so much by characters as voices for his wide-ranging ideas. That is not to say that none of his protagonists develop over the course of the series: Constance, arguably the central figure, does evolve in consciousness, particularly in the final two books, as I will discuss.

Nevertheless, the text contests binary notions of self and Other, presenting people as multiplicities lacking coherent, stable identities (85; 280; as Sutcliffe says, '[t]he human psyche is almost infinitely various – so various that

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counterculture's interest in Eastern philosophy, reading extensively in this field and admiring Rilke for being 'perhaps the first bridging of eastern and western philosophy in European literature' (Bowker, p. 135). Additionally, in 1950 Durrell became interested in the metaphysical writings of Francis J. Mott, who warned of apocalypse and urged people to join his Society of Life to avert it (Bowker, pp. 200–01).

- 8 Lawrence Durrell, *The Avignon Quintet: Monsieur, Livia, Constance, Sebastian, Quinx* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 335. All subsequent references to the work will appear in the text in parentheses.
- 9 Bowker, p. 150. Durrell argued that logic was inadequate in explaining the world. Akkad notes that people 'refuse to accept the findings of direct intuition. They want what they call proof. What is that but a slavish belief in causality and determinism, which in our new age we regard as provisional and subject to scale' (195). Accordingly, the initiation-ritual is designed to convey a 'significance which one cannot render clear by words, a deep symbolic significance of something which by-passed causality' (122). Bruce realises that meaning is 'being conveyed to me as a sense impression, and not being made rationally explicit in order not to indulge my natural faculty of ratiocination' (118) and that 'through this experience with Akkad and his sect that I at last managed to gain a foothold in that part of reality which was probably my own inner self' (118). The gnostics thus reflect the consequences of the Bomb, which 'alters our understanding of time and space, cause and effect' (Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), p. 54).

The *Quintet*, too, accommodates the common-sense-defying findings of quantum physics, avoiding causal explanation for creative balance (Bowker, p. 191), the irrational progression of its poetic prose resisting the determinism of the age (Bowker, p. 345). As it says, '[s]ometimes the terror of the pure meaninglessness of things seized [Blanford] by the hair – for there was no reason for things to be the way they are [...] Ah, the mind-numbing ineptness of the rational man with his formulations! Defeated always by the flying multiplicity of the real. "Ordinary life" – *is there such a thing?*' (1260, emphasis in original).

it can afford to be contradictory even as regards itself' (335)) and promoting the idea of fusion (693). At times, the different levels of reality in the *Quintet* intertwine, with one invading the other to result in fusion which is both creative and confusing. Durrell called it a literary expression of the quantum physics which created the Bomb but which effectively violates common sense.<sup>10</sup> In *Quinx* this idea becomes explicitly political: 'all people are slowly becoming the same person, and [...] all countries are merging into one country, one world' (1192). (The flipside to this – the B-side of the A-bomb, so to speak – is that, as the second Sylvie says, '[t]o be a whole person discountenance[s] all nature' (1165).)

For example, Constance and her sister Livia possess opposing personalities: blonde Constance studies Eros, while dark-haired Livia reads de Sade. At the same time, by sharing a brother and a lover, and pursuing their quests for meaning in life through devotion to influential Austrians (Freud and Hitler respectively), the sisters constitute a single split-selfhood which mirrors the paranoid citizen and their melancholic bipolar world in (Cold) wartime. The split-self they form in turn comprises one half of a binary with their brother, Hilary the Resistance-fighter, and of another with their lover, Blanford the apolitical individualist. The sisters form two nodes or sides of a triangle with each of these men, and these triangles map on to the two central, equally tortured and incestuous triumvirates in *Monsieur*.<sup>11</sup> The idea of the trinity is thus

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10 Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth and The Abolition* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), pp. 9–10.

11 The final chapter of *Monsieur* reveals that everything which has preceded it is the work of the novelist Blanford. The following four volumes follow Blanford and his friends in the 'real' world. These books also include a couple of his creations who cross from one plane to the reality, a fiction one moment and a fact the next, mimicking quantum duality by which an entity can behave as a particle or a wave.

Incidentally, Blanford's novel (the full title of which is *Le Monsieur*) is not the first book of the *Quintet* (*Monsieur* or *The Prince of Darkness*), with or without its final chapter, which introduces Blanford. This is evident when the second book, *Livia*, and its sequels feature quotes which did not appear in its prequel, and Constance is alive when his novel is published, whereas in the first volume she (albeit unidentified) is already dead when he completes his manuscript. (The subtitle of Durrell's novel, *The Prince of Darkness*, is the name of a work by Sutcliffe, Blanford's creation who enters the world his author inhabits.) Nevertheless, the two *Monsieurs* are evidently a close reflection of one another, so the characters in the book-within-Durrell's-first-book can be read as reflections of others in the



the core around which the *Quintet* is structured, as it was front-and-centre of the atomic-weapons programme which overshadowed Durrell's world, on account of the code-name which Oppenheimer gave the first test ('Trinity' at Alamogordo on 16th July, 1945). Like the avant-garde *ménages*, this label undermines the bipolar conception of the world which was sponsoring his project. Sutcliffe writes: the 'unity of the three children as a total *self* [a]gainst the traditional duality figure of our cosmology [is] a gnostic notion' (212). In this way, Durrell's characters, Oppenheimer's designation and the quantum physics which both author and scientist used comprise a final trinity which deconstructs the binary-oppositions fundamental to the world-order in which they operated.

Incidentally, Oppenheimer's choice is believed to be a reference to John Donne's sonnet 'Batter my heart, three-person'd God', which he came to admire under the influence of his one-time lover Jean Tatlock. Tatlock was a psychiatrist and, in this capacity, can be seen to have a counterpart in Constance; being also politically subversive (a member of the American Communist Party), she functions as a model for the other half of Constance's split-self, Livia (a French member of the National Socialists). In this regard, Affad can be read as Oppenheimer's double, since he is involved in the development of the Bomb as well as being subversive (not only in the eyes of orthodox society but also his own underground sect, which brings him before a committee-hearing to hear him plead his loyalty). Livia has her own ambitious proponent of the Bomb in Smirgel, her one-time Nazi lover who countenances wrongdoing in pursuit of ultimate good: the end justifies the means. Suffering from depression and under state-surveillance, Tatlock committed suicide, as does Livia when she has become disillusioned with the Nazi creed and fears she is under observation. Read this way, Livia becomes a suicide-proxy for her sister. This is not, however, the manner of proxy which is practised by the sect and this is only right since, firstly, Constance is not a gnostic and, secondly, the sect is found to fall short in its struggle with the world when Affad is murdered.

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subsequent four.

## **The *Quintet's* key suicides**

### (1) Piers' suicide – by proxy?

The *Quintet* begins with news of Piers' death – presumably by his own hand – in a hotel in 1970s Avignon, which brings his friend and brother-in-law, Bruce, from his position at the British Embassy in Prague to make the necessary arrangements while privately searching for an explanation. Although Bruce has come down from the cold of the Communist Bloc, it is clear that the political concerns which govern his life originate in these warmer latitudes, and the ice which has built up in the river flowing below the city's walls (12) suggests that this is a world equally in the grip of ideological confrontation. As his train speeds through Provence, he begins his story by accounting for '[t]he Bruce that I was, and the Bruce I become as I jot down these words' (5), as if standing before a modern-day Inquisition. The identity he claims is but 'an echo of far-off certainties which had taken no account of the revenges of time' (6); his current state the result not only of his friend's death but also of the conflicted age in which he remains. He tries 'to objectify his thoughts and emotions by treating them as one would in a novel' (6), articulating a split-subjecthood which strives to contain the feelings of his everyday life in deference to the overarching political narrative.<sup>12</sup> This strategy, he concedes, 'didn't really work' (6), but he goes on to reflect on the similarities of his situation and that of his double who exists in his friend Sutcliffe's novel who is rushing to the bedside of a dying man who wishes to disclose important information. By drawing on this fictional reality, Bruce momentarily brings Piers back to life and, anticipating the wisdom his alternative self will receive, rescues himself from the uncertainties of a frozen age which condemns him to perpetual half-death.

Piers was a member of an Egyptian gnostic brotherhood who believe that

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<sup>12</sup> Several characters in the *Quintet* explicitly anticipate the split-subjecthood of the Cold War citizen. The Greek-Alexandrian who comes to collect Mnemidis from the clinic tells Contance that his people 'see the world in a different way [...] we see things with your eyes. But we also see their way. A split-vision. Of course a lot has to do with simple definitions' (1068).

the world is in the throes of an existential struggle between two irreconcilable powers: that of good and evil. It believes that life is ruled by the Prince of Darkness. 'What sort of God could have built this malefic machine of destruction, of self-immolation?' (135), asks Akkad (the mystic in *Monsieur* based on the other novels' Affad), referring to the 'death-desiring culture' (215) of the age in a manner evocative of its epitomic Bomb. The members believe they inhabit a world of fictions, 'masks and caricatures of reality with names, mere labels' (117), a distinctly Baudrillardian perspective. Simulation cannot be fought with truth and must be exceeded,<sup>13</sup> and the gnostics seek to exceed the world of darkness by 'pre-empt[ing its] death by voluntary suicide' (913) or 'auto-annihilation' (135). As Akkad says,

[t]he refusal to conform to the laws of this inferior demon leads insensibly on towards death But [sic] then death... What is it after all? It is nothing. It is not enough! We will all die. Yet to the pure gnostic soul the open gesture of refusal is necessary (137).

Those brothers eligible for ritual suicide are 'the mature who have tasted the world to the full' (142) and so go to their self-elected self-exile from the world in a state of triumph. These desert-sages take control over their mortality to show that control is possible, rejecting identity as participants in materialist society immersed in its fantasy-projections of certainty (140)<sup>14</sup> like the dissociated Westerner who figuratively kills their socio-political self by travelling to the desert.

However, as the mob-justice following the Nazis' withdrawal from Avignon makes clear (760), an individual living under an imposed authority can choose only collaboration or resistance, and so a dissenter's suicide must be collaboration, given that it cleanses society of their taint (reflecting Michel Foucault's function of the asylum). Consequently, 'ordinary suicide, banal self-destruction, that is forbidden' (138). In Jean Baudrillard's words, '[d]eath has only

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13 Paul Hegarty, *Jean Baudrillard: Live Theory* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 82.

14 Affad: 'Children! you [sic] were born to disappoint your parents as we have all been, for our parents built us gilded and padded cages to live happily-ever-after-in – and look what came about: exile, bereavement, folly, voyages, despair, ecstasy, illness, love, death' (988).

given and received meaning, that is to say, it is socialised through exchange<sup>15</sup> and, accordingly, when a brother dies, 'it is not their own hand that is raised against them' (142–43). This suicide-by-proxy restores a meaning to death 'which can only be thwarted [by society] by the [...] gift of death itself'.<sup>16</sup> However, the gnostic-suicide is 'actually unanswerable' because society could only reciprocate with its own destruction.<sup>17</sup> In order to justify its imposed authority over its citizens, the State expounds an (ideological) immortality which is implausible since, as Akkad notes, death is an ever-present aspect of life (140). It is this discrepancy which creates the tension in the individual which is expressed as paranoia.

Baudrillard makes the point that '[i]n our culture [...] everything is done so that death is never done to anybody by *someone* else, but only by "nature", as an impersonal expiry of the body [...] and we end up believing in the biological essence of the body, watched over by death which in turn is watched over by science.'<sup>18</sup> However, the Bomb effectively destroys distinctions between nature and science and so society relegates responsibility for death to an Other (nature) while claiming that its own science can provide protection against it. Consequently, the citizen's death does not implicate the State, even in war, as happens to Sam. In *The Literary Cold War*, Adam Piette draws on René Girard's theory of the scapegoat to explain this paradox in its explicitly atomic incarnation. Such an individual, he says, 'channels the war's eerie violence so as (seemingly) to avert nuclear catastrophe, simultaneously obscuring the uncanny truth: that the Cold War *is* a scapegoating mechanism'.<sup>19</sup> The *Quintet* argues that '[t]he myth and ritual that used to free the body from science's supremacy has

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15 Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. by Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993), p. 166.

16 Hegarty, p. 41.

17 This is Baudrillard's idea of impossible exchange. See Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, pp. 36–37 and Hegarty, p. 146.

18 Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, p. 166; italics in original.

19 Adam Piette, *The Literary Cold War: 1945 to Vietnam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009), p. 14, emphasis in original.

been lost, or has not yet been found' by Western society, but is hidden in the desert east of Alexandria.<sup>20</sup>

While citizens find themselves legitimate targets of a nuclear-strike on the grounds that they have by default accepted the State's protection and so its convictions, the gnostics choose to give the sect authority over their lives. Socially endorsed death, such as the Bomb, marks the end of time and so is timeless, outside time, beyond experience, only approached through metaphor, textually.<sup>21</sup> The letter which each brother receives notifying them that their time is upon them is a declarative text and thereby overrules the speculative text of socially endorsed death. This letter is likened to a missile (see below), and Baudrillard writes that missiles and simulacra substitute for the lack of death in society. This missive brings the event of death within time, allowing the individual to prepare for it calmly and rationally. It makes the Otherness of death familiar, thereby destroying the binary between life and death on which society constructs itself. Death's Otherness impedes the individual's experience of life; confident of knowing death before it arrives, the gnostic can experience life. Since the instant of death itself remains a secret (like all symbolic violence against the system, it cannot be controlled and must be submitted to), the gnostics also escape the temporality which rules society (143). Thus free from society's dictates, they effectively wield the power to destroy the world as it is and, in the words of Oppenheimer, become death.

Those initiated into arcane knowledge and so power over the world

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20 Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, p. 166.

21 Death – such as the Bomb – ends any narrative one attempts to make sense of it: as Sutcliffe says, '[a]ll that we think and write about death is fictitious' (174). Since the Bomb is, paradoxically, both beyond words and strictly textual, it might be said that its arrival changed only the horror signified. This passage from *Constance*, describing a moment in occupied France, was, of course, written after the invention of the Bomb, but nevertheless suggests that the brain's scope for articulating horror is far more limited than its ability to create it.

[Constance was filled] with a weight of apathy and weariness which astonished even herself. They were like people living upon the slopes of a volcano, Vesuvius or Etna, resigned to the knowledge that one day, nobody knew when, the whole of the world they knew would be blown apart by forces beyond their imagining. And yet they continued to respect social forms like automata (538).

remove themselves from civilisation, whether Manhattan or Alexandria, and in the desert built a new society operating below the known one (literally so when the 1963 limited test-ban treaty forced atomic-testing underground).

Appropriately, Affad meets the sect's executive in an Alexandrian crypt (1006). This place of shelter, prayer and salvation mirrors the nuclear-bunker; both are sites in which past cultures fuse to create a society for the future. Such acts promise only a 'precarious victory':<sup>22</sup> as Akkad says, '[o]ur hopes of stepping outside this sepulchre are very faint, but they are there' (141). Baudrillard stresses that the horizon of the system remains always unreachable, but we can attain a glimpse of what lies beyond to cultivate hope and, within the framework of this thesis, escape nuclear-paranoia.

The lines in this battle cut across the East–West divisions of the Cold War Durrell knew. Accordingly, comparisons should not be drawn too quickly between the Egyptian authorities' crackdown on the self-proclaimed apolitical (130) secret sect on suspicion of being a 'subversive political movement' (1146) as the *Quintet* approaches its end and the atomic age dawns (1017) and, for example, the 1950s witch-hunt for Western communist sympathisers. The parallel might be tempting, especially given that the gnostics have already been explicitly identified as early communists (241), but I would argue that the brotherhood instead represents a challenge to hegemonic norms. Gordon Bowker notes that, while Durrell was critical of capitalism, he was very much anti-communist and voiced support for McCarthy's policies.<sup>23</sup> The Manichaean gnosticism does not square with the Manichaean political philosophy of the era in which it was imagined.

It might be more profitable to equate this brotherhood of initiates to the truth fighting a secret war against the forces of darkness with the CIA, members of which saw themselves as a modern-day Knights Templar.<sup>24</sup> Both constitute an

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<sup>22</sup> Hegarty, p. 76.

<sup>23</sup> Bowker, pp. 199–201.

<sup>24</sup> William Colby, *Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1978), quoted in

authority in excess to formal government,<sup>25</sup> which Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari term 'the war machine', a heterogeneous, ultimately unregulated dynamism which is either orderly society's hired gun or its armageddon. 'The war machine is always exterior to the State, even when the state uses it, appropriates it. The man of war has an entire becoming that implies multiplicity [and] metamorphosis and treason [...] secret brotherhoods [...] animate the battlefields'.<sup>26</sup> While the sect would not identify itself on one side or other of the Cold War bipolar world, this very declaration of independence casts it as Other to both East and West. As Baudrillard argues, the opposite of Good is not Evil; instead, it is the symbolic, a central absence within a system which insists that all is Good.<sup>27</sup> On account of its ambiguity, therefore, the sect is all the more a binary opposite of the CIA. This equivalence is most evident in how each channels death in their quest to save the world in keeping with their respective creeds: the gnostics defect from orthodox reasoning and sacrifice themselves, while the CIA sacrifices others.

## The desert

The *Quintet* first enters the desert on the bequest of Akkad, the enigmatic Egyptian who invites Bruce, Piers and their friends to a gnostic ritual at a remote oasis. As they set out from Alexandria, Bruce notes how the desert sands lay siege to this emblem of civilisation and the vestiges which have not been swallowed only emphasise the fragility of the human project. The world through which they move feels of lesser substance than that of Alexander's time (95), as if the propaganda of civilisation has lost its power to deceive. Once in the desert, a

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Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 1999), p. 33.

25 Ann Douglas, 'Periodizing the American Century: Modernism, Postmodernism, and Postcolonialism in the Cold War Context', *Modernism/Modernity*, 5 (1998), 71–98 (pp. 76–77).

26 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 268

27 Hegarty, pp. 81–82.

different set of rules applies. It is a liminal space between states of reality, populated with trees turned to stone (132), suggesting a magical fusion of elements through which new meaning might be created. Evoking its age-old associations with ascetic prophets (93), the desert is the death not only of sanity but also of the authority which pronounces on sanity. Denied a rational foundation, any edifice of logic which one might try to build over the desert is fated to collapse around itself, a mushroom-shaped fallout signalling the end of civilisation. Fittingly, the ritual takes place in the tomb of a holy-man having 'the peculiar disorienting effect of churches with no central altar, no point of focus' (101). It is less an outright heresy of Western ordering-beliefs than a gnostic mutation and, perhaps, all the more unsettling for it.

A later encounter with the desert occurs in *Constance*. Faced with the disintegration of all he values (the Provençal idyll) in the shadow of the coming war, Blanford has taken up a job-offer in Egypt, experiences which inform his novel, *Monsieur*. In this way, he echoes the other protagonists examined in this thesis. It might, nevertheless, be argued that, for all his sense of alienation from the State (579), he is fleeing not so much tension as apathy, seeking not meaning but distraction. His textual journey to the desert, however, *is* an escape from the state of war which never breaks, but also never ends, under which he lives. He takes a trip on the Nile with Sam and Affad, during which '[t]he desert was a metaphor for everything huge and dangerous, yet without so seeming' (650). The Sahara thus becomes a simulacrum for the war he has left behind. The atomic incarnation it would herald can be approached only through metaphor, and so experiencing the scorched sands brings him safely one step closer to the post-war world.

The friends share their felucca with a couple called Bruno and Sylvaine, names which bring to mind Lewis Carroll's Bruno and Sylvie. These latter hear of a map on a scale of 1:1 which is abandoned since it prevented the crops from



growing,<sup>28</sup> a cautionary tale of how man's scientific ingenuity threatens to turn society into (the Western construct of) an uninhabitable desert. This evocation of curious cartography calls to mind, of course, Borges' map which forms a palimpsest over the empire it represents and which, when similarly found to be impractical, is allowed to rot away, its vestiges littering the desert.<sup>29</sup> Inescapably, both tales suggest that the living world is in conflict with the impositions of science and that it was mankind's realisation of its folly, rather than any inherent resilience on the part of nature, which averted doomsday.

## (2) Livia's suicide – the shortcomings of alternative narratives

Before the war and his experiences in Egypt, Blanford is briefly and disastrously married to Livia. She runs away to lose herself in Paris' nightspots and then Germany's national socialism. For all that she is a law unto herself, belonging to nobody (827) – when Blanford slips a ring on her finger, she violently rejects what she perceives as the author(ity)'s bid to contain her (463) – Livia is forever in search of a greater order which will give the world meaning. She flirts with Buddhism (581) and her time exploring fascism also introduces her to a more abiding interest in yoga (995). The common element which attracts her to all three would appear to be their valorisation of the absence of the ego. When she kills herself, Constance reflects that 'nothing that she did or was entered into the sphere of rational explanations' (821) and puts her suicide down to 'the failure of her central beliefs' (888). As was the case with Livia's spurned lover, Blanford and, indeed, the continent burning around him (489), suicide appears to be the answer when reality refuses to fit the order one tries to project on it. As with the Cold War state, she is tormented by a death-drive created by her internal tensions.

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28 Lewis Carroll, *Bruno and Sylvie Concluded* (New York and London: Macmillan, 1894), chapter 11 <[www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/48795](http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/48795)> [accessed 16 September 2015]

29 Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. by Andrew Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 325.

By holding the novels' various triumvirates up to one another, Livia's search for meaning in life is equated with the psychological illness of *Monsieur's* Sylvie. As a psychiatrist says, 'the state of schizophrenia is not one of mental disorder, but one in which a different sort of order applies' (943): it is not an illness but a heresy, testifying to 'the truth of a belief which ran counter to the whole structure of an age's thoughts' (458).

The defining authority is, by definition, sane. However, it is also always unavoidably self-contradictory. For an individual to be deemed sane, they must contain these tensions within themselves and honour the opposition between self and Other which is the foundation of society's normative world-view, creating in themselves a split-subjecthood. Furthermore, sanity is mandatory because, if it were not, their endorsement of the State would be meaningless and they could not shoulder their everyday responsibility for the State's ultimate victory. However, they are deprived of agency since, in theory, the State acts in their interests and, in practice, the political confrontation is conducted above their heads.

These social tensions increased in the atomic age, since the Bomb collapsed distinctions between protection and threat,<sup>30</sup> compelling the Cold War citizen to practise a denial of reality in order to live everyday life.<sup>31</sup> In light of this, the mad can be seen as dissidents who resist the double-think necessary to live under a self-contradictory authority. Not only do the mad undermine the normative concept of a stable identity; as the text says, '[t]he mad must be people without selves' (1130), thereby being a clear manifestation of Durrell's idea that '[p]eople are not separate individuals as they think, they are variations on themes outside themselves' (948). In *Monsieur*, the psychologically unstable Pia

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30 Schell, pp. 214–15.

31 'We place our daily doings in one compartment of our lives and the threat to all life in another compartment [...] Before long, denial of reality becomes a habit', Schell, p. 152. See also Schell, p. 8: 'When one tried to face the nuclear predicament, once feels sick, whereas when one pushes it out of mind, as apparently one must do most of the time in order to carry on with life, one feels well again. But this feeling of well-being is based on a denial of the most important reality of our time, and therefore is itself a kind of sickness'.

identifies with her dolls (220), these simulacra expressing her multiplicity. Sutcliffe writes: 'We are born mad [...] acquire morality and become stupid and unhappy. Then we die' (263). The absolutist values imposed by the hegemony are unnatural; nevertheless, it consigns the dissident to social death, removes them from the system, by identifying them insane. *Monsieur's* Sylvie is, like the Third World and its sect, regarded as an outright threat.<sup>32</sup> Bruce, flying the flag for Western empirical science, argues with Piers, who is becoming increasingly immersed in Eastern wisdom, about what is in her best-interests, seeking to subsume and naturalise her Otherness within their world-views, making her feel she is the 'battleground of three selves' (25).

In truth, such individuals do not oppose the norm but operate across it. As Piers says when being initiated into the wisdom of the desert-agnostics, '[t]hen there is another kind of sense which is not just nonsense?' (136). In turn, Sylvie finds the gnosticism repressively dogmatic, its ideas about Good versus Evil and salvation through destruction little different to socially endorsed beliefs. To her, it is ultimately 'both boring and somewhat frightening' (158), as was the Bomb, the suicidal-logic and logic-defying physics of which is as ungraspable as the Prince of Darkness, to many a Cold War citizen. It is outside her narrative.

Similarly, when Constance wonders if Affad might be schizoid, she corrects herself: 'what could such formulations possibly mean in the context of a reality such as the one he was embracing?' (1017). Nevertheless, she is not far wrong, since '[t]he schizoid states are uncrystallised mysticism' (1338), mirroring Affad's unorthodox world-view. From an orthodox point of view, Affad *is* mentally abnormal, just like his son, who has been diagnosed with autism. Both access a different order of reality: the boy is not taken by the stimuli of the world

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<sup>32</sup> As Adam Piette writes, '[d]eviance from this normative pressure is itself psychologically controlled by being labelled as neurotic; or more specifically as conspiratorial paranoia' (Piette, p. 15). Ann Douglas writes that, '[i]n the mid-1960s, the psychopath label was dropped by psychiatrists [in favour of] "borderline," with its heavier investment in apolitical narcissism' (Douglas, note 40). Like the mad, the self-avowedly apolitical gnostic-sect (130) is borderline, existing at the margins of society and seeking to advance the border between Good and Evil.

(1034), while his father is not taken in by the meaning it seeks to impose on his reason. When Constance finally connects with him emotionally, 'it was as if his little psyche had exploded like a bomb and was on the point of disintegration.' For him, she is the outside of the system brought within: a singularity, like the Bomb.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, '[s]he held him tight, as if to hold the shattered fragments together against total dispersion' (1042). One of the epigraphs to *Livia* is a Chinese proverb which states that 'five colours mixed make people blind' (298); equally, to receive such an excess of reality without an organising narrative would make one go mad to oneself. One must choose the myths by which to live in the world.<sup>34</sup>

### (3) Affad's suicide-by-proxy and subsequent death

The war which Durrell leads his reader into anticipates both the Bomb which he will introduce in the third book, *Constance*, and the post-Hiroshima world in which he was writing. The German officer Smirgel tells Constance how the Nazis are moulding nature for their own ends, nurturing it into the perfect weapon (807). At one point, what appears to be a natural storm turns out to be the explosions from a skirmish (615), suggesting that the force of nature has been harnessed.

The Germans are shown to regard themselves as necessarily stooping to wrongdoing in order to achieve a greater good, anticipating the Americans' rationale in the face of a major land-offensive against Japan in 1945: Smirgel says that 'we must first go back and start from the wolf, so to speak. We must become specialists in evil until the very distinctions are effaced. Then he will come, the new man whom Nietzsche and Wagner divined' (806). Since the Bomb has been

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33 Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2001), pp. 130–31. See also Hegarty, pp. 161–63.

34 Characters voluntarily allow narrative to determine experience, perhaps the most memorable example being how the Prince's life in London is framed by Turner's work (519). In this way, they choose a myth by which to live in the world, which is how the Cold War subject can live free of nuclear-paranoia, if not the Bomb.

developed by a liberal democracy,<sup>35</sup> however, and because its power to destroy the world calls to mind the Creator,<sup>36</sup> any dissidence is tantamount to heresy.

In the *Quintet*, the Bomb is pre-empted by the destruction of the Second World War and followed by Affad's impersonal, incidental annihilation by similarly mass-produced weapons in the form of Upinal Steel kitchen-knives (1074). Furthermore, his experiences bring the Bomb into the narrative more explicitly than the references to the bombing of Japan which brings the war to a close. A member of the gnostic sect, he, like the protagonists discussed in previous chapters, has found in the desert an alternative world-view. Although Egyptian, he is not an inappropriate subject for this study because of his influence on the (re)formation of identity of two Western characters, one of whom travels to the Sahara and one of whom does not: Blanford, whose internalisation of Affad manifested as Akkad is the pivotal element in the first book of the *Quintet*, and Constance, whose quest for valid meaning in the world becomes the work's primary concern.

His visit to the Canadian research-centre is not integral to the plot, although it does enhance the texts' thematic preoccupation with death. Given that Durrell did not plan the plot comprehensively in advance of writing,<sup>37</sup> he might have incorporated the expedition on the basis of topical inspiration: *Constance* was the first volume published after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the announcement of Star Wars which ended the détente. As a marginal observer of the political stand-off under which Durrell was writing, Affad can perceive the similarity of East and West, what Baudrillard calls the bipolar nature of monopolistic authority.<sup>38</sup> For example, for him the centre is located amid 'vast snowscapes like another inclement Russia' (870).

Nevertheless, the language with which he recounts his visit expresses a

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35 See Schell, pp. xxviii–xxix.

36 Nadel, p. 166.

37 See, for example, Bowker, p. 409.

38 See Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, p. 69, and Hegarty, p. 106.

tension between the desire to describe his brush with history and the awareness of what he is describing. His experience is imparted through metaphors, as if he finds the subject indescribable, like death itself. The laboratory is 'the smithy of Haephaestus', which displaces the research from the sphere of contemporary warfare while evoking both an antiquity which conveys the fundamental nature of the work and an element of the superhuman which gestures towards the power in question. When his story comes to the Bomb itself, Affad contains it with the diminutive metaphor of 'the Toy' (the device used in the Trinity test was nicknamed 'the Gadget'). The weapon is not concerned with war but rather 'aimed at our bone marrow' (870). As well as disintegrating distinctions between military and civilian, combatant and non-combatant, this implicates all of life, in the sense both of daily activity and biological existence. Furthermore, since Affad's fictional double, Akkad, has previously characterised evil as a new cancer in the biological marrow (141), these words associate the Bomb with a literal, personifiable – and dissident – idea of immorality.<sup>39</sup>

### Desert Lily

Affad's wife, Lily, has synaesthesia (1021), another way of seeing the world. She removes herself even from the society of the asylum to prevent herself contaminating it, and so truly commits herself to an asylum-of-the-self.<sup>40</sup> The head of the monastery who oversees her self-exile greets Affad and then

crossed the room to the wall upon which there was a large framed picture of the oasis with the grouping of the buildings clearly marked, thinning away into the desert where there were the cells, mere wattle shelters which housed those who had chosen to live as solitary anchorites [...] He placed his finger on one of the star-shaped huts and said, "There!" (1021–22).

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<sup>39</sup> Durrell thus realises a project he conceived at the start of the war to connect the work of Einstein with metaphysics (Bowker, p. 121). This ambition provided the core thematic concern of his 1963 play 'An Irish Faustus', which forged an analogy between Goethe's alchemist and nuclear-science (Bowker, p. 310).

<sup>40</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. by Richard Howard (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

He employs a simulacrum, a metaphor, to make sense of the space between the desert and society beyond the monastery, as if the reality outside his door is too uncertain to put his finger on. Here, different rules apply: the monk who leads Affad to his wife's hovel strides across the sand, while the visitor struggles to keep up through this unfamiliar element (1022). In this dawning atomic age, nature, formerly neutral, can now be manipulated, just as an abstract idea can be twisted into propaganda.

Before arriving at this desert-retreat, Affad thinks of 'the desert. It, too, was an abstraction like the idea of death – until the life of the oasis made it a brutal reality' (1019). The presence of life creates the possibility of death, as is maintained by the gnostic sect (their suicide brings death into society and so 'recalls the process which initiated it, and therefore also the possibility of its non-being').<sup>41</sup> It also echoes the logic of the Cold War, by which the threat of danger becomes the promise of protection. The symbiotic relationship between everyday life and ever-possible death creates a living-death which is reflected in the fact that the oasis is neither desert nor society, and so is the place of madness. The description of Lily's dwelling as 'one of the remotest cells beyond which lay nothing – just the uncompromising sea of sand curling and flowing away into the empty sky' (1022) suggests that she is only one step away from vanishing into the void like Kit in *The Sheltering Sky*. The *Quintet* refers to insanity as a 'quasi-death [...] almost more cruel really than outright death' (18), calling to mind the maxim 'better dead than Red'.<sup>42</sup> Since madness is defined as a threat to society, it is contained by the asylum, a place not outside society but not within it. Lily's self-committal is collaborative suicide. Perhaps this is why Affad's thoughts focus on the desert which surrounds the oasis, the home of the resistance which decrees his death will be a means to life.

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41 Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, p. 2, and see Hegarty, p. 41.

42 Schell, p. xxxvii.

The 'machine which [i]s already launched upon a trajectory'

When he falls in love with Constance, Affad resigns his membership of the gnostic fraternity. However, he learns that he has done so too late, because the letter which informs him that his death is imminent has already been sent, like 'a machine which was already launched upon a trajectory' (1118), and this fact rekindles his faith in the gnostic cause. When Constance tries to intercept the missive, he responds: 'I understand your feeling that things can be prevented from happening by an act of resolution...But they can't' (1057), as has been amply demonstrated by the outbreak of war.

Constance's attempt articulates Western society's fear of death: '[t]he whole of her training, her science, her practice was dedicated to working against this cowardly principle of suicide and abdication' (914). For her, love cannot be reconciled with death (118–19). She feels that Affad should have spared her the experience of their affair 'since he had known from the beginning that it must all come to nothing' (914). Her thoughts continue:

Why did she feel such a keen sense of reproach towards him simply because he was a card-holding member, so to speak, of this absurd suicide confraternity with its cowardly refusal to face the world as it was? It's because (she thought) Eros demands a false reassurance, a promise of immortality, in order to flourish – and 'flourish' simply meant to bear a child (914–15).

As Baudrillard says, 'Eros is nothing but an immense detour taken by culture towards death, which subordinates everything to its own ends'.<sup>43</sup> In other words, the false reassurance referenced above is effectively a means for society to promote the ostensible immortality of its values. Such means will, in due course, include the Bomb, society's sterile creation which perpetuates the culture of Thanatos.

The flip-side of the lovers' disagreement, this clash between Eastern and Western viewpoints (914), is that Constance's understanding of the world

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43 Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, p. 149.



expands. She has become irradiated with Eastern ideas, leading her to question her socially endorsed values like many dissenters before her. Affad explains that

there is a man behind me and a man before, I am part of a chain, a link. Our ambitions in a mad sort of way are scientific in the most exact sense of that misused word. We are setting up a chain-reaction which we believe could counter the laws of entropy – the irreversibility of process leading always to death, dispersal, disaggregation (1119).

Constance ultimately becomes part of this collective refusal of the world's death-obsession, the counter-nuclear chain reaction.

Despite her failure to intercept the letter, it fails to reach Affad, which creates problems for the brotherhood. (The fact he has become an apostate to a heretical belief shows that orthodoxy and heresy are not the only options available to the individual: the gnostics' Manichaeian creed does not exist in a Manichaeian world.) Languishing in limbo, Affad returns to Egypt to plead with the sect to restore his death.

The gnostic creed champions two ideals in the bid to defeat Monsieur: death and love. The sect's suicide-by-proxy is equated with the natural entropy of the universe and, in his interview before the sect's representatives, Affad identifies the love he shares with Constance as likewise adhering to Nature and so also something which should not be resisted (1009). However, in the eyes of his brothers, their practices concerning death take primacy over those concerning love, (presumably) because they are engaged in a battle with the Prince of Darkness and believe in fighting fire with fire.<sup>44</sup>

The individual is unavoidably forced to choose between the self and the system because love and death are pitted against one another through Cold War technologies. In 1968, research at Harvard's medical faculty relocated the event of clinical death from the heart to the brain. Whereas service to the system could previously have been coincident with love (for example, sacrificing one's life for

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<sup>44</sup> 'If the whole sum of human knowledge had to be put to the question then only a prophet of wrath, a poet of wrath, could do it, and could carry us with him over the rapids into the new country which was, according to our friend [Akkad], waiting to claim us.' (111).

one's fellow-man), loyalty now became logical – that is, 'sane' – and quantifiable – that is, assessable. A supplementary consequence of this decision was that life was lengthened, albeit incrementally. The few seconds during which the brain shuts down following the cessation of the heart<sup>45</sup> can be equated with the duration of an atomic-test, which similarly requires technology in order to be captured, studied and understood. Fittingly, therefore, the time which separates love from duty is also that which divides the world between the industrial and atomic eras, and between everyday life and apocalypse.

The Bomb is a product of the brain, and now the brain is the Bomb's ultimate target: as Jonathan Schell writes of atomic-weapons, '[t]heir target is someone's mind'.<sup>46</sup> Affad remarks that, '[w]hen man starts to *feel* with his reason, with his intelligence, why, Monsieur is there!' (871, emphasis in original). When a society's values come from the heart, the idea of their immortality derives from the collective desire for them. When they come from the brain, their immortality must be argued for: whence the Bomb, which, of course, is intended to destroy the brain. The nuclear-cycle is a closed-system, self-exiled from the world (as Affad says, 'nature has lost all interest in us' (870)), like an oasis in a desert.<sup>47</sup>

When the sect accepts Affad's contrition and restores his ritual-death, '[f]or the first time he realised the enormous attraction of death, and the secret lust for it which animates human beings. Fear and lust' (1017). The dissident is not uncontaminated by the 'death-desiring culture' of the Prince of Darkness and

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45 Horizon Research Foundation, 'The Brain During Cardiac Arrest', *Horizon Research Foundation: Science at the Horizon of Life* <[www.horizonresearch.org/for-professionals/the-brain-during-cardiac-arrest](http://www.horizonresearch.org/for-professionals/the-brain-during-cardiac-arrest)> [accessed 16 September 2015]

46 Schell, p. 222.

47 One character's investment in marital-aids after the war (1150) introduces the modern, mechanised simulacra of love, the denial of creative sperm in favour of gold, a simulacrum of excrement and decay (139). In an interview following the publication of *Quinx*, Durrell laments the fact that the all-pervasive techno-culture is detracting from such fundamental elements of human life:

Our sex lives are enormously compromised. The tabloid which I bought yesterday reported Americans have invented some sort of snuff which will prevent conception. And there's a dipstick which you can dip in your girlfriend's urine and assure yourself you won't get something terrible from her. Marvellous! It's the beginning of the end (Bowker, pp. 415–16).

the Cold War, but can choose how to channel the drive. Like the protagonists examined in previous chapters, Affad turns his back on Western values in favour of the desert in the hope of restoring death to life and so finding peace.

That said, in the face of his dissent, the sect has pursued a strategy of containment: no system will tolerate an individual professing heterogeneous loyalties (1118). For all Akkad's emphasis on the role of ambivalence at the heart of the gnostic doctrine, it shows itself effectively to be an inversion of the orthodox. Seen in this light, and bearing in mind Baudrillard's assertion that hegemonic monopoly is bipolar, it is appropriate that carnival – the traditional, and authorised, period when society is turned on its head – is an important time for the brotherhood (1007). Ultimately, gnosticism is another narrative which falls short of its promise to provide a meaning in life.

As Durrell writes, '[w]hen insight hardens into dogma it goes dead' (1180): the gap between the sect's narrative and experience swallows any hope of salvation.<sup>48</sup> Akkad asserts 'there is a kind of nothing which we can do creatively, which will add oxygen instead of diminishing it, which is more fruitful than fruitless' (217), but this will only maintain the oxygen-supply to the bunker he inhabits. '[Sutcliffe] was right to call it a grubby little suicide academy. It isn't even a pessimism of a philosophic kind for that would be the opposite of something. It's worse, a sort of ungraduated colourless hopelessness about the very fabric and structure of our thought, our universe' (242). Ultimately, the sect passively ignores the hegemony it condemns, and thus is bested by it. Even pessimistic acknowledgement of the world – that is, creative-despair-in-practice (27) – would constitute agency and so raise the possibility of change: after all, '[e]verything is conquered by submission, even submission itself, even as matter is conquered by entropy, and truth by its opposite' (1124; 928).

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48 While Schell makes the point that denial of socio-political reality can be seen positively as a refusal of fate, the crux is surely how that refusal is enacted. See Schell, p. 8.

## Affad's murderer, the madman Mnemidis

The Egyptian murderer Mnemidis is confined to the Genevan asylum where Constance works, but the psychoanalysis which it practises is inadequate to contain his homicidal desires: her colleague Schwarz considers him either 'too sane or too mad [...] everything he says is true and yet it's all surface' (979–80). Constructs such as sanity and insanity become questionable in a world which permits the Holocaust and the Bomb.

Because insanity operates across the defining system, Mnemidis can draw on such constructs and uses them to conceptualise his reality. He tells Constance: 'even when I was *acting*, I myself was only acting. Where had I gone? My I? My eye?' (985, emphasis in original). His 'I' is his 'eye', since the individual draws from their understanding of the environment in order to define themselves.<sup>49</sup> Mnemidis can be inherently performance, elementally difference. Without an I, he has no fixed standpoint; without an eye, he has no stable perspective of his own, instead being always simulacra of other things. This allows him to turn his environmental signifiers on themselves to expose their insubstantiality. This logic is in operation when he swallows Constance's watch 'to stop the world' (986). Through this act, Mnemidis internalises the dictates of the mechanised world which seeks to contain him, becoming its equal and negating its authority.

Being without a stable identity, Mnemidis is ruled by the forces of uncertainty (1130). Unlike the Westerners in conflict with atomic-society, he thrives in this condition since he is not torn with ambivalence caused by the conflict between the hegemony's reassuring narrative and his own experience. He does not need to choose a myth by which to live. Instead, he mirrors nature, in which '[t]here is no norm, no absolute' (141): 'he was equally ripe for black mischief or the felicity of pure godhead. It was all according to how the dice fell

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49 Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 1–6.

[...] he recognised that nature itself was completely indifferent' (1130). He is not intrinsically good or bad, just as the energy produced by nuclear-fusion is not intrinsically productive or destructive, the outcome depending on the situation.

Consequently, in his hands a handbag is 'at once defensive and aggressive' (982). This totem is made of 'cheap crocodile skin'; thus associated with the Ancient Egyptian signifier of death and sterility, it represents anti-creation. However, being a handbag, it is a mere simulacrum of it: the madman's evil is, to use Akkad's words, 'untrue but it is real' (116), that is, dangerous. It is his strategic-defence initiative; like Reagan's nuclear-deterrent (which, after four years of development, was proposed the year that *Sebastian*, in which this episode occurs, was published), it is intended for display without being used: '[i]t was probably quite empty, but for him it was a kind of bomb' (982). Later, when the asylum-staff search Mnemidis' belongings for Affad's stolen letter, it is not in the bag; nevertheless, Constance still fears he might have it. The madman's power is unlocatable and enduring and thus a source of paranoia, just like the concept of the Bomb irrespective of how many missiles are destroyed as a consequence of bilateral de-escalation agreements. Although he trained as a magician in his youth (1132), the psychopath's inclination is far from dovelike: his sleight-of-hand and mind-games are equal to working a cruise of a very different nature. He has conjured up a Schroedinger's catastrophe, and the eventual fallout is lethal for Affad.

To effect his escape, Mnemidis disguises himself as a member of staff (1085), thereby again appropriating one of the signifiers through which the hegemony operates in order to undermine it. This efficient attack on the institutional order shows that his insanity is logical, if different.<sup>50</sup> As it is, the logic of the institution is demonstrated by a 'long and exhausting series of blood-tests and nerve-tests, of analyses and readings, of cephalograms and cardiograms

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<sup>50</sup> Baudrillard writes that the Freudian death-drive fails since it rationalises a phenomenon which should remain outside the system (see Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, pp. 148–51, discussed in Hegarty, p. 43). The value of this criticism is evident in the shortcomings of the asylum-nurse's attempt to negate the madman's threat.

[...] the whole rigmarole of quantitative science [which] must have a final outing before restoring [Mnemidis] to his world of occasional involuntary murder' (1080). Western science, whether Freudian or Manhattan, pursues its quantitative goals in isolation from the world it affects.

Seeking revenge on Constance, Mnemidis kills the swaddled figure in her bed. Immediately, a 'whole mass of gloom-laden preoccupation seemed at once to fall from his shoulders. It was as if his conscience had voided itself like a sack' (1132). Having no intrinsic self, he cannot be intrinsically good or evil; having no stable viewpoint from which to judge the act, he projects the morality of it on the already-vilified other. For him, this self-serving reverse-logic creates meaning. Logic is paramount, even, effectively, over the nature which Mnemidis valorises since, by adherence to logic, destruction can be read as entropy. Accordingly, the Nazi or atomic war-machine can justify wrongdoing in the pursuit of an ultimate good.<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, any certification of the death of sanity absolves the individual of the responsibility for choice (245). By identifying Mnemidis as insane, Freud's fledgling science acquits him of Affad's death. That is not to say that responsibility lies with the system since, by definition, it cannot be at fault. Logic ascribes the murder to nature. Consequently, death is not *exchanged*, and so remains outside the system: the system is safe.

When Mnemidis mistakes Affad's sheeted form for that of the doctor, the consequent death is arguably the most significant in the *Quintet*. It is an accident, collateral damage in a battle between two opponents with irreconcilably different perspectives on the world. The missile decreeing Affad's death has been launched and cannot be called back but, in the event, the lethal strike is perpetrated blindly, its agent effectively distant from the atrocity he wreaks and acting in response to a simulation of the world: Mnemidis might as

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<sup>51</sup> See Henry L. Stimson, 'The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb', *Harper's Magazine*, 194 (1947), 97–107. Stimson was the US Secretary of State and Secretary of War, 1940–45.

well be looking at a monitor on the other side of the globe. The mistaken murder achieves the same result as the sect's ritual-death (as does an atomic-bomb, irrespective of who drops it). However, Affad's death has not been accomplished in accordance with gnostic-practices. Contrary to the madman's logic, therefore, meaning comes from the agent, not the situation.

#### (4) Schwarz's suicide – the failure of Western civilisation

Like Mnemidis, the system might be logical but display 'the rationality of irrationality'.<sup>52</sup> Just as a state would wish to present any nuclear-strike it launched as both sensible and inevitable in the circumstances, when Constance's colleague, Schwarz, commits suicide it is evident that 'he had been anxious to present his decision as reasonable, the act as pardonable because quite logical. Nevertheless there was some guilt mixed up in the business, for he had felt the need to make a case for himself' (1154). The thinking which equates the pardonable and the logical is problematic, since logic does not necessarily imply reason or sanity, as the psychiatrists well know. Logic alone might be sufficient support for murder committed by a state or an individual, but Schwarz is compelled to rationalise his actions to himself and the colleague with whom he shares a world-view.

#### Deserting Lily

Schwarz has received a photograph taken when his wife, Lily, is liberated from a Nazi death-camp which shows her 'worn to the skeleton with hunger' (1155): she has become death. Like her namesake (Affad's wife), she has lost her mind and her husband blames himself. The two men are also united by their wish to escape the evil of the world by suicide; the difference is that, for Affad, the evil lies without, whereas for Schwarz it lies within, since he abandoned his wife as

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<sup>52</sup> Herman Kahn, quoted in Schell, p. 204.

the Germans advanced on Vienna. Good man or not, he did nothing and evil triumphed. He is responsible for the 'hair-raising' (1155) human-monster his wife has become which is a metonym for the world which gave birth to the concentration camps. However, the photo shows that her hair and teeth have fallen out and, when Schwarz speaks to her by telephone, her mouth produces only a dry, clicking sound: thus resembling a victim of atomic-fallout,<sup>53</sup> Lily is also a synecdoche of the world which gave birth to the Bomb. While the Nazi-machine with its camps and ovens has been dismantled, the Bomb remains, an indelible scorch on the planet and psyche, condemning the scientists who husbanded it. Lily, similarly, is 'a living, breathing reproach to the man who had been responsible' (1156). Although Schwarz's suicide is driven by personal remorse, it is reclaimed for the political by the fact it echoes Livia's fatal ideological disillusionment. Indeed, even in the moment itself, he recalls a man who tried to kill himself but who only shot out his eyes (1157), proving that the necessarily unique act of self-slaughter is but a simulacrum of someone else's suicide. Furthermore, a famous actor at the ritual in the desert is said to trade on 'the stagecraft of suicide' (105), underlining the point that, fundamentally, suicide is always fake because death (symbolic violence) is by definition beyond control. Suicide is a simulation of death intended to exceed the hegemonic simulation of the world, a pre-emptive strike against the authority which would claim one's life.

Schwarz's recollection also calls to mind the Japanese soldiers whose eyes have dribbled down their cheeks in John Hersey's account of Hiroshima.<sup>54</sup> Fittingly, just as the war is ended by the Bomb it created, Schwarz replaces the traditional firearm with the scientific projectile of a lethal injection (1157–58) for what Constance considers his 'self-annihilation' (1163).

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<sup>53</sup> See John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (London and New York: Penguin, 1946), pp. 102–03.

<sup>54</sup> Hersey, p. 73.



## (5) An over-arching, death-driven machine-culture

The centre-piece of Geneva's celebrations when peace is declared is a lake-front spectacle of fireworks and projected simulations of wars throughout history 'in the hope that by closing the whole chapter a notion might be launched of some change of direction' (1148) . However, '[i]t closed no door upon the past, it opened no door upon the future' (1149) because of humanity's perpetual drive for suicide.

Earlier, in Nazi-occupied Avignon, Constance notes that a 'deep-seated self-destructiveness was the most one could diagnose about such a state of affairs. But it involved everyone. You could not opt out. Even those comfortable neutrals up in Geneva, though they thought themselves out of reach, were involved in this calamitous historic process – it would reach them in time' (755). Her thoughts anticipate not only the danger of radiation, which marks the point when natural law is infected by suicidal human nature, but instances such as the American bombing of officially neutral Cambodia in 1969, which became public knowledge while Durrell was writing *Monsieur*.

The suicidal-potential of mechanised warfare is already evident when a sortie of German tanks, chasing an 'invisible foe', get caught up in a fire-storm of their own making and are destroyed: 'And slowly, from two ends of the horizon, the world began to burn' (616). Nevertheless, the Nazi command considers this misadventure 'only a minor incident in an uninterrupted chain of successful actions – they were almost bored with the reiterated signals which told of objectives attained' (616). The statistics produced by the military-operation are paramount and the unambiguous integers leave no room for failure. In Baudrillardian terms, the code of the system excludes death; 'a violent real does subsist as a kind of fallout, as “events continue at ground level [...] but subtly they no longer have any meaning”'.<sup>55</sup> This lack of meaning, by which death goes unrecognised, goes towards explaining a character's belief that '[t]he will to self-

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<sup>55</sup> Hegarty, p. 61, the inner quote coming from Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994), p. 36.

destruction seems more advanced in the more gifted nations or peoples' (1339), that is, where the system is most established. Constance reaches the same hypothesis, concluding that the death-wish comes from worldly success, not ruin (1035). Little wonder that, when she sees a graffito in the occupied city claiming that the end of the world has begun, this message appears, for once, sane (767).

### **A different suicide-by-proxy: Blanford**

In contrast to the other protagonists so far examined in this thesis, Blanford recognises that the desert is not beyond the war ('the desert is out of bounds to ordinary civilians' (631)). This recognition is complicated, however, by the fact that he adopts the military narrative of an army-uniform in order to experience the desert as a tourist. By introducing this simulacrum to the desert, he accentuates the unreality (that which lies outside the system) of the encounter and so, as in *The Sheltering Sky*, tea in the Sahara heralds death. The site of interest he visits turns out to be a militarised zone used for bombing-practice, the picnic-spot a simulation of war (657ff). There are no distinctions between danger and safety, combatant and citizen.

The ambivalence of the system which caused the accident cannot be acknowledged: it is the excluded abstract which sets up home at the heart of the system. This absence becomes the presence of shrapnel within the individual: the fallout of modern warfare literally radiates through Blanford. By transforming him into 'the man with the iron spine' (282), mechanised conflict blurs the distinctions between self and Other, nature and science, creation and destruction. For him, the war is neither spatially nor temporally contained. The shrapnel makes him a perpetual emblem of mechanised conflict which thus mirrors and fuses with the indefinitely deferred horrors of the atomic age. Just as every Bomb harks back to 'the Gadget' at Alamogordo and heralds the explosion which will annihilate history and the first explosion of any Bomb is

also the last explosion, so in the text space and time are collapsed: Blanford's flight to the desert shows that removing oneself from the war is not sufficient to remove the war from oneself. The incident clouds Blanford's sense of self as his cerebral cortex, the mushroom-shaped seat of selfhood, internalises this archetypal site of death ('my brain swelled and became full of darkness and sand' (660)). He is half-killed by the military-apparatus supposed to protect him but, consistent with the concerns of this thesis, his desert-experience pre-empts literal annihilation by the State and allows him to pass to a new life.

Initially, his accident despatches him to the heart of the mechanised hegemony, as exemplified by a military hospital. This authority forcibly remodels his physical Otherness to make it the same as itself<sup>56</sup> by means of a body-brace (302) – an excess of the 'real' – which forces a simulation of convention on to his contortions, forcing him into the pose of an upright citizen. This would seem to condemn the author to hegemonic control; however, given that that which removes the body from its purported natural-state brings it into the realm of the symbolic,<sup>57</sup> Blanford thus acquires agency to exceed the system. The half-death of his body now furthers the quasi-death of his non-conformist mind: within the regulated practice and spaces of the institution, Blanford comes to play across the grain.

A friend arranges for a nurse to care for him in the hospital and she initiates sexual relations (667–69). Blanford recalls: 'With her I rose from the dead' (669). In the light of this wording, she assumes the role of the goddess Isis who gathered the fragments of her lover, Osiris, from the Sahara and similarly cared for his body, in that case mummifying him and thus granting him new life as the king of reincarnation. In practice, Blanford unites *himself* through his writing, using it to harmonise the contradictions between hegemonic narrative and personal experience which society forces him to maintain. He effects an

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<sup>56</sup> Hegarty, p. 122.

<sup>57</sup> Hegarty, p. 132 note 11, referring to Baudrillard, *Télémorphose* (Paris: Sens and Tonka, 2001), pp. 19–20.

impossible exchange of the self by inventing a number of writers, contradictory variations on himself,<sup>58</sup> thus becoming a fusion of subject and object, slipping between realities which lack clear distinctions, inviting deliberate defection or accidental apostasy. Thus does he naturalise the split-selfhood and accommodate the fictional constituents of the world without straining to hold together the contradictions of the hegemony. Blanford's characters are not representations but simulacra, since they are versions of his friends which precede the reality, appearing as they do in the first volume of the *Quintet*.<sup>59</sup> His novel is thus not a representation but a copy of his world written in his quest to heal the pain of his life and of the age. Through his characters, he brings death and ambiguity within the system. Baudrillard argues that death enforces entropy on assemblages (the goal of Eros)<sup>60</sup> and the coming of the Second World War leads to the disintegration of the group of friends in Provence. Blanford, however, writes a story in which Piers' death is a means to life, and bring old friends together again.

The novelist survives the *Quintet* alone of Constance's trinity of desert-adventurers from whom she learns its alternative wisdom. Sam, a soldier, travels there as a representative of the Western hegemony, while Affad brings the desert-perspective to Western society. Both are killed in misunderstandings: both their world-views founder when in contact with multiplicitous reality. Despite Blanford's devastating experience in the desert, he learns to incorporate it into his everyday life and ultimately benefits from it. Being a writer, he is aware that all truths and dogmas are mere projections, as illusory as the self-deluding sect-member Durrell briefly makes him at the close of *Monsieur*. Just as various realities fuse in the *Quintet*, so do different elements combine in him.

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58 Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, pp. 77–78. Baudrillard's thoughts expressed in an interview in Hegarty pp. 146–47 were also useful in arriving at this idea.

59 Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, p. 1; this idea is expanded on in Hegarty, pp. 57–58.

60 Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, p. 150.

The *Quintet* repeatedly distinguishes between knowledge and experience (142; 292). The gnostics operate on a symbolic level beyond reason which must be lived in order to be understood (292): '[i]t was as if Akkad had exhausted all the possibilities of language' which shapes society, hems it in (144). The truth is unreal (116), hence 'language [is] an obstacle, a clumsy hurdle [...] words conceal more than they reveal' (253).<sup>61</sup>

The importance of ambiguity in the construction of meaning is evident when Piers confronts Akkad about the magazine article which suggests that the ritual was a tourist-scam (165–66). Piers has already been described as someone who will believe anything (104); discussing the article, he says that he 'wouldn't want to believe something false' but that he simultaneously 'need[s]' his experience in the desert to have been true (161). Piers engages the kind of double-think demanded by the Cold War state, denying the uncertainties of society (in this case, the secret society) and orchestrating his loyalty by subsuming his awareness of the truth; a case of faith over facts ('you were able to go on believing something which you *knew* to be untrue' (163, emphasis in original)). This incident mirrors, albeit through inversion, certain of the Congress for Cultural Freedom's publications which promoted the West at the expense of communism during the 1950s and 60s while failing to acknowledge their CIA-sponsorship. Just as the sect kills its own while the CIA kills others, Akkad's article (since he planted it in order to test the initiate's faith) inspires doubt about itself rather than others. The sect wishes to introduce ambivalence, while the Agency promotes certainty. This is on account of the different positions the two clandestine organisations occupy in relation to orthodox society. Indeed, the gnostics' tactic of presenting doubtful evidence in order to garner greater credibility recalls the defence of black-listed Americans who cited past

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61 The power of language is evident when the Nazis retreat from Avignon and the citizens hardly dare put their liberation into words. However, Sutcliffe's word-games demonstrate how language, while so powerful, is insubstantial to the extent that it can be made its opposite (1093). Consequently, disorder is always a breath away and it is dangerous to identify oneself with any label. Significantly, the sources of meaning which characters seek – political fervour, religious conviction, aesthetic or chemical transport, love – all lie beyond language.

incidences of secrecy in order to bolster their claims of candour before the HUAC.

### **A different suicide-by-proxy: Constance**

After Constance learns of Sam's death in the accident which maimed Blanford, the first familiar face she encounters is Sutcliffe (who has stepped out of the pages of Blanford's novel). 'She wanted to avoid talking about Sam with half of her; with the other half she realised that it might help her to find her way out of this temporary numbness, the way back into life' (689). Her melancholia creates a split-subjecthood: the person she is now is so much the product of war and its integral tensions that, when she considers a time after the conflict, she is consumed by restlessness (848). She is not a coherent, stable identity. In this sense, the epitome of war is Cold War, which enforces distinctions while destroying them (for example, between sense and nonsense),<sup>62</sup> and the conflict it displaces on to the everyday life of the individual who is ever-conscious that the Bomb might drop.

Her conversations with Affad teach her the importance of balancing reason and emotion to better negotiate the world's demands on her sense of self. As a result, she comes to ask Blanford for every detail of the accident. Since '[t]he same people are also others without realising it' (978), by hearing of this past event of Sam's death, Constance is facing up to the future event of her own, narrativising something which defies narrative, in the same way that the Western dissident in the Sahara pre-empts nuclear-apocalypse in order to alleviate their tension and reclaim their lives. Constance irradiates herself with harmful elements of her loved-one's death, the fusion of their experiences generating creative rather than destructive power.

Affad's subsequent death gives her life for the simple fact that she was the

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<sup>62</sup> Nadel, p. 59.

intended victim, but it also, like Sam's, gives her life in a qualitative sense. As Constance unwraps his body, she recalls his tale of an excavated Egyptian mummy which was found to have been stabbed after death (1133). Affad's fresh corpse sheds 'surprisingly little blood' as if he, too, was already dead when attacked (1135). These allusions to a double-death can be read as ironic inversions of Affad's fate, since he has effectively been killed *before* his death. Equally, however, a lack of blood suggests a lesser injury: the attack by what is, after all, *Constance's* enemy has been less than fatal and his target (Constance) will survive it. Thus reading Affad as, like Livia, a proxy-suicide for her, Constance again mirrors the Western dissident who 'dies' in the desert and thereby escapes the nuclear-state's control over their mortality and gains a second life. Her reaction to the corpse, after all, is: 'So the future has arrived! Life will be no longer a waste of breath!' (1134). Whereas before, she believes there is little point in 'trying to pre-empt reality when destiny may well be preparing to make an end of us in the next five minutes' (1121), from now on her life is her own.<sup>63</sup>

As Constance says, death 'revives the whole universe in us at a blow' (1182), this inner multiplicity being the selves or themes which are at once smaller and larger than the individual.<sup>64</sup> Her friends' experiences enable her to pass through death to be reborn; their example inspires her, amid all the death, to choose life, to choose the myths by which she is to live. Richard Rorty writes that 'self-knowledge [i]s self-creation'<sup>65</sup> and, with her learning, Constance remakes herself in accordance with her own desires. Whereas Affad sees himself as a link in a chain reaction which will destroy hegemonic norms, only to die without contributing to it, Constance is the end-product of another chain reaction, and

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63 This is the moment of her psychic-birth of Chinese philosophy (255).

64 'All the people are parts of larger people or composed of parts of smaller people, enlarged or diminished according to need' (1217).

65 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), p. 27, quoted in James Gifford, 'Self-Authenticity as Social Resistance: Reading Empiric Approaches to Social Identity, Self-Esteem, and Fear in Durrell's *Monsieur*', in *Culture + the State: Alternative Interventions – Critical Works from the Proceedings of the 2003 Conference at the University of Alberta*, ed. by James Gifford and Gabrielle Zezulka-Mailloux, 4 vols (Edmonton: CRC Humanities Studio, 2003), IV, pp. 212–24 (p. 214).

succeeds where the gnostic dogma fails. In the sect's form of suicide, the proxy holds the agency; in her version, the proxy is passive. In other words, she denies any system any authority over her while diffusing the threat of the Other (whether this system or its alleged opposite) which otherwise dictates how she should live her life.

By the end of the *Quintet*, Constance recognises that no fixed belief-system fits the world. While society might hold that the desert is the space of death (as was indeed the case with Sam), she has learnt that so is society (as Affad's experience proved). In the face of a world which demands that truth be objective, she can acknowledge that it is an individual achievement. When Sam dies, Constance rejects her previous faith in love but, after her experience with Affad and his death, she now feels that she is free to love truly (1317). Her love for Blanford is the means she chooses in pursuit of self-fulfilment and meaning in life. She escapes the quasi-death of the half-life dictated by the state.<sup>66</sup>

## **Conclusion: There can be no conclusion**

The reader leaves the characters of the *Quintet* where they were first encountered, in Provence, 'a land which from ancient times had given itself up to dreaming, to fabulating, to tale-telling, with the firm belief that stories should have no ending' (247). Suicide and sectarian proxy have given way to a different sort of quest for meaning: Constance, Blanford and their friends are about to enter a cave beneath the arches of the Pont du Gard, where the lost treasure of the Knights Templar might be awaiting discovery.<sup>67</sup> Both its existence and its

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<sup>66</sup> In the final chapter of *Monsieur*, an older Constance and Blanford are members of the gnostic-sect, which would undermine the peace she attains at the end of the *Quintet*. I would suggest that these people are not the protagonists of the later four books and that this chapter is a transitional reality between the book-within-a-book, *Monsieur*, and the 'real' world of the rest of the work.

<sup>67</sup> This construction of ancient hegemony has been undermined, literally, by the ambitions of the Third Reich which stored valuables beneath it, safe in the knowledge that the Allies would avoid destroying the historic site, and, more recently, its columns – rising up before falling outwards into arches, one stratum billowing above another into the heavens – have been



nature are ambiguous, being possibly material wealth or esoteric wisdom (461). The overflowing Grail corresponds to the flowering lotus of the yogi, the blossoming tree of the Buddha and the fertile Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. However, when these are caught in Monsieur's mirror, the simulation in the glass is the mushroom cloud billowing upwards and falling back to the sterile desert. Creation becomes anti-creation. As Blanford says, 'everything is obstinately and deliberately turning into its opposite' (1204), which expresses the Cold War dynamic of immanent reversal.<sup>68</sup> In this way, the unreal-but-true gnostic-creed fuses with the rationality of irrationality of the nuclear-confrontation, the alchemy which turns consciousness into gold (215; 427ff) blurring with the quantum-physicists' principle that matter and energy are one and the same, confusing Cold War political philosophy and material security.<sup>69</sup>

This is what Durrell's meditation on mortality simulates. Like Blanford, he recognises that the individual can create fiction, that personal experience is constructed (and so features characters who are authors) and that the world

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overshadowed by the American mushroom cloud. Additionally, the edifice's soaring layers are not above being surmounted for subversive ends, such as when the young friends stage a clandestine surveillance of the Prince's hedonistic soirée.

68 Reversibility is a key idea running throughout Baudrillard's work. See Douglas Kellner, 'Jean Baudrillard', in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ baudrillard>> [accessed 30 May 2012], particularly section 4, 'Into the 1990s: From Immanent Reversal to Impossible Exchange'; Douglas Kellner, 'Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007): A Critical Overview', in *Baudrillard Now: Current Perspectives in Baudrillard Studies*, ed. by Ryan Bishop (Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2009), pp. 17–27 (pp. 23–24); and William Merrin, 'Floral Tributes, Binge-Drinking and the Ikea Riot Considered as an Up-Hill Bicycle Race', in *Jean Baudrillard: Fatal Theories*, ed. by David B. Clarke, Marcus A. Doel, William Merrin and Richard G. Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 61–82 (p. 62). For the idea's persistence in his last major work, see Douglas Kellner, 'Some Reflections on Baudrillard's "On Disappearance"', in *Baudrillard Now*, pp. 154–58 (p. 157).

Schell discusses Cold War reversibility in Schell, p. 201. In 1955, Churchill outlined the realpolitik which would safeguard the future thus: 'Safety will be the sturdy child of terror, and survival the twin brother of annihilation' (Schell, p. 197), thus articulating the bipolar nature of hegemonic monopoly.

69 If, as the gnostics hold, under the reign of Monsieur thought has become matter – which is a simulacra of excrement (139), the true currency of the Prince of Darkness – it seems that their own insight is not exempt. However, immanent reversal allows for redemption since, as Schwarz tells Constance following his discussions with Affad, 'matter is not excrement but thought' (991). It is possible to overcome the materialistic world of the Prince of Darkness from within, working across it creatively. It is just a matter of engaging with it rather than passively ignoring it.

(hegemonic narrative) is a fiction (and so reveals that the events of *Monsieur* are not 'real').<sup>70</sup> However, he goes further in that he recognises that we, too, are fictions, fusions of hegemonic narrative and personal experience. His characters are less simulations of himself than like the dolls which Pia arranges around herself, all seated on the same level, because he acknowledges the ambivalence of the self, rejecting the fiction of the ego, like the Templars, gnostics, Buddhists and insane. While Blanford is aware that one's consciousness distorts one's understanding of the world (facts do not come from objective reality), it is also true that the world distorts one's consciousness (and so neither do facts come from narrative). Neither narrative nor experience has precedence, and the individual must move rhizomatically between the two, acknowledging each while undermining the distinction, drawing on both but never relying exclusively on either in a process of immanent reversal. As one of the *Quintet's* epigraphs asks, '[b]etween the completely arbitrary and the completely determined perhaps there is a way?' (298). They must become, in the Deleuzian sense, a becoming.

Blanford is a closed-system and so has nothing against which to define himself, which is why he needs to practise impossible exchange. When his creations speak back and write their own stories across the official narrative (172; 1168), he reacts: 'I am annoyed because my power is not absolute over [Sutcliffe] – he is after all my creation; but he can sometimes break loose and show traces of free will. My domination is incomplete, damn him [...] He mutinied. He must be punished!' (901). Even if his interaction with his characters leads him to understand the role that (his) fictions play in informing his reality, Blanford claims objective authority over them, aided by the fact that

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<sup>70</sup> As Akkad says, '[y]ou speak about society [...] but your view of it will fundamentally depend on what view you take of the human psyche which has formed it, of which it is a reflection' (166). Since 'human consciousness distorts in the act of observing' (323; 263–64) and 'each one brings a little of himself to what he sees' (128), the amoral, neutral nature which Mnemidis aspires to emulate 'can only reproduce the limitations of his understanding, the boundaries of his personal vision' (1260). Durrell has his novelist ponder the fact that '[b]y a singular paradox (perhaps inherent in all writing?) the passages that he knew would be regarded as over-theatrical or unreal ("people don't behave like that") would be the truth, and the rest which rang somehow true, the purest fabrication' (280).

they acknowledge their fictitiousness.<sup>71</sup> Sutcliffe, is conscious of his fictional nature and so is what Baudrillard terms a vital illusion.<sup>72</sup> The model he constructs precedes the reality (since it is the first volume of the *Quintet*); like the sect, he ultimately ignores the world while he tries to generate the real. He is what Baudrillard calls an objective illusion, failing to acknowledge anything outside himself. Blanford wants to simulate democracy in order to consolidate his power, mirroring the spread of democracy which expanded American influence over the globe.<sup>73</sup> He is a hegemonic authority, denying the viability of alternative narratives in order to claim ideological immortality. Similarly, the superpowers treated the world as their own creation, theirs to do with as they wished (and, in a sense, it was, since they created the *Cold War* world). Their most significant creation was the Other behind the Iron Curtain; as the world, so the *Quintet*: 'Durrell later said, half of the characters existed only in the minds of the other half'.<sup>74</sup> The fact that Blanford's characters step effortlessly from his page to the world demonstrates that, within the *Quartet*, his writing exists on an equal level with the fictions of the hegemony.

Of course, this is precisely Blanford's shortcoming. There *is* something outside himself which he cannot contain, not least the war which has literally invaded his physical self. The shrapnel-suffused scribe has shut himself in the fall-out shelter of his own fiction, but it is inadequate to protect him from the outside. As his own thoughts conclude, '[r]ealising that all truths are equally false he becomes a posthumous person' (930), like *The Sheltering Sky*'s Kit unmoored, dead to the system. Such are 'the perils [...] of absolute freedom'

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71 Consequently, he can safely contemplate a scenario in which his creation 'wrote a book to prove that the great Blanford is simply the fiction of one of his fictions'. This is simply a fictionalisation of his own hegemony, rather than an acknowledgement that he is a fiction in the sense of an incoherent, unstable entity. After all, he advises Sutcliffe that they 'would have to make do with reality – it was all they had to work on; it's boring, this question of there being several different versions of a self, so to speak, no?' (921), despite the fact that he is talking to an unreal version of himself.

72 Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. by Chris Turner (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994), p. 94. Hegarty, pp. 83–84, provides a useful summary of this line of thought.

73 Nadel, p. 7.

74 Bowker, p. 358.

(1233). The *Quintet* shows that all systems (Freudian, Nazi, gnostic) fail since their narratives ignore the multiplicity of the world.<sup>75</sup>

Since there is no such thing as truth, hegemonic simulation can only be fought through excess.<sup>76</sup> The final sentence of the *Quintet* is as follows: 'It was at this precise moment that reality prime rushed to the aid of fiction and the totally unpredictable began to take place!' (1367). It brings the "outside" – the symbol of prime reality to a prisoner of any category' (944) – within the narrative, highlighting the ambiguity of existence in a world of competing truths, the limits of any system. It ushers in a flow of influence which Blanford and the Cold War hegemony denies, a fusion which could destroy the system.<sup>77</sup> By moving between objective illusion and vital illusion, writing across the horizon of the system to recuperate that which is excluded, the *Quintet* undermines the (literary) orthodoxy.

Bowker argues that the message of the *Quintet* is the need to accept reality and reconcile opposites,<sup>78</sup> but I would suggest that the former precludes the

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75 Barbara Fisher Williamson writes in her review of *Quinx* for *The New York Times*:

What makes the single volumes most perplexing is that the systems the different characters propose to give life meaning [...] are described with such conviction and passion that they seem sufficient rather than provisional and flawed. Reading the theories in any one volume alone, one is tempted to think Mr. Durrell is silly. Reading them all, one is convinced he is wise ('Links and Winks', *New York Times*, 15 September 1985 <[www.nytimes.com/1985/09/15/books/links-and-winks.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1985/09/15/books/links-and-winks.html)> [accessed 13 August 2012]).

Durrell has created Blanford, who has invented Sutcliffe, who writes the author Blanford into being. Every author(ity) is exposed as a fiction. The four scribes are a set of Russian dolls on a Möbius strip, passing in and out of one another by way of quantum mechanics. Furthermore, every author(ity)s' creations speak back to them: Sutcliffe to Blanford, Blanford to Durrell, Durrell to the Cold War hegemony. The chain reaction of dissent reaches beyond the text of the *Quintet*, exploding the myths of the Cold War and ensuring that ambiguity works across both the text and the world.

76 Hegarty, p. 82; as Hegarty writes, 'excessive simulation gets you beyond the simulated world's insistence on its own reality' (Hegarty, p. 99). For an example, see Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. by Paul Patton (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995), p. 39.

77 If the fiction was truly a closed-system, never to be disrupted by reality, the reality would not need to come to its aid, much as the US military presence in Guatemala did not have to 'become real' unless and until the fictitious nature of the insurgency invented by the CIA was in danger of being exposed (Nadel, p. 160).

78 Bowker, p. 401.

latter by recognising that the individual does not need to swear loyalty to one side or another but can operate rhizomatically between the two. Such fusion of extremes (which remain opposed) is possible since they are equally fictitious, immanently their reverse.<sup>79</sup> There is ultimately only uncertainty in life (263–64) but this is not the problem: certainty is the problem. The individual must choose a myth which invests their life with meaning, but be conscious of the ambivalence immanent to that choice and so also engage with the world.

Durrell embraces ambiguity while, fittingly, containing its danger within his text. Durrell related his *Quintet* to an Elizabethan dance called a quincunx,<sup>80</sup> which suggests that through the text he is leading an interweaving chain of self-destroyers contained within a Möbius strip. A quincunx is also a five-pointed symbol resembling pyramid seen from above (a cross in a box, a bombardier's target). The antagonists can commit suicide if they wish, but the contained explosion will not be able to take the rest of the world – friend or foe, combatant or collateral – with them.

Durrell enacts an impossible exchange not of himself but of holocausts, defusing the one he fears with the one he has survived, the original which would be rendered mere simulation through atomic excess. Like the Westerner who goes to the Sahara, he pre-empts one apocalypse with another. He is always moving, rhizomatically, between the Nazi and the nuclear, his pen the waist of an hourglass through which pass the ashes of the Aryans' ovens and the sand of the apocalyptic wastes, achieving fusion.<sup>81</sup> After a nuclear-apocalypse, there will be no opportunity for mourning, and he naturalises this fact through the gnostics' ritual-suicides, for which no mourning is needed. Durrell's fiction inverts,

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79 As Akkad says, 'what is imagined with enough intensity has a claim to be real enough' (216); for example, the German forces fear an invasion on the south coast of France as a result of Allied propaganda (814) which, after all, in Guy Debord's words, is ideology become material (*The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1994), chapter 9 (sections 212–21)). The idea that the physical is a reflection of the mental is espoused by the psychotherapist Georg Groddeck, whom Durrell greatly admired (Bowker, p. 247).

80 Bowker p. 358.

81 Durrell emphasises that the Bomb is a Jewish weapon of pure matter (870; 890) and as such is a Faustian revenge – and, ultimately, a Pyrrhic victory – for the Holocaust.

subverts and perverts the atomic world in order to make it habitable once again.

While the gnostic-sect sees ambivalence as a reason for passivity, he 'believed that it was through personal experimentation and psychological wholeness that human happiness was attainable [...] practice rather than belief [...] If he had a wider solution it was a negative one – against scientific rationalism and the depredations of modern technology, against materialism'.<sup>82</sup> This rejection of hegemonic narratives is why there can be no conclusion. There is no linear, progressive history towards a single end-point,<sup>83</sup> as favoured by the hegemony ambitious for ideological immortality. The Templar treasure is still out there, hidden. As, indeed, is the sect: invisible, out of the forefront of public consciousness like the Bomb at the time Durrell began the *Quintet*, effectively an absence within society, the clandestine presence of death within the system. The sect can radiate throughout society, spreading undetected, infecting people irrespective of where they officially stand. The ultimate meaning of the *Quintet* – and the world outside – lies within the reader, the weight of its thirteen-hundred-odd pages pressing on them to shed any passivity, accept the fictitious nature of reality in the Cold War and, since the author(ity) does not provide a meaning, construct one for themselves.

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<sup>82</sup> Bowker, p. 430.

<sup>83</sup> Hegarty, p. 103.

**Section 3.**  
**Alterity in the Sahara, 1985–91**

## Chapter 5.

### Annihilating Narrative:

#### Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger* (1987)

The protagonist of Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger*, the unorthodox historian Claudia Hampton, lies in a hospital bed in the late 1980s reflecting on her life which has encompassed the Second World War and the Cold War: 'I've grown old with the century; there's not much left of either of us'.<sup>1</sup> She writes of 'a past that is more myth than history and all the better for it' (189). Whereas Claudia's words imply that history is factual, and so myth fiction, Ralph Levering writes in *The Cold War 1945–1987* that 'myth is not defined as something that is necessarily false, but rather as a belief that some people live by, often without being willing to submit it to critical examination'.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Jean Baudrillard writes that '[h]istory is our lost referential, that is to say our myth'.<sup>3</sup> It can be argued, therefore, that the two are not antithetical, both being beliefs which serve their authors' interests. 'As the past has gone,' Keith Jenkins writes in *Re-thinking History*, 'no account can ever be checked against it but only against other accounts'.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike the principal characters of the other novels discussed in this thesis, by travelling to the Sahara Claudia is not turning her back on Western society. That said, she is nevertheless reacting to its hegemonic dictates concerning her gender and it must be noted that she is the only principal female protagonist (and Lively the only female author) covered in this research.

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1 Penelope Lively, *Moon Tiger* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 66. All subsequent references to the novel will appear in the main text in parentheses.

2 Ralph B. Levering, *The Cold War 1945–1987* (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, 1988), p. 7.

3 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994), p. 43.

4 Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 11, quoted in Guðrún Valdimarsdóttir, "Let Me Contemplate Myself Within My Context": An Analysis of Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger* as a Work of Historical Fiction and a Commentary on History' (unpublished BA dissertation, University of Iceland, 2012), p. 9.



However, the disconnect between her sense of self and social expectations does not purely concern gender norms ('If feminism had been around then I'd have taken it up, I suppose; it would have needed me. As it was, I never felt its absence; being a woman seemed to me a valuable extra asset. My gender was never an impediment' (14)). Instead, it arises from society's attempts to impose fixed definitions on all of its citizens. Rather than escaping the West, Claudia hopes to understand it better, and it is this wish to fill a blankness in her knowledge about society as much as herself ("You asked," [Tom] says, "what it is like out here. For purposes of your article, I suppose?" [...] "No," she says. "I wanted to know for myself" (101)), which corresponds to those of the other protagonists under examination.

Her attempt to escape the impositions of society is performed through her life over the decades which follow, guided by the light of the eponymous mosquito-repellent which illuminates her affair in Egypt (to which I will return in my conclusion). As I hope to show, having herself been tested out in the Sahara – not so much in the manner of an ascetic in the presence of God, and more like a casualty in a cradle of war – Claudia's experience of the desert generates the geopolitical-awareness (for want of a better word, since gender-politics also play their part) with which she confronts the Soviet–Western tensions which overshadow the rest of her life and reverberate through her final testimony. By the time she records her deathbed-memories, she has witnessed first-hand the political reconstruction of postwar Europe and brought the ideological conflict into her home in the form of the orphaned Hungarian artist, Laszlo (a creator of countercultural projections of meaning). She has also witnessed the comfortable materialism of Cold War America and wrestled with her fear of the Bomb. Her final thoughts are composed in the age of glasnost, even if political distinctions have not yet collapsed, and so are refracted through her non-conformist and anti-nuke activities. In this way, the atomic age reconfigures her construction of the earlier conflict in the desert, which in turn

informs her relationship with the Cold War present.

## **The whitewash of history**

As Claudia says, '[a]ll history, of course, is the history of wars' (66). It is, despite her distinctions mentioned above, a myth to legitimise the status quo. As Alan Nadel says in his study of Cold War society, *Containment Culture*, '[h]istory is a cipher for omission, and the process of representation is never one of proportionality but of narrativity'.<sup>5</sup> The hegemonic narrative is a story full of silence which effaces individuals such as Claudia's lover Tom Southern at the moment of their sacrifice which lays the foundation for the status quo. These individuals' ambiguity – their perpetration of and contamination by 'death and muddle and waste' (152) – transgresses the narrative's legitimating coherency of cause and effect. Just as '[a]t Hiroshima, the new technology of death made military heroism suddenly old-fashioned and impotent',<sup>6</sup> mechanised war turns Tom into metaphorical machine, an extension of his tank 'functioning like an automaton' (203–04), strips him of human-value and so casts him as a *homo sacer* as described by Giorgio Agamben.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the authorised grand narrative replaces the individual with the anonymous normativity of myth (104) so that everyone follows the prescribed script written by 'well-fed complacent men and women designing the future and re-arranging the past [...] as fake as a film set' (152). Since their experiences exceed this predictable narrative, these people are denied the sacrificial status which would accord their deaths meaning

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5 Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), p. 8. Nadel writes that discourse is 'the composite of unrecorded activity for which historical records substitute. The substitution claims to capture or represent events, but instead replaces them with language' (p. 38).

6 Freeman Dyson, 'Fighting for Freedom with the Technologies of Death', in *Values at War: Selected Tanner Lectures on the Nuclear Crisis* (Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 1983), pp. 4–24 (p. 13), quoted in Bryan C. Taylor, 'The Politics of the Nuclear Text: Reading Robert Oppenheimer's *Letters and Recollections*', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 78 (1992), 429–49 (p. 441).

7 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998).

and so are effectively obliterated like the dead of Hiroshima.<sup>8</sup>

The lack of evidence of Tom's death is neither proof nor disproof that it happened.<sup>9</sup> His death has already occurred, but not been noticed<sup>10</sup> so it can never occur and his absence cannot be grieved.<sup>11</sup> He is in limbo, just like Claudia as she waits for the (purely textual) Bomb, a threat and a protection, present and absent, transgressing not merely the unitary logic of normative definitions but her own sense of self, forced to continue daily life made meaningless by official dictates. Since Claudia knows the time but not the place of Tom's death, he is not contained within the axes of narrative and so exists in the unbounded desert of her unconscious. Being abstract, he is everywhere. As official narrative denying his death has proliferated, so has his death. Tom's denied death remains centre-stage, interrupting the controlled flow of human life. I will return to the narrative's silencing of Tom later in the chapter.

Claudia discovers on the film-set of the adaptation of one of her popular-history books, however, that the only actors permitted are those devoid of individuality; interchangeable, empty signifiers or blank screens for their paymasters' projections. She is familiar with the movie-star, Caxton, 'peering out of oilskins over the wheel of destroyers, lurking under lamp-posts in fedora and belted raincoat, shooting it out in frontier towns – an international cipher of the century, known to all and none' (157). Being transparent, devoid of depth or texture – 'he is a profoundly uninteresting man. He seldom says anything of any

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8 Nadel, p. 59.

9 Paul Hegarty, *Jean Baudrillard: Live Theory* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 102. This idea is derived from Baudrillard's discussion of the Holocaust in *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, trans. by James Benedict (London: Verso, 1993), p. 91.

10 Elias Canetti's thinking discussed in Hegarty, p. 103. See Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. by Chris Turner (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994), p. 1.

11 'Culture and memory limit the "reality" of individual death [...] they soften or deaden it in the realm of the "symbolic." The only referent that is absolutely real is thus of the scope or dimension of an absolute nuclear catastrophe that would irreversibly destroy the entire archive and all symbolic capacity'. With regard to Tom's death, the archive has already effectively been destroyed since it has no record, and so the fact of his death has not been softened for Claudia. Jacques Derrida, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)', trans. by Catherine Porter and Philip Lewis, *Diacritics*, 14 (1984), 20–31 (p. 28).

note whatsoever' (159) – he uses this constructed multiplicity (which is authorised by the hegemony) to create difference against which to define himself. In other words, he performs a Baudrillardian impossible exchange.<sup>12</sup> The film-production, on the other hand, establishes a binary-opposition 'more real than real [which, Baudrillard argues,] is how the real is abolished'.<sup>13</sup> Just as another historical drama Claudia watches is composed of 'expensive fiction [...]' And slotted into this are clips of [news-reel] film, looking in contrast somehow amateurish, quaint and not quite real' (50), on location she witnesses the celebrated encounter between Cortez and Montezuma in battle which, she notes, never occurred, but by which the two actors perform a binary-opposition more perfect than the reality. This simulation of competition ensures the continuance of a normative status quo, be it the Western sense of self or the bipolar world of the Cold War. Since the opposition is constructed, the Other cannot be used to define the self authentically and so, Baudrillard concludes, this 'end of all competition [is] the end of every original reference'.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the film's artistic licence is casually incorporated into historical narrative as 'a bit of conflicting evidence. Looks good, doesn't it?' (157).

### **The desert as the limit of grand narrative**

Before she goes to Egypt, Claudia has already experienced the disconnect between hegemonic narrative and individual experience on a personal level ('I once thought I was myth' (7)). In time, the binary constructions of Claudia's childhood, which incorporate ancient ammonites into a personal narrative of the self, fragment into ambiguous multiplicity:

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12 Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2001), pp. 77–78 and Baudrillard's thoughts expressed in an interview in Hegarty, pp. 146–47.

13 Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, p. 81.

14 Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. by Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993), p. 69.

In the beginning there was myself; my own body set the frontiers, physical and emotional, there was simply me and not-me; the egotism of infancy has grandeur. And when I became a child there was Claudia, who was the centre of all things, and there was what pertained to Claudia, out at which I looked, the world of others, observed but not apprehended, a Berkeleyan landscape which existed only at my whim – when it ceased to interest me it no longer existed. And eventually, or so I am claiming, I grew up and saw myself in the awful context of time and place; everything and nothing (187).

Society's containment of feminine alterity as the complementing difference of the wife, mother and the like reflects and reinforces the containment of ideological alterity. Claudia, however, is a whole other story, refusing to be spoken for and, by bucking the norms of matrimony, maternity and more she presents a dangerous fusion which explodes ostensibly stable distinctions. Claudia is a seductress in the Baudrillardian sense, performing roles *across* the narrative in order to allude to her ambiguous alterity, her excess which it cannot contain, and thereby undermine it (rather than present a direct challenge, which could be used to bolster the status quo).<sup>15</sup> While she consciously behaves in certain ways to attain her ends – gaining access to the masculine spaces of the war ('the desert was no place for women' (118)) through dint of seduction in the regular sense (69) – her seductiveness itself is an unchosen performativity since it is her nature. She submits to, rather than controls, this expression of her authentic self, that is, that which exceeds the repetition of hegemonic dictates, beyond any activity valorised by narratives which turn this activity into acts of meaning. By shunning perceived feminine traits, Claudia draws on so-called masculine characteristics in order to engage with the (masculine) hegemony on equal terms.

This can involve the manipulative performance of femininity for her own ends, pursuing relationships with alpha-males who complement and augment rather than contain her. First and foremost, there is her brother (and lover) Gordon, by whom she defines her own strength: 'We confronted each other like

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<sup>15</sup> Hegarty, pp. 70ff.

mirrors, flinging back reflections in endless recession. We spoke to each other in code' (137). Accordingly, on the subject of history, they are diametrically opposed: two days before he dies, Gordon says 'One resents being axed from the narrative, apart from anything else. I'd have liked to know the outcome' (184). To counter Claudia's assertion that

'I've always given theory its due. It's just that I have preferred to write about action.'

'Mad opportunists,' says Gordon. 'Tito. Napoleon. That's not real history. History is grey stuff [...] It moves slowly. That's why you get impatient with it. You look for spectacle [...] the spectacle may mislead. What's really happening may be going on elsewhere.' (186).

For him, the overarching narrative has more value since they invest mere experience with meaning.

Claudia gains awareness of the geopolitical repercussions of the disconnect between the official and the personal through her experience of the desert-campaign where she meets Tom, their subsequent time together when he is on leave, and when she is awaiting news of him in Cairo. Before exploring her geopolitical-awakening, however, I will first turn to the portrayal of the desert-space in which this occurs.

That the story she tells of her affair calls to mind the tradition of desert-romances is perhaps inevitable, given the Western cultural touchstones (Valentino, Thesiger, *Lawrence of Arabia*) regarding the desert. However, while all her memories of the desert are constructed on her hospital bed in 1987, her encounters with the desert are recounted largely in chronological order and so trace the evolution of an awareness which suggests that *Moon Tiger's* portrait of the Sahara is more than a non-Western stage on which Westerners encounter exilic revelation. Claudia establishes that she is writing against Western conventions of reductive classifications which deny Egypt its own identity and agency: 'In my history of the world – this realistic kaleidoscopic history – Egypt will have its proper place as this complacent indestructible force that has perpetuated itself [...] Egypt is not then but now, conditioning the way we look at

things' (80). Equally, she does not classify or fix it down as timeless in the Orientalist tradition; Egypt is instead ahistorical in the sense that it is always present and relevant rather than defined by (and so effectively relegated to) specific times past:

when I think of how I am going to invoke Egypt within the story of the world – I have to think of it as a continuous phenomenon [...] Past and present do not so much co-exist in the Nile valley as cease to have any meaning. What is buried under the sand is reflected above (80).

By defying normative definitions – '[t]here was no chronology to the place, and no logic' (89) – her Egypt reflects her own status as a woman who bucks the hegemonic essentialisms of the West: 'The landscape, fusion of antiquity and the present, had its counterpart in the brimming life of the city, where all races met, all languages were spoken' (88). Mindful of her hegemonic role as historian, Claudia steers clear of speaking for it and only alludes to its ambiguous alterity, and through this allusion she simultaneously articulates her own.

After all, both the Sahara and she are spoken for by the hegemonic narratives of the age, even if Western conceptions of the desert as barren establish it in opposition to her femininity and its potential for motherhood. Indeed, it is a place of death not only for history – on account of the North African campaign and later atomic-tests – but also for Claudia through the deaths of Tom and their baby and, arguably, her authentic self (comprised of her so-called masculine and feminine sides which both find expression in the love-affair).

Remembering her arrival in Cairo, she writes that, '[l]ike anyone else, I knew Egypt before ever I went there' (80). Confronted by the reality of the country, she sees the landscape through a prism of Western culture: 'it was looking like a picture. A Breughel perhaps [...] nothing but a backdrop' (72), her experience constructed on and interpreted through cultural conventions which are part of the West's myth about itself. When she travels into the desert, she

again sees familiarity, likening it to 'an infinite sandy rubbish-tip' (82), but it subsequently refuses to be descriptively contained, 'evoking another wilderness and another time' (84). Nevertheless, the desert still represents a reality, which she can report on for her newspaper. As Claudia goes further, however, 'the landscape of the last hour, and the one before, repeats itself' (84), contravening the unitary dictates of normative discourse, before defying all stable definition, being 'both empty and populous' (96).

As she arrives at the sites of military-engagement ('[t]he Front, that elusive shifting goal: a concept rather than a place' (92)) she enters a space of simulation, with no connection to reality. Tom describes the campaign to her as

more like a war fought at sea than on land, a sequence of advances and retreats in which the participants related only to each other and barely at all to the landscape across which they moved. A war in which there was nothing to get in the way – no towns, no villages, no people – and nothing tangible to gain or lose. In which you fought for possession of a barely detectable rocky ridge, or a map position. In which there were suddenly hundreds of thousands of men where there had been nothing, but still the place remained empty. He spoke of the desert as being like the board in some game in which opposing sides manoeuvred from square to square (73).

The armies around her are fighting over a simulation of order (96), a human construct projected on the desert (allowing a tent to become the 'centre of civilisation' (98)), where a former taxi-driver 'navigates by a combination of map-reading and guesswork [...] and treats the desert with contemptuous familiarity, as though it were some Alice-in-Wonderland inversion of London topography' (83), believing the Knowledge can contain the desert. Indeed, in the dust of battle, Tom notes that 'I can't see the map unless I hold it inches from my nose' (196), which only blinds him to the reality around him.

Similarly, in the desert words lose their relation to reality. Their referentiality to the world, constructed through consensus and repetition, is exposed as an active replacement of the world by the specialist jargon of the tank-regiments – 'that lunatic language that lays a smokescreen of fantasy' (67)



camouflaging the experience of war with code. Claudia remembers that 'men did not die but bought it, were not shot but stopped one' (67). In *Letter Bomb*, Peter Schwenger writes: 'it is through language [...] that war's aspect of unmaking is removed from the nation's consciousness'.<sup>16</sup> Actors are effaced, replaced with words and the myth of just cause and effect. 'Death was unmentionable and kept at bay with code-words' (90) within the event itself, liberating it for discussion, since semantic remove is the only means of constructing distance from it. This community language cannot (and is not permitted to) be measured against any external objectivity.<sup>17</sup> Like the euphemisms which Claudia and Tom use (93), however, the jargon's Derridean *différance* only serves to preserve the excluded death as a central absence. Drawing on Baudrillardian theory, Paul Hegarty writes that '[t]here is a crucial shift in the status of the event, which occurs within the time of its "liberation", such that as it comes to mean, it loses meaning [...] cause and effect is lost. In this case, historical events themselves also undo history as narrative [because each event] loses its situatedness in historical narrative'.<sup>18</sup> In this way, the jargonised war mirrors the acronyms and MADness of the later nuclear stand-off. Claudia recalls the jargon of the 1940s as 'a language that seems fossilised now [...] Speech regenerates itself like the landscape'. At the time of her recollections, it has now become nukespeak (68), the extreme propagandisation of language having drastically destabilised the semantic and semiotic values of words.<sup>19</sup>

Being an outsider to the military situation, Claudia is not blinded by its jargon and so can see that the real desert is not hostile but neutral: 'it is untouched, thinks Claudia. Already the sand is starting to digest the broken vehicles, the petrol cans, the tangles of wire; a few more storms and they will

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16 Peter Schwenger, *Letter Bomb: Nuclear Holocaust and the Exploding Word* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992), p. 51.

17 Nadel, p. 167.

18 Hegarty, p. 104; see Baudrillard, *Illusion* p. 11 and p. 32.

19 Derek C. Maus, *Unvarnishing Reality: Subversive Russian and American Cold War Satire* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2011), p. 2.

sink beneath it. In a few years' time they will have vanished' (96).<sup>20</sup>

On account of her unconventional nature, Claudia has first-hand experience of Tom and his duties out in the desert, and so can understand his situation without recourse to any substitutes, such as letters he might have written home (which would anyway have been censored to replace anything which did not conform to the official narrative with silence). By going outside society, Claudia sees what lies beyond normative accounts (or at least allusions to this beyond), enabling her to appraise them. Consequently, when she returns to Cairo and this first-hand experience is replaced by communiqués from the front, she occupies a position from which she can see the disconnect between narrative and experience and so discern the official simulation of the conflict.

As a war-correspondent, she tries to represent her experiences, but her copy must pass through the military-censor. '*War conditions thought of us and them, ours and theirs, good and bad, black and white, no confusing uncomfortable indeterminate areas*', Tom's diary reflects, '*Except the desert, of course, which is neutral*' (198, italics in original). Similarly, the wasteland of postwar Europe is a place of shifting boundaries creating nomads-by-default, such as an old woman Claudia meets 'somewhere on the German–Polish border [...] whose given nationality was Polish but who spoke French' (133–34). By contrast, '[i]slands do disproportionately well' (134). This insular denial of ambiguity and alterity means that, on her return to Britain from Egypt, she perceives a disconnect between the victorious nation being projected on to the white cliffs and blacked-out windows on the one hand and the people struggling to rebuild their lives on the other. London's 'invented landscape' (the 'bomb-sites,

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<sup>20</sup> In the face of such absence of meaning, it is necessary to project a narrative on to the world. When Tom is on leave, they visit a zoo, an orderly, more-perfect projection of the nature beyond society in which they can unconsciously recreate the circumstances of their first meeting out in the desert. In contrast, when Claudia and Jasper reluctantly take Lisa to London zoo for her birthday, it articulates the restrictions which society imposes on the world, including these two free-spirits who happen to have a child. See Hegarty for a discussion of zoos and the simulated perfection of the world, particularly p. 124, p. 132 note 17, and p. 162.

and the gutted interior of a house with fireplaces airily exposed and the marks of ghostly staircases' (136)) only becomes authentic when Claudia can incorporate it into her own narrative of experience. Nevertheless, the official narrative, the same which has effaced the ambiguity of Tom's death, then silences this disconnect to lay the foundations for the world following the Allied victory in which she must live.

Claudia is well aware that 'truth is tied to words, to print, to the testimony of the page' (6). Narrative, not some objective reality, is the source of facts, and so of reality.<sup>21</sup> Ann Douglas notes that the US 'policy makers who authored NSC 68 [employed language], in their words, to convince "the American people and all free peoples that the cold war is in fact a real war"'.<sup>22</sup> Authenticity, that is, coherent meaning, is constructed through narrative: 'Only with hindsight are we wise about cause and effect' (28), '[t]he rest of us grow old and tell each other what really happened; [those who died], of course, will never know, just as they never knew at the time' (104). Official narrative uses facts to legitimate itself and discredit alternative narratives, while relying on potentially disruptive personal narrative both to establish facts and disseminate the official line.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, the disconnect between narrative and experience authorises alternative accounts, which thus legitimise alternative facts.<sup>24</sup> As Lawrence Durrell shows, heresy is not the opposite of orthodoxy. Returning, disillusioned, to the UK at the dawn of the atomic age, Claudia abandons attempts to represent experience and turns to writing popular histories, which are her own conscious constructions of the past which resist being incorporated into the orthodox account. Aware of the death of authorised grand narrative, Claudia has the

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21 Nadel, p. 202.

22 Ann Douglas, 'Periodizing the American Century: Modernism, Postmodernism, and Postcolonialism in the Cold War Context', *Modernism/Modernity*, 5 (1998), 71–98 (p. 76). NSC 68 was the top-secret document endorsed by the National Security Council in 1950 which outlined the plan to further militarise the Cold War.

23 Nadel, p. 3. For example, Claudia tells a plausible but incomplete narrative of her war-experiences, which effaces Tom's death: "I was a war correspondent during the war. That rather put me off reporting on the present." Caxton nods' (161), but an alternative version of events would be equally authentic.

postmodern recognition that 'history is not the enemy but the accomplice of the artist, who sees writing not as recording or recollecting history but as creating it. Postmodern writers, in other words, realize they have complete control over history and no control whatsoever over events'.<sup>25</sup> Claudia deconstructs the constituent strata of authorised history to build her own, appropriating a fossil for a paperweight (94) to fix down an alternative account of the multiplicitous world. By thus turning nature into culture, she echoes the way that the brain transforms stimuli of its environment into meaning by interpreting it with the aid of previous learning, fusing the 'confection of fact and fantasy that is how we know the world' (62). In contrast, normative discourse seeks to fix nature and culture, or self and Other, as separate so that it can dictate a coherent, unitary meaning of experience.

As a journalist, Claudia tries 'to reduce to words what she has seen and thought' (86), believing that 'I control the world so long as I can name it' (51). However, words' referentiality is undermined by Claudia on her deathbed: 'Today language abandoned me. I could not find the word for a simple object – a commonplace familiar furnishing. For an instant, I stared into the void. Language tethers us to the world' (41)). It is revealed as mere consensus founded on ambiguity.<sup>26</sup> Normative language does not correlate to objective reality, but instead shows that objective reality is created by shared language.<sup>27</sup> As Lively says, words are manipulative but necessary, being the foundational strata of any resistance to hegemonic projections of meaning.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Claudia relishes the ambiguity of the world which words cannot contain while, as the above quote shows, using words as a necessary means to construct meaning. Words acquire

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24 Nadel, p. 38, p. 44 and p. 49.

25 Nadel, p. 39.

26 This is also exploded by Lisa in infancy: "But if there is a word dragon," she said, "then once there must have been dragons" (9). The consensus is suspended between the two voids of childhood and senility.

27 Nadel, p. 168.

28 'Penelope Lively – Moon Tiger', *World Book Club*, BBC World Service, 4 December 2011 <[www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00lw91x](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00lw91x)> [accessed 3 September 2012]

confirmation through dissemination, but excessive repetition erodes their power in the same way that excessive nuclear-propaganda creates not conformity but dissent.

Consequently, narratives which allow for ambiguity are better able to accommodate the world than those which do not.

Beliefs are relative. Our connection with reality is always tenuous [...] I am by nature sceptical – a questioner, a doubter, an instinctive agnostic. In the frozen stone of the cathedrals of Europe there co-exist the Apostles, Christ and Mary, lambs, fish, gryphons, dragons, sea-serpents and the faces of men with leaves for hair. I approve of that liberality of mind (8–9).

Baudrillard argues that ambivalence is natural, since we can never capture reality,<sup>29</sup> an attitude which Claudia endorses in her characteristically strident way: 'Argument, of course, is the whole point of history. Disagreement; my word against yours; this evidence against that. If there were such a thing as absolute truth the debate would lose its lustre. I, for one, would no longer be interested' (14). Her popular histories appear to go against convention in their form as well as their content:

My readers know the story, of course. They know the general tendency. They know how it goes. [Likewise, for my final history] I shall omit the narrative. What I shall do is flesh it out; give it life and colour, add the screams and the rhetoric. Oh, I shan't spare them a thing. The question is, shall it or shall it not be linear history? I've always thought a kaleidoscopic view might be an interesting heresy. Shake the tube and see what comes out (2).

This attitude places Claudia in the ranks of the first generation of artists following the Second World War who, 'faced with the psychotic behavior and elaborately systematic deceit of the cold war era, were nerved to fresh acts of resistance and self-expression [which were] desperately creative acts of heroic subjectivity [...] designed to declassify every kind of information for

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29 Hegarty, p. 27; see Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. by Charles Levin (St Louis: Telos, 1981).

revolutionary political and artistic ends'.<sup>30</sup> Claudia's kaleidoscopic, non-linear history recounts events repeated times, thereby undermining the authority of normative discourse which is founded on its (repeated) insistence that events occur once<sup>31</sup> and notions such as self and Other are distinct. Her history emphasises the excess of experience which cannot be contained in narrative. Although she is a product of meaning she both has consumed and created – 'the confection of fact and fantasy' – the elderly Claudia is aware that she lives more by myth (projecting meaning on to events) than history (receiving the meaning of events). As Nadel notes, personal narrative oscillates situationally between identification with and alienation from a historical order.<sup>32</sup>

When she is with Tom, Claudia feels the need to orient her experiences within the official narrative of the campaign composed safely behind the lines which demands that he return to his post –

'On Wednesday morning you'll be in the desert again.'

'You aren't supposed to think of that.'

'I have to', says Claudia. 'In order to keep a grip on things.'

For there are moments, out here in this place and at this time, when she feels that she is untethered, no longer hitched to past or future or to a known universe but adrift in the cosmos (90).

With hindsight, however, she writes: 'The collective past, curiously, provides [knowledge]. It is public property, but it is also deeply private. We all look differently at it' (2). Claudia's understanding of her experiences is culturally informed but independent: 'Some of us are less conditioned than others, or would like to be' (110). Writing about the Cold War, Douglas argues that

most people have something like a truth instinct, for lack of a better phrase, a steering and self-defining device that goes far deeper than conscience or convention. This motive force is the hope of establishing an accurate and meaningful narrative, an authentic form

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30 Douglas, p. 84.

31 Nadel, p. 175.

32 Nadel, pp. 3–4.

for the self and the world it inhabits. Its representation and dynamic are, of course, culturally inflected; the modes change over time, but increased violations of this truth instinct, whether by individual behavior or national policy, are *felt*.<sup>33</sup>

The citizen is a fusion of the self and Other on which the Cold War world-view is founded: defined, but excessive; culturally informed, but always more. Claudia reflects on the accounts of the war which she has read: 'they seem to have little to do with anything I remember' (70), 'what I know of war seems most vivid in the head' (66). The simulated pilgrims' village she visits in the United States, and the consequent history it implies, are an official myth she chooses *not* to believe and she uses the occasion to undermine the myth that we can trust that the steady march of progress has led from the imperfect past to the more-perfect present, holding the decidedly Baudrillardian view that 'by the time we have reduced everything to entertainment we shall find that it was no joke after all' (51). The screen of stories and secrets disseminated by the State is negotiated by narrativising the scant information obtainable. The value of these replacement-narratives lies in the alternative story they present, their imperfect doubling of the concealed event (and the State's duplicity) which allows it to be known *of* (alluded to through simulation), if not known (represented). Lively encourages a negotiated and tactical reading by withholding key facts in order to create a mystery (who was this man in Claudia's life who has died?). In doing so, she uses the tactics of the State (which are in turn borrowed from story-telling) when it wishes to create a secret, but ones not intended to invite curiosity. As I shall discuss in relation to Tom's war-time diary, Claudia also narrativises the scant information obtainable from the State-machinery to serve her own interests.

Since hegemonic discourse is founded on personal narrative, Claudia can appropriate constituent parts of the official story (as she does the fossil) to build her own. Such resistance 'does not attack the system, but recalls the process which initiated it, and therefore also the possibility of its non-being'.<sup>34</sup> Cause and

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<sup>33</sup> Douglas, p. 82, emphasis in original.

<sup>34</sup> Hegarty, p. 41.

effect, lost in the duplicitous operations of the hegemony, are recreations of the official narrative which follows. As Claudia says, '[c]hronology irritates me. There is no chronology inside my head. I am composed of a myriad of Claudias who spin and mix and part like sparks of sunlight on water' (2). While cause and effect can be constructed in Claudia's life-story, the important point is that one should always be aware that there is another story to be told. She is writing against any progressive history in which ends (the status quo) justify the means (silencing Tom). As Nadel says, the atomic age 'alters our understanding of time and space, cause and effect' and reveals that causes are rhetorical functions which rationalise and classify events, for example through the random nature of Hiroshima's deaths.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, MAD and pre-emptive strikes also undermine the State's insistence on causality. Since, as Jasper says, '[t]he world's much too interesting a place to let oneself get stuck with one aspect of it' (19), Claudia has faith that '[m]ythology is much better than stuff history. It has form; logic; a message' (7). It helps her in her attempts to find meaning in her life throughout the decades of global-hostility following her experience of the desert-campaign when all accounts and explanations have become suspect.

## **The Claudian Cold War**

By effacing Tom's death, the authorised account has denied Claudia a narrative of grief and healing. The numbing stasis of melancholia is doubled in the Cold War stand-off around her, since both are products of the same narrative. By not relinquishing her attachment to the absent Tom, Claudia has created a central absence in her life, an ambiguity which she cannot incorporate since it remains unincorporated by the official narrative which informs her life (although not dictating it outright). Melancholic, she is dislocated from the axes of space and time.<sup>36</sup> In this way, she is an incomplete narrative herself; while her dead brother

<sup>35</sup> Nadel, p. 58. The rhetorical nature of cause is noted on p. 167 and the quote about how the Bomb alters the notion of cause and effect is from p. 54.

<sup>36</sup> See Jessica Dubow, 'A Therapeutics of Exile: Isaiah Berlin, Liberal Pluralism and the Psyche of



Gordon 'is complete; he has a beginning and end' (187) Claudia is deprived of a coherent (that is, authentic) narrative necessary to live in the duplicitous world of the Cold War. When she returns to Egypt as a tourist in the 1960s, she says that, 'confronted at last with the mirage – with the shining phantom of that other time – I was surprised to find that it was myself that was the poignant presence. Not him – not Tom. It was in other ways that Tom was there' (88). It is her authentic self whom she has lost and so her history is an elegy for her own absence. While she says that '[y]ou keep the dead with you for ever and deny the possibility of your own annihilation' (14), because of hegemonic dictates Claudia has not been able to keep Tom ('He is nowhere now' (128)) and so is not able to escape the annihilation which these dictates construct.

Throughout these years of nuclear-confrontation, Claudia is engaged in her own, personal war between the event of Tom's death, an experience of central importance in her life, and the non-event of the triumphalist narrative which justifies the status quo but silences his death.<sup>37</sup> This dispassionate sequence [of authorised history] explains – or purports to explain – why the war happened and how it evolved and what its effects have been. Your experience – raw and untreated – does not seem to contribute to any of that. It is on a different plane' (207). Memory is radioactive, lingering long after we have departed the material conditions of the experience, encoding identity at an essential level. For Claudia, 'events continue at ground level [...] but subtly they no longer have any meaning'.<sup>38</sup> She detaches herself from the specific place and time of the present, dissentingly dreaming of an alternative world.<sup>39</sup> The disconnect between narrative and experience, the erosion of cause and effect and of sacrifice which she experienced in Egypt, is perpetuated through the Cold War split-selfhood

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Assimilation', *Environment and Planning A*, 44 (2012), 2463–76 (p. 2473).

37 Hegarty, p. 146. Baudrillard characterises war as the opposition between event and non-event. See Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, pp. 37–38 and *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, trans. by Paul Foss, John Johnston, Paul Patton and Stuart Kendall (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), pp. 111ff.

38 Hegarty, p. 61; see Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, p. 36.

39 This idea is derived from Dubow, p. 2473.

induced by paranoia of the reportedly imminent but absent Bomb and the individual's responsibility for hegemonic victory while, as Claudia knows, the hegemony has no responsibility to include the individual in that history. Both Tom and the Bomb are Baudrillardian singularities (experiences which cannot be incorporated into normative discourse), abstract and so inevitable.<sup>40</sup> However, while Nadel argues that the Bomb cannot be historicised since it will not leave anyone to write about it,<sup>41</sup> it is circumscribed in narrative by being labelled ahistorical. In this way, the hegemony replaces the ambiguity of death with the Soviet threat which can only be contained by individual conformity to its narrative: 'Nuclear critics generally agree that, while the potential consequences of nuclear weapons defy discourse, it is only through discourse that the weapons acquire their value and utility'.<sup>42</sup>

It is in this way that the Cold War forces the geopolitical back into Claudia's life, which is otherwise occupied by producing popular histories and the odd 'attack on the latest work of a leading academic historian' (151). She says that

I waited for the Bomb to drop. As the world lurched from Korea to Laos to Cuba to Vietnam I was simply sitting it out [...] I marched and demonstrated when I felt it appropriate. I kept to myself that curdling of the stomach I felt during the nine days of Cuba, and at a dozen other times over the years. On some days I could not turn on the radio or pick up the newspaper, as though ignorance might insulate me from reality (182).

This insulation is a myth to help her go on living, and the fact that she chooses to believe it is all the more significant given her experience of waiting for news of Tom exposes it for the fiction that it is:

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40 Bryan C. Taylor, 'Nuclear Pictures and Metapictures', *American Literary History*, 9 (1997), 567–97 (p. 571).

41 Nadel, p. 39.

42 Taylor, 'Nuclear Pictures', p. 568.

First there is disbelief, resolute disbelief. No, it is not possible. Not him. Others but not him. And then there is hope because wounded does not necessarily mean killed, missing men turn up – wounded, taken prisoner. Or they walk in out of the desert days later, unscathed; Cairo is full of such tales (127).

Accordingly, 'I no longer shrink from newspapers', she continues. 'The world is no safer than it was twenty years ago. But we are still here; the monster has been contained, so far – with every year that passes the hope grows that it might continue to be contained, somehow; daily expectation of calamity is too exhausting to sustain' (183). In the face of a constant textual threat, the brain's confirmation-bias takes control, drawing on the fact that there is no apocalypse in evidence.

However, containment of paranoia is not enough since this denial sets her in opposition to the State, which can then incorporate her as its legitimating Other.<sup>43</sup> She is still beholden to its dictates: her insulation is really self-containment of her political ambiguity, preventing her paranoia from becoming dissent. This is evident in how, despite the fact that Claudia refuses to be maternal towards Lisa, she still fears for her daughter: 'I never expected to see Lisa grow up. For years, when she was a child, I waited for the Bomb to drop [...] What might happen to the whole of humanity became concentrated on Lisa's small limbs, the unknowing eyes, her blithe aspirations' (182).<sup>44</sup> While she has never been contained by social definitions, she is nevertheless paranoid, so needs to find an alternative (geopolitical) meaning by which to live. In this way, Claudia mirrors Kit in *The Sheltering Sky*. If she is to succeed where Kit fails, she must neutralise the discourse of paranoia by aligning herself with an alterity outside the hegemonic system analogous to the desert or death. Comparison with Bowles' novel suggests that Claudia mirrors Kit's husband in her refusal to be a passive consumer of Western dictates, but she does not unquestioningly follow Western constructs in her quest for a space outside hegemonic dictates.

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43 Hegarty, p. 55.

44 See Adam Piette, *The Literary Cold War: 1945 to Vietnam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009), p. 107 for further discussion of the Bomb as an attack on motherhood.

Claudia perceives the disparity between officially and individually created narratives which actively define political identity.

Accordingly, I will now consider her final work and particularly the form she adopts for it.

### **'I hear the babble of voices': Claudia's 'realistic kaleidoscopic history' of the world**

On her deathbed, Claudia is composing a final history with herself at its centre – 'The Life and Times of Claudia H.' – to resist the hegemonic narrative on its own level.

The voice of history, of course, is composite. Many voices; all the voices that have managed to get themselves heard. Some louder than others, naturally. My story is tangled with the stories of others – Mother, Gordon, Jasper, Lisa, and one other person above all; their voices must be heard also, thus shall I abide by the conventions of history. I shall respect the laws of evidence (5–6).

Previous critics appear to take these words at face-value. Guðrún Valdimarsdóttir considers her to be writing an ultimately orthodox history and Debrah Raschke, while arguing that Claudia's account works both within and against hegemonic discourse, believes with Ayfer Onan that the text allows characters besides Claudia to speak directly to the reader.<sup>45</sup> This present reading, however, interprets the lines quoted above as a signal to be wary of the text's apparently heterogeneous constitution because, as the novel suggests time and again, history is conventionally told by one hegemonic voice. Accordingly, this chapter suggests not only that Claudia's final history flies in the face of convention (as her popular histories have already done) but furthermore reads all the other characters' voices in the text as part of this work. This includes not

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<sup>45</sup> Valdimarsdóttir, p. 4. Debrah Raschke, 'Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger*: Re-envisioning a "History of the World"', *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 26 (1995), 115–32 (p. 116). Ayfer Onan, 'A Fictional Analysis of Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger* and Adalet Ağaoğlu's *Ölmeye Yatmak*', *Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi Buca Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi*, 16 (2004), 98–102 (p. 99).

only the different perspectives on past events in Claudia's life, but also her time in the hospital ('What he brings is in my head, not his' (65)), the doctors in the corridor outside her room (whose conversation she would not be able to hear) and Lisa's present inner-life concerning her opinion of her mother and her extramarital affair (which, in making her more like her mother, becomes an act of reparation on Claudia's part; patronising, indeed, but entirely in keeping with the chronicler's prerogative).

Being her creation alone, her final history is not heterogeneous or democratic, unavoidably speaking for – silencing – those who feature in it. However, since she herself has experience of resisting normative social definitions, Claudia is aware of the self-serving nature of her narrative but recognises that her irresistible authoritarianism is necessary if she is to erode the self-professed primacy of society's authorised narrative. Her work is a 'mirror of the mind' (154) in which she seeks an authentic self in the face of hegemonic duplicity. However, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau says, 'the problem confronting any genuinely radical cultural production is not simply a matter of transforming existing forms through the insertion of some new politicized content or subject matter, but rather to intervene on the level of the forms themselves, to disrupt what the forms put in place'.<sup>46</sup> If Claudia were simply to replicate the hegemony's strategies, she would construct herself as its legitimating Other and so she must therefore evade being thus incorporated into its narrative.

I had a nightmare. In which I now realise I was present at one of the more gruesome moments of the early sixteenth century. The flight of the Spaniards from the Aztec capital of Tlacopan. [I] was going to be gashed, blown apart, sliced open, stabbed, impaled at any moment. I was fighting for my life. But was I a Spaniard or an Aztec? (153–54)

Claudia's nightmare reflects the fact that the history we know is a fantasy, but it also successfully alludes to the alterity of those who are normally spoken for. Like her popular histories, the nightmare (re)creates the multiplicitous stimuli

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<sup>46</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991) p. 189, quoted in Bryan C. Taylor, 'Nuclear Pictures', p. 591.

of the experience of the event's participants unadorned with the orderly cause and effect constructed from the objective distance of her orthodox fellow-historians (or, say, the bomber aboard the *Enola Gay*). Instead, Claudia is aware that the kaleidoscope at her eye gives her not the Apollonian gaze of a spy-plane but the contingent view of an informant, meaning that whatever she reports of others will likely also implicate herself.

That said, Claudia knows that she cannot report on these people's experiences since, she says, 'I cannot shed my skin and put on yours, cannot strip my mind of its knowledge and its prejudices, cannot look cleanly at the world with the eyes of a child, am as imprisoned by my time as you were by yours' (31). As Nadel says, '[h]istory is the gallery of reproductions for which there exist no originals. It produces only reproductions because it necessarily divides itself temporally from the site it (re)produces'.<sup>47</sup> Claudia recognises the necessity of imposing meaning on the world, but remains alert to the fact that it is constructed.<sup>48</sup> Her popular histories, like her nightmare, 'omit the narrative [...] give it life and colour, add the screams' (2) and so perform something akin to a Deleuzian becoming-other, the acknowledgement that the world exceeds normative definitions, including those imposed by the self.

Even so, aware that she cannot give a voice to those silenced by authorised accounts, and rather than replicate hegemonic strategies to speak *for* them – to try to contain their alterity as difference<sup>49</sup> – Claudia seeks to create a space for them, to allude to the horizon of their alterity. Its kaleidoscopic nature means that her work can, in Nadel's words, 'perpetually recontextualize situations from absolute and relative perspectives that ultimately present [...] "history" [...] as

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47 Nadel, p. 42.

48 When Claudia returns to Egypt as a pampered tourist, she necessarily understands her surroundings by means of a narrative of her own construction: 'I was left alone [on the coach] with the tinted glass through which I saw my own images, the distant but vivid shapes and colours of another time' (87): she appropriates Pharaoh-tours' constructed theatricalities as a screen on which to project her own narrative.

49 Hegarty, p. 119.

an expression of power caught in an infinite play of difference'.<sup>50</sup> As discussed above, Claudia the historian is living through the height of the Cold War. In her work, narrative and experience meet and binaries fuse and fragment to 'destabilise the authority of official nuclear images and narratives by contrasting them with their unofficial counterparts'.<sup>51</sup> The chronicled stimuli of experience, Bryan Taylor argues,

reject nuclear certainty by asserting its formal *opposite*: reflexive images that *evoke and critique through their multistable forms* the oppressive discourses of the nuclear age. Through the contrast created by their forms, these images suggest *how* these discourses have historically effaced their own contingency and distorted the authentic expression of collective nuclear experience. The open-endedness of these images jars their viewers into new levels of participation in – and responsibility for – discursive closure of the nuclear future.<sup>52</sup>

In this way, they decentre the hegemonic Cold War narrative spatially and temporally, depriving the status quo of a stable base of binary-oppositions. Being her work alone, Claudia's history cannot be dialogic, but its immediate, first-person oral-narrative style reflects the need to speak *with* – rather than issue a command – thereby breaking down the barriers of space and time and the inequality between creator and consumer of history. In so doing, it demands the reader's acknowledgement of shared responsibility in constructing meaning, encouraging a collaborative (feminine) effort in contrast to a passive acceptance of the totalising (masculine) myths disseminated by the State.

Thus far, this section has concerned the fact that this historian is unavoidably responsible for the representation of others. I now turn to the consequences of the elderly Claudia more specifically (re)creating the others who feature in her own life-story, namely her family, acquaintances, the hospital staff and her own younger selves. Whether her recollections are understood as being merely in her head or whether these passages are seen as the text of her final

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<sup>50</sup> Nadel, p. 67.

<sup>51</sup> Taylor, 'Nuclear Pictures', p. 571.

<sup>52</sup> Taylor, 'Nuclear Pictures', p. 591, emphasis in original.

history (an idea which some critics have approached, see below), the reader is confronted with the voices and perspectives of many different characters.

In addition to her manner of writing history, or her vivid nightmares, Claudia's destabilising of self/Other oppositions is perpetuated through her assertion that 'one's previous selves are unreachable' (113) but can be enlisted to playfully perform her uncontained, multiplicitous nature in the face of the State's reductive dictates which fix life free of change or ambiguity. While critics such as Raschke write that the reader 'is split between a multitude of perspectives and voices and between a multitude of Claudias',<sup>53</sup> the key point is rather that these incarnations are simultaneously fused together in the originating bed-bound Claudia,<sup>54</sup> her consciousness disseminated across a multiplicity of selves, which disrupts normative, unitary discourse further.

While concern for her daughter increases her nuclear-paranoia, by cloning herself textually Claudia counters the death which the hegemony holds over her.<sup>55</sup> Ranged against the missiles of the opposing narrative, Claudia is likewise simultaneously a protection and a threat. She contains this duplicity textually, thus articulating her multiplicity on the same level as hegemonic discourse.

More than a mere rhetorical device, this self-proliferation mirrors the individual's lived-experience of others, which resists fixed definitions. For example, when Claudia apologises for being a bad mother, Lisa tries to brush away this awkward display of emotion with 'Well, you were who you were' (182), thus simultaneously blaming Claudia, distancing her from her past acts, and remaining neutral. Claudia, on the other hand, recalls Lisa as

this small unreachable alien creature locked in her amoral preliterate condition with no knowledge of past or future, free of everything, in a state of grace. I wanted to know how it felt. I would question her, craftily, with adult sophistry, with the backing of Freud and

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53 Raschke, p. 125.

54 This does not introduce any sense of progress, since Claudia is as ignorant of the circumstances of Tom's death as her 1942-self.

55 For a discussion of Baudrillard's thoughts on cloning, from which I developed this idea, see Hegarty, p. 122.



Jung and centuries of perception and opinion. And she would slip away from me, impervious, equipped with her own powers of evasion, with Indian lore, with techniques of camouflage (43).

Life is experienced at the distance between the received stimuli and the brain's interpretation, and so Claudia is aware that she can only ever understand her daughter 'up to a point, insofar as it is possible for another person to do so' (56). She is aware that Lisa is as ambiguous as the Aztecs and has her own opinions of her mother.

Cyndy Hendershot writes that 'Freudian theory forces the individual to resign himself or herself to a constant inner war between id and superego [which] causes the individual to accept things as they are'.<sup>56</sup> Claudia's own disunified unconscious, however, is not subject to this conflict and so is in a position to resist. Her totalitarian superego, authoring her life-story in 1987, is in cahoots with her seductive, slippery ego manifest across her many incarnations which articulates her dissent while evading the hegemonic witch-hunters. Both are in sympathy with her id, which is all the while buried in the Egyptian desert of 1942 – the space of the unconscious – and not beholden to the dictates of the superego, either her own or that of the State. In short, her very nature fragments the id/superego binary-opposition. Just as 'the sand has no boundaries, no frontiers, no perimeters' (96), Claudia knows 'that nothing is ever lost, that everything can be retrieved [...] That, inside the head, everything happens at once' (68), despite the dictate of the hegemony which strives to control the course of a single, linear narrative leading to a determined outcome.

The distinctions of time break down in her hospital bed as she relives her life. She loses track of the days as she lies dying, an end of narrative before the end of experience. However, although words begin to escape her, Claudia keeps hold of narrative, meaning, and her sense of self. Nevertheless, a disconnect between coherent articulation and her own subjectivity arises from her now

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<sup>56</sup> Cyndy Hendershot, *I Was a Cold War Monster: Horror Films, Eroticism, and the Cold War Imagination* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green U Popular P, 2001), p. 94, quoted in Piette, p. 15.

needing to sleep for long periods and at irregular times. As a consequence, Claudia requires an anchor in the world if she is to effectively resist the hegemonic narrative on its own level. She finds one in the form of Tom's diary.

### **Tom's diary**

The penultimate chapter of *Moon Tiger* is mostly comprised of a transcription of Tom's diary of his desert-experiences, which Claudia says she received from the sister whom he mentioned. It is set off from the rest of the novel by being italicised and as such – even if one reads all Claudia's past and present experiences and the different perspectives on those experiences given in the novel as filtered through Claudia's subjectivity, whether merely in her head or on the pages of her final history – it appears as an independent voice with which Claudia converses. However, again rejecting existing criticism, I want to suggest that the sister's letter and the diary are her creation. I will briefly note the textual evidence to support this idea before examining the consequences that this interpretation has on the novel as a challenge to the Bomb.

During their first encounter in the desert, Claudia and Tom talk about life on the battlefield. "I keep a diary," says Tom. "Nicely cryptic, of course, in case I get put in the bag" (93). When the reader sees the diary, however, it is not cryptic.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, whereas Tom's words clearly suggest that he has started his diary before he meets Claudia, in the diary she reads she is front-and-centre from the first entry (and neither the sister's letter nor Claudia's introduction suggest that the quoted pages are only the excerpted parts of the diary which concern her).

Claudia's authorship can also perhaps be perceived in the extent to which the diary reflects her views rather than Tom's. Whereas in the desert Tom tells her that he is keeping a diary because 'one of these days one may want to

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<sup>57</sup> It might be argued that the recorded conversation is itself a fabrication, but this would not suggest that the diary was written by Tom.

remember what all this was like' (93), which arguably accords with his (masculine) postivist normativity ('history is true and that unfortunately you are a part of it' (103)), the diary expresses a hitherto absent degree of ambiguity ('*At some point I shall want to make sense of it – if there is sense to be made*' (204, italics in original)) closer to Claudia's own response to the diary that 'it is all clearer to me than any chronicle of events but I cannot make sense of it, perhaps because there is none to be made' (206). It also appears that Tom still holds faith in objective space and time. As noted above, he consults his maps when they have lost him in the desert. His assertion that the desert 'does lunatic things with time. An hour can seem like a day or a day like an hour' (101) can be read to suggest that he still maintains that there is such a thing as an empirically measurable hour, despite his experiences. In contrast, the diary begins with the words '*This written God knows where, on a day in 1942*' (194, italics in original), discarding any faith in the human measurements of days and hours and so replacing the desert with an atemporal space ('*Time is not time any more, in any proper sense. Becomes simply the hands on one's watch*' (195, italics in original)).

In the diary the desert has become a place of stimuli experienced without a narrative of meaning: '*I couldn't say now what came before what, where we were when, how this happened or that, in the mind it's not a sequence just a single event without beginning or end in any proper sense simply a continuity*' (196, italics in original), which mirrors Claudia's belief that 'there is no sequence, everything happens at once' (2) and 'that nothing is ever lost, that everything can be retrieved, that a lifetime is not linear but instant. That, inside the head, everything happens at once' (68). While Tom's words in the desert (such as the quote from page 103 above) suggest that he believes in the grand narrative of history and the value of keeping a diary, the diary itself articulates Claudia's view that narrative's axes of space and time do not contain all of life and that these factors are ultimately meaningless: '*So I make myself move backwards and forwards, lying there huddled in the sleeping-bag on the cold sand – backwards to*

*other places, to childhood [...]* ' (201, italics in original). Following the transcription of the diary, when Claudia meditates on the role it has in her life, its author's identity is incorporated within her own (unlike those of the figures in her popular histories and nightmare, or her daughter): 'you are also, now, a part of me, as immediate and as close as my own other selves, all the Claudias of whom I am composed; I talk to you almost as I would talk to myself [...] you are in my head' (206).

The diary is of crucial importance to Claudia if she is to live authentically in the duplicitous age following the death of grand narrative: 'I need it' (207), she says. If it did not exist, she would have to invent it. While her work as a historian – and, as I have argued, her recollections of her past experiences which compose her final history – has already alluded to the alterity of experience which exceeds hegemonic discourse, her construction of meaning in this last testimony has thus far been explicitly grounded within the narrative of her own subjectivity. The diary now provides an external reference-point which allows the history to be a fusion of the personal and the political, a dialogue between her experience of something outside herself and her own previous learning. It allows her to locate, orient and define herself free from the shadow of the Bomb.

Seemingly paradoxically, this function of the diary is not compromised if its independent existence is only a myth she chooses to believe. After all, the referential nature of the words with which she constructs her history is equally a myth enlisted in the service of her interests. Since she is now losing her grasp on this myth ('Today language abandoned me. I could not find the word for a simple object' (41)), she needs to reach for another.

Claudia describes the diary as 'a light green exercise book with CAHIER on the front in black letters. Ruled paper, rough and grainy' (194). If it is indeed an object, it is not merely several pages of italicised text in her final history, meaning that while the authenticity or meaningfulness of words is dependent on her interpretative faculties, the diary is not. It will continue to be something

which she can literally cling on to. Furthermore, the more she loses her grasp on the world, the more the diary will become for her Tom's authentic voice. The author of the diary is 'as close as my own other selves' and so as distant. As these other selves become victims to her forgetfulness, so will 'he'. The diary is thus what Baudrillard calls a radical illusion, an originary construction which resists being incorporated into the system of simulation and which, in hindsight, is seen to grant the possibility of truth.<sup>58</sup>

Like Claudia's nightmare, the fragmented nature of the diary shuns the ostensibly objective distance of hindsight to mirror the excessive stimuli of actual experience: on the battle-field, Tom feels '*as though one existed on different planes: that of sight [...] and that of sound*' (197, paralleled on 204, italics in original). If the narrative of history is a synaesthetic simulation which embraces all the senses, annulling them as individual instances,<sup>59</sup> Tom's fragmented perception suggests that this narrative does not fit experience. The removal of the temporal axis precludes narrative, which is why, when Claudia hears of Tom's death, she hopes that it was instant (128) since its narrative would be of pain, its meaning only negative. Tom's diary notes a moment when he wistfully contemplates a desert-gazelle, '*carefree [...] that I envied for a moment*'. It continues: '*but the gazelle has no story, that is the difference. Pinned down and shit-scared, I have a story, which makes me a man*' (201, italics in original). The gazelle is sand-coloured, without demarcations, reflecting how it can move across the unbounded desert, while Tom's body is demarcated ('He is so sunburned that the parts that have not been exposed seem unnaturally pale [...]) The colour changes at his navel – above is brown, below is another man' (109)), mirroring his fate to be clearly defined, his multiplicity of aspects prescribed into one social self. The function of the gazelle in the diary is analogous to the function of the diary in Claudia's final history: an alterity smuggled within. By demonstrating that the axes of her narrative cannot contain all of the

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<sup>58</sup> Hegarty, p. 46 note 10.

<sup>59</sup> Hegarty, p. 57.

experience, Claudia draws on the 'possibility that excessive simulation gets you beyond the simulated world's insistence on its own reality'<sup>60</sup> and so avoids replicating (and extending) hegemonic rule.

The transcription of Tom's diary is italicised and does not appear to be part of her history, making it seem more a recording of real experience. History *replaces* the past in response to a present melancholic nostalgia for meaning.<sup>61</sup> By filling an absence in both her knowledge and the pages of her history, the text of the diary satisfies Claudia's need to real-ise her myth while preserving that myth's status as what Baudrillard calls a singularity. As a singularity, Tom's death is always already and is always yet to occur, and so is 'utterly closed yet infinitely becoming itself. The subject never actually comes to be, although we devise a linear conception of time to combat the horror of the eternal return' by which the individual repeats every moment infinitely.<sup>62</sup> As Michel de Certeau writes, 'chronology becomes the alibi of time [...] a way of banishing from the realm of knowledge the principle of death'.<sup>63</sup> But Claudia is aware that death is ever-present and her non-chronological history subverts this attempt to banish Tom's death from narrative. Her kaleidoscopic style, which repeats events, reflects the experience of the Eternal Return (in opposition to the normative idea that events are unitary). Tom's death appears to be alterity outside the system of simulation, but it is an absence within it, attained both by accident and by fate.<sup>64</sup> Just as the Bomb is historicised by being labelled ahistorical, Tom's non-existent death can be located temporally; singularity is not timeless but of time (within simulation, but eluding it) and, as Hegarty elucidates, comes from trying to understand the challenge of the present moment, and then challenge it

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60 Hegarty, p. 57 and p. 82. See Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. by Paul Patton (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995), p. 39.

61 See Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, p. 6.

62 Hegarty, p. 163. See Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, p. 131, and Friedrich Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), pp. 544ff.

63 Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1986), p. 216, quoted in Nadel, p. 42.

64 See Jean Baudrillard, *D'un Fragment l'Autre: Entretiens avec François L'Yonnet* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001), p. 129.

back.<sup>65</sup>

While Tom's experience remains a central absence, since it still has to be spoken *for*, Claudia's creation of his final days takes precedence because it satisfies the brain's confirmation-bias by providing a coherent explanation as to why he is no longer here. From a Baudrillardian perspective, by replacing (not representing) the absent event, the model generates the event<sup>66</sup> and so Claudia's allusion to reality has primacy.

The event of Tom's death itself, however, is absent from the diary. This fact both adheres to simulation (in that Tom could not have written it after his death) and writes against it (since the ambiguity of his death is not safely incorporated into narrative): the diary is seductive, writing across the official narrative, evading not opposing it, smuggling excess inside in order to explode it. When the Bomb is labelled ahistorical, it is circumscribed narratively but preserves the excess which causes fear. Claudia enacts the same logic by replacing Tom's death with words (whose meanings are agreed by common consensus, thereby installing it on the same level as the hegemony's discourse) while preserving the excess which is its alterity. While the hegemonic narrative omits Tom's death because it would introduce ambiguity, Claudia's history omits the actual event of Tom's death precisely to preserve this ambiguity. This ambiguity 'has been *systematically* excluded in order to found the unitary logic that is the attribution of value and binary opposition',<sup>67</sup> and so when it is brought back in, the hegemonic narrative fragments. Tellingly, this narrative is not coherent in itself, and other information must be incorporated in order to make it meaningful: just as a duplicitous State might co-opt false and contradictory testimony in order to maintain its official line (for example, the US following the Bay of Pigs fiasco), the reader is told that '[b]elow the last entry Jennifer Southern has written, in now faded ink, "My brother was killed in an

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65 Hegarty, p. 163.

66 Hegarty, pp. 57–58. See Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, p. 1.

67 Hegarty, p. 42.

enemy air attack [...]” (205). Claudia thus creates a myth larger than herself or any narrative framework.

The diary thus performs a 'play of absence and presence that establishes and undermines the apparent solidity of the “proper” (*propre*), this being identity in the shape of the self, the same or the truth'<sup>68</sup> which Claudia resists. She says, '[w]hat is buried under the sand is reflected above' (80); just as the devastating effect of an underground atomic-test is not visible on the surface and can only be seen in representations (such as maps), the reverberations of Tom's death are only evident in the fractures of her final work. By going beyond the hegemonic narrative to bring ambiguity back within it, 'on the one hand, [she] has been with the dead, and is now back; on the other, this means that the dead are accessible, and have a vital role in initiating the start of (adult) life',<sup>69</sup> allowing Claudia to relinquish her attachment to Tom ('You are left behind, in another place and another time' (206)). In this way, she mirrors the other protagonists studied in this thesis who travel into the Sahara – the archetypal place of death – and bring their experience of the desert within their culturally informed understanding of the world.

Just as cause and effect are lost in the atomic age, so they are in the challenge Claudia presents to the hegemony, which Baudrillard would identify as acts of terrorism.<sup>70</sup> Consequently, by writing the diary, Claudia retrospectively locates herself in the world again. The diary is a successful alternative to the tank-regiment's misguided maps, since it can successfully guide her out of her desert of melancholia distant from society. As well as operating retrospectively, the diary's function is also tautological: Claudia incorporates the melancholic loss of Tom by writing it but, as she effaces herself from the event of its creation, it is as if Tom is thinking of her, thereby confirming that she is alive.

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68 Hegarty, p. 75, italics in original.

69 Hegarty, p. 43.

70 Hegarty draws from a number of Baudrillard's works to summarise his definition of terrorism, see pp. 95–97.



A tormenting thought: as of a certain point, history was no longer *real*. Without noticing it, all mankind suddenly left reality; everything happening since then was supposedly not true; but we supposedly didn't notice. Our task would now be to find that point, and as long as we didn't have it, we would be forced to abide in our present destruction.<sup>71</sup>

Through restoring Tom to the narrative, Claudia reverses her own destruction. The diary meaningfully incorporates Tom as a coherent constituent in the Allied sacrifice within the narrative of the present. Whereas Claudia felt: 'He is not lying there any more. He is nowhere now' (128), his being abstract making him a ubiquitous absence and so generating her melancholia, she can now say: 'You are left behind, in another place and another time [...] you are also, now, a part of me [...] Death is total absence, you said. Yes and no. You are not absent so long as you are in my head' (206). Because Tom's death has now already happened, Claudia's life since then is now retrospectively freed of the official dictates which have denied him (because silenced) death and her (overshadowed by the Bomb) life. His death gives her life once she has constructed her own edifice of belief situated between the orthodox ('St George's Pro-Cathedral, Cairo [...] The rituals of the Church of England are observed [...] Claudia makes her own silent isolated squirming intercession [...] Let him not be dead' (57–58)) and the alterity beyond (she 'crosses the road to be alone [...] This is a land ridden by gods, she thinks. A god for every need. She adds, now, some further prayers. She casts her prayers to the dry desert wind, indiscriminately' (59)). She no longer needs to deny what the newspaper says (or reassure herself that it is wrong) since she can replace it with an alternative narrative which legitimates alternative facts and so does not end with the Bomb, thereby freeing her from her nuclear-paranoia. While the goddess Isis, so the myth goes, searched the desert for the pieces of her slain lover Osiris to enable his rebirth as the king of the dead, by composing 'a past that is more myth than history and all the better for it' (189) Claudia reunites the fragments of herself, a Russian doll of many selves, her authentic core hidden from the eyes of the surveillance-state.

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71 Elias Canetti, *The Human Province*, trans. by Joachim Neugroschel (London: Deutsch, 1985), p. 69, quoted in Hegarty, p. 157.

Paradoxically, if the diary *is* written by Claudia, it is more successful than if it had been written by Tom. Tom's real diary has been lost or silenced by the military-censor and cannot help her. If she has created it to serve her interests and then distanced herself from its authorship, her history is freed from pursuing 'truth as something arrived at through the interaction of social and rhetorical contract' and becomes a statement which 'presumes an external authority for truth; its rhetoric *reveals* the Truth [that is, it alludes to alterity], doing so in such a way as to exempt the speech from judgment and present the speaker not as peer but as paragon'.<sup>72</sup> In this way, her work resists being incorporated into normative discourse. As such, Claudia's history is an example of what Nadel calls spiritual testimony in contrast to the forensic testimony which the McCarthyite hearings twisted for their own ends.

By restoring Tom to narrative in this way, Claudia also restores ambiguity to him, recuperating him from the normative account of his life he tells her for one which is not beholden to hegemonic dictates. For all that, like her, he rejects a fixed social-identity, his account of his life is 'not very personal' (79), as if he interprets his experiences through the hegemonic narrative of history, which he perceives is opposed by fantasy (103) rather than personal experience. Tellingly, when he weaves his story of their future domesticity, Claudia is distracted by a bird-of-prey which shares his totalising view (121–22). By recuperating him, she succeeds where Kit in *The Sheltering Sky* failed. Whereas Bowles' creation needed to define herself by (a) society, Claudia reflects that 'unless I am a part of everything I am nothing' (207). She is not beholden to any one version, her interpretation instead drawing on nature and nurture, personal and political, history and myth in her construction of meaning. Claudia is arguably what might be called a Nietzschean *Überfrau*, accepting all the good and bad of the Eternal Return: I 'saw myself in the awful context of time and place; everything and nothing' (187). Her understanding of the world is non-linear ('History is disorder' (152)) and rejects the interpretation of the Eternal Return as an

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<sup>72</sup> Nadel, p. 83.

Apollonian view, a narrative of order and progress (if not actually progressive) in favour of regarding it as repetition without reference to an external authority. While normative, unitary discourse perceives value in uniqueness, Claudia is aware that discourse itself gains authority through repetition within society. Tom's death, in which she places such value, is in truth neither unitary nor instant (which would make it effaceable and meaningless); instead, it is a singularity which she has always carried with her and is always mythically re-living. The fact that she accepts that the hegemonic narrative is a product of its time (thereby displaying a 'Nietzschean "strength to *forget* the past" – in preparation for the mutation of the superman to come – [...] redeployed as a property of storytelling itself')<sup>73</sup> enables her to see beyond the paranoia it seeks to impose.

### **Claudia's last words**

The novel ends with the image of Claudia's death in hospital as life continues oblivious outside her window. Raschke emphasises the indifference of the world towards Claudia's death ('no one will pay much mind to Claudia's death; the world will simply go calmly on. So even what this text most affirms dissolves'),<sup>74</sup> and Mary Hurley Moran considers the unobserved death as ultimately insignificant (only granting that 'although Claudia herself is extinguished at the end of her novel, she too will continue to exist in the form of words').<sup>75</sup> Like Tom,

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73 Fredric Jameson, 'Foreword', in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, by Jean-François Lyotard, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984), pp. vii–xxi (p. xii, emphasis in original).

74 Raschke, p. 130.

75 Mary Hurley Moran, *Penelope Lively* (New York: Twayne, 1993), p. 125, quoted in Raschke, p. 130. Moran's pessimistic interpretation of the death-scene inevitably finds it problematic for the novel. 'As we have seen, Moon Tiger comes close to endorsing solipsism, with its suggestion that the universe is contained inside Claudia's head. This suggestion seems to be vindicated by the novel's ending, in which Claudia dies and, first, an eerie void suddenly replaces the rich human consciousness that had filled the room and, next, the radio time signal clicks on and a mechanical voice begins reading the news to an empty, uncomprehending room, reciting events that are meaningless apart from a human mind reflecting upon them'. However, I would suggest that this reading unwittingly replicates the

therefore, Claudia dies within the State-machinery and the world does not notice. In contrast, this thesis reads the final pages as Claudia's version of the event: she has already acknowledged that she will probably be 'appallingly misrepresented' once she is gone (125), so now composes an end to suit her own ends. Her authoring of her (future) death is the other side of the coin to her continuous reconstruction of her past love-affair in the pre-atomic desert which has sustained her through her years of CND-activism and fears of the Bomb. Read this way, in contrast to existing criticisms' interpretations, *Moon Tiger* itself can be seen as the final work Claudia is writing on her deathbed. Moran considers Claudia to be only contemplating the writing of her final history, and says that 'Penelope Lively has given us, in the form of *Moon Tiger*, the kind of subversive history of the world that Claudia would find most authentic [...] This is precisely the strategy Claudia herself wants to use in her history of the world'. Stacy Burton also interprets Lively's novel as the type of history which Claudia would have imagined, but appears to consider the fact that she did not write it down to be considered a failing. Raschke associates Lively's and Claudia's works more definitely, but again decides that Claudia has only imagined what she wants to write.<sup>76</sup>

The diary has rewritten the narrative spanning the textual poles of Tom's death (event narrativised as non-event) and the Bomb (non-event narrativised as ever-present event); the death-scene now rewrites that defined by the experiential poles of her birth and death, which she connects to the ultimate birth ('My beginnings; the universal beginning' (3); 'In the beginning there was

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solipsism it criticises because it locates the construction of meaning in Claudia's head alone, and not in the world which continues to turn outside her window. See her 'The Novels of Penelope Lively: A Case for the Continuity of the Experimental Impulse in Postwar British Fiction', *South Atlantic Review*, 62 (1997), 101–20 (p. 114).

76 These critics generally stop short of seeing the goings-on around Claudia in the hospital or the death-scene as also parts of her final history. See Mary Hurley Moran, 'Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger*: A Feminist "History of the World"', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 11 (1990), 89–95 (p. 91). Stacy Burton, 'Bakhtin, Temporality and Modern Narrative: Writing the "Whole Triumphant Murderous Unstoppable Chute"', *Comparative Literature*, 48 (1996), 39–64 (p. 59). Raschke, p. 116.

myself' (187)) and, by extension, her death to the ultimate death of the Bomb (when 'history will indeed come to an end' (13)).

Claudia's authorship of her own death wrestles back authority over it from the nuclear-state. Jacques Derrida writes that the Bomb will end discourse,<sup>77</sup> but here Claudia demonstrates that she has pre-emptive capabilities. By defining her own death, Claudia replaces the experience with an alternative narrative which defuses the Bomb hanging over her. Drawing on Bataille's *The Accursed Share*, Baudrillard's thinking casts Claudia's death (and Tom's absent death) as an unanswerable resistance to the hegemonic narrative: 'the challenge [...] must take the form of death, as only in the sacrifice of death can the slowly administered death [that is, living under the threat of the Bomb] be disrupted or annulled'. It has value in 'not demanding anything other than the recognition of the challenge itself'.<sup>78</sup> As Bataille argues, gift-giving (in this case, of the challenge) has the virtue of surpassing the subject who gives but, in exchange for the ambiguity given, the subject appropriates the surpassing<sup>79</sup> and in this way Claudia creates a myth larger than her own or the hegemony's narrative.

Claudia's description of her death focuses on the inanimate objects of her hospital room. The novel has already examined how words give one agency over the world, and so this inventory can be interpreted as investing her with control: 'The power of the bomb is ruled by the power of the word, and only by continual de-construction of the world will we avoid the destruction of the world'.<sup>80</sup> However, she also feels tension with that control, most obviously in how it constructs meaning. Instead, by naming her environment, Claudia might be drawing on words' referentiality ('bed, chair, table, picture, vase, cupboard, window, curtain' (41)) to create a space for the alterity which they cannot

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77 Derrida, p. 26.

78 Hegarty, p. 42. See Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, p. 39.

79 Hegarty, p. 39. See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, trans. by Robert Hurley, 3 vols (New York: Zone, 1991), I, p. 69.

80 David Dowling, *Fictions of Nuclear Disaster* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1987), p. 208.

contain: the central absence, her uncontainable excess of meaning.<sup>81</sup> 'And within the room a change has taken place. It is empty. Void. It has the stillness of a place in which there are only inanimate objects: metal, wood, glass, plastic. No life' (207–08).

Critics argue that Claudia's final history is ultimately conservative<sup>82</sup> and it might be claimed that, for all that she challenges the official narrative, her textual containment of death for her own ends ultimately mirrors the nuclear-state's attempt to contain and employ its citizens' fear of apocalypse. Indeed, as Douglas writes, 'as long as life is chronological, in other words, as long as we all die [...] history will in some way honor narrative and even metanarrative'.<sup>83</sup> However, the referential function of the words Claudia uses (see quote from page 41 above) means that we must accept responsibility for the effect we have on the world<sup>84</sup> and recognise that it does not exist purely in the service of our own ends, as the Cold Warriors regarded everything from the sub-atomic to the interstellar. The final scene serves to reinforce this idea when it is read as Claudia's creation, since the description of the world outside her window continuing to turn after her death then asserts that the axes of any narrative do not contain that which makes life meaningful.<sup>85</sup> The real story goes on beyond the limits of history, beyond the community of the campfire which illuminates the storyteller within each listener's mind. The raindrops on the window distort her view of the world outside, but she is aware that there is an outside and does not try to project her

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81 In this way, Claudia becomes a truly postmodern writer. Jean-François Lyotard considered the function of the postmodern was to create 'allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented' (Lyotard, p. 81).

82 See Valdimarsdóttir, p. 4.

83 Douglas, p. 74.

84 Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 149. See also Leonard M. Scigaj, 'Contemporary Ecological and Environmental Poetry: *Différance* or *Référence*?', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 3 (1996), 1–25 (p. 6).

85 Shortly before he dies of cancer, Claudia's brother Gordon 'talks of events that have not yet come about and sees light and texture, the kaleidoscope of fruit outside a greengrocer [...] And all this will go on, he thinks. And on, and on.' (186). Although this appears to mirror Claudia's death-scene, Gordon views these practices as incidents within a grand narrative. Claudia, on the other hand, thinks about the spectacle (not in the Baudrillardian sense, but in the common, Big-Top sense), the multiplicity of different stories yet to be told.

own images on to it. '[A]s the sun comes out it catches the drops and they flash with colour [...] Claudia gazes at this; it is as though the spectacle has been laid on for her pleasure and she is filled with elation, a surge of joy, of well-being, of wonder' (207). This distortion is what makes the world as brilliant and endlessly interesting as a kaleidoscope. She asserts the presence of the world over the absence of absence:

within the room a change has taken place. It is empty. Void. It has the stillness of a place in which there are only inanimate objects: metal, wood, glass, plastic. No life [...] Beyond the window a car starts up, an aeroplane passes overhead. The world moves on (207–08).

Try as the State might, she is determined that speculative nuclear-armageddon is not going to ruin anyone's day.

By thus acknowledging the world around her, Claudia replaces the definite endpoint of a single, linear narrative favoured by hegemonic discourse with a diffusion of equal stories, 'the present in all its open-endedness'.<sup>86</sup> As Miss World says, destiny is what you make of it (171). Claudia is the product and producer of history, acting like a refracting-lens on which the multiplicity of (past) events falls and is directed onwards as one of a multiplicity of (possible) narratives. She, the chronicler, is like the multiplicity which radiates from the medallion on a seafarer's map, which is always placed where the authority's knowledge ends. By denying closure, she denies the closure which the nuclear-state arrogates over her life, and compels the reader to question the construction of meaning. Her final history is *the* final history: history ends, but life endures, and myth will always make it meaningful.

If the final pages are Claudia's authoring of her own death, it prompts the question whether the history is written at all. If it exists only in her head, her final testimony would, paradoxically, from a Baudrillardian perspective be a more-effective challenge to the hegemonic system, since it would evade all risk of

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<sup>86</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981), p. 7.

being incorporated into the authorised narrative as evidence against her (for example, as the ramblings of an 'ungodly foulmouthed old woman with a bloodcurdling record of adultery and blasphemy' (30)).

Speaking of herself in the third-person, she seemingly adheres to the hegemonic discourse but, since it is she who is speaking of herself in this way, she simultaneously speaks across it, distancing herself from imposed identity (like Stencil in Pynchon's *V.*), preventing the hegemonic narrative from imposing its sentence on her. In this way, she escapes paranoia about the (merely textual) Bomb. Furthermore, if she is replacing her death-scene with words *in* the event itself – as Michael Ondaatje's English patient says, 'Death means you are in the third person'<sup>87</sup> – she truly has attained alterity outside normative dictates, exceeding the alterity of the diary (which adheres to the logic that Tom cannot compose his own death-scene after the event). The ambiguity (of *whether* she is dead and *of* her death) is a further denial of closure which compels the reader to question imposed narratives of the self. This possibility makes her testimony a myth the reader cannot but choose to believe. In short, if Claudia did not exist, Lively would have to invent her.

### **Conclusion: Moon tiger, burning bright**

*Moon Tiger* traces Claudia's active production of meaning in the face of the expected passive consumption on which the myths of the global confrontation were founded forty years earlier. Her account of her life negotiates what Taylor calls 'the tension between cultural forgetting and the uncontrollable, dreamlike eruptions of lived nuclear history'<sup>88</sup> but, by rewriting history to fragment constructed binary-oppositions into multiplicities, she articulates a capacity to simultaneously honour and forget historical knowledge in order to construct a meaning for life. Only allusion to that which lies beyond the system has the

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<sup>87</sup> Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), p. 247.

<sup>88</sup> Taylor, 'Nuclear Pictures', p. 573.



potential to free us from imposed narratives and enable us to desert society. While, according to Baudrillard, this leaves us with nothing but illusion, Claudia's history is a *vital* illusion,<sup>89</sup> one that is aware of its own fiction and which she nevertheless chooses to believe, forever being drawn back to it for a light by which to navigate the otherwise meaningless world. As she says to the Tom in her head, '[y]our voice is louder now than the narrative I know – or think that I know' (206). It speaks over the hegemonic narrative's previous silencing of its disruptive reality, the flame of the moon tiger shines brighter than the fire of the Bomb.

'The Moon Tiger is a green coil that slowly burns all night, repelling mosquitoes, dropping away into lengths of grey ash, its glowing red eye a companion of the hot insect-rasping darkness' (75). Like the glow of the flame, Claudia is never fixed, being instead a point moving across a reflexive spectrum, progressing but not beholden to the myth of progress, 'a necklace of moments' (139). A moon/tiger herself, she embodies traits deemed both feminine and masculine which were only truly balanced in the crucible of the desert. Her memories, her sense of self, forever circle the kaleidoscopic lens which captures a freeze-frame projection of a truth she chooses to believe, a map by which she navigates the life which, seen from her deathbed, 'is not linear but instant' (68). Existing outside temporal narrative, it thus cuts across the nuclear-fuse running from the end of grand narrative, which prohibits Tom a meaningful death, to the end of history, which precludes meaning for all.

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89 Hegarty, pp. 83–84.

## Conclusion.

### Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992) and Deserting the Desert in the Shadow of New Threats

The Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, leaving the United States as the world's only superpower and spelling an end to the stand-off which had spawned such paranoia in the societies of both East and West. Moscow had already declared a moratorium on atomic-testing the previous year, and Washington was to follow in 1992. That year also saw the publication of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, another story of a Westerner seeking to escape their home-society for the potential of the Sahara. Although published after the Cold War, the novel had taken six years to write<sup>1</sup> and, I suggest, reflects the uncertainty and upheavals of this time of political thaw and fragmentation. In a similar manner to *Moon Tiger's* portrayal of the Second World War, this text looks back to the end of that conflict in order to acquire a perspective on the shifts and easing of tensions which accompanied Gorbachev's leadership and pursuit of *glasnost*. However, while Penelope Lively shows how her historian can transcend the forces which try to contain her, *The English Patient* presents both another historian and the writer striving but ultimately failing to flee the shadow of the status quo.

Determined to make a home away from the nation-states he so despises, the title character Almásy tries to ignore the flames of the world war licking at the edges of his desert. Even before the conflagration overruns the Sahara, the small, self-avowedly apolitical international community whose fringes he inhabits betrays political loyalties. Indeed, his most important work – locating a site of antiquity – is dependent on the use of an aeroplane which turns out to be the property of British intelligence. Contrary to much existing criticism, my analysis of the novel reads Almásy's supranationalism not as an apolitical

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1 Willem Dafoe, 'Michael Ondaatje', *BOMB – Artists in Conversation*, Winter 1997  
<<http://bombmagazine.org/article/2029/michael-ondaatje>> [accessed 2 September 2015]

humanism but Eurocentric supremacism, based primarily on a canon of Classical narratives of self and Other. As Qadri Ismail has pointed out, the texts he frequently cites on his sick-bed, such as *The Last of the Mohicans* and *Kim*, 'are directly implicated in the justification of Western imperialism and divisive nationalist discourses',<sup>2</sup> while his principal touchstone for engaging with the world is *The Histories* by Herodotus, which Rebecca Stefoff classifies as a key element of the Ancient Greek suprapstate project.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, his edition of Herodotus is an English production, a translation from 1890 and so a contemporary of the war against the Boers who contested British imperial certainties (it was also the first war in which journalists were embedded with troops, created a new way of writing history). In other words, it is not so removed from the world of modern nation-states and their political battles as it might appear. These texts are as much what Lilijana Burcar calls 'ideological platforms' as are nation-states, as much what Bryan Taylor terms 'performances of nationalist resolve' as are nuclear-weapons.<sup>4</sup> It is through such discourse that Almásy constructs his own fixed narrative to contain the world around him. In the case of the Herodotus, his notes written in its margins are literally circumscribed by its accepted authority.

In Almásy's world-view, meaning is fixed at the moment of production rather than reception ('you must read Kipling slowly. Watch carefully where the commas fall so you can discover the natural pauses [...] Your eye is too quick and

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- 2 Qadri Ismail, 'Discipline and Colony: *The English Patient* and the Crow's Nest of Post Coloniality', *Postcolonial Studies*, 12 (1999), 403–36, described in Lilijana Burcar, 'Re-Mapping Nation, Body and Gender in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*', in *The Flesh Made Text Made Flesh: Cultural and Theoretical Returns to the Body*, ed. by Zoe Detsi-Diamanti, Katerina Kitsi-Mitakou and Effie Yiannopoulou (New York: Peter Lang: 2007), pp. 99–110 (p. 102). This is also examined in Stephanie M. Hilger, 'Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Rewriting History', *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 6 (2004), 1–9 (p. 2) <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1246&context=clweb>> [accessed 21 February 2012].
  - 3 Rebecca Stefoff, *The British Library Companion to Maps and Mapmaking* (London: British Library, 1995), p. 27.
  - 4 Burcar, p. 102; Bryan C. Taylor, 'Nuclear Pictures and Metapictures', *American Literary History*, 9 (1997), 567–97 (p. 567).

North American. Think about the speed of his pen')<sup>5</sup> and this is no less the case with regard to his burnt body erased of all identifying features. His wealth of references all arrive at the same conclusion, and its ostensible heterogeneity is only a strategy to extend his power, just as the US' promotion of democracy around the world aided the expansion of its influence during the Cold War.<sup>6</sup>

The story which revolves around this figure is a contest between authoritarian dictates and dialogic experience. In Almásy, Ondaatje crafts a character striving to cling on to history as its demise licks at the edges of his writing-desk, while the other displaced people sharing the Tuscan convent look to the future.<sup>7</sup> Of these, Caravaggio alone can see past the patient's words since he was in Egypt at the time of the recounted events. He does not contradict the other's narrative, but instead identifies the speaker as Almásy, thereby connecting the awe-inspiring Nazi-collaborator with the dying scholar in their midst. In this way, Caravaggio brings death into and so undermines the invalid's formidable system of control. Pulled down from his Apollonian heights, the historian becomes a mere man with limits, the site at which others can meet and relate to him on equal terms. In Baudrillardian fashion, Caravaggio does not seek to accomplish anything more.

The younger generation, represented by Hana and Kip, have no comparable power to counter the patient's prescription. For all Ondaatje's postcolonial credentials, the contest he sets out 'between old-age humanism – the patient – and the new age of Kip[,] a historical moment that remapped the world, when the balance shifted from colonialism',<sup>8</sup> itself topples over under the

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5 Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), p. 94. All subsequent references to the novel will appear in the text in parentheses.

6 Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), p. 7.

7 For the sense of futurity expressed in literature following the Cold War, see Daniel Grausam, "It is Only a Statement of the Power of What Comes After": Atomic Nostalgia and the Ends of Postmodernism', *American Literary History*, 24 (2012), 308–36

8 Maya Jaggi, 'The Soul of a Migrant', *Guardian*, 29 April 2000  
<[www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/apr/29/fiction.features](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/apr/29/fiction.features)> [accessed 10 March 2012]

weight of a problem which is exposed by the glare of Hiroshima's destruction.

Three years before the *Enola Gay* took off on her historic mission, Almásy bails out of a malfunctioning aircraft over the desert. He survives, but is grievously burnt, which effectively compounds the desired erasure of his Hungarian national identity. In its final pages, the novel catches up with Little Boy, a weapon that does not sit on the historical continuum of conflict which the scholar commands so effectively (contrary to the boiling oil proposed by German officers which makes the campaign of 1943–44 '[t]he last mediaeval war [...] fought in Italy' (69)). The reverberations of the blast can be read back through the novel, tinting preceding events with the atomic dawn. The inhabitants of the Tuscan shelter do not survive unscathed, as Caravaggio's deformities, Hana's miscarriage and Kip's experience of being chalked as a new recruit (as if he himself were one of the ordnances he is being trained to defuse) all acquire a nuclear-dimension. The patient, of course, becomes a victim of the Bomb, a living corpse, forever burning, caught eternally in the moment of the explosion, as Robert Lifton and Greg Mitchell describe the survivors of Hiroshima.<sup>9</sup> However, the cultural-imperialist is more than a victim: forever falling from his aeroplane, he is also the perpetrator of the suffering. After all, the only foliage which can survive in his presence are the murals in his room, already flattened yet also idealised like the atomic-future which promised to contain the public of the 1950s as safely as a convent's walls. The burnt man is a denotation of detonation like an image of a mushroom cloud, irradiating his audience with a sense of awed respect and consequent compliance. It is for this reason that Almásy must be identified and buried if the new age Ondaatje promotes is to have its day. However, he continues to contaminate the world, and the totalising narratives of his age persist in this time of uncertainty.

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9 Referred to in Taylor, p. 578. For how paranoia collapses past and future into an all-consuming, self-aware present, creating the desire for both multiplicity and stability, see Stephen O'Donnell, *Latent Destinies: Cultural Paranoia and Contemporary US Narrative* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2000).

The young Indian, Kirpal, is fragmented and re-coordinated as Kip by the British military, and particularly the paternal Lord Suffolk, to become a dutiful son maintaining the hegemonic status quo. As a character, he is the product of institutions of received Western power-knowledge, being formed by the regimented training of the army and then birthed into the novel through the broken wall of the library in Tuscany (the home of the Renaissance which ultimately produces Almásy). The damage has been caused by a mortar-shell, the practical application of this same wisdom, its narrative of violence embodied in the tomes along the walls and so literally circumscribing the natural world which can be glimpsed through the hole. In contrast to the interior stillness of this Western cultural space, the brown man's active life is affiliated with the outdoor elements of mud, water and air. While the patient is the author of his history of transcendent art and love and so can stand above it, Kip's experiences are grounded in the spatial and temporal coordinates of scientific military manoeuvres.

Equipped with a field-radio, it is Kip who relays to his companions the reports of the 'tremor[s] of Western wisdom' (284) which have levelled two Eastern cities, Ondaatje's wording calling to mind John Hersey's aside in *Hiroshima* that, 'in the first moment of the atomic age, a human being was crushed by books'.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, it is through Kip's vivid thoughts that the reader learns the news. 'If he closes his eyes he sees the streets of Asia full of fire. It rolls across cities like a burst map, the hurricane of heat withering bodies as it meets them, the shadow of humans suddenly in the air' (284): his imagining of the experience, which becomes the reader's, removes the geographic and technological detachment (even if, significantly, it is the European who suffers from the flames). Kip confronts the learned Westerner, demanding to know where humanity lies in this desolation: 'American, French, I don't care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you're an Englishman' (286). The assault on Japan has exposed Almásy's supranational but totalising and self-

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<sup>10</sup> John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (London and New York: Penguin, 1946), p. 31.

interested authority which many critics read as anti-authoritarianism.<sup>11</sup> The patient offers no response and, indeed, after this moment he is not ascribed direct speech for the rest of the novel. Confronted with the annihilation of the Oriental Other, the only suitable response is his own death.

Kip departs, wondering if the brother who has fought British imperial rule has not been right all along. However, a motorcycle accident throws him from the metalled road and into a river, reconnecting him to the elements to which he has so long been billeted and reverting him to his acceptable identity and the foot of his mentor (and not, say, his Canadian lover Hana).

Around three a.m. [the patient] feels a presence in the room. He sees, for a pulse of a moment, a figure at the foot of his bed, against the wall or painted onto it perhaps, not quite discernible in the darkness of foliage beyond the candlelight. He mutters something, something he had wanted to say, but there is silence and the slight brown figure, which could be just a night shadow, does not move [...] And he would not be so lucky, he thinks, to speak to the young sapper again.

He stays awake in any case this night, to see if the figure moves towards him [...] If the figure turns around there will be paint on his back, where he slammed in grief against the mural of trees. When the candle dies out he will be able to see this.

His hand reaches out slowly and touches his book and returns to his dark chest. Nothing else moves in the room (298).

Told from the patient's perspective, the scene literally paints Kip as an exotic simulation at the edges of the story. The dreamlike nature of the homecoming removes all context and consequences, but perhaps this is the only way to sustain a belief in the possibility of people from different parts of the world forging a community in the face of the West's destruction of that world.

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11 Nicola Renger acknowledges the tensions between the two men but does not really seize on their source. She does say that '[t]he imaginary homeland [Kip] has built for himself is destroyed in the nuclear explosion and, in response, Kip attacks the representative of this betrayal, Almásy' but then defuses the confrontation she sets up by stressing the two men's similarity that, '[a]s migrants, Almásy and Kip have cut their filiative bonds to redefine themselves, but, because the world has no place for "international bastards," they face betrayal' by the status quo. See 'Cartography, Historiography, and Identity in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*,' in *Being/s in Transit: Travelling, Migration, Dislocation*, ed. by Liselotte Glage (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 111–24 (pp. 121–22).

Most commentators do not address this reconciliation. Lesley Higgins and Marie-Christine Leps, for example, discuss the preceding scene but skip over it entirely to look at the epilogue. Ahmad Abu Baker limits his discussion of the events following the news from Japan to the observation that the atrocities committed by the Nazis pale in comparison to the crimes of imperialism and the A-bomb, which is problematic given the novel's cautious optimism in the postwar world-order centred on America and the decolonised nations, personified in Hana and Kip. Alice Brittan does examine it and concludes that it disrupts the spatial binary of the A-bomb and thereby champions the precedence of interpersonal connections. However, this does not approach Kip's apparent conformism. Indeed, the ultimate legacy of his decision seems to be, from a reading of her article, the perfect synchronisation of Hana and Kip's falling kitchenware on separate continents thirteen years later which – even when the table-knives are read as mass-produced weapons plummeting to earth – perhaps takes the maxim that the personal is political a step too far.<sup>12</sup>

Josef Pesch is one of the few critics who acknowledges that the scene is problematic and that the cultural divide cannot be bridged. However, his conclusion that '[c]ulture and rationality may not be an ideal basis for mutual exchange and understanding, but without them attempts at negotiating with the foreign and the other are even less promising'<sup>13</sup> seems to overlook a number of points. The novel has already noted that there is 'no reason' or rationality in this time of war (50), while the construct of the Other would seem to preclude any such connection on these bases, and also take the argument back to the binaries which the novel is seeking to dismantle.

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12 Lesley Higgins and Marie-Christine Leps, "'Passport, Please': Legal, Literary, and Critical Fictions of Identity', *College Literature*, 25 (1998), 94–138 (pp. 122–23); Ahmad M. S. Abu Baker, 'Maps in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*', *Nebula: A Journal of Multidisciplinary Scholarship*, 5 (2008), 98–109 (p. 107) <[www.nobleworld.biz/images/Abu\\_Baker3.pdf](http://www.nobleworld.biz/images/Abu_Baker3.pdf)> [accessed 3 March 2012]; Alice Brittan, 'War and the Book: The Diarist, the Cryptographer, and *The English Patient*', *PMLA*, 121 (2006), 200–13 (p. 210).

13 Josef Pesch, 'Cultural Clashes?: East Meets West in Michael Ondaatje's Novels', in *Across the Lines: Intertextuality and Transcultural Communication in the New Literatures in English*, ed. by Wolfgang Kloos (Amsterdam: Adopi, 1998), pp. 65–76 (p. 73).



Of course, this reading argues that the novel tries to achieve this by making the Oriental Other the same as the Occidental self. Kip's return restores the status quo and endorses the European's supremacy. The 'presence in the room' might be a figment of the patient's (guilty? slighted?) imagination, but it is perceived from his perspective – and Kip remains passive – and so this distinction is ultimately irrelevant. The scene maintains the ambiguity crucial to imperial power. It comes to an end as the English patient's 'hand reaches out slowly and touches his book and returns to his dark chest' (298):<sup>14</sup> the Western narrative of both the book and the dying cultural-imperialist who here identifies with it maintains the ambivalence inherent to the interracial encounter at the end of the colonial age. Irrespective of how Ondaatje describes the novel ('a debate that remapped the world, when the balance shifted from colonialism'), the climactic rapprochement reads more as complicity with Western authority, instruction rather than conversation, this *hierarchic* community having been forged and now being renewed through a European world-view.

Consequently, the character of Kip, the embodiment of the new, post-imperialist age, is no more than lip-service to a heterogeneous world. It is because of a personal relationship with a Westerner that he kindles a faith in books; in the light of the A-bomb which drops into his world, he sees that this relationship is predicated on Western power-knowledge, and severs it. He then returns to the relationship *because of the Western narrative*, although he has faith in this *only on account of this relationship*. His loyalty to the Western project is a closed system. Constructed on logic without reason, it is self-justifying and so self-negating in the manner of the MAD doctrine of the Cold War. The proud status of being an 'international bastard' (176) is just a fairy-tale if you return to claim your father's legacy; you must walk away from the texts

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<sup>14</sup> It is not explicit whether the book is *The Histories* or *Kim* (or another text). I imagine it is the Kipling, given that this has been the textual bridge between the two men. Abu Baker suggests that it is Herodotus on the grounds of J. J. Clarke's reflection (although he attributes it to Stephen Batchelor) that Herodotus encapsulates the origin of the enmity between East and West (p. 101, referring to J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 4).

you have inherited from the old order to build your own community.

For all that the members of the younger generation regard truth to be relational (writing their own meanings of the patient's body against his wishes, Hana finding a surrogate father, Kip another mentor), the old dictates shape their engagement with the world and one another. Although Hana's last recorded words to Kip give a name to the thread which connects them ('Love is so small it can tear itself through the eye of a needle' (288)), she is only repeating what she has learned from her bedridden pedagogue. Their failure to escape the dictates of the war-ravaged world is evident in the final paragraphs of the novel, which portrays Hana and Kip as prescribed by the moral-geographic dictates of the British Commonwealth. In Stephanie Hilger's words, this situation comprises 'a new kind of imprisonment [which] make[s] Caravaggio's earlier statement that "the trouble with all of us is we are where we shouldn't be" (122) appear as a dark prophecy'.<sup>15</sup> While Hilger ultimately sees this conclusion to the novel in a positive light,<sup>16</sup> by accepting unproblematically Ondaatje's narrational leap from 1945 to 1958 (which glosses over the horrors of Partition to present a harmonious moral geography of a relatively peaceful moment in Nehru's push for a South Asian socialism) the ambivalence which her article proposes promotes a hegemonic status quo rather than the interests of the individual. The younger generation has surmounted the restrictions of the nation-state only to find itself identified by a model received ready-defined by the former imperialists rather than developed through dialogic, collaborative experience. By superseding (regional, ethnic, cultural) self-determination, this supranational community reinforces the ideological essentialisms of the Cold War world, and the thread which connects the couple is hardly a grounds for practical change.

While thus conforming to the Western narrative tradition which has

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<sup>15</sup> Hilger, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> '[I]t provides the reader with the possibility to participate in the writing of history and therefore also in the shaping of the future [...] Binaries establish oppositions which eventually give way to the ambivalence of the historical process, thereby undermining any rigidly established barrier', Hilger, p. 8.

served the model of the nation-state, Ondaatje makes a gesture of departure by now stepping into the text to acknowledge that the author is not omniscient. He grants Hana freedom with the reflection that '[s]he is a woman I don't know well enough to hold in my wing, if writers have wings, to harbour for the rest of my life' (301). With this intrusion, Ondaatje reveals that he is subscribing to a framework which is inadequate to contain the world since it does not take into account the multiplicitous world. In this way, he is like his title character, and both fail where Penelope Lively succeeds, if *Moon Tiger* is read as Claudia's history. Speaking from beyond 1945, the writer here comprises the real or, in Alan Nadel's words, spiritual authority which gives his hypothesis of hope its worth.<sup>17</sup> However, given his confessed limitations, this authority is unstable, a fact which brings a lack or death into his narrative system. The novel cannot provide a unifying frame for all the testimonies and truths he presents: it is another master narrative which fragments in the age of the Bomb. This would not be a problem if he embraced the uncertainty of the new age but, for all that Ondaatje lets Hana fly his page, he circumscribes her with the political status quo around it by entrusting her to the Commonwealth. Again mirroring Almásy, the semblance of democracy Ondaatje presents is really its opposite, and his profession of powerlessness mirrors the ambiguity which welcomes Kip back to the fold. The author is melancholic for a stable authority; like his scholar, he wants meaning to be fixed at the moment of production.

While Ondaatje shows that individuals can dialogically engage with received narratives despite the intentions of the producing authority, they remain circumscribed by its power. Furthermore, he acknowledges the limits of (his own) authority. Taken together, these two points seem to destabilise both the postwar world in which individuals live and its hegemonic narrative of Cold War. The fact that the author ultimately conforms to narrative tradition, however, gives rise to the question of whether this state of uncertainty is not just another story pasted on to the world, in reality as authoritarian as the powers it

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<sup>17</sup> See Nadel, pp. 60ff.

disavows. Consequently, it would be a mistake to dismiss the political hegemony operating through totalising narratives as a rambling, broken man dying in an abandoned institution, since the new community on the terrace outside is still dancing to his tune.



The tensions in *The English Patient* and the other texts analysed signal what Daniel Grausam has called 'the multiple and incomplete ends of the Cold War'<sup>18</sup> which, I suggest, occurred for the individual before 1991 no less than they have seemed illusory for political states since then. After all, the effective and widely accepted end of the Cold War came when the Soviet Union disbanded, thereby conceding defeat, meaning that it ultimately played out in convention with traditional, rather than atomic, warfare.<sup>19</sup> However, while the Cold War did not spell the end of humanity, neither did it bring an end to war.

Indeed, it was the bilateral fear of 'unprecedented threats and [...] risks to our security' owing to a new state of war which heralded what can arguably be considered the official end to the confrontation. Following the attacks on New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon, a summit between NATO and the Russian Federation in May 2002 thus declared 'a new page in [their] relations' which would allow them to strengthen their 'ability to work together in areas of common interest and to stand together against common threats'.<sup>20</sup>

The fears and tropes which have arisen from the events of 11th September 2001 are strikingly similar to those which grew out of the Western public-awareness of the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Just as, in Suzanne Clark's words, 'news of the nuclear aftermath entered everyday life not as a

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<sup>18</sup> Grausam, p. 311.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth and The Abolition* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), pp. vi–vii.

<sup>20</sup> NATO Office of Information and Press, *NATO–Russia Council Rome Summit 2002* <[www.nato.int/docu/comm/2002/0205-rome/rome-eng.pdf](http://www.nato.int/docu/comm/2002/0205-rome/rome-eng.pdf)> [accessed 2 September 2015] The quotes come from the summit declaration, p. 2. See also 'Address by Costas Simitis, Prime Minister of Greece', p. 33: 'Today marks the formal ending of the Cold War'.

thoughtful reflection on national responsibility[...], but as a threat to American futures',<sup>21</sup> the danger of another attack on Western interests has been perceived to be clear and present for much of the last fourteen years, for all that it is nebulous. In his study of literature's response to the global Cold War, Andrew Hammond underlines the analogies between the two eras explicitly:

[i]n many ways, the crises, inquiries and concerns [...] between 1945 and 1989 are those of our own times, particularly after '9/11' [...]. In the post-CW era, the resurgent neoliberalism, the Manichean worldview, the continual conflict abroad, the militarization of public life and the crushing of dissent, [...] have altered little since the 1980s, and although the terminology may have changed – from 'interventionism' to 'regime change', from 'red threat' to 'global terror' – the political landscape remains the same. The sense of helplessness [...] remains, with no 'third way' clearly emerging between the forces of an American-led West and the entity it chooses to confront.<sup>22</sup>

While the danger is not exclusively atomic, the threat remains. A pervasive menace is the terrorist group armed with a biological or nuclear-weapon. While commentators claim it is highly unlikely that a terrorist group will acquire the Bomb,<sup>23</sup> the huge consequences of this slim possibility means that it nevertheless consumes people's thoughts and produces their paranoia. If such an instance were to occur, the common rational restraint on which the

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21 Suzanne Clark, *Cold Warriors: Manliness on Trial in the Rhetoric of the West* (Carbondale, Southern Illinois U, 2000), p. 98. In *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*, Paul Boyer details how even the first hours and days of victory over Japan were shot through with the consciousness that it was only a matter of time before another country – in all likelihood Russia – acquired the technology to build a Bomb and direct it against the United States (Chapel Hill and London: U of North Carolina P, 1994).

22 Andrew Hammond, 'From Rhetoric to Rollback: Introductory Thoughts on Cold War Writing', in *Cold War Literature: Writing the Global Conflict*, ed. by Andrew Hammond (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1–14 (pp. 11–12). Seen in this light, the Cold War and the War on Terror appear as simulations of peril which control society and the individual through fear and paranoia. There are of course limits to the parallels which can constructively be drawn, as Daniel Grausam has pointed out. His article 'Atomic Nostalgia' is a good introduction to the links and disjoints between the Cold War and the War on Terror.

23 Jason Burke, "'There is No Silver Bullet': Isis, al-Qaida and the Myths of Terrorism', *Guardian*, 19 August 2015 <[www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/19/isis-al-qaida-myths-terrorism-war-mistakes-9-11](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/19/isis-al-qaida-myths-terrorism-war-mistakes-9-11)> [accessed 19 August 2015] Documents released by Wikileaks – itself a reminder of the continuing fight to control the narrative – quote the concerns of Russia's Foreign Ministry regarding the very real possibility of this happening in Pakistan. Warren Buffett, arguably the most successful analyst in history, believes that a nuclear-strike on a US city is 'inevitable'.

Cold War superpowers relied to avoid catastrophe could not be counted on. The same mindset is often ascribed to 'rogue' states reporting advances in atomic-technology, such as North Korea and Iran. Alongside and at times entangled with this, conventional Cold War militarism persists. Arguably more than at any time since 1991, the front pages are reporting tensions and violations of non-proliferation or disarmament agreements between the West and Russia and hosting the fight to control the narrative.

Such concerns are cited as reasons against nuclear-abolition or even further disarmament, and the statements from the five official nuclear-powers at a United Nations' non-proliferation treaty review-conference in April–May 2015 were as non-committal as they have ever been. Thus, with the recent seventieth anniversary of the Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki marking seventy years of calls for the abolition of atomic-weapons, while the likelihood of a global holocaust has decreased, the world remains closer to Ground Zero than 'zero nuke'.<sup>24</sup>

The authors of annihilation in the Western popular imagination of the early twenty-first century are less identifiable than they were during the late-twentieth, a symptom of an unprecedented proliferation of narratives of self and Other. Their agents are more diverse – not necessarily nuclear – and so the fear

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24 Regarding the idea that the threat of human extinction has receded, see Grausam, p. 332 note 7. Nevertheless, apart from during the most-intense period of thermonuclear-testing on both sides of the Iron Curtain in the early 1950s, the doomsday clock is closer to midnight than ever, although it does take into account factors such as global warming and accidents at weapons-sites and power stations. Eric Schlosser has reported extensively on numerous instances which have come close to causing inadvertent armageddon in the belief that we are aware of the horror but do not appreciate the danger. He persuasively contends that, as the Nuclear Club expands, such a disaster is increasingly probable (see his *Command and Control: Nuclear Weapons, the Damascus Accident, and the Illusion of Safety* (New York: Penguin, 2013) and *Gods of Metal* (New York: Penguin, 2015)). That said, he is ultimately optimistic about humanity's survival, unlike Jonathan Schell, author of *The Fate of the Earth*, who believed that, with the genie out of the bottle, it is only a matter of time before it wreaks havoc. Accidents and misunderstandings between nuclear-states were two of the reasons to abolish nuclear-weapons presented by the 2014 'Vienna Pledge' which was signed by over a hundred countries. In the first months of his presidency, Barack Obama called for renewed global-effort to rid the world of the Bomb, but openly admitted that he did not expect this to be achieved in his lifetime.

they induce is further abstracted from any psychologically containable menace. As a consequence, any study of how Western culture and the individual negotiate paranoia is surely as pertinent as ever, and it is hoped that this thesis has provided some useful suggestions as to how this might be undertaken. The Bomb has been deposed as the principal threat to society, or at least has to share this distinction with other terrors, and the specifically nuclear-tinge of public paranoia has faded, the existence of atomic-weapons normalised, to produce a complacency comparable to that pertaining to 'flu.<sup>25</sup> The danger of the Bomb, so long hanging over the public, has fallen from the popular imagination.

What *does* occupy the popular imagination, however, is the North African world with which the thesis has concerned itself. As much as ever, this arid sector is a site of destruction and salvation, a source of paranoia and potential freedom in the Western mind, its challenges and resources equally contested by today's neo-imperialist superpowers. Continuing unrest – both sympathetic and hostile to the West – across the Sahara consolidates its identity as a node on an axis of troubled and troubling desert-regions across Africa and the Middle East<sup>26</sup> which is increasingly both ensnaring Westerners – those who have escaped their

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25 As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, when a nuclear-warhead is detonated off the Miami waterfront in the 1994 American film *True Lies* (dir. by James Cameron (20th Century Fox, 1994)) – that year's third-highest grossing film both in the US and worldwide – it is not even accorded centre-stage and is little more than a cymbal-sting for comedic effect. See Box Office Mojo, '1994 Domestic Grosses' <[www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=1994&p=.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=1994&p=.htm)> [accessed 11 September 2015]; Box Office Mojo, '1994 Worldwide Grosses' <[www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?view2=worldwide&yr=1994&p=.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?view2=worldwide&yr=1994&p=.htm)> [accessed 11 September 2015] More significantly, when Baltimore is obliterated in *The Sum of All Fears* (dir. by Phil Alden Robinson (Paramount Pictures, 2002)), there are no radiation-effects, and certainly no bodies, which takes the presentation of a nuclear-attack back to the principles delimiting American reports of the devastation of Hiroshima. Furthermore, the principal consequence of this – again – marginal event is a bright new era of East–West concord.

26 Significantly, all the countries named by Eisenhower's Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in his definition of the Middle East ('the area lying between and including Libya on the west and Pakistan on the east, Syria and Iraq on the North and the Arabian peninsula to the south, plus the Sudan and Ethiopia') are currently experiencing conflict or have witnessed it since 2001, let alone 1991. Quoted in Roderic H. Davison, 'Where is the Middle East?', *Foreign Affairs* 38 (1960), 665–75 (p. 665). At the time of writing (September 2015), it is increasingly evident that Syria has become a 'hot' battleground on which the West and Russia are each seeking to prove their continuing global influence.

home-societies for a two-week beach-holiday or to wage holy war alike – and haemorrhaging refugees and other migrants into Europe.

The fact that the West can be surprised by this quarter in which it has long involved itself suggests that it needs to consider the region and its own perception of it from new angles if it is to understand the protagonists, ideas and phenomena it is producing and their effects on the rest of the world. To begin with, it would do well to recognise that the limits of its understanding of the Sahara – the frontier of paranoia – are bound up with the limits of its understanding and paranoia about itself. If it does not, it risks condemning itself to wandering in the desert.

The Sahara is thus as culturally relevant to the West as at any time during the colonial or Cold War eras. English-language fiction-writers continue to draw on the canvas the desert offers to work through the problems they perceive in society and express their ambivalence without necessarily reconciling their tensions. In Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* (1999), for example, the Egyptian wilderness is the crucible for postcolonial revisionism. The desert – this time that of ancient Judea – is once again the site of ambiguous spiritual insight in *Quarantine* (1997) by Jim Crace, while a trip – in both senses – involving the American wastes reiterates the potent association with other types of revelation in Douglas Coupland's 'In the Desert' (published in *Life After God* (1994)).

Staying on this continent, Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) takes us to a decommissioned airbase in remotest Nevada for a tantalising episode (a mirage?) at the edge of a narrative very much tied to the lingering vestiges of the Cold War. More recently, neighbouring Arizona provides a perspective on 11th September in *Once in a Promised Land* by Laila Halaby (2007). Kamila Shamsie circles the same concern – among many others – in *Burnt Shadows* (2009), which moves between the wastelands of Nagasaki and Manhattan after 9/11 via the deserts of Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation. Lastly, I should



acknowledge *A Hologram for the King* (2012), Dave Eggers' venture into the Saudi desert of global capitalism.<sup>27</sup>

As is evident from this brief overview, the Sahara and other deserts have not been abundantly cultivated by recent English literature, despite their tropic potential and cultural relevance to the West's concerns, either during the approach to the millennium or in the early twenty-first century. It might be precisely because so many of the West's fears and uncertainties are every day *seen to be* associated with desert-spaces (unlike during the Cold War) that its writers have gone elsewhere. Perhaps the textual desert seems too literal a simulation – that is, too confusable with the world beyond literature – to allow a constructive exploration of their ambivalence and life's ambiguities. However, the desert has long existed at the heart of the stories which society tells itself to make sense of and deal with its fears about the world. While it might be banished to the margins today, its sands will doubtless seep back and fuse with the very nucleus of the West again.

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<sup>27</sup> Ahdaf Soueif, *The Map of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999); Jim Crace, *Quarantine* (London: Penguin, 1997); Douglas Coupland, 'In the Desert', in *Life After God*, by Douglas Coupland (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), pp. 159–214; Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (New York: Scribner 1997); Laila Halaby, *Once in a Promised Land* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007); Kamila Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009); Dave Eggers, *A Hologram for the King* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2012).

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