

**Growing Up Neoliberal:**  
**The *Bildungsroman* Under Neoliberalism**

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## Abstract

Since the 1970s, the world has seen the ascendance of a new form of global capitalism and, underlying it, a new ideology with its own set of core beliefs and assumptions: neoliberalism. The rise of neoliberalism has had a profound effect on society, culture, and life worldwide. This thesis offers an analysis of one part of that broader socio-cultural picture. It explores how a specific cultural form with a particular societal focus, the literary genre of the *Bildungsroman*, has been adapted by authors seeking to use the genre to address the dominant political-social system of their day. The *Bildungsroman* has its roots in the rise of capitalism, and the exploration of certain socio-political problems is central to the genre through its core focus on the relationship between human development, the individual, and society. As such, the rise of a new, dominant form of capitalism has particular significance for it. Taking four novels by four significant authors from across the lifespan of neoliberalism – Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974), David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996), Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003), and Roberto Bolaño’s *2666* (2004) – this thesis examines how each author has sought to examine, reclaim, redeploy, and problematise the genre in order to address neoliberalism. Two key features of neoliberalism are of particular significance here: neoliberal ideology’s individualised models of human behaviour and societal functioning, and neoliberal capitalism’s global dominance and systemic functioning. Each case-study demonstrates something about how these aspects of neoliberalism have overlapped with, co-opted, and undermined core elements that enable the *Bildungsroman* to function as a tool for socio-political exploration and critique, and so about how neoliberalism functions culturally. Through these analyses, this thesis explores not only what neoliberalism can tell us about the *Bildungsroman* but also what the *Bildungsroman* can tell us about neoliberalism.

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Although I offer specific thanks here to a select few, I owe a debt of gratitude to so many more. In a society such as ours, we all depend on numerous others in a myriad ways. No matter how apparently individual, any work, academic or otherwise, is ultimately the product of the labour of far more people than it is possible to thank.

## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

## Introduction

In its simplest form, such a society consists of a number of independent households – a collection of Robinson Crusoes, as it were. Each household uses the resources it controls to produce goods and services that it exchanges for goods and services produced by other households, on terms mutually acceptable to the two parties to the bargain.

Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), 13

Even though the concept of the *Bildungsroman* has become ever more approximate, it is still clear that we seek to indicate with it one of the most harmonious solutions ever offered to a dilemma conterminous with modern bourgeois civilization: the conflict between the ideal of *self-determination* and the equally imperious demands of *socialization*.

Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World* (1987), 15

Writing in 1962, Milton Friedman, one of the key theorists and popularisers of neoliberalism, invoked *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) to demonstrate his vision of the ideal society and concept of freedom.<sup>1</sup> The character of Crusoe is isolated, independent, and rational. He emerges onto the island fully formed, remains constant and unchanging in both his character and his goals as he shapes the world around him to his ends. This island and its resources, it seems, exist entirely to be rationalised, quantified, and used by Crusoe. Using nothing but his own self and the raw materials around him, Crusoe builds a microcosmic world of his own, existing free of any external interference or complication.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (London: Penguin, [1719] 2001).

Crusoe represents a certain ideal of human experience and behaviour, although Friedman's invocation of Crusoe is not quite identical to the original. For one, he calls on Crusoe "(without his Man Friday)", and in so doing avoids addressing the racist, colonial, and exploitative elements of Crusoe's tale.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Friedman speaks of a collection of Crusoes trading amongst themselves – a level of sociality and economy the absence of which is central to the original tale – and goes on to note that the specialisation of labour has brought a level of societal complexity beyond this simple, ideal social vision. Nonetheless, Friedman uses Crusoe as an inspiration, calling upon key traits of the character and qualities of his situation. In doing this, Friedman not only demonstrates something about his vision of humanity and human behaviour, but also suggests a relationship between literature and politics, drawing attention to how literature shapes and articulates how we view the world.

Robinson Crusoe's life, however, is not representative of typical human experience. Few people emerge fully-formed, constant, and alone on an island (either metaphorical or literal) that is ripe for exploitation, and none are born that way. Instead, each individual is born into a society in which they grow, learn, and are moulded, and within which they must learn to live. It is this complicated and contradictory process of trying to reconcile individual freedom with existence in society that is the subject matter of the *Bildungsroman*. The *Bildungsroman* is a genre very different from the Robinsonade, as Franco Moretti points out in his comparison of the two, but initially emerged from similar cultural conditions. Both genres arose during the period of early capitalism's rise and out of the accompanying societal and ideological changes.<sup>3</sup> Whereas the Robinsonade gives an image of the resourceful, rational, nature-conquering human individual, the *Bildungsroman* explores the experience of the human individual in society, their development shaped by the world as much as the world is shaped by them in their existence as a social animal.

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<sup>2</sup> Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, Fortieth Anniversary ed. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, New Ed ed. (London: Verso, 2000), 25-27.



The neoliberal ideology that Friedman explains and promotes in *Capitalism and Freedom*, and its attendant vision of the human, has since the 1970s ascended to worldwide dominance, providing the foundation for a new form of global capitalism. Over most of the globe, and especially in the Anglo-American world, it has shaped everything from government policy and political institutions to day-to-day decisions and popular culture, coming to serve as the basis for normative, “common-sense” understandings of the way the world works.<sup>4</sup> The work of Friedman and his fellow neoliberals may tell us the ideals and models underlying this contemporary society, but the *Bildungsroman*, with its central focus on sociality and the individual, and its historical function as a genre exploring the complex experience of growing and living within a society, can tell us about the messy reality of neoliberalism in practice. To this end, this thesis examines four examples of the *Bildungsroman* from across the lifespan of actually existing neoliberalism: Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974), David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996), Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003), and Roberto Bolaño’s *2666* (2004). I look at each of these in turn in order to understand what they reveal about the effect of neoliberalism on literary and artistic culture, what they say about the period of neoliberalism in which they emerged, and what they can tell us about living and growing up under neoliberalism. In the following sections of this introduction I expand upon the key aims and concepts of this thesis. I offer a summary of the position of neoliberalism in literary criticism, an overview of the history and ideology of neoliberalism, an account of the history and core logic of the *Bildungsroman* genre, and an outline of each of the chapters.

### **Neoliberalism and literary criticism**

Neoliberalism is a term that has seen a rapid increase in use in recent years, especially since the 2008 financial crash, entering into public discourse in a way that few political terms do. The rise in attention paid to neoliberalism in literary academia has been no less

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<sup>4</sup> For a useful analysis of the colonisation and exploitation of ideas of common-sense, see Stuart Hall and Alan O’Shea, “Common-Sense Neoliberalism,” *Soundings* Winter 2013, no. 55 (2013): 8-24.

precipitous, but with this widespread use have come numerous accusations of a lack of clarity in what the term means, charges of imprecision and inaccuracy in its use, and recently even suggestions that the term should be retired entirely due to overuse having emptied it of meaning.<sup>5</sup> There are two recent publications that, taken together, provide a good overall picture of the position of neoliberalism in contemporary literary studies.

First is Leigh Claire La Berge and Quinn Slobodian's review of Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos* and Rachel Greenwald Smith's *Affect and American Literature*. According to La Berge and Slobodian, although the term neoliberalism has a longer history with sociologists, historians, and political scientists, literary studies has yet to properly adopt the definitions provided by these fields and decide which one will dominate literary analysis.<sup>6</sup> Instead, according to the two critics, the most significant texts for literary and cultural studies have been David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* and Michel Foucault's *The Birth of Biopolitics*. Harvey, they write, provides a more Marxist understanding, with neoliberalism being the project undertaken since the 1970s to reinstate class power by combining "market incentives, through privatization and loosened consumer credit, with nationalism, through warmongering and the repression of alternative political formations".<sup>7</sup> Foucault, by contrast, focuses primarily on the nature of the neoliberal subject, and how it functions to enable a new form of governmentality. The two critics note that this Foucauldian understanding has been used to support "claims of the emergence of a post-1970s, all-embracing market logic".<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For a good overview of the rise in the term's use, and the dissatisfaction with it, see Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, "Introduction," in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, ed. Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 1-3; Leigh Clair La Berge and Quinn Slobodian, "Reading for Neoliberalism, Reading Like Neoliberals," *American Literary History* 29, no. 3 (2017): 602.

<sup>6</sup> La Berge and Slobodian identify four key definitions in these other disciplines: neoliberalism as a period from the 1970s marked by shifts in regulation, global relocation of manufacture, and opening of markets in the Global South; neoliberalism as a "doctrine of governance" that promotes competitiveness and flexibility over reducing inequality and increasing social justice; neoliberalism as a "movement of intellectuals" distributing key ideas through a network of think tanks and institutions; and neoliberalism as a broad "order of normative reason" that amplifies elements of capitalism to a new level. See "Reading for Neoliberalism, Reading Like Neoliberals," 603. As explored below, this thesis incorporates elements of all of these definitions, with a focus on neoliberalism as a system of ideas put into practice with sometimes unexpected results.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 604.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

These two texts, write La Berge and Slobodian, are increasingly being replaced by Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos*, which builds upon the Foucauldian reading to posit a neoliberalism defined by two things: "the reduction of humans to utility-maximizing "*homo oeconomicus*" and the extension of markets to every aspect of human life".<sup>9</sup> Greenwald Smith's *Affect and American Literature*, meanwhile, demonstrates the potential contribution of a specifically literary approach to discussions of neoliberalism. One of the first analyses of its kind to engage fully with form, *Affect and American Literature* ties the recent turn to affect in literary studies to the simultaneously occurring rise of neoliberalism, arguing that affect-laden texts support a monadic, individualistic, tradable worldview of human emotion in line with the core vision of neoliberalism.

Yet La Berge and Slobodian also have a number of concerns about Brown and Harvey's understandings of neoliberalism, and, given the centrality of these texts to many analyses, the term's position in literary criticism. They argue that despite the useful insights Brown provides, her broad characterisation of neoliberalism positions it as an immense, unstoppable, all-consuming force, seemingly with an agency of its own. Harvey, they claim, offers a similarly broad picture, albeit with a more of a focus on the economic and politically coercive elements of neoliberalism. These depictions, argue La Berge and Slobodian, relate to a problem in literary criticism, where neoliberalism is used as a blanket term, "satur[ing] together left-inflected investigations of all aspects of culture."<sup>10</sup> The solution they suggest is an engagement with the original theorists of neoliberalism. They attempt to demonstrate the benefits of such engagement through a comparison of Friedrich Hayek's writings with Brown and Greenwald Smith's descriptions of neoliberalism. This approach, they argue, will return specificity to what form of neoliberalism is being addressed, and so generate more productive literary analyses of neoliberalism.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 605. The expansion of market logic to previously non-economic areas of life is also a feature of Harvey's analysis. He states, for instance, that neoliberalism "holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and [...] seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market." See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>10</sup> La Berge and Slobodian, "Reading for Neoliberalism, Reading Like Neoliberals," 605.

In their introduction to a recent collection of essays, titled *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, Mitchum Huehls and Greenwald Smith offer a different analysis, one which demonstrates the wide range of differing approaches to neoliberalism literary critics have taken, and attempts to explain the reasons for this range.<sup>11</sup> They suggest a periodisation of neoliberalism that divides it into four key phases. The first phase they define as the economic one, starting in 1971 with Nixon unpegging the dollar from the gold standard and the collapse of Bretton Woods.<sup>12</sup> The second phase was ideological, starting in the 1980s as Thatcher and Reagan pushed both neoliberal policy and ideology to dominance in their respective countries, while simultaneously linking neoliberalism to conservatism, Christian morality, and a generalised fear of outsiders.<sup>13</sup> The third, socio-cultural, phase began in the 1990s with the end of the Cold War. Baseline neoliberal ideas like profit, competition, and consumerism began to be absorbed into the culture, and neoliberalism began to be normalised as a normative common sense.<sup>14</sup> The final phase, starting in the 2000s and continuing until today, is ontological. Neoliberalism is no longer a set of ideological beliefs, political commitments, or deployable rationalities, it is simply the way we are, requiring only our presence in society. Literary scholarship has numerous competing models of neoliberalism, the two critics argue, because different scholars are addressing different stages in the trajectory of neoliberalism's development, in which different aspects were dominant.<sup>15</sup>

These two accounts give some idea of the current position of neoliberalism in literary studies. La Berge and Slobodian identify key texts that serve as the basis for much of this literary criticism and note the relative lack of attention that has been paid to the original political and economic theorists. In their concern over a lack of specificity, they also demonstrate a moderate version of a common critique of the use of neoliberalism in literary studies: that the term is used loosely and without adequate definition. Huehls and Greenwald

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<sup>11</sup> Huehls and Greenwald Smith, "Introduction."

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

Smith, on the other hand, demonstrate the side of the debate that is more forgiving of the term's broad usage, seeing this breadth as the result of multiple analyses exploring different aspects of the same phenomenon's development over time. They reveal the range of approaches that have been taken to neoliberalism, identifying key groupings around questions of economy, ideology, culture, and ontology.<sup>16</sup>

The approach taken in this thesis fits neither of these positions precisely. I make use of the work of some of the original neoliberal theorists, but rather than uncritically accepting the writings of any given neoliberal as demonstrative of the true nature of neoliberalism, I pay attention to the historical relationship each theorist had to the neoliberal political phenomenon that arose in the 1970s. In seeking specificity through using neoliberal theorists, La Berge and Slobodian's use of Hayek assumes a very direct relationship between neoliberal theory and practice, and between the work of early theorists and the neoliberal political-economic situation that actually emerged. Similar to the approach of Huehls and Greenwald Smith, the chapters of this thesis do trace a trajectory of neoliberal development over time from the 1970s onwards, but this trajectory functions alongside an understanding of core continuities in neoliberalism as an ideological and political project. This approach avoids a schematic division of aspects of neoliberalism into each decade and examines apparently disparate elements as part of an ideological whole. While Huehls and Greenwald Smith correctly identify key events in neoliberalism's history and the different approaches that have been taken to it in literary analysis, their neat periodisation risks offering too simplistic an explanation of neoliberalism's development and obscuring that all its apparently separate elements work together as part of a complex whole. This thesis is predicated on the idea that an investigation of neoliberalism, and its effect on literature, must necessarily be concerned with neoliberalism as it actually exists, but that this neoliberalism must be understood specifically. Instead of being taken as the purely abstract system of a single theorist or the sum of all political events occurring since the 1970s, neoliberalism must be understood as a continuous historical phenomenon, a new capitalist ideology underlying a new form of global

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<sup>16</sup> Given that La Berge and Slobodian identify four key definitions of neoliberalism from outside literary criticism, and Huehls and Greenwald Smith identify four key periods, there may be more alignment to their analyses than at first appears.

capitalism, emerging in a specific shape from a messy mix of theory, ideology, realpolitik, internal flaws and inconsistencies, and a good dose of historical accident. In order to understand *what* neoliberalism is, it is necessary to understand *how* it came to be.

## Early neoliberalism

Angus Burgin's *The Great Persuasion* and Daniel Stedman Jones's *Masters of the Universe* are the two essential texts that together provide a nuanced and substantiated understanding of the origins and early rise of neoliberalism.<sup>17</sup> Burgin's and Jones's work emerges as a remedy to the characterisation of neoliberalism as overwhelming, omnipresent, and seemingly autonomous that La Berge and Slobodian diagnose in the work of Harvey and Brown. But the two historians also counter the analytical approach implicit in La Berge and Slobodian, which treats the ideas of neoliberal theorists in isolation from their historical context. Although there is much crossover in their approaches, Burgin focuses primarily on the individuals behind neoliberalism, analysing their ideas, their ideological conflicts, their personal roles, and their complex histories. Jones, on the other hand, is generally stronger in exploring how, rather than emerging fully formed from theorists or pure ideology, neoliberalism spread through a complex network of institutions, think-tanks, funding bodies, and figures that built up over time.

The combined approach of Burgin and Jones has one immense advantage over many other accounts of the early neoliberals. Instead of inferring the motivations and ideologies of each neoliberal theorist – and assuming agreement between all of these individuals – purely from their theoretical writings and the later developments of neoliberalism, the historians make strong use of primary sources such as private correspondence between the key figures.<sup>18</sup> The work of Burgin and Jones makes up the primary resources used in the

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<sup>17</sup> Angus Burgin, *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets since the Depression* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012); Daniel Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> In addition to exposing the complex interactions between the very different individuals now collected under the label of neoliberal, another particularly interesting facet of this approach is seeing the personal exchanges between Friedrich Hayek and John Maynard Keynes. While publically appearing as quasi-rivals, many of their

following account of early neoliberalism in particular, with other works such as Daniel T. Rodgers's *Age of Fracture* and David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* providing supporting information for much of the account of the later years of neoliberalism. Beyond the condensed accounts of Burgin and Jones, I rely on the works of a number of the key original neoliberal theorists for this thesis's understanding of neoliberal ideology, although each theorist's work is understood in its proper historical context.

The origins of neoliberalism can be traced back to the 1930s. In the wake of World War One, the Russian Revolution, and the Great Depression, capitalism was in crisis. The prevailing atmosphere was one of disillusionment with the laissez-faire capitalism of the previous century; the ideas of Keynes were on the rise, and government intervention in the economy was viewed generally favourably. A small number of academics, primarily in the fields of economics and politics, opposed this dominant view and held to the value of certain elements of nineteenth-century capitalism. Although very much in the minority and spread out across the world – there was a strong contingent of Austrians and two major enclaves, one at LSE in the UK and one at Chicago in the US – a network of these academics was gradually established through academic positions, personal correspondences, and one-off meetings. Although this process was interrupted by World War Two, which for many of these academics appeared to confirm their fears of a trend towards the decline of individual freedom in favour of collectivism, it eventually culminated in the foundation of the Mont Pelerin Society in 1947.

In contrast to quasi-conspiratorial accounts of the Mont Pelerin Society (hereafter MPS), such as that offered by Philip Mirowski in *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go To Waste*, or even Harvey's account of neoliberalism as always and entirely about reinstating class power, Burgin makes clear that the academics that made up the MPS were a very disparate group.<sup>19</sup> They were united in their opposition to the trend towards collectivism (the term they used to

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interactions reveal a more nuanced relationship verging on friendship, with Keynes giving Hayek advice and admiring some of Hayek's theories even while disputing their practicality. See, for example, *Masters of the Universe*, 62 and 67.

<sup>19</sup> Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste* (London and New York: Verso, 2013).

group all political philosophies that involved a large degree of state involvement in economic affairs, from social democracy to communism to fascism) and a belief in the necessity of some form of liberalism, predicated on the market and private property, in order to preserve freedom. However, they differed widely in both what they believed this ideal liberal society would look like and how to go about achieving it.

Even the general tendencies on which the early theorists did agree are not immediately recognisable as distinctly neoliberal from a contemporary perspective. The chief aim of MPS was to rethink and reconstruct the basis of liberalism in order to make it fit for their historical moment, with almost as much ire directed towards laissez-faire as to socialism.<sup>20</sup> They believed a fundamental rethinking of liberalism was required, both in order to ensure the maintenance of the market, as critics like La Berge and Slobodian note, and to prevent the worst excesses and failings of this market.<sup>21</sup> For instance, most agreed on the necessity of some form of welfare state – both for moral reasons and to prevent the siren call of communism – and strong anti-monopoly laws, and several were concerned about the necessity of something beyond capitalism, as they believed that pure capitalism would inevitably lead to the moral and ethical degradation of society (a critique more in common with what is seen on the left today).<sup>22</sup> But the members of the MPS were not seeking any kind of direct political control; they were broadly suspicious of any form of public engagement, largely viewing the MPS as a place to formulate their ideas and influence intellectual debate.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Burgin, *The Great Persuasion*, 56. Hayek, for instance, notes that “[p]robably nothing has done so much harm to the liberal cause as the wooden insistence of some liberals on certain rough rules of thumb, above all the principle of *laissez-faire*”. Friedrich Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London: Routledge, 2001), 18.

<sup>21</sup> Jones, *Masters of the Universe*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Frank Knight, for instance, saw that markets shaped needs and wants – an incredible blind-spot for many contemporary theorists given today’s multi-billion dollar advertising industry – and argued that “any claim for ethical neutrality of markets simply ignored their tendency to reshape the ethical standards of the societies they operated within”. Burgin, *The Great Persuasion*, 114. Knight was just one of numerous members of the early MPS, Röpke and Von Mises amongst them, who worried in this vein. See, for example, *ibid.*, 35, 81, and 113.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Burgin’s account of the early Chicago school and the early MPS. *Ibid.*, 46 and 83.



While they were still very much in the minority and were deeply opposed to the broad consensus of the post-war years, the ideas of the early neoliberals slowly began to gain more traction in certain quarters over the course of the 1940s and 1950s as the memory of the Great Depression and pre-war years began to fade. Perhaps the best demonstration of this was the success of the 1944 publication of Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*. Hayek was an instrumental figure in the establishment of the MPS, and played a central role in its early years, but it is the success of *The Road to Serfdom* which is the primary reason that he remains the most well-known of the early neoliberals today. The book, which Hayek had primarily targeted at UK intellectuals and socialists, achieved unexpected success and public attention in the US, thrusting Hayek into the limelight.<sup>24</sup> The tract's argument synthesised the broad strokes of many of the early neoliberal views, but in particular offered perhaps the best and clearest theoretical justifications for one of the earliest major continuities of neoliberal thought: a suspicion of government intervention and a faith in markets.

In *The Road to Serfdom*, Hayek fundamentally understands the market as a large, complex, and highly efficient information processor. No single individual or organisation can ever have enough information to make a perfect plan for economic distribution, Hayek argues, and attempting to do so requires concentrating power in the hands of a small group. Any plan, no matter how well-intentioned, will have to choose how to distribute finite resources and necessitate prioritising the interests of some people over the interests of others.<sup>25</sup> However, under the conditions of competition, his argument goes, the price signals in the free market function to automatically guide economic distribution, placing resources where they are needed and desired most. This automatic distribution does not require difficult decisions on questions of value and renders any poor luck less degrading and upsetting by virtue of being the product of impersonal forces, rather than conscious decisions – or so Hayek believes.<sup>26</sup> In not requiring excessive organisation or the concentration of power in the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>25</sup> Hayek makes these claims, or similar, numerous times, as they are a central plank of his argument. See, for example, Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, 51, 62, and 77.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 52 and 110.

hands of the government, the market also guarantees a large degree of political freedom, reducing the possibility for the abuse of power and allowing freedom of choice in the widest range of day-to-day activities, which might otherwise be centrally regulated or available only at governmental discretion.

It is important to note, however, that Hayek found himself frustrated with the industrialists and right-wing political figures who publicised *The Road to Serfdom* and used the book to advocate an unqualified return to laissez-faire.<sup>27</sup> Hayek in fact included numerous caveats about the market and advocated a range of interventions, including limiting business fluctuations through “monetary and perhaps even fiscal policy”, providing infrastructure for things like transportation, and “maintain[ing] quite strict regulations against certain business practices by limiting working hours, requiring sanitary arrangements, proscribing the use of poisonous substances, prohibiting deforestation, preventing harmful farming methods, restricting the noise and smoke produced by factories, and imposing stringent price controls on monopolies to curtail extraordinary profit”.<sup>28</sup> He even advocated providing a basic standard of living for all and warned that failing to control the excesses of the market could lead to later authoritarianism. Even Keynes praised much of the book, although he noted that the lack of clear distinction between what constituted good and bad planning left it unclear how these interventions could be synthesised with Hayek’s core argument.<sup>29</sup> And Hayek was not alone among the early neoliberals in advocating such interventions; they were widely favoured by much of the MPS membership, to varying degrees.

In addition to these direct and ameliorative duties, there is a specific subset of state functions which Hayek gives particular prominence to in *The Road to Serfdom*, and which are of particular importance in the larger history of neoliberalism. Hayek emphasises the

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<sup>27</sup> The condensed version of *The Road to Serfdom* that was circulated in *Reader’s Digest*, and which was largely responsible for widespread awareness of the work, was a key reason that, much to Hayek’s irritation, his work was so widely used to justify and promote ideas of laissez-faire. This condensation was heavily altered from its original form, suturing together and reordering sections and observations, and stripping out the majority of Hayek’s qualifications. Burgin, *The Great Persuasion*, 88-90.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 90-91.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-92.

importance of an “intelligently designed and continually adjusted legal framework” for the market, arguing that not only is this necessary for a functioning market system but that it is valuable because delineating in advance the powers available to the state prevents the arbitrary use of power, limits the potential for abuse of power, and frees the state from making individual judgements for every case of every economic interaction, avoiding the inevitable work and disagreements this would entail.<sup>30</sup> A necessary counterpart to the legal role Hayek proposes is the power of the state to enforce these rules and ensure this legal framework.<sup>31</sup> The powers Hayek grants to the state in this regard include protecting private property rights, enforcing contracts, encouraging competition, and providing for defence. This combination of the rule of law and state power of enforcement make up another core element of the broader neoliberal vision of the state.

However, given Hayek’s emphasis on individual freedom, preventing coercion, and the danger and harm of excessive government power, it is perhaps surprising the extent to which he is willing to tolerate extensive state power in non-economic areas provided economic freedom, in his terms, is secured. Having argued that even a well-intentioned partial transfer of economic control to the state is a slippery slope and having underscored this argument with reference to Nazism and Fascism, Hayek proceeds to argue that there has “often been much more cultural and spiritual freedom under an autocratic ruler than under some democracies” and asserts that one must remember that democracy is not an end but a means to ensuring individual freedom, and so should not be viewed as a given necessity.<sup>32</sup>

Simultaneous to the increasing public attention evidenced by the popularity of *The Road to Serfdom*, the membership of the MPS swelled throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Through such factors as funders for the MPS meetings – flying the attendees across the Atlantic was no small matter and required substantial economic assistance – the influence on their students and academic environments, and the attention of sympathetic industrialists and

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<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, 40, 69-71, and 90.

<sup>31</sup> For more on neoliberal thought on the rule of law beyond Hayek, see Burgin, *The Great Persuasion*, 63-65.

<sup>32</sup> Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, 73-74.

politicians, the transatlantic network of connections and contacts of the neoliberals began to grow.<sup>33</sup> The MPS itself served as the prototypical model for a new form of elite political organisation that would come to dominate the future of politics: the think-tank. Following the example of the MPS, numerous privately funded groups with a wide range of aims began to emerge. This network of connections, organisations, and influences would be the key to eventually transforming neoliberalism from an intellectual exploration into an actual political force. But for all their centrality in shaping this powerful network, it would not be the original neoliberals who wielded its power.

### **Neoliberalism rising**

By the early 1960s, the influence of the older neoliberals in the movement was on the wane. Where it had once sought to recruit from a wide range of disciplines, the MPS was now almost exclusively comprised of technical economists, and was dominated by American members, with Milton Friedman rapidly replacing Hayek as the leading figure.<sup>34</sup> While influenced, inspired, and quite frequently taught by the earlier neoliberals, these younger members were the product of a new historical moment.<sup>35</sup> They brought with them a new and radically simplified ideology and focus, casting off many of the earlier concerns and qualifications about pure, free-market capitalism. In direct contrast to the reticence of their forebears, they enthusiastically spread and publicised their ideas through the networks of institutional influence, think-tanks, and money that had been built up over the years. In the figure of Friedman, neoliberalism's chief populariser, this simplified ideology was combined with a knack for rhetoric and a great capacity for popular engagement exemplified in the popularity of Friedman's 1962 book *Capitalism and Freedom*.

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<sup>33</sup> Alongside exploring how the neoliberals prepared the intellectual terrain for a later adoption of their ideas, the establishment and utilisation of this institutional and influential network is the key focus of *Masters of the Universe*.

<sup>34</sup> Burgin, *The Great Persuasion*, 125.

<sup>35</sup> The stark differences between the views of the early Chicago neoliberals in the 1930s and what would later become known as the Chicago school in the 1960s and 1970s are an excellent demonstration of this. See Burgin's account of the views of members of the early Chicago school for more. *Ibid.*, 32-35.

The new neoliberals – key members of which group, beyond Friedman, included Gary Becker, Ronald Coase, Robert Lucas, George Stigler, and James Buchanan – combined a highly technical economics with an unrelenting enthusiasm for the market, and while Hayek’s understanding of the market still served as the basis for their views, gone were almost all caveats and recognitions of market imperfection. Friedman’s *Capitalism and Freedom*, for instance, paints a picture of market mechanisms as almost always better than non-market alternatives for everything from motorways to education to luxuries to healthcare to housing.<sup>36</sup> In Friedman’s view, economic crises and problems are primarily the result of excessive government intervention, and monopolies, a chief concern of the early neoliberals, are not deemed a serious problem. In addition, Friedman posits a stronger relationship between the market and freedom, arguing that economic freedom, understood as being the product of private property and the free market, actively generates political freedom.<sup>37</sup> He describes the market as a form of “proportional representation [where] each man can vote”, although he neglects that in this analogy a rich man will have more votes, and so more power, than a poor one.<sup>38</sup> Friedman even argues that the supposed neutrality of the market is in fact ethically positive, helping to prevent discrimination and the economic marginalisation of minority groups, although he later provides an example of exactly the opposite effect without acknowledging the contradiction, arguing that a store-owner in a racist community should not be forced to employ a black employee as they would lose customers by doing so.<sup>39</sup> It is this more extreme market faith, rather than the more moderate early version, that makes up the core of neoliberal ideology as we know and experience it today.

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<sup>36</sup> Friedman’s claims about market efficiency were supported by work such as that which came to be known as the Coase theorem, which, when the numerous caveats originally included are ignored, demonstrates that market-based mechanisms provide the best and most socially efficient method to resolve disputes. They do this by providing a method of valuation that allows quantification and so compensation, even for such things as air pollution. For more on this theorem, see Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012), 57-58.

<sup>37</sup> For example, see Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, viii-x.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-13. Burgin argues that, in contrast to the focus on neutrality of other theorists, Friedman made an even stronger argument for the ethically positive effects of market mechanisms, directly aligning the act of market mediation with ethical behaviour. See Burgin, *The Great Persuasion*, 187-89.

Correspondingly, the later neoliberals' views on government and state power were in many ways merely a more extreme version of the approach taken by their predecessors. They rejected the earlier advocacy of social welfare, strict regulation of potentially harmful activities, and anti-monopoly practices, on the grounds that the market's efficiency was so great that it rendered such things unnecessary and that such government interventions were illegitimate and potentially harmful.<sup>40</sup> However, they were not anarchists. Even Friedman, known for his vocal opposition to much government action, followed in the footsteps of Hayek and insisted on the importance of the rule of law and a government to protect and enforce the proper legal framework, dedicating an entire chapter of *Capitalism and Freedom* to the proper functions of the state.<sup>41</sup> Such legitimate duties again included enforcing contracts, protecting private property, and providing for security and defence, this latter point revealing a residual nationalism in Friedman's in-other-ways radical social vision. What is again striking is the extent to which, even with his more extreme anti-government stance, extensive political power was explicitly tolerated by Friedman provided that neoliberal economic policies were enacted. In the preface to the 2002 re-edition of *Capitalism and Freedom*, Friedman cites the introduction of neoliberal policies in China as evidence of the inextricable link between capitalism and freedom, before going on to say that his one major regret with *Capitalism and Freedom* was that he overstated the importance of political freedom, which is only sometimes beneficial to economic and civic freedom, and at other times detrimental.<sup>42</sup>

The one largely new and concrete contribution of the later neoliberals was their model of human behaviour. Some focus on the individual is a necessary element of neoliberalism's

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<sup>40</sup> Friedman, for instance, concludes that, in general, private monopolies are the lesser of the three evils of private monopoly, public monopoly, or public regulation, believing that private monopoly can and will be easily overturned through competition and technological change, although there are a few instances in which public ownership or regulation may be preferable. See Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 28-30. This view of monopoly is aided by the work of other neoliberals, in particular George Stigler's theory of regulatory capture, which fundamentally argues that it is primarily government intervention that sustains monopolies because the institutions designed to regulate an industry inevitably come under the sway of that industry's most powerful members. For a brief overview of this theory see Jones, *Masters of the Universe*, 110.

<sup>41</sup> Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 22-36.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, viii-x.

descendance from liberalism, the political-philosophical tradition which many of the neoliberals, both early and late, saw themselves as continuing.<sup>43</sup> But the later neoliberals went far beyond this, and had a highly specific, individual-centric understanding of the human and human nature, on which the rest of their ideological and economic models were based. Early neoliberal figures such as Hayek and Röpke were deeply opposed to the *homo oeconomicus* model of human behaviour, in which the individual is taken to rationally and solely pursue their self-interest, and in *The Road to Serfdom* Hayek very clearly states that individualism did not have to be associated with “egotism and selfishness”.<sup>44</sup> The later Chicago school, however, embraced the idea of *homo oeconomicus* and expanded its scope and application immensely. They offered a vision of the individual as exclusively self-interested and entirely rational, always making rational decisions – and having enough information to do so – entirely on the basis of how to maximise their personal gain. This expansive yet simple model of human behaviour underpins the microeconomic theory at the heart of neoliberalism, famous examples of which include the Coase theorem, the free-rider problem, the tragedy of the commons, and rational expectations theory.<sup>45</sup> So, while Friedman talks of the liberal focus on the “freedom of the individual” and awareness of “men as imperfect beings”, it is fundamentally this rational behavioural model that underlies his vision of the ideal society.<sup>46</sup>

The supposed efficiency and neutrality of the market and the easily comprehensible neoliberal model of behaviour make for a potent combination. As numerous scholars have

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<sup>43</sup> Both Friedman and Hayek, for instance, claim to be liberal in the proper use of the term. See *ibid.*, 5; Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Burgin, *The Great Persuasion*, 82; Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, 14.

<sup>45</sup> *Age of Fracture* provides a good account of the shift towards microeconomics in the 1970s and 1980s and the key theories and models of this shift. See Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, 41-76.

<sup>46</sup> Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 12-13. Recent critical work has put forward the notion that the family, rather than the individual, is the fundamental unit of neoliberal ideology. For instance, La Berge and Slobodian note this as being a key observation of Brown’s analysis of neoliberalism. See La Berge and Slobodian, “Reading for Neoliberalism, Reading Like Neoliberals,” 5. Again, however, this should come as no surprise to those familiar with neoliberal theorists. Friedman explicitly states that liberals take the “freedom of the individual, *or perhaps the family*, as [their] ultimate goal” and talks of how the ideal society would consist of a “number of independent households” (italics my emphasis). See Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 12-13. That Friedman does not address the contradiction between pure, rational self-interest and family is a testament to the ideology’s internal contradictions and a latent patriarchalism inherent in Friedman’s worldview. For a useful analysis of the prominent role family plays in the work of a number of neoliberal theorists, see Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (London: Zone Books, 2017).

noted – most notably Foucault and Brown – one of the key features of neoliberalism in practice has been the expansion of market logic and rational-actor models to areas previously considered outside the realm of economics.<sup>47</sup> This is again entirely evident in the works of the later neoliberals themselves. As Rodgers notes, during the 1970s “the new intellectual movements in economics pushed to its limits the extent to which society could be analytically dissolved altogether into its individual, utility maximising parts”, but much of the theory behind this work was already well underway in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>48</sup> One particularly significant figure in the expanded application of individualised, rational behavioural models was Gary Becker, who offered models of things as diverse as “fertility, housework, criminality, and the use of time” in terms of rational self-interest.<sup>49</sup> Such was Becker’s faith in the practical applicability of the neoliberal model of human behaviour that he even attempted to explain addiction as a matter of rational choice.<sup>50</sup> It is perhaps debatable how simply or literally the original theorists like Becker intended their models to be applied, aware as they might have been of the assumptions and limits around them, but in their popularised, simplified forms there were no such caveats.<sup>51</sup> One key result of the broad application of individualised models for explaining human behaviour and social phenomena was the theoretical dissolution of the concept of society, as a framework beyond the individual is unnecessary when everything can be explained by individual, rational (inter)actions. From such a perspective culture and society only introduce unnecessary complications that obscure the real functioning of human behaviour, and part of the appeal of

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<sup>47</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, ed. Arnold I Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (Chippenham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015).

<sup>48</sup> Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, 63.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>50</sup> See Gary Becker and Kevin Murphy, “A Theory of Rational Addiction,” *The Journal of Political Economy* 96, no. 4 (1988): 675-700.

<sup>51</sup> In his Nobel acceptance speech Becker provides a useful and relatively concise overview of a number of his most famous theories, and displays a more nuanced awareness of the potential limitations of these models. Gary Becker, “Nobel Lecture: The Economic Way of Looking at Behavior,” *Journal of Political Economy* 101, no. 3 (1993): 385-409. Similarly, in the article which lays out the problem that would later become known as the Coase theorem, Coase in fact highlights that one of the key assumptions – that of no transaction costs – never in fact occurs in reality. Ronald Coase, “The Problem of Social Cost,” *Journal of Law and Economics* 3, no. 1 (1960): 1-44.



the neoliberal model lies precisely in its ability to do away with such complications. The theoretical and practical effects of this disaggregation of society is a key focus of Rogers's *Age of Fracture*.<sup>52</sup>

Friedman again was key in popularising these individualising models and ideas, with one notable example being the concept of human capital.<sup>53</sup> From its original theoretical underpinnings, Friedman condensed the idea of human capital into its simplest form, arguing in *Capitalism and Freedom* that “investment in human capital [is] precisely analogous to investment in machinery, buildings, or other forms of non-human capital” and that children were at once both consumer goods and potential members of society.<sup>54</sup> As in Becker's formulation of human capital, on which Friedman heavily relies, the chief example of such investment is education, which Friedman describes as a method to “raise the economic productivity of the human being” in order to receive a “higher return for his services”.<sup>55</sup>

The more extreme stance on market and government, the new models of individual behaviour, and the extension of market logic to previously distinct areas, mark out neoliberalism as a distinct, if sometimes contradictory, ideology. Although there have been some theoretical developments over the lifespan of neoliberalism since the 1970s, it was the work of the key figures of the previous decades that gave it the general form and core consistencies that remain recognisable today. Propagated through the network of think-tanks, academics, businessmen, political advisors, and more, this was the ideology that was rapidly and widely spreading and circulating as the 1960s drew to a close.

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<sup>52</sup> For another notable example of an analysis focusing on the neoliberal disaggregation of society, see Wendy Brown, “The Big Picture: Defending Society,” *Public Books*, Nov 10, 2017, accessed Dec 12, 2017, <http://www.publicbooks.org/defending-society/>.

<sup>53</sup> For Becker's analysis, see Gary Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis with Special Reference to Education* (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1964). Although it is almost solely associated with neoliberalism today, Melinda Cooper notes that the original theorist of human capital, Theodore Schultz, while a member of the Chicago School of Economics, was not a neoliberal. His theorisation had a very different emphasis and different aims, intending to explain an apparent discrepancy in GDP growth through viewing education as a form of investment, and notably advocating an increase in public investment in education. Cooper, *Family Values*, 219-27.

<sup>54</sup> Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 100 and 33.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-101.

## Neoliberalism in power

It was in this way that, when the financial crises of the early 1970s struck, neoliberalism was ready and waiting to offer an alternative to the cultural status quo and the neo-Keynesian economic orthodoxy that had dominated the previous decades. It is here that the story offered in this thesis begins, and that the history of neoliberalism as a truly political construct starts. From here, neoliberal ideology would rise to dominance, providing the basis for a new, neoliberal form of capitalism, which operates on a global scale. While it would adjust to the pressures of realpolitik, the rhetoric of politicians, the conflicts of party divides, and the interests of industry, by this point the core ideas of what we now call neoliberalism had been shaped and would not substantially change. Each chapter of this thesis offers a more in-depth account of a specific period in the history of neoliberalism over the subsequent decades, and what developments these decades entailed, but below I offer a brief overview.<sup>56</sup>

The first full application of neoliberal ideas and policies came in Chile, where the new regime of Pinochet invited trainees of the Chicago school to help restructure the economy following the coup that overthrew the democratically-elected, socialist president, Salvador Allende, in 1973.<sup>57</sup> This was the first neoliberal experiment, but it would not be long before Chile was joined by others with substantially more political sway on the global stage. As early as the mid-1970s some elements of the work of neoliberal theorists were being used by Labour and Democrat governments in the UK and US, and although neoliberal policies and ideology ended up primarily being enacted by conservative politicians in most countries, elements of the ideology, especially its anti-governmental and individualistic aspects, aligned with a widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo that was felt across the political

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<sup>56</sup> The following overview draws on numerous works, the specifics of which are addressed in each chapter, but key texts include Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*; Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York: Verso, 2007); Jefferson R. Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010); Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*.

<sup>57</sup> The role of Chile in the rise of neoliberalism, what the easy co-existence of a military dictatorship and neoliberal economics at their very beginnings says about the political foundations of neoliberalism, and how this can help us better understand neoliberalism is addressed in particular depth in the final chapter of this thesis. For more on the pre-Reagan and Thatcher deployment of neoliberal ideas in the US and UK, see Jones, *Masters of the Universe*, 215-18.

spectrum.<sup>58</sup> However, it was with the elections of Thatcher and Reagan in 1979 and 1981 that neoliberal ideology and policy began to gain the substantial foothold in the Anglo-American world that would catapult it to global dominance. Throughout the 1980s, Thatcher and Reagan reshaped the economies of their respective countries along neoliberal lines and used their rhetorical and political strength to spread the core ideology of neoliberalism, tying it to more traditionally conservative commitments to nationalism, the military, and conservative moral values.<sup>59</sup>

Although the US and UK remained the trailblazers, and Chile an early experiment, by the mid-1980s neoliberalism was beginning to spread to the wider world, sometimes through the choices of democratically elected officials, and sometimes through more coercive means. The structural readjustment of Mexico by the US, IMF, and World Bank in return for debt rollover in the mid-1980s would become the model for similar interventions in the future.<sup>60</sup> With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, serious alternatives to neoliberal capitalism, now the dominant political-economic ideological system in the Western world, seemed to have been exhausted, bearing out Thatcher's earlier claim that "there is no alternative".<sup>61</sup> The dominance of neoliberalism was confirmed in the Anglo-American world with the Labour and Democrat governments that replaced the Conservatives

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<sup>58</sup> An exploration of this question of the alignment between neoliberal ideology and popular sentiment in the 1960s and 1970s is a central element of the first chapter of this thesis, where it is explored in depth.

<sup>59</sup> This alignment of conservatism and neoliberalism was far from inevitable. As Stedman-Jones notes, the core logic of neoliberalism entailed an extensive restructuring of society that is not at all easily reconcilable with traditional conservative emphases on social continuity and tradition, a fact which can be seen in the conflicts within conservative parties during neoliberalism's rise. See Jones, *Masters of the Universe*, 135-37. The early neoliberals in particular were not unaware of this conflict, sometimes rebuffing conservative attempts to propose a natural alliance between the two philosophies. As Burgin recounts, on one notable occasion and in response to the work of a conservative author, Hayek very pointedly gave a speech entitled "Why I Am Not a Conservative", outlining a rigorous distinction between conservatives and liberals. Burgin, *The Great Persuasion*, 143. Yet the alignment eventually proved productive for both parties, at least in terms of accession to power.

<sup>60</sup> Harvey provides accounts of the varying paths taken to neoliberalism in several different countries, although he pays particular attention to the more coercive examples. See Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 87-115.

<sup>61</sup> This phrase is so well-known and widely-cited that it is surprisingly difficult to track down a verifiable source on its original usage. Even a recent Thatcher biography title *There is No Alternative* is notably lacking in references for the phrase. See Claire Berlinski, *There is No Alternative: Why Margaret Thatcher Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2008). However, one of the earliest notable examples is Thatcher's 1967 speech to the Conservative Party Conference. See Margaret Thatcher, "1967 Speech to Conservative Party Conference," *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, accessed May 5, 2018, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/101586>.

and Republicans in the mid-1990s. Branding themselves New Labour and the New Democrats, they accepted the fundamental tenets of neoliberal ideology and policy, moderating this acceptance by wedding it to a more socially liberal platform with regards to things like sexuality, women's rights, and healthcare.<sup>62</sup>

The 1990s were in many ways the heyday of neoliberal dominance, and this largely continued into the early 2000s, although the cracks were beginning to show. Popular critiques of contemporary capitalism began emerging, while the war on terror, and invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq – where an economic restructuring very similar to structural readjustment took place after the invasion – drew criticism and negative attention towards the US, whose dominant global position is central to neoliberalism's hold on power.<sup>63</sup> However, it was the 2008 financial crisis that presented the first true challenge to neoliberal hegemony, exposing flaws in both the economic basis and underlying ideology of neoliberal society.

The clear hallmarks of neoliberal politics since the 1970s were and are a number of now-familiar policies: tax cuts, extensive deregulation of industries (especially finance), the privatisation of previously publicly owned industries/utilities/goods, the stripping of labour protections, and the introduction of regulations to limit labour organisation.<sup>64</sup> The effects of these neoliberal policies have been far from the quasi-utopian vision of Friedman. The rise of neoliberalism has seen the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a shrinking minority, leading to a rapid and pronounced rise in inequality, which has been linked to numerous social ills.<sup>65</sup> Precarity of employment combined with low and unstable income

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<sup>62</sup> This period of neoliberal dominance is covered in greater depth in chapter two of this thesis.

<sup>63</sup> Naomi Klein's work is a notable example of such popular critiques of capitalism. Her 2007 book *The Shock Doctrine* also provides an analysis of a number of enforced applications of neoliberal policies, including the transformation of the Iraqi economy. See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (London: Penguin, 2008).

<sup>64</sup> Although his analysis of the nature of neoliberal ideology and aims of neoliberal theorists is sometimes excessively focused on coercion, and ignores the other neoliberal avenues to power, Harvey's account of neoliberalism's effects is very useful in this regard. See Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.

<sup>65</sup> Of particular note is the research of Kate Pickett and Richard G. Wilkinson, who use a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods to demonstrate both the rise in inequality and the strong link between inequality and a variety of harmful effects, including on mental and physical health. Richard G. Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Equality Is Better for Everyone*, New ed. (London: Penguin, 2010).

have accompanied the rise of neoliberalism in the West, while those in the Global South have faced increasing exploitation as corporations buy up or move industry and manufacturing there, often aided by US-backed structural readjustment, in order to exploit the weaker legal protections and lower economic demands of workers.<sup>66</sup> Numerous industries and utilities, either privatised or forced to work along competitive market lines, have struggled to provide the necessary services, become immensely costly, or failed entirely.<sup>67</sup> Deregulation and privatisation, especially the deregulation of the finance industry, helped produce the 2008 financial crisis from which the global economy has still not entirely recovered.<sup>68</sup>

Although the immediate aftermath of the 2008 crash saw widespread criticism and discontent, the medium term has seen little change in the underlying economic and ideological system and the long-term effects are still unclear. Some, like William Davies, have argued that we are witnessing the arrival of a new period and form of neoliberalism, in which neoliberalism's dominance is such that it no longer needs a coherent justification for its power.<sup>69</sup> However, it is notable that many of the trends in contemporary politics increasingly bear little correspondence to even Friedman's vision of neoliberalism. The current political moment is seeing both a rise in ethno-nationalist authoritarianism and old-school socialism, and it is still too early to say what new political form will ultimately emerge from the 2008 crisis, or whether it will be neoliberal at all. Despite only relatively recently achieving widespread mainstream attention, then, neoliberalism has a long and somewhat complex history. The neoliberal ideology that emerged from this history has a set of clearly identifiable central features, and serves as the foundation for the contemporary, global, and globally dominant form of capitalism, re-presenting the old problems of capitalism in a new form. It is with this understanding that the term is used in this thesis. Having established the

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<sup>66</sup> For more, see Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*; "The 'New' Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession," *Socialist Register* 40 (2004): 63-87.

<sup>67</sup> See, for instance, Lisa Duggan's account of the neoliberalisation of universities or Tony Judt's overview of the costs and inefficiency of the privatisation of railways. Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003); Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land* (London: Allen Lane, 2010).

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, the analysis in Wolfgang Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End?: Essays on a Failing System* (London: Verso, 2016).

<sup>69</sup> William Davies, "The New Neoliberalism," *New Left Review* 101 (2016): 121-134.

meaning, history, and practice of neoliberalism, it is now necessary to explore the second key term of this thesis: *Bildungsroman*.

### **The birth of the *Bildungsroman***

The term *Bildungsroman* (plural *Bildungsromane*) is both widely known and used. In non-academic parlance, the genre is generally defined as a novel following the life of a character from a young age as they grow into an adult.<sup>70</sup> Yet as with almost any generic designation, especially one so broadly used as the *Bildungsroman*, the closer one looks the less clear a precise definition becomes. Beyond the broad scope of the popular understanding, academic definitions have ranged from describing the genre as phantom-like and quasi-non-existent to ubiquitous and universally applicable, from viewing it as defined by a prescriptive plot-formula to seeing it as centred around a precise thematic content, and from arguing that it is bound to a specific national-historical context to claiming it is international and ahistorical. And even where there is broad agreement that the genre's focus is on the development of a character, the significance, nature, and aim of the central character's development are widely debated.

In this section I offer an overview of the different critical approaches to the *Bildungsroman* and identify one element that is shared among many of these approaches: the idea that at its core the genre explores the relationship between the individual and society through a narrative of individual development. Taking this idea as the basis for the genre's definition, my research addresses a gap in contemporary theorisation of the genre, exploring how the rise of neoliberalism has altered the significance of key concepts and narrative elements that are central to the *Bildungsroman*, such as the models of the individual, society, and power. These alterations, I argue, require authors to take new approaches to the genre in

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<sup>70</sup> As explored below, the earliest definition of the *Bildungsroman* suggests something very similar to this broad usage of the term. See Tobias Boes's translation of Karl Morgenstern, "On the Nature of the 'Bildungsroman'," *PMLA* 124, no. 2 (2009): 650-659.

order to be able to explore the experience of growing up neoliberal and continue to use the genre for political exploration and critique.

It is worth mentioning here a number of other terms associated with the *Bildungsroman*. These terms are *Künstlerroman* (the novel of the artist), *Erziehungsroman* (the novel of upbringing or education), and *Entwicklungsroman* (the novel of development).<sup>71</sup> There are obvious areas of overlap with all these terms, and they are to varying degrees applicable to the novels studied in this thesis. *The Dispossessed* features the protagonist's education extensively, and while he is a scientist, his emotional and intellectual struggle to complete his life's work is in many ways an artistic struggle. One of the two main characters of *Infinite Jest* spends the entirety of the narrative at an academy and under a strict learning regimen. In *Oryx and Crake*, the focal character's years in education, from the earliest school years through to university, take up a sizable portion of the narrative and are central to his development as a character. While he is not exactly an artist, there is also considerable focus on his (wasted) literary interests and talents. Finally, the *Bildungsroman* section of *2666* follows the life story of an author, invoking again the idea of artistic development.

While the *Künstlerroman* and *Erziehungsroman* are more properly considered sub-genres of the *Bildungsroman*, the *Entwicklungsroman* is more akin to a synonym. However, its particular focus on the idea of *development* is important to note. The concept of development is central to the *Bildungsroman* genre as understood in this thesis, and the *Entwicklungsroman* makes this explicit in its name. In doing so it further foregrounds a concept that is also centrally evident in the *Künstlerroman* and *Erziehungsroman* (through artistic creation or learning). Such ideas of progressive development – successful, failed, or otherwise – are central to all of the novels analysed in the following chapters and, in interaction with ideas of individual and society, central to how these novels articulate their critiques.

In contrast with the plethora of criticism on *Bildungsroman*, however, these other terms remain largely the domain of German-language criticism, which makes stronger use of

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<sup>71</sup> For a brief overview of these terms see Michael Minden, "Bildungsroman," in *Encyclopedia of the Novel*, ed. Paul Schellinger, Christopher Hudson, and Marijke Rijsberman (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998), 118-122.

the precise etymological roots of each word. The greatest exception to this is the *Künstlerroman*, which, through its focus on the figure of the artist and artistic creation, has gained a greater critical purchase in English-language literary studies.<sup>72</sup> For this reason, and because of the overarching unity provided by the term, I have used the term *Bildungsroman* throughout this thesis and addressed the specific nature of narrative events (artistic, educational, developmental) in detail in each chapter.

In critical terms, the first proper usage of the term *Bildungsroman* was by Karl Morgenstern in an 1819 lecture at the University of Dorpat.<sup>73</sup> In his lecture, Morgenstern cites *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795) by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe as the seminal text marking the birth of the genre.<sup>74</sup> The originary status of this text for the genre is one of the few facts on which there has remained a large, although far from universal, degree of consensus.<sup>75</sup> Morgenstern, speaking not only after the fall of the Holy Roman Empire but also from a period prior to a unified German nation-state, locates the origins of this exemplary *Bildungsroman* in a German culture. He notes that *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* “presents to us German life, German thought, and the morals of our time”, and states that Christoph Wieland’s work failed to do this because he lived in a “period in

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<sup>72</sup> In particular, Modernist concerns with art and artist makes this genre particularly viable; James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is possibly the most prominent text to be frequently read through the lens of the *Künstlerroman*. See, for example, Whitney Standlee “George Egerton, James Joyce and the Irish *Künstlerroman*,” *Irish Studies Review* 18, no. 4 (2010): 439-452; David P. Rando, “The Future of Joyce’s *A Portrait*: The *Künstlerroman* and Hope,” *Dublin James Joyce Journal* 9 (2016): 47-67; S. J. Catterson, “Joyce, the ‘*Künstlerroman*’ and Minor Literature: Francis Stuart’s ‘Black List, Section H,’” *Irish University Review* 27, no.2 (1997): 87-97.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. In the introduction to his translation of Morgenstern’s lecture, Tobias Boes notes that the term *Bildungsroman* was actually first used a decade earlier, but 1819 marks the first time the term was defined and explained as denoting a new genre. See Tobias Boes, “Introduction to on the Nature of the ‘*Bildungsroman*’,” *PMLA* 124, no. 2 (2009): 647, endnote 2. The University of Dorpat is now known as the University of Tartu, Estonia. At the time of Morgenstern, it was a half-German, half-Russian institution in the Governate of Livonia of the Russian Empire, and it only acquired its current name after numerous wars, conquests, and political upheavals.

<sup>74</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship and Travels*, trans. Thomas Carlyle (London: Chapman and Hall, [1795] 1893).

<sup>75</sup> One major exception to this is Bakhtin’s usage of the term. He defines the novel and *Bildungsroman* as forms existing in some form since the classical era. However, even he concedes that *Wilhelm Meister* and the era it heralded marked a significant new stage in the genre. Bakhtin devotes much attention to Goethe’s understanding of deep historical time as being a key feature of this new stage. See Mikhail Bakhtin, “The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism (toward a Historical Typology of the Novel),” in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 19-22.



which German *Bildung* could not yet hold its own against meddling foreign influences”.<sup>76</sup> Yet despite the German origins of the ur-text, Morgenstern repeatedly refers not to anything specifically German but rather to the universal category of the “human being”.<sup>77</sup> For Morgenstern, the *Bildungsroman* explores the “harmonious formation of the purely human”, with a “German environment” merely being the one “most suitable for [...] representing a *general formation*” (my emphasis) of the human.<sup>78</sup>

The *nature* of the formation or development that Morgenstern describes is also deeply significant. Morgenstern distinguishes between the epic and the novel by stating that while the epic “portrays the hero as acting on the external world and as bringing about important changes in it [, the novel] depicts the influence that men and environments exert on the hero and explains to us the gradual formation of his inner being.”<sup>79</sup> The *Bildungsroman*, claims Morgenstern, is the epitome of the novelistic approach to development, because it follows the process of formation of a single character over the course of a significant part of their life, “represent[ing] the development of the hero in its beginning and progress to a certain stage of completion.”<sup>80</sup>

However, Morgenstern’s initial usage received minimal attention, and it was not until nearly a century later that the term *Bildungsroman* was popularised, this time by Wilhelm Dilthey, most notably in his 1906 work, *Poetry and Experience*.<sup>81</sup> Dilthey’s understanding of

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<sup>76</sup> Morgenstern, “On the Nature of the ‘Bildungsroman’,” 655.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 655 and 656. From this representation of a general formation of the human arises Morgenstern’s secondary defining characteristic of the *Bildungsroman*: its pedagogic capacity. For Morgenstern the *Bildungsroman* “promotes the development of the reader to a greater extent than any other kind of novel.” Ibid., 654-55.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 654.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. Given the significance of Morgenstern’s emphasis on *general* human formation, it is important to note that he uses the term “hero” in the sense of protagonist or central character rather than to denote heroism in a moral sense.

<sup>81</sup> It was only in 1961 that Fritz Martini rediscovered Morgenstern’s invention of the term *Bildungsroman*, and Morgenstern remained in relative obscurity until his recent championing by Tobias Boes. Boes provided an English translation of Morgenstern’s original lecture in 2009, and Morgenstern’s definition of the genre is central to Boes’s 2012 *Formative Fictions*. See Tobias Boes, “Introduction to on the Nature of the ‘Bildungsroman’.”; Karl Morgenstern, “On the Nature of the ‘Bildungsroman’.”; Tobias Boes, *Formative*

the genre held sway as the foundation of much *Bildungsroman* criticism into the mid-20th century, and it differs significantly from Morgenstern's.<sup>82</sup> Like Morgenstern, Dilthey sees the *Bildungsroman* as originating in the specific cultural conditions of the fragmented German micro-states of the late Holy Roman Empire. However, rather than these conditions just being those most conducive to the birth of a universally applicable genre – as was Morgenstern's understanding – Dilthey claims that the fragmented conditions produced a genre that was intrinsically German. According to Dilthey, life in the many small Princedoms allowed little opportunity for political engagement due to the small domains and high level of governmental authority.<sup>83</sup> The severe constraints of this German political culture led to a cultural turn inwards, producing a focus on self-development and the private sphere that Dilthey believes the *Bildungsroman* epitomises. For Dilthey, the emergence of the *Bildungsroman* was, in his oft-quoted description, demonstrative of the 'individualism of a culture whose sphere of interest was limited to private life'.<sup>84</sup>

There are two key axes of difference between these two earliest accounts of the *Bildungsroman* genre. First, there is the question of the nationalism or universality of the genre, which is the central organising element of Boes's comparison between these two critics.<sup>85</sup> Second, there is the question of the focus of the genre, and the nature of the

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*Fictions: Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2012).

<sup>82</sup> See Wilhelm Dilthey, *Poetry and Experience*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi, vol. 5, Selected Works (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985). Boes offers a good account of the early history of *Bildungsroman* criticism in both the introduction to his translation of "On the Nature of the 'Bildungsroman'," and in *Formative Fictions*.

<sup>83</sup> Dilthey, *Poetry and Experience*, 335.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> For Boes, Dilthey is the first in a "nationalist essentialist" tradition of *Bildungsroman* criticism that first viewed the genre as inextricably German and then later saw it as demonstrating the national character of each text's country of origin. Morgenstern's universalism, by contrast, demonstrates not the empty universalism of later theorisations, argues Boes, but a middle-ground understanding of the genre as rooted in specific material conditions but not tied to prescriptive ideas of national identity. Boes, *Formative Fictions*, 4-6. A great deal of work has gone into exploring the concept of *Bildungsroman* and *Bildung* as part of a specifically German philosophical tradition with highly specific meanings. See, for example, Walter H. Bruford, *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation: 'Bildung' from Humboldt to Thomas Mann* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Todd Kontje, *The German Bildungsroman: History of a National Genre* (Columbia, South Carolina: Camden House, 1993). Just as much work has gone into contesting this view of the genre. See for,

development it depicts, which is of most interest to the analysis offered here. While perhaps not immediately obvious, there is a vital distinction between Morgenstern and Dilthey's accounts of the genre in this regard. Both see the genre as arising out of specific social and political conditions, but for Dilthey the focus is the individualised interiority of the central character, who develops as the product of his internal changes, quasi-independently of the external world. For Morgenstern however, interiority cannot be taken alone, and the genre shows "the influence that men and environments exert on the hero [and] the gradual formation of his inner being" as this process occurs in general human experience.<sup>86</sup> In the differences between these two accounts, the foundational elements of longstanding disagreements over the genre's definition can be found.<sup>87</sup>

### **Interiority and sociality in the *Bildungsroman***

Dilthey's emphasis on individualism and interiority has spawned a lengthy critical tradition. Joseph Slaughter, for instance, notes that "the *Bildungsroman* has often been read as narrating the emergence of modern egoistic self-reliance by critics who concentrate on the protagonist's (*Bildungsheld*'s) individualism at the expense of 'his' sociality", and cites as one of the more extreme examples of this Randolph P. Shaffner's description of the genre in 1984 as the story of a hero "emerging as, if not a genius, then at least an exceptional individual."<sup>88</sup> Written a decade earlier than Shaffner's work, David Miles's influential essay,

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example, Michael Beddow, *The Fiction of Humanity: Studies in the Bildungsroman from Wieland to Thomas Mann* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

<sup>86</sup> Morgenstern, "On the Nature of the 'Bildungsroman'," 654.

<sup>87</sup> Some of this disagreement may be down to the varying uses of the term *Bildung*, which has never been as determined as it might appear. Boes offers a good overview of the evolution of the term, including its roots in theology and its alternating meanings of both inner striving and passive receptivity. See Boes, *Formative Fictions*, 46-53.

<sup>88</sup> Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc.* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 19; Randolph P. Shaffner, *The Apprenticeship Novel: A Study of the 'Bildungsroman' as a Regulative Type in Western Literature with a Focus on Three Classic Representatives by Goethe, Maugham, and Mann* (New York: Peter Lang, 1984), 16. Obviously, an emphasis on exceptionality is totally anathema to the general formation and pedagogic principle advocated by Morgenstern. Nor does Slaughter share Shaffner's perspective on the *Bildungsroman*, diagnosing it as a result of the "Wilhelm Dilthey's early (mis)lead". Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc.*, 19.

“The Picaro’s Journey to the Confessional”, does not place the same emphasis on *exceptional* individuality, but still posits that the primary features of the *Bildungsroman* are the significance of the individual and an emphasis on internal development. Miles’s focus on these elements leads to the paradoxical claim that the “first great Bildungsroman in the German language, *Wilhelm Meister’s [Apprenticeship]*, may not be a Bildungsroman at all.”<sup>89</sup> Miles’s reading of *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* centres around the claim that “for a book purportedly describing a leisurely odyssey to self-awareness, it is strangely unpsychological”, and he argues that it is really the narrator of the novel, who is intentionally “merged toward the end of the novel with the role of the Tower Society” who comes anything close to being an “educational hero”.<sup>90</sup> For Miles the true growth of the genre occurred as it increasingly focused on introspection and psychological realism.<sup>91</sup> Any emphasis on the importance of things that are external to the hero is counter to what Miles views as the core of the genre.<sup>92</sup>

However, while traces of the Diltheyian approach remain in *Bildungsroman* criticism, a general shift has occurred in the latter half of the 20th century to an approach to the genre more in line with Morgenstern’s theorisation.<sup>93</sup> Perhaps the most influential text in this shift was Moretti’s 1987 *The Way of the World*. Moretti’s approach expands upon Morgenstern’s, offering greater specificity in its analysis of social conditions and the effect these conditions

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<sup>89</sup> David H. Miles, “The Picaro’s Journey to the Confessional: The Changing Image of the Hero in the German Bildungsroman,” *PMLA* 89, no. 5 (1974): 981.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 981 and 984.

<sup>91</sup> The specific connotations, both national and philosophical, of the term *Bildung* have led critics such as Michael Beddow to advocate the alternate term *Humanitätsroman*. See Beddow, *The Fiction of Humanity*, 46-53.

<sup>92</sup> In a similar but inverted vein to Miles, Jeffrey Sammons argues that since *Wilhelm Meister* there have been almost no *actual* examples of the *Bildungsroman*, because few texts given the label conform to the ideal of social reconciliation suggested by Goethe. See Jeffrey L. Sammons, “The Mystery of the Missing *Bildungsroman*, Or: What Happened to Wilhelm Meister’s Legacy?,” *Genre* 14, no. 1 (1981): 229-46. This approach to the genre can be adequately countered by the approach of Moretti outlined below.

<sup>93</sup> As explored below, feminist readings of the genre have frequently remained more sympathetic to an approach that has something in common with Dilthey’s, emphasising a self-developing interiority largely independent from external conditions. Susan Midalia, for example, places an emphasis on the *Bildungsroman*’s historical alignment with “autonomy and self-determination” and “integrity of the self”. See Susan Midalia, “The Contemporary Female Bildungsroman: Gender, Genre and the Politics of Optimism,” *Westerly* 41 no. 1 (1996): 89.

have on human development. Moretti identifies the *Bildungsroman*, starting with Goethe and *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, as arising out of changing conditions of capitalism and the massive cultural transformation this produced: in his terms, the “plung[e] into modernity”.<sup>94</sup> In Moretti’s reading, the *Bildungsroman* develops as “status society starts to collapse, the countryside is abandoned for the city, and the world of work changes at an incredible and incessant pace”.<sup>95</sup> This results in a hitherto unseen level of social mobility, at least for some, as people are no longer guaranteed to proceed into the employment of their parents.<sup>96</sup> In the form of the *Bildungsroman*, youth becomes the symbolic embodiment or “specific material sign” of this modernity due to its capacity to “accentuate modernity’s dynamism” and the new temporality – in terms of both pace and possibility of change – that arises alongside this modernity.<sup>97</sup>

Like Morgenstern, Moretti does not reject interiority; in fact, he states that modernity produces an interiority that is both “fuller” and “perennially dissatisfied”. Importantly, however, this interiority is a *product* of the new conditions of capitalist modernity, and also has to attempt to reconcile itself with the dominant social structure. It is this process of formation and reconciliation – with an interiority doubly influenced by external factors – that Moretti sees the *Bildungsroman* as representing. According to Moretti, the *Bildungsroman* that arises with *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* – what Moretti terms the “classical *Bildungsroman*” – attempts a reconciliation between the new mobility of modernity available to the young bourgeois male and the need for a social order, between “the tendency towards *individuality*, which is the necessary fruit of a culture of self-determination [and] the opposing tendency to *normality*”.<sup>98</sup> In order to fulfil its political function of organically

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<sup>94</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 5.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>96</sup> Provided they are of a certain class, gender, and nationality, a point which Moretti emphasises in the preface to the 2000 edition. See *ibid.*, ix-x.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 16. There are a number of alternate terms for the “classical *Bildungsroman*”. Jeffrey Sammons would view it as the only *Bildungsroman* proper, Joseph Slaughter terms it “affirmative”, and Bakhtin might term it “modern” (as opposed to classical, medieval, or renaissance).

synthesising these two tendencies, this reconciliation must also “appear symbolically legitimate” and be based on consent rather than coercion, meaning that the protagonist of the “classical *Bildungsroman*” must internalise social norms and “fuse external compulsion and internal impulses [...] until the former is no longer distinguishable from the latter.”<sup>99</sup>

But while his analysis was highly influential, Moretti was far from the first to advocate most of the elements at its core. Morgenstern aside, Georg Lukács and Mikhail Bakhtin are two prominent literary theorists that offered earlier, but similar, approaches to Moretti, although due to a variety of linguistic and political factors these approaches did not receive much critical attention at the time they were written. Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel* – first published in a collection in 1916 (and then book form in 1920) but not receiving an English translation until 1971 – places *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* as an exemplary model of one of the three fundamental types in his typology of the novel form. Here the *Bildungsroman* steers a middle course between “abstract idealism, which concentrates on pure action, and Romanticism, which interiorises action and reduces it to contemplation.”<sup>100</sup> Once again the central theme is “reconciliation between interiority and reality” in a world where interiority must concede to the constraints of reality even as, for such an interiority to exist, there must exist the possibility of some degree of “effective action in social reality”.<sup>101</sup> Notably, Lukács states that the “soul [here largely synonymous with the interiority of the subject] is not purely self-dependent, its world is not a reality which is, or should be, complete in itself and opposed to the reality of the outside world”.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1978), 135.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 132-33. Earlier Lukács uses the phrase “reconciliation of the *problematic* individual [...] with concrete social totality” (my emphasis), implying that the subject of the *Bildungsroman* is not the general human subject but rather a specific subject that faces particular difficulty reconciling with social totality. However, in all other respects Lukács’s analysis serves as a *general* model of the experience of social development and reconciliation. However, Boes takes this specific phrase to align Lukács with Dilthey’s school of analysis. See Boes, *Formative Fictions*, 21-22.

<sup>102</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 132.

Bakhtin, in a work from the 1930s, offers a different typology, and a far temporally broader use of the terms novel and *Bildungsroman*.<sup>103</sup> Bakhtin views the *Bildungsroman* tradition as extending back into antiquity but distinguishes a new form of modern *Bildungsroman* (examples including *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532-1564), and *Simplicius Simplicissimus* (1668)) as a key part of the rise of “the realistic novel”.<sup>104</sup> What distinguishes this modern *Bildungsroman* are new conceptions of time, both historical and on the level of character, that have notable parallels to Moretti's ideas of the new temporality of modernity. Bakhtin notes that in works like *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, “human emergence [...] is no longer man's own private affair” but rather he “emerges along with the world” as both human and world are in a state of change and transition.<sup>105</sup> The human is necessarily shaped by their surroundings even as those surroundings are susceptible to change.

Clearly, then, there is a long pedigree to the idea that the core of the *Bildungsroman* is an exploration of the interaction between the individual and society/world during the process of development, and Moretti makes reference to both of these critics.<sup>106</sup> One notable addition of Moretti's is the specificity of his socio-economic analysis, locating the core idea of individual-social development as emerging from a clear historical and ideological context: the rise of the bourgeois at the outset of capitalism. However, the strongest point of his analysis may be the realisation that, almost as soon as the ideal of social harmonisation of the individual was narrativized, the narrative potential of the failure of such harmonisation

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<sup>103</sup> The essay that survives in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* is a small remaining fragment of a much larger completed work, perhaps explaining some of its idiosyncrasy. The completed manuscript was destroyed, along with the publishing house in which it was stored, during the Second World War, and most of the preparatory material was later used by Bakhtin to make cigarettes during paper shortages. See Michael Holquist, “Introduction,” in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), xiii.

<sup>104</sup> Bakhtin, “The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism”, 23 and 19.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>106</sup> The relative obscurity of Morgenstern in comparison to Dilthey may explain why Moretti does not draw on him more despite the many parallels between their arguments. Moretti makes just one reference to Morgenstern, focusing on the educational capacity Morgenstern ascribes to the *Bildungsroman*. This reference is relegated to an endnote, and the quote used is received by way of Martin Swales's *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse*. See Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 56, endnote 56.

became clear. Moretti notes that only thirty years after the first example of the “classical *Bildungsroman*”, many of its central tenets of harmonisation and socialisation were “now dismissed as so many fairy-tale illusions.”<sup>107</sup> In Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black* (1830), he argues, the classical hero whose inner thoughts “enriched and strengthened their outward choices” has transformed into a character for whom “interiority appears as a principle of contradiction: of unfaithfulness and inconsistency”; the link between outer world and inner reality is, if not severed, then severely distorted.<sup>108</sup> Later still, according to Moretti, Balzac’s *Comedie Humaine* (1830-1847) uses the relation between individual and world, interiority and society, to demonstrate the unsuitability of capitalist society to human life.<sup>109</sup> Rather than reject these texts as deviations or false *Bildungsromane*, as Jeffrey Sammons does, Moretti recognises such texts as fundamental to the genre itself. The principles of the classical *Bildungsroman* serve to define the genre even in their contradiction, with failed development always being read against the ideal of social harmonisation.

There is one key concept that is implicit in the analyses in this vein but never explicitly noted in any of them: typicality. I draw this term from the work of Lukács, not from his analysis of the *Bildungsroman* in *The Theory of the Novel*, but from *Studies in European Realism*.<sup>110</sup> Lukács never explicitly defines the term, but the meaning is clear from his usage of it. Typicality is the way in which the experience of one entity can be taken as exemplary of the experience of the group to which it belongs. The individual entity’s story depicts typical experiences – those commonly shared by members of that entity’s group – and through this, the individual story takes on a greater significance than simply detailing the

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<sup>107</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 75.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-86.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 162-63.

<sup>110</sup> In particular, the meaning of typicality can be seen in Lukács’s contrast of Balzac and Stendhal. He notes that Balzac used the stories of individual characters to depict “how the rise of capitalism to the undisputed economic domination of society carries the human and moral degradation and debasement of men into the innermost depths of their hearts”. Although Stendhal saw the degradation and debasement entailed by capitalism “with even greater contempt and cynicism”, argues Lukács, he failed to relinquish a romantic notion of persistent interior purity, and consequently failed to create characters that achieved the same level of “social typicality” as those of Balzac. Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, trans. Edith Bone (London: The Merlin Press, 1978), 79-82.



singular events within it. In the case of the *Bildungsroman*, it is the central character that is in some way typical. Their story exists not only as the story of a single character's life but also as a story revealing to the reader something about the typical experience of the social group to which that character belongs, be that humanity in general or members of a particular race, gender, or social class.

Typicality is distinct from allegory, another common way in which individual narratives take on broader meaning, although these two techniques can work in conjunction. Typicality relies on depicting one example of experiences that are shared by entities of a given type, with these common experiences then informing the reader about that type. Allegory relies on elements of a text metaphorically representing something, with the elements used not necessarily bearing any resemblance to the material reality of the thing being represented. For instance, to return to the topic of class addressed by Lukács, a narrative detailing the day-to-day life of a member of the 19<sup>th</sup> century working class functions typically by representing the typical experience of that social group. A narrative depicting a member of the old upper classes growing infertile and ill during the same historical period is not portraying experiences common to the majority of that group, so it is not typical, but it functions allegorically if the infertility and illness are used as symbolic representatives of the decline of that social group as a whole.

Typicality, then, is a key mechanism by which a *Bildungsroman* narrative takes on broader significance. However, its dependence on individual stories and shared, typical experience places a number of constraints on what topics it can adequately explore and address. Issues that are large-scale or long-term, in which cause and effect are complexly or distantly linked, which do not produce regularly typical individual experience, which affect a wide range of different people, which manifest in a multiplicity of significant but different ways, and which generally operate beyond the level of the individual, all present serious challenges to the mechanisms of typicality. As is addressed at greater length in the fourth chapter of this thesis and explored in the novel that is the subject of that chapter, neoliberal capitalism has many of these traits that render it difficult for typicality to address. The

*Bildungsroman* genre's reliance on typicality and individual focus, then, is one of the key factors that contributes to the ultimate conclusions of this thesis.

### **The nature of society in the *Bildungsroman***

For Moretti the society that the *Bildungsroman* explores is an early capitalist, broadly European one and the subject is young, white, male, and bourgeois. Moretti argues that this choice of subject is not a preference of his own but a necessary result of the fact that at the time of the *Bildungsroman*'s birth it was only individuals from this group that had gained the social mobility required to make the subject matter of the *Bildungsroman* viable.<sup>111</sup>

According to Moretti, the developing *Bildungsroman* responded to changing events in Europe: *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* was published in Germany while the French Revolution was underway in France – in Moretti's words, the “classical *Bildungsroman* narrates how the French Revolution could have been avoided” – while *The Red and the Black* emerged in France in the wake of Napoleon and the French Restoration.<sup>112</sup> The genre also responded to changing capitalist conditions: in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* the “process of formation-socialization [is] placed outside work” because while capitalism generates the conditions for the *Bildungsroman* it cannot generate its closure, closure being inimical to capitalism's very nature.<sup>113</sup> In the *Comedie Humaine* this tension between capitalism's unending growth and the need for closure reaches breaking point as “the bourgeois ‘ethic’ moves from individual to the system, and is thus transformed from free choice to an inescapable objective imperative”.<sup>114</sup> The central character, Lucien, risks deadly fatigue as he simply cannot keep up with the constant, unending expansion that is required of him by a society dominated by capitalist dynamism. And it is because society transformed

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<sup>111</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*, x.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 162-63.

away from these initial bourgeois cultural conditions that Moretti argues the genre came to an end at the start of the 20th century.

However, in much of the critical work that follows Moretti, especially since the 2000s, the precise nature of the society that the *Bildungsroman* depicts, and so the nature of reconciliation with it, has become contested. This is of particular importance for those seeking to address examples of the *Bildungsroman* from after the period that Moretti says it ceased to be viable. Jed Esty, for example, focuses on Moretti's analysis of youth as the symbol of modernity, and the model of reconciliation featured in the classical *Bildungsroman*. For Esty, adulthood – which is attained in the classical *Bildungsroman* at the moment of reconciliation with society – symbolically correlates to the nation-state. Whereas youth embodies capitalist modernity, adulthood symbolises the nation and its “language of historical continuity or social identity” that provides necessary limits to capitalist modernity's ruthless drive for expansion.<sup>115</sup> In Esty's reading, capitalist processes are contained within national boundaries in the “classical *Bildungsroman*”, and so the youthful central character is fundamentally reconciling with a *national* society. Having established the apparent importance of national context, Esty reads the arrested development of the central characters of colonial, modernist *Bildungsromane* as representative of the arrested national development produced through the “global asymmetries of capitalism” and imperialism.<sup>116</sup>

A central plank of Esty's argument is his claim that he only draws out something implicit in Moretti's argumentation, and this claim is dubious. Moretti makes clear that the social structures that shape the development and lives of the central characters are those of a pan-European bourgeois culture. Developments in the *Bildungsroman* occurred in relation to broad European events and transformations – the French Revolution, Napoleon, the

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<sup>115</sup> Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 7. Esty's reading further differs from Moretti's in that the connection it establishes between nation and adulthood is purely symbolic. To clarify, the new autonomy of youth in Moretti's reading is both the actual, material result of the rise of capitalism *and* symbolic of a socio-cultural change induced by capitalism. In contrast, adulthood and nationhood are only *symbolically* linked by Esty, as there is no necessary link between the experience of adulthood and the existence of nation.

Restoration – and not merely in the countries most directly affected by these events. The German, ur-*Bildungsroman* *Wilhelm Meister Apprenticeship*, for example, arose in relation to the French Revolution. Even England, which Moretti claims had a relative “stability of narrative conventions and basic assumptions” over the period of the *Bildungsroman*, and which produced a literature of social stability and conformity, did so not because of its national character but because its relative geographic isolation distanced it from the turmoil that occurred on the broader European continent.<sup>117</sup> Esty also focuses on Moretti’s analysis of the “classical *Bildungsroman*”. In doing so he ignores that Moretti provides many examples of the *Bildungsroman* where symbolic reconciliation is not achieved – Balzac and Stendhal being the most prominent – within non-colonial nations, and where this failure is not linked to national failure. However, Esty’s flawed reading of Moretti does not negate the fact that the approach he outlines, where the development of the nation is linked to the development of the individual, has been used in the years since the *Bildungsroman*’s inception, as his analysis of a number of examples of colonial *Bildungsromane* demonstrates.

Joseph Slaughter is another major theorist who has recently contributed to the theorisation of the *Bildungsroman*. Slaughter provides a compelling account of the interaction between legal discourse and literature, and between human rights and the *Bildungsroman* more specifically.<sup>118</sup> For Slaughter the *Bildungsroman* has been a central part of the discourse that has shaped notions of human subjecthood and fed into the legal apparatus that now define these terms. As such, the genre can be used to problematise the way in which supposedly universal rights lack universality, both in terms of their philosophical underpinnings and their material realisation. In Slaughter’s view, the *Bildungsroman* depends on a “residual nationalism”, that excludes alternative models and experiences that do not fit a national paradigm, in much the same manner that human rights remain dependent on the

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<sup>117</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 181.

<sup>118</sup> Slaughter notes that *Robinson Crusoe* was explicitly invoked during the formulation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, providing material for two opposed readings of human nature. This is particularly interesting, because, as we saw earlier, Friedman also invoked this text to explain his vision of human nature. See Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc.*, 46-49.

nation-state, both legally and practically.<sup>119</sup> However, Slaughter maintains a cautious optimism for the genre as a flawed but necessary literature of “de-marginalisation”.<sup>120</sup>

Tobias Boes’s 2012 *Formative Fictions* emerges as a counter to the emphasis on nation that he sees in accounts such as Slaughter’s and Esty’s. Boes champions Morgenstern’s retrieval from obscurity and uses Morgenstern’s theorisation heavily as he returns to the historical roots of the genre. The central claim of *Formative Fictions* is that criticism of the *Bildungsroman* remains trapped “between the Scylla of national essentialism and the Charybdis of an empty universalism.”<sup>121</sup> In other words, Boes argues that *Bildungsroman* criticism has either defined the genre through the idea of a specific and specifically national context or through a concept of the human that is so broad as to be virtually meaningless. Boes claims to aim for a middle ground, suggesting that at its very inception the genre contained “cosmopolitan” remainders that defied its apparent nationalism. By cosmopolitanism, Boes means a form of identity not based on nation, or perceived national essence, but a form of “common identity” that cuts across state boundaries and “arises from the day-to-day practices of ordinary peoples, rather than being imposed from above”.<sup>122</sup>

A particular target of Boes’s criticism is Esty, and through him Moretti. Boes argues that there are a number of critical flaws in Esty’s nation-focused reading of the *Bildungsroman*, and in other readings like it. Chief among these failings is that *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, the ur-*Bildungsroman*, “predates both the creation of a unified nation-state on German soil and even the formulation of coherent theories for what such a state might look like.”<sup>123</sup> Boes also criticises Moretti, arguing that Moretti makes “even broader claims” for the *Bildungsroman* than Esty, viewing the genre as the “symbolic form of

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<sup>119</sup> Joseph Slaughter, “Enabling Fictions and Novel Subjects: The ‘Bildungsroman’ and International Human Rights Law,” *PMLA* 121, no. 5 (2006): 1419.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> Boes, *Formative Fictions*, 3.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

modernity” and linked “to the idealist tradition”.<sup>124</sup> In Boes’s view, Moretti is aligned with a deeply limited “universalist” and idealist approach to the genre. As evidence for this limitation, Boes notes that it “is surprisingly hard to discover novels that fulfil the structures of totality, teleology, and normativity demanded by the idealist understanding of *Bildung*.”<sup>125</sup>

Boes’s critique of the nation-based approach to the *Bildungsroman* is valid, at least for the earliest examples of the genre, but his reading of Moretti is both cursory and flawed, relying heavily on Esty’s analysis, which as mentioned above is far from indisputable, and featuring almost no direct engagement with Moretti.<sup>126</sup> Boes overlooks that Moretti recognises the lack of *Bildungsromane* that conform to the ideal of social-individual reconciliation; Moretti in fact analyses the failure of reconciliation in *The Red and the Black* and *Comedie Humaine* and cites these two as prime examples of the genre. Nor does Boes’s claim of Moretti’s broad “universalism” stand up to scrutiny. Not only does Moretti view the genre as responding to European events, as outlined previously, he also limits the *Bildungsroman* to a very specific historical period, as the product of very specific capitalist socio-cultural conditions, and available only to those of a gender, class and social position that could take advantage of those conditions. In contrast, the content, rather than the nature, of the cosmopolitan culture that Boes posits is never really clarified. Boes’s failure to engage directly with Moretti is especially problematic as he chooses to analyse many of the same texts as *The Way of the World*, including *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, *The Red and the Black*, and *Comedie Humaine*, and so appears to mount a direct challenge to Moretti’s. However, Boes’s work is useful for tracking the history of the genre, for recognising Morgenstern’s position as the foundational figure for the genre, and for offering a critique of nation-focused analyses of early *Bildungsromane*.

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 24.

<sup>126</sup> Moretti receives six mentions in Boes’s text, four of which are actually references to Moretti’s essay “Conjectures on World Literature”, one of which deals with the “afterword to [Moretti’s] revised second addition of *The Way of the World*” in which Moretti briefly treats on modernism and the *Bildungsroman*. See Boes, *Formative Fictions*, 130. Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 235-45. Only Boes’s first brief mention of Moretti engages with any of Moretti’s theorisation of the genre and at no point does Boes engage with Moretti’s readings of Goethe, Balzac or Stendhal.

While it does not suffer the flaws Boes cites, for critics wishing to analyse contemporary examples of the *Bildungsroman*, Moretti's analysis, however useful in some areas, presents notable challenges. Chief among these challenges is Moretti's periodisation and limitation of the genre. He argues that the historical conditions that made the *Bildungsroman* possible began to come to a close at the end of the 19th century and were finally cut off by the First World War. According to Moretti, with the rise of the state and the marginalisation of the individual by psychology and social sciences, the conditions that had placed the individual (as modelled on the ideal of the young bourgeois male) at the centre of historical understanding disappeared.<sup>127</sup> However valid his reading is of the initial conditions that produced the *Bildungsroman*, Moretti's understanding of the genre's fate can be said to fly in the face of the historical reality of the genre's continued and expanded usage, especially in the period after World War Two.

We may indeed, as Moretti claims, have moved beyond the conditions which first occasioned the rise of the *Bildungsroman*. Even given this – and even if we were to lose the conditions of mobility and dynamism that originally enabled the genre – the fact of the genre's previous coming into existence remains. While the core idea of exploring social-individual synthesis through an individual's life-story was established in a highly specific historical context, having been established and embedded in the *Bildungsroman*, this idea can be and has been redeployed in a variety of new contexts. Different deployments function to explore how this social-individual synthesis functions in a variety of periods and for a variety of social groups, and so demonstrate the versatility of the *Bildungsroman* for social exploration, explanation, and critique. The examples explored above provide some demonstration of this, but in line with broader trends in literary criticism, towards the end of the 20th century much work on the *Bildungsroman* began to focus on the experience of those previously marginalised in society and literature due to gender, race, nationality, or sexuality.

There have been a variety of different approaches to the female and feminist *Bildungsroman* since the topic first began to be explored in earnest. Bonnie Hoover Braendlin's 1979 claim that a "woman's quest for a self-determined, self-regulated, and

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<sup>127</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 228.

hence ‘authentic’ identity expresses itself in the bildungsroman” serves as both exemplar and starting point for an approach that views the genre in terms of individualised self-development.<sup>128</sup> One successor to this argument is Aránzazu Usandizaga, who in her reading of how the female modernist *Bildungsroman* is part of a long tradition that differs from the male approach to the genre, states that while male modernists wrote the *Bildungsroman* to “escape from the real world”, women “use the genre for self-creation and self-understanding [...] as a way to approach experience with the hope of changing it.”<sup>129</sup> In terms of self-realisation, if not nationalism, the core idea of this analysis shares much with Dilthey’s reading of the *Bildungsroman*. A different, but still prominent, approach is exemplified by the influential collection, *The Voyage In* (1983). The central principle of this collection of essays is that even “the broadest of definitions of the *Bildungsroman* presuppose a range of social options available only to men”.<sup>130</sup> The collection provides a variety of analyses of female *Bildungsromane*, from the 19th century to the contemporary period, in order to explore the common experience of development shared by women that has been obscured through the historical positioning of male experience as the norm.

Both of these approaches have received challenges. It is against the critical approach exemplified by *The Voyage In* that Lorna Ellis positions her 1999 study, *Appearing to Diminish*. Ellis’s argument hinges on the idea that there are more similarities between male and female *Bildungsromane* than has previously been acknowledged, even at the moment of their inception in the 18th century, and she argues that there are even female examples of the

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<sup>128</sup> Bonnie Hoover Braendlin, “Alther, Atwood, Ballantyne, and Gray: Secular Salvation in the Contemporary Feminist Bildungsroman,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies* 4, no. 1 (1979): 18. For her core claim Braendlin draws on Ellen Morgan’s description of the *Bildungsroman* as “the most salient form for literature influenced by neo-feminism.” See Ellen Morgan, “Human Becoming: Form and Focus in the Neo-Feminist Novel,” in *Images of Women in Fiction*, ed. Susan Cornillon (Ohio: Bowling Green Press, 1973), 185. One other key observation by Braendlin is that the female *Bildungsroman* shifts the moment of realisation and awakening from early youth to later periods of life.

<sup>129</sup> Aránzazu Usandizaga, “The Female Bildungsroman at the Fin De Siècle: The ‘Utopian Imperative’ in Anita Brookner’s *A Closed Eye* and *Fraud*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 39, no. 4 (1998).

<sup>130</sup> Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland, “Introduction,” in *The Voyage In* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1983), 7.



genre that predate *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*.<sup>131</sup> This suggests that, while his analysis of the political and social shifts of the period is valid, Moretti is too quick to preclude female experience from being sufficiently influenced by these shifts. In a similar vein to Ellis, working in many ways against both Braendlin and *The Voyage In*, Susan Midalia states that much “feminist work on the contemporary female *Bildungsroman* has argued for the emancipatory nature of the genre”, but she herself argues that this need not be the case and that “actual textual diversity can also be attributed to the way in which the issue of social class problematises that of personal liberation, and to the different emphasis in different novels on the psychological and social determinants of identity.”<sup>132</sup> Her reading of the genre, then, expands upon the kind of reading typified by Moretti and Morgenstern, where the genre explores the impact of external social context on internal development. But Midalia builds on this approach in offering the possibility of a variety of different *Bildungsromane* shaped by different social experiences but occurring within the same socio-historical context, rather than offering a general model of development of the “human”, as with Morgenstern, or a model limited to male bourgeois youth, as with Moretti.

A generally later turn has been towards racial, colonial, and postcolonial readings of the *Bildungsroman*. Perhaps the single most influential work in this area has been that of Slaughter. While Slaughter offers a general model of the *Bildungsroman's* functioning, tying it to the Eurocentric legal and philosophical tradition of human rights, and to a variety of globalising projects, the primary focus of his work is the application of this model to postcolonial *Bildungsromane*. He examines how a number of different examples of the genre have attempted to reveal that the assumptions of human rights discourse have been exclusionary or unrealised in non-European contexts and have tried to accurately represent experiences not accounted for by the framework of human rights. Slaughter's analysis and approach have provided the basis for much further criticism in this vein. Esty's work has also

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<sup>131</sup> Lorna Ellis, *Appearing to Diminish: Female Development and the British Bildungsroman, 1750-1850* (London: Associated University Presses, 1999), 7.

<sup>132</sup> Midalia, “The Contemporary Female Bildungsroman,” 91-92. Given female exclusion from mainstream theorisations of the genre, and the societal restrictions placed on women historically, it is perhaps unsurprising that the feminist criticism against which Midalia positions her reading has been more sympathetic to the notion of the genre as one of emancipatory self-expression/determination rather than a genre heavily determined by dominant social context. Midalia again cites Morgan as exemplary of this self-expressive tradition.

been significant. Again, although he provides a general model of the *Bildungsroman* as tied to nation, he uses this general model to explore the specific problems of *Bildungsromane* from colonial countries and the colonial era. His nation-centric approach provides a solid theoretical foundation that is particularly suited to colonial and post-colonial work. Beyond these broader studies, however, there have also been a huge number of more focused analyses, often single-text studies, that explore both the subversive and reconciliatory potential of the *Bildungsroman* in terms of ethnic, postcolonial, or non-European terms.<sup>133</sup>

Another significant area of critical work that has seen recent expansion, although somewhat later than the uptake of this topic in *Bildungsromane* themselves, is criticism focusing on questions of different kinds of sexuality. A central or seminal critical work equivalent to that of Moretti's or Slaughter's has yet to clearly emerge in this critical field, but there have been a wide range of studies published, ranging from tackling implicit questions of sexuality in early *Bildungsromane* to analyses of contemporary examples of queer *Bildungsromane* of a more explicit kind and often featuring explorations of how sexual identity intersects with a variety of other identities.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> A small selection includes postcolonial work such as Feroza Jussawalla, "Kim, Huck and Naipaul: Using the Postcolonial Bildungsroman to (Re) Define Postcoloniality," *Links & Letters* 4 (1997): 25-38; Gregory Castle, "My Self, My Other: Modernism and Postcolonial Bildung in Assia Djebar's Algerian Quartet," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 59, no. 3 (2013): 628-648; Ralph A. Austen, "Struggling with the African Bildungsroman," *Research in African Literatures* 46, no. 3 (2015): 214-31; Piret Peiker, "A.H. Tammsaare's Truth and Justice as a Postcolonial Bildungsroman," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 46, no. 2 (2015): 199-216. There are works in line with Esty focusing on colonialism, for example, Mandy Treagus, *Empire Girls: The Colonial Heroine Comes of Age* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2014). And there is a particularly strong vein of criticism focusing on the experience of Asian Americans, perhaps largely thanks to the work of Lisa Lowe. See, for example, Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Stella Bolaki, *Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction* (New York: Rodopi, 2011); Xiaojing Zhou et al., *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature* (London: University of Washington Press, 2005).

<sup>134</sup> See, for example, Robert Tobin, "Bildung and Sexuality in the Age of Goethe," in *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature*, ed. E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 276-91; Lies Xhonneux, "The Classic Coming out Novel: Unacknowledged Challenges to the Heterosexual Mainstream," *College Literature* 39, no. 1 (2012): 94-118; Joseph Valente, "Other Possibilities, Other Drives: Queer, Counterfactual 'Life' in Truman Capote's Other Voices, Other Rooms," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 59, no. 3 (2013): 526-46; Eddie Whyte, "(Un)Manacled Sexuality! Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* as a Queer Bildungsroman?," *Journal of West Indian Literature* 19, no. 2 (2011): 85-100; Fantasia Annette, "The Paterian Bildungsroman Reenvisioned: 'Brain-Building' in Alison Bechdel's 'Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic'," *Criticism* 53, no. 1 (2011): 83-97.

These readings all serve a key role in redressing the historical marginalisation of numerous different social groups. They pay attention to how experiences have differed from the normative male, bourgeois, European account of humanity that key examples of the genre, and much criticism, originally presented as representative of humanity as a whole, and they examine how the *Bildungsroman* has been used to explore these experiences.<sup>135</sup> The rise of neoliberalism presents a new universalising model of the human, a new experience – that of growing up neoliberal – and new challenges for the genre which have yet to be concretely addressed.

### **Neoliberalism and the *Bildungsroman***

Neoliberalism has had a widespread impact on the lives of people the world over, not only through the way in which neoliberal policies have reshaped society, but also through the dominance of neoliberal ideology, which has come to govern day-to-day life in deeper, less direct ways. The advent of a new and influential form of capitalism presents a significant change for a genre that has its roots in the cultural changes occasioned by the birth of capitalism. This significance is only enhanced by the way in which the ideology of this new form replaces earlier normative models of society and the human, concepts central to the *Bildungsroman*, with a simple universal conceptualisation of the individual and individualised behaviour that dissipates the concept of society altogether.<sup>136</sup> All the prior

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<sup>135</sup> The fact that identity politics focusing on the experience of these groups, of which criticism focused on identity categories is a part, has risen to prominence simultaneous to the rise of neoliberalism has prompted some critics to draw a link between the two. A prominent example of this is Nancy Fraser's exchange with Johanna Brenner, on the idea of "Progressive Neoliberalism". Fraser outlines an (unwitting) alliance between the forces of neoliberal financialisation and prominent progressive social movements. She argues that neoliberal politicians were able to push through blatantly harmful policies under the guise of progressive politics. This alignment, she argues, has collapsed in the wake of the 2008 crisis. See Nancy Fraser and Johanna Brenner, "What is Progressive Neoliberalism?: A Debate," *Dissent* 64, no 2. (2017): 130-140. There are, of course, a variety of other explanations for the simultaneity of these political changes, ranging from unwitting collusion to neoliberal co-optation to an element of neoliberal ideology being exploitable by identity movements to identity politics being the only political approach viable under neoliberal hegemony. The topic has been contentious to say the least. The first chapter of this thesis explores the relationship between the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s and the radical leftist politics of the 1960s, and so offers an analysis that may shine some light upon this topic.

<sup>136</sup> By positioning all subjects, regardless of their actual cultural or material position, as subjects of interest with equal capacity for realisation of those interests, neoliberal ideology has laid claim to a falsely egalitarian and liberating rhetoric. Under this rubric, the position any subject finds themselves in is not the product of systemic

analyses I have explored here, even those addressing texts written in the neoliberal period, have been tied to or critiqued a certain model of subject and society – broadly speaking a *liberal* model – that has largely been replaced under neoliberal ideology, or they have focused on a specific racial or gendered experience which neoliberalism attempts to override with its normative, universal model of the individual.<sup>137</sup>

A central aim of this thesis, then, is to explore how the rise and dominance of neoliberalism has influenced the *Bildungsroman* and has changed the possibilities available for those writing in the genre, especially those attempting to use it for political critique and social exploration. The new ideology of the individual, the dominance of neoliberal rhetoric, the global scale of neoliberal systems, and the new structures of neoliberal power all present new considerations and challenges for the genre. Exploration of the effect of these factors on the *Bildungsroman* can potentially tell us not only about the fate of a single – if popular – genre, but also, through the elements this genre shares with other literary and cultural forms, tell us something about the effect neoliberalism has had on broader cultural and artistic production.

However, this thesis is at least as much about what the *Bildungsroman* can tell us about neoliberalism as what neoliberalism tells us about the *Bildungsroman*. It begins from the basis that like historical, sociological, political-economic, and ideological works, literature has its own unique role to play in exploring the phenomenon that is neoliberalism. The four case studies analysed in this thesis help us explore key elements of neoliberalism's rise to cultural dominance, its effect on society, and the realities of growing up in a neoliberal

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inequalities, but rather the product of an individualised failing to leverage neutral economic transactions. This claim was encapsulated by John Prescott, who became New Labour's Deputy Prime Minister under Tony Blair, in his famous claim in the runup to the 1997 UK elections that "we're all middle class now." See "Profile: John Prescott," *BBC*, Aug 27, 2007, accessed May 5, 2018, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/6636565.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6636565.stm).

<sup>137</sup> Slaughter, for instance, is an obvious example of this, as he centres his analysis of contemporary *Bildungsromane* around rights discourse and its, frequently qualified and complicated, relationship to a European philosophical tradition of personhood. But the neoliberal model of the individual differs significantly from the liberal rights model. Foucault, in fact, suggests that one of the core distinctions between neoliberalism and liberalism is the replacement of the subject of right with the subject of interest. See Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 275. To briefly gloss Foucault's distinction: in all their actions the subject of right was supposed to operate with conscious regard to certain inalienable rights shared by all subjects. The subject of interest, however, need only pursue their own interest without regard for its impact on others. Theoretically, through this behaviour, individual interests are not only "preserved" but actually "increased". *Ibid.*, 275-76.

world. Each of these novels comes from a key period in the history of neoliberalism as an active political and cultural force. They are examples of *Bildungsromane* by authors of particular significance, using the genre deliberately to articulate and critique the problems of capitalism and neoliberalism. Their deployment of the *Bildungsroman* is characterised by a self-consciousness, awareness, and active engagement with the core logic of the genre. They explore, critique, and redeploy the *Bildungsroman* in new ways both alongside and as a part of their critique of neoliberalism. Both the successes, failures, and unintended consequences of their attempts to articulate critiques of neoliberalism through the *Bildungsroman* provide productive material for analysis. These texts help to expose contradictions in the ideological logic of neoliberalism, to explore the nature of its global and systemic functioning, and to reveal the difficulties facing those wishing to represent and challenge neoliberalism. At the core of all these analyses is a focus on neoliberal ideology's colonisation and domination of the key concepts of individuality and society, its impact on how these concepts are understood to function, and the influence of these factors on the concept of development. The overlap between this aspect of neoliberal ideology and the *Bildungsroman*'s core logic, which is also centrally concerned with the individual and society, is what gives the analytic focus of this thesis its strength.

The authors chosen for this study all originate from the Americas (two from the USA, one from Canada, and one from Chile), and three of the four chosen texts are primarily set in North America, taking place in the USA, Mexico, and/or a future transformation of North American nations (*The Dispossessed* is a clear exception in being set on two fictional planets). As explored previously, the USA's culture and dominant geopolitical position allowed it to play a central role in neoliberal history, and so, in the broadest terms, novels originating and set in the USA and its surrounding areas have obvious relevance to a study focused on neoliberalism. However, neoliberalism was never a purely national, US phenomenon. Not only did it originate from a transnational society of academics – and become partially implemented in Chile and the UK before the US – but it also required rapid global expansion of neoliberal ideology and practices, often to the benefit of the USA and frequently without democratic consent; as previously noted, one of the most prominent

examples of this was the 1980s structural readjustment of Mexico. In new national arenas that lacked the US's cultural, economic, and geopolitical centrality, the overall impact of neoliberalism was quite different. The choice of authors for this thesis, then, has sought to register this difference, exploring not only the central location of the US but the varied experience of neoliberalism even in the US's closest neighbours. Each of the authors chosen for this thesis – and their choice of textual settings – introduce a new and specific aspect to this thesis's understanding of neoliberalism.

Le Guin is a US author and *The Dispossessed* was written and published (1974) at a key point in the history of neoliberalism. The novel, then, comes from the national context and political milieu that enabled neoliberalism's development and rise to dominance. Her highly political work can therefore give insight into the intellectual environment from which neoliberalism emerged as dominant, informing us about its origins and nature. While elements of the novel's setting can be linked to the political environment in which it was written – one planet features fictional nations bearing a resemblance to the USA and USSR and engaged in a Cold War – by virtue of its attempt to imagine a concrete political alternative, rather than simply registering or expanding upon a political reality, the other half of the text is set on a planet that cannot be linked to any Earth setting. In neither of these settings is *The Dispossessed* addressing a neoliberal world, per se, and it is more through the ideas explored and the context of its publication that its value to a study of neoliberalism can be drawn.

Wallace, too, is from the US, and *Infinite Jest* reflects the experience of a US during the heyday of US neoliberalism in the late 1980s and early 1990s. *Infinite Jest*'s setting reflects this, depicting a futuristic US setting that explores (in horrifically magnified form) the socio-cultural impact of neoliberal hegemony in what is arguably its primary country of origin. While *Infinite Jest* explores the negative socio-cultural effects of neoliberalism's dominance, then, the problems it explores are those specific to the culture of a country that, at least on the national level, was a beneficiary of neoliberalism, and, due to its geopolitical dominance, had a very specific set of social and material circumstances. However, *Infinite Jest*'s inclusion of Canada and Mexico in ONAN (a futuristic North American superstate), as

minor partners to the USA and as dumping sites for US waste, hints at regional variations in the functioning of neoliberalism that become central in the work of the two non-US authors that follow Wallace in this thesis.

As a Canadian author, Atwood still operates within close proximity to the US, but Canada's geopolitical position still differs from that of the USA, and awareness of the impact of such differences on a broader global scale emerges in *Oryx and Crake*. The novel takes place in an apparently post-national world but is set largely within the geographical area of the old USA, highlighting this region's influence in the story of neoliberalism. However, the novel's inclusion of a narrative focusing on a character from rural East Asia (and the local social divisions between corporate employees and "plebs") highlights that there is a huge imbalance in how neoliberalism functions and is experienced beyond the confines of the USA and that for many the impact of neoliberalism is not only socio-cultural but also profoundly material.

Chilean by birth but moving to Mexico and then Spain, Bolaño personally witnessed the functioning of neoliberalism in a wide range of non-US settings, and this again inflects his exploration of neoliberalism. The majority of *2666* is set in the region of Mexico that borders the USA – where US corporations exploit cheap, unprotected labour – while the novel explores a range of globally interconnected stories, two of which take place partially or fully in Europe. This focus furthers the exploration of geopolitical variations suggested in *Oryx and Crake*, highlighting the complex systemic functioning of neoliberalism on a global level and exploring in particular the impact of neoliberalism on those beyond neoliberalism's dominant US centre who are exploited in order to sustain the neoliberal order.

The regional focus of this thesis, then, is the Americas, particularly North America. This is in part because of the core location of the USA, which is central here due to its centrality to the story of neoliberalism. However, the inclusion of non-US authors exploring non-US experiences of neoliberalism is necessary to highlight how, even within the comparatively limited framework of North America, neoliberalism does not function

uniformly, with geographical disparity and inequality being central to how it operates and sustains itself.

While I primarily use the analytic framework of the *Bildungsroman*, it is also important to note that none of the four novels studied here are *solely Bildungsromane*. Each of the texts participates in the genre by including key textual elements associated with it, but as always, this is entirely compatible with other generic categorisations.<sup>138</sup> Even a highly conventional *Bildungsroman*, for instance, would fall into the genre categories of *Bildungsroman*, realist fiction, and a variety of others determined by other textual or authorial differences. However, even given this, the novels analysed in this thesis are particularly notable examples of generic hybridity. Each of them features *Bildungsroman* elements, generally determining much of the plot structure and thematic focus, combined with a wide range of other genres – including utopia, dystopia, science-fiction, thriller, historical, and the *Bildungsroman* sub-genres noted earlier – that shape other aspects of the text such as setting, additional plot, and narrative structure.

The use of multiple genres by these novels is valuable in a number of ways. In their use of genre – both the *Bildungsroman* and others – the novels demonstrate an authorial awareness of generic conventions and functioning that makes analysis of how the *Bildungsroman* genre has been deployed, redeployed, and changed particularly productive. In addition, many of the chosen generic elements, in particular science-fictional settings, allow aspects of the novels' central themes/critiques to be externalised onto the world of the setting, establishing early on awareness and critique of the results of capitalism and neoliberal ideology. Not only does this allow critique on multiple levels, but most significantly for the purposes of this analysis, it also enables more complex deployment of the *Bildungsroman* elements of each novel. Having established a critique of capitalism by setting, for instance, a *Bildungsroman* narrative can then do things that it could not otherwise do or that would take on an altogether different or ambiguous significance against another backdrop. Such an approach is essential, for example, to the analysis of the use of the *Bildungsroman* in *Oryx*

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<sup>138</sup> For a brief and useful overview of genre and generic participation, see Adam Kelly, *American Fiction in Transition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 20-23.



*and Crake*, as analysed in the third chapter of this thesis. These generic choices also provide avenues of exploration not readily available to realist fiction, which is constrained by the necessity of representing things such as social structure as they currently exist. The use of alternating and contrasting genres gives a method to register differing or alternative social or experiential possibilities, aiding the exploration of neoliberalism's non-uniform functioning highlighted in the selection of authors.

The first chapter explores what Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* – a novel published at a time prior to neoliberalism's mainstream emergence but at a key point in its rise – can tell us about the functioning of ideology and how neoliberalism rose to dominance out of an era that is renowned for radical left-wing attempts to restructure society. *The Dispossessed* contrasts two narratives, one set in a flawed but utopian communal-anarchist society and the other in a superficially alluring but hierarchical authoritarian-capitalist nation. Together these narratives tell the life-story of a single character, Shevek, who journeys between the two worlds. Beyond the more obvious critique embodied in the contrast between the two societies, this chapter focuses on how Le Guin attempts to co-opt and rehabilitate the *Bildungsroman* genre. Le Guin uses the genre to demonstrate that, although the *Bildungsroman* has its origins in early capitalism, the ideals of individual freedom and social synthesis that it proposes are better met by a communal anarchist society. The society she presents is structured explicitly around the principles of individual-social synthesis and fulfilling development that are at the core of the *Bildungsroman*. But Le Guin's ability to use the genre in this way requires the centrality of certain ideas that have parallels in neoliberal ideology, in particular a suspicion of institutionalised power and focus on the individual. These parallels demonstrate how, through the superficial similarities between the core concerns of neoliberalism and some of the radical politics of Le Guin's era, neoliberal ideology could lay claim to much of the same rhetoric of anti-establishmentarianism and individual freedom as was popular on the left. This ability allowed it to gain cultural traction in an era in which many would have been very opposed to the end results of the ideology through a shared sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo. The role played by the *Bildungsroman* in emphasising these similarities demonstrates the existence of certain parallels between the core logic of neoliberal ideology

and that of the *Bildungsroman*, revealing why future authors attempting to use the genre critically against neoliberalism would have to find novel ways to deploy it.

Chapter two focuses on *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace. The novel, composed during the period of neoliberalism's rise to dominance in the 1980s and published during its heyday in the mid-1990s, explores the experience of life under neoliberalism. It examines the isolation, addiction, and depression engendered by the neoliberal focus on the individual and the stripping away of any larger frameworks of meaning. Through the failure of the *Bildung* of the central character, Hal Incandenza, *Infinite Jest* demonstrates the contemporary failings of not only the neoliberal framework of meaning, which always returns focus to the self and its meaninglessness, but also older frameworks of meaning, such as liberal models of the individual and nationalistic models of society. The failure of these frameworks exposes contradictions in neoliberal logic, which undermines the very things that enable its existence in the first place. But Wallace does not abandon *Bildung*; through the character of Don Gately, he attempts to re-engage it by offering an alternative social framework centred around sociality. However, the apparent positivity of the message of Gately's narrative rests on a reliance on focusing on and privileging a single individual's importance. Such narrative privileging is central to the *Bildungsroman*'s use of typicality, which relies on a single individual's narrative to convey a story of broader relevance, but also has parallels to the focus of the self-interested individual of neoliberal theory. This self-interested focus is precisely the thing that the social framework Wallace proposes is intended to avoid. Ultimately, it is the form of the novel itself that offers a tantalising glimpse of a functional alternative social model, offering a dialogic vision of society that acknowledges all people as full individuals and persons, and demonstrates that human existence is always and inevitably socially interconnected.

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* is the focus of the third chapter. Published in 2003, the novel comes from a period when the cracks were beginning to show in neoliberal hegemony. It offers a subversion of the *Bildungsroman* genre, deliberately exploiting rather than attempting to avoid or overcome the uncomfortable alignment between elements of neoliberal ideology and *Bildungsroman* narrative logic. Chapter three explores how each of

the main characters of *Oryx and Crake*, through both the contents of their life-stories and how those stories are presented, offer a critique of different aspects of neoliberalism, of the challenges facing the *Bildungsroman*, and of the political capacity of literary forms that rely on logic similar to the *Bildungsroman*'s. The apparently central and sympathetic character of Jimmy demonstrates how socialisation in a neoliberal society – growing up neoliberal – leads to dissatisfied pleasure-seeking and selfishness, as with Hal in *Infinite Jest*. But Jimmy also demonstrates how the individual focus of neoliberal ideology, which is paralleled in the *Bildungsroman*, can lead to and justify abusive behaviour and the exploitation of others, while simultaneously obscuring larger structural issues by giving undue significance to the individual self. Crake demonstrates the way in which the *Bildungsroman*, and genres relying on similar logic, are unable to adequately represent alternatives to neoliberal models of existence. Through not conforming to neoliberal ideas of the individual as self-interested and growth-obsessed, alternative models necessarily also run up against core elements of narrative logic that enable the *Bildungsroman* to function, necessitating a new approach to narration of such alternatives if they are to succeed. *Oryx*, however, demonstrates the difficulty of even successful alternatives, especially for marginalised members of society. Narratives like *Oryx*'s that challenge the status quo can be easily drowned out by the narratives that benefit the dominant socio-political system, as the ubiquity of these narratives means they have become the standard by which the believability of stories is judged.

The final chapter analyses Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, which, although published relatively shortly after *Oryx and Crake*, offers a different and larger scope, taking a global-historical perspective on neoliberalism. The chapter focuses primarily on the last of the five parts into which the novel is divided, and how it functions in relation to the rest of the novel. The final part follows the story of Hans Reiter, a German-born author who writes under the pseudonym Archimboldi, who, over the course of his semi-nomadic existence, experiences many of the major historical events of the 20th century. Most superficially, Reiter's story, taken alongside the rest of the novel, demonstrates the continuities between the violence of mid-20th century totalitarianism and the systemic violence of global neoliberal capitalism. But the chapter explores how the novel destabilises ideas of class and nation, which

numerous analyses have placed at the centre of the *Bildungsroman*, and even the very concept of teleological development, questioning the underlying logic of the *Bildungsroman*'s model of human existence. In its contrast with the other sections of 2666, Reiter's narrative highlights two key elements of the *Bildungsroman* narrative logic on which its capacity to explore and critique rests: first, an established understanding of historical context against which smaller narratives are read and given meaning and, second, the capacity for individual narratives to say something about a more general human experience or the experience of a specific social group: typicality. As the chapter explores, 2666 provides a new historical-contextual backdrop for the neoliberal age in its central section, suggesting that neoliberalism, like the any political system and the capitalism that came before it, must be understood in relation to its worst exploitative and violent manifestations, which are not the exception but reveal its underlying nature. In addition, the novel highlights that the complex systemic nature of contemporary systems of power presents a serious challenge to typicality, suggesting that attempts to use the *Bildungsroman* to explore such a topic risk, beyond failure, replicating the logic of neoliberalism.

In his influential 1960 work, *Growing Up Absurd*, Paul Goodman offered a lament for the "disgrace of the Organized System of semimonopolies, government, advertisers, etc., and the disaffection of the growing generation."<sup>139</sup> Goodman's analysis, like the *Bildungsroman*, locates the period of youth and the experience of growing up as being of crucial significance for a society, and vital to understanding it. Citing the example of the Beat movement and the Angry Young Men, Goodman argues that the dissatisfaction and disengagement of the young men of his time – and it is young *men*, as Goodman's views on women and gender are as regressive as his other ideas are radical – is the product of the rejection of a society and culture which offers almost nothing worthwhile to them. Goodman argues that the "structure of society has become increasingly disastrous to the growth of excellence".<sup>140</sup> The Organized System, he says, has become fixated on structure and organisation, and forgotten that society

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<sup>139</sup> Paul Goodman, *Growing up Absurd: Problems of the Youth in the Organized System* (London: Gollancz, 1961), ix.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

exists to provide for the people in it, not for its own sake or for the sake of ever-greater systematisation. He laments the bureaucratic stifling of education, the system's repression of so many human virtues, the attempts at a socialisation to prevent the disaffection of youth without addressing the underlying problems, and the very process of growing up absurd. In his argument, Goodman reflected the concerns of many of his era, the desire for radical change being evident in the numerous political movements that were prominent in the 1960s.

Published a mere two years later, in 1962, the critique of society offered in Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom* in many ways shares a great deal with Goodman's. Friedman, too, laments the stifling presence of government. He calls for a system that enhances social, economic, and political freedom, advocating choice and the reduction of government control in a huge number of areas, including, notably, education. He promotes a system of economic models and methods that he claims will lead to such liberty and excellence, an ideal vision of a capitalist society determined by dynamism, flexibility, and freedom. It was Friedman and his fellow neoliberals that would define the shape of the society that was to come, and although in many ways the neoliberal vision seemed to meet with the desires of Goodman and those like him, in many others it did not. In the following chapters of this thesis, I explore the difficulty and absurdity of growing up neoliberal.

## Chapter 1

### Triumph: Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*

“There was a wall” opens Ursula K. Le Guin’s 1974 novel *The Dispossessed*.<sup>1</sup> This stark initial image immediately establishes the central concern of the text: division. More specifically, *The Dispossessed* explores the conflict produced by divisions within society, and suggests that such conflict can be overcome through an anarchist social structure that has at its core synthesis and reconciliation. For the society that Le Guin depicts, the fundamental synthesis occurs between the needs of society and the needs of each individual, but synthesis and reconciliation serve as central themes beyond that, occurring at every level of the text: within and between individuals, but also across worlds, cultures, and time. I argue that these fundamental themes operate not only as the structuring principle of the novel’s utopian society, but also underlie the genre and form chosen for *The Dispossessed*. While many critics have already explored *The Dispossessed* as a science-fiction utopia, this chapter offers an analysis of it as a *Bildungsroman*. I argue that Le Guin’s use of the *Bildungsroman*, and how the logic of this genre relates to the anarchist societal model presented in the novel, provides useful insight into the changing political milieu of the era in which *The Dispossessed* was written. The political significance of Le Guin’s use of the *Bildungsroman* provides a basis for understanding why later authors seeking to use the genre to critique neoliberal capitalism would choose to deploy it in a variety of new and unconventional ways.

Published in 1974, *The Dispossessed* emerged at a critical moment in the political and ideological shifts from which neoliberalism would eventually rise to dominance. *The Dispossessed*’s optimism towards political possibility and the concrete utopianism of its anarchist world mark it as a product and part of the debates that emerged from the political milieu of the 1960s. Yet, simultaneously, the year prior to the text’s publication had seen the

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<sup>1</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (London: Gollancz, 2002), 5. Further references will be given in parentheses within the text.

1973 oil crisis and Augusto Pinochet's violent coup in Chile.<sup>2</sup> *The Dispossessed*, a text praised for its recuperation of the utopian genre and the believability of the utopia it depicts, emerged in the middle of a decade that would end with the election of a UK Prime Minister famous for proclaiming that "there is no alternative" to neoliberal capitalism.<sup>3</sup> The question is, then: what can *The Dispossessed* tell us about how neoliberalism could emerge as the dominant political ideology out of an era renowned for its radicalism and left-wing politics?

To answer this question this chapter examines how the anarchist society presented in *The Dispossessed* is not only explored through the *Bildungsroman* but is explicitly structured around the central principle of the *Bildungsroman* genre: the reconciliation of individual autonomy with necessary societal structure in the process of individual development.<sup>4</sup> *The Dispossessed* exploits the *Bildungsroman*'s historical and ideological affiliation with capitalism in order to co-opt and rehabilitate the genre, using a *Bildungsroman* narrative to demonstrate an alternative, anarchist society more conducive to meeting the central principle of social-individual reconciliation than the capitalist society which originally produced the genre. This approach is most evident in the text's structure, which contrasts two interrelated narrative strands and so depicts the experience of living and developing in two societies. However, I argue that the very capacity of *The Dispossessed* to so easily make use of the *Bildungsroman* reveals that the political vision it presents not only aligns with anarchist, feminist, and even Taoist philosophies, but also shares elements with liberalism, libertarianism, and, crucially, neoliberalism. The elements shared include not only a suspicion of institutionalised power, but more fundamentally an emphasis on the autonomous

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<sup>2</sup> Many analyses privilege the 1973 oil shock as being a critical turning point in the breakdown of the old economic order and the rise of neoliberalism. For one of the better known accounts see Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Pinochet's Chile was the first place where neoliberal theories were tested out by economists educated and supported by the Chicago School. For a concise account see Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, 52-54.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Thatcher's (in)famous catchphrase neatly encapsulates the development of political discourse during the decades that followed her election, during which there was a process of ideological normalisation which peaked in the 1990s following the fall of the USSR. The most famous example of this normalisation is Francis Fukuyama's 1989 proclamation of the "end of history". See Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *The National Interest*, Summer 1989, no. 16 (1989): 3-18.

<sup>4</sup> See Moretti, *The Way of the World*.

individual as the fundamental unit from which society can be derived.<sup>5</sup> While Le Guin attempts to appropriate the genre for new political ends through these shared elements, they in turn enable the co-optation of elements of her political vision, revealing that the structure and form of the traditional *Bildungsroman* are deeply, and perhaps inextricably, tied to specific ideological presuppositions.

I argue that *The Dispossessed* can be usefully compared to alternative, capitalist political philosophies of its historical period that also lay claim to anarchist credentials, in order to help explore the rise of neoliberalism in the wake of the political movements of the 1960s. The key example for comparison explored in this chapter is Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974) – a work of political philosophy central to the development of libertarian thought in the US in its most popular, and capitalist, form – which was published in the same year as *The Dispossessed*. This comparison reveals much about how specific conceptual similarities allow political philosophies from opposite ends of the spectrum to lay claim to the same concepts and rhetoric. These diverse political philosophies can then make use of popular sentiment around concepts and rhetoric even if the manifestation of each political philosophy differs in practice from popular perception of what that rhetoric entails. Understanding the relationship between individualist, anti-statist philosophies from across the political spectrum helps clarify certain factors involved in the rise of neoliberalism. Like the other popular political philosophies emerging out of the 1960s and 1970s, neoliberalism emphasised individual autonomy and a suspicion of state power; money, they argued, was merely the best way to achieve individual freedom in this mode. In this way, neoliberal theorists were aligned with opposition to the status quo and made use of the kind of popular, individualist, and anti-establishment sentiment also found in *The Dispossessed*. *The Dispossessed*, then, positioned at a key juncture between historical periods, literary genres, and political ideologies, is an ideal subject for analysis.

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term suspicion rather than hostility as Le Guin's attitude to political and social organisation is more nuanced than some accounts have given it credit for, as I explore in later sections of this chapter.



## ***The Dispossessed* and its critics**

*The Dispossessed* consists of two narrative strands, alternating chapter by chapter, and both following the development of a single, central character: Shevek. One strand follows Shevek as he grows up in the anarchist society of Anarres, the moon of planet Urras. The Anarresti strand follows Shevek from childhood to adulthood. As he grows up, Shevek struggles with being exceptionally intelligent and individualistic in a collective society, eventually learning that he must reconnect with others to fulfil all aspects of life and that completing his scientific theories alone is not enough. He comes to recognise the existence of a nascent, unofficial power structure within Anarresti society, and ultimately decides that his purpose in society, alongside the more private aim of completing his unified theory of time, is to work with others to challenge this power structure. In doing this he aims to stay true to the anarchist principles upon which Anarresti society was founded.

The other strand of the novel follows Shevek's experiences when, as part of his mission to challenge the entrenched norms of Anarresti society, he becomes the first Anarresti in centuries to travel to Urras, and the hierarchical capitalist society of A-Io. He finds the possibilities for intellectual development in A-Io deeply appealing, and is partially taken in by many elements of the upper-class society he witnesses. However, he ultimately realises that the apparently positive aspects of A-Io rest on exploitation, and that he was only invited there because of the potential benefit that exclusive access to his unified theory of time could provide. This leads him to flee his hosts, aid a mass demonstration that is brutally suppressed, and finally seek safe passage back to Anarres on a human ship after choosing to share his unified theory of time with all the known worlds.

A fair amount of critical work has been done on Le Guin's writing, and scholarship on *The Dispossessed* makes up most of it.<sup>6</sup> The majority of this critical work can broadly be divided into three strands, although there is inevitably some overlap. The first strand is

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<sup>6</sup> A large proportion of available criticism comes from two sources: a 1975 special edition of *Science Fiction Studies* published in the year following *The Dispossessed*'s publication and a 2005 collection of essays. See *Science Fiction Studies* 2, no. 3 (1975); *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed*, ed. Laurence Davis and Peter Stillman (New York: Lexington Books, 2005).

concerned with what *The Dispossessed* does for utopia as a textual genre and/or intellectual concept.<sup>7</sup> The second strand explores the political content of Le Guin's work in terms of a specific political philosophy.<sup>8</sup> Finally, the third strand explores the social challenges and solutions that Le Guin's work presents through a variety of lenses, without necessarily tying these elements to a specific political philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

As evident from this overview, valuable work has been done analysing the political content of Le Guin's works. However, comparatively little criticism has attempted to

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<sup>7</sup> Notable examples of this approach include Judah Bierman's essay on the multiple kinds of ambiguity operating within Le Guin's use of utopia in *The Dispossessed*; Nadia Khouri's comparison of the functioning of power in *The Dispossessed*, and two other utopian novels; and Jim Jose's work on how the narrative structure of Le Guin's work relates to its utopian politics. See Judah Bierman, "Ambiguity in Utopia: *The Dispossessed*," *Science Fiction Studies* 2, no. 3 (1975): 249-55; Nadia Khouri, "The Dialectics of Power: Utopia in the Science Fiction of Le Guin, Jeury, and Piercy," *Science Fiction Studies* 7, no. 1 (1980): 49-60; Jim Jose, "Reflections on the Politics of Le Guin's Narrative Shifts," *Science Fiction Studies* 18, no. 2 (1991): 180-97. *The New Utopian Politics* also features numerous essays on this topic, including Laurence Davis's analysis of how *The Dispossessed* counters the critique of utopias as ahistorical, Simon Stow's analysis of utopia's function as a literary construction, and Andrew Reynolds on what utopia means after consumerism. See Laurence Davis, "The Dynamic and Revolutionary Utopia of Ursula K. Le Guin," in *The New Utopian Politics*, 3-36; Simon Stow, "Worlds Apart: Ursula K. Le Guin and the Possibility of Method," in *The New Utopian Politics*, 37-51; Andrew Reynolds, "Ursula K. Le Guin, Herbert Marcuse, and the Fate of Utopia in the Postmodern," in *The New Utopian Politics*, 75-94. There are a small number of critics that view Anarres as fundamentally and profoundly dystopian. However, these readings do not offer novel insights on the functioning of the depicted society, and as such their analyses reveal more about their authors' specific ideological viewpoints. See, for example, John P. Brennan and Michael C. Downs, "Anarchism and the Utopian Tradition in *the Dispossessed*" in *Ursula K. Le Guin*, ed. Joseph D. Olander and Martin Harry Greenberg (New York: Taplinger, 1979).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, David L. Porter's contextualisation of *The Dispossessed* as part of a trajectory visible across Le Guin's published works, moving politically "from a more individualized existentialist orientation and anthropological concern in the mid-1960s to an emphatic embrace of Taoism [to] a much richer social critique and explicit anarchist commitment", or Victor Urbanowicz's dissection of *The Dispossessed* for traces of key anarchist thinkers such as Kropotkin and Bakunin, or Lewis Call's analysis of *The Dispossessed* as contributing towards a new postmodern anarchism building on the work of past thinkers. See David L. Porter, "The Politics of Le Guin's Opus," *Science Fiction Studies* 2, no. 3 (1975): 243; Victor Urbanowicz, "Personal and Political in *the Dispossessed*," *Science Fiction Studies* 5, no. 2 (1978): 110-17; Lewis Call, "Postmodern Anarchism in the Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin," *SubStance* 36, no. 113 (2007): 87-105. *The New Utopian Politics* features an entire section entitled "Anarchist Politics." See Dan Sabia, "Individual and Community in Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*," in *The New Utopian Politics*, 111-28; Mark Tunick, "The Need for Walls: Privacy, Community, and Freedom in *The Dispossessed*," in *The New Utopian Politics*, 129-48; Winter Elliott, "Breaching Invisible Walls: Individual Anarchy in *the Dispossessed*," in *The New Utopian Politics*, 149-64.

<sup>9</sup> John Huntington, for example, explores how *The Dispossessed* finally attempts to reconcile the conflict between public and private duties that is present throughout Le Guin's oeuvre, while Gerard Klein explores how Le Guin's work diverges from other science fiction of the period in presenting a pluralistic vision of future society with multiple diverse solutions to problems. See John Huntington, "Public and Private Imperatives in Le Guin's Novels," *Science Fiction Studies* 2, no. 3 (1975): 237-43; Gerard Klein, "Le Guin's 'Aberrant' Opus: Escaping the Trap of Discontent," trans Richard Astle, *Science Fiction Studies* 4 (1977): 287-95. The non-anarchist political approaches taken in *The New Utopian Politics* take a variety of focuses, ranging from time, to ecology, to self-reflexivity. See Ellen M. Rigby, "Time and the Measure of the Political Animal," in *The New Utopian Politics*, 167-80; Peter G. Stillman, "*The Dispossessed* as Ecological Political Theory," in *The New Utopian Politics*, 55-73; Bülent Somay, "From Ambiguity to Self-Reflexivity: Revolutionizing Fantasy Space," in *The New Utopian Politics*, 233-47.

concretely link this content to broader political debates occurring at the time that Le Guin was writing. One key exception is the essay “Do You Believe In Magic? Literary Thinking After the New Left” by Sean McCann and Michael Szalay.<sup>10</sup> McCann and Szalay’s primary aim in the piece is to explore the “magical” approach to politics that they see the New Left as having adopted in the 1960s and 1970s, and which they believe Le Guin exemplifies. Their analysis is explored in greater depth later in this chapter. Their attempt to contextualise Le Guin’s work within broader political trends, and their analysis of the sympathies between elements of the New Right and New Left, are vital tools for the analysis offered here.

While genre-focused criticism on *The Dispossessed* has overwhelmingly analysed the text as a utopia, this designation only defines the setting, and not the narrative that occurs within that setting. On the most basic narrative level, *The Dispossessed* deploys the *Bildungsroman* genre its central focus on the story of a single character’s life and development. Beyond this, examining *The Dispossessed* in relation to theories of the *Bildungsroman* reveals that the text is operating as an example of the genre on a more complex thematic level as well, consciously engaging with the underlying conceptual basis of the genre.

A cursory examination of *The Dispossessed* might suggest that it aligns with what I term Diltheyian view of the *Bildungsroman* genre, in which the central focus is an exceptional individual undergoing a process of self-development. Shevek, after all, is an exceptionally intelligent individual, but because of this, he feels alienated and struggles to fit in on Anarres in his youth and early adulthood, developing a strong individualistic streak as a result. In the text he is described as having known “since he was very young [...] that in certain ways he was unlike anyone else he knew” (*The Dispossessed*, 90). There are numerous examples of Shevek coming into conflict with or being hampered by the norms of his society due to this exceptionality. At a young age, for instance, Shevek is accused of “egoising” by a teacher and sent from the classroom when he attempts to explain a version of Zeno’s arrow paradox that he has devised himself, and which none of his fellow students can

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<sup>10</sup> Sean McCann and Michael Szalay, “Do You Believe in Magic? Literary Thinking after the New Left,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 18, no. 2 (2005): 435-68.

understand (26-29). Later he resents doing manual labour, because he has the capacity and preference for intellectual work while others do not mind what work they do (43). Later still, during a famine, he loses his position as a researcher as his research is considered not “functional” by those who have managed to secure themselves a degree of unofficial power (219). This sense of Shevek’s exceptionality is only enhanced in the chapters which take place in A-Io, as there Shevek is quite literally a unique alien outsider. Taken alone then, these events might indeed suggest that *The Dispossessed* is aligned with readings of the *Bildungsroman* genre such as that of Dilthey and Shaffner, who view the genre as essentially concerned with individualism, the private world, internal self-development, and how exceptional individuals grow within the constraints of society.<sup>11</sup>

However, Shevek’s attempts to follow his private goals alone, to live as purely an individual life as possible, do not end well. When, for example, he attempts to minimise contact with others on Anarres and work on his scientific theories in near-total isolation, he finds himself intellectually blocked and falls sick (100). This occurrence is repeated in A-Io when he realises that, due to the nature of their society, he cannot trust anyone, and so becomes aware of his already-realised social isolation (224-39). For Shevek, fulfilment does not come through studiously working away at his personal goals in private, but when he begins working collectively with others. On Anarres he works with his friends to publicly challenge the entrenched norms and unofficial power structures of Anarresti society, and channel the true spirit of Anarresti anarchism. This work on Anarres enables his visit to A-Io, which in turn enables the completion of his theories. However, it is not until he escapes his supposed benefactors and assists in organising a working class uprising in A-Io that Shevek has the opportunity to share his theories so that they can have their full impact: allowing the development of faster-than-light communication for all.

Shevek and his allies may challenge elements of Anarresti society as it exists in their time, but they do so in order to preserve the ideals upon which Anarres’s anarchist society was founded, in which the implicit requirement for collective responsibilities is balanced by

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<sup>11</sup> See Dilthey, *Poetry and Experience*, 5; Shaffner, *The Apprenticeship Novel*. A more in-depth analysis of this strand of *Bildungsroman* criticism is offered in the introduction to this thesis.

the real possibility of individual freedom. Shevek's narrative then, does challenge social norms which inhibit the individual, but the ultimate aim of the narrative is a synthesis between the needs of individual and collective life, a synthesis which succeeds *because of* rather than *in spite of* the interrelation between the two spheres of life.<sup>12</sup> Fundamentally, then, *The Dispossessed* operates on the same logic as the "classical *Bildungsroman*", to use Moretti's term, which narrates how "the tendency towards *individuality*, which is the necessary fruit of a culture of self-determination [can be reconciled with] the opposing tendency to *normality*" without the need for coercion.<sup>13</sup>

This central *Bildungsroman* element – synthesis of individual and society – does not only occur on the level of *The Dispossessed*'s story but also has explicit parallels in the fundamental structuring principles of the anarchist society that the text depicts. The "Odonian" philosophy of Anarres makes use of a central organic analogy to explain its political vision. Shevek provides the best condensation of this analogy when he discusses "his 'cellular function', the analogic term for the individual's individuality, the work he can do best, therefore his best contribution to his society" (*The Dispossessed*, 274). He notes that a "healthy society would let him exercise that optimum function freely, in the coordination of all such functions finding its adaptability and strength" (274). The individual following the best path of personal development, in this vision, is identical with how they can best contribute to society. This description of the ideal functioning of Anarresti society is strikingly similar to Moretti's description of the *Bildungsroman* genre's fundamental success in its original form: convincingly depicting and normalising the idea that in the bourgeois society of the genre's inception "in fact [...] there is no conflict between individuality and socialization, autonomy and normality, interiority and objectification. One's formation as an individual in and for oneself coincides without rifts with one's social integration as a simple

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<sup>12</sup> John Huntington notes that *The Dispossessed* represents a change from Le Guin's earlier works, which often saw the private aims of the central characters sacrificed for a greater public good. According to Huntington, rather than exploring the possible private sacrifices that might have to be made in order to ensure a positive political order, *The Dispossessed* reaches a new level of political maturity by assessing the validity of a political system precisely through its capacity to reconcile public and private needs in its creation and maintenance. See Huntington, "Public and Private Imperatives in Le Guin's Novels."

<sup>13</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 16.

part of a whole.”<sup>14</sup> The centrality of synthesis to *The Dispossessed*, then, is a deliberate attempt to engage on the level of both form and content with elements of political thought with which the *Bildungsroman* genre is deeply linked.

### **Capitalism and autonomy: rehabilitating the *Bildungsroman***

There are of course a number of key differences between *The Dispossessed* and the original *Bildungsromane* that are the focus of critics in the synthesis school such as Morgernstern, Lukács, Bakhtin, and Moretti. Shevek is clearly an exceptional individual, both in terms of his abilities and his experiences, complicating the idea of the genre as depicting a general process of socialisation applicable to all members of a social group.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Moretti’s analysis, in particular, ties the genre to a very specific moment in the development of capitalism. For Moretti, the *Bildungsroman* necessarily emerged as capitalist development enabled new levels of interiority and autonomy for the young, bourgeois male, requiring a reconciliation of these newfound elements with social structure, and the *Bildungsroman* ceased to be viable at the start of the twentieth century when these conditions changed.<sup>16</sup> Shevek’s youth and early adulthood takes place entirely in a non-capitalist, anarchist society. In fact, it is only in being male that Shevek bears any close resemblance to Moretti’s protagonist, and this, as noted in this thesis’s introduction, is the least accurate element of his historical analysis. As explored previously, there have been numerous analyses since Moretti that do not place such an emphasis on the genre’s bourgeois roots, but the value of Moretti’s analysis for understanding *The Dispossessed* is precisely the specificity with

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> The idea that the *Bildungsroman* narrates a process of socialisation generally applicable to all members of a social group or humanity as a whole, rather than just being a process of development applicable only to the single, specific individual the narrative follows, is one of the key distinctions explored in the introduction to this thesis between the two broad schools of *Bildungsroman* criticism, the Morettian/Morgernsternian and the Diltheyian. Morgernstern, who coined the term *Bildungsroman*, insisted that the genre had pedagogic capacity in depicting the “general formation” of the human. For Dilthey, the genre was one of profound “individualism [and] private life”, narrating the independent development of a single individual. See Morgernstern, “On the Nature of the ‘Bildungsroman’,” 655; Dilthey, *Poetry and Experience*, 5, 335.

<sup>16</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 4-6.

which it links the genre to its historical, capitalist roots. While the genre has continued after the point at which Moretti claims it ends – and been used in a variety of ways since then – Morretti’s analysis still provides the best understanding of the political-ideological foundations from which the genre emerged and which continue to underlie its formal structure. *The Dispossessed*’s redeployment of the genre in a very different political setting functions precisely through this setting’s contrast with the origins of the genre. This contrast is central to how *The Dispossessed* engages with the core political concepts of the *Bildungsroman* genre and how it articulates its critique of capitalism.

On the level of fundamental theme and narrative focus, then, Shevek’s life-story is a highly conventional “classical *Bildungsroman*”. Shevek ultimately completes his grand theory of simultaneity, finds his place promoting the original ideals of his society, and becomes a fulfilled individual. However, by presenting fulfilling development occurring in an anarchist society, Anarres, and constantly contrasting this with the experience of living in a capitalist-statist society, A-Io, *The Dispossessed* demonstrates that the capitalist society that produced the *Bildungsroman* provides neither the conditions for the full satisfaction and development of the individual to their best potential, nor an adequate basis for social cohesion, and so synthesis between these two elements is virtually impossible. *The Dispossessed*’s use of the genre in this way enables a rejection and critique of both the capitalist society which produced the *Bildungsroman* and capitalist society as it existed at the time of *The Dispossessed*’s publication. This critique of capitalist-statism is where the narrative strand of *The Dispossessed* that takes place on A-Io gains its full significance.

The A-Io narrative strand serves as both a continuation of (in terms of the internal chronology of the story) and parallel to (in terms of theme and the structure of the novel) Shevek’s narrative of development on Anarres. Although Shevek succeeds in starting to challenge the status quo of Anarres by the end of the first narrative strand, it is not until he travels to A-Io that he completes his theory of time, his own personal goal, and truly initiates

broad changes on Anarres.<sup>17</sup> However, the structure of *The Dispossessed*, alternating between the two strands chapter by chapter, places these two strands side by side and so invites comparison between the times, societies, events, and developments they feature.

Additionally, Shevek's life-work within the novel is to find a unified theory of Simultaneity physics, a scientific school that functions on the principle that while time appears linear to human perception, on a fundamental physical level all moments in time exist simultaneously and interact.<sup>18</sup> The human, subjective perception of time, and the nature of narrative itself, dictate that the text must have some level of sequential linearity. However, the text's structure and focus on simultaneity emphasises the importance of understanding multiple temporalities, and so the two narrative strands, as functioning in interaction.

The comparison the two strands invite, and its political function, has been noted by a number of critics. Chris Ferns's provides one useful example. Ferns argues that the Anarresti strand taken alone neither represents a society capable of maintaining revolutionary change, nor overcomes the "stasis inherent in the utopian narrative".<sup>19</sup> Rather, it is the comparison between the conditions on Urras, which Anarresti society arose to counter, and the conditions on Anarres society itself which make the Anarresti ideals desirable.<sup>20</sup> Ferns focuses on the

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<sup>17</sup> In the closing chapter, just as he prepares for landing on Anarres, Shevek notes that a "lot of enemies, and a lot of friends will be there. The good news is the friends.... It seems there are more of them than when I left" (*The Dispossessed*, 315).

<sup>18</sup> Temporality is a central theme of *The Dispossessed*, and critics have offered a variety of analyses on time and its political function in the text, often focusing on how *The Dispossessed's* acknowledgement of change over time saves it from the failures of previous utopias. See, for example, Davis, "The Dynamic and Revolutionary Utopia of Ursula K. Le Guin"; Jennifer Rodgers, "Fulfillment as a Function of Time, or the Ambiguous Process of Utopia"; Ellen M. Rigby, "Time and the Measure of the Political Animal".

<sup>19</sup> Chris Ferns, "Future Conditional or Future Perfect? *The Dispossessed* and Permanent Revolution," in *The New Utopian Politics*, 254. Other critics, such as Davis, disagree with Ferns on this point. Davis argues that Anarres taken alone *does* exhibit the capacity for change, and that it is precisely the imperfection of Anarres, and its ability to change for better or worse, that renders *The Dispossessed* a believable utopia and saves the utopian genre from stasis. See Davis, "The Dynamic and Revolutionary Utopia of Ursula K. Le Guin".

<sup>20</sup> Ferns, "Future Conditional or Future Perfect?" 255. Bülent Somay offers an alternative reading of the functioning of the contrast. Somay argues that Anarres, rather than having lapsed into conformity over many years, is fundamentally flawed through its inherent rejection of difference and otherness. According to Somay, reform cannot be achieved on Anarres without visiting Urras, and so the utopian horizon in *The Dispossessed* is not located on either world but rather in the "space" between them. This reading, however, suffers from placing too much emphasis on Shevek's perspective and understanding; it ignores the capacity for reform exhibited by Shevek's friends on Anarres, many of whom realise the necessity of reform long before Shevek, never venture to Urras, and successfully continue working towards reform while he is away. In addition, the imaginary utopian space Somay describes risks reinstating precisely the kind of unachievable utopianism that other critics praise



concept of utopia, whereas this chapter focuses on how the comparison functions in relation to the specific societal models, Anarchist and capitalist-statist, that the text presents, and what this comparison reveals about the key *Bildungsroman* elements of individual development and social integration in these societies.

The egalitarian nature of Anarres makes it relatively easy to derive a general model of development for its inhabitants from a single character. All Anarresti share a great deal in their day-to-day lives, from chores to meals to cohabitation, and the fundamental ideal of individual-social synthesis is encoded into the explicit ideology of their society. Shevek may be exceptional in some regards, but in practical terms he shares the vast majority of experiences with the rest of the members of his society. In this way, his exceptionality serves to demonstrate how wide a range of individuals can be catered for by an anarchist society. However, A-Ioti culture is alien to Shevek; it is (literally) on another planet, and it features such alien things as class hierarchy, money, and gender inequality. While Shevek's story remains the focus of the chapters set on A-Io, and tells us something about society there, having grown up on Anarres Shevek cannot and does not serve as the novel's main means to explore the normal processes of socialisation and development in this capitalist-statist society.

*The Dispossessed's* depiction of individual development and autonomy in capitalist-statist A-Io requires examining the experience of a native A-Ioti character. However, A-Ioti society is depicted as having numerous divisions of class and gender, all of which entail a diverse range of developmental experiences. This renders it difficult to establish and analyse a general process of development that reveals the nature of the society as a whole. However, *The Dispossessed* sidesteps this problem as, aside from a small number of comments and observations Shevek makes on other characters, there is only one A-Ioti character whose views on individual freedom and society are heard in any depth: Veä.

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*The Dispossessed* for overcoming. See Somay, "From Ambiguity to Self-Reflexivity: Revolutionizing Fantasy Space".

Vea gives insight into the two major axes of hierarchy in A-Io: class and gender. As a member of the upper classes she is a clear beneficiary of the class system, but as a woman she is in many ways considered a second-rate citizen, unable to hold a job or any position of official power. Vea explicitly articulates her understanding of personal autonomy and freedom. When Shevek questions how Vea can stand being considered inferior in her society, Vea claims that, despite appearances, the women of A-Io are entirely free as they can “do exactly as they like. And they don’t have to get their hands dirty, or wear brass helmets, or stand about shouting in the Directorate, to do it” (*The Dispossessed*, 178). When Shevek talks about the value of morality over coercive rules and moralisation, Vea demonstrates how far she thinks personal freedom should be taken, saying, “I don’t care about hurting and not hurting. I don’t care about other people, and nobody else does, either. They pretend to. I don’t want to pretend. I want to be free!” (183). For Vea then, personal freedom is the ability to do *whatever* one wants, without even regard for the impact of one’s actions on others, and without having to do anything in return for this ability. This may seem like the outburst of a single, selfish individual, but this approach to freedom is encoded in the fundamental structure of Vea’s society.

Shevek notes that, in order for Vea to throw a party, preparations are made by “‘her’ cook, ‘her’ maid, and ‘her’ caterer” (181). Vea’s freedom, then, is necessarily dependent on infringing on the freedom of others, whom she sees as tools that she owns. Vea’s situation is merely typical of the broader structures of A-Ioti society; the members of the upper classes depend on exploiting the lower classes – who are viewed as “rebellious cattle” (192) in the words of one A-Ioti man of the upper class – in order to secure their personal autonomy. Shevek, for instance, notes that at the University of A-Io there is “[c]omplete leisure to work; all materials at hand; intellectual stimulation, argument, conversation whenever wanted; no pressures. Paradise indeed!” (108). But the luxurious environment and freedom from pressure are predicated on the hidden labour of the working classes of A-Io, who do all the undesirable work that the university students do not have to think about.

However, while the class structure formalises the subjugation of the majority for the benefit of a privileged few, even between members of the same class there is constant

competition for whose freedom will be privileged and who will be exploited. This is most obviously the case between genders. Veia argues that in A-Io, although men control all the official positions of power, the women “run the men [and] it’s perfectly safe to tell them that, because they never believe it” (178). Shevek notes that Veia is what Takver (his partner) would call a “body-profiteer”, a woman “who used [her] sexuality as a weapon in a power struggle with men” (177). This competitive conception of power and freedom reveals the two key limiting factors of the form of individual autonomy available even to the most privileged in A-Io.

When everyone pursues Veia’s approach to freedom, pursuing their own desires while ignoring or exploiting the desires of others, no individual’s autonomy can ever be achieved, as each person is constantly subject to every other person’s attempts to use those around them as means to the satisfaction of their own desires. Starting from an ideal of total individual autonomy, one quickly reaches a state in which autonomy is constantly challenged and limited for everyone. This situation is part of what the class system of A-Io is intended to prevent, by prioritising the desires of members of the upper class. However, the competition and manipulation demonstrated by Veia and those like her shows that exploitation is not limited to occurring across class boundaries. In addition, in order for Veia to get access to the resources she requires for her concept of freedom, she must necessarily play the social role ascribed to women, being passive, sexually alluring, and domestic. Yet, paradoxically, as the novel demonstrates, in behaving in a societally accepted way in order to guarantee her autonomy, her autonomy is necessarily limited. Veia transforms herself into an object to meet the desires of others, and to fulfil this role must conform to the strict legal and customary limitations of her society.

When Shevek, drunk for the first time in his life, responds to a kiss from Veia with fumbling attempts to remove her clothes, she says “it won’t do, not now. I haven’t taken a contraceptive, if I got stuffed I’d be in a pretty mess, my husband’s coming back in two weeks!” (191). When he does not respond to this she says “we can arrange it, we can fix up a place to meet, I do have to be careful of my reputation, I can’t trust the maid, just wait, not now—” (191), before he finally ejaculates on her dress. The gender power imbalances in A-

Ioti society make it somewhat difficult to discern Vea's true feelings here. That Vea provides so many reasons so rapidly suggest that she may not desire to have sex with Shevek but, due to her status as a woman, feels that simply expressing her lack of desire to do so is not an "acceptable". If this is the case, and she is genuinely scared of Shevek's advances, then she has only been behaving sexually around him previously because she has internalised that this is the way that she must behave towards men and/or this is her only available method of access to the luxuries she desires. Alternatively, she does genuinely want to sleep with him, but she is unable to do so because the conventions of her society require that she must at very least do so discreetly. Neither scenario, it should be noted, excuse Shevek's behaviour, and both cases reveal Vea's autonomy to be deeply constrained. Her sexual and personal conduct is defined by social norms, and deviation from these norms means denial of the resources she needs to live and be "free".

Vea's status as a woman makes the social constraints she faces all the clearer, but while they do not face the extreme marginalisation of women, the upper-class men of A-Io still have surprisingly limited autonomy. There is no male A-Ioti in the novel who provides an explicit account of their worldview equivalent in depth to Vea's. To some extent the limitations of autonomy can be seen with the numerous University students, academics, and officials Shevek meets in A-Io, but the most useful example is Oiie, Vea's brother. Oiie is more guarded than Vea, but invites Shevek to dinner at his home, providing a glimpse into his life. Shevek notes that Oiie is "a changed man at home. The secretive look left his face, and he did not drawl when he spoke" (*The Dispossessed*, 123). Despite the sexism of A-Ioti society, it becomes clear at his home that "Oiie was fond of his wife, and trusted her", and Oiie behaves towards his wife and children "very much as an Anarresti might" (123). There is a clear disjunction between Oiie's public and private behaviour, and the significance of this is laid out by Shevek. He notes that "[i]n fact, at home, [Oiie] suddenly appeared as a simple, brotherly kind of man, a free man. It seemed to Shevek a very small range of freedom" (123). For Oiie, and those like him, real freedom of any kind is only available in private life, away from the competition and conventions of their public roles. Oiie, then, demonstrates how in the capitalist-statist world of A-Io even the apparent ultimate beneficiaries do not experience

an organic synthesis of their own individual autonomy with social structure. Even in a social structure designed to benefit them, the behaviour and actions of upper-class men are still governed by the codes and competition of their society, which they are unwilling or unable to challenge without risking both their privilege and access to the necessities for guaranteeing even limited freedom.

The logic of the *Bildungsroman*, according to the Morgernsternian vein of criticism, entails a developmental process that allows the organic synthesis of individual autonomy and a necessary social structure. *The Dispossessed* demonstrates that even in the most limited form articulated by Moretti, where the possibility of autonomy and synthesis is only available to bourgeois men, such a synthesis is impossible within a capitalist-statist society. While capitalism is unable to meet the conditions of autonomy and socialisation that it itself suggested, the anarchist society seen on Anarres, while imperfect and capable of regressing into a more restrictive form, is capable of providing the conditions for this ideal of social-individual synthesis, as can be seen by contrasting Shevek's developmental arc and experience with those in A-Io.<sup>21</sup>

In demonstrating that the conditions for individual-social synthesis can be better met by an anarchist society than a capitalist one, *The Dispossessed's* deployment of the *Bildungsroman* appears triumphant. It successfully turns the genre, and its attached principles, back on the very capitalist system that produced it, both demonstrating the internal contradictions of capitalist society and the possibility of a better alternative. However, in order to understand the specifics of *The Dispossessed's* political philosophy, and what it tells us about the rise of neoliberalism in relation to the new leftism of the 1960s and 1970s, it is vital to note that A-Io is deeply and explicitly hierarchical. Le Guin chooses to present a

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<sup>21</sup> Much of the advantage of Anarres over A-Io in terms of autonomy and development is the position of work. Moretti notes that the process of formation-socialisation must take place outside of work and that this is one of the internal contradictions of capitalism that the classic *Bildungsroman* attempts to smooth over. See Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 25. However, *The Dispossessed* seeks to expose the depths of that contradiction. Given that a capitalist society is structured around the logic of work, the possibilities for socialisation-formation, and so autonomy and synthesis, are deeply limited. *The Dispossessed* presents Anarres, where work is done voluntarily and not for remuneration, as having de-alienated work and so overcoming this barrier. For more on labour de-alienation, see Reynolds, "Ursula K. Le Guin, Herbert Marcuse, and the Fate of Utopia in the Postmodern."

capitalist society where inequality, although often articulated along economic lines, is deliberately maintained and tied to the existence and interests of a strong state. While this statism assists Le Guin's critique and nuances her opposition to capitalism, it also places an emphasis on the state that has the potential to obscure the role played by capitalism in oppression.

In light of the historical events since *The Dispossessed*'s publication, another side to Le Guin's usage of the *Bildungsroman* can be seen. The political vision expressed in *The Dispossessed* is based upon certain fundamental ideological principles, both those explicitly endorsed in the social structure of Anarres, and those implicit in its use of the *Bildungsroman*. Analysis of *The Dispossessed*'s political philosophy in the context of its time reveals that these fundamental ideological elements, and by extension the political movements of which *The Dispossessed* is a part, could unintentionally enable the rise of an ideology totally opposed to the utopian, anarchist vision of the novel. In order to understand how this blurring of ideologies could take place, it is first important to understand the politics of the era in which *The Dispossessed* emerged.

### **Le Guin and politics in the 1970s**

A few critics have attempted to contextualise Le Guin's work in relation to the left-wing politics of its era.<sup>22</sup> However, as noted earlier, the most extensive and useful contextualisation is by McCann and Szalay, who focus not on *The Dispossessed* but on Le Guin's earlier novel, *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971).<sup>23</sup> In *The Lathe of Heaven* (hereafter *Lathe*), the central character, Orr, has "effective dreams" that have the power to alter reality.

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<sup>22</sup> Somay, for instance, notes that *The Dispossessed* emerged in the wake of the 1968 revolutions, "the first truly transnational anti-systemic movement", which "involved a vast transformation in sexual traditions, national affiliations, religious and moral beliefs, and the conceptions of race, class, and gender", but she goes little further than this. Andrew Reynolds, meanwhile, centres his entire analysis of *The Dispossessed* around comparing it to the work of prominent New Left thinker Herbert Marcuse. See Somay, "From Ambiguity to Self-Reflexivity: Revolutionizing Fantasy Space," 233; Reynolds, "Ursula K. Le Guin, Herbert Marcuse, and the Fate of Utopia in the Postmodern".

<sup>23</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Lathe of Heaven* (London: Gollancz, 2001).

Orr, who lives in an overcrowded and dystopian future, is sent to a psychiatrist after attempting suicide. The psychiatrist, Haber, soon discovers Orr's abilities and attempts to use them to create a utopian world free of human conflict, racism, disease, and overpopulation. However, with each attempt the desired effect is achieved with frequently horrifying unintended side-effects: overpopulation is solved by a devastating plague; racism is solved by turning everyone dull grey; disease is cured by a eugenics program and forced euthanasia of the ill and old; human conflict ends when an alien threat appears, forcing humanity to unite or die.

McCann and Szalay seek to explain how the significant successes of “Civil Rights [,] feminism [,] gay liberation and ecological movements” took place “during the rise to pre-eminence of an enormously powerful conservative movement” and the dominance of capitalism.<sup>24</sup> For them, the answer lies in the way that “a significant portion of the left responded to the frustration of traditional political methods by fully embracing the counterculture” and developing a deep anti-institutional tendency.<sup>25</sup> As part of this tendency, they claim, the New Left began to reject all forms of concrete political organisation and action as already compromised by their instrumental nature, favouring “magical” and symbolic actions intended to disrupt the cultural, rather than material-institutional, status quo.<sup>26</sup>

According to McCann and Szalay, Le Guin exemplifies this anti-organisational and magical approach in *Lathe*. In their reading, the coercive nature of Haber's relationship with Orr is demonstrative of a view of political organisation as inherently coercive, and the horrific results of Haber's attempts to achieve his utopian vision represent a belief in the inherent harm and illegitimacy of instrumental political action in pursuit of a concrete aim,

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<sup>24</sup> Sean McCann and Michael Szalay, “Do You Believe in Magic?” 441.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 437.

<sup>26</sup> McCann and Szalay are far from the only critics to note the widespread anti-statism of the 1960s and the years following it. As part of his wide-ranging analysis of the cultural developments of the 1960s and their impact on the years that followed, Daniel T. Rodgers notes that, “infused by anti-authoritarian ferment of the late 1960s, the popularity of radical antistatism mushroomed in the 1970s and early 1980s.” See Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, 187.

such as the material improvement of living conditions. In addition, they claim that *Lathe* demonstrates the New Left's turn to an appeal to identity; *Lathe* promotes accepting existence as is, as "[c]hanging the world appears to rob it of its truest value which, it turns out, is its capacity to 'be'".<sup>27</sup> The two critics, then, see *Lathe* as demonstrating the fundamental failure of the New Left; in committing itself to the intrinsic value of the world as it is, to identity, and to a rejection of instrumental political action in favour of the mysterious or magical, the New Left effectively ruled out the possibility of achieving political change, leaving the field open for the right.

McCann and Szalay's attempt to link Le Guin's work to the politics of her day is valuable. However, in their rush to diagnose a political tendency they judge Le Guin's politics from a single text and ignore the specificity of the political conflict in *Lathe*. Their reading is heavily allegorical – they argue that the text “offers an all but direct allegory in which a passive aesthetic sensibility comes to replace an illegitimate effort to transform the world through instrumental means” – but the text contains a more direct political message.<sup>28</sup> Haber is a member of the establishment who abuses his institutional power to advance his own interests and force his own particular utopian vision upon billions of unknowing people. McCann and Szalay gloss over the cost of Haber's ambitions, noting only that “Orr refuses to grant the importance of these accomplishments because, he doesn't ‘want to change things’”, and that Le Guin is not primarily concerned with the “unintended consequences” of Haber's actions, but wants to promote a more fundamental acceptance of reality.<sup>29</sup> But these “unintended consequences” deserve attention; the solution to overpopulation alone costs the lives of several billion people. A clearer alternative political critique can be drawn from *Lathe*: the danger of excessive power granted to an individual through institutions, of the

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<sup>27</sup> McCann and Szalay, “Do You Believe in Magic?” 446.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 445.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 446. This idea of a fundamental acceptance of reality owes at least as much to Taoist philosophy as it does to the philosophy of the New Left. Taoism was one of Le Guin's earliest philosophical inspirations, before feminism and anarchism, and the title of *Lathe* comes from a (mis)translation of a line of the *Tao Te Ching*. See Lao Tzu, *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching: A Book About the Way and the Power of the Way*, trans. Ursula K. Le Guin (London: Shambhala Publications, 1998).



harm done by using others as tools, and of the damage that a monolithic utopian aim can do when ends are seen to justify means.<sup>30</sup>

This alternative reading of *Lathe* aligns it more with *The Dispossessed*, both in exploring the problems and promises of utopias, and in exploring the dangers of the concentration of power. Where *Lathe* is more allegorical, *The Dispossessed* is more literal and explicitly political, offering both a positive and negative model of society. *The Dispossessed* further challenges McCann and Szalay's reading of Le Guin as being opposed to active, material politics. While *The Dispossessed* demonstrates a deep suspicion of institutionalised and entrenched power, the way that Shevek and his allies counter this power is through precisely the kind of concrete action that McCann and Szalay argue Le Guin eschews: on Anarres they set up a syndicate to actively oppose the established status quo, and on Urras the oppressed stage a massive protest (246-249). Le Guin's attitude to political organisation is more nuanced than McCann and Szalay suggest. She is opposed to the concentration and entrenchment of political power, as this concentration enables oppression and violence, but is also aware that combating such power and achieving political change can only be achieved through collective political action and organisation, of which symbolic resistance is only a small part.

While their analysis of Le Guin's politics lacks nuance, in seeking to understand how the era of the New Left could give way to the dominance of right-wing ideology that followed, and by taking Le Guin as an example, McCann and Szalay's fundamental approach is productive. Their contextualisation of the New Left, and their examination of the intersections between elements of the New Left and New Right, hints at an alternative approach to understanding the New Left's role in the surprising political developments of the 1970s and following decades. McCann and Szalay note that "it is worth pointing out the sympathies that sometimes appeared between the New Left and their contemporaries on the

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<sup>30</sup> A common critique of utopia, both as a literary genre and philosophical concept, is articulated by Somay, who states that "the utopian tradition, up until the 'open-ended' utopias of the 1970s, was authoritarian in style as well as totalitarian in content" due to the enforcement of certain social structures and visions of human nature as necessarily better. See Somay, "From Ambiguity to Self-Reflexivity: Revolutionizing Fantasy Space," 235. We need look no further than the fascist or (nominally) communist endeavours of the 20th century to see the horrific totalitarian potential of the single-minded pursuit of a rigid vision of utopia.

New Right, the conservative movement that would later claim responsibility for our current state of affairs.”<sup>31</sup> Activists of the New Left such as Tom Hayden and William Domhoff even went so far as to praise the youth of the New Right, and encourage cooperation with them. McCann and Szalay describe “expressions on the left that objected to the overweening power of the state while often referring nostalgically to the freedoms of an ostensibly fading free market.”<sup>32</sup> The two critics describe this capacity to cooperate as arising “because the two movements shared a basic antipathy to big government”, and go on to note that a “libertarian sensibility coursed through much of the era’s countercultural fiction as well”, citing such authors as Ken Kesey and Thomas Pynchon.<sup>33</sup>

McCann and Szalay do not give any full definition of what they mean by libertarianism in the New Left, beyond a vague anti-institutional sensibility. However, “Do You Believe in Magic?” goes on to analyse several developments in the literary academy that McCann and Szalay link to the New Left’s growth. There are two key points in this analysis that suggest that the meaning of the term libertarian deserves greater attention for the political exploration they are attempting. First, they note that much sixties radicalism “drew implicitly from a lingering ideology of the professional as ‘social trustee’”, with the professional owing their skills and circumstances to society as a whole, and so having a duty to contribute to the greater good. However, the two critics claim that over the course of the 1960s and 1970s this approach to professionalism waned, and instead the “professional [became] the master of valuable knowledge and abilities, but ow[ed] no special debt to the public good and need[ed] no non-market, ideological defense.”<sup>34</sup> They offer an explanation for this change, one that is again fundamentally tied to the New Left’s anti-institutional tendency; when the desire for professional autonomy came into conflict with bureaucratic organisation, the apparent affinity between “professionalism and the regulatory state” that had prevailed in previous

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<sup>31</sup> McCann and Szalay, “Do You Believe in Magic?” 442.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 454.

centuries dissolved in favour of alignment between the professional and the market.<sup>35</sup> The second point that suggests the importance of libertarianism is McCann and Szalay's analysis of post-structuralist criticism. Taking Foucault as their example, they argue that "libertarianism runs through the diverse styles of poststructuralist theory".<sup>36</sup> The key elements of Foucault's politics that they explore are a concern with the homogenising tendency of institutions, a rejection of involvement in the public sphere, and a refusal to engage with conventional politics, which is deemed illegitimate.<sup>37</sup> Again, the role of anti-institutionalism is clearly important, but libertarianism is left undefined beyond that.

McCann and Szalay's analysis presents us with many unanswered, but potentially productive, questions. If what the New Left and New Right shared was an anti-institutional tendency, and this tendency led to long-term failure for the New Left, how can it have led to success for the New Right? To this end, what fundamentally constitutes the libertarianism that these two political movements shared, beyond a broad anti-institutionalism? Why should professional autonomy become such a concern at that point in time as to break a longstanding alignment between the state and professionalism, and why should a break from institutions entail a break from the public good? Why, if the cause of this change in the form of professionalism can be traced back to developments in the New Left, did the change in professionalism so easily take on a market-oriented form? If the expansion of civil rights and the expansion of the market were fundamentally opposed, as McCann and Szalay claim, why did many on the New Left lament the loss of the free market? However, "Do You Believe in Magic?" is only one account of the role played by the political left in the rise of neoliberalism. A number of alternative accounts provide an understanding of the period that answers the questions posited above. In doing this, these accounts also help provide the conceptual framework for understanding the significance of *The Dispossessed* and its choice of genre.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 456.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 456-58.

A key resource for understanding the transition from 1960s Leftist radicalism to 1990s neoliberal ideology is Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (hereafter *New Spirit*), originally published in French as *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* in 1999, and first translated into English in 2005.<sup>38</sup> With a title explicitly referencing Max Weber's landmark *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, *New Spirit* is a complex and comprehensive sociological tome. The stated aim of the authors is to restore the possibility of critique by explaining the new ideological configuration underlying contemporary capitalism. To do this they explore how this configuration arose out of the political-cultural milieu of the 1960s and 1970s, and examine how this transition disarmed critique through shifting the terrain of debate and adopting elements traditionally associated with Leftist critiques of capitalism.

*New Spirit's* central argument – and its value – depends upon analysis of three key elements: what form the current “spirit” of capitalism takes, the function of ideology in capitalism, and the four areas that have historically served as the basis for critiques of capitalism. The central premise of *New Spirit* is heavily based on the work of previous sociologists, in particular Max Weber and Albert Hirschmann. Weber's work famously argues that the Reformation provided the earliest personal justification for engaging in the hard work of capitalism through the rise of the Protestant idea that working in a worldly vocation served god. Boltanski and Chiapello note that Hirschmann explores how wealth accumulation in early capitalism came to be associated with the common good through the idea that it subdued the passions and so prevented dangerous behaviour. These two levels of justification, the personal and the common good combined, are what Boltanski and Chiapello understand as being the ideology, or “spirit”, of capitalism at any given stage. They argue that there have been three “spirits” in total over the course of capitalism, with the third emerging out of crises of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>39</sup> This third spirit corresponds to the ideology of neoliberalism.

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<sup>38</sup> Boltanski and Chiapello, *New Spirit*.

<sup>39</sup> For an overview of the earlier “spirits”, see *ibid.*, 17-19.

One key element of Boltanski and Chiapello's reading is their understanding of what ideology entails. Boltanski and Chiapello go beyond what they view as the reductive understanding of ideology offered by "Marxist vulgate", i.e. ideology as a superficial veneer concealing material interests and "constantly contradicted in practice."<sup>40</sup> Instead they argue that ideology constitutes "a set of shared beliefs, inscribed in institutions, bound up with actions, and hence anchored in reality."<sup>41</sup> Ideology is not just a matter of justifying the oppression of the weak by the strong, the poor by the rich – although it also often serves this function – but must provide a reason for participation for everyone, worker or capitalist. This justification is necessary because capitalism generally impoverishes participants, materially or otherwise, and psychological research demonstrates that simply receiving a wage is not a sufficient motivator for engaging in capitalism when taken alone.<sup>42</sup> Nor is the justification provided by ideology simply a mental construction masking the same underlying structures. While capitalism can be loosely defined as an "*imperative to unlimited accumulation of capital by formally peaceful means*", ideology determines what is deemed legitimate or illegitimate on an institutional and behavioural level within a given capitalist society.<sup>43</sup> In this way, ideology shapes the structure of society, and limits the accepted forms of profit accumulation, determining, amongst other things, what "formally peaceful means" entails.

The primary focus of Boltanski and Chiapello's analysis is how the ideology of the third "spirit" functions in terms of the organisation and justification of work. Under the first "spirit" social life was presented in the "form of a series of rights and duties towards an extended familial community", and under the second it took "the form of the wage-earning class within a hierarchical body whose rungs one climbs, where one spends one's whole career, and where professional activity is clearly separated from the private sphere".<sup>44</sup> However, under the new ideology the concept of the network comes to dominance. Social life

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 8 and 11.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 104.

is presented as consisting of numerous “temporary, but reactivatable connections”, often eliding the boundary between professional and private.<sup>45</sup> The dominant form of work under this model becomes the project, where a small section of the network joins together to work for a clearly delineated and temporally constrained goal. To compensate (in theory) for the relative instability of project-based employment compared to earlier models – career progression within a single firm in the mid-20th century being a good example – project-based work operates on the premise that each project provides both new connections for an individual’s network and new skills/experience that enhance future employability.<sup>46</sup>

After defining their understanding of ideology, Boltanski and Chiapello identify four key elements that have been the historical basis of critiques of capitalism. These are capitalism as a source of inauthenticity; capitalism as a source of oppression; capitalism as a source of poverty and inequality; and capitalism as a source of opportunism and egoism.<sup>47</sup> The first two combine to form what Boltanski and Chiapello call the artistic critique, the latter two form the social critique.<sup>48</sup> These two critiques appear natural allies in their mutual opposition to capitalism. However, each of them can be addressed without touching on the concerns of the other, and their respective aims can easily come into conflict due to the different bases. This is precisely what Boltanski and Chiapello argue happened in the political transformations that occurred in the 1970s. The political status quo of the post-war years was dominated by the social critique, with organised labour and the working class involved in an uneasy negotiation with both the state and capitalists to mitigate the social harm of capitalism. This arrangement broke down with the political turmoil of 1968 and the economic crisis of the early 1970s. Traditional minor concessions of wages and benefits did not achieve the usual dampening of unrest, and under these conditions the continued demands of workers were considered to require too great a sacrifice of profit accumulation. The movements of the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Here we can see a marked similarity between this description and the concept of human capital explicitly advocated by neoliberal theorists such as Milton Friedman and Gary Becker.

<sup>47</sup> Boltanski and Chiapello, *New Spirit*, 37.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 38.

1960s had seen an increased demand for autonomy and self-determination, a key element of the artistic critique, both within and beyond the workplace. By incorporating elements of the artistic critique into its ideology, capitalism disarmed the social critique, with many of its key elements – job security and organised labour’s collective negotiation, for example – coming to be seen as part of the old, rigid capitalist order.

*New Spirit*’s conception of ideology is useful for understanding how cultural and intellectual histories relate to material transformations in the experience of life under capitalism. The work’s description of the “spirit” of neoliberal capitalism offers insight into why and how work functions the way that it does in contemporary society, and its analysis of the artistic and social critique of capitalism helps provides a framework for analysing the success of certain elements of neoliberalism. However, Sebastian Budgen, in his review of the text, notes two major potential flaws in *New Spirit*.<sup>49</sup> First, the text’s analysis of the current ideology of capitalism depends largely on a small selection of management texts for evidence, and there is little analysis of how influential these texts actually are.<sup>50</sup> Second, and this is a limitation acknowledged by the authors, *New Spirit* focuses solely on France, placing a heavy emphasis on the role of the 1968 movements, and this focus potentially limits how broadly Boltanski and Chiapello’s analysis can be applied.<sup>51</sup> These are valid criticisms, but there are a number of other works that analyse the same historical period in the US, exploring different aspects of the cultural changes of the 1960s and 1970s, which bear out Boltanski and Chiapello’s core conclusions. These works demonstrate that in the US, too, the concept of autonomy played an important role, and that the aims and ideologies of the counterculture were not always as antithetical to capitalism as is often assumed.

One such text is Thomas Frank’s *Conquest of Cool*.<sup>52</sup> Frank identifies two main political readings of the sixties in popular American discourse, against which he positions his

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<sup>49</sup> Sebastian Budgen, “A New ‘Spirit of Capitalism’,” *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 149-156.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997).

own reading. The conservative view blends the counterculture, the New Left, and the government of the Great Society into a single catastrophic force that broke with the great traditions and trajectories of US history and risked reversing the progress of Western civilisation.<sup>53</sup> The established, broadly left-wing account instead views the decade as a rebellion against a “mainstream culture [that] was tepid, mechanical, and uniform”, but ending with “the counterculture sold out to Hollywood and the television networks.”<sup>54</sup> Frank offers a third account, one which does not fit with received wisdom but which, he argues, better fits the evidence from the period. He notes that the counterculture was from its beginning heavily rooted in mass culture – its stars were rock stars and celebrities seen on television and radio – and that the dominant reading of it as anti-capitalist and anti-consumer depends too heavily on an oversimplified vision of the true nature of American business.<sup>55</sup> Through an analysis of management theory and the practices of the advertising industry, Frank demonstrates that many in the business world saw the counterculture as a natural ally in overthrowing the hierarchy and bureaucracy of the post-war period. Not only did newcomers to the advertising industry use anti-consumerist satire and irony to sell cars, in contrast to the rigid, prescriptive, and faux-scientific guidelines used in previous eras, but their workplaces were organised around concepts of creativity, originality, and artistic autonomy. It was not consumer culture that was anathema to the broad demands of the counterculture, but only the particularly rigid, hierarchical forms of business that dominated the post-war period. According to Frank, although there were areas that did not fit this mold, overall the counterculture’s emphasis on individualised self-expression was compatible with consumerism and perhaps even better suited to fuelling consumer consumption than the cultural uniformity of the earlier period had been.

Lee Konstantinou’s *Cool Characters* provides a similar perspective on elements of the supposedly anti-capitalist counterculture in the 1970s. *Cool Characters* explores the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 3-5.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 8-9.



functioning of irony as a tool for political critique and rebellion in a variety of time periods, and features a chapter on the US punk movement in the 1970s.<sup>56</sup> Despite the widely assumed anti-capitalist nature of the movement, Konstantinou argues that “counterculture and marketing culture have far more in common than is commonly recognized”, and that punk can be understood almost as a form of managerial theory.<sup>57</sup> Konstantinou points out that punks were as disgusted with the welfare state as they were with monopoly capitalism. The punk movement “came to view large, durable collective institutions (and arguably social life as such) as oppressive, and imagined that cutting up or negating hegemonic discourses could undermine power by transforming [...] ‘individual’ political consciousness.”<sup>58</sup> He notes that the anarchic vision offered by even the most political of US punks did not entail any commitment to a better social order, but rather the destruction of all social orders that were perceived as oppressive of individual freedom, which was understood as fundamentally and intrinsically chaotic. Like the 1960s counterculture that preceded it, and which many saw as punk’s enemy, punk did not necessarily oppose or conflict with capitalism as a whole, but rather clashed with a very specific conjunction of paternalistic state and hierarchical capitalism. Punk’s shock value, individualism, and anti-social elements actually helped “reorganize or reinvent the spirit of capitalism” and aided the early development of neoliberalism.<sup>59</sup>

Finally there is Jefferson Cowie’s *Stayin’ Alive*, a comprehensive and brilliant history of the US working class from the 1960s to the 1970s, covering everything from cultural analysis to a history of organised labour to changes in political rhetoric.<sup>60</sup> It is a key text for anyone seeking to understand the seismic political shifts of the period, complementing the

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<sup>56</sup> It is significant that Konstantinou focuses on the US punk movement, as punk in the UK, although in some ways vulnerable to Konstantinou’s critique, has its own distinct history of political engagement and commitments.

<sup>57</sup> Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 110.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 115 and 117.

<sup>60</sup> Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*.

picture of US counterculture and business provided by Frank and Konstantinou with an understanding of the role of the US working class. *Stayin' Alive* narrates the political capture of the majority of this class, who were once stalwart Democrat voters, by the Republican party. According to Cowie, in the late 1960s and early 1970s workers had grown dissatisfied with the wage-increases, promised promotions, and material benefits that had been won by organised labour, and which were now routinely rolled out in response to any industrial action. Instead they demanded qualitative improvements in their workplace roles; they wanted something more than the mind-numbing repetitiveness of the assembly line: meaningful work that would give them satisfaction and provide for greater autonomy and self-determination. Simultaneously, the established unions increasingly came to be seen as part of the established order, out of touch with the needs of their members, dominated by bureaucracy, and in some cases riddled with corruption.

This desire for qualitative improvements in work combined with dissatisfaction over the crude tools used by the Democrat administration to address racial segregation, in particular the practice of forced bussing. Members of the – predominantly white and male – working class began to look for political figures that promised radical change, writes Cowie. From the mid-1970s onwards attempts to revitalise unions, reform organised labour, and promote affirmative action coincided with an economic downturn, the decline of US global economic dominance, and corporations exporting jobs abroad to exploit cheaper labour costs and weaker labour protections. In Cowie's account, the result was a situation in which, by the 1980s and 1990s, the mind-numbing jobs rejected in the past became highly prized occupations, labour organisation collapsed, and a weak job market pitted people against each other. The white working class that had dominated the previous era found themselves in a position of insecurity, and with only an increasingly conservative cultural identity to fall back on. This cultural identity was ruthlessly exploited by Republicans, who harked back to an imagined golden age of America, directing blame onto marginalised groups in society.

In businesses, cultural movements, working class jobs and organisations, there was widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Hostility was directed towards many elements of the established social order, not only to rigid,

hierarchical capitalism but also towards institutions such as labour unions and the welfare state. At the core of all the hostility was a demand for greater autonomy and meaning in work and life, predicated on an increased importance placed on individual satisfaction and freedom, the two elements that Boltanski and Chiapello identify as constituting the artistic critique. This dissatisfaction, however, did not necessarily entail a rejection of capitalism *per se*, just its specific post-war form. It was often supported and embraced by members of the business and advertising world as much as by members of countercultural movements, and eventually proved deeply compatible with a new, individualised, consumer capitalism, which on multiple levels operated in ways that mark it out as distinct from the capitalism that preceded it.

Questions of individual freedom and choice did ultimately reshape work, life, and capitalism, but not in the ways expected by the radical social movements of the 1960s. How demands for autonomy and meaningful work could lead to the rise of neoliberalism, and how that process relates to the *Bildungsroman*, can be understood by comparing the diverse political philosophies developing in the 1960s that claimed the territory of individual autonomy for themselves, of which the anarchist utopianism of *The Dispossessed* represents only one example.

### **The social and artistic critique in *The Dispossessed***

If we examine the worlds of *The Dispossessed* through the framework of Boltanski and Chiapello's four strands of capitalist critique, we can see that the text incorporates elements of all four, and Anarresti society is explicitly structured to respond to each of them. The upper-class characters of A-Io such as Vea and Oiie, constantly competing and having to perform social roles, demonstrate the inauthenticity of living under capitalism. The university students who can only see the world in terms of career demonstrate the inhibitions to autonomy and creativity that living in such a framework causes, even at the top of the social ladder. The working classes are even more deeply oppressed, stuck doing dangerous, difficult, and unrewarding work simply in order to access basic amenities and avoid violent punishment. Their oppression is also deeply ingrained in their psychology and behaviour. The

character of Efor, provided to Shevek as a manservant, long maintains a rigidly subservient, quiet, and fearful demeanour, unable to trust that Shevek's attempts at friendship and openness are genuine. Inauthenticity and oppression constitute the artistic critique, but A-Io also demonstrates elements of the social critique. The working class of A-Io are depicted as living in incredible poverty. This is first described to Shevek by Efor – who talks of filthy hospitals, disease-ridden slums, and the death of his three children (233-35) – and is then seen first-hand by Shevek when he flees his A-Io benefactors (239-41). Egoism and selfishness, the other aspect of the social critique, are encoded in the very fabric of A-Ioti society in class and visible in the competitive attitudes of the upper class to freedom and power, as explored earlier.

The Odonian philosophy on which Anarresti society was founded, by contrast, has de-alienated work. It emphasises the importance of doing work for its own value, working in a range of communal jobs, and finding a vocation to which one is dedicated for its own sake. The deliberate lack of an economic or political hierarchy allows greater authenticity of behaviour, as individuals do not have to behave in a certain way to fit in with the established order. As an unintended and informal hierarchy begins to form on Anarres, Shevek and his friends fight against it precisely to retain the possibility of authenticity and autonomy that are the core tenets of Odonianism. In addition, although there is a general expectation that people will contribute, they are not forced to work through the threat of deprivation or punishment, as food and housing is available for all, and the pursuit of one's own interests is explicitly lauded in Odonian philosophy as an aim both for personal and common good, as evident from the organic analogy mentioned earlier. Anarresti society, then, is designed to guarantee both autonomy and authenticity. In terms of the social critique, inequality is prevented as the resources of Anarresti society are available to all equally. Although poverty is still possible given the scarce resources of the planet, the burden is shared between all members of society. Egoism and the pursuit of self-interest over collective interest are explicitly militated against. The society's institutions and traditions are designed to promote social interaction and cohesion through education, community, and collective living. But beyond this, Odonian ideology explicitly opposes egoism and draws a clear distinction between the selfishness of

egoism, which involves harming or constraining others in pursuit of material gain or power, and the pursuit of one's life purpose, which is the best way to serve society. These distinct behaviours are demonstrated by Sabul, an exploitative Anarresti academic, and Shevek respectively.

Very clearly, then, the two societies depicted in *The Dispossessed* demonstrate an understanding of capitalism that spans both the artistic and social critiques. However, *The Dispossessed's* use of the *Bildungsroman* genre has a significant role in determining what is thematically dominant on the level of narrative and story, and so what becomes significant in the novel as a whole. While Le Guin's use of the genre is key in enabling her critique of capitalism on the grounds of individual autonomy, it leads to the narrative and thematic marginalisation of other social issues that are also central to her political vision, primarily those of the social critique. This marginalisation occurs because of two factors that are at the core of the *Bildungsroman's* narrative logic: the genre's focus on a single individual and its central concern with the progressive development of that individual.

Shevek is the focus of *The Dispossessed* throughout its entirety, and as such it is ultimately his story that determines the dominant concerns of the text. The primary challenges Shevek faces in his life on Anarres centre around issues of oppression, coercion, and control by the dominant social order, as Anarresti society drifts away from the principles on which it was founded, and as a result the novel focuses on the question of living an authentic and autonomous life. As a child Shevek is chastised because his intellect outmatches other children and makes them uncomfortable, and implicit in this chastisement is a demand to conform. As an adult he faces having his work controlled and his labour appropriated by Sabul, who wields informal institutional power to either take credit or prevent publication. Sabul eventually uses this power to deny Shevek a place at the central university of Anarres and so denies Shevek the ability to perform his own "organic function", his life's purpose in studying physics, at least within the established framework of Anarresti society. In the non-capitalist society of Anarres, then, the dominant issues from the perspective of Shevek's development are conformity and control, authenticity and individual autonomy.

In contrast, while inequality is not such a concern, the long-lasting, large-scale famine on Anarres demonstrates that poverty and hardship are entirely possible. For the fictional inhabitants of Anarres this famine is a significant historical event, shaping their lives in profound ways through starvation, hardship, and death. However, the narrative skips over these years. The reader only witnesses the start of the famine – when Shevek loses his position at the institute and takes a job that separates him from his family (205-223) – and the period immediately after its end – when Shevek’s primary fear is the way in which “every emergency, every labour draft even, tends to leave behind it an increment of bureaucratic machinery” (*The Dispossessed*, 271). He worries that “the social conscience completely dominates the individual conscience, instead of striking a balance with it” (272) to the point where no one refuses job postings. Even though the famine has a clear and devastating material impact on those living on Anarres, the focus of the narrative remains on questions of individual autonomy rather than material conditions.

I argue that beyond Le Guin’s intention to focus on individual autonomy, there are also generic constraints inherent in the *Bildungsroman* that necessarily foreground autonomy and marginalise questions of poverty. From the perspective of an interest in individual development, the gruelling and repetitive day-to-day struggle of attempting to survive poverty makes poor narrative material. After the period of famine is over Shevek can draw conclusions that aid his development, but poverty cannot be his permanent condition and concern, because under such conditions questions of development and autonomy are sidelined by the more urgent necessities of survival.<sup>61</sup>

In addition, while Sabul, in seeking power and appropriating the work of others, is depicted as egoistic in a very negative sense, the concept of egoism holds a more ambiguous place in *The Dispossessed*. Excessive self-interest is certainly negative, but Shevek as both a child and an adult is repeatedly accused of egoism in his attempts to pursue his own work and express his intellectual capacity. While learning to work with others rather than in isolation is

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<sup>61</sup> It is for precisely this reason that Moretti claims that the classic *Bildungsroman* could only emerge at the advent of capitalism. Only a very specific alignment of circumstances could allow for the degree of material security and social freedom that allowed questions of individual autonomy and authentic personal calling to become dominant concerns. See Moretti, *The Way of the World*, ix-xi.

presented as a key element of Shevek's development, the novel portrays the accusations of egoism towards Shevek as being excessive and continuing after he has learnt this lesson. For instance, once he and his allies establish a syndicate of their own, they are accused of putting their own interests first in establishing contact with A-Io and agreeing to send Shevek there, demonstrating a conflict between pursuit of autonomy and prevention of egoism. Again, the individual focus of the *Bildungsroman* genre is significant here. First, a narrative that focuses on a single individual necessarily attributes special significance to that individual's life, even if that significance supposedly derives from their life experiences being representative or typical of a broader general experience. Implicit in the choice of a character's perspective is the suggestion that this character's perspective has particular value or importance, as there must be some reason for this focus. Egoism must necessarily remain an ambiguous concern for such a narrative because it necessarily promotes a single (fictional) individual's experiences over those of others. Second, all the actions of other characters in such a narrative are understood and inflected by their relationship to, and effect on, the central character. While Sabul is clearly motivated by self-interest, for instance, *The Dispossessed* never provides insight into the motivations of Sabul's allies, leaving open the possibility that they genuinely believe that they are acting in the interests of Anarres, and that Shevek is recklessly endangering them. From their perspective the story could look very different, showing the reckless actions of a selfish renegade. Consequently, without the focus on Shevek, the line between duty to collective or individual interests should be drawn remains unclear.

In the narrative on Anarres, then, autonomy and authenticity are the primary concerns, while poverty and egoism, if not inequality, occupy a less prominent and more ambiguous position. Poverty, inequality, and egoism are built into the very structure of A-Ioti society, as analysed previously, making the issues of the social critique more pressing than on Anarres. But due to the text's focus on Shevek, autonomy and authenticity remain the primary concern even in the narrative strand set in A-Io. Shevek spends the vast majority of his time living amongst the upper classes of A-Io in luxurious accommodation. The issue he faces is not poverty but being used as a means the ends of others, having his work appropriated, and

having his freedom restricted. The worldviews he has access to are those of the upper class to whom poverty and inequality is not a concern. And despite the capacity for violence inherent in A-Ioti society, the restrictions Shevek faces function almost exclusively through social pressure, rather than physical coercion, punishment, or deprivation. Effectively, for the vast majority of his time in A-Io the problems Shevek faces personally are the same that he faced on Anarres.

Shevek's entire exposure to the poverty and the horrible living conditions of the working class in A-Io takes place in a single chapter (*The Dispossessed*, 233-53). Shevek is spoken to openly by Efor, realises his entrapment and exploitation at the hands of the A-Ioti state, flees from the university, aids a mass demonstration, and sees that same demonstration brutally crushed. That all these events take place in a single chapter is telling, but the necessary focus of the narrative means that the concerns of the artistic critique largely remain dominant even once Shevek is exposed to the truth of A-Io, with the exception of a brief section in which Shevek faces the possibility of capture by the A-Ioti military (249-53).

At the start of the chapter featuring these events, Shevek notes that on Anarres "he had chosen, in defiance of the expectations of his society, to do the work he was individually called to do. To do it was to rebel: to risk the self for the sake of society" (*The Dispossessed*, 225). The centrality of autonomy and individual-social synthesis is clear here, Shevek's apparent egoism in breaking with the accreted conventions of his society was simultaneously following his own aims and risking his own status, in both capacities striving for the benefit of the society. However, on A-Io he says that what had been an "act of rebellion [on Anarres] was a luxury, a self-indulgence. To be a physicist on A-Io was to serve not society, not mankind, not the truth, but the State" (255). This makes him realise that coming to A-Io was a mistake, and he asks himself how having "locked himself in jail, might he act like a free man?" (255).

Rather than a pure rejection of poverty, class, or the suffering of others, then, Shevek's flight is primarily motivated by a desire to regain his autonomy and escape what was effectively a wage-relationship – he was provided with all he needed and more in return



for working on his theories – as well as recover authentic relationships with people, rather than the power-based relationships he has with the members of the A-Ioti upper-class. This is not to say that Shevek is depicted as unsympathetic to the needs and suffering of the A-Ioti working classes, but rather that, on a narrative level, the question of their material and social needs appears as subordinate to Shevek's personal development and autonomy. A key demonstration of this narrative subordination is the symbolic function of the protest that Shevek participates in. Having fled from his hosts/jailors to the slums of A-Io's capital, Shevek gives a speech at the peaceful protest which his presence inspires, before witnessing the protest's brutal suppression. Shevek is forced to flee, and eventually escapes back to Anarres. Shortly after these events, *The Dispossessed* ends on a hopeful note, coming to a close as Shevek, having shared his completed theory of simultaneity with all humanity, considers the possibilities for the future shortly before landing back on Anarres.

The narrative is only able to end hopefully because of its focus on Shevek's individual experience. For the majority of his time in A-Io, Shevek complacently lived within the class-based power structure, benefiting from the luxuries it provided, and so tacitly accepted it. The protest allows Shevek to symbolically regain his freedom and his voice by openly speaking out against the power structure of A-Io's society. The speech exorcises Shevek's complicity in A-Io's oppressive social system and allows Shevek to rediscover his true solidarity with the working classes. Shevek is described as speaking "their mind, their being, in their language, [...] out of the centre of his own being" and talks of "brotherhood" and the "suffering that brings us together" (247), all of which emphasises his alignment with those oppressed members of the working classes. He then offers an impassioned account of Anarres's equality and collectivity and emphasises the importance of interdependence and "be[ing] the Revolution" (248). This exorcism of his previous complicity reaches its symbolic peak as a wounded protestor slowly dies in his arms while the two of them hide in a cellar (252-253), sealing his solidarity through a moment of literally shared suffering. The protest, then, plays a key role in completing Shevek's development, fulfilling his role in society, and symbolically recognising the importance of a certain form of freedom. However, this ending is only satisfactory because of the classic *Bildungsroman*'s individual,

developmental focus. The experience of the numerous other participants cannot be represented within this framework, both because of their number and because the events do not necessarily entail development from them. Their perspective would give a very different significance to the events with which the novel ends. Many die and are wounded, the peaceful protest is brutally crushed, and unlike Shevek, the A-Io working class cannot flee to a faraway home but must continue to live in A-Io's oppressive society.

The focus of *The Dispossessed* on questions of autonomy and authenticity is no doubt partially the result of these being prominent concerns at the time the novel was written. However, the novel's deployment of the *Bildungsroman*, chosen as it was for its engagement with these concepts, plays a key role in deepening this focus. While the societies that Le Guin depicts in *The Dispossessed* demonstrate a concern with issues relating to both the social and artistic critique, the use of the classic *Bildungsroman*, with its narrow focus on a single individual and dominant concern for the positive development of that individual, not only further pushes to prominence questions of autonomy and authenticity, but also greatly limits the text's capacity to explore issues of poverty, egoism, and social solidarity. Given the genre's bourgeois origins, this focus is perhaps unsurprising, reflecting as it does the concerns of that class. However, the dominance of questions of autonomy has a profound political significance. While *The Dispossessed* depicts solutions to the artistic and social critiques of capitalism as going hand-in-hand, the egalitarian, communal anarchism of *The Dispossessed* is far from the only political philosophy that has individual autonomy as a central concern. To fully understand how this central focus relates to neoliberalism, it is necessary to return to the concept of libertarianism.

### **Egalitarian anarchism, capitalist libertarianism, and neoliberalism**

In *The Dispossessed*, the term "libertarian" is sometimes used interchangeably with anarchist, a designation which would fit McCann and Szalay's broad usage of the term to

mean a general anti-organisational or anti-statist political approach.<sup>62</sup> However, the large differences that can exist between societies that share the moniker of anarchist or libertarian can be usefully demonstrated through a literary comparison. Donna Glee Williams compares the political vision of *The Dispossessed* to that of Robert Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (1966). Both books feature a moon-based, anarchist society, and both "radically redesign family structures", "give children and teenagers complete sexual freedom", "deal with the issue of language change", "have strong male protagonists whose sensibilities are shared by the reader", and feature a trip by the protagonist to the home-planet, where they are tempted but from which they ultimately return joyfully to the moon that is their home.<sup>63</sup>

Despite these numerous similarities the two novels offer radically different social visions. As Williams puts it, for Heinlein the fundamental principles "might be described as 'masculine,' individualist, libertarian, laissez-faire capitalist, anarchist, and based on Christianity. For Le Guin, the governing principles might be described as feminist, communal, centrally coordinated, anarchist, and Taoist."<sup>64</sup> Williams's description is not entirely correct – Anarres is not centrally organised, although it does have a single, central database for job postings so that people can find work should they want it – but is generally accurate. However, Williams does not use the term libertarian to describe *The Dispossessed*, and this is a significant omission given that the novel uses this term itself. Williams's essay was published in 1994, and her omission is likely a result of the connotations that have become attached to the term in general discourse since the time of *The Dispossessed*'s publication. Analysis of one of the key texts in the development of the dominant vein of libertarian thought in the US, Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974), shines some light on these connotations, and the cause and significance of Williams's omission.<sup>65</sup> It

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<sup>62</sup> For instance, when Shevek first encounters working-class demonstrators and asks if they are Odonians, they say "[p]artly. Syndicalists, libertarians" (*The Dispossessed*, 243).

<sup>63</sup> Donna Glee Williams, "The Moons of Le Guin and Heinlein," *Science Fiction Studies* 21, no. 2 (1994): 164.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>65</sup> While the kind of libertarianism analysed below is the dominant vein, and could be broadly classified as right-wing, there is libertarian philosophy across the political spectrum. For more on contemporary left-libertarianism, for example, see Peter Vallentyne and Hillel Steiner, *Left-Libertarianism and Its Critics: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Palgrave, 2000). That contemporary leftist approaches to libertarianism need

reveals that the anti-institutionalism that McCann and Szalay identify as central to libertarianism is a secondary product of libertarianism's core concern with individual freedom, and that, despite Le Guin's utopian vision, this core concern is compatible with a version of capitalism that shares much with the vision of some key neoliberal theorists.

*Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (hereafter *ASU*) was published in 1974, the same year as *The Dispossessed*.<sup>66</sup> Its title and date of publication make it clear that *ASU* engages with the same political issues and historical context as *The Dispossessed*. *ASU* is an extensive work of political philosophy, attempting to derive a vision of a morally just society from minimal original principles, and working in dialogue with other political-philosophical explorations such as John Rawls's famous "original position".<sup>67</sup> The very first line of *ASU* establishes the basic principle from which Nozick derives his vision of a just society: "Individuals have rights, and there are things no person or group may do to them (without violating their rights). So strong and far-reaching are these rights that they raise the question of what, if anything, the state and its officials may do."<sup>68</sup> This statement usefully identifies two key elements of Nozick's political philosophy: it is individualistic and it is rights-based. However, Nozick's statement is not as simple, revealing, and self-evident as its phrasing suggests. Even if one accepts the principle of rights, there remains the key question of the nature and relative priority of the rights that Nozick views as intrinsic. Over the course of *ASU* numerous rights are included and excluded by Nozick – the justifiable rights include the right to life and the

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specify their leftism gives some indication of the dominance of the other end of the political spectrum in this field.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1974). While it was possibly the most significant, *ASU* was far from the only text advocating and exploring libertarianism in this vein that was published in the early 1970s. See, for example, Jerome Tuccille, *Radical Libertarianism: A Right Wing Alternative* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970); John Hospers, *Libertarianism: A Political Philosophy for Tomorrow* (Los Angeles: Nash Publications, 1971). Hospers went on to become the first US presidential candidate for the Libertarian Party in 1972. His candidacy gives some indication of the extent to which the term libertarianism in the US is tied to the political worldview advocated by Nozick and those like him.

<sup>67</sup> See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

<sup>68</sup> Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, ix. Nozick is a part of a long tradition of political philosophy based on intrinsic rights, and as such, *ASU* is in many ways a continuation of liberalism. Assumed knowledge of the long tradition to which Nozick is contributing allows him to assert the validity of the concept of intrinsic rights. For more on this topic, see Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred D. Miller Jr., and Jeffrey Paul, ed., *Natural Rights Liberalism from Locke to Nozick* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

right to self-defence but not the right to food or shelter, for instance. However, the overriding right that determines what else is considered valid is implicit in the term libertarianism and becomes evident over the course of Nozick's analysis: the right to liberty. The form this liberty takes is visible in *ASU*'s opening line; Nozick views liberty in terms of freedom from interference, from being forced to act or behave in any way that is not of your own choosing. Nozick even suggests that the right to liberty is so fundamental and has such priority that it can justify selling oneself into slavery.<sup>69</sup> In the terminology of Isaiah Berlin, then, *ASU* is concerned with preserving "negative liberty".<sup>70</sup>

*The Dispossessed* shares with *ASU* a concern for preserving individual autonomy but ties this concern for negative liberty to a strong positive liberty, which, although not given huge significance on a narrative level, is supported by strong positive rights and free access to material necessities in Anarresti society. Le Guin appears to see no contradiction in this, assuming that given the right environment, a high level of social equality, and the right ideological basis, individuals will happily work for a combination of social recognition and the intrinsic joy of unalienated labour. She even goes so far as to satirise the "common-sense" capitalist view that people will only work for monetary gain or to avoid material deprivation.<sup>71</sup> Shevek, upon visiting farms and villages in A-Io on guided tours, notes that all the workers he sees are industrious. This surprises him because he "had assumed that if you removed a human being's natural incentive to work – his initiative, his spontaneous creative energy – and replaced it with external motivation and coercion, he would become a lazy and careless worker" (*The Dispossessed*, 70).

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<sup>69</sup> Here arises one of the grand paradoxes of liberty rights; the right to liberty of action is so overriding that an individual can legitimately choose to enter into a situation or agreement in which their liberty is entirely unavailable. The ability for a (theoretically) free man to legitimately enter into such a constrictive agreement is the foundation of capitalist labour relations.

<sup>70</sup> See Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered before the University of Oxford on 31 October, 1958* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958).

<sup>71</sup> Le Guin's views on human motivation are borne out by Boltanski and Chiapello, who note that wage alone is far from a sufficient motivator to psychologically justify engagement in the capitalist system. Boltanski and Chiapello, *New Spirit*, 8.

Nozick's conception of autonomy, liberty, and the necessary conditions for both, diverges significantly from Le Guin's, and *ASU* offers a vision of the necessary structure of a just society that is very different from that offered by the anarchist, Anarresti society of *The Dispossessed*. His vision depends on an understanding of human behaviour that universalises specifically capitalist behaviours as simply natural, and largely ignores the possibility and historical existence of alternative social structures. Nozick argues for a "minimal state, limited to the narrow functions of protection against force, theft, fraud, enforcement of contracts, and so on."<sup>72</sup> However, he notes that the authority necessarily accorded to this minimal state does not extend to coercing others "for the purpose of getting some citizens to aid others, or in order to prohibit activities to people for their *own* good or protection."<sup>73</sup> The duties Nozick ascribes to this minimal state give some idea of his essentially capitalist idea of human behaviour and bear a striking resemblance to the role given to the state by neoliberal theorists.

Nozick uses "state of nature" logic to derive his societal vision, arguing that while he would prefer a fully anarchist society, any fully anarchist situation will inevitably lead to a limited state through what are effectively the invisible mechanisms of the market (although he does not use this term). The reasoning behind this conclusion is lengthy, but fundamentally can be summarised like this: In the abstracted state of nature people will naturally trade goods and services.<sup>74</sup> They will also seek to protect themselves from harm and

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<sup>72</sup> Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, ix. Strictly speaking, the presence of a minimal state makes his vision minarchist rather than fully anarchist, as he notes, but it shares this with Anarres, which has a minimal state in the infrastructure and organisation around its central work database.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. Nozick claims that from the perspective of "rights" no action can be pursued on the basis of the utilitarian desirability of its end-state, but must be judged from the perspective of whether it does or does not violate rights. He notes that "being *forced* to contribute to another's welfare violates your rights" whereas "someone else's not providing you with things you need greatly, including things essential to the protection of your rights, does not *itself* violate your rights." See *ibid.*, 30. This understanding of what constitutes rights violation does not necessarily arise merely from having rights *per se*, but rather from the priority given to liberty in Nozick's schema. If the right to the necessities of life were given more priority than the right to freedom from interference, then refusal to provide others with the necessities for their own survival would be a violation of others' rights (provided doing so did not compromise your own capacity to survive).

<sup>74</sup> The justification of private property through state of nature logic also has a long tradition in liberal political-philosophical thought. Possibly the most famous example of this is Locke's argument that the right to private property originally arises from the process of using one's own labour to transform natural resources into property. This, he argues, justifies the principle of private property such that acquisition and ownership of property need no longer be related to having performed the original labour to generate it. For a concise account

protect their interests. Because being constantly vigilant for threats and defending yourself takes up so much time and labour, people will inevitably begin to delegate this responsibility. Such delegation, Nozick assumes, will necessarily occur through contracts, with individuals paying another person or organisation to protect them. This will result in multiple “mutual-protection associations”. These associations will inevitably compete with one another, with the agency best able to protect individuals ultimately achieving local dominance, as due to obligations to their membership two agencies cannot co-exist within a geographical area without conflict.<sup>75</sup> On becoming dominant, an association effectively takes on the role of a minimal state, fulfilling the basic functions of “protection against force, theft, fraud, enforcement of contracts, and so on” for all within its geographical area.<sup>76</sup>

There are a number of key observations that we can draw from Nozick’s derivation. Fundamentally, Nozick’s minimal state is formed on the basis of the contract, and in this he is part of a long political-philosophical tradition.<sup>77</sup> However, while all social contract theory could be argued to have capitalist implications, *ASU*’s understanding of the contract takes a very specifically capitalist form. It involves a literal trade of goods and services, and assumes the buying and selling of labour in some form, understood in terms of individual exchange for mutual gain.<sup>78</sup> The central role that the enforcement of contracts takes in the duties of the proposed minimal state is significant on multiple levels. Its centrality reveals a fundamental belief in the power of capitalist competition on Nozick’s part. He argues that the minimal state would have to take on the duty of enforcing contracts, but makes no provision for how the initial contracts that instantiate the mutual-protection associations would be enforced. He

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of this argument see Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, trans. Rebecca Balinski (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 41-43.

<sup>75</sup> See in particular Part 1 in Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>77</sup> Perhaps the most well-known figures in this tradition are the key classical liberals: Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. See Paul, Miller Jr., and Paul, ed., *Natural Rights Liberalism from Locke to Nozick*.

<sup>78</sup> Again, Nozick’s approach is an exaggerated version of a longstanding trend in liberal thought. One of Locke’s major contributions to political-philosophical thought was predicating the existence of society on exchange rather than cooperation or preservation. See Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, 44.

overlooks the possibility that those delegated the duty of protection could abuse the power this affords them, and that multiple protection agencies could enter a state of war. Instead, he trusts in the innate power of competition and contract to allow the peaceful dominance of one organisation.

In addition, Nozick assumes the universal validity and sanctity of the contract, but contract enforcement cannot be justified from the standpoint of negative liberty rights and non-interference, which are otherwise absolutely fundamental to Nozick's argument. From the premise of negative liberty one can argue it is a violation of an individual's rights to prevent them entering into a contract, even if it is harmful to them, but enforcing this contract does not come under the same remit because it does not ensure the freedom of any individual. Fundamentally, Nozick should oppose contract enforcement on the same basis that he opposes redistributive taxation. The validity and primacy of contracts, even when they infringe on individual liberty, is an unacknowledged precondition of his argument. It is notably missing from his opening statement, and has a highly specific influence on his vision of society. Finally, the assumption that paid protection would necessarily arise as the dominant form of protection also ignores the numerous alternative ways that protection has been organised in non-capitalist, non-statist societies.<sup>79</sup>

Assuming the necessity of certain behaviours in order to produce a certain kind of society is not in itself problematic; *The Dispossessed's* vision of society, for instance, rests upon the possibility of people being capable of behaving communally, without economic incentives, and without a legal system. However, *The Dispossessed* grounds these ideas in a specific ideological, historical, and social context, which it shows as necessary in order to

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<sup>79</sup> For example, complex ties of kinship, allegiance, or tribe can serve as the basis for social protection, without requiring the exchange of goods for services. These systems arguably provide a more consistent form of protection, as they do not depend on the protectee being able to pay for protection. The society seen in the Icelandic sagas provides a notable historical example of a social protection system in a heavily decentralised, quasi-anarchist (if not entirely non-hierarchical) society. In the sagas, protection for individuals does not depend on either state or payment, but emerges from the combination of kinship ties, complex legal traditions, and democratic discussion. Interestingly, the punishment for breaking these laws is being outlawed. In effect, rather than being directly punished, if an individual breaks the laws of the social system they are no longer subject to the protections that social system affords. In this way the old Icelandic system is a clear example of the social contract in a non-capitalist society. For more on this topic see William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).



promote these behaviours. In characters such as Sabul, the novel demonstrates the possibility of alternative behaviours being dominant and so changing the shape of society. *ASU*, on the other hand, offers a view of intrinsic human behaviour that exists independently of any historical, social, cultural, or technological context. *ASU*'s understanding of behaviour, with its focus on contracts, individuals, and exchange, is highly capitalist, but presents itself as simply being the natural behaviour of humans in the absence of external social pressures (although such an absence can never truly exist). Ideas of contract and exchange then become tied to the concept of individual autonomy, appearing as the fundamental method for exercising freedom. In addition, because *ASU* presents its idea of behaviour as occurring independent of context, as being simply natural, the society that emerges from this behaviour is depicted as the only just form of society that *can* exist, regardless of the desirability of other forms. This stands in direct contrast with *The Dispossessed*, which acknowledges that multiple kinds of society are possible – desirable and just or otherwise – with the form they take depending upon the specific historical, ideological, and material conditions present.<sup>80</sup> Clearly, the dominant strain of US libertarian thought both overlaps with and differs from the political vision offered by *The Dispossessed*, and this is key. Nozick's libertarianism shares much with the later theorists of neoliberalism, and so its relationship to *The Dispossessed* and the political movements the novel represents, can give us an insight into neoliberalism's rise.

As explored in the introduction to this thesis, precisely defining neoliberalism is not easy. The key theorists all contribute different (and sometimes contradictory) elements, and each theorist's contribution must be understood in relation to the time at which they wrote and their role in popularising neoliberalism. The focus of this chapter is an element of neoliberal history that, as Konstantinou notes, is often overlooked: the fact that neoliberal ideas were popularly received.<sup>81</sup> As such, it is the work of the theorists and popularisers who shaped public perception of neoliberalism up to and during the 1970s that require analysis here.

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<sup>80</sup> See, for example, the discussion between Shevek and the ambassador from Earth, in which they compare the societies on Earth, Anarres, and Urras, and how multiple factors combined to shape these societies in different ways.

<sup>81</sup> See Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, 113.

Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek are perhaps the most well-known names in the development of neoliberalism, and this recognition is reflective of their central role in formulating and promoting neoliberal ideology. It is a significant indicator of the rapidly changing position of neoliberalism in the 1970s that both Hayek and Friedman won Nobel Prizes in the middle of the decade (Hayek winning it in 1974, and Friedman following suit in 1976). Hayek, however, belonged to an earlier generation of neoliberal thinkers, and was never as enthusiastic a populariser as Friedman, who was prolific in his work publicising and promoting neoliberal ideology.<sup>82</sup> So despite Hayek winning the Nobel Prize in the 1970s, from the 1960s onwards it was Friedman who was the most significant and well-known figure in the general popularisation of neoliberalism, and it was Friedman's ideas of neoliberalism that were spread, most famously through his 1962 book *Capitalism and Freedom*.<sup>83</sup>

The assumptions and logic behind *ASU* follow a long tradition of liberal thought, and while generally later labelled neoliberals, many neoliberal theorists, Friedman among them, claimed to be classical liberals in the proper sense of the term, and claimed to work from the basis of classical liberal principles.<sup>84</sup> Friedman has also been labelled a libertarian, and in an interview accepted this designation, suggesting it was practically equivalent with classical liberal.<sup>85</sup> *Capitalism and Freedom* clearly demonstrates the overlap between libertarianism and popular ideas of neoliberalism. Like *ASU*, *Capitalism and Freedom* places questions of individual autonomy at its core from its title onwards, claiming that “freedom [is] the ultimate goal and the individual [is the] ultimate entity”.<sup>86</sup> *Capitalism and Freedom*'s central

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<sup>82</sup> Friedman wrote books, did academic work, gave numerous speeches and interviews, and with Rose, his wife, even produced a TV show promoting neoliberal ideas, with an accompanying book, entitled *Free To Choose*.

<sup>83</sup> Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*. This chapter provides a relatively concise account of the reason for Friedman's prominence and the key aspects of his work in *Capitalism and Freedom*. For more on these topics see the analysis and history offered in this thesis's introduction.

<sup>84</sup> See Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, 5; Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 3.

<sup>85</sup> Milton Friedman, interviewed by Peter Jaworski, “Friedman and Freedom,” *Queen's Journal* 129, no. 37 (2002): 18-19.

<sup>86</sup> Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 5.

argument is that political freedom is a necessary result of economic freedom, and economic freedom requires a free market and private property.

Friedman argues that government organisation is generally negative, allowing the concentration of power and disrupting the efficient processes of market competition, but following in the footsteps of earlier neoliberals he accepts the necessity of a limited, minimal state, which serves to provide for defence, guarantee contracts, and enforce the laws of the market.<sup>87</sup> In contrast to government power, the free market is seen as entirely positive by Friedman; it promotes and preserves freedom, and through the mechanisms of competition both prevents the concentration of power and provides the most efficient method of resource distribution. Friedman and his fellow neoliberals argue that all human behaviour can be explained as the rational pursuit of self-interest, and that, on the basis of Hayek's earlier argument, the market and price system enable a method of valuation and exchange that allows neutral mediation between these competing self-interests.<sup>88</sup> Friedman claims that the capitalism he envisions can never be coercive because competition will always produce alternative market options, and people are always free to choose not to enter into a contract or exchange.<sup>89</sup>

*Capitalism and Freedom*, then, shares a great deal with *ASU*. Both of them offer an individual-centric ideology and construct a societal model on an individualised basis. They view liberty in terms of freedom from interference, and advocate a minimal state limited to the role of providing defence, enforcing contracts, and ensuring the rules of the market. They offer a fundamentally capitalist view of human behaviour, and place emphasis on the power

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<sup>87</sup> See, for instance, *ibid.*, 34. Here Friedman summarises his views on the legitimate functions of the state and makes a point of noting that “[t]he consistent liberal is not an anarchist.”

<sup>88</sup> See, for example, his account of the benefits provided to “negroes” in the Southern US by the “maintenance of the general rules of private property and of capitalism after the abolition of slavery”. *Ibid.*, 109. This account fails to note the role that private property and capitalism played in creating the conditions from which black Americans needed to escape.

<sup>89</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, 13.

of competition and contract to produce a just and fair society that preserves freedom.<sup>90</sup> However, there are three key differences. First, *ASU* is a heavily philosophical text, and its vision of society is not intended as a literal blueprint for a society. Were its social vision implemented in practice it would require a fundamental dismantling of existing social structures. *Capitalism and Freedom*, however, is a more practical text, which offers concrete examples of how the ideas it advocates could be implemented in immediate practice, within society as it exists, and it espouses the benefits of doing so.<sup>91</sup> Through these practical suggestions, *Capitalism and Freedom* demonstrates the compatibility of its political vision with political reality, and its possible alignment with elements of the society in which the work emerged. Second, *Capitalism and Freedom* draws a stronger connection between capitalist behaviour and the existence of individual autonomy. While *ASU* assumes capitalist behaviour and describes the best just society that could arise from that behaviour, *Capitalism and Freedom* not only assumes capitalist behaviour but describes this behaviour as actively generating and sustaining the conditions for freedom. Third, while both texts are concerned with liberty, *ASU*'s argument and vision centres around the concept of inalienable rights, and so on what any given individual *can* do, whereas *Capitalism and Friedman* explicitly and centrally constructs its argument on the basis of individual rational self-interest, and so on a uniform idea of what each individual *will* necessarily do. Such self-interest is only implicit in Nozick's argument. This distinction is a key difference between classical liberal thought and neoliberal thought, as Foucault highlights in *The Birth of Biopolitics*.<sup>92</sup>

It is in light of these differences that we can compare the neoliberalism seen in Friedman's work to that offered by Le Guin, and the radical left-wing approach she

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<sup>90</sup> While Friedman can be viewed as anti-statist in some regards, he explicitly states that "government is essential both as a forum for determining 'the rules of the game' and as an umpire to interpret and enforce the rules decided on." *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>91</sup> The core argument and basis of *Capitalism and Freedom* is effectively outlined in its introduction and first two chapters. The subsequent ten chapters are dedicated to specific areas of policy and government action, with title such as "Fiscal Policy", "Occupational Licensure", "The Distribution of Income", and "Social Welfare Measures".

<sup>92</sup> The distinction between what an individual *can* do and what they *will* do is central to a key difference between liberalism and neoliberalism that Foucault identifies in *The Birth of Biopolitics*. The former works on the basis of the subject of right and the latter on the basis of the subject of interest. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 275.

represents. Through this comparison we can see a more complex alternative to McCann and Szalay's understanding of the relationship between neoliberalism and the New Left. Neoliberal ideology offered a societal vision that promised a central commitment to freedom and appeared to oppose centralised power, wedding these elements to an uncompromisingly capitalist worldview and individualised, simple model of human behaviour. Advocates of neoliberalism could lay claim to a rhetoric of freedom and autonomy at a time when these ideas had gained significant societal importance, and their anti-institutional tendencies chimed with the widespread dissatisfaction many felt towards the rigidity and bureaucracy that had dominated Western society after the Second World War (most visibly in the form of paternalistic welfare states, hierarchical and monopolistic firms, entrenched labour unions, and similar). However, neoliberal ideology was also in practice compatible with a number of entrenched interests and existing social structures because of its capitalist nature and because it privileges the issues of the artistic critique at the cost of neglecting those of the social critique.<sup>93</sup>

In contrast, while the anarchist society presented in *The Dispossessed* also focuses on freedom and anti-institutionalism, it depends on a more complex view of human behaviour as multi-faceted and influenced by socio-cultural and ideological context. Additionally, implementing the basic elements of Le Guin's anarchist vision in practice would require a total transformation of society, whereas the neoliberal approach, with its more simplistic and capitalist view of human behaviour and freedom, was more amenable to integration within existing social and political systems, both ideologically and practically. Simultaneously, neoliberal ideology's understanding of human behaviour as universally and intrinsically self-interested positioned neoliberal solutions as the only valid options. *The Dispossessed* leaves open the option that different elements of human behaviour, self-interest or cooperation for instance, could shape and be dominant in any given society. Neoliberal ideology, on the other hand, positions self-interest as always being the determining factor in human behaviour, and so society as only ever able to function on that basis.

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<sup>93</sup> For accounts of this dissatisfaction with the status quo and the social and artistic critique, see the earlier overview and analysis of Boltanski and Chiapello, *New Spirit*; Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*; Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*; Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*.

The societal model offered by *The Dispossessed* cannot be taken as definitively representative of the entire range of radical left-wing ideas circulating during the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, it nonetheless provides a useful picture of the political trends of the period, and, in comparison with neoliberal ideology, helps explore how neoliberalism rose to dominance as a solution to questions of individual autonomy that were dominant in society at the time. The relative ease with which neoliberal ideas could be integrated into society while appearing to address concerns about autonomy, combined with the simplicity of neoliberal models of behaviour can contribute to our understanding of both how neoliberalism rose to dominance and how it became hegemonic, producing claims such as Thatcher's "there is no alternative", Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis, and the generalised contemporary acceptance of the neoliberal worldview that Mark Fisher terms "capitalist realism".<sup>94</sup>

### **The *Bildungsroman* after the rise of neoliberalism**

On a literary level, the hegemony of neoliberalism and its capture of the ideological territory of individual autonomy have significant ramifications for the *Bildungsroman* genre. *The Dispossessed* deliberately deploys the *Bildungsroman* to make use of the genre's core concerns and historical affiliation with capitalism, using the genre to demonstrate that an anarchist form of society better meets the *Bildungsroman*'s ideals of individual autonomy and fulfilling development than the capitalist society that originally produced it. However, this deployment also demonstrates the *Bildungsroman*'s political limitations, which are particularly significant under the ideological and political dominance of neoliberalism. The genre's focus on individual and autonomy is a key element of *The Dispossessed*'s critique of capitalism, but it is also the novel's key limitation in the face of neoliberalism, drawing attention towards the issues neoliberalism addresses and away from the social problems it ignores.

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<sup>94</sup> See Fukuyama, "The End of History?"; Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009).

In foregrounding individual autonomy, the *Bildungsroman*'s logic means that critiques of capitalism articulated through it will be engaged primarily on the terrain of questions of individual autonomy and individual experience. This is particularly significant in the era of neoliberalism for two reasons. First, as explored by Boltanski and Chiapello and expanded on in the analysis in this chapter, neoliberalism rose to dominance precisely because of such a foregrounding of questions of individual autonomy while neglecting or undermining questions of social critique. Second, due to the success of neoliberalism, neoliberal ideology and rhetoric, clearly already successful at engaging with these issues, broadly dominate discussions of individual autonomy.

Under neoliberalism, the issues of the social critique, which are neglected by neoliberal theory and practice, such as poverty, inequality, and social solidarity, have again become major social concerns. These issues, then, must be incorporated into any comprehensive critique of neoliberalism, but as evident in *The Dispossessed*, addressing these issues presents a challenge for the *Bildungsroman*. The issues of the social critique gain their significance precisely from their widespread nature, rather than their individual impact, and their causes are complexly distributed throughout society and social structures, making them difficult to view and address from an individual perspective. Additionally, as already discussed, the experience of poverty and hardship make poor material for a narrative focusing on individual development. The difficulty of representing the experience of material poverty in the *Bildungsroman*, and of linking such issues to social structure, is likely the reason for a variety of Le Guin's narrative choices in *The Dispossessed*. For example, her choice of Shevek as a central character and depiction of a rigidly stratified class system in A-IO sidestep some of these issues.

The class system allows the position of individuals in the social order to be clearly defined, and so their behaviour and experiences can be easily linked to the explicitly hierarchical structure of the society in which they live. This functions well in the exploration of the hypothetical capitalist society Le Guin depicts – one close to that in which the *Bildungsroman* originated – but neoliberalism again offers a greater challenge. Neoliberal ideology's emphasis on minimising the role of the state and increasing autonomy has resulted

in the dismantling of many explicit hierarchies, both in government and business, and reduction in state powers, of the kind that dominated the post-war period in which *The Dispossessed* was written. This, combined with the ideology's emphasis on individual autonomy and the supposedly neutral mediation of the market, has resulted in a society in which the economic and social structures are much less visible, though no less real, and often function systemically rather hierarchically. These factors render Le Guin's limited solution to the problem of relating social issues to social structure in the *Bildungsroman* no longer viable. While, huge social divisions still exist, explicit and rigid class stratifications no longer accurately represent the way in which these social divisions are experienced, enacted, or articulated.

Critics such as McCann and Szalay correctly argue that analysis of Le Guin's work contributes to an understanding of how the era of the New Left fed into the dominance of neoliberalism. Le Guin's work *can* serve to identify the link between these two political tendencies, but the reading offered by McCann and Szalay – that the New Left abandoned the field of real politics to the political right due to their anti-institutionalism – is too simplistic. Instead, the issue of individual autonomy, which is central to Le Guin's critique in *The Dispossessed*, is the key to understanding the political shifts of the 1970s. Multiple accounts of this period demonstrate that autonomy was a key concern in a variety of societal arenas, and across the political spectrum, and it was around issues of autonomy and authenticity that business and society was restructured during the rise of neoliberalism.

By examining *The Dispossessed* through the lens provided by Boltanski and Chiapello, we can see that the utopian society depicted in the novel rests upon elements of both the social and artistic critique. However, on the narrative level *The Dispossessed*'s focus on questions of autonomy and authenticity comes at the expense of a focus on questions of poverty and inequality, as a result of both deliberate choice and generic constraints. This imbalance in focus reveals something about how the transition from the era of the New Left to that of neoliberalism could have occurred, and also demonstrates the difficulties faced by politically critical *Bildungsromane* under neoliberalism. While Le Guin and the New Left's social visions incorporated elements of both the artistic and social critique, various political



philosophies of the time, neoliberalism chief amongst them, focused on the artistic critique's key concerns of autonomy, while neglecting other issues. As such, neoliberalism spoke to people's widespread concerns about autonomy, while offering a political vision far easier to integrate into the existing social structure, partially due to its neglect of the concerns of the social critique. The dominance of neoliberalism, then, presents a major challenge to any *Bildungsroman* attempting to offer a critique of capitalism after the rise of neoliberalism, as the *Bildungsroman*'s focus aligns with the central concerns that enabled neoliberalism's rise. Over the decades following the publication of *The Dispossessed*, the genre would be redeployed in a number of new and complex ways by authors seeking to overcome the challenges presented by neoliberalism and reclaim the politically critical *Bildungsroman* as a tool for addressing the dominant political order of their time.

## Chapter 2

### Failure: David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

*Infinite Jest* (1996) opens with Hal Incandenza sitting in front of a university admission board. Hal's internal monologue, a rare example of first-person narration in the novel, is intelligent, articulate, and clear. But when he speaks, his interviewers react with horror and disgust. To Hal's own ears his speech sounds normal, but to the interviewers it is "[u]ndescribable", a horrifying combination of "[s]ubanimalistic noises and sounds", like a "writhing animal with a knife in its eye".<sup>1</sup> Hal finds himself solipsistically imprisoned, tragically cut off from the possibility of communication with other human beings, a representation of self-absorption and social disconnection taken so far as to manifest physically. Yet the tragic truth is that Hal is far from alone in experiencing isolation. *Infinite Jest* is full of characters who are desperately alone, caught in cycles of addiction and depression, with Hal himself revealed to be addicted to marijuana. In this chapter, I argue that analysing *Infinite Jest* through the lens of the *Bildungsroman* reveals that the novel offers a complex critique of elements of neoliberalism that are responsible for the epidemic of dysfunction that it features. The novel's use of the *Bildungsroman* genre is also central to how it presents and conceives of potential alternatives to the ideological framework of neoliberalism. However, closer analysis reveals that the solutions *Infinite Jest* proposes are deeply flawed, only appearing successful due to key elements of the genre's narrative logic that have worrying parallels to the logic of neoliberalism. This analysis allows an understanding of the challenges facing the *Bildungsroman* in the peak era of neoliberalism, even in the hands of an author clearly concerned with core elements and effects of this ideology.

Hal's development – the culmination of which is, in fact, the opening scene described above – is doomed to failure from the start. But through his narrative *Infinite Jest*

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<sup>1</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (London: Abacus, 1996), 14. Further references will be given in parentheses in the text.

demonstrates two things. First, it suggests that the hyper-individualised and consumption-oriented worldview of neoliberalism fails to provide the possibility of fulfilling human development because it does not provide a framework for meaning and value beyond the individual. In emphasising self-interest and the individual, the neoliberal worldview isolates individuals from one another, and so from a key alternative source of value and meaning. Second, Hal's failed *Bildung* demonstrates the inadequacy of the old, hierarchical nation-state model of society to provide meaning and enable *Bildung* in the neoliberal era, as this model is vulnerable to sliding into nationalist fanaticism or being easily subsumed into the dominant neoliberal framework.

However, *Infinite Jest* does not abandon *Bildung*. Instead, it attempts to provide a new social framework for it, implicitly maintaining the necessity and validity of the *Bildungsroman*'s model of social-individual development. Alcoholics Anonymous provides the novel's most practical demonstration of such an alternative social framework, one that functions through an emphasis on sociality itself as a source of meaning. The developmental narrative of Don Gately, who goes from self-interested drug-addict to self-sacrificing guardian, demonstrates this framework's efficacy. However, the apparent promise of AA as an alternative to the failed frameworks of neoliberalism and nation-state has major limitations. The novel's capacity to present AA as it does depends upon elements of the *Bildungsroman*'s core narrative logic – most centrally its individual focus – that have worrying parallels to the elements of neoliberal ideology that *Infinite Jest* is attempting to oppose.

It is ultimately the novel's overall form that gives a tantalising hint of a true alternative. Mobilising the Bakhtinian concepts of polyphony and dialogism, *Infinite Jest* uses a broader variety of dialogism and polyphony, giving over textual space to seemingly minor characters and showing them to be in constant interaction with one another. This demonstrates the importance of recognising each individual as a complete human being, and acknowledging that human experience is always necessarily determined by complex, inescapable social interactions occurring between these complete human beings. Through this model of human sociality, *Infinite Jest* suggests precisely the kind of social framework that

the novel demonstrates is so necessary yet fails to adequately provide within its *Bildungsroman* narratives.

*Infinite Jest* demonstrates both an awareness of and a response to certain problems facing the *Bildungsroman* genre and the concept of *Bildung* in the age of neoliberalism. However, not only is the social model it proposes in AA deeply limited in practice, but, in ultimately retaining a focus on specific individuals and their development, Hal and Gately, *Infinite Jest* undermines the egalitarian political promise hinted at by its form. Despite its aims, then, *Infinite Jest* does not resolve the problems facing the genre in the age of neoliberalism, and in this failure, it reveals certain problems intrinsic to the logic of the genre that limit its effectiveness when attempting to address or propose alternatives to neoliberalism.

### ***Infinite Jest* and the neoliberal nineties**

*Infinite Jest* is a vast text, containing a multitude of characters, a deliberately unclear internal chronology, lengthy digressions, and footnotes that explore the most intricate minutiae or threaten to spiral off into narratives of their own. Offering a precise definition of what the text is *about* is not an easy task. The setting is a quasi-futuristic North America, in which the USA, Mexico, and Canada are joined together in ONAN (the Organisation of North American Nations). ONAN largely exists for the benefit of the old US, which catapults vast quantities of toxic waste into an area of heavily polluted land “gifted” to Canada in order to fuel the “annular fusion” on which US society runs. ONAN’s president is an ex-Las Vegas showman, Johnny Gentle, with a compulsive attitude to cleanliness, and who won the presidency on a platform to literally “clean up America”. The Wheelchair Assassins – Quebecois separatists whose initiation involves amputation-by-train – terrorise the country. Throughout the text Canadian insurgents and ONAN agents search for the master copy of the eponymous “Infinite Jest”, an entertainment cartridge containing a video that is so rapturously absorbing and pleasurable that viewers permanently lose all interest in anything else, even the basic necessities of life, lapsing into a semi-catatonic state of pure passive

consumption. Despite this bizarre backdrop, most of the novel centres around two fictional Boston locations: the Enfield Tennis Academy (ETA) and Ennet House halfway house. While it explores the lives of numerous characters that are in some way related to these locations, Hal Incandenza and Don Gately are the central characters at ETA and Ennet House respectively, with their narratives taking up significantly more textual space than any other character's.

Published in 1996, and written over the preceding decade, *Infinite Jest* emerged in the middle of what could be described as the peak decade of neoliberalism. As explored in the previous chapter, the 1970s saw the first major practical implementations of neoliberal policy, the ideology emerging as a new alternative to the previous status quo, and the decade ended with the election of Margaret Thatcher as the UK's Prime Minister. 1980 saw the election of Ronald Reagan in the US, with "Reagonomics" introducing now-familiar policies and ideology on a large scale.<sup>2</sup> Both Thatcher and Reagan stayed in positions of power for the rest of the 1980s, citing their approach as the only possible solution to the economic problems of the 1970s, and consolidating neoliberalism's gains on the Western political imaginary. The 1980s also saw neoliberalism spread elsewhere in the globe, often thanks to the economic and political clout of the US and not always with democratic consent. One particularly relevant example of this spread occurred in Mexico. Through the IMF, a previously largely Keynesian organisation which rapidly became neoliberal in the early 1980s, the US forced numerous neoliberal reforms on Mexico, reducing labour protections, opening up state assets to cheap foreign purchase, and deregulating large swathes of the economy, in return for desperately needed debt rollover.<sup>3</sup> This process became the model of "structural readjustment" which would be used to introduce neoliberalism, willingly or unwillingly, to numerous countries from then on. The effects of the resultant economic situation in Mexico, and the significance

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<sup>2</sup> While Thatcher and Reagan were key figures in the implementation of neoliberalism, it is important to note that, as with any political shift, they were part of a larger trend. Reagan, for instance, was often expanding on work already started by Paul Volcker, the chairman of the Federal Reserve. What Reagan's political inclination and position as US President allowed was a large increase in the pace of change, which had previously been held back by president Jimmy Carter. See Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 23-25. Reagan's showmanship was also useful for propagating neoliberal ideology in popular US discourse, completing the Republican ideological capture of much of the US working class that was started by Nixon. For more, see Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the neoliberalisation of Mexico, see Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 98-104.

of this new approach to global economics, is addressed at length in the fourth chapter of this thesis, to which it is central.

By the time the early neoliberal leaders left power – Reagan in 1989, Thatcher and Pinochet in 1990 – neoliberalism was far from the upstart political newcomer it had been two decades earlier. However, the turn of the decade saw events that would further cement neoliberal capitalism’s ideological and material hold. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a new historical understanding arose, most famously articulated by Francis Fukuyama in his essay “The End of History?”<sup>4</sup> Fukuyama argued that the end of the Cold War demonstrated the lack of practically and morally viable alternatives to Western liberalism, and that this political form represented the teleological end-point of historico-political development that Hegel had predicted. Yet while Fukuyama trumpeted the success of Western liberalism and democracy, the dominant political force in the West was now firmly in the grip of neoliberalism. The global changes at the turn of the decade, then, seemed to bear out Thatcher’s infamous claim that “there is no alternative” to the political-economic model she had introduced, and as the 1990s progressed, more countries continued to join the neoliberal fold.<sup>5</sup> In the Anglo-American world, Thatcher and Reagan’s exit from power did not spell the end of neoliberalism, but rather the successful normalisation of the ideology across the mainstream political spectrum. While nominally on the left, both Bill Clinton’s New Democrats, elected in the US in 1993, and Tony Blair’s New Labour, elected in the UK in 1997, fundamentally accepted the basic tenets and claims of neoliberalism in both theory and practice. One particularly visible manifestation of this was NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement), which was signed into law in 1994, creating a trade bloc between Canada, the US, and Mexico, and furthering the neoliberalisation of Mexico. By the mid-1990s, then, neoliberal capitalism had no serious

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<sup>4</sup> See Fukuyama, “The End of History?” In his own contextualisation of Wallace and *Infinite Jest*, Konstantinou offers a good overview of Fukuyama’s essay. Konstantinou’s analysis is particularly useful for the way it emphasises the profound sadness and boredom that Fukuyama, and the thinkers that followed him, claimed would reign in this post-historical period, an element of his predictions that is often overlooked. See Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, 167-69.

<sup>5</sup> Harvey again provides numerous useful examples of these varying national transformations. See Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 87-119. His account of China’s – heavily qualified – adoption of numerous elements of neoliberalism is particularly interesting. See *ibid.*, 120-51.

ideological contenders in mainstream politics, a central place in the policies of the world's most dominant economies, and a central position in the ideology governing the nations to which those economies belonged. The number of nations under its sway was only increasing.

*Infinite Jest*'s world is science-fictional, and like *The Dispossessed* – and like all good science fiction – this world serves to explore elements of the novel's own historical period. Johnny Gentle seems more than coincidentally similar to US President Ronald Reagan, who was an actor rather than a Vegas showman prior to his political career, while ONAN itself has strong echoes of the NAFTA agreement. *Infinite Jest*'s world is one of rampant advertising and consumerism, where even the naming rights to calendar years have been sold off, and the USA's experialist export of toxic waste to Canada is nicely allegorical for the relocation of manual labour jobs to Mexico enabled by NAFTA. ONAN's main power source, a (fictional) process called annular fusion, requires ever more toxic waste to be poured into fuelling a cycle of growth and collapse. This process hints towards the toxic nature, both physical and metaphysical, of capitalist boom and bust cycles.<sup>6</sup> While the *term* neoliberalism is never used in *Infinite Jest*, the text certainly demonstrates an awareness of many of neoliberalism's manifestations. This chapter aims to analyse how the political awareness evident in *Infinite Jest*'s world extends through to the level of both narrative and form.

A full overview of Wallace criticism is beyond the scope of this chapter – since *Infinite Jest*'s publication critical interest in Wallace has exploded, with Wallace Studies becoming a field of its own – but a broad overview of such criticism, up until 2015, is provided by Adam Kelly.<sup>7</sup> Kelly outlines three broad stages in Wallace criticism. The first stage “considered [Wallace's] fiction primarily in terms of its emphasis on science and information systems and its intersections with American postmodernism”.<sup>8</sup> This approach

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the connection between consumerism and ecological devastation in *Infinite Jest* see, Heather Houser, “Managing Information and Materiality in *Infinite Jest* and *Running the Numbers*,” *American Literary History* 26, no. 4 (2014): 742-64.

<sup>7</sup> Adam Kelly, “David Foster Wallace: The Critical Reception,” in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*, ed. Philip Coleman (Massachusetts: Grey House Publishing, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

was followed by a turn to examining Wallace's aesthetic choices in relation to irony and sincerity, often relying on Wallace's "E Unibus Pluram" essay, and then by numerous explorations of Wallace's relationship to literary theory and philosophy. Despite the obviously political character of elements of *Infinite Jest*, it is only relatively recently, Kelly notes, that much attention has been paid to the political in Wallace, "despite the evidently political character of strands of *Infinite Jest* in particular [and the] overt political themes of *The Pale King*".<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, there are several strands of criticism that are of particular use to this chapter. The first focuses on the treatment of concepts of individuality and autonomy in *Infinite Jest*, central concepts in both neoliberal ideology and the *Bildungsroman* genre. Key analyses in this vein come from N. Katherine Hayles's, who explores *Infinite Jest*'s demonstration of the failure of "possessive individualism", and Elizabeth Freudenthal, who examines compulsive behaviour and "anti-interiority" in the novel.<sup>10</sup> The second strand is concerned with Bakhtinian dialogism and polyphony. David Hering's *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* features a chapter on this topic, which explores how Wallace's fixation on communication through fiction translates into attempts to avoid a monologic voice in favour of multiple perspectives on any given concept.<sup>11</sup> In "Development through Dialogue", Kelly examines how *Infinite Jest* explores key *political* concepts dialogically. Kelly analyses a debate between the characters of Marathe and Steeply, in which the Canadian separatist and ONAN agent discuss different concepts of liberty, as a demonstration of such dialogism and the value of dialogic knowledge.<sup>12</sup> The third strand examines the role of institutions and work in *Infinite Jest*. Mark McGurl, for instance, offers a scathing analysis of the novel's depiction

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>10</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, "The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*," *New Literary History* 30, no. 3 (1999): 675-97; Elizabeth Freudenthal, "Anti-Interiority: Compulsiveness, Objectification, and Identity in *Infinite Jest*," *New Literary History* 41, no. 1 (2010): 191-211.

<sup>11</sup> David Hering, *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 15-49.

<sup>12</sup> Adam Kelly, "Development through Dialogue: David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas," *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 3 (2012): 267-83.



of institutions as sites of subject formation.<sup>13</sup> However, the single most significant attempt at a comprehensive and explicit political and economic analysis of Wallace's work is *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books* by Jeffrey Severs, published in 2017.<sup>14</sup> Severs examines how Wallace's explorations of the concept of value across his oeuvre are interwoven with a complex economic and social critique, with the concept of value providing the framework to connect the personal realm of depression to the broader world of economic and political dysfunction. Wallace, Severs argues, attempts to reclaim the value of work from the vulgar, economic utilitarianism of neoliberalism.<sup>15</sup>

This chapter incorporates and combines the concepts that these critics draw out – the role of individual and institutions, work and value, dialogism and textual form – with the key concepts of the *Bildungsroman* and neoliberal ideology. Using these concepts together, this chapter examines *Infinite Jest's* complex exploration of the (im)possibility of fulfilling individual development under neoliberal hegemony, the possibility and limitations of alternative models of sociality, and the fate of the *Bildungsroman* in a neoliberal world.

### **Hal and the failures of (neo)liberalism**

Hal is a young male from a bourgeois background – his family own and run ETA – at a vital stage in his development into an adult. He is wealthy enough that his life choices need not be determined purely by economic necessity, and while he does train at ETA this is not necessarily an indicator of his future occupation. In many ways, then, Hal is the ideal *Bildungsroman* subject as described by Moretti: a young, autonomous, bourgeois male. In this understanding of the *Bildungsroman*, this central character seeks to find their place in

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<sup>13</sup> Mark McGurl, "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program," *boundary2* 41, no. 3 (2014): 27-54.

<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey Severs, *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> It is worth bearing in mind here Boltanski and Chiapello's analysis of the ideologies by which participation in capitalism has historically been justified, of which the work ethic is just one early example, as explored in the previous chapter. See Boltanski and Chiapello, *New Spirit*. However, regardless of the desirability of the work ethic or the validity of viewing this ethic as somehow freeing, Severs's analysis of the positive role that the work ethic place in Wallace's oeuvre still holds.

society and, in so doing, demonstrates the possibility or difficulty of a synthesis between individual autonomy and social structure.<sup>16</sup> However, Hal differs from Moretti's model in several important respects. *Infinite Jest*, and so Hal's narrative, was published far after the historical period to which Moretti limits the possibility of the *Bildungsroman*. As explored in previous chapters, this fact does not preclude Hal's narrative from being a *Bildungsroman*, but it is significant in that despite his similarities to Moretti's model, Hal represents the experience of a similar kind of subject under a new form of capitalism. This difference is important with regards to the second key area of difference between Hal and Moretti's original *Bildungsroman* hero: the nature of the failure of Hal's development.

The depiction of a failed *Bildung* is not in itself novel. Moretti notes that by 1830 – thirty-five years after the 1795 publication of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, the text widely regarded as the ur-example of the *Bildungsroman* – the idea of reconciliation between individual autonomy and social structure had already been turned on its head, with reconciliation's failure used to demonstrate the repressiveness of society.<sup>17</sup> Later critics have made such failure the centre of their analyses. Jed Esty, for example, examines how failed *Bildungsromane* in colonial settings demonstrate the arrested development of colonial nations, while Joseph Slaughter explores how such failures demonstrate the limited applicability of a model of development reliant on the nation state beyond the Western world.<sup>18</sup> However, Hal's failed development does not demonstrate the oppressiveness of a society or the absence of nation as a societal framework. Instead, an analysis of the institutional-social context in which he develops reveals that his development suffers from something new: an excess of individual autonomy, as defined in neoliberal terms.

In terms of Hal's *Bildung*, the most obvious source of societal structure would seem to be ONAN, the pan-North American pseudo-nation in which Hal lives. However, rather than provide a framework to enable and support Hal's development, ONAN's ideology is

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<sup>16</sup> See Moretti, *The Way of the World*.

<sup>17</sup> See *ibid.*, 52-55.

<sup>18</sup> See Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*; Slaughter, "Enabling Fictions and Novel Subjects." For on this topic, see the overview in the introduction to this thesis.

revealed to be responsible for the failure of Hal's *Bildung*. The dominant ideology of ONAN (it is worth noting here the intentional masturbatory/self-pleasuring implications of this name) reflects the neoliberal ideology of the 1990s US and NAFTA on which it is based, encouraging commodification, consumption, and profit.<sup>19</sup> These aspects of ONANite society rest on an underlying ideological emphasis on individual self-interest, as an analysis of Hal's *Bildung* reveals, and it is this ideology that not only causes the failure of Hal's development, but is responsible for the epidemic of depression, addiction, and isolation that is omnipresent in *Infinite Jest*. Why this ideology produces such dysfunction and failed development is perhaps best articulated by the Head Coach of ETA, Gerhard Schtitt.

Schtitt notes, in somewhat imperfect English, that at the heart of the ONAN lies the "myth of the competition and bestness" (*Infinite Jest*, 80), the "myth of efficiency and no waste that is making this continent of countries we are in" (80). He laments the state of ONAN and the "U.S. of modern A. [...] where the only public consensus a boy must surrender to is the acknowledged primacy of straight-line pursuing this flat and short-sighted idea of personal happiness" (83). The pursuit of happiness might seem like an entirely laudable goal, but in ONAN this pursuit always takes the form of short-sighted, material pleasure-seeking. The reason for this, and the reason that this is so profoundly dissatisfying, explains Schtitt, is because self-interest does not provide an adequate source of meaning. As Schtitt puts it, "[w]ithout there is something bigger. [There is n]othing to contain and give meaning. Lonely" (83).

Schtitt argues that a larger framework of meaning beyond the self is necessary to render individual experience meaningful, and that it is learning to function within and realise the meaning of such an implicitly social framework that constitutes the process of development.<sup>20</sup> Schtitt's understanding of social frameworks replicates the logic of the

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, the selling off of year names to corporate sponsors, the rise and fall of videophony due to the narcissism of its users (*Infinite Jest*, 144-51), and the adverts that drove cable TV to extinction by using adverts to induce discomfort, pain, and insecurities in viewers in order to sell products (412-16).

<sup>20</sup> In *Balancing Books*, Severs notes that at its core Wallace's work is deeply concerned with the idea of value and the way in which its diverse "mathematical, metaphysical, monetary, moral, linguistic, and aesthetic" meanings interact. The concept's multi-valency, argues Severs, provides a key way of linking the political-economic developments of the neoliberal era with both a general cultural impoverishment and the experience of

*Bildungsroman*, albeit with a heavy emphasis on the priority of the social over the individual. It is no accident, then, that Schtitt is German, hailing from the homeland of the *Bildungsroman*, and is described as having been educated with “Kanto-Hegelian” ideas (82). Schtitt suggests that a suitable social framework is a universally necessary precondition for fulfilling individual development. However, the task of providing one is both particularly pressing and particularly difficult in the context of a society dominated by neoliberal ideology.

Schtitt notes that in the *absence* of a broader framework of meaning development and fulfilment are impossible. But ONAN presents *particular* difficulties for Schtitt’s *Bildungsroman* model of development because, while it provides a broader framework, this framework ultimately returns attention to the individual and to self-interest. The neoliberal ideology of ONAN centres almost entirely around two key ideas: individual self-interest as the sole source of value and competition between individuals to pursue that interest. Any individual looking for meaning in life within this framework will either find their attention consistently returned to the individual perspective that they found so meaningless to start with – the thought cycles of depression – or repeatedly return to material pleasure as the only thing that is immediately, intrinsically, and clearly valuable from a purely self-interested perspective divorced from social context – the thought-cycles of addiction. Simultaneously, the neoliberal emphasis on the self distances individuals from one another, and so from a key source of meaning, cyclically driving an ever-deeper focus on the self, and resulting in a profound sense of isolation. These three closely linked states, *Infinite Jest* suggests, are the logical result of living within the ideological framework of neoliberal self-interest.<sup>21</sup>

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depression. See Severs, *Balancing Books*, 2-3. As such, while Schtitt should not generally be taken as Wallace’s mouthpiece, here his analysis of the *problem* of development in ONAN does provide a usefully condensed version of one of the core issues of *Infinite Jest*.

<sup>21</sup> For a useful analysis of some of the links between consumerism and mental health in *Infinite Jest*, see Eric A. Thomas, “‘Psychotic Depression’ and Suicide in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 54, no. 3 (2013): 276-91. There is now an ever-expanding body of knowledge on the links between mental illness and neoliberalism from a variety of perspectives, including philosophy, literature, psychology, and health sciences. See, for example, Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*; Wilkinson and Pickett, *The Spirit Level*.

Numerous critics have analysed *Infinite Jest* as exploring the failure of some element of the liberal subject, with two of the most useful analyses being those of Hayles and Kelly. Hayles argues that the novel demonstrates the way in which a belief in individual autonomy, a central element of liberal subjecthood, actually serves to keep characters in *Infinite Jest* trapped in cycles of addiction.<sup>22</sup> Their belief in their own autonomy and control over their lives, argues Hayles, keeps characters from realising the external factors which determine those lives, especially when recursive cycles of market feedback and technology tailor consumer objects to be more and more perfectly suited to their desires. Kelly focuses on the debate on liberty between the characters of Marathe and Steeply that spans much of *Infinite Jest*. During this conversation, Steeply, an agent of ONAN's secret service and ONAN's most vocal proponent, offers a classically liberal argument in defence of negative liberty, which he sees as tied to a specifically American societal vision. Kelly argues that *Infinite Jest* demonstrates that the "earlier historical context in which Steeply's traditional liberal argument was developed" has been profoundly altered by new media technologies and a hyper-consumer entertainment society, rendering the model of liberal individualism he advocates no longer viable.<sup>23</sup>

I would argue that the elements laid out by Schitt's comments – the centrality of the individual, self-interest, and competition – mark ONAN as promoting a neoliberal vision of society and individual, and that, as such, *Infinite Jest* is primarily concerned with the fate of the neoliberal subject. A focus on the idea of the self-interested individual is central to neoliberal ideology, visible in the work of the original theorists like Friedman and Becker, and in the analyses of the harshest critics of neoliberalism, such as Judt, Harvey, and Mirowski.<sup>24</sup> However, it is useful to again note here that, in his complex and expansive analysis of neoliberalism's history and pedigree as a form of governmentality, Foucault emphasises the importance of distinguishing between liberalism and neoliberalism. Two key elements he identifies as marking this distinction are "the shift from exchange to competition

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<sup>22</sup> See Hayles, "The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity."

<sup>23</sup> Kelly, "Development through Dialogue," 275.

<sup>24</sup> See the introduction to this thesis for more on this topic.

in the principle of the market” and a shift from a subject of right to a subject of interest.<sup>25</sup> These are the two elements that Schmitt highlights as being the guiding ideology of ONAN.

However, the fact of ONAN’s neoliberalism does not invalidate the arguments of Hayles and Kelly but is in fact implicit in their analyses. Their approaches help to demonstrate how neoliberalism’s dominance, both ideologically and materially, undermines the very liberal framework of meaning that aided neoliberalism’s rise. As noted previously, many key neoliberal theorists claimed to be classical liberals, continuing a long tradition and reasserting the rightful place of liberal principles. Similarly, in his defence of the American liberal tradition, Steeply argues that the US is “a community of sacred individuals which reveres the sacredness of individual choice. The individual’s right [...] Defended with teeth and bared claws all through our history” (*Infinite Jest*, 424). By being positioned as a continuation of a liberal historical tradition, and as part of the US national myth, neoliberalism is validated and its defence justified, as demonstrated by Steeply. Simultaneously, the emphasis on individual autonomy that Hayles identifies, which exists within both liberal and neoliberal models of the subject, helps to keep the ideological influence of neoliberalism obscured by focusing attention on individual choice rather than systemic influencing factors.

Yet the neoliberal order presents significant problems for classical liberalism. Kelly argues that *Infinite Jest* demonstrates how the combination of new media technologies and consumer culture produces a monoculture that renders the classical liberal model of choice non-functional. However, Steeply’s statements also reveal a specifically *ideological* element to the invalidation of liberalism, as neoliberal ideology’s dominance removes the very foundation of the liberalism from which it claims descent. Steeply refers to the sacredness of rights, the value of collective good, the specifically American ideal, and the value of fighting

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<sup>25</sup> See Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 118 and 275-78. In other words, while the liberal model of the market, and its attendant society, serves to harmonise the needs of individuals – one individual providing something that another needs in return for something that they need – the neoliberal model serves to determine the relative priority and value of needs. And with regards to right and interest, while the liberal subject *can* do what they want (due to their natural rights) the neoliberal subject *will* do what it wants (due to their rational pursuit of self-interest). This shift in subject, as noted in the introduction and previous chapter of this thesis, is a key distinction between the ideologies.

for an ideal. His statements reveal that the liberalism he espouses relies upon more than individual self-interest. The liberal subject of right, as identified by Foucault, has the capacity to choose due to their “natural” right to freedom of choice.

However, as Steeply demonstrates, despite liberalism’s emphasis on individual choice, these choices are fundamentally given value by precisely the same kind of external, social frameworks that Schitt identifies as necessary to give life meaning. Under conditions of neoliberal dominance, where the only framework provided is self-interest, the liberal subject of right necessarily collapses into the neoliberal subject of interest. This collapse is ultimately what Hayles’s analysis identifies when discussing the recursive feedback loops that trap the autonomous liberal subject in cycles of consumption. It is not just that these loops produce objects more and more catered to appeal for consumption, but that the alternative frameworks that would provide choice beyond material consumption for self-interest, and so render the subject of right possible, have been evacuated of meaning by neoliberalism, leaving no choice *but* consumption.<sup>26</sup> Steeply’s appeal to liberalism, then, within a world which manifestly demonstrates the absence of the values on which it relies, serves to demonstrate how these liberal ideals cannot serve as a solution to neoliberalism. They are no longer applicable as, at the very peak of its dominance, neoliberalism has invalidated the liberal framework it originally claimed legitimacy from.

*Infinite Jest*’s structure supports the idea that there is some fundamental problem facing development in the age of neoliberalism. Any reading of Hal’s *Bildung* is necessarily impacted by the deliberately confusing chronology of the novel. Not only does *Infinite Jest* jump between characters and times, but the “subsidized time” of the text’s world – in which years are named after their corporate sponsors – provides a profound lack of temporal reference points for the reader. This disorientation of time prevents an easy, linear reading of

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<sup>26</sup> In short, the sphere of reproduction is eliminated by the market, becoming merely production and consumption – more of the latter in the case of *Infinite Jest*’s depiction. Although elements of his analysis of neoliberalism differ from the understanding offered by *Infinite Jest*, Michel Feher’s article on self-appreciation offers a productive analysis of liberalism’s dependence on non-economic values and of how the neoliberal concept of human capital helped the collapse of the distinction between the spheres of reproduction and production. See Michel Feher, “Self-Appreciation; or, the Aspirations of Human Capital,” *Public Culture* 21, no. 1 (2009): 21-41.

Hal's narrative. The difficulty of such a reading has a double significance. It not only suggests a disruption of Hal's development, but also a disruption of the core teleological, developmental logic that is fundamental to the developmental model of the *Bildungsroman* genre.

As the novel progresses, with setting and events providing a clearer frame of reference, it becomes evident that the opening scene of *Infinite Jest* – in which Hal exists in a state of total dysfunction – is the chronological end of the novel's story, and so depicts the end result of Hal's development. As this chronology becomes clearer, the temporal order of the narrative has a new effect beyond suggesting disruption. The opening of the novel retroactively becomes increasingly important, as any subsequent scene featuring Hal's development is necessarily affected by the knowledge that this development will ultimately fail. Both of these elements suggest that there is a fundamental problem, beyond Hal as an individual, that dangerously undermines the possibility of *Bildung*.

The opening scene of *Infinite Jest* seems to confirm Schitt's analysis of both the causes and consequences of a lack of broader framework in ONAN. "I am in here" (*Infinite Jest*, 3) thinks Hal. And Hal does indeed demonstrate that his brain houses a distinct individual, with a personality and a prodigious intellect. "I study and read. I bet I've read everything you've read. [...] I'm not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions. Some of them are interesting. I could, if you'd let me, talk and talk" (12) Hal says, or tries to say. Because while Hal may "believe [he] appear[s] neutral, maybe even pleasant" (3) and may have "committed to crossing [his] legs, [he hopes] carefully" (3), when he attempts to communicate, in what appears to him a perfectly normal manner, those around him see flailing and hear only horrific sounds. They pin him to the floor and call an ambulance, berating his uncle for attempting to foist this monstrosity on them. While Hal may demonstrate a distinct individuality, being an individual alone (in both senses of the word) is not enough. Hal's individuality and autonomy are rendered profoundly isolating and meaningless without the ability to communicate. This scene, then, literalises the lack of framework that Schitt so fears and the effects of this lack. Hal's inability to communicate is a metaphorical representation of the way in which a social framework which only focuses on



the self isolates the individual, prevents their full development, and leads to dysfunction.<sup>27</sup>

The critique of neoliberal self-interest articulated by Schitt, then, is borne out by the way in which the failure of Hal's development manifests. Importantly, however, in representing the effects of a lack of such development as catastrophic for the individual, the novel remains strongly attached to the necessity and validity of individual development in the mould of *Bildung*.

### **ETA and the failure of the nation-state**

While it may be the dominant one, ONAN is not the only social framework available to Hal. The philosophy that Schitt, as the head coach, lays out for ETA makes it clear that the academy is intended to provide the framework for development that ONAN fails to offer and so provide the necessary social component of the *Bildungsroman*'s central individual-social synthesis. Mark McGurl observes that Wallace's work is deeply concerned with the process of "*institutionalization*" – an interest McGurl ascribes to Wallace's own institutional upbringing and experience with Alcoholics Anonymous – and in the light of ETA's philosophy we can see that such institutionalisation comprises a form of socialisation.<sup>28</sup> However, while McGurl claims that Wallace's work is not interested in specific institutions, the social framework provided by ETA has a highly specific, nationalist-statist content, distinguishing it from other frameworks, such as that of AA. This content helps explain why, despite ETA's social framework being explicitly intended to provide a counter to ONAN and enable fulfilling growth, Hal's development still fails.

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<sup>27</sup> Communication, and its failure, serves as both a literal and metaphorical demonstration of social and developmental failure throughout the rest of *Infinite Jest*. Later in the novel it is revealed that Hal's father, James Incandenza, was obsessed with the idea that Hal did not communicate, going so far as to rent an entire office and pose as a "professional conversationalist" (*Infinite Jest*, 28) in an attempt to talk to his son. Yet the problem is revealed to once again be self-interest, which James himself is unable to break out of. He launches into an extended rant, largely about himself, and ignores Hal's interjections. The scene ends on four lines, a repeated juxtaposition of "... 'Son?' '...' Son?'" (31), demonstrating the tragic subtext of the conversation. It is due to this lack of communication that James originally creates the Entertainment, but in attempting to use self-interest to draw Hal into communication, James unintentionally creates the opposite: a tool for creating profound solipsistic isolation.

<sup>28</sup> McGurl, "The Institution of Nothing," 37. This socialising aim is explicit in ETA but, as explored later, is also implicit in the structure of institutions such as AA.

When the narrative voice intrudes into the text to narrate Schtitt's philosophy for ETA, the nation-state basis for the academy is made clear; the fundamental purpose of tennis training is "citizenship", which means, "learning to sacrifice the hot narrow imperatives of the Self [...] to the larger imperatives of a team (OK, the State) and a set of delimiting rules (OK, the Law)" (*Infinite Jest*, 83). Later an older student, Ortho Stice, notes to the younger students in his charge that if they ever talk to the head coach he will "talk about patriotism [...] He'll talk about it's [*sic*] patriotic play that's the high road to the thing" (120) and make them proud to be an American, even though Schtitt himself is not. Schtitt identifies the need for a higher source of meaning beyond the individual, and in response offers the model of the nation-state. This nation-state framework of meaning is simultaneously both implicitly social, constructed on the basis of a collection of people, and abstract, in that it is not formed from any specific individuals.<sup>29</sup> In subordinating their desires to this abstract, higher social entity, Schtitt argues, the individual can find both greater meaning and a social connection with others.

The very structure of ETA reveals two elements that are necessary for this nation-state model to function: hierarchy and discipline. On the question of hierarchy, there is more than might first appear to the description of Schtitt as "mellowed to the sort of elder-statesman point where he's become mostly a dispenser of abstractions rather than discipline" (79). Schtitt does not need to discipline the students himself because, like an elder-statesman, as head coach he is at the top of a hierarchy of power that enables him to assign these responsibilities to others while still fundamentally ensuring that they are carried out. He has "all these *Lebensgefährtins* and prorectors to administer most of the necessary character-building cruelties" (79). This is a necessary corollary of the model he outlines. In order to serve as a single, unified and unifying entity, the nation-state must have a clear and non-

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<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the best-known analysis of the functioning of the nation-state as a constructed social framework is that of Benedict Anderson. Anderson notes that the idea of national community overrides the reality of any social hierarchies and differences and posits one set of shared values. This shared national community is always necessarily imagined because no single member of that community can meet all the others or share values with them. Significantly, Anderson dates the rise of this idea of nation to the rise of capitalist mass-print culture. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

contradictory set of aims and principles, and since it is an abstract construct, in practice these aims and principles will have to be determined by a limited number of people.<sup>30</sup>

As Ortho Stice notes, for Schitt tennis and the national model are “about discipline and sacrifice and honor to something way bigger than your personal ass” (*Infinite Jest*, 120). The requirement for sacrifice combined with the abstract nature of the nation-state helps explain the central role of discipline. First, since there is no intrinsic, immediate motivation for the individual to subordinate their will to an abstract entity, this subordination must be artificially induced through standardisation and discipline, which both trains this capacity and instils the idea of its necessity.<sup>31</sup> Second, discipline serves as a way to enable social bonding, with the shared experience of discipline providing a bond beyond the abstract one provided by shared fealty to the nation-state ideal. The students of ETA routinely complain about the harsh regimen and debate who is ultimately responsible: Schitt or the coaches. Yet Hal notes that no students leave, and that not only are the coaches aware of the group complaining, but they actively encourage it as competitions draw near. As Hal puts it, the coaches “give themselves up to [the students’] dislike”, and when the students “get together and bitch, all of a sudden [they are] giving something group expression. A community voice” (114). Shared suffering is a central source of community in Schitt’s model, implicit in the idea of sacrifice, but if it does not arise naturally for all it must be artificially induced, and discipline and hierarchy provide an ideal mechanism to do this.

The nation-state model’s dependence on hierarchy and discipline has the potential to be deeply politically problematic, and contrary to critics like McGurl, who claims ETA is presented as a uniformly beneficial and positive institution, *Infinite Jest* repeatedly draws

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<sup>30</sup> In the necessary concentration of power demonstrated by ETA’s hierarchical nation-state philosophy we can see a reflection of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*. The absolute power of the Sovereign of *Leviathan* is ultimately justified on the basis of each individual having consented to giving this power to the Sovereign in order to protect their lives, thus preventing an otherwise inevitable war of all against all and producing the commonwealth. Similarly, in Schitt’s model of ETA, the students must necessarily give up power to the hierarchy of the institution, albeit in a far less absolute form, and suffer the discipline and hardship this entails, in order to avoid the horrors of depression, addiction, and isolation. See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. John Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>31</sup> This use of disciplinary mechanisms as a method for creating a specific form of subjecthood and forcing the internalisation of certain concepts clearly echoes elements of the Foucauldian reading of discipline. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

attention to the dangers of its nation-state model. Schtitt wears “high and shiny black boots, [...] epaulets, [and carries a] weatherman’s telescoping pointer that’s a clear stand-in for the now-forbidden old riding crop” (*Infinite Jest*, 79). When he wants to enjoy the “occasional bit of fun” (79) he “dons [a] leather helmet and goggles and revs up [an] old F.R.G.-era BMW cycle” (79) to ride alongside students doing conditioning runs and use a pea-shooter on those lagging behind. In addition, it is explicitly stated that Schtitt “like most Europeans of his generation, [was] anchored from infancy to certain permanent values which – yes, OK, granted – may, admittedly, have a whiff of proto-fascist potential [but which do] anchor nicely the soul and course of a life” (82). Schtitt as a character, then, evokes a very specific vision of mid-century nationalism, calling to mind the many horrific things done in the name of the nation and carried out through rigid hierarchies devoted to supposedly higher ideals.<sup>32</sup>

However, while Schtitt’s appearance may suggest fascism, he is old and mellowed, has a weatherman’s pointer instead of a riding crop, and uses a pea-shooter to discipline slow students. The authoritarian threat he evokes is rendered tame and almost quaint within the mainstream, institutionalised context of ETA. Extreme nationalism, such as that of the Wheelchair Assassins, is dangerous and undesirable, overwhelming and negating individual development and autonomy rather than enabling it. However, such extremism is clearly limited to fringe groups in *Infinite Jest*’s world. Schtitt asks, despairing, “who can imagine [ETA’s] training serving its purpose in an experialist and waste-exporting nation that’s forgotten privation and hardship and the discipline which hardship teaches by requiring?”

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<sup>32</sup> While Schtitt’s appearance suggests a historical example, the dangers of hierarchy and subordination to the nation-state ideal are demonstrated *within* the text’s world through the Wheelchair Assassins. As Kelly notes, Marathe, a member of the Assassins, outlines a “powerful argument for positive liberty” in contrast to the classically liberal negative liberty that Steeply advocates. See Kelly, “Development through Dialogue,” 274. But beyond providing the material conditions for fulfilment, Marathe adds a further imperative for the nation-state. In order to overcome the neoliberal subject’s self-interest and prevent freedom from becoming simply “a child’s greedy choices” (*Infinite Jest*, 320), Marathe, similar to Schtitt, advocates an explicitly patriarchal hierarchy where a need for “[s]omething bigger than the self” (107) is combined with a need for a “loving-filled father to guide, inform, teach the person how to choose” (320). Demonstrating the potential dangers of such subordination, the Wheelchair Assassins not only engage in ritualistic self-amputation – an example of the physical manifestation of metaphysical conditions that Severs highlights in his analysis of Wallace’s work – but also routinely use brutal violence on others. In doing this, they demonstrate how a hierarchical, nation-state-centric philosophy can, through its focus on the nation-as-ideal, lose touch with the aims of human benefit and fulfilment it is originally intended to provide. It can become a philosophy equally as obsessive and self-destructive as that of neoliberal consumerism, or as Freudenthal puts it, in practice the “terrorist sect that Marathe sees as freeing him from isolation merely displays another form of O.N.A.N.-ism, pursuing their objectives without regard for the pain and suffering they inflict on others.” Freudenthal, “Anti-Interiority,” 695.

(83). In this lament, he reveals that the main problem facing the nation-state model in *Infinite Jest*'s neoliberal society is the opposite of excessive nationalism; this model in fact provides far too *weak* a motivation to overcome the individual, self-interested imperatives advocated by broader neoliberal society.<sup>33</sup>

Hal's narrative provides the main insights into the results of ETA's attempts at socialisation, and it is key to remember here that fundamentally his development *fails*. It does not fail through transforming him into a violent nationalist who neglects human wellbeing, although this would definitely constitute a failure, but rather fails by ultimately resulting in Hal's total social isolation and solipsism. Schitt's own analysis might suggest that this failure is the result of a lack of "privation and hardship". However, while Hal cannot be said to be materially poor, many of *Infinite Jest*'s characters that experience similar problems are, and it is inaccurate to say he does not suffer hardship. Hal experiences both the physical hardship of training, while being aware of its intended function as a form of social bonding, and the mental/existential hardship of isolation that ETA's training is supposed to prevent. Yet these hardships do not serve to bond him with others. The reason for this, and the fundamental failing of ETA's model, is best revealed through the observations of Mario Incandenza, and through examining the experience of ETA's students.

Attempting to understand Schitt's philosophy, Mario mentally identifies a contradiction within it, wondering "[b]ut then how does this surrender-the-personal-individual-wants-to-the-larger-State-or-beloved-tree-or-*something* stuff work in a deliberately *individual* sport like competitive junior tennis, where it's just you v. one other guy?" (*Infinite Jest*, 83). Later, when Hal is analysing the way in which ETA training is intended to promote togetherness and community, the younger students demonstrate this competitive, individualist idea further. They enumerate their relative rankings, and one notes, "[w]e're all on each other's food chain. All of us. It's an individual sport. Welcome to the meaning of *individual*" (112). Given this, another student asks, "[h]ow can we also be together? How can we be

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<sup>33</sup> It is notable here that, while leading neoliberal theorists were to varying degrees opposed to the power of the nation-state, they did outline a key role for it to play as lawmaker and enforcer, and the original neoliberal leaders of Chile, the USA, and the UK all introduced neoliberal policies under a heavily nationalist rhetoric and through strong state action. For more on this topic, see the introduction to this thesis.

friends?” (112). While these statements have a literal application with regards to tennis, they also have a wider political meaning. They reveal that, despite Schtitt’s aims, the day-to-day experience of the students is still dominated by neoliberal ideology; the two central concepts Schtitt fears are visible in the basic make-up of ETA: self-interested competition and individualism.

The centrality of these concepts is profoundly significant, because it demonstrates that not only is the culture beyond ETA, in the form of ONAN, dominated by neoliberalism, but the culture within it is too.<sup>34</sup> ETA’s attempts at socialisation fail because, despite its attempt to provide an alternative, hierarchical framework for development, this framework operates within a world where the material conditions are determined by another ideology. While Schtitt aims to make his students invested in the higher ideal of the American nation-state, in the era of ONAN the only content of American ideology is the ONANistic ideology of neoliberal self-interest, precisely the focus which subordination to the nation-state is intended to avoid. Nor can ETA serve as a higher ideal in and of itself. Despite Schtitt’s grand desires, it is ultimately a private institution providing training to a specific clientele in exchange for money. It is both too small and does not break with the dominant social mode of the society in which it exists. The ideal to which Schtitt aspires, then, must remain profoundly abstract and disembodied, containing no specific content beyond the *idea* of a higher ideal. The appeal of such an extremely abstract ideal is limited, especially when paired with Schtitt’s emphasis on the *necessity* of suffering and the ease with which this ideal has historically become divorced from human wellbeing.<sup>35</sup> Combined with the way in which the rules of

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<sup>34</sup> There are numerous other examples of the material and ideological dominance of capitalism within ETA. There exists, for example, a huge market amongst the students for drugs and urine samples to beat drug-tests, mirroring the TV ads featured in *Infinite Jest* that advertise solutions to problems they create. The commodification and branding of the students is another example of the infiltration of neoliberal ideology within the supposedly higher realm of tennis training. Students are allowed “to sign on with different companies for no fees but free gear” (*Infinite Jest*, 266), and so find themselves plastered with slogans. In a demonstration of just how deeply the presence of commodification affects their existence, the students are described as literally becoming the brands: “Coyle is Prince and Reebok, [...] John Wayne is Dunlop and Adidas” (266).

<sup>35</sup> In his analysis of Wallace’s work and postirony in *Cool Characters*, Konstantinou argues that one of Wallace’s key concerns was the need for a “postironic belief” because such belief “underwrites the possibility of genuine human communication.” Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, 168. Wallace’s primary aim, notes Konstantinou, was to overcome the cynicism and the lack of belief central to the dominant postmodern ethos. As such, Wallace does not advocate a specific belief system, but rather a “general ethos of belief”. *Ibid.*, 174. Konstantinou’s analysis is insightful, and reinforces the analysis of this chapter in demonstrating the importance

tennis/rules of life under neoliberal ideology isolate, individualise, and place into competition the students of ETA, the only ideal to which the training can be directed is ultimately self-interest, albeit deferred, in the form of competing for victory, rankings, and inclusion in The Show of mainstream tennis. All the problems previously identified with the self-interested neoliberal subject remain, with Schitt's model serving only as a veneer for a profoundly neoliberal reality.

The experience of the students at ETA represents the typical experience of those living under neoliberal ideology both literally (through their off court trading and competition) and symbolically (in the form of the individualised and competitive rules of tennis).<sup>36</sup> Similarly, ETA's failure as a framework for development is both typical of an institution working within a neoliberal society and allegorical for the failure of the nation-state model, on which ETA's model is based, as a viable source of meaning in the neoliberal age. *Infinite Jest* suggests that while in the past the nation-state could serve to motivate and influence people *too much*, in the neoliberal era the nation-state model is no longer truly applicable to the realities of life in mainstream society and the emptiness of national ideals.

This failure of the nation-state is deeply significant for the *Bildungsroman* genre. In the earliest analysis of the *Bildungsroman*, by Morgenstern, the concept of society or external world remains loosely defined, and this remains the case in later analyses such as those of Lukács and Bakhtin. Moretti's analysis clarifies the concept somewhat, as Moretti focuses on the specifically bourgeois nature of the *Bildungsroman*, arguing that society as represented in the "classical *Bildungsroman*" is a reflection of pan-European bourgeois culture and values. However, as explored in the introduction, numerous critics have since argued that the nation-state is, implicitly or explicitly, central to the *Bildungsroman*'s model of development,

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*Infinite Jest* places on the necessity of frameworks of meaning. However, I would contest the idea that Wallace, in *Infinite Jest*, is purely interested in belief in the abstract. While *Infinite Jest* struggles to find a source of meaning, it demonstrates a keen awareness of the limitations of some belief-systems, such as the nation, and the limitations of abstraction as a source of belief, as demonstrated by ETA.

<sup>36</sup> I am here referring to the concept of typicality as used by Lukács mentioned in the introduction, wherein the experience of something in a text represents the general experience of all things of that type, for instance, a factory worker's experience of work being generally representative of an experience shared by all factory workers. See Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*.

providing the basis for the idea of society on which the genre's ideal of social-individual synthesis relies, as explored in the introduction. Esty is a particularly significant critic in this vein. He argues that not only is the nation-state central to the *Bildungsroman* but that this centrality is implicit in the analysis of Moretti, and by extension those like it.<sup>37</sup> While Moretti focuses on how the new autonomy provided by capitalism is represented by the dynamism of youth, it is the nationhood represented by adulthood, argues Esty, that provides the historical continuity and social identity that enables the *Bildungsroman*'s developmental trajectory.

While the centrality of the nation-state is not uncontested in *Bildungsroman* criticism, *Infinite Jest*'s characterisation of traditions of development in both Europe (in Schmitt's Kanto-Hegelian ideas of citizenship) and America (see Steeply's defence of the American ideal of liberalism) suggest that the novel accepts the idea that nations have historically provided social frameworks for development.<sup>38</sup> ETA's failure demonstrates that the fundamental ideological logic on which the nation-state relies to command dedication and serve as a societal-developmental framework has been rendered non-functional in the neoliberal era, through a combination of the historical association of nation-statism with nationalist violence, and the dominance of neoliberal ideology. If the nation-state has historically served as the source of a societal framework for development, as *Infinite Jest* suggests, an era in which the ideal of the nation-state is suspect and/or outdated presents a profound crisis for the possibility of the *Bildung* model of fulfilling development. As much as neoliberalism is responsible for undermining the nation-state, Hal's failed development demonstrates that neoliberal ideology cannot provide a societal replacement for the nation-state. In order to continue both the *Bildungsroman* genre and the process of *Bildung*, an alternative social model is needed. This model would need to simultaneously avoid the Scylla and Charybdis of neoliberal nihilism and nationalist fanaticism.

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<sup>37</sup> Slaughter is another particularly prominent critic who writes in this vein. In his work on the *Bildungsroman* and human rights he argues that the model of development of the *Bildungsroman* fundamentally excludes experiences that do not fit a national paradigm. See Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc.*

<sup>38</sup> Both Boes's and Moretti's analyses provide examples of approaches to the *Bildungsroman* that do not place nation at the centre. As explored previously, Boes argues for a cosmopolitan, pan-European reading of the *Bildungsroman*, and Moretti's analysis centres around bourgeois culture, suggesting that the nation is only significant for its instantiation of bourgeois ideology. See Boes, *Formative Fictions*; Moretti, *The Way of the World*.



## The *Bildung* of Don Gately

While Hal's narrative demonstrates the failings of the social models of ONAN and ETA, the novel features another central developmental narrative: that of Don Gately. While Hayles designates him the "second-story man", Gately features prominently enough in *Infinite Jest* for Freudenthal to describe him as the "widely acknowledged hero of Wallace's novel", a designation with which numerous other critics agree.<sup>39</sup> While Hal opens the novel, Gately closes it, and where Hal's narrative is the most prominent at ETA, Gately's is dominant at AA. If the failure of Hal's development marked the failure of ETA, it is necessary to analyse carefully the trajectory of Gately's development, which if successful would suggest that AA and Ennet House provide a social framework that enables an escape from self-interest and thus the continued possibility of *Bildung* in a neoliberal world.

Although he is a less traditional *Bildungsroman* subject, being a working-class drug addict, Gately's narrative nonetheless traces a developmental arc. Gately is first introduced as "a twenty-seven-year-old oral narcotics addict (favoring Demerol and Talwin), and a more or less professional burglar" (*Infinite Jest*, 55). His first scene recounts a retaliatory visit to an Assistant Detective Attorney's house, and then a robbery, during which Gately unintentionally causes the death of the homeowner, a Canadian man with numerous links to anti-ONAN groups. This incident is a turning point for Gately, and when he is next seen he is 421 days substance-free and has not only become involved with AA (by way of court-mandated attendance of the sub-organisation Narcotics Anonymous) but become a member of staff at Ennet House. Gately's subsequent scenes detail his experiences of AA (meetings, sayings, daily rituals, the ancient members nicknamed "crocodiles", his difficulties, his thoughts) and reveal his responsibilities and interactions with the residents of Ennet House. His time at Ennet House culminates in a scene in which he defends the residents from a group of armed Canadians, after one of his charges murders the Canadians' dog. During this confrontation, Gately is hospitalised, and he remains so for the rest of the novel.

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<sup>39</sup> Hayles, "The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity," 693; Elizabeth Freudenthal, "Anti-Interiority," 205. See also Severs, *Balancing Books*; Thomas, "'Psychotic Depression' and Suicide in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*."

On the issues of self-interest and solipsism, which were key elements of Hal's failed *Bildung*, Gately's development from self-serving drug-addict to responsible member of AA and Ennet House is a clear success. Gately goes from harming people in his blind pursuit of material pleasure to actively taking care of them, eventually even placing himself in harm's way to protect, amongst others, an individual whom he personally dislikes. However, the novel ends with Gately in hospital, having spent the latter portions of *Infinite Jest* there. He is unable to properly move or talk (due to injuries, pain, and a tube down his throat), is in a great deal of pain but refusing painkillers (as they were his drug of choice as an addict), and has numerous flashbacks to his life prior to AA. His isolation and inability to communicate suggests parallels to Hal's situation in the opening scene of the novel and might suggest an ultimate failure of development of a similar kind. This is what Mary Holland argues, stating that although Gately's time in hospital is a struggle between "two competing impulses – toward emotional maturity and reaching out to others and toward infantile regression to self-absorption – the final moments of his narrative suggest that [...] infantile narcissism proves irresistibly compelling."<sup>40</sup>

Holland's argument rests on the memories that close the novel. Gately remembers his friend, Fackelmann, a fellow enforcer and drug addict, cheating their mutual employer out of money. Knowing what has happened and aware that their employer will take revenge, Gately fails to encourage Fackelmann to flee and does not even press him on how he acquired the mountain of drugs he bought with the stolen money. Instead, Gately joins Fackelmann on an epic binge, ultimately finding himself watching passively, stoned into paralysis, as Fackelmann is tortured. In this memory, Gately is unable to put the interests of another above his own pleasure, even when that person's life is at risk. At this stage, then, Gately provides a perfect demonstration of extreme self-interest. Holland argues that the return to this memory is not an example of the Freudian model of compulsion, as Gately does not "attempt retroactively to prevent [the memory's] trauma by generating the anxiety that was initially

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<sup>40</sup> Mary K. Holland, "The Art's Heart's Purpose': Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 47, no. 3 (2006): 236.

lacking”.<sup>41</sup> Instead, the memory features Gately feeling blissfully high even as his friend is tortured in front of him. Holland argues that, because of this, Gately’s return to the memory is actually an escape from the pain of the present to the remembered sensations of drug-use and so represents a relapse into narcissism and self-interest.

It is true that *within* his memories of Fackelmann Gately does not seem to experience guilt or anxiety. However, as Gately recalls these events in hospital, he lies “pop-eyed with guilt and anxiety” (926). He thinks to himself that “in the retrospect of memory now it bothers him more” (932) that he so automatically succumbed to “the familiar desire that blots out all bother” (932). He “feels the worst of all” (932) that he “lumbered so automatically out to Fackelmann under the pretense – to himself, too, the pretense, was the worst thing – the pretense he was just going to check on poor old Fackelmann” (933) and that, “to Gately’s shame” (933), he immediately agreed to partake in the binge while “no part of the reality of Fackelmann’s creek and the need for action had even been brought up” (933). The novel’s narration of the memory itself is faithful to the events as they happened, not retroactively introducing anxiety or guilt where there was none at the time, but that does not mean that Gately’s experience of the memories in the narrative present does not induce these feelings.<sup>42</sup>

There are also a number of key elements of Gately’s time in hospital that differentiate Gately’s experience from Hal’s. Unlike Hal, Gately’s narration never slips into first-person, and Gately’s experience revolves around interaction with people in a way totally absent with Hal. For example, when treated to a long confessional monologue by Tiny Ewell, despite the pain “getting to be emergency-type pain, like scream-and-yank-your-charred-hand-off-the-stove-type pain” (815), Gately wants “to tell Tiny Ewell he could totally fucking I.D. with Ewell’s feelings, and that if he, Tiny, could just hang in” (815) there it would work out. He continues to empathise with Ewell, even while in extreme pain, in a way that he failed to do

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> In addition, were Gately seeking an escape from the pain of the present, he could very reasonably accept painkillers. He resists this, going so far as “fastening [his hand] onto the [doctor’s] balls” (*Infinite Jest*, 889) to stop the man offering them, and he is never shown to succumb to this desire, leaving open-ended the possibility of successfully resisting addiction. Also, were he fleeing into memory, his long history of drug use would surely provide him with less potentially traumatic memories to use.

earlier in life with Fackelmann. Different forms of communication are also central to Gately's hospital experience. At first, Gately wryly notes that he "normally couldn't ever get Ewell or Day to sit down for any kind of real or honest mutual sharing, and now that he's totally mute and inert and passive all of a sudden everybody seems to view him as a sympathetic ear" (831). Later, when Joelle van Dyne visits him, Gately is able to make "his chest go up and down rapidly to signify amusement" (855), "grunt[s] softly" (857), "smiles" and "nods" (859), and "[hikes] an eyebrow at her, to get her to smile" (858). Later still, he uses a notebook and pen to communicate with his sponsor, Ferocious Francis. Perhaps most significant, however, is Gately's surreal psychic conversation with "the wraith", the apparent ghost of James Incandenza.<sup>43</sup> Whereas Hal was unable to communicate with James prior to James's death and Hal's own solipsistic isolation, even with Gately paralysed and James dead they are able to hold a conversation.

Gately's repeated flashbacks to Fackelmann, then, serve a fundamentally contrastive function, placing Gately's past alongside his present in order to demonstrate how much he has developed. While Gately at the time of Fackelmann was an ideal demonstration of self-interest and self-absorption, the Gately of the narrative present demonstrates the empathetic and communicative faculties his earlier self lacked. On a formal level, the return to Gately's past at the end of the *Infinite Jest* serves as an inversion of the novel's opening, which focused on Hal's future. Whereas Hal's development was foreclosed by the opening, rendering inevitable the failure of his *Bildung* and his isolated end-state, the future of Gately is left open, the contrast of his past with his present demonstrating the very possibility of development. If Hal's experience was representative of the lapse into solipsistic self-interest inherent in failed development under neoliberalism, Gately's is representative of how, while incredibly difficult, both communication and non-self-interested development are still possible.

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<sup>43</sup> This exchange could be dismissed as a hallucination or dream, a fact the novel highlights when the wraith makes "a weary morose gesture as if not wanting to bother to get into any sort of confusing dream-v.-real controversies" (*Infinite Jest*, 830). However, the novel emphasises that the conversation introduces ideas and topics that Gately could not possibly know on his own, such as lengthy lists of complex vocabulary (832).

## **Alcoholics Anonymous as social-developmental framework**

A social-developmental framework, which the novel has demonstrated to be so necessary for *Bildung*, is provided to Gately by the text's other main institution: AA. Gately's development only truly starts once he becomes a member of AA, and it is very explicitly the tenets and experience of AA that aid his progression from self-interested pleasure-seeker to carer and hero. Critical opinion on AA has been mixed. While there has been a general recognition of AA as a distinct institutional form, there has been little agreement on its nature and functioning. Holland argues that "the AA program provides an alternative to [...] addiction, an alternative way of forgetting the self: the Program as stand-in for the drug".<sup>44</sup> Noting that it is "ironic that a collection of people defined by solipsism should endeavour to cure themselves chiefly through an appeal to empathy", Holland argues that, like all other attempts to escape narcissism in the novel, this appeal ultimately fails.<sup>45</sup> Freudenthal, on the other hand, argues that "despite the problems one may have with AA as a vehicle for healthy living, Gately's mode of fighting addiction is the only one in the novel that actually works". AA in her reading works against self-absorption and addiction through encouraging a direct, non-contemplative engagement with the material world, and producing a mode of subjectivity premised on "a generative embrace of the material world of objects".<sup>46</sup> Gately embodies this approach, fighting "addiction by replacing his compulsive drug use with his kind of repetitive, performative, bodily ritual".<sup>47</sup>

Freudenthal correctly identifies the necessity of escaping from cycles of self-absorption through a turn to something beyond the self. However, she also notes that a

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<sup>44</sup> Holland, "The Art's Heart's Purpose," 233.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Freudenthal, "Anti-Interiority," 191 and 205. In a similar vein to Freudenthal, Hayles argues that AA rebuilds subjectivity to counter the flaws of liberal autonomy. Gately's inability to understand how AA works, claims Hayles, is unimportant or perhaps even beneficial to the fact that it does work, as one of the central dangers of addiction is its capacity to co-opt reason and will in service of rationalising addiction. See Hayles, "The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity". This conception of the relationship between addiction and rationality runs entirely counter to the neoliberal view. As noted in the introduction, the idea of rational, self-interested choice is so central that Becker argued that addiction itself was a product of rational choice, just like any other form of behaviour. See Becker and Murphy, "A Theory of Rational Addiction."

<sup>47</sup> Freudenthal, "Anti-Interiority," 192.

compulsive embrace of materiality can be both positive and negative, and as such, her analysis cannot tell us what is distinctive about the framework provided by AA.<sup>48</sup> Holland's final analysis, on the other hand, depends heavily on a flawed reading of Gately's development as failed, but she does identify the central role that empathy plays in AA – although she views active cultivation of empathy as ironic rather than an obvious counter to self-absorption. It is Eric Thomas, in his analysis of *Infinite Jest*'s depiction of depression in the minor character of Kate Gompert, that combines elements of both of these analyses in a way that leads to a more specific understanding of AA. According to Thomas, whereas pharmaceutical or therapeutic treatments for depression fail, “Alcoholics Anonymous succeeds for two significant reasons: the program encourages *identification* and *spirituality*.”<sup>49</sup>

Religion and spirituality do make up core elements of the twelve steps of AA, but in *Infinite Jest* the role of specifically religious elements of AA is repeatedly undermined.<sup>50</sup> Despite his progress overcoming addiction, the religious component of AA leaves Gately feeling perplexed. His attempts to genuinely think about belief leave him feeling an absolute “Nothingness”, and he imagines “his prayers going out and out, with nothing to stop them, going, going, radiating out into like space and outliving him and still going and never hitting Anything out there, much less Something with an ear” (*Infinite Jest*, 444). Consequently, religious belief cannot be a necessary, central part of AA's functioning as *Infinite Jest* understands it. Instead, it is the idea of empathy and identification, which numerous critics have noted but few have explored in-depth, that indicates the true nature of AA.

The explicit practice of empathy, ritualised in the meetings but encouraged as part of day-to-day practice, is a central part of AA. Thomas correctly notes that a key function of this

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<sup>48</sup> See, for example, the reading of Johnny Gentle and his compulsive attitude to cleanliness. *Ibid.*, 196-200.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas, “‘Psychotic Depression’ and Suicide in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*,” 288. Thomas’s reading in turn references Marshall Boswell’s reading of AA, another critic who identifies AA as a “program devoted to ‘sharing’ and group therapy” which “serves as Wallace’s tentative antidote to all this paralyzing psychological concealment”. See Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 143.

<sup>50</sup> For the official twelve steps, see “The Twelve Steps,” *Alcoholics Anonymous*, Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., accessed March 12, 2017, [https://www.aa.org/pages/en\\_US/twelve-steps-and-twelve-traditions](https://www.aa.org/pages/en_US/twelve-steps-and-twelve-traditions).

practice, which he sees as being necessarily bound up with spirituality, is to “force the angst-filled individual ‘to get outside him/herself’ and break the cycle of self-centred thinking”.<sup>51</sup> It is important to note here that empathy is a fundamentally social practice: it requires communication, especially in the ritualised form it takes in AA meetings, it generates an understanding of other individuals as thinking and feeling subjects, and it creates relationships between individuals.

Empathy is merely the clearest manifestation of the sociality-based approach that lies at the core of AA as a whole. Beyond the meetings themselves there is the sponsorship system, a profoundly social exercise in which older members sponsor and support the sobriety of younger ones, and so develop a voluntary, personal relationship that cannot be reduced to a mutually beneficial exchange.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, if we examine Gately’s personal aims in AA – to be “so disgustingly humble, kind, helpful, tactful, cheerful, nonjudgmental, tidy, energetic, sanguine, modest, generous, fair, orderly, patient, tolerant, attentive, truthful” (357) as possible – we can see that the vast majority of these character traits are concerned with an individual’s conduct towards others. And when critics like McGurl and Severs argue that work is central to Gately’s development, the former critically and the latter more approvingly, they are right.<sup>53</sup> What their analyses largely overlook, however, is that Gately’s work is fundamentally social in nature. All of his duties, from cooking to checking chores to

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<sup>51</sup> Thomas, “‘Psychotic Depression’ and Suicide in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*,” 289.

<sup>52</sup> Counter to the arguments like Holland’s that AA replaces free will or functions disciplinarily, AA seeks to maintain egalitarian social relationships rather than ones characterised by discipline and power even with the unofficial social hierarchies inherent in sponsorship or length of membership. The long-term members of AA, or “crocodiles”, in addition to serving as a physical embodiment of the capacity for AA’s success, frequently offer advice and wisdom, not often in the most delicate of terms, but they never take on a position of control over the younger members. Even with Gately lying crippled in hospital, with doctors urging him to take pain-killers, Ferocious Francis, Gately’s sponsor, refuses to outright tell Gately what to do. Instead, Francis says that it is “[n]ot my business to say one way or the other. Kid’s gonna do what he decides he needs to do for himself”, although he suggests that Gately might “want to Ask For Some Help, deciding” (*Infinite Jest*, 889), referencing the principles of AA and the advice to ask for help from a higher power.

<sup>53</sup> McGurl describes the character of Don Gately as demonstrating a “profound reversal of the usual rhetoric of liberation, what we have here is a profound desire to be a tool, to be useful like Sisyphus, who at least has a job”, while Severs characterises Gately as distinguished in terms of “work, weight, and value, and unassuming virtues of gratitude and generosity” and argues that Wallace is attempting a positive reclamation of the work ethic. See McGurl, “The Institution of Nothing,” 38; Severs, *Balancing Books*, 89.

manning the front desk, centre around interacting with and caring for other people. This social nature is the fundamental source of his work's value.

Fundamentally then, the key practices and elements of AA all revolve around social interaction. This interaction – be it listening and empathising, providing advice and support, or caring for other members – is not reducible to pleasurable experience, yet nonetheless is shown to have an inherent value in what it provides to others. Whereas ETA posited the necessity of an abstract higher ideal, with discipline required to produce bonding between students, AA both explicitly and implicitly positions social interactions and relationships as valuable in and of themselves. In emphasising social *interaction*, AA draws away from a framework focused on an individual towards one that involves but simultaneously maintains the specificity of each individual, as when interacting they operate independently *with* one another rather than being unified in action or existence. In doing this, AA avoids the key problems of the nation-state model. In contrast to an abstract ideal, sociality has both an immediacy and visible value. In addition, it is impossible to conclude that it is necessary to sacrifice people in pursuit of a higher value when people themselves are the source of value. Fittingly, AA's approach fundamentally reconstitutes the basic logic of the *Bildungsroman* genre within its social model. It synthesises individual autonomy with necessary social structure by demonstrating that the two are mutually generative: individual experience is only meaningful in a broader framework, but such a framework can only be legitimately and functionally derived directly from people themselves. *Bildung* and the *Bildungsroman*, it seems, are saved. However, while *Infinite Jest*'s presentation of AA is positive, there are a number of issues with its social model which the novel does not address.

The characters of *Infinite Jest*'s world are overwhelmed by depression and addiction, the necessary results of a worldview organised around individual self-interest. Escaping this, the novel suggests, requires a process of development taking place in a framework of meaning that directs attention beyond the individual self while not drowning out the individual entirely. AA, then, seems to provide the solution. However, despite its positive presentation, AA has some major limitations that prevent its application on a larger scale.



One key issue is the matter of membership and social cohesion within AA. As befits its egalitarian social basis, membership of AA is both free and open to all, and its structure is profoundly non-disciplinary: as Gately notes, they “can’t kick you out. [So you can d]o exactly as you please – if you still trust what seems to please you” (*Infinite Jest*, 356). This is part of AA’s fundamental success and appeal as a social model. In being open to all it appears to be universally applicable, and doing away with the threat of exclusion renders possible precisely the kind of unconditional social relationships that its model depends upon. However, AA’s openness and cohesion rests upon the fact that, by virtue of AA’s nature, all those who join it will have a shared experience of addiction. As such, the apparent openness of AA rests upon a pre-existing commonality. This is not a flaw for the goals of AA itself, but it is a problem the model faces in any attempt to deploy it on a larger scale, where this pre-existing shared experience would not exist.

In addition, by virtue of the nature of this shared experience, AA’s developmental framework is fundamentally designed for subjects who have already failed in their development on some level. The members of AA are motivated by a fear of returning to addiction. This requires that they have already reached the desperate lows of addiction, with all the risks of pain, death, and suffering that this involves, prior to their participation in AA. Not only is this a dangerous and problematic basis for a social grouping, but it ensures that AA’s model can only ever serve an ameliorative, rather than preventative, function with regards to the issues of self-interest that plague the characters of the novel.

While the psychological elements of the AA program are explored in some depth in *Infinite Jest*, the material conditions underlying it are generally neglected. Gately’s successful development may be thanks to AA as an ideological framework, but he only has this opportunity because he was provided with food, shelter, and basic necessities. It is Ennet House that provides these things, relying on more-or-less free labour, in the form of staff-members such as Gately, and the generosity of its benefactors to function. But Ennet House can only provide for so many, and must choose who is deserving of the limited resources that it has. While AA can be unconditionally open and non-hierarchical, it relies on other systems

of power to provide the material conditions that are necessary for its ideological success, and so on the economic system in which it operates.

AA, then, provides a framework that renders choice meaningful by providing an alternative to the neoliberal ideological understanding of value only arising from the self. As such, AA is not quite the replacement of “free will with twelve steps” that Freudenthal suggests.<sup>54</sup> However, it does place great importance on the fact that its framework works without individuals needing to know *how*, and Freudenthal is correct in identifying that this approach, whatever its uses for countering addiction’s co-optation of rationalisation, has profoundly anti-intellectual implications. This emphasis on not knowing suggests that not only is knowledge and comprehension unnecessary to AA’s functioning, but it might actually be antithetical. Gately, for instance, is simultaneously the novel’s best example of recovery and one of its least inquisitive characters. Leaving aside any critique of Wallace’s romanticisation of Gately’s naive yet common-sensical approach to life, this feature of AA is another barrier to the large-scale implementation of its framework. If no one can understand how it works, constructing it on a larger scale is impossible, and not only does the anti-intellectual component exclude a wide range of personalities from being functional subjects of AA’s model, but it risks abuses of power by those who *do* claim to know how AA works, replicating some of the dangers of hierarchy suffered by the nation-state model.

There are further issues which render scaling up AA’s social model difficult – the question of expanding a model of sociality modelled on individual interaction, for instance – but the key issues highlighted here demonstrate the fundamental problem. While ETA promotes a general social model that is inadequate, AA cannot function as a general social framework for development. Not only are certain elements of its functioning inherently local and small scale, but AA’s existence, cohesion, member involvement, and material basis all depend on the economic-ideological system that produces the depression and addiction that its model aims to counter. AA can only respond to the suffering of addiction and depression, not prevent it. While the nation-state model of ETA presented a weak and limited alternative

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<sup>54</sup> Freudenthal, “Anti-Interiority,” 201.

to ONAN's neoliberal framework, AA does not present a true alternative at all, but functions within ONAN's framework to negate its worst excesses. In light of this, the social work that Gately does contribute, however noble in intention, ultimately serves on some level as free labour supporting the very system to which AA is opposed.

The capacity of *Infinite Jest* to rest so much hope for *Bildung* on AA's model, and so imply that it offers a viable general model of development, rests upon the way in which the novel, in its representations of development at least, sticks to the *Bildungsroman* genre's traditional focus on single individuals. This is perhaps unsurprising given the novel's attachment to the concept of *Bildung*, and the interest in individualism and autonomy that this attachment implies, but it has a profound impact on how the novel's exploration of human development functions. Critics like Freudenthal and Thomas can designate Gately the novel's "hero" not only because he is "so dang likeable" – if somewhat clichéd, as Freudenthal notes – but by virtue of the textual space he occupies.<sup>55</sup> *Infinite Jest* has numerous characters, and even more narrative strands, but Hal and Gately are unique in having a significant proportion of the novel dedicated to their developmental narratives. This textual space and focus necessarily results in the attribution of a greater significance to the events and experiences of these narratives, as we saw with Shevek in *The Dispossessed* in the previous chapter. This the reason that the majority of criticism involving character analysis focuses on Hal and Gately. This the significance given by focus is particularly central to the *Bildungsroman*, as the genre is intended to represent a general process of development through an individual narrative.

Hal's failed development, as already analysed, serves to demonstrate the failure of the ideologies of ETA and ONAN as developmental frameworks, and through them the failure of the frameworks of nation-statism and neoliberalism. However, this fundamental message of failure is also generally reinforced by the world *Infinite Jest* depicts. The vast majority of the characters appear to experience isolation, addiction, and depression in a way similar to Hal, and so, it can be inferred, are also influenced by the same ideological-social factors as him, making clear that his narrative has a broader applicability. Gately's narrative serves to

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 191.

demonstrate the functioning of AA's framework, and through the success of his development, AA's framework appears to be a counter to the problems of neoliberal ideology and the failure of the nation-state model. However, the significance of Gately's narrative does not have the broad applicability it at first appears to. Freudenthal's statement that "Gately's mode of fighting addiction is the only one in the novel that actually works" can be taken nearly literally; Gately is one of very few characters who achieves any kind of success, and this fact reinforces the limitations of AA as a large-scale social model.<sup>56</sup> What we see with Gately, then, is a fundamentally *individual* success that is, at best, applicable to a select few. AA is able to take on such outsized importance precisely because, despite its attempts to move away from the harmful worldview of the neoliberal individual who can see no meaning beyond the self, *Infinite Jest*'s fidelity to elements of the *Bildungsroman* genre in fact produces a similar focus on a formal level.<sup>57</sup> The focus of the text determines how the significance of elements of the novel is determined, with the primary criterion for value becoming the relationship anything has to Gately himself.

### **Polyphony, dialogism, and formal equality**

The grand hope embodied by AA, then, only appears viable through its use of a specific narrative and focalising logic. This logic's flaws parallel those of the neoliberal logic AA is intended to counter. But *Infinite Jest* is not entirely without hope for large-scale alternatives to neoliberal self-interest or the nation-state. The form and structure of the novel itself give a tantalising glimpse of an alternative model of society, one premised on a recognition of all people as human beings of equal significance, and an understanding of the necessary social interconnectedness of all individuals. Elements of the social framework suggested by AA are expanded in elements of the novel's form but are stripped of their

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> The generality ascribed to AA is also aided by *Infinite Jest*'s depiction of extreme addiction and depression as *the* universal experience. This depiction is symbolic of a certain social-ideological state of affairs but takes on a more literal significance when functioning alongside frameworks specifically designed to counter actual addiction.

limiting specificity and dependence on an individual perspective. It is by looking at the novel through the lens of dialogism and polyphony that this new social model first becomes apparent.

The concepts of dialogism and polyphony come from Mikhail Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, in which Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky's work represents a new and superior way of constructing a novel.<sup>58</sup> Instead of using a monologic voice, which provides a single, authorial perspective representing a single "correct" view of the world, Dostoevsky's work is polyphonic – equally representing multiple perspectives even if they conflict with that of the author – and dialogic – drawing these perspectives into interaction and dialogue to produce a complex form of truth. The power of this approach, and Dostoevsky's dedication to it, is perhaps best known from Dostoevsky's worry that, in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879), he had rendered one character's "argument for atheism so powerfully that [...] it could convince readers of the nonexistence of God".<sup>59</sup>

Several critics have already noted the centrality of the concept of dialogism to Wallace's work. Kelly's "Development Through Dialogue" traces the development of Wallace's dialogism through *Broom of the System* (1987) to *Infinite Jest* to *The Pale King* (2011). Kelly argues that, despite the ultimately monologic nature of early attempts in *Broom of the System*, dialogism later provides a key tool for Wallace. In addition to secondary functions, such as allowing Wallace to avoid his own overbearing narrative voice, dialogism is central to Wallace's exploration of the complex ideas at the core of his work, allowing an altogether more nuanced and intricate conception of truth. As Kelly notes, both Marathe and Steeply "exist in the novel primarily so that they can undertake their conversation [and illustrate] some of the major themes," but their political debate does not serve merely to echo or dramatise Wallace's own political view.<sup>60</sup> Instead, Marathe and Steeply's arguments are fully realised, and they have an existence as characters beyond their political views; their

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<sup>58</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

<sup>59</sup> Kelly, "Development through Dialogue," 275.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

actions and thoughts are complex and sometimes conflicted, demonstrating their status as nuanced human beings who do not merely serve to allegorise a certain political viewpoint through their behaviour.<sup>61</sup>

Hering offers the second key analysis of dialogism in Wallace's work. He argues that the central source of dominant monologic discourse in Wallace's work is not totalitarianism, as was the case for Bakhtin, but rather the style, self-consciousness, and presence of Wallace as an authorial persona.<sup>62</sup> According to Hering, the exchanges between the wraith of James Incandenza – a monologic artist who resembles an early Wallace – and Don Gately produce a dialogic critique of monologism. The text's own dialogism, argues Hering, then helps Wallace achieve his aim of a reader-author relationship that balances equally between the two sides, with the text's meaning emerging from the interaction between these two actors and unable to emerge monologically from either one alone.

Both of these analyses identify key elements of dialogism in Wallace's work: the complex nature of dialogic truth, the polyphonic realisation of characters as full human beings, the real-world possibility of dialogic communication, and the politically exploratory capacity of dialogism. However, I argue that *Infinite Jest* expands the concept of polyphonic dialogism beyond the original definition given by Bakhtin, instituting the concept as a structuring principle for the novel. This structuring principle has two constituent parts: the polyphonic element – concerned with giving voice to a wide range of characters – and the broad dialogic element – concerned with demonstrating the interaction of these characters.

Some understanding of the novel's polyphony can be gained merely by examining the novel's huge cast. To offer a far from exhaustive list, there are the Incandenza family, the

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<sup>61</sup> A good demonstration of the complexity dialogism allows, and the full realisation of Marathe and Steeply, is the way in which their lives conflict with their ideological-political stances. Marathe derides self-interest, and advocates sacrifice and subordination to a higher national ideal. Steeply defends ONAN, negative liberty, and the right to the pursuit of self-interest and pleasure. However, it is Marathe who betrays his fellow Wheelchair Assassins, feeding information to both ONAN and the Assassins, in return for treatment for his chronically disabled wife, his relationship to whom seems addictive, as he feels a chronic dread in her absence. Steeply, on the other hand, cross-dresses and undergoes surgery in order to fit female cover identities to which he – a large, muscular man – is radically unsuited and ultimately sacrifices his marriage to continue defending ONAN.

<sup>62</sup> Hering, *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form*, 7-8.

students and staff of ETA, a number of homeless drug addicts such as Poor Tony and the unnamed “yrstruly”, the numerous members of AA, a variety of Canadian separatists (including the Wheelchair Assassins), Marathe and Steeply, and the staff and residents of Ennet House, who are probably the most socially diverse collection of characters in the text. Yet it is not the range of characters alone that is significant, but the position many of these characters occupy within the novel. Although they do not rival the space and full narratives given to Hal and Gately, a large proportion of *Infinite Jest* is taken up by scenes detailing the lives and experiences of many seemingly minor characters.

A comprehensive analysis of examples would be too extensive to fit here, but taking the characters of Kate Gompert and Joelle van Dyne as examples gives some idea of *Infinite Jest*'s polyphonic functioning. Gompert and van Dyne both experience drug addiction, suicidal tendencies, and depression, and end up at Ennet House. However, van Dyne is connected to the novel's central narratives – she is the ex-girlfriend of Hal's brother Orin, the host of Mario Incandenza's favourite radio show, the actress featured in the Entertainment, and Gately becomes romantically interested in her – while Gompert occupies a more marginal role as a resident of Ennet House. From a purely thematic or plot-based perspective, then, Gompert seems superfluous, or at least very easily rendered so. Yet Gompert persists as a presence in the text, and while she does not feature to the same extent as Hal and Gately, there are scenes dedicated entirely to her experience.

The question of textual space for minor characters is addressed explicitly within the novel too. James Incandenza's experimental films are deeply concerned with the question of the figurant, the silent background character, and the horror of their marginalisation. In his surreal conversations with the hospitalised Gately, the Wraith/James expounds on this topic. He notes that “you can't appreciate the dramatic pathos of a figurant until you realize how completely *trapped* and *encaged* he [*sic*] is in his [*sic*] mute peripheral status” (*Infinite Jest*, 835). Using the TV show “Cheers!”, the Wraith, through Gately's internal mental voice, demonstrates that there is no way out for the figurant. Even if they decided that they “couldn't take it any more [*sic*] and stood up and started shouting and gesturing around wildly in a bid for attention and nonperipheral status”, (*Jest*, 835), the focus of the show

would still return to the actions of the main characters and the effect the figurant's behaviour has on these characters.

Alex Woloch's work on major and minor characters in *The One vs The Many* provides a useful framework for understanding the significance of the novel's use of polyphony.<sup>63</sup> Woloch notes that there is a central tension at the core of narrative fiction between characters as representations of human beings and characters as symbols of something else. Focus on the narrative transforms the minor character into their utilitarian function in the story, be that their role as a plot element or symbol of something larger, but attempting to focus on every minor character's interiority, motive, and complexity threatens to derail narrative progress entirely. The relative priority given to characters, Woloch notes, always both represents and instantiates a social power structure, from the *Odyssey's* focus on heroic kings to bourgeois literature in which minor characters are, both literally and metaphorically, the proletariat of the novel.<sup>64</sup>

The *Bildungsroman*, argues Woloch, usefully demonstrates the relationship between character and narrative function. In the genre, "the hero's progress is facilitated through a series of interactions with delimited minor characters", with each character representing a particular "psychological function within the interior development of the young protagonist".<sup>65</sup> Minor characters exist in relation to the development of the protagonist, and even if the protagonist is intended to represent a general process of development, their specific social position is given privilege. *Infinite Jest's* dedication of space to minor characters, then, is not just a matter of representative fidelity, although it does continue the text's attempts at all-inclusive expansiveness of detail, but also represents a commitment to an egalitarian social vision that gives importance and voice to a full range of individuals in a wide range of social positions.

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<sup>63</sup> Alex Woloch, *The One Vs. The Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-28.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.



In Bakhtin's original formulation of dialogism, in order to have a truly dialogic encounter the characters of a narrative must come into literal dialogue, and in order to achieve dialogism these characters must meet a very specific set of requirements. Bakhtin argues that dialogism requires "[s]elf-consciousness, as the *artistic dominant* governing the construction of a character", and that consequently "not all persons are equally favourable material for such a representation".<sup>66</sup> For Bakhtin's dialogism to function there must be "literally nothing we can say about the hero [...] that he does not already know himself".<sup>67</sup> As such, despite the radical potential he attributes to the dialogic novel, and the seemingly egalitarian promise of dialogic polyphony, Bakhtin's original conception implicitly limits such a narrative to exploring both a narrow social range and a limited variety of topics, requiring highly intelligent and/or educated individuals discussing topics of which they are aware and knowledgeable.

There are examples of dialogism of Bakhtin's original formulation in *Infinite Jest*; the discussion between Steeply and Marathe analysed by Kelly is a good example. However, the limitations of dialogism outlined above run counter to the socially inclusive approach of *Infinite Jest*'s polyphony. So, in addition to literal dialogue, the novel adopts dialogism as a formal-structural principle. The characters of *Infinite Jest* are shown to be in constant interaction with one another, their lives shaping and being shaped by the lives of others, whether they are aware of it or not. Tony Krause, or Poor Tony, is a comparatively minor character, appearing in around eight of the novel's two hundred or so scenes, but analysis of these scenes demonstrates this dialogic interconnection. A homeless, transvestite drug addict, Poor Tony is neither a resident of Ennet House nor ETA, yet in the small narrative space afforded to him he has some form of contact or connection with a wide range of other recurring characters. These include his "former crewmate" Mad Matty Pemulis (brother of Hal's friend and fellow ETA student Michael Pemulis), two residents of Ennet House (Ruth Van Cleve and Kate Gompert, from whom Tony steals a purse), the Antittoi brothers (Canadian separatists who ETA students buy drugs from), the Wheelchair Assassins, and

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<sup>66</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 50.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

Randy Lenz (an Ennet House resident whose dog-killing habits result in the conflict that hospitalises Gately). In addition, Tony recalls being hired to mill around in a group of similarly dressed transvestites, unwittingly providing cover for an attack on an ONAN minister by Canadian insurgents, and is revealed to have featured in one of “Helen” Steeply’s articles on purse-snatching.

Poor Tony not only exemplifies the interconnectedness of the text’s characters, but also demonstrates how broad dialogism enables the inclusion of characters incompatible with dialogism in its original formulation. Poor Tony appears neither highly self-aware nor knowledgeable, and by virtue of his socially marginalised status he is never in a position to enter into meaningful conversations with most of the novel’s characters. Yet this lack does not make him any less of a person, nor does it exclude him from being a part of the complex social network of actions and reactions that constitute society, shaping the lives of others and having his own life shaped in return. The use of this formal-structural principle, then, has both political and generic significance. It provides a model of society predicated on the individual, but combined with the recognition that each individual is one of a multiplicity of others of equal significance, regardless of their social status or relation to any given perspective. In addition, these individuals are shown to be always and necessarily socially connected. This demonstrates the falsity of the idea of total individual autonomy, and so suggests a higher framework of meaning – society, in the form of the network of inevitable social connections between individuals – that, like AA, emerges directly *from* individuals, and so does not risk either excessive abstraction or subordination.

Through its use of broad dialogism, *Infinite Jest* demonstrates an awareness of the limitations of a textual focus on single individuals that is unrealised in its dedication to the *Bildungsroman* elements of the text. It attempts to construct a fundamentally egalitarian and social novel on the level of broader form. In doing so, these formal principles suggest a framework that incorporates many of the more positive elements of AA while avoiding the limitations, although the capacity for the formal structure to be realised in practice is limited. *Infinite Jest*, then, uses the *Bildungsroman* to articulate a critique of both neoliberalism and the nation-state, arguing that neither can provide the necessary framework for fulfilling

human development in the contemporary era. But while the novel's use of polyphonic dialogism creates an egalitarian textual structure that offers some hope for society in the neoliberal era, the solutions *Infinite Jest* proposes through the *Bildungsroman* are deeply flawed. In its commitment to the *Bildungsroman*, *Infinite Jest* seems to fall prey to the subject of its own critique, as the narrative logic on which its positive representation of *Bildung* depends ends up replicating elements of the neoliberal logic the novel as a whole is attempting to oppose. In the era of neoliberalism's dominance, core elements of the *Bildungsroman* genre, it seems, may inextricably tie it to neoliberalism, even in attempts to challenge and offer alternatives to the hegemony of neoliberal ideology. If this is the case there are two major questions that arise: what does this mean for the genre in the period following *Infinite Jest*, and in what ways can authors in this period continue to make use of the genre in a socio-political way against neoliberalism?

### Chapter 3

#### Subversion: Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

“I haven’t grown as a person, you cretin”, cries the character of Jimmy to a deserted post-apocalyptic landscape halfway through Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003).<sup>1</sup> In this devastated world, in which he refers to himself as Snowman and appears to be the sole human survivor, Jimmy alternates between struggling to survive and thinking back to his life growing up in the hyper-capitalist, dystopian society that existed before the end of the world. *Oryx and Crake* incorporates elements of both post-apocalyptic and dystopian genres, alternating between the two parallel strands. Like the dystopia-utopia combination of *The Dispossessed*, this setting provides a backdrop for a *Bildungsroman* narrative. In this context, Jimmy’s anguished cry about his own lack of development has a greater significance, drawing attention to both the concept of *Bildung* and its failure. In this chapter, I examine the varying ways in which the life-stories of the three central characters of *Oryx and Crake* are narrated – or not narrated. I argue that the different approaches to narration employed for each character subvert expectations in order to highlight and critique different aspects of the dominance of neoliberal ideology, the narrative logic of the *Bildungsroman*, and the links between these two.

Jimmy is the focal character of the novel, and his narrative is the clearest example of the *Bildungsroman* features of *Oryx and Crake*. Yet despite his centrality, and the sympathetic and superior status granted to him by some critics, Jimmy is demonstrably selfish and abusive, and, as he himself highlights, fails to grow as a person. On the most obvious level, Jimmy’s flawed developmental arc serves as a continuation of the critique of neoliberal capitalism embodied by the extreme excesses of the novel’s hypercapitalist world. But I argue that an even more complex argument is articulated through the disjunction between Jimmy’s centrality to the narrative and his passivity, unpleasantness, and lack of

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (London: Virago Press, 2013), 279. Further references will be given in parentheses within the text.

importance to events in the world. *Oryx and Crake* subverts the expectations of the individual-focused *Bildungsroman* narrative, and through the disjunction between Jimmy's expected and actual role, the novel draws attention to the parallels between the functioning of the novel's *Bildungsroman* focus and that of Jimmy's self-interest, with both attributing significance to events, people, and things only through their relationship to Jimmy. By deploying and then subverting the standard focus and narrative of the *Bildungsroman* genre, *Oryx and Crake* uses Jimmy to critique not only the individual-centric, self-interested worldview of neoliberalism, but also the problematic parallels between this worldview and the core logic of the *Bildungsroman*.

It is through the characters of Crake and Oryx that this exploration of the *Bildungsroman*'s contemporary political functioning is expanded. Often neglected as unrealistic and flat characters, they in fact function as the inverse of Jimmy, being far more significant – by virtue of everything from the novel's title to their centrality to the world-shaping events of the story – than is superficially suggested by the novel's focus on Jimmy.<sup>2</sup> Their apparent lack of realism is a function of the way in which their stories are narrated. The two differing and limited modes of narration used with these characters demonstrate the limitations of the *Bildungsroman*'s capacity to narrate the experiences of individuals who do not conform to the neoliberal model of human experience.

Crake's life-story, despite its central pertinence to the apocalyptic events of the novel, is barely narrated, and given surprisingly minimal attention by Jimmy. This is not only a demonstration of the failings of Jimmy's self-interest – and self-interest more generally – but because Crake's life is characterised not by change but by consistency in aim and purpose. He is dedicated to an apocalyptic plan that is actively opposed to growth in all forms. Instead of self-advancement and material pleasure, Crake places significance primarily on the future of life and the planet itself, which he believes to be fundamentally at odds with the aggressively expansive nature of humanity. In his rejection of self-interest and growth, Crake defies the expectations of neoliberal ideology, but in doing so he also renders his life impossible to narrate through the *Bildungsroman*, as the genre relies on a similar focus on

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of critics citing *Oryx and Crake* as flat are provided in the sections that focus on them.

self-interest and growth. Crake, then, demonstrates a key limitation of the *Bildungsroman* genre under conditions of neoliberal capitalism: it is unable to narrate alternatives to the neoliberal model of existence because of the similarities between the logic on which both the genre and the ideology rely.

Oryx is often dismissed by critics as an oriental stereotype, a victim in denial, or an unbelievable fantasy object. However, such readings overlook key aspects of the novel that show that Oryx's narrative undermines and subverts such stereotypes, using them in order to critique the way in which these stereotypes dominate political narratives around people marginalised by race, gender, and class. In the central section of the novel, Oryx provides her own, highly consistent narrative of her life, but it is surrounded on all sides within the text by Jimmy's own narration. Jimmy constantly contradicts her, asserting that she must have been to places and done things that she denies, and refuses to believe her when the emotions she expresses conflict with his expectations. Her characterisation as mysterious, oriental, and elusive depends upon the reader's acceptance of both Jimmy's claims and the assumptions and expectations embedded in his worldview, which reflects the dominant narratives of his society. Oryx's narrative, and the way it is embedded within the broader novel, simultaneously demonstrates the need for alternative narratives to counter the dominant ones, and the major obstacles such narratives face. The primary challenge facing Oryx's narrative is the way in which the dominant narratives and ideologies of the world in which she lives overwhelm her own account of herself. The global society in which she lives continues to deny autonomy to individuals like Oryx and refuses to recognise the complicity of dominant ideologies in the exploitation of marginalised people.

Through analysis of the three different *Bildungs* of the central characters, and the varying ways in which these *Bildungs* subvert norms of narration, this chapter explores the nuanced critique *Oryx and Crake* makes of elements of neoliberal ideology. The chapter examines the ways in which elements of the narrative logic of the *Bildungsroman* make the genre vulnerable to perpetuating neoliberal ideology and analyses how, while it is possible to subvert these elements to articulate a critique of neoliberalism, both the inherent logic of the

genre and the context in which it operates present potentially insurmountable obstacles to presenting a constructive alternative to neoliberalism.

### ***Oryx and Crake* and the future(s) of neoliberal capitalism**

The relatively recent publication of *Oryx and Crake* in 2003 makes a historical contextualisation like that possible for *The Dispossessed* and *Infinite Jest* more difficult. However, there are key events with respect to which it remains useful to position *Oryx and Crake*. The novel was published prior to the 2008 financial crisis. The effects of the crisis are still not entirely clear today, but it presented the first major challenge to neoliberal hegemony since its rise to dominance in the 1970s and early 1980s. The collapse of growth and decline in living standards presented a material contradiction of the neoliberal claims of perfect competition, abundant growth, and self-stabilising markets. However, while *Oryx and Crake* emerged prior to this major event, it was still published in a socio-political context very different from that of *Infinite Jest*. In addition to a wide range of technological changes – the rapid spread of the internet chief among them – the turn of the millennium saw a number of large political changes. 2001 saw the launch of the “war on terror” by US President George W. Bush following the September 11th terror attacks.<sup>3</sup> This led to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and involved much of the Western world in a conflict that continues to this day.

Regardless of the reality of the threat to Western capitalist society, 2001 saw the emergence into the political imaginary of the first clear ideological opponent to the reigning ideology of Western society since the fall of Soviet communism. The nature of the terrorist threat was loosely defined (although almost always associated with Islamist fundamentalism), was characterised as operating on a very different basis from communism (on a smaller scale, avowing conservative rather than progressive aims, and proposing a socio-religious rather

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<sup>3</sup> Bush, a Republican, took over the presidency from Bill Clinton in the same year as the attacks. Clinton, as explored in the previous chapter, was the first Democrat president to accept the basic premises of neoliberal theory, and enact and popularise neoliberal economic policy.

than socio-economic vision), and was less of a large-scale threat to the Western way of life (unable, for instance, to in any way threaten an actual takeover of the US). However, the very fact that it was accepted as a threat to capitalist society was a significant break in the conceptual hegemony of neoliberal ideology.

In addition, the period after 2001 represented a shift in the level of explicit coercion used by the US to spread neoliberal policies.<sup>4</sup> As David Harvey notes, after “all the other reasons for engaging in a pre-emptive war against Iraq were proven wanting, the president appealed to the idea that the freedom conferred on Iraq was in and of itself an adequate justification for the war.”<sup>5</sup> In practice, this freedom took the form of the privatisation of nearly all aspects of the economy, the elimination of barriers to trade and foreign ownership, and the implementation of tight restrictions on the capacity of labour to organise.<sup>6</sup> Although the regime that preceded it could hardly be mourned, the neoliberalisation of Iraq represented an enforced social and economic vision in which the population had no say, and which was not designed to meet their interests.<sup>7</sup> In addition, in the US and the rest of the Western world, the war on terror was also used to justify the further expansion of state security apparatuses, which, as numerous critics have noted, is a key element in the maintenance of neoliberal

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that the US was previously committed to using only peaceful means or economic coercion to spread and protect capitalist interests. Throughout the 1970s the US was involved in the installation and support of numerous right-wing regimes in Latin America. The US covertly provided both pre-existing and newly installed regimes with military, financial, and political support for campaigns of political repression and violence. Perhaps the best example of this is the covert US involvement in Operation Condor, which resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and hundreds of thousands of political imprisonments. The US also provided similar support for rebel groups opposed to still-existing left-wing governments, with the most famous example of such a group being the Nicaraguan Contras. The CIA was the chief US tool used for these interventions. For more detail on US involvement in violence in Latin America, see Marcia Esparza, Henry R. Huttenbach, and Daniel Feierstein, ed., *State Violence and Genocide in Latin America: The Cold War Years* (New York: Routledge, 2010). The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq represented a change of approach in that these wars involved a new combination of overt US military involvement with a lack of even superficially adequate justification.

<sup>5</sup> Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>7</sup> Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* offers one of the most well-known, mainstream accounts of how the shock-and-awe tactics of the invasion of Iraq were used to push through neoliberal policies during the time of crisis. Klein views Iraq as the largest and most thorough implementation of the “shock doctrine” implementation of neoliberalism, with the covert interventions in South America mentioned previously being smaller scale, prototypical attempts.



economics, both in theory and in practice, despite its superficial conflict with some of the anti-state elements of neoliberal ideology.<sup>8</sup>

Further contextualisation of *Oryx and Crake* can be achieved through a comparison between the world the novel presents, that of Atwood's previous dystopian work – *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) – and those of the works analysed in the two previous chapters: *The Dispossessed* and *Infinite Jest*.<sup>9</sup> This comparison reveals that *Oryx and Crake* demonstrates a change in how neoliberalism is understood and what is considered the greatest political threat to society in comparison to the works of earlier periods. *The Handmaid's Tale* features a near-future US, renamed the Republic of Gilead, that is ruled by a religious, authoritarian, military regime. Most elements of everyday life in Gileadean society are heavily regulated, but there is a particularly strong focus on the control of sexuality and reproduction. Abortions, contraception, and sex outside of wedlock or state-approved handmaidship are illegal, and punishable by death in most instances. Women have almost no rights and are divided into castes; the titular handmaids are fertile women who have committed some of Gilead's numerous gender crimes and been consigned to reproductive slavery. The world of *The Handmaid's Tale*, and the political concerns it articulates, share much with the best-known dystopian visions of the mid-20th century, such as George Orwell's *1984* (1949), although with a strong focus on sexism and religion. The novel features a centralised system that rigidly regulates every aspect of day-to-day life through an authoritarian political structure. While more authoritarian and less concerned with capitalism than Le Guin's dystopian vision, it shares much with the gendered and hierarchical capitalist-statism depicted in *The Dispossessed*, which was published eleven years earlier.

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, 65; Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 77.

<sup>9</sup> The version of *The Handmaid's Tale* used for reference in this chapter is Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Vintage, 1996). In *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, Coral Ann Howells also offers a comparison between Atwood's two dystopian works. However, her focus is largely on how the two fit into different generic traditions within dystopia, rather than examining the specific politics of the worlds and their relation to the political context of the periods in which they were published. As such, her analysis differs from the comparison I want to offer here. See Coral Ann Howells, "Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Visions: *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. Coral Ann Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 161-75.

By contrast, the world of *Oryx and Crake* offers a very different vision of politics and dangerous societal trends, one which numerous critics have, either in passing or in depth, noted to be deeply neoliberal and/or capitalist.<sup>10</sup> Here, power is divided between multiple, competing corporations, each with their own private compounds. Although nominally set in a future US, there is scarcely a mention of any nation-state, and the closest approximation to a centralised power structure is the CorpSeCorps private military force that provides security for the corporations.<sup>11</sup> In addition, there are no formal or legal divisions of gender or class, unlike the hierarchy of Gilead, and the society is characterised by a generally permissive attitude to individual behaviour, especially of the sexual and pleasure-oriented kind that was tightly controlled in *The Handmaid's Tale*. However, inequality and exploitation still exist on a massive scale, operating through the seemingly neutral operations of the market and economics and persisting in pervasive but nebulous cultural forms instead of being instituted through a rigidly formalised system. But while there are next to no moral constraints on behaviour and material pleasure is readily available, any form of political organisation or hindrance to profit is violently and rapidly stamped out.<sup>12</sup> *Oryx and Crake*, then, shares more

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<sup>10</sup> Gerry Canavan, for instance, describes *Oryx and Crake* as depicting a “hyperextended, hypertrophic version of US-style consumer capitalism” and “a world in which the historical trajectory of neoliberal capitalism has reached its logical culmination.” Gerry Canavan, “Hope, but Not for Us: Ecological Science Fiction and the End of the World in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*,” *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 23, no. 2 (2012): 140 and 142. However, it is Chris Vials who goes furthest in his analysis of the novel’s exploration of neoliberalism. Vials focuses on the world in which *Oryx and Crake* is set, examining how it reveals that the supposed freedom at the core of neoliberal ideology is restricted to a certain sphere, and is denied to those not of a specific group. As such, neoliberalism goes hand in hand with a political system that can be as oppressive as any totalitarian regime. See Chris Vials, “Margaret Atwood’s Dystopic Fiction and the Contradictions of Neoliberal Freedom,” *Textual Practice* 29, no. 2 (2015): 235-54. Vials’s analysis is complementary to the analysis offered in the present chapter, which focuses on the characters of *Oryx and Crake*, rather than the world, and explores different, more specific ideological questions.

<sup>11</sup> For a more comprehensive and political-theoretical account of the different structures and understandings of power in both *Oryx and Crake* and Atwood’s other works, see Pilar Somacarrera, “Power Politics: Power and Identity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. Coral Ann Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 43-57. It is notable that the CorpSeCorps bear a striking resemblance to the mutual protection agencies that make up the ideal minimal state in Nozick’s *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, which was examined in the first chapter of this thesis.

<sup>12</sup> Such coercion and violence to protect economic interests in an otherwise extremely morally permissive society is characteristic of neoliberal practice, although the world of *Oryx and Crake* appears to lack the nation-state structure that provides and legitimises such action in contemporary society. For a good analysis of neoliberal violence and the state’s role, see Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 76-78. As noted in the introduction, the presence of a force to guarantee contracts, protect the market, and enforce rules is not a contradiction of neoliberal ideology but a central point of numerous theorists, although they generally assume that a nation-state will fulfil this role.

with *Infinite Jest* than with *The Dispossessed* in depicting a world of rampant capitalism and consumerism, but there are also key differences that distinguish *Oryx and Crake*'s understanding of neoliberalism: the non-existence of the nation-state, the focus on the global reach of capitalism, the emphasis on the economic divisions within society, the exploration of privilege and privation, and the focus on coercive violence under capitalism.

Atwood is a prolific and multi-award-winning author, winning the Man Booker Prize in 2000, for instance, and critics have produced a body of work to match her standing.<sup>13</sup> However, for the purposes of this chapter, it is criticism addressing *Oryx and Crake* that is of interest. There are two areas of criticism that are of particular use: essays that offer a broad examination of the politics of *Oryx and Crake* and essays that focus on how *Oryx and Crake* deploys its characters. In terms of the broader political analyses key texts include: Coral Ann Howells comparison of Atwood's two dystopias; Gerry Canavan's exploration of *Oryx and Crake*'s political-ecological critique of capitalism; and Chris Vials's essay on neoliberalism and freedom.<sup>14</sup> Criticism on the functioning of characters in *Oryx and Crake* has tended to be narrower in focus but, as a result, more precise in analysis. There are three essays of this type that are of central use to this chapter. The first is by Hannes Bergthaller, who looks at *Oryx and Crake*'s exploration of the tension between human life and ecological sustainability.<sup>15</sup> Bergthaller breaks with the simplistic view of Jimmy as hero and Crake as villain, arguing that both characters represent equally flawed approaches to synthesising human nature and ecology. Michael Spiegel offers another interesting analysis, this time focused on Crake.<sup>16</sup> According to Spiegel, readings of the novel which view the titular characters as flat and unrealistic do so because they are measuring the characters not against the standards of reality

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<sup>13</sup> For just a small sample, see Sherill E. Grace and Lorraine Weir, ed., *Margaret Atwood: Language, Text, and System* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983); Harold Bloom, ed. *Margaret Atwood*, Bloom's Modern Critical Views (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009); Coral Ann Howells, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Howells, "Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Visions."; Canavan, "Hope, but Not for Us."; Vials, "The Contradictions of Neoliberal Freedom."

<sup>15</sup> Hannes Bergthaller, "Humanism and the Problem of Sustainability in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *the Year of the Flood*" *English Studies* 91, no. 7 (2010): 728-43.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Spiegel, "Character in a Post-National World: Neomedievalism in Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*," *Mosaic* 43, no. 3 (2010): 119-34.

but against the standards of the modern novel. Crake's representation, according to Spiegel, is an attempt to represent a new form of subjectivity emerging in the contemporary era of global capitalism and so arising out of different conditions than those which shaped the conventional standards of the modern novel. Finally, Susan Hall addresses the much-neglected character of Oryx. Hall argues that the apparently stereotypical representation of Oryx as an exotic Asian woman is actually challenged and subverted by the novel in order to critique the psychological-economic logic behind orientalist fantasies of exoticism and discourses surrounding sex trafficking. Drawing on these critical approaches to both politics and character in *Oryx and Crake*, this chapter offers an analysis of Jimmy, Crake, and Oryx in turn, with a focus on how these characters operate in relation to the politics of neoliberalism and the novel's use of the *Bildungsroman* genre.

### **Jimmy as *Bildungsheld***

Like Hal in *Infinite Jest*, Jimmy embodies almost all the key traits of the *Bildungsheld* in Moretti's analysis. In the world of *Oryx and Crake* there are only two real social groups. The "pleebs" are the surplus population who make up the majority of the human race. They live in poverty and destitution in slums known as the pleeblands and are rarely seen in the novel. The rest of the population is made up by corporate employees. Very much in the minority, they live in a world apart from the pleebs, spending almost the entirety of their lives in the comfort and safety of corporate compounds, and avoiding the pleeblands unless looking for cheap thrills. Jimmy is the son of two corporate geneticists and so has a degree of individual autonomy and choice guaranteed to him by his economic position. In addition to being a young, white, Western male, he is a member of the social group as close to being bourgeois as is applicable for his society. However, the imperfect alignment between the class designation of bourgeois and Jimmy's position indicate that the world presented in *Oryx and Crake*, which exaggerates almost all aspects of neoliberal capitalist society, represents a new development of capitalism onto which the original basis of the *Bildungsroman* is not directly mappable.

The trajectory and contents of Jimmy's pre-apocalypse narrative also mark it as an example of a *Bildungsroman* narrative. It starts with "Jimmy's earliest complete memory", which is "of a huge bonfire" when he was "five, maybe six" (*Oryx and Crake*, 18). From there it continues through the key events of his childhood, such as his interactions with the genetically engineered animals at his father's work; the conflicts between his depressed, anti-capitalist mother and his complacent father; his experiences in school; his first meeting with Crake; his explorations of pornography; and his first experiences with women. After this he goes to university, gets his first job, then a promotion, before ultimately being personally hired by Crake to work at Crake's compound. Both the progression from childhood to adulthood and the developmental milestones that the novel highlights are characteristic of a *Bildung* narrative, and Jimmy's alignment with literature – he is identified as a "word person" (25) and attends a much-neglected college of the arts – serves to highlight this use of genre.

Given his status as *Bildungsheld* it is perhaps unsurprising that critics have often viewed Jimmy sympathetically and positively. Howells, for instance, argues that, in contrast to the other characters, Jimmy "emerges as a morally responsible man and the novel's unlikely hero", while Spiegel argues that the novel "succeed[s] in revealing [Jimmy's] emotional depth and psychological complexity, as well as that of the reader who identifies with him."<sup>17</sup> This sympathetic understanding of Jimmy is encouraged on a formal level. Jimmy is the narrative focus of the novel, it is his *Bildung* that is followed, and it is from his perspective that the story is seen. He is the sole character to whose memories, feelings, and thoughts the reader has access. All other characters – and the speculations with regards to their behaviour, motives, or personality – are seen through this lens.

In addition, Jimmy's status as the apparent guardian of literature in the novel further encourages such a reading. As Berghaller notes, positioning the "flawed but nevertheless repentant" Jimmy as the moral centre of the novel in contrast to Crake "as an embodiment of the corrupt culture that is wrecking the planet" is both "superficially plausible and comforting

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<sup>17</sup> Howells, "Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Visions," 133; Spiegel, "Character in a Post-National World."

to literary scholars”.<sup>18</sup> Jimmy is told he is a “word person” rather than a “numbers person” and attends a once proud arts university, the Martha Graham Academy, that is chronically underfunded and looked down upon due to the marginalisation of arts in favour of sciences, because the sciences are more clearly profitable and so deemed more valuable. The Martha Graham Academy has added “Our Students Graduate With Employable Skills” to its, now deeply ironic, original Latin motto “*Ars Longa Vita Brevis*” (*Oryx and Crake*, 220). The appeal of Jimmy to a literary academic operating in the context of contemporary neoliberalism is obvious.<sup>19</sup>

However, close analysis of Jimmy’s actions undermines any notion of him as morally responsible. Any positive reading of him relies on ignoring that his behaviour throughout the novel is abusive, selfish, and harmful to others. Motivated almost entirely by self-pity and the pursuit of material pleasure, Jimmy is at best passively complicit and at worst actively engaged in the exploitation of others throughout the novel. Perhaps the best demonstration of this is in his attitude towards women. Within the first few pages of the novel Jimmy, from the post-apocalypse, thinks of “some tart he once bought. Revision, professional sex-skills expert” (12). As a teenager, he tries to get “Crake in the queue” for the “blonde LyndaLee” (84), viewing LyndaLee not as a person but as a source of sexual pleasure that can be used to impress another man. He also watches a mix of violent executions and exploitative pornography, often while in the company of Crake. This includes child pornography, of which he notes that none “of these little girls had ever seemed real [...] – they’d always struck him as digital clones” (103). At university he finds that he has a certain appeal to “[g]enerous, caring, idealistic women” who he initially takes care of before switching “from bandager to bandagee” (222). He deliberately and performatively deploys his self-pity, first to lure in women and generate sympathy, and then to prevent himself from having to undergo any real change. He persists in deepening his self-pity until it forces the breakdown of the

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<sup>18</sup> Bergthaller, “Humanism and the Problem of Sustainability,” 735.

<sup>19</sup> In *The Twilight of Equality*, Lisa Duggan offers a good account of the intended aims of the neoliberalisation of higher education in the US, alongside a case study of this approach in action with the City University of New York. Duggan explains that the aim of universities in the neoliberal view is merely to provide the conditions to produce adequate workers, with the concept of intellectual value and broadened horizons being at best an unnecessary expense and at worst an obstacle to worker training. Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality*.

relationship, allowing him to move onto the next “woman with intriguing vulnerabilities” (224).

Jimmy’s mother rejected the complicity in exploitation entailed by life in the compounds and fled when he was a child, and Jimmy exploits this story to elicit.<sup>20</sup> It is only Oryx, never failing to confront Jimmy’s conventional expectations, who challenges this, saying, “*So Jimmy, your mother went somewhere else? Too bad. Maybe she had some good reasons. You thought of that?*” (225). Even with Oryx, whom he claims to love, Jimmy’s behaviour does not substantially change. He first sees Oryx, or believes he does, when viewing child pornography (102-105), and as Hall notes, Jimmy’s “lifestyle is deeply implicated in the factors that facilitate Oryx’s exploitation, even if his involvement is less direct.”<sup>21</sup> When they finally meet and start a relationship, he refuses to believe her account of her life and emotions. Instead, he insists that she conform to his expectations. He tries to get her to reassure him that the pornography in which he saw her was not harmful (and so avoid his own complicity), and he attempts to produce the same sympathy and pity from her as he received from other women. He even wonders whether the main reason he remained interested in Oryx was because “he could never get from her what the others had given him so freely” (225).<sup>22</sup>

From his mother to girlfriends to schoolmates to porn stars to Oryx, Jimmy only considers women in terms of the sexual pleasure and/or emotional support they can provide him, with no consideration of their existence as people in their own right. He engages in emotionally and economically exploitative behaviour, and his attempts to sanitise his role in such exploitation – for example, by using technological and economic language, or explicitly

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<sup>20</sup> Even some critics who are otherwise critical of Jimmy have fallen prey to this sympathy-garnering, with Bergthaller arguing that Jimmy’s mother leaving “appears like an act of sheer ideological callousness which leaves her son entirely bereft of emotional support”. See Bergthaller, “Humanism and the Problem of Sustainability,” 739. This reading reduces Jimmy’s mother to her function in relation to Jimmy, neglecting both the fact that she left to fight for a greater cause and suggesting the heavily gendered assumption that the single most important thing for her should be her role as a mother.

<sup>21</sup> Susan L. Hall, “The Last Laugh: A Critique of Object Economy in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*,” *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 4, no. 3 (2010): 194.

<sup>22</sup> The full nature and significance of Jimmy’s behaviour towards Oryx and how this relates to Oryx’s narration is explored in a later section of this chapter.

asking Oryx to absolve him of responsibility in her childhood abuse – only serve to emphasise his failure to face up to the nature of his behaviour. Jimmy’s consistent sexism and exploitation cannot be overlooked as a minor character flaw, especially given the focus on sex and gender in Atwood’s previous works such as *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Yet while it is the most prominent, it is not the only area in which Jimmy’s status as morally responsible protagonist is deeply questionable.

Jimmy is apathetically complicit in all manner of violence and exploitation. This ranges from, as noted earlier, watching brutal executions and child pornography in his youth, to consuming Happicuppa coffee (despite the Happicuppa corporation being involved in a brutal war against the farmers it has driven into poverty), to his lust for alcohol and food driving him to miss Crake’s hints at the plan to wipe out humanity. Even Jimmy’s supposed guardianship of the arts reveals a similarly materialistic approach. Jimmy accumulates and hoards words, appreciating their aesthetic value as something akin to a currency but not recognising any broader value beyond this. As Bergthaller notes, Jimmy “is fully alive to the thrill of artistic beauty but does not understand that it is meaningful not in itself, but because it provides ways of coping with conflicting tendencies.”<sup>23</sup> And his friendship with Crake – his only long-lasting relationship of any kind – is marked by petty competition on Jimmy’s part. He compares their sexual conquests and attempts to get Oryx to run away with him despite knowing of Crake’s love for her. Once Crake is dead – along with the rest of the human race – Jimmy introduces religion, which Crake detested and attempted to eradicate on a genetic level, to the posthuman Crakers. In fact, while many critics have read him as some form of guardian, many aspects of Jimmy’s relationship with the Crakers suggests an altogether more sinister role. In return for religious stories, Jimmy asks the Crakers to provide him with fish to eat. Jimmy makes no attempt to catch the fish himself even though having to do so horrifies and disgusts the Crakers, who are genetically modified to be pacifistic and vegetarian (*Oryx and Crake*, 115-17). In effect, Jimmy, having led the Crakers out of a place called Paradise, introduces them to the forbidden knowledge of religion, and the original sins of murder and trade, all traits Crake hoped to remove from them.

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<sup>23</sup> Bergthaller, “Humanism and the Problem of Sustainability,” 737.



Jimmy, then, is characterised by extreme self-interest and self-pity, and a total disregard for the feelings and needs of other people. He is both deeply unhappy in himself, and complicit in multiple ways in causing or perpetuating the suffering of others. Despite apparently fulfilling the external developmental milestones provided by his society, Jimmy's deep personal dissatisfaction and harmful behaviour mark his development as a clear failure. And as with Hal in *Infinite Jest*, the inevitable failure of Jimmy's development is encoded in the structure of the novel. *Oryx and Crake* opens to a post-apocalypse from which Jimmy narrates his past life. Thus, on the level of narrative, the possibility of a lasting and satisfying societal-individual synthesis is symbolically foreclosed from the very beginning. It is important to note here that the apocalypse and post-apocalyptic scenario do not function as some radical, cleansing break from a corrupt past for Jimmy.<sup>24</sup> Instead, his behaviour remains substantially the same: he whines, complains, and calls out for sympathy, although there is no one there to hear him. He cries out things like “‘I didn't do this on purpose,’ [...] in the snivelling child's voice he reverts to in this mood. ‘Things happened, I had no idea, it was out of my control! What could I have done?’” (50). He even highlights his lack of development by shouting, as noted at the start of this chapter, “‘I haven't grown as a person, you cretin” (279).

There is one final thing to note about Jimmy's position in the novel. As the focal character, he is undoubtedly central to the narrative, but *Oryx and Crake* goes to great lengths to decentre Jimmy and suggest that he is unimportant, insignificant, and marginal to the really significant events occurring in his world. This is suggested through everything from the title of the novel, *Oryx and Crake*, to the pantheon he creates for the Crakers, in which he positions Oryx and Crake as full-blown creator gods and himself as “‘Crake's prophet” (120).<sup>25</sup> *Oryx and Crake* contains within it the story of the annihilation of the human race as

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<sup>24</sup> Canavan's analysis of *Oryx and Crake* is particularly interesting for its examination of how the deployment of the post-apocalyptic genre in the novel – especially the simultaneous deployment of dystopia and post-apocalypse in interaction – serves to destabilise the traditional functioning of this genre, preventing romanticisation of either pre or post-apocalyptic scenario. Canavan, “Hope, but Not for Us.”

<sup>25</sup> In true self-pitying style, despite being entirely responsible for having decided his and Crake's relative positions in his pantheon, Jimmy refuses to take responsibility and complains, “[w]hy didn't they glorify [Jimmy] instead? Good, kind [Jimmy] who deserves glorification more” (*Oryx and Crake*, 120).

the end result of what appears to be decades of complex planning on Crake's part. Yet despite the obvious significance of this story, Jimmy remains almost entirely uninvolved with it. He spends the vast majority of his time both far away from the centre of events that will shape the future of his world, and totally ignorant of Crake's plans, even later wondering "[h]ow could I have missed it?" (215). He is passive throughout, undertaking no actions to drive the broader plot, and even sitting through the apocalypse in a state of passive observation and consumption. It is Crake who thinks, conceives, plans, and enacts all the major events. Two key questions arise here. What do we make of the demonstrable failure of Jimmy's personal development given his success in meeting the developmental milestones provided to him by his society? And why does the text so encourage identification with and focus on Jimmy formally, while simultaneously demonstrating his numerous behavioural failings and his unimportance to the textual world at large?

### **Jimmy, failure, and self-interest**

As explored previously, the possibility of the failure of *Bildung* has been an integral part of the *Bildungsroman* genre since its inception. *Bildungsromane* of failure have generally served to critique the societies in which they were written, demonstrating that the new capitalist conditions were not conducive to fulfilling human existence.<sup>26</sup> Jimmy's failed development can be read as a continuation of this tradition, albeit with a slightly altered approach. As mentioned previously, the novel depicts Jimmy as fulfilling the developmental milestones of his society yet simultaneously failing to positively develop on a personal level in terms of his satisfaction with life, his behaviour, and his effect on others. This suggests that the structures of his society are radically unsuited to fulfilling human development, with their focus on profit, consumption, and self-interest being entirely disconnected from human wellbeing. This focus, the extent of which is manifested in the novel in the quite literal transformation of living beings into profitable commodities, appears responsible for pushing

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<sup>26</sup> Moretti, for example, provides analyses of several examples, including Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* and Balzac's *Comedie Humaine*. See Moretti, *The Way of the World*. This approach is also central to Esty's analyses. See Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*.

Jimmy towards selfishness. As a child he demonstrates a large degree of empathy. He worries that disinfectant “would get into the eyes of the ducks” (*Oryx and Crake*, 17) that are painted on his boots; he sees a bonfire of infected animals and feels “anxious about [them], because they were being burned and surely that would hurt them” (20); he feels guilty for the “suffering animals [...] because he’d done nothing to rescue them” (20); and he does not want to eat the pig-hybrid pigeons his father works on because he thinks of them as friends and “creatures much like himself” (30). But as he grows up, Jimmy is exposed to the ideology of the culture around him, which strongly discourages empathy with others in multiple ways. Some key examples of this exposure include the aforementioned commodification of living beings, the violent and pornographic videos Jimmy watches as a teenager, and his father’s “us versus them” description of the compounds as being like castles designed “for keeping you and your buddies nice and safe inside, and for keeping everyone else outside” (32). As an adult in this society, Jimmy demonstrates none of the empathy he showed as a child.

Jimmy, like Hal in *Infinite Jest*, demonstrates the failings of neoliberal society as a developmental framework. However, *Infinite Jest* focuses on the way in which an emphasis on autonomy without a framework to provide meaning beyond the self is harmful to the individual undergoing development.<sup>27</sup> In *Oryx and Crake*, while Jimmy’s own dissatisfaction with his life is a part of the critique, it is not the core of the critique. Instead, the novel shifts attention away from Jimmy’s personal suffering to the question of how the self-interest and lack of empathy of those in privileged positions, like Jimmy, produces and is used to justify behaviour that causes broader suffering within society. Beyond this, however, Jimmy’s narrative articulates a complex critique of both the functioning of neoliberal ideology, and the parallels to this ideology that occur within the *Bildungsroman*’s core logic. The novel creates a tension between the way in which the form attributes value to elements of its textual world,

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<sup>27</sup> Jimmy exhibits many symptoms of depression, but this neither excuses his behaviour nor undermines the reading of it as a product of a neoliberal capitalist system. Jimmy’s behaviour perfectly matches what Mark Fisher has described as the form of depression symptomatic of contemporary neoliberal society, what he terms “depressive hedonia”: an “inability to do anything else *except* pursue pleasure [combined with] a sense that ‘something is missing’”. Fisher argues that there is a statistically supported connection between social context and mental illness, but notes that viewing mental illness as “an individual chemico-biological problem has enormous benefits for capitalism”, both providing a profitable market for pharmacological remedies and allowing an avoidance of responsibility on the part of capitalist systems. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 22.

and the way in which other aspects of the novel suggest value should be attributed. Through this tension, *Oryx and Crake* draws attention to aspects of the *Bildungsroman*'s traditional focus. In short, the undue attention and sympathy given to Jimmy by the novel's focus replicates precisely the self-involved logic of Jimmy himself. This logic is in turn the product of Jimmy's internalisation of neoliberal ideology's emphasis on self-interest.<sup>28</sup> There are three key elements to how *Oryx and Crake* draws attention to and makes use of the parallels between representational and ideological logic.

First, the novel contrasts the sympathy and importance suggested by the form with the numerous actions that demonstrate Jimmy to be undeserving of such sympathy and attention. Through this, *Oryx and Crake* demonstrates how the kind of self-interest advocated by neoliberalism can produce and be used to justify abusive behaviour. As the focus of the novel demonstrates, a self-interested focus marginalises others and overemphasises the importance of the emotions, needs, and experiences of the self. Second, through contrasting the primacy given to Jimmy by the form with his marginalisation by many other aspects of the text, *Oryx and Crake* demonstrates how a perspective such as Jimmy's causes further harm by ignoring broader issues beyond the individual. Large-scale issues such as climate change, overpopulation, and environmental degradation – or in *Oryx and Crake*, Crake's apocalyptic plan – are ignored because, despite the impact these things will ultimately have on the wider world, they are not easily visible or immediately relevant to the desires of the self-interested individual. Third, by encouraging identification with Jimmy despite his behaviour, *Oryx and Crake* attempts to make the reader question their own behaviour and whether they are engaged in similar ignorance, self-interest, and complicity.

*Oryx and Crake*, then, subverts the *Bildungsroman*'s focus in order to demonstrate and critique the harmful functioning of neoliberal ideology's emphasis on individual self-interest. However, the very thing that enables *Oryx and Crake* to use the *Bildungsroman* genre as a critical tool with Jimmy also presents a challenge to the genre, and to other, similarly individual-focused genres. The similarity of aspects of neoliberal and

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<sup>28</sup> For more on neoliberal self-interest, see previous chapters.

*Bildungsroman* logic can be subverted to be used for critique, but this remains a very limited application of the genre, and the many positive critical readings of Jimmy demonstrate that the approach used with him may be too successful in eliciting sympathy to be used consistently to articulate critique. In order for this subversion to occur in the first place, the core logic of the *Bildungsroman* must already have parallels with neoliberal ideology that render conventional uses of the genre susceptible to producing narratives that inadvertently perpetuate neoliberal logic, as we saw in the previous chapters of this thesis. While Jimmy demonstrates the use of these parallels to articulate critique, it is through Crake that the novel explores how they place serious limitations on the genre's political capacity for narrating alternatives to, rather than critiques of, the neoliberal worldview.

### **Crake as character**

One of the major criticisms of *Oryx and Crake* has been the perceived flatness of characters other than Jimmy. As Spiegel notes, the novel's detractors tend "to share the same critique: the novel's eponymous characters Oryx and Crake both lack psychological depth and plausibility".<sup>29</sup> Crake in particular is often dismissed as "Crake, the mad genius", in the words of Hall, and viewed as little more than an archetype.<sup>30</sup> Even those critics who do not dismiss these characters as flawed constructions "routinely interpret Oryx and Crake through archetype or allegory."<sup>31</sup> Such readings overlook key details in the novel, relying too heavily on identification with Jimmy, and making assumptions that ignore the way in which *Oryx and Crake* subverts the tropes it deploys.<sup>32</sup> Close analysis shows that Crake serves as an inverted counterpart to Jimmy, revealing a character who is underexplored and too easily dismissed due to the mode of narration in which he operates.

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<sup>29</sup> Spiegel, "Character in a Post-National World," 119.

<sup>30</sup> Hall, "The Last Laugh," 183.

<sup>31</sup> Spiegel, "Character in a Post-National World," 120.

<sup>32</sup> Canavan's analysis of the novel's generic subversion, mentioned previously, is a good example of this. Canavan, "Hope, but Not for Us."

One of the few analyses that does not dismiss Crake is provided by Spiegel, who argues that Crake and Oryx's presentation is "not evidence of an author's waning storytelling skills or unrealistic characters [...] but rather key pieces of a subversive narrative strategy".<sup>33</sup> His reading centres around the concept of neomedievalism: the idea that contemporary global capitalism has produced a "world of simultaneous globalization and fragmentation where the nation-state persists, though weakened".<sup>34</sup> According to proponents of neo-medievalism, this fragmentation of nation and new distribution of power has resulted in a system of contradictory loyalties closer to that of medieval Europe, where individuals had competing loyalties to church, lords, and kin. These contemporary competing loyalties in turn result in a "social and political schizophrenia [requiring] multiple and often contradictory loyalties that can only be reconciled through the fragmentation of the collective, continuous self into a patchwork of distinct and dissociated identities".<sup>35</sup> According to Spiegel, Crake is an attempt to represent such a fragmentary personality, with his character the result of "contradictory loyalties [to the] technocratic system [and to] a terrorist group seeking to destroy said system".<sup>36</sup> Critics and reviewers who view Crake as unrealistic do so not because it is impossible for a person such as Crake to exist, writes Spiegel, but because they are measuring him against standards of character realism defined by the "modern novel" – by which he means the standards established at the form's origins in the 18<sup>th</sup> century – which arose under conditions different from those of the contemporary period.

Spiegel's analysis, while differing from the general critical approach to Crake, still has certain flaws. The theoretical assertion that nationality can serve or has ever served as the sole basis for a unified identity, overriding loyalties to family, friends, and other sources, is

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<sup>33</sup> Spiegel, "Character in a Post-National World," 120.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 126. Interestingly, this idea of a schizophrenic self bears a striking resemblance to the "fragmentation of the self" that Philip Mirowski posits in *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go To Waste*. Mirowski argues that a single, unified self is the natural, normal, and healthy state of affairs, and that the neoliberal emphasis on the entrepreneurial self, aided by technologies such as Facebook that allow the packaging and presenting of aspects of identity, results in a "fragmentation of the neoliberal self [as] not just an employee or a student, but also simultaneously a product to be sold, a walking advertisement, a manager of a resume". Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, 108.

<sup>36</sup> Spiegel, "Character in a Post-National World," 128.

arguable enough. But this is largely irrelevant given that Spiegel's reading of Crake is clearly contradicted by the evidence available in the novel itself.<sup>37</sup> The lynchpin of Spiegel's reading is the idea that Crake demonstrates a schizophrenic mix of loyalties, and that he triggers his apocalyptic virus because he discovers Jimmy's affair with Oryx, causing his fragmented self to collapse "into a contradictory and highly unstable collective identity".<sup>38</sup> However, far from being a spur-of-the-moment decision, Crake's engineering of the apocalypse takes years of meticulous planning. He builds up a position of power and autonomy within a corporation, gathers together other disaffected scientists, carefully designs a virus to efficiently and exclusively eliminate the human race, custom builds the Crakers as a peaceful and non-destructive replacement for humanity, and mobilises the corporate machinery of advertising and distribution to spread the virus in pills marketed as libido enhancers. His final words and actions, supposedly those of a highly unstable character suffering a psychological collapse, show none of the instability and schizophrenia that Spiegel's reading suggests. Crake ensures that everything is in its planned position – the virus distributed and Jimmy both vaccinated and locked away with the Crakers – before coming to Jimmy with an unconscious Oryx. There Crake calmly tells Jimmy "I'm counting on you" and "slit[s] [Oryx's] throat" (385), causing Jimmy, predictably, to shoot him. While Spiegel is correct to suggest that the portrayal of Crake is a deliberate choice, his reading of Crake, and so his understanding of what purpose Crake serves, is flawed.

Crake may show dedication and consistency in his pursuit of his plan, thereby undermining Spiegel's reading, but he is not a monomaniacal mad scientist, obsessed with

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<sup>37</sup> Spiegel roots his analysis of the role of the nation in identity in a reading of Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. However, Spiegel makes a somewhat tenuous jump between a newly imagined nationhood serving as a basis for a continued political-social grouping and it serving as a core element that prevents the disintegration of self. Spiegel overlooks the numerous analyses that link the rise of the novel to the rise of capitalism, a link which also occurs in *Imagined Communities*, and to an attendant growth in individualism. In such analyses, rather than allowing the creation of a singular, national identity, the rise of the novel served as a way of narrating multiple, increasingly different identities in such a way as to demonstrate the existence of a social totality of which they were all a part. In so doing, it enabled continued social, rather than individual-psychological, unity. The most famous of these analyses is Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*, but the rise of individualism also plays a key role in Moretti's account of the *Bildungsroman*'s origins. See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1987); Moretti, *The Way of the World*.

<sup>38</sup> Spiegel, "Character in a Post-National World," 128 and 129.

destroying humanity for no better reason than his own insanity. Nor is he there to demonstrate the evils of science gone too far, as readings that view him as archetypal or allegorical would have it. *Oryx and Crake* provides numerous hints that Crake has both depth of character and emotional range – all things for which Jimmy is praised by critics and reviewers – and there are numerous indications that he suffers some kind of internal conflict. As Jimmy notes from the post-apocalypse, “[e]very moment he’s lived the past few months was dreamed first by Crake. No wonder Crake screamed so much [in his sleep]” (129). Crake’s relationships with Jimmy and Oryx are the best demonstration of emotion and personality beyond that of an archetypal scientist, and are the best example of Crake’s existence as a fully realised character.

There are many small indications of Crake’s affection for Jimmy: their continued email communication, the smiles and inside jokes the two share, Crake’s personal visits to Jimmy and the numerous hints about his plan that he drops in Jimmy’s company. When Crake first introduces Jimmy to his project in Paradise, for instance, he affectionately remarks, “[g]lad you’re here, cork-nut, [...] I needed somebody I could talk to” (360). Given the huge resources at Crake’s disposal, and Jimmy’s mediocrity in both personality and social position, there seems to be no reason other than personal attachment for Crake to involve Jimmy in his project, and there is no reason for him to fake a lifelong friendship. Jimmy himself notes that the job Crake assigns him is hardly necessary as the “BlyssPluss Pill would sell itself [;] it didn’t need help from him” (367). While this job also serves as a cover, keeping Jimmy around until he is needed to ensure the Crakers are released from Paradise, Jimmy is only selected for this job because Crake knows him, not for any particular qualifications.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Critics such as Howells argue that Jimmy is chosen to instil in the Crakers his humanist and literary values, a reading seemingly supported by Crake saying that the scientists he employs “wouldn’t have the empathy to deal with the Paradise models” (*Oryx and Crake*, 376). However, when pushed directly on what skills Jimmy has that make him suitable to the job, Crake clarifies that Jimmy has “a great ability to sit around not doing much of anything” (376). Crake views art as little more than outsized mating behaviour, demonstrates little faith in human empathy, and has attempted to custom engineer the Crakers to have precisely the behaviour he desires (and not have all the behaviours that Jimmy exemplifies). As such, it seems likely he chooses Jimmy partially for their personal relationship, but also because he believes Jimmy’s self-absorption and passivity will make him avoid suicide and survive long enough to guide the Crakers out of Paradise.



The focus of *Oryx and Crake* on Jimmy means that Crake's relationship with Oryx features minimally in the novel, but even Jimmy, who is jealous of the relationship and desires to have Oryx to himself, immediately recognises Crake's emotional attachment to her. A mere page of dialogue after first seeing Oryx, when asking Crake who she is, "Jimmy's heart [sinks]. Crake was in love, for the first time ever. It wasn't just the praise, rare enough. It was the tone of voice" (366). There is no reason to suspect that this affection is not genuine. There is nothing to be gained for Crake by pretending to be in love, and his involvement of Oryx – who, despite being a teacher for the Crakers and a distributor of the pills, is unaware of Crake's true aims – seems motivated again largely by personal attachment. Even in his eventual murder of Oryx, unconscious in his arms as the virus she unwittingly helped spread starts to wipe out humanity, Crake demonstrates an emotional attachment, albeit one which continues the objectification and control by men which Oryx has experienced her entire life. Long before he enacts his plan, Crake asks Jimmy if he would "kill someone [he] loved to spare them pain?" (375). In light of Crake's eventual actions, the significance of this question is clear: it explains his motives for murdering Oryx. Furthermore, rather than stay alive to see his plan with the Crakers become fully realised, Crake kills Oryx in a way that guarantees his own death. This suggests that despite believing that his plan is ultimately necessary, Crake recognises on some level that what he has done is horrific despite its necessity, and believes that he deserves death, both for the plan and what he does to Oryx.

These elements serve to present Crake as a character that goes beyond archetype, but it is his motivation for his world-ending plan that is key to understanding why the novel represents Crake in the way it does. There is an element of personal vengeance to Crake's plan. His father, who "believed in contributing to the improvement of the human lot" (215), was murdered in order to prevent him exposing that the corporation he worked for, HelthWyzer, was spreading new diseases in their vitamin supplements in order to profit from selling the treatments. In what could be an act of ironic vengeance, Crake uses a similar

method to distribute his own virus, putting it in pills sold for another purpose.<sup>40</sup> But while this may be a contributing factor to Crake's aims, throughout his friendship with Jimmy Crake drops many hints that he is deeply concerned with civilisation's destructiveness and unsustainability, although Jimmy, in his self-absorption, always misses them. Even as early as their university years, Crake asks such things as "suppose for the sake of argument [...] that civilization as we know it gets destroyed[?]" (261) and ponders whether human civilisation is worth preserving given its destructiveness.<sup>41</sup> There is more to this motivation than a moral objection to humanity's destruction of nature. In *Paradise*, Crake tells Jimmy that as "a species [humanity] is in deep trouble" (347). Crake has access to information that confirms that their society's rampant materialism has exploited the available resources beyond all limits and, as Crake puts it, they are "running out of space-time" (347) because soon "demand is going to exceed supply *for everyone*" (347). Humanity is heading for a violent collapse, which might take life on Earth with it. In order to preserve life, Crake decides to destroy the human race, which he believes to have destructive, overexpansive behaviours encoded in its very nature. In light of this, Crake's actions are in a certain, twisted sense heroic. He is motivated by a positive desire to preserve life and improve the world but has seen the failure of all less extreme attempts to change the world, such as those of his father and Jimmy's mother, fail. To Crake, it seems only extreme options are left open.

Crake, then, is neither fragmentary nor flat as a character but is depicted as having a range of emotions and attachments and a consistent personality and motivation. He is not only central to the novel's plot and world but an interesting character in and of himself. Yet *Oryx and Crake* only illustrates his character through small hints and observations from Jimmy's perspective. It does not narrate Crake's own perspective, and it leaves him absent for a large portion of the narrative. Spiegel offers one key observation that helps explain this:

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<sup>40</sup> The nature of his father's death also explains other apparent instances of callousness or lack of emotion by Crake. He seems to show no feeling, for example, when his mother or "uncle Pete" die. However, Crake's father, immediately before being murdered, had warned them both that he was going to whistle-blow on the company, strongly implying that one or both were complicit in his death.

<sup>41</sup> This conflict is handily demonstrated by the Blood and Roses game that Jimmy and Crake play in their youth, where human atrocities are pitted against human achievements to see which outweighs which in a reductive arithmetic of value (*Oryx and Crake*, 89-92).

reviewers understand Jimmy but not Crake “because [the reviewers] inhabit a world defined by the modern novel; a world where representation has replaced reality as the touchstone for psychological plausibility”.<sup>42</sup> Spiegel is in a sense correct, but more than just being an example of the modern novel, *Oryx and Crake* evokes the *Bildungsroman*. As such, it relies on a more specific representational logic, one which has a great many parallels to neoliberal ideology, as seen with Jimmy. The way Crake is presented, then, is the result of this intersection between narrative and ideological logic, which renders Crake’s representation difficult and demonstrates the problems facing the *Bildungsroman* in narrating alternatives to the neoliberal worldview.

### **Crake and the logic of growth**

Crake is not entirely immune to the neoliberal ideology of his society, and he demonstrates an internalisation of some core ideas. Most significantly, he appears to accept his society’s notions of what constitutes innate human behaviour. This understanding is most clearly demonstrated by Crake’s plan, and by the reasoning behind the many functions of the BlyssPluss pill, which he designs the way he does because of “the nature of human nature” (*Oryx and Crake*, 346). According to Crake, the biggest threats to human life arise from war, “which is to say misplaced sexual energy”, from “[c]ontagious diseases,” and from “[o]verpopulation, leading – as we’ve seen in spades – to environmental degradation and poor nutrition” (345). Consequently, the pill is marketed as an all-in-one libido enhancer, longevity treatment, and disease-protector. However, it secretly serves to sterilise the user and, even more secretly, spreads the disease with which Crake wipes out humanity.

Crake reveals that he believes humanity to be defined by two key things: an insatiable hunger for sexual gratification, with the failure to pursue it resulting in violence, and an unending drive for expansion, which leads to an inevitable overexploitation of available resources, threatening the continuation of life itself. The former determines the method for

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<sup>42</sup> Spiegel, “Character in a Post-National World,” 131.

the virus's distribution; the latter explains the virus's necessity. As a scientist in a society where the genetic modification and the instrumentalisation of biology is used to provide everything, Crake can only understand humanity in reductive biological terms, and comes up with a highly instrumental, genetic solution. Yet there are numerous indications in the novel that these behaviours are not so biologically encoded as Crake suggests. One of the selling points of the BlyssPluss pill, for instance, is an increase in libido, suggesting that the desire for sex on the part of its users outstrips their biological capacity and must originate elsewhere. In addition, there are numerous characters who do not seek to reproduce, yet nonetheless contribute to detrimental levels of resource use, Jimmy chief among them.

The central elements of the behaviours Crake highlights can be abstracted further, and doing so reveals that Crake is at core concerned with two features of human behaviour. The first is self-interest, which manifests itself as the pursuit of personal pleasure above all other concerns, with sex providing one particularly notable example of such a pursuit. The second is unlimited growth (and the attendant resource consumption), which necessarily results in devastation. Population growth is merely the most visible example of such growth and resource degradation. Put in these terms, it is clear that Crake accepts the model of innate human behaviour that underlies neoliberal capitalism. Under this rubric, all behaviour and motivation is reducible to individual self-interest, with each individual always seeking to maximise material gains for themselves.<sup>43</sup> Constant growth is linked to this self-interested maximisation of gains and is central not only to neoliberalism but to capitalism more generally, in which it is viewed as both natural and necessary.<sup>44</sup> Yet Crake accepts only the model of human nature, and not the neoliberal understanding that this behaviour, when given free reign and channelled through the free market, will inevitably produce positive results.

There are a number of characters through whom *Oryx and Crake* demonstrates that this model of human behaviour, however much Crake accepts it, is not in fact accurate but is

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<sup>43</sup> The connection between this kind of self-interest and the pleasure-seeking behaviour exemplified by self-interested characters is a central part of *Infinite Jest's* critique, as seen in the previous chapter.

<sup>44</sup> As Moretti notes in his discussion of the origins of the original *Bildungsromane*, closure and boundaries are inimical to capitalism's fundamental nature. Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 25-26.

instead the product of a cultural-ideological framework that emphasises certain aspects of human behaviour while undermining and ignoring others. Both Jimmy's mother and Crake's father sacrifice their own self-interest, personal gain, and social-biological reproductive function in order to pursue higher goals that are in many ways in opposition to growth. But it is Crake himself who provides the best example of the failure of the neoliberal model. Both the underlying logic of Crake's plan and his lifelong dedication to it are in complete conflict with the imperatives of growth and self-interest. In wiping out the human species, Crake acts in a way that directly opposes any kind of growth – be it reproductive, economic, or of any other kind – and the resource consumption that comes with it. His lifelong dedication to the plan also means that the core of his personality is characterised by consistency rather than change and growth. Furthermore, in killing himself Crake not only precludes any personal growth but also rejects self-interest at the most fundamental level.<sup>45</sup> Any material gain he makes throughout his life is either channelled into the plan, and so into its own negation, or sacrificed during the plan's enactment. Crake, then, very clearly contradicts the neoliberal model of human behaviour provided by his society, and it is this contradiction that is the key to understanding how he is presented in the novel.

Writing about *Freedom* (2010) by Jonathan Franzen, Margaret Gram offers an analysis of the novel's representation of political issues that can also provide a useful insight into the reasons for the characterisation of Crake in *Oryx and Crake*.<sup>46</sup> Gram notes that numerous reviewers claim that *Freedom*, an otherwise brilliant novel, is let down by a sudden didacticism when it comes to discussing the question of overpopulation. Gram argues, as I have above, that the concern with overpopulation actually represents a broader concern with capitalist growth, but she further suggests that the novel's difficulty in organically addressing the problem stems from a core part of the formal logic of the social realist novel. According to Gram, social realism relies on the reader identifying with the main characters and being

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<sup>45</sup> For an interesting analysis of the relationship between self-interest, survival instinct, and life see Jane Elliott, "The Microeconomic Mode," in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, ed. Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

<sup>46</sup> Margaret Hunt Gram, "Freedom's Limit: Jonathan Franzen, the Realist Novel, and the Problem of Growth," *American Literary History* 26, no. 2 (2014): 295-316.

invested in their success. In this way, these characters serve as a quasi-stand-in for the self, and you “can identify [with the characters] or you can abhor growth” but you cannot do both.<sup>47</sup> As such, any attempt to address growth in such a novel faces the problem of running counter to the very basis of the novel’s functioning.

While Gram is writing about a different novel and the social realism genre, her core observations can be applied if anything more strongly to *Oryx and Crake*’s use of the *Bildungsroman*. In its focus on a single, central character, the *Bildungsroman* genre relies heavily on the kind of character identification and investment which Gram identifies as also operating in the social realist novel. As analysed previously, Jimmy provides a good example of the functioning of this identification, as well as its parallels to the neoliberal logic of self-interest. However, in its emphasis on following the development of a central character over time, the *Bildungsroman* also has a more explicit investment in growth, which goes beyond that which Gram argues is implicit in a reader’s identification with characters in a social realist novel.<sup>48</sup> In defying the neoliberal model of behaviour, then, Crake also defies the standards of representation of the *Bildungsroman*, lacking or outright rejecting both an attachment to growth, and the investment in personal interest that traditionally enables character identification in the genre.

If Jimmy demonstrates the dangers of the overlap between certain aspects of the *Bildungsroman* and neoliberal ideology, Crake demonstrates the profound limitations this overlap places on the genre’s political capacity in the neoliberal era. Core components of the *Bildungsroman* share an underlying logic with aspects of neoliberal ideology, making rejection of the latter result in an inability to fit the narration of the former. This overlap of logics, then, makes narrating alternatives to the neoliberal worldview difficult within the constraints of the *Bildungsroman*. Crake’s society demonstrates the ultimate effect of such a lack of alternatives, a world unable to escape from unending expansion and consumption,

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>48</sup> Even *Bildungsromane* that depict the failure of development of a central character are in some way invested in the necessity and importance of growth, with failed development being used, as is the case with Jimmy, to demonstrate something gone wrong, generally on a social level. See, for example, Moretti’s of *The Red and the Black* in *The Way of the World*, or Esty’s analysis of colonial *Bildungsromane* in *Unseasonable Youth*.

resulting in violence, inequality, ecological devastation, and its own inevitable collapse. Crake himself serves as an even starker warning. Having only the narratives and models of his society, which naturalise capitalist assumptions about human behaviour as innate, he lacks the means to conceive of or comprehend alternatives to this idea of human nature. Lacking any such alternatives, or even the tools to imagine them, the only solution available to him is the destruction of humanity in its entirety.

### **Oryx's *Bildung***

Despite her prominence in the novel's title, by far the most critically neglected character of *Oryx and Crake* is Oryx herself. She is frequently dismissed alongside Crake as unrealistic and unconvincing and as little more than an exotic, oriental stereotype.<sup>49</sup> Yet even more so than Crake, who receives a fair share of attention even from those critical of his representation, scholars tend to ignore Oryx, with the novel's core issues often taken to be illustrated by the conflict between the two male characters.<sup>50</sup> Yet Oryx features in the novel as much, if not more than, Crake, and there is even a section of the novel which details a large portion of Oryx's life in her own words. Oryx's narrative has two key critical functions. First, it works to demonstrate the harmful nature of certain elements of neoliberal ideology and practice, and the way in which these elements interact with already existing gender hierarchies to bring about exploitation and abuse. Second, it rejects the simplistic narratives and expectations that are normally applied to women like Oryx, who are marginalised by class, race, and sex. Through this lack of conformity to expectations, Oryx's narrative explores the functioning of these dominant, simplistic narratives, which serve the interests of

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<sup>49</sup> Both Hall and Spiegel offer extensive overviews of responses to Oryx (and Crake) by both reviewers and critics. See Spiegel, "Character in a Post-National World," 119-20; Hall, "The Last Laugh," 180.

<sup>50</sup> Howells, for instance, writes that in *Oryx and Crake* Atwood "makes both her protagonists male (Crake is the 'numbers man' and Jimmy is the 'word man')" in order to undermine the traditional, gendered, binary opposition between art and science, emotion and reason. Bergthaller instead argues that Jimmy and Crake stand for two equally flawed approaches to tackling the problems of human nature, failed humanism and horrific posthumanism. Canavan explores in depth the primitivist aspects of Crake's beliefs and plan, contrasting this with Jimmy's responses and the role Jimmy plays in undermining Crake's plans for the Crakers. All three, however, rarely if ever mention the character of Oryx. Howells, "Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Visions," 170; Bergthaller, "Humanism and the Problem of Sustainability," 729; Canavan, "Hope, but Not for Us."

the dominant socio-political order and undermine alternative narratives that challenge the neoliberal status quo. The critical reception of *Oryx*, however, suggests that the *Bildungsroman* narrative approach faces great difficulty in challenging such dominant narratives due to the genre's narrative focus and the socio-political context into which the critique emerges.

As Jimmy is the novel's viewpoint character, it is primarily through his perspective that Oryx is seen, and it is chiefly from him that the idea of Oryx as mysterious or elusive emerges. Statements like "[s]he was never very forthcoming at the best of times" (*Oryx and Crake*, 132) are a fairly typical response from Jimmy when Oryx does not tell him what he wants to know. Leaving aside how this response from Jimmy expects and demands disclosure from Oryx about her abusive past, assuming some kind of obligation on her part to Jimmy, it is important to note how the novel frames Jimmy's claims about Oryx. His comments and assertions are often phrased in a way that highlights their fictionality. At one point he says that he "sometimes felt that her entire past – everything she'd told him – was his own invention" (371), and at another point, he notes that there was "Crake's story about her, and Jimmy's story [...] a more romantic version; and then there was her own story about herself, which was different from both, and not very romantic at all" (133). Jimmy, known as the words man and as a prodigious storyteller, makes full use of his ability when it comes to Oryx, and it is revealing that Jimmy lists Oryx's own story of her life after his and Crake's versions. The novel makes clear that, rather than a lack of information, there is a lot of information, coming from numerous incompatible narratives, surrounding Oryx.

Jimmy, who, again, is the prime source of information about Oryx for most of the novel, in fact applies two identifiable narratives to Oryx. The first, which corresponds to what he terms the romantic story, is that of Oryx as the embodiment of his sexual ideal and of a special connection between the two of them. Perhaps the best example of this is Jimmy's relationship to the image of Oryx, or someone he believes to be Oryx, that he first sees on HottTotts, the site on which he and Crake watch child pornography. When he first sees it, he feels like Oryx looks "right into the eyes of the viewer – right into Jimmy's eyes into the secret person inside him" (104). He feels "burned by this look" (104), and while he claims to



suddenly feel a previously lacking guilt, he also feels “hooked through the gills: if he’d been offered instant teleportation to wherever Oryx was he’d have taken it” (104). He later insists, despite information to the contrary, that this picture must be of Oryx (371).

This story, which is representative of part of his broader approach to Oryx, has several key elements. It posits that there is some kind of special connection between the two of them, that Oryx has a special insight into Jimmy’s person, and that she has directed attention specifically towards him. Additionally, it inverts the power dynamic of their first “encounter”, legitimising and romanticising Jimmy’s obsession. The story positions their relationship as somehow uniquely different from the other sexual relationships Oryx has had in the past, a point Jimmy presses by attempting to get Oryx to run away with him, show him sympathy, and confess to loving him alone (374-75). In addition, in insisting that the picture is Oryx – an insistence which he applies to other supposed sightings of her – Jimmy transposes all his desire onto a single individual, rendering her both a romantic and sexual ideal. Oryx becomes his single “true love” and the single target of all of his sexual desire, the manifestation of all his sexual/romantic fantasies made flesh.

The second narrative Jimmy constructs around Oryx is of her as a constantly suffering victim, treated entirely abusively by everyone until she arrived in the US and encountered him. For example, Jimmy recalls thinking he understood why Oryx did not want to talk about her past, and in response telling her “[i]t’s all right, [...] [n]one of it was your fault” (*Oryx and Crake*, 132), although this response only confuses Oryx. In another instance, Jimmy remembers wondering “[w]here was her rage, how far down was it buried, what did he have to do to dig it up?” (167). Through numerous thoughts and statements like these, Jimmy paints a picture of Oryx as deeply troubled and pained but repressing her pain. It is revealing of Jimmy’s motives that, despite believing that the recollection of past events will cause her great pain, Jimmy insists on Oryx recounting these events, and digs for details with the explicit intention of producing a pained response.

This image of Oryx’s emotional state works hand-in-hand with Jimmy’s understanding of her treatment by others. Jimmy refuses to believe that there were any acts of

kindness, or displays of guilt, on the part of people involved in Oryx's trafficking. But this insistence on Oryx having been universally abused and dehumanised, which implicitly dehumanises her in insisting that no one *could have* treated her in any way that recognised her humanity, is applied not only to those clearly involved in her trafficking but to those potentially not involved. For instance, Jimmy recalls an article he read about a "so-called maid scandal" (371) involving the trafficking of young women. He believes he saw Oryx in this article, and when he asks Oryx about it, he insists, despite numerous protestations from her, that there was a "creepy old geezer [who made her] have sex in a garage" (371). When Oryx says that her arrival in America was aided by a "kind old man" (371) and his wife, who were "trying to be helpful" (372), Jimmy insists that the woman "hated sex" (372) and so "put up with [Oryx, to get] the old goat off her back" (372).<sup>51</sup> This narrative, then, tells a story of Oryx's life as constituted entirely by abuse and a lack of recognition of her as a person, rejecting outright the idea that she could have experienced kindness or positive treatment.

Were these two narratives the reader's only access to Oryx, it might be understandable to read Oryx as mysterious or archetypal. Yet, while her speech is filtered through Jimmy's recollection and surrounded on all sides by his assertions, the novel also contains sections where Oryx provides her own, coherent, micro-*Bildungsroman*.<sup>52</sup> She explains that she was born in a poor, rural village, somewhere in East Asia. After her father died, her mother was forced to sell Oryx and one of her brothers to a man they called Uncle En, or else face starvation. From there, Oryx was taken to the city, where she worked as a flower seller, was used to blackmail potential paedophiles, and, after the murder of Uncle En, was sold on to star in child pornography. In response to Jimmy insisting that Oryx was flown to America and kept in a garage as a sex slave, she offers her own account of coming to America, as mentioned in the previous paragraph. Oryx says she was taken in by a kind old

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<sup>51</sup> Oryx's account of events is in fact even supported by the original version of the story Jimmy gets from the news, whether or not it actually features Oryx. The girl in the news story "refused to say anything negative about the man" (*Oryx and Crake*, 299) whose garage she is found in. She insists that she was rescued, promised she would be sent to school once her English was good enough, and had spent her time studying English and watching TV (299).

<sup>52</sup> The largest section of this occurs between pages 132 and 169 of *Oryx and Crake*.

man who was “rescuing young girls [and] paid for [her] plane ticket” (371). Significantly, she notes that there were many others in the old man’s house, an unexpected detail which adds a certain implication of veracity to her account (371-72). While there are some elements of Oryx’s story that need to be gleaned from the accounts given by other characters – how she met Crake, for instance – she provides a clear account of much of her early life, often with highly specific details of individuals and events.

Oryx’s narration, however, frequently contradicts the two narratives of Oryx offered by Jimmy, much to his frustration. When Jimmy shows her the image from HottTotts, she says it is not her and points out that a “lot of girls did these things” (105). It is only when he insists that it must be her that any ambiguity arises, with Oryx explicitly asking “[d]o you want me to pretend?” (105) and “[w]ould that make you happy, Jimmy?” (105). Similarly, when Jimmy presses Oryx to confirm that it “wasn’t real sex [but] only acting” (169) in the pornography in which he first saw her, and so relieve him of any guilt, Oryx instead says “[b]ut Jimmy, you should know. All sex is real” (169). Numerous exchanges like these deny Jimmy’s idealisation of Oryx as some kind of guiltless, ideal sexual fantasy object with whom he has a unique relationship.

Similarly, Oryx notes many small acts of kindness and positive interactions on the part of those she encountered as a child. This is not just the case with the man who brought her to America but even those more clearly and directly involved in her trafficking and exploitation. Far from any kind of repressed lack of emotion, Oryx demonstrates a wide range of different emotional attachments and responses to these people. For instance, Oryx recounts how she cried when she found out Uncle En had been murdered. Jimmy insists that Uncle En “was vermin, he was a cockroach” (159), to which Oryx responds, “[h]e liked me” (159). Jimmy says that Uncle En did not like Oryx but liked money, to which Oryx responds, “[o]f course, [...] Everyone likes that. But he could have done much worse things to me, and he didn’t do them” (159). Jimmy refuses to accept this account, and all the “sweetness and acceptance and crap” (167) that he thinks Oryx is presenting, as again it conflicts with his own narrative of her. Nor is she unable to express negative emotions, which would allow Jimmy to explain her lack of anger and unexpected emotional responses as the result of

repression. At one point in her exchange with Jimmy she talks “coldly” (166) and says that “Crake is right [that Jimmy does] not have an elegant mind” (166). This is not to say that Oryx was not exploited by those in her childhood, but the story is not nearly so clear-cut and simple as Jimmy attempts to present it, with regards to both Oryx’s treatment by others and her emotional response to her own life.

In addition to the way her narrative conflicts with the narrative that Jimmy attempts to impose upon her, Oryx often challenges Jimmy more directly. She draws attention to Jimmy’s involvement in her exploitation quite explicitly, protesting to Jimmy that a cameraman she had sex with as a child “never did anything with me that you don’t do. Not nearly so many things!” (166). She directly addresses how poverty forced the hand of those in her home country. When Jimmy is indignant and rude about the villagers, she asks him, “you would like it better maybe if we all starved to death?” (138). Finally, she draws attention to the way in which Jimmy’s desire for her to express suffering is another form of the fetishisation that has contributed to her sexual exploitation throughout her life. When he says that he does not “buy” her lack of anger, she responds, “[i]f you don’t want to buy that, Jimmy, [...] what is it you would like to buy instead?” (167). This highlights the fact that this desire for her to have experienced suffering is part of a broader economic and ideological system.

In short, the two narratives that Jimmy offers are in direct conflict with Oryx’s own narrative of her life, both because of the way they differ from Oryx’s narrative and the direct challenges Oryx targets at them. Oryx provides a coherent account of her life and fully admits to such things as featuring in child pornography and having sex with a camera-man in return for English lessons as a child. When she claims to have been sad over the death of Uncle En, or expresses confusion and asks, “Jimmy, why do you dream up such things? I was never in a garage” (370-71) in response to Jimmy’s assertions about her arrival in America, there is actually very little reason to doubt her except for the certainty with which Jimmy does so. Oryx’s supposed mysteriousness or ambiguity is not the result of a lack of realism or believability, then, but the result of Jimmy’s expectations and narratives being privileged over Oryx’s own account. While the novel attempts to draw attention to the falsity of these

expectations through Oryx – who even explicitly states, “[y]ou have a lot of pictures in your head, Jimmy. Where did you get them? Why do you think they are pictures of me?” (132) – judging by critical responses to the character of Oryx, this attempt has only been partially successful. The way the novel challenges expectations is of particular significance because these expectations are not unique to Jimmy. In the same way that Jimmy’s personality is a result of his development in a neoliberal society, his narratives and expectations reflect those of the dominant society he inhabits and have a key function in protecting the interests of that society. Oryx’s challenge to these narratives is a challenge to the society itself.

### **Oryx and societal narratives**

One key critic who does not dismiss or ignore Oryx is Susan Hall.<sup>53</sup> Hall still agrees with readings that view Oryx as fundamentally ambiguous, saying that “there is much uncertainty about even the most basic elements of Oryx’s identity”.<sup>54</sup> However, she views this ambiguity and “difficulty of interpreting [Oryx’s] speech and laughter” as having a political function in the novel, and she makes several key observations that are useful for the analysis offered in this chapter.<sup>55</sup> According to Hall, Oryx’s “seeming inscrutability” serves to force Jimmy to confront the fact that she is not just an object for his sexual satisfaction and so demonstrate a core psychoanalytic observation: the object economy will always fail to satisfy sexual drive.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, Hall argues that Oryx’s ambiguity is intended to force an awareness of the problematic nature of the dominant rhetoric of human trafficking. This rhetoric, Hall notes, offers a simplistic vision that demonises those in poverty-stricken countries, ignores the role of the West, and frequently strips women such as Oryx of agency.

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<sup>53</sup> Hall, “The Last Laugh.” Spiegel also includes Oryx fairly extensively in his neomedieval analysis. However, his reading of her differs little from his reading of Crake and so, having already addressed his analysis of Crake, I have chosen not to focus on this reading here. For more, see Spiegel, “Character in a Post-National World.”

<sup>54</sup> Hall, “The Last Laugh,” 180. Hall notes that the reader does not even know Oryx’s “real name”. Although it is not her birth name, Oryx does reveal that she was called SuSu earlier in life

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

While Hall's analysis is useful in many regards, I disagree with her on the idea that Oryx is fundamentally ambiguous. My analysis focuses on respecting that it is perfectly possible that Oryx's account is true, and that its apparent ambiguity arises from the way in which it conflicts with the expectations Jimmy imposes. However, similar conclusions to Hall's, with some expansion on the specific relation to neoliberalism these narratives have, can be drawn from my analytic approach.

Oryx's story evokes the *Bildungsroman*, in both its overall structure and a number of minor details, but by virtue of her race, sex, and class, the trajectory of development normalised by the *Bildungsroman*, which is derived from the experience of a privileged minority, is not available to Oryx. From a young age she is trafficked, exploited, sexualised, and commodified; questions of personal autonomy, education, employment, identity, and consumption have a very different significance to her than they do for someone in Jimmy's position. Oryx, then, does not fit the model of *Bildung* seen with Jimmy, which is so suited to a neoliberal ideal of the autonomous, self-interested individual. But much as the core logic of the *Bildungsroman* arises from an attempt to synthesise the individual with social structure, the two narratives that Jimmy attempts to impose upon Oryx serve a similarly integrative function for the neoliberal social order, although this attempt at integration has little concern for questions of Oryx's autonomy.

The narrative of Oryx as an ideal sexual fantasy object is representative of a broader sexualisation of women, especially those in a similarly marginalised position. This narrative's value to the dominant social order arises from the way in which it serves the interests of two of the dominant social hierarchies: patriarchy and capitalism. The narrative serves the interests of the dominant gender, as Jimmy clearly demonstrates, in that it both acts out a sexual fantasy that serves male desires and contains within it a negation of any guilt for the implications of that fantasy. It implicitly or explicitly suggests the idea that the women acting out the fantasy either have no desires of their own or desire only to fulfil the male fantasy. As Jimmy notes when watching HottTotts, "[t]here were at least three layers of contradictory make-believe, one on top of the other. *I want to, I want not to, I want to*" (*Oryx and Crake*, 104). Simultaneously, this narrative provides the basis for a highly profitable industry

through a market in prostitution, pornography, and trafficking. As such, it also serves the prime capitalist interest: making money.

While superficially contradictory, the narrative of Oryx as a suffering victim who never knew empathy before her arrival in Western society serves a complementary function to the narrative of sexual fantasy. This victim narrative reflects much of the anti-trafficking rhetoric that Hall explores. As Hall notes, those in Oryx's home country are "demonized", diverting attention away from the role Western capitalism plays in producing the structural conditions and demand for trafficking while also "serv[ing] specific ideological interests" of religious and anti-immigrant groups.<sup>57</sup> Hall is largely correct, but it is important to note that Jimmy also demonises those Oryx interacts with in the West, and there are broader ideological interests at play here. A key element of how this narrative functions is individualisation. By narrating trafficking as the result of evil individuals, attention is directed away from large-scale causes of trafficking, which often implicate capitalism itself. The way Jimmy descends into personal insults and invective when Oryx mentions any individuals from her past life, while never even considering the broader context in which these individuals operated, is demonstrative of this individualising tendency. Individualisation is a key tool in the arsenal of neoliberal capitalism, as it fits well with the individual-centric core logic of neoliberal ideology.<sup>58</sup> Individualisation enables the dominant Western society to position itself as opposed to exploitation and committed to treating women fairly, in much the same way as Jimmy attempts to despite the numerous indications that he cares more for his own personal desires than Oryx's actual wellbeing. This narratively-enabled moral superiority allows the maintenance of, as Mark Fisher puts it, "the fantasy [...] that Western consumerism, far from being intrinsically implicated in systemic global inequalities, could itself solve them".<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>58</sup> Fisher, for example, notes the frequent use of individualisation to obscure and redirect attention from the systemic problems of neoliberal capitalism. One good example of such individualisation can be seen in the response to the 2008 financial crisis, where "media focus was on the excesses of individuals bankers [...], not on the systemic causes of the crisis." See Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 63.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 15.

But Oryx's own narrative of her personal experience offers a different view on the realities of global neoliberal capitalism. Her narrative contradicts the dominant narratives of her as sexual fantasy object or a constantly suffering victim, exposing how these narratives cover up the complicity of neoliberal capitalism in the exploitation of those in her position. The content of her narrative offers a more specific critique as well, exploring the potentially harmful ramifications of other aspects of neoliberal ideology. Oryx notes, when talking of first travelling with Uncle En, that the children "had no more love [but] they had a money value: they represented a cash profit to others" (*Oryx and Crake*, 146). Although she notes that "having a money value was no substitute for love [and that every] child should have love" (146), she still recognises that there is a certain benefit to having a money value. Later, when she tells Jimmy about her time in child pornography, she states that she "learned about life", by which she means that "everything has a price" (162). She then recounts how she "traded" sex for English lessons with the camera-man, noting that "[n]ow maybe [she] wouldn't do it, but [she] was a child then" (167).

The experience Oryx details is a very clear representation of the idea of human capital, albeit one that demonstrates the effects of this idea in practice to be far more horrific than neoliberal theorists hypothesised. As explored previously, at its core the idea of human capital is that "investment in human capital [is] precisely analogous to investment in machinery, buildings, or other forms".<sup>60</sup> With this idea in mind, Oryx's experience can be seen as a form of neoliberal *Bildung*, demonstrating the nature of neoliberal ideology in action through her development within this human capital framework. This development starts with her being sold off.<sup>61</sup> *Oryx and Crake* makes it clear the villagers will likely starve if they do not sell some of their children, and acknowledges that they feel ill at ease with their

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<sup>60</sup> Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 100. For more on the topic of human capital, see the introduction to this thesis.

<sup>61</sup> This exchange of money for children is given respectability by talk of "apprenticeship" (*Oryx and Crake*, 135). Not only does this mention of apprenticeship evoke the origins of the *Bildungsroman*, but it is also in a sense true, given that Oryx is going to learn the harsh realities of the economic system in which she must operate.



actions.<sup>62</sup> However, under the neoliberal framework of human capital, these actions are a classic demonstration of rational decision-making in action as, again in Friedman's words, "children [are both] consumer goods and potentially responsible members of society".<sup>63</sup> After being sold, Oryx progresses from understanding the importance of money value to learning that everything has its price to learning to utilise her "value" through "trading" what could be termed her sexual capital. In doing this, she follows a twisted form of *Bildungsroman* trajectory, learning that, while she may not fully accept it, she must operate within the framework of human capital that within which she lives.<sup>64</sup>

The way in which Oryx's story demonstrates the extreme results of neoliberal ideology in practice, and its horrific ramifications, inverts the story of the dominant narratives that are imposed upon her. In these narratives her exploitation was entirely the result of those in her immediate surroundings, while the dominant neoliberal society and ideology was opposed to this exploitation. By contrast, in Oryx's narrative, rather than individuals being the source of evil, it is only from individual interactions, rather than broader systemic forces, that Oryx gets any positive experience, such as the small kindnesses and sweets from Uncle En. The broader systemic forces of capitalism, meanwhile, offer *only* exploitation. This is not to excuse those directly involved in her trafficking but simply to point out that these relationships had at least the *possibility* of positive interaction on a personal level. They demonstrated that Oryx could not be entirely reduced to an object. From this perspective, Jimmy's exploitation of Oryx as a child, which he attempts to avoid taking responsibility for, is potentially worse than many of those more directly involved with Oryx. Prior to meeting

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<sup>62</sup> The novel explicitly makes clear that the parents feel "as if this act, done freely by themselves (no one had forced them, no one had threatened them), had not been performed willingly" (*Oryx and Crake*, 140). This scene hints towards broader questions of choice and economic coercion. Choice is fetishised by neoliberal theory and is abstracted in theoretical accounts from the possibility of indirect coercion and the influence of the context in which choice occurs. While this idea is too broad to fully explore here, this scene is clearly engaging with this element of neoliberal theory and could be usefully analysed through Jane Elliott's concept of suffering agency, which examines the underexplored question of the intersection between choice and suffering under the neoliberal framework. See Jane Elliott, "Suffering Agency: Imagining Neoliberal Personhood in North America and Britain," *Social Text* 31, no. 2 (2013): 83-101.

<sup>63</sup> Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 33.

<sup>64</sup> It is significant that the core industry of genetic modification on which Jimmy's society relies depends upon on acceptance of a utilitarian logic and approach to living beings that is barely removed from the absolute reduction to capital that this society superficially abhors when this reduction is applied to Oryx.

her, his exploitation of her is not tempered by any humanising interactions but carried out at a technological and economic remove that, although superficially sanitising it, renders it an even purer form of exploitation.

Yet for all the ways in which *Oryx*'s narrative works to expose and critique the narratives of the dominant neoliberal social order, the way in which her character has generally been received and read demonstrates a broader problem. *Oryx and Crake* goes to great lengths to demonstrate that Jimmy is exploitative and selfish, that Oryx has a distinct life-story of her own, and that the dominant social order imposes narratives that serve that order's interests and override alternatives. However, judging by the reaction of many critics and reviewers to *Oryx* (and Jimmy), *Oryx and Crake* can easily fall victim to many of the problems it is attempting to expose. Numerous critics and reviewers appear to side with Jimmy and accept the dominant narratives he offers, rejecting Oryx's lack of conformity as unrealistic, mysterious, or the result of repression. Oryx's narrative, then, is vulnerable to precisely the things it attempts to critique: individualisation and being overridden by dominant narratives. Thus, like Crake, Oryx demonstrates another problem facing the *Bildungsroman* genre's capacity for political criticism in the age of neoliberalism. Oryx's narrative does not present a radical anti-neoliberal approach to life, but the way in which her narrative goes against the expectations of the dominant neoliberal society still renders it difficult for her narrative to be accepted and achieve its aims. The neoliberal context in which the novel was published, and in which it is currently read, necessarily conditions expectations and governs the meaning of any given narrative presented within it. In this case, it is precisely the dominant narratives that *Oryx and Crake* seeks to expose and critique through Jimmy that condition how Oryx's story is understood.

The narratives of the three main characters of *Oryx and Crake* each deploy elements of the *Bildungsroman* genre, subverting generic logic and expectations in order to deliver a critique of both neoliberal ideology and aspects of the *Bildungsroman* genre itself. But while the novel is at least partially successful in this subversion, both its critique and its reception demonstrate a number of problems facing the genre in the age of neoliberalism. These problems emerge from the parallels between the ideological logic of neoliberalism and the

narrative logic of the *Bildungsroman*, and from the fact that individual *Bildungsroman* narratives that challenge the dominant social system emerge into an already established socio-political understanding that offers widely-accepted counter-narratives that benefit the dominant neoliberal order. Although *Oryx and Crake* subverts these parallels and expectations in order to highlight them and offer a critique, the broader reception of the characters of the novel indicates that the mechanisms through which it does this may be too complex to be reliably deployed. Even if this problem could be overcome, however, *Oryx and Crake* also draws attention to the difficulty of using the *Bildungsroman* to narrate lives that differ from neoliberal models of behaviour, and so the difficulty of narrating political alternatives through the genre. All these problems raise serious questions about the viability of the genre as a political and critical tool in the age of neoliberalism. If the core logic of the *Bildungsroman* is so close to that of neoliberal capitalism; if the genre requires such complex subversion and distortion in order to articulate a critique; if this subversion is so easy to misread; and if the genre's capacity to narrate critiques and alternatives to neoliberal capitalism is so limited; what critical role is left for the *Bildungsroman*? This is a question I attempt to answer in my final chapter, on Roberto Bolaño's *2666*.

## Chapter 4

### Exhaustion: Roberto Bolaño's 2666

Roberto Bolaño's *2666* is an immense and labyrinthine work, barely finished prior to its author's death in 2003. The five parts into which the work is divided, and the numerous digressions they contain, span a huge range of times, spaces, and genres. Yet all these sections are united by a common centre of gravity in the hundreds of brutal femicides in the Mexican border town of Santa Teresa, a loosely fictionalised version of the murders in Ciudad Juárez.<sup>1</sup> As one oft-quoted character in *2666* states, "[n]o one pays attention to these killings, but the secret of the world is hidden in them".<sup>2</sup> I argue that this secret is not a mystical or metaphysical truth, but an understanding of the systemic, overlapping web of factors that determine human experience and create large-scale events such as the Santa Teresa murders in the age of global neoliberal capitalism.

This chapter focuses primarily on the often neglected final part of *2666*, "The Part About Archimboldi", exploring how the *Bildungsroman* it presents works in relation to the rest of the text, reconfiguring earlier sections to illustrate certain political-aesthetic problems presented by the global dominance of neoliberal capitalism. As I analyse below, when compared with Bolaño's earlier work, *2666* represents a significant shift in focus from totalitarianism to neoliberalism, and this shift can be usefully understood in relation to Bolaño's personal experience of both socio-political orders. The continuity *and* the difference between these two orders is central to the formal structure of *2666* and is key to understanding how and why Bolaño makes use of the *Bildungsroman* genre.

I examine how "The Part About Archimboldi" destabilises concepts of nation and class, on which many readings of the *Bildungsroman* rest, and disrupts the idea of

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<sup>1</sup> Sergio González Rodríguez's work, in particular *Huesos en el Desierto* (Bones in the Desert), is perhaps the most well-known account of the events in Ciudad Juárez and served as a source for Bolaño's work on *2666*. See Sergio González Rodríguez, *Huesos En El Desierto* (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Roberto Bolaño, *2666*, trans. Natasha Wimmer (London: Picador, 2009), 348. Further references will be given in parentheses within the text.

teleological development central to all critical understandings of the *Bildungsroman* genre. This destabilisation suggests that the fundamental logic of the genre's narrative model is already flawed, but the final section of *2666* also demonstrates two other key elements that are implicitly central to the socially explanatory capacity of the *Bildungsroman*. Both these elements remain useful and functional in understanding the totalitarian political violence of the mid-20th-century that is explored in "The Part About Archimboldi", despite the destabilisation of other aspects of the genre's logic. The first element is a shared historical-contextual knowledge, which serves as a backdrop against which the meaning and significance of narrative events can be established. The second is typicality, a term I borrow from Lukács and which I explored in this thesis's introduction, which enables a single character's story to inform a reader about a larger social context. However, despite the continuity that *2666* demonstrates between the totalitarian violence against marginalised groups during the 20th century and the systemic violence of neoliberalism seen in Santa Teresa, in the face of neoliberal dominance the capacity of the *Bildungsroman* to explore political violence is near-exhausted, as both historical-contextual knowledge and Lukácsian typicality can no longer fulfil the same function under these new political conditions.

*2666* demonstrates that the political violence of the contemporary era of global neoliberal capitalism lacks the kind of accepted historical-contextual framework of knowledge that exists for the period surrounding World War II, and so, in "The Part About The Crimes", the text attempts to create such a context. In doing this, "The Part About The Crimes" re-centres understanding of the contemporary world around the Santa Teresa murders, making them the context against which all narrative events are read. This re-centring demonstrates that the contemporary dominance of neoliberal ideology and neoliberal economic practices *must* be understood in relation to the violence this dominance causes, with seemingly minor events of exploitation or sexism in the narrative taking on new significance as part of a broader system. Following this, I examine how, by contrasting "The Part About The Crimes" with "The Part About Archimboldi", *2666* demonstrates that the changed nature of dominant political systems that cause violence – from totalitarianism to neoliberalism – challenge the explanatory capacity of Lukácsian typicality. In the face of a

political order that is systemic rather than hierarchical, under which violence is incidental to political aims rather than intentional, and under which the web of causation has become incredibly complex, an individual perspective and individual story no longer adequately function to explore political problems, and perhaps even risks tying into the individualising logic of neoliberal ideology.

### **2666 and its critics**

*2666* is composed of five different sections, each with a specific focus indicated by their title: “The Part About the Critics”, “The Part About Amalfitano”, “The Part About Fate”, “The Part About The Crimes”, and “The Part About Archimboldi” (Hereafter “Critics”, “Amalfitano”, “Fate”, “Crimes”, and “Archimboldi” respectively). “Critics” follows a group of four literary academics as they search for the author Archimboldi – a search which takes three of them to Santa Teresa – and engage in sexual intrigues surrounding the sole female member of the group. “Amalfitano” follows the existential struggle and internal conversations of Amalfitano, a Spanish academic living in Santa Teresa. “Fate” focuses on Oscar Fate, a black reporter sent to Santa Teresa to cover a boxing match before becoming involved in a search for answers about the murders. “Crimes” is an exhaustive and exhausting account of the hundreds of gruesome rape-murders of women, predominantly *maquiladora* factory workers, in Santa Teresa. The clinical and precise cataloguing of violated corpses is interspersed with the largely futile attempts of a cast of characters – including a few non-corrupt Mexican police, an American sheriff, several journalists, and a prominent female politician – to solve or stop the crimes. As the name implies, the last part, “Archimboldi”, details the life-story of the object of the critics’ hunt, as he grows up in rural Germany, lives through World War Two, becomes a successfully published author, and wanders across Europe.

Despite his prolific output in his native Spanish, and his late-life canonisation in Spanish literary circles, Roberto Bolaño’s rise to literary prominence in the English-speaking

world has been a largely posthumous achievement.<sup>3</sup> It was only in late 2003, the year of Bolaño's death, that *By Night in Chile* became the first of Bolaño's novels to be published in English.<sup>4</sup> *2666*, widely regarded as Bolaño's magnum opus, received a posthumous Spanish publication in 2004 and did not receive an English publication until 2008. There is a certain irony in writing critically on *2666* given the less than favourable representation literary academics receive in "Critics", but despite this, and despite the late uptake of his works, a solid core of critical work on Bolaño has been produced in English, much of it focusing on *2666*.

Critical approaches to Bolaño and *2666* can be broadly divided into two strands, one more focused on explicit explorations of art, artists, and aesthetics in his work, and one focused on the political content. There is inevitably much overlap between these two areas, but one is generally predominant in any given analysis, providing us with a productive typology. Examples of the former kind of criticism include Andrea Marinescu's exploration of the role of the avant-garde in *2666*, Catherine Grall's analysis of intertextuality and the ethical role of literary fiction as a method to explore evil, Emilio Sauri's exploration of *2666* in relation to questions of literary autonomy in global literary markets, and Martin Paul Eve's analysis of metatextuality and *2666*'s critique of the commodification of the university in the 21st century.<sup>5</sup>

The more politically-focused criticism has taken a variety of approaches, from examining the role of race, nation, and nativism, to analysing the text in relation to Giorgio

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<sup>3</sup> Between 1993 and 2003 Bolaño published nine novels as well as several short story and poetry collections. In addition to his less frequent publications prior to 1993, since 2003 many earlier works have been discovered and posthumously published. Chris Andrews offers an explanation of the "fiction-making system" that aided Bolaño in his productiveness, including the re-use of characters, expansion of previous minor tangents in other works, and addition of seemingly tangential detail in order to alter the meaning of a story. See Chris Andrews, *Roberto Bolaño's Fiction: An Expanding Universe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 33-68.

<sup>4</sup> Originally published in Spanish as *Nocturno De Chile* in 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Andreea Marinescu, "I Can't Go on, I'll Go On': The Avant-Garde in the Works of Roberto Bolaño and Raúl Ruiz," *Romance Notes* 54, no. 3 (2014): 391-98; Catherine Grall, "2666 by Roberto Bolaño: Fiction as an Attempt to Travel between Worlds," *Neohelicon* 40, no. 2 (2013): 475-87; Emilio Sauri, "Autonomy after Autonomy, or, the Novel Beyond Nation: Roberto Bolaño's *2666*," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 42, no. 4 (2015): 369-409; Martin Paul Eve, "Keep Writing: The Critique of the University in Roberto Bolaño's *2666*," *Textual Practice* 30, no. 5 (2016): 949-64.

Agamben's concept of "bare life" or the US "war on terror".<sup>6</sup> But the body of criticism this chapter primarily builds upon is that which analyses the position of capitalism in *2666*. In this vein key critics are Sharae Deckard, Grant Farred, Sol Peláez, and Fermin A. Rodríguez. Deckard usefully combines aesthetics and politics, arguing that the distinctive "irrealism" of Bolaño's style is a way of recognising multiple varying perspectives of the "uneven structural relations of capitalist modernity" while rejecting both the commodified stereotypical exoticism of "boom era" Latin American magical realism and the false cultural homogeneity implied by realism.<sup>7</sup> The thrust of Farred's argument is that *2666*, refusing the traditional postcolonial paradigm, reclaims the political force of death in order to critique neoliberalism through its indifference and inability to make intelligible such death.<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein, Peláez explores *2666*'s problematisation of there being any "safe [...] point" from which to read the kind of violence that the text depicts, exploring the way language itself can bring violence towards women into the supposedly apolitical private sphere and so de-politicise the Santa Teresa crimes. Peláez also emphasises how the text goes beyond offering any *singular* determining political cause for the murders.<sup>9</sup> Finally, Rodríguez offers a biopolitical reading,

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<sup>6</sup> See Jeffrey Gray, "Roberto Bolaño, Ciudad Juárez, and the Future of Nativism," *Pacific Coast Philology* 49, no. 2 (2014): 166-76; Alice Laurel Driver, "Más O Menos Muerto: Bare Life in Roberto Bolaño's *2666*," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 23, no. 1 (2014): 51-64; Eli Jelly-Schapiro, "'This Is Our Threnody': Roberto Bolaño and the History of the Present," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 56, no. 1 (2015): 77-93.

<sup>7</sup> Sharae Deckard, "Peripheral Realism, Millennial Capitalism, and Roberto Bolaño's *2666*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (2012): 351, 352-53, and 356. Deckard argues that Bolaño "refuses aestheticism" because it has either been reified by fascism and nationalism or commodified by the market. Her argument is more sympathetic and sees a deliberate aim behind the aesthetic style of *2666*, but her core claim shares elements with the argument presented in *n+1*'s "On Bolaño": that "Bolaño can write page after page without indulging in a single metaphor, or adding a dab of rhetorical color to the account of a dinner party or a murder" and in doing this he demonstrates "that you can't be a really important novelist anymore unless you can't really *write novels*." This reading does something of a disservice to the deep poetic language that is present in Bolaño's work and his primary occupation as a poet. Marinescu's analysis offers another explanation, exploring the role of the avant-garde in Bolaño's work and concluding that avant-garde aesthetics are not inherently political one way or the other but cannot avoid *context* without becoming commodified or lapsing into fascism. In other words, an author must be aware of the political context in which they write and the political effect of their aesthetic choices and deploy them accordingly. The questions of commodification and context raised by Deckard and Marinescu are highly relevant to the generic and narrative analysis offered in this chapter. See *ibid.*, 366; Marinescu, "I Can't Go on, I'll Go On.," The Editors, "On Bolaño," *n+1* 7, Fall 2008, accessed Sep 5, 2017, <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-7/the-intellectual-situation/on-bolano-2/>.

<sup>8</sup> Grant Farred, "The Impossible Closing: Death, Neoliberalism, and the Postcolonial in Bolaño's *2666*," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 56, no. 4 (2010): 691-93, and 701.

<sup>9</sup> Sol Peláez, "Counting Violence: Roberto Bolano and *2666*," *Chasqui* 43, no. 2 (2014): 34, and 36-38. Peláez rejects both purely postcolonial and neoliberal understandings of the violence, positioning her argument



analysing the intersection between subjectivity and capital, the female body and the body of the worker, and the mechanics of population control depicted in *2666*.<sup>10</sup>

The most comprehensive critical work of all, and one that does not fit into the typology offered previously, is that of Chris Andrews. Alongside Natasha Wimmer, Andrews is one of the main English translators of Bolaño's work, and although he is keen to stress that the translator's slow progress through a text has drawbacks as well as advantages, the benefits of his familiarity with Bolaño's writing is evident in the clarity and scope of *Roberto Bolaño's Fiction: An Expanding Universe*. Early chapters explore the differing explanations for Bolaño's success (including literary merit, mythmaking, political content, and simple chance) and the system by which he rapidly produced large quantities of work. From there Andrews moves to more textually analytical questions of Bolaño's deployment of suspense and his subversion of genre expectation, before finally moving onto more philosophical issues such as different representations of ways of being-in-time, the meaning of the term poet, the poet's duty to take action, the nature of evil, and the ethics and appeal of Bolaño's strong "sense of what matters."<sup>11</sup> While Andrews does not address neoliberalism specifically, his analysis of other elements in Bolaño's work remain useful in relation to the issues explored in this chapter.

### **Totalitarianism, neoliberalism, violence, and *2666***

Comparing *2666* to Bolaño's earlier works shows a shift in the focus of his political concerns that is useful for understanding the role of both neoliberalism and the *Bildungsroman* in the novel. While human nature, violence, and perhaps even evil (as some

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specifically against Farred, amongst others. She argues that such a reading not only obscures the heavily gendered nature of the killings but reinstates a hierarchy of *significance* of violence, subordinating private to public, gender to economy. While taking my point of departure from a neoliberal analysis, I aim to explore how neoliberalism interacts with and exacerbates these other significant factors, rather than necessarily subordinating them. In exploring this interaction, I hope to avoid re-creating a hierarchy of significance.

<sup>10</sup> Fermin A. Rodríguez, "Fear, Subjectivity, and Capital: Sergio Chejfec's *The Dark* and Roberto Bolaño's *2666*," *Parallax* 20, no. 4 (2014): 345-59.

<sup>11</sup> Andrews, *Roberto Bolaño's Fiction*, 172.

have claimed) are central to Bolaño's work, the framework in which this behaviour occurs is not incidental to this interest.<sup>12</sup> Such violence always occurs in a social and political context, and Bolaño's concern with the political nature of violence is clear in his explorations of totalitarianism, dictatorship, and the multiple forms of "evil". It is important then that *2666* represents a change of direction from texts such as *By Night in Chile*, *Nazi Literature in the Americas* (1996/2008), or *Distant Star* (1996/2004), all of which focus on fascism.<sup>13</sup>

Andrews offers a typology of "evil" from across Bolaño's fiction – the types being the accomplice, the dictator, the sociopath, and the administrator.<sup>14</sup> However, while Andrews's typology functions well in relation to texts dealing primarily with totalitarianism, it is severely limited with regards to *2666*, and it is this limitation that illustrates Bolaño's changed approach to political violence in the contemporary era. The only example of a "type" Andrews provides from *2666* is taken from "Archiboldi", and so once again comes from the era of mid-century totalitarianism, in this case Nazism.<sup>15</sup> Andrews's explanations for the lack of an evil "type" for the horrific violence of Santa Teresa are an unconvincing combination of added realism, ethical restraint, and the possibility of some mystery of human nature.<sup>16</sup> Andrews attempts to derive a generalised, ahistorical conception of evil from across all of Bolaño's work, and so abstracts the violence from the context in which it is shown to occur. In doing this, he misses that the violence of Santa Teresa takes place in a political and historical context distinct from the one that produced the earlier totalitarian violence that is

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<sup>12</sup> Both Grall and Andrews offer readings of evil in Bolaño's work. See Grall, "Fiction as an Attempt to Travel between Worlds."; Andrews, *Roberto Bolaño's Fiction*, 149-71.

<sup>13</sup> Some of the versions of these novels that I have used for reference in this chapter are later editions, hence the discrepancy in publishing dates. Roberto Bolaño, *By Night in Chile*, trans. Chris Andrews (London: Vintage, [2000] 2009); *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, trans. Chris Andrews (London: Picador, [1996] 2010); *Distant Star*, trans. Chris Andrews (New York: New Directions, [1996] 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Andrews, *Roberto Bolaño's Fiction*, 149-73.

<sup>15</sup> The character of Sammer/Zeller, a German administrator who organises the mass-murder of a trainload of Jews accidentally sent to him, is Andrews's example of the administrator-type. Sammer, and the type he represents, serves as an obvious reference to Adolf Eichmann, the German administrator whose trial famously inspired Hannah Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil", and Andrews's analyses Sammer in this light. See *ibid.*, 161-65, and 67-71; Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Penguin Classics (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> Andrews, *Roberto Bolaño's Fiction*, 169-71.

depicted in Bolaño's earlier work and in "Archiboldi". This new context is why he has limited success at including 2666 in his typology.

In its depiction of the crimes of Santa Teresa, what 2666 does share with Bolaño's earlier work is that, long after the apparent fall of totalitarianism in the West, violence remains. The shift in focus from totalitarianism to neoliberal capitalism, and the continuity and discontinuity between them, can be better understood with reference to Bolaño's biographical experience. Bolaño was Chilean by birth, and spent most of his later life in Spain, but much of his youth took place in Mexico; in 1968, at age 15, he moved to Mexico with his family just in time to witness the violent repression of the student movement there, which features in *The Savage Detectives* (1998/2007) and *Amulet* (1999/2006).<sup>17</sup> In 1973 he returned to Chile to support the socialist government of Salvador Allende, but shortly after Bolaño's return, Allende was overthrown by Augusto Pinochet, and Bolaño was imprisoned for eight days before being forced to flee back to Mexico.<sup>18</sup> Even without the added effect of personal imprisonment, the impact of the overthrow of democratic socialism in his country of birth by a totalitarian regime, alongside the broader history of dictatorships in Latin America, is clearly central to Bolaño's particular interest in totalitarianism, with *By Night In Chile* explicitly featuring a depiction of Pinochet himself.

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<sup>17</sup> Roberto Bolaño, *The Savage Detectives*, trans. Natasha Wimmer (London: Picador, [1998] 2007); *Amulet*, trans. Chris Andrews (London: Picador, [1999] 2010). The events in Mexico were significant to the formation of Bolaño's political views. Always on the left of the spectrum, the specific nature of Bolaño's left-wing political commitment varied over time. In one interview later in life, he noted that "we fought for parties that, if they had won, would have sent us immediately to forced labor camps". The Editors, "World Lite," *n+1* 17, Fall 2013, accessed Sep 7, 2017, <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-17/the-intellectual-situation/world-lite/>.

<sup>18</sup> Patricia Novillo-Corvalán, "Transnational Modernist Encounters: Joyce, Borges, Bolaño, and the Dialectics of Expansion and Compression," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 108, no. 2 (2013): 341-67. Though Bolaño's return to Chile is widely accepted as fact by critical accounts, doubt has recently been cast over the veracity of this narrative and Bolaño's whereabouts in 1973. Whether this possible fabrication resulted from regret over missing the political event of his generation or was the product of Bolaño's mischievous tendency towards fictionalisation and ambiguity is disputed even by those who agree on the account's falsity. See Larry Rohter, "A Chilean Writer's Fictions Might Include His Own Colorful Past," *The New York Times*, Jan 27, 2009, accessed Sep 9, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/28/books/28bola.html>. However, as Andrews notes, the myth surrounding Bolaño is as much the product of embellishments by others as of Bolaño's own efforts. In an interview, translated from Spanish by Andrews, Bolaño humourously noted how the length of his imprisonment increased to a month prior to his first publication in Germany, and three months when that first publication did not sell well. Andrews, *Roberto Bolaño's Fiction*, 19.

In addition to being a demonstration of the fascism that would make up the subject matter of much of Bolaño's later work, the coup in Chile was also a key moment in the development of neoliberalism, with Pinochet's Chile serving as the first testing ground for neoliberal policies. As mentioned in the introduction, this testing was carried out by economists trained and endorsed by the Chicago School of Economics, and Milton Friedman even went on a speaking tour around Chile in 1975.<sup>19</sup> But Chile's adoption of neoliberal policy did not result in the kind of political freedom that Friedman had claimed was a necessary result of economic freedom. Instead, it revealed that neoliberal economics could easily coexist with extreme political violence and repression. At neoliberalism's first practical application, Friedman's claims of an inextricable link between freedom, political progress, and the economic doctrines of neoliberal capitalism were proven false.<sup>20</sup> Understanding this meeting of political orders reveals the continuity in Bolaño's work in more specific terms than an abstract interest in evil or violence. Insofar as the Mexico of 2666 is drawn from Bolaño's personal experience, then, it is not the Mexico that Bolaño lived in during his years as a young anarchic poet – the Mexico that serves as the inspiration for *The Savage Detectives* – but rather a Mexico that is the descendant of the neoliberal experimentation of Pinochet's Chile.

As David Harvey, amongst others, has noted, Mexico became one of the first targets of neoliberal structural readjustment following its 1982 bankruptcy. In return for a loan to prevent Mexico's total economic collapse, "the IMF, the World Bank, and the US treasury [...] not only insisted on budgetary austerity [but], for the first time, on broad neoliberal reforms, such as privatization, reorganization of the financial system [...], the opening of internal markets to foreign capital, lowering tariff barriers, and the construction of more flexible labour markets".<sup>21</sup> As Harvey details, the consequences of this were disastrous for the majority of the population, one major result being the "*maquila* programme expand[ing]

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<sup>19</sup> See Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, 53.

<sup>20</sup> "The kind of economic organization that provides economic freedom directly, namely, competitive capitalism, also promotes political freedom" Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 99-100. For the complete account of the causes and results, see pages 98-104.

rapidly along the northern border [of Mexico] to become fundamental to Mexico's industrial and employment structure."<sup>22</sup> Structural readjustment was eventually followed by the 1994 NAFTA agreement, further increasing deregulation and privatisation, which, as Deckard notes, "catalyzed criminal and social violence alongside the rapid expansion of the 'shadow economy' in narcotics, arms, and smuggling."<sup>23</sup>

One key consequence of neoliberalisation more generally is what Harvey terms the "increasing feminization of poverty", with the obligation to work *and* support a family (often including children *and* a husband) falling disproportionately on women.<sup>24</sup> It is the border-factory *maquiladoras*, social violence, and the feminisation of poverty that are at the core of the Santa Teresa depicted in *2666*. Given the role played by neoliberal experimentation in the two countries of Bolaño's youth, first under a dictatorial regime and then through international economic coercion, it is clear that the femicides of Santa Teresa, and the neoliberal capitalism that enables them, are part of a broader continuum of political and social violence serving to build and sustain political orders of power, both gendered and economic. This link between old, cruel totalitarianism and new, indifferent neoliberal capitalism is one element behind the inclusion of "Archimboldi" in *2666*, with the narrative spanning from the 1920s to the 2000s, from the era of Western totalitarianism to that of neoliberal capitalism. As explained below, there is even more at stake in the "Archimboldi" narrative: it plays a fundamental role in *2666*'s critique of the inadequacy of certain forms of narrative, of which the *Bildungsroman* is exemplary, to explain and challenge the changed nature of the contemporary political order.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>23</sup> Deckard, "Peripheral Realism, Millennial Capitalism, and Roberto Bolaño's *2666*," 354.

<sup>24</sup> Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 202.

## Nation and class, temporality and teleology in “The Part About Archimboldi”

The final part of 2666, “Archimboldi”, is a *Bildungsroman* narrative. It follows the author Benno von Archimboldi, real name Hans Reiter, from very early childhood, through adolescence, to adulthood, and into old age. Reiter grows up in rural Germany, in Prussia (newly transitioned from a kingdom within the German Empire to a “Free State” or republic within the Weimar Republic), in the 1920s, with a one-legged father (a veteran of the First World War), a one-eyed mother, and eventually a baby sister. In his earliest years, narrated in a style reminiscent of a fairy-tale, Reiter grows disproportionately tall and has a near-fantastical affinity for being underwater, enhanced by his repeated reading of *Animals and Plants of the European Coastal Region*, the only book he owns. In his adolescence he works in a baron’s mansion, where the baron’s nephew, slowly looting the mansion to fund his lifestyle, introduces Reiter to fiction. Eventually Reiter moves to the city, is drafted into the German military, and lives through World War II, during which he finds and reads the diaries of a dead Jewish-Russian science-fiction author. At the war’s end he is interned in a POW camp, where he kills a German administrator, Sammer, who confesses to the mass-murder of a trainload of Jews accidentally sent to his town. After this Reiter meets Ingeborg, who becomes his long-term partner, becomes a successfully published author (adopting the pseudonym Benno von Archimboldi), and begins his wanderings across Europe, working part-time jobs and writing. This life of wandering and transience continues into his old age.

The basic structure of this narrative is clear, and the explicit references to the German literary tradition and Goethe in particular – as previously noted, *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* is widely regarded as the founding text of the *Bildungsroman* tradition – indicate a clear awareness of the generic tradition “Archimboldi” is operating within.<sup>25</sup> This generic designation has, in fact, been used before: Deckard describes the final part of 2666 as a combination of “the bildungsroman and the historical novel”, claiming that these are “genres long associated with the rise of capitalism” that 2666 reconfigures into “forms of

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<sup>25</sup> For an example of references to the German literary tradition, see Hugo Halder’s explanation of literature to the young Hans Reiter (2666, 657).

representation that register the contemporary dynamics of capital.”<sup>26</sup> Here I want to question the extent to which “Archiboldi” can be said to explore the issues of contemporary, neoliberal capitalism. The *Bildungsroman* does, as previously explored, have its roots in the rise of capitalism, and these origins are central to its core logic. However, “Archiboldi” problematises key elements of this logic, and so destabilises the explanatory capacity of the *Bildungsroman*, not only in the contemporary era but even in earlier historical periods. This destabilisation makes clear the techniques on which the *Bildungsroman* depends, and their limitations. In problematising the elements on which the *Bildungsroman* relies, “Archiboldi” makes the significance of narrative choices in earlier sections of *2666* clearer.

Fitting “Archiboldi” into a specific critical model of the *Bildungsroman* is notably difficult. In the introduction to this thesis I explored a number of conceptions of the *Bildungsroman*, of which all have at best limited applicability to “Archiboldi.” Obviously, contemporary readings of the *Bildungsroman* genre that focus on intersections between gender, class, race, and post-coloniality – such as Lorna Ellis’s or Susan Midalia’s – are not really applicable to “Archiboldi” due to Reiter’s status as a white male European.<sup>27</sup> But even approaches to the genre that initially appear to work with this choice of character and setting prove difficult to fit to Reiter’s narrative.

This choice of protagonist, as well as referencing the origins of the genre, might suggest a reading along national lines, such as that by Jed Esty or Joseph Slaughter – both of whom suggest that a national framework is central to the developmental process depicted in

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<sup>26</sup> Deckard, “Peripheral Realism, Millennial Capitalism, and Roberto Bolaño’s *2666*,” 368. Deckard also earlier uses the term “*Künstlerroman*” to describe “Archiboldi”. Ibid., 356. This is an understandable designation given that “Archiboldi” follows the life of an author, and as explained in the thesis’s introduction, the *Künstlerroman* is a subgenre of the *Bildungsroman* concerned with the development of an artist. However here, like Deckard, I will be using the broader generic frame of the *Bildungsroman*, as it is the general principles of individual and social, rather than artistic, development that are most relevant to *2666*’s exploration of political systems through the *Bildungsroman*’s deployment in *2666*. The specific focus on an artist’s narrative does, however, serve a function in relation to the exploration of aesthetic issues in *2666* that are highlighted by the critics – such as Marinescu and Grall – cited previously. An exploration of the specifically artistic function of “Archiboldi” in relation to the rest of the text is outside the focus of the current chapter.

<sup>27</sup> Ellis, *Appearing to Diminish*; Midalia, “The Contemporary Female Bildungsroman.”

the *Bildungsroman*.<sup>28</sup> However, this national approach is undermined in *2666* at the very beginning of “Archiboldi”. Although Reiter is technically German, and later fights in the German army, his father, who also fought in the German army during World War One, identifies the family as Prussian. In a significant event in Reiter’s early childhood his father reels off an impressive list of nationalities and regional identities, describing them all as swine.<sup>29</sup> He states that the “only people who aren’t swine are the Prussians”, but as he notes “Prussia no longer exists. Where is Prussia? Do you see it?” (*2666*, 643). Although Reiter’s father’s comments are somewhat comical, they do highlight the intangibility and contingency of conceptions of identity based on nation, dispelling the suspension of disbelief that holds together the imagined community of nationhood.<sup>30</sup> In addition, Reiter’s affinity for the sea and water is used to distance him from a German identity. Early in Reiter’s childhood, in a rare moment of narratorial intrusion, the narrator notes that “Canetti, and Borges, too, I think – two very different men – said that just as the sea was the symbol or mirror of the English, the forest was the metaphor the Germans inhabited [, but] Reiter defied this rule from the moment he was born” (639). This dispelling of nationhood continues throughout Reiter’s life, as, both during and after World War Two, he crosses national boundaries constantly and never becomes tied to a single place.<sup>31</sup> Although the nation-state is significant in many of the events in Reiter’s life, it does not play a key role in shaping his identity.

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<sup>28</sup> Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*; Slaughter, “Enabling Fictions and Novel Subjects.”; Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc.*

<sup>29</sup> The complete list of terms used, with names sometimes repeated to reiterate their swinishness, is Welsh, English, Scottish, Italian, Austrian, Hungarian, Bohemian, Jewish, Bavarian, Rhinelander, Poles, Russians, Serbs, Americans, Canadians, French-Canadians, Irish-American, Turkish, Saxons, Westphalians, and Greeks. Sweden, Norway, Finland, Iceland, and Greenland are also later mentioned, but as potential destinations for the vanished Prussians rather than homes of swine. See Bolaño, *2666*, 642-43.

<sup>30</sup> Here I am of course referring to the notion of nationhood as a fictional social construct held together by an imagined commonality of interest and identity famously proposed by Benedict Anderson. For more on this concept, see Anderson, *Imagined Communities* and discussions of the concept in the *Infinite Jest* chapter of this thesis.

<sup>31</sup> Farred’s insistence on referring to Reiter as a Nazi is particularly puzzling in this regard. Reiter never engages with Nazism or espouses anything approaching the ethno-nationalist outlook so central to the Nazi ideology. He is merely a member of the German army during the war, somewhat unwillingly, and he is unaware of broader political events. When the Nazi ex-administrator Sammer confesses to Reiter, revealing to him the nature of Nazi atrocities, Reiter responds by killing him in retribution. This distancing of nation from Reiter also helps dispel the idea that the forms of political violence that he witnesses are a matter of national character rather than social and political circumstances. See Farred, “The Impossible Closing,” 3, 4, and 11.



Moretti's approach cannot be directly applied to Reiter either. The *Bildungsroman* in his reading is a fundamentally bourgeois genre that narrates the attempted synthesis of youthful potentiality released by the rise of capitalism with the necessity for a social structure. Even leaving aside strict historical periodisation – as noted earlier, the historical conditions that enabled the genre ceased to exist at the start of the 20th century according to Moretti – this bourgeois model of the genre is not easy to apply to Reiter's narrative. Most obviously Reiter is not a member of the bourgeois class. Instead he comes from a rural family, and from his youth onwards works in a variety of working class jobs, from fisherman to servant to road-worker to soldier to night-watchman to bouncer, continuing such work even once he becomes a published author. The bourgeois youth of Moretti's *Bildungsroman* was given a new sense of interiority and autonomy by the possibilities opened up by the rise of capitalism, which then had to be reconciled with the need for social order. But for Reiter economics only plays a role through the necessity of finding work and a wage rather than providing conditions for increased interiority and personal development.

Reiter's writing could be considered a more bourgeois occupation, and is the kind of work that provides both an income and, conventionally, a method of self-expression. This combination suggests that writing could serve as precisely the kind of synthesis between societal necessity and individual autonomy that Moretti sees as the heart of the *Bildungsroman* genre. However, Reiter describes his writing as both "a game and [...] a business" (2666, 817). Neither of these terms are conventionally associated with identity-formation, and neither of them implies a level of significance and centrality that would be expected were authorship a central element of Reiter's sense of self. In this vein, it is significant that Reiter, despite the implications of his name in English, publishes under the pseudonym Archiboldi, further distancing himself from his literary work. As such, authorship in 2666 does not assume the role of providing identity (this is one reason for my use of the category of *Bildungsroman* over *Künstlerroman* in this analysis) nor represent a fundamental acceptance of the dominant social order. While the divergences from critical understandings of the *Bildungsroman* explored above are significant, there is a more

profound difference between the *Bildungsroman* of “Archiboldi” and critical models of the genre.

What severs “Archiboldi” most completely and significantly from critical understandings of the *Bildungsroman* is its disruption of temporal and teleological notions of development. As we saw in the introduction, the concept of development is absolutely central in readings of the *Bildungsroman* as far back as Karl Morgenstern’s coinage of the term in his lecture of 1819. Morgenstern described the genre as narrating the “harmonious formation of the purely human” and depicting “the gradual formation of [the hero’s] inner being” in response to the influence of his surroundings.<sup>32</sup> Moretti’s reading is that the *Bildungsroman* fundamentally narrates a development from youthful instability to stable maturity.<sup>33</sup> In the work of Esty and Slaughter, too, development, or the significance and harmful consequences of its failure, plays a central role. Even the understanding of the genre offered by Wilhelm Dilthey and those taking a similar approach to him, which fundamentally differs from the Morgensternian approach in focusing on the self as independent from societal and environmental conditions, shares with the Morgensternian approach an emphasis on development as a key element of the *Bildungsroman* genre.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to the originary texts analysed by Moretti, Morgenstern, and other critics, all the works analysed in previous chapters of this thesis make use of the idea of teleological development as a central element of their narrative and political critiques. At the end of *The*

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<sup>32</sup> Morgenstern, “On the Nature of the ‘Bildungsroman’,” 655 and 656.

<sup>33</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*. As noted in the introduction, significant critics in the Morgensternian vein of *Bildungsroman* criticism include Bakhtin, Lukács, and Boes, all of whom similarly place an emphasis on development over time. Two key terms of Bakhtin’s analysis of the *Bildungsroman* are “historical time” and “biographical” time, with the modern genre viewed as the culmination of the long history of novelistic development that finally combines the two. The specific focus of the genre is “the image of *man in the process of becoming*”. Lukács describes the *Bildungsroman* plot as “determined by the necessary condition that a reconciliation between interiority and reality [...] has to be sought in hard struggles [...] yet is ultimately possible to achieve.” And Boes describes the *Bildungsroman* as modelling “a kind of temporal existence”. See Bakhtin, “The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism,” 19; Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 132; Boes, *Formative Fictions*, 9.

<sup>34</sup> Dilthey, *Poetry and Experience*, 5. For some examples of critics working in a similarly interior-emphasising trend to Dilthey, see Shaffner, *The Apprenticeship Novel*; Miles, “The Picaro’s Journey to the Confessional.”; Braendlin, “Alther, Atwood, Ballantyne, and Gray: Secular Salvation in the Contemporary Feminist *Bildungsroman*.”

*Dispossessed*, the most traditional of the texts analysed, Shevek manages to reconcile his individual scientific pursuits with his collective purpose in society after experiencing a process of development in two different societies. In *Infinite Jest*, Hal's socialisation fails due to inadequate social structures and in failing to develop he falls into depressive solipsism, unable to reconcile interiority with external conditions due to the inadequacy of the traditional frameworks provided to him. In *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy develops to the standards of maturity of his society, his development visibly shaped by living within that society, but these standards are so distorted and perverse that this produces a self-pitying, depressive, and un-empathetic individual. In contrast with these texts, all of which emphasise the necessity of an extended process of social-individual development within a positive social framework, 2666 constantly frustrates notions of teleological development in "Archimboldi", throwing into question whether such developmental logic is a necessary or desirable part of human experience.

Andrews's analysis of the two ways of being-in-time that are present in Bolaño's fiction, which Andrews terms diachronic and episodic, is a useful tool for understanding Reiter's life. Diachronic living is living with a central awareness of existence over time, with continuity and development from past into future. Episodic living is living only concerned with existence in a specific moment, not looking to the future or the past for meaning, or seeing a need for long-term consistency in action.<sup>35</sup> Andrews places Reiter firmly in the camp of an episodic character, but Reiter does not lead a *purely* episodic existence; doing so would make him more *picaro* than *Bildungsheld*.<sup>36</sup> He maintains multiple long relationships and key past events do continue to influence him over the course of his life. He has a romantic relationship with Ingeborg until her death and maintains his friendship with Mrs Bubis, the wife of his publisher. This friendship with Mrs Bubis itself only starts because he re-

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<sup>35</sup> For further definition, see Andrews, *Roberto Bolaño's Fiction*, 97-100. It is important to note that Andrews disputes the notion that either of these temporalities imply a necessary ethical or moral approach to life, arguing that ethicality is not a necessary product of diachronic temporality as some have claimed. See *ibid.*, 121-23.

<sup>36</sup> One of the more famous accounts of the relationship between these two genres and types of character is that of Miles. Although Miles's definition of the *Bildungsroman* lacks the historical specificity and social emphasis of Moretti's, the key elements that Miles identifies – development of both character and plot in the *Bildungsroman* versus a static character and episodic narrative in the *Picaresque* – are useful in distinguishing the genres. See Miles, "The Picaro's Journey to the Confessional."

encounters her and she recognises him as having once been a servant in her family mansion (810-11). Reiter's disappearance to Mexico, the element that most clearly links his section to the wider events of *2666*, is prompted by the re-establishment of contact with his estranged sister, who requests that Reiter go to Mexico in aid of her son (890-91). In addition, the pseudonym Archiboldi is apparently the result of his attempting to evade attention for the murder of the German administrator and mass-murderer Sammer (767), and that murder itself could be seen to be at least partially motivated by Reiter's reading of Ansky's diaries (707-37) – Ansky being a Jewish Russian and so a victim to violence similar to that perpetrated by Sammer. Reiter's life narrative, then, certainly exists *within time*, past events do influence future ones, and so his narrative avoids the unmoored temporality of a pure *picaro* narrative. Nevertheless, Reiter's life lacks any clear progression or change in a developmental sense. What is key for us here, although somewhat incidental to his own analysis, is that Andrews notes that if “meaning is conferred on a life by ‘movement toward a climax or *telos*,’ Archiboldi's life lacks meaning.”<sup>37</sup>

It is in the extended temporality of Reiter's narrative that the frustration of teleology is most plainly evident on a structural level. Reiter's story does not progress from childhood to adolescence to some final point of maturity or failed maturity. In fact, insofar as this is possible in a finite text, Reiter's story does not end; he grows old but neither dies nor experiences a moment of particular final significance, instead vanishing off in the direction of Mexico on the final page of *2666* after a conversation about ice-cream and botany. This lack of narrative closure or clear significance deprives the narrative, and *2666* as a whole, of a teleological endpoint.

However, even the notion of *unbounded* progression, of continual development in a direction rather than towards a goal, is undermined constantly throughout “Archiboldi”.<sup>38</sup> As mentioned earlier, Reiter has a strong link water as a youth: slipping to the bottom of the

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<sup>37</sup> Andrews, *Roberto Bolaño's Fiction*, 119.

<sup>38</sup> Reiter can be said to display the other key element of the Morgensternian approach to the *Bildungsroman*: adaptation to external conditions and reconciliation between interiority and exterior reality. However, this reconciliation is not a matter of progression to a certain state of being at which he is reconciled, or fails to be reconciled, with the world. Rather it is a matter of adaptation to the immediate conditions he finds himself in.

tub as a baby, walking on land “like a novice diver along the seafloor”, only ever reading a single book on marine life, fixating on seaweed, and diving into the sea at every possible opportunity (2666, 640). Under a narrative logic of development, this tendency would have great significance for his later life, serving as the basis on which his later experiences would expand; yet this idea is subverted. Instead, he becomes a writer and wandering labourer, occupations entirely unrelated to this sea-affinity. Despite his name, however, writing does not give Reiter directional progress in his life either. Writing for him is not some transcendental purpose but rather an element of mundane existence, “a game and also a business, a game insofar as he derived pleasure from writing [...] and a business insofar as the publication of his books helped to augment, however modestly, his doorman’s pay” (817).<sup>39</sup> Even after his multiple publications and well into his old age Reiter continues to live a transitory existence, moving from place to place and job to job. There is no sense that he needs or wants any kind of developmental progression in his life.

“Archimboldi” clearly evokes the *Bildungsroman*, only to undermine elements central to critical understandings of the genre. This undermining destabilises the traditional logics of the genre, showing that they are dependent on assumptions about human experience and social existence that need not be the case, and so throwing the reliability of the genre as a way of exploring human experience into doubt. However, the full significance of this usage of the *Bildungsroman* in “Archimboldi” is only apparent in relation to the parts that precede it in 2666, and together they serve to present a more complex critique than “Archimboldi” taken alone.

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<sup>39</sup> Such little attention is given to the actual quality of Reiter’s work – given that they are such objects of ridicule, the opinions of the critics in the 2666 itself are suspect – that critics writing on 2666 have been unable to agree on whether he is a truly terrible writer or a genuine literary genius. Farred states that Archimboldi “is not, Bolaño wants to make clear, a very talented author”, suggesting that in so doing Bolaño “demonstrates his superiority” and satirises the cult status of elusive authors. However, he provides no textual evidence to support this claim. By contrast, Andrews believes Reiter is one of the few exceptions to the literary careerists that Bolaño ridicules, enjoying writing for its own sake rather than for social gain. See Farred, “The Impossible Closing,” 699; Andrews, *Roberto Bolaño’s Fiction*, 117-18.

## Contextual knowledge as narrative tool

The *Bildungsroman* as a genre is destabilised in its deployment in “Archimboldi”. Traditional broad frameworks for society in which development can occur – such as nation and class – and the concept of teleological progressive development are undermined. However, while these elements are thrown into doubt, what does remain as an inescapable boundary for experience is the specific historical-political context in which Reiter’s narrative occurs. While national or class-based identity can be easily disrupted or changed, historical period and events cannot be evaded. This historico-political context serves not only *within* the text as the remaining boundary that shapes Reiter’s experience – even if his experience is typified by disruption and intransience it still remains a response to external conditions, most prominently World War Two – but it also serves as a backdrop against which the events in the narrative can be read, and by which their meaning is determined.<sup>40</sup>

Although the entirety of Reiter’s narrative demonstrates the necessity of contextual historical knowledge to generate meaning – the narration of his experience of World War Two lacks almost any contextualising information about broader historical events yet is still necessarily understood in relation to them – the most relevant examples here are the tales of Sammer and Ansky. The stories of these characters gain general meaning in relation to broader knowledge about the organised mass-murder of Jews in Nazi Germany and the purges of Soviet Russia. The importance of contextual knowledge to understanding the broader significance of events in “Archimboldi” retroactively clarifies one reason for the structure of “Crimes”, the section which precedes it. “Crimes” subordinates individual narratives to a constant enumeration of the Santa Teresa femicides and their hideous results. It does this because, in order for *2666* to explore the contemporary political world, it is essential to establish a historico-political context in the contemporary period, against which the meaning of individual narratives can be established. Without such a context, or with only

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<sup>40</sup> Historical context plays a key role in many analyses of the *Bildungsroman*: for example, Moretti’s emphasis on the historico-political events that changed approaches to the *Bildungsroman* in its early years. The French Revolution, the Restoration, and World War One all play a key role in this analysis of the change and eventual end of the *Bildungsroman*. See Moretti, *The Way of the World*.

an individualising neoliberal understanding, the broader significance of the individual events “Crimes” depicts would be lost.

Multiple critics have highlighted the importance of context in relation to artistic creation in Bolaño’s work. Andrews, for example, notes that established historical knowledge renders satire possible in Bolaño’s fiction. *By Night in Chile* can feature a satirical depiction of Pinochet, argues Andrews, because he was a real person who was “ultimately responsible for crimes whose seriousness can hardly be cast into doubt”, while a fictional sociopath must be treated with seriousness as to “hold them up to ridicule would be, indirectly, to make light of their crimes”.<sup>41</sup> Marinescu, on the other hand, analyses how in works such as *Nazi Literature in the Americas* Bolaño demonstrates that attempting to create avant-garde art while “ignoring one’s socio-historical context [...] can only result in a kind of fascism.”<sup>42</sup> Both of these critics establish context as a key element in the construction of meaning in texts. Most relevant to *2666*, however, is Catherine Grall’s conception of multiple worlds. Grall suggests that each of the five parts within *2666* “can be read as a separate novel, and thus as a separate fictional world.”<sup>43</sup> She contends that each of these worlds represents “specific laws and definitions of truth”, and that the fundamental tension of *2666* as a whole is derived not from tensions within the parts but between them.<sup>44</sup> In effect, her differing worlds correspond to differing contexts that determine the view of the characters within each part.<sup>45</sup>

There is much compelling about Grall’s reading, as it is in reading the separate parts of *2666* in conjunction with one another, in particular “Crimes” and “Archimboldi”, that

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<sup>41</sup> Andrews, *Roberto Bolaño’s Fiction*, 173.

<sup>42</sup> Marinescu, “I Can’t Go on, I’ll Go On,” 396.

<sup>43</sup> Grall, “Fiction as an Attempt to Travel between Worlds,” 475.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 475-76.

<sup>45</sup> Grall’s reading, although more rigidly dividing *2666* along the lines of the parts, shares elements with Deckard’s reading, in which the “welding of multiple genres and modes of realism with irrealist imagery [...] can be understood as [...] corresponding to the radical mixtures of residual and modern temporalities, cultural formations, and social relations in the peripheries of millennial capitalism.” Deckard, “Peripheral Realism, Millennial Capitalism, and Roberto Bolaño’s *2666*,” 356.

broader meanings appear. However, her reading neglects the centrality of “Crimes” in the text as a whole, both literally and figuratively. “Crimes” is at the physical centre of *2666*, taking up pages 353-633 of the nearly 900-page novel, while the first three parts take up only the first 349 pages between them. Only “Archimboldi” rivals “Crimes” in length, taking up pages 637-898. In addition to the subordination of individual narratives to the murders within “Crimes” itself, the broader significance of the first three parts of *2666* becomes clear in relation to “Crimes”. All the earlier sections feature the murders in Santa Teresa in some way. Although “Critics” appears less directly concerned with the horrific crimes, they serve as a backdrop to the actions of the critics in Santa Teresa and elsewhere. “Amalfitano” and “Fate” take place almost entirely in Santa Teresa, with the murders being central elements of their narratives; Amalfitano worries constantly that his daughter, Rosa, will be murdered, and Fate gets actively involved in the journalistic hunt for answers to the murders and saves Rosa from a potentially fatal situation. In “Archimboldi”, as already noted, there is an established, earlier historical context for the story. As a result, the Santa Teresa crimes only become significant towards the end of the section, as it gets to the present day. Santa Teresa only appears in “Archimboldi” in the recollection of Reiter’s sister, who goes there to visit her son, Klaus, who is imprisoned for the femicides. The section ends inconclusively as Reiter sets off for Mexico.<sup>46</sup>

By placing “Crimes” and the horrific violence it details at its centre, *2666* attempts to create a context for contemporary narratives, both those featured within it and those outside it, with “Archimboldi” then demonstrating the profound effect such a context has on the generation of meaning in an earlier historical moment. This (re-)contextualisation is especially important in the contemporary moment, because while in the mid-20th century the political narratives of totalitarian movements that caused violence, such as Naziism, had

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<sup>46</sup> The differing worlds or contexts of Grall’s analysis also correspond to the different dominant genres that each part features most prominently. Bolaño makes extensive use of different genres in his work, and as Deckard notes, in *2666* alone there are elements of “academic satire/campus novel”, “philosophical thriller”, “Beat road novel”, “crime/detective fiction” and “historical fiction” in addition to the *Bildungsroman*. Ibid. However, the prominence and distinction given to “Archimboldi” in *2666*, both in terms of its length and the way its contents differ from the other parts of the text, mean that reading the text through the frame of the *Bildungsroman* is particularly productive. For an analysis of how the genres of horror and detective fiction are used in Bolaño’s work, see Andrews, *Roberto Bolaño’s Fiction*, 69-93.



similarly powerful rival narratives to challenge their construction of meaning, in the era of neoliberal narratives are globally dominant. *2666* demonstrates the necessity of the context provided by “Crimes” throughout the novel, showing that the recontextualisation of the world around the crimes is particularly important not only because of their horrific nature, but because by the standards of the dominant socio-political system that produces them the crimes do not even register as a problem.

The character of Albert Kessler is a retired US criminologist brought to Santa Teresa to satisfy the public that something is being done about the crimes. He notes that the crimes are the result of a broader social problem, that walking “in the streets in broad daylight [is] frightening for a man like [him]”, that for “a woman [...] it’s dangerous to be out at night [as most] of the streets [...] are poorly lit or not lit at all [, and the] police keep out of some neighborhoods” (*2666*, 605). However, the government officials who invite him to look into the crimes are only interested in dinner parties and social events, and he has to actively evade them to do any investigation. At dinner – where, tellingly, the meal is followed by “the near-instantaneous disappearance of the women, following prior instruction by their spouses” (593-594) – officials “talk [of] business, not crime (the economic situation along their strip of the border was good and still improving)” (593). This brief moment reveals not only an entrenched cultural sexism that devalues women, but that by the measures of profitability and economic growth that are the dominant factors of value under neoliberal understanding, Santa Teresa is a flourishing town; these two elements work in conjunction together to maintain a political status quo. Any investigation into the crimes risks compromising this growth and so is not to be encouraged, as the Santa Teresa mayor notes that the “important thing is not to stir up any shit” (470) and a man “from the chamber of commerce” requests that any investigation is done “discreetly [...] without sending anyone into a panic” (471). Clearly, then, economic concerns outweigh any other consideration, especially when the problem affects women, especially poor women.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> There is a long history of organisations actively seeking to obscure the truth when it conflicts with their interests and profitability; cigarette companies with cancer research and fossil fuel companies with climate change research are two prominent examples. Philip Mirowski offers a good account of numerous and large-scale attempts at obfuscation for profit in the neoliberal age. His account is perhaps excessively conspiratorial,

Through the contrast between “Archimboldi” and “Crimes”, *2666* demonstrates the necessity of historical-contextual knowledge as both a narrative and political tool. The need for such a framework of knowledge is shown to be particularly pressing in the case of contemporary neoliberal society, in which dominant neoliberal and sexist ideological discourses combine to dismiss the violence and exploitation that they produce as unimportant. However, *2666* also demonstrates the difficulty of establishing such a historical-contextual consensus through individual narratives. Whereas “Archimboldi” could rely on historical knowledge to give meaning to Reiter’s individual narrative, “Crimes” can only attempt to re-centre understanding of global economic and political systems around the ignored violence they produce by subordinating individual narratives to a grim recounting of contextualising information. *2666* shows, then, that the *Bildungsroman*, as a genre relying on individual-focused narratives operating within an established context of knowledge to inform the reader, faces a great challenge to its explanatory capacity in the contemporary political era.

### **Political violence and the limitations of typicality**

The challenge to the *Bildungsroman* is not limited to the question of context. *2666* also explores and problematises another narrative element related to context that is implicitly key to the *Bildungsroman*’s functioning: typicality. In addition to re-centring understanding of events within the text around the Santa Teresa crimes, *2666* presents the problem of whether common narrative forms can adequately represent and explain the systemic violence of global neoliberal capitalism, especially given neoliberal logic’s tendency towards individualisation. The *Bildungsroman* serves as the most prominent example here as it exemplifies two elements that are to some degree present in a variety of common genres: a reliance on the idea of typicality and an individual-focused narrative.

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ascribing actions to a unified political program rather than multiple self-interested actors; however, the examples he provides remain valid. See Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*.

As explored in this thesis's introduction, Lukács analyses the *Bildungsroman* in *The Theory of the Novel*, his analysis linking to a broader tradition of *Bildungsroman* criticism, in the vein of Morgenstern, that sees the genre as fundamentally narrating the attempted synthesis between interiority and external social conditions. However, it is his usage of the term "typicality" in *Studies in European Realism* that is most useful here.<sup>48</sup> To summarise, the typicality of a character essentially consists in the depiction of their lived experience being so representative of the typical experience of their social group that they can be used as an ideal example of members of that group and demonstrate the factors that shape their lives.<sup>49</sup> While Lukács does not explicitly link typicality to the *Bildungsroman*, an expanded form of this typicality, not always tied to notions of class, is implicitly a central element of the genre's functioning in almost every analysis of the *Bildungsroman*. From Morgenstern's "harmonious formation of the purely human", to Moretti's synthesis of capitalist energy with social stability in the bourgeois male, to Midalia's exploration of intersections of class, race, and genre in *Bildungsromane*, accounts of the genre all rely on typicality, on the story of a single individual of a certain group being able to inform the reader about the experience of that group as a whole, and expand upon the reasons for that experience.<sup>50</sup>

A key distinction can be made here between a narrative that functions, or attempts to function, through typicality, and one that does so through allegory, although obviously no narrative is necessarily limited to using one or the other technique. Put simply, a narrative of typicality aims to be literally representative, whereas one of allegory aims to be symbolically or metaphorically representative. A narrative of typicality uses an individual narrative to represent material experiences. These material experiences are not simply limited to the individual subject of the narrative but are experienced by all members of the particular group

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<sup>48</sup> As noted previously, his contrast of Balzac and Stendhal is particularly useful for understanding the concept of typicality. Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, 79-82.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Morgenstern, "On the Nature of the 'Bildungsroman'," 655; Moretti, *The Way of the World*; Midalia, "The Contemporary Female Bildungsroman."

of which the subject of the individual narrative is a member.<sup>51</sup> Because of this shared experience, typicality can be used to inform the reader about the group as a whole while only representing one of their number. By contrast, in a narrative of allegory the experience of the individual subject of the narrative is not necessarily one shared by other members of that group. However, that individual experience has a metaphorical significance that can be used to comment on the group as a whole. The subject of the individual narrative serves as a method of tying this symbolic meaning to a broader group by virtue of their membership of that group.<sup>52</sup>

Given the explanatory capacity implicitly ascribed to typicality by critical accounts of the *Bildungsroman*, it might seem strange that, despite the incredible importance of the crimes, “Crimes”, and *2666* as a whole, features no narrative following the life of a victim or a killer. It is upon contrasting “Crimes” with “Archimboldi” that the reason for this lack becomes clear. The political violence of the Santa Teresa murders is the product of multiple complex and systemic problems, caused by an almost inconceivable network of factors. As “Archimboldi” demonstrates, individual typicality can explain and explore totalitarian political violence, as such violence is carried out through explicit hierarchical structures of power. But the systemic complexity of neoliberal capitalism renders the violence it causes no longer explicable through such previously successful narrative techniques.

Reiter himself does not seem particularly typical, this lack being another element of the generic destabilisation seen in his narrative, but “Archimboldi” still makes use of typicality. The two clearest examples of typicality occur in the stories of Sammer and Ansky,

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<sup>51</sup> In the context of the *Bildungsroman* these “groups” are social, collections of people. However, allegory and typicality can function more broadly, with the group consisting of anyone or anything.

<sup>52</sup> To put this slightly less abstractly and return to the realm of social experience, it is helpful to return to the example used in the introduction. A narrative of typicality could show the day-to-day experience of a member of the working class during the industrial revolution. This individual might encounter conditions of poverty, the ever-present spectre of unemployment, callous factory bosses, or more positively the traditions of working class community. In encountering these things, they would share that experience with other members of their class and so inform us about that class and the factors that shape their experience. A narrative of allegory might show a member of the upper classes growing infertile and ill during the same period, as the bourgeoisie rise in power. Obviously not all members of the upper classes would have these material experiences, but the symbolic implications of stagnation and decline have a relevance to the position of the social group as a whole during that historical period. Channelling Lukács I have used a class-based example here, but any identifiable social grouping could use a similar narrative technique.

which are encountered second-hand by Reiter. Both of these narratives have a particular bearing on the kinds of historical political violence that 2666 clearly parallels with the crimes of Santa Teresa. During World War Two Jews were systematically persecuted and killed due to their ethnicity and religion, and in the Soviet Union, Russian intellectuals were systematically persecuted and purged. As such, both groups shared the experience of persecutions with all other members of that group, and so Ansky serves as typical of these two groups; Ansky's fate does not have to be allegorical for the fate of this community as a whole but can be literally representative. Sammer is a German administrator responsible for the mass killing of Jews. This mass murder of Jews and other "undesirables" was a deliberate and systematic program of the Nazi state, and as such Sammer shares his experience with other Nazi administrators, and more broadly with all administrators that carry out or are involved in deliberate state-sanctioned violence. He can be deemed typical of this group of individuals, as evidenced by his inclusion in Andrews's typology of evil.<sup>53</sup>

The violence of both Sammer's and Ansky's stories is a product of the explicit intent of a hierarchical structure of power. Violence against a certain group is the aim of actions carried out by a clearly delineated selection of people communicating together to further this aim. This functioning is best demonstrated by Sammer, although it operates similarly in Ansky's story, albeit with him as victim rather than perpetrator. Sammer attempts to evade responsibility for the trainload of Jews that arrive in his town, attempting to pass them off to someone else, who he knows will kill them. Ultimately, he is told the Jews were meant to go to Auschwitz but there is no transportation and so he should "dispose of them" (2666, 759). This ambiguous order has to be interpreted, leaving no doubt that Sammer is already aware of, and complicit in, the systematic violence of the regime, even before he becomes directly involved in carrying out this violence. Unable to avoid direct responsibility, Sammer organises numerous death squads to methodically murder and bury the Jews, eventually even drafting in the young men of the town as the scale of the slaughter leaves successive squads of his men burnt out with exhaustion and horror (759-65). Despite his claim that "others would have killed [the Jews] with their own hands" (767), he is no less guilty for not having

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<sup>53</sup> Andrews, *Roberto Bolaño's Fiction*, 161-65.

physically killed anyone, and his attempts to mystify or deny his position in relation to the violence are untenable because of his visible interaction with the structures of power of the Nazi hierarchy. From his individual narrative we are able to see the direct structures of power that lead to the killings. However, this clarity is not so evident in the violence of Santa Teresa.

Much of the criticism on *2666* has focused on the Santa Teresa murders, how they are produced, and what their significance is. The systemic nature of their causation is best described by Deckard, who states that the crimes are “complex rather than simple phenomena, the product of an assemblage of structures: the relations between the neoliberal economy and its treatment of women as disposable labor, [...] the corrosive social values of machismo and homophobia, [...] and the machinery of the state [...] mystify[ing] the sources of the crime”.<sup>54</sup> Neoliberalism, then, is a key element in creating the conditions for the murders, but the mechanisms through which it operates are rarely clear, and the harm it does lies not just in its direct effects but in the way it interacts with and enables other harmful discourses. The complexity of causation and the lack of clarity that the systemic nature of neoliberalism present have a key significance for the formal structure of *2666*, with “Crimes” working in contrast to “Archimboldi” to demonstrate the challenges this political order presents for narration, especially that dependent on typicality.

As we saw earlier, Andrews’s typology of evil actually ceases to function beyond the realm of totalitarian evil, as he can provide no typical examples of perpetrators of the violence in “Crimes”.<sup>55</sup> This lack is not the product of anything supernatural or mysterious, but because there is no one cause or perpetrator for the violence. The violence is the result of a complex combination of factors that render typicality non-viable. Klaus Haas, for example, is arrested and positioned as the prime suspect in “Crimes”, but it is unclear whether he is actually guilty of any of the charges against him, and regardless of Haas’s guilt, the gruesome femicides continue long after his arrest. In addition, a few of the crimes *are* solved, with the

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<sup>54</sup> Deckard, “Peripheral Realism, Millennial Capitalism, and Roberto Bolaño’s *2666*,” 360.

<sup>55</sup> Andrews, *Roberto Bolaño’s Fiction*, 161-71.

perpetrators ranging from abusive husbands to policemen. Two prominent examples of such “solved” crimes are the rape of prostitutes by police officers, which is witnessed by the character of Lalo Cura, and the rape and murder of Maria Mendoza by her abusive husband and his cousin (2666, 511-512).<sup>56</sup> But even with these known perpetrators, both police rape and Mendoza’s death seem to have no cause beyond the whims of the men involved, and the known criminals range across a wide variety of classes and social positions. A similar lack of typicality is the case for the victims, too. They are all women, but beyond that they come from a variety of groups: disproportionately the poor *maquiladora* workers or prostitutes, but also American tourists or rich businesswomen. The wide range of victims and perpetrators, and the lack of clarity of immediate motives, presents a problem for typicality. Whereas Sammer and Ansky could serve to explain political violence in “Archiboldi”, no single character can serve a similar function for neoliberal political violence. The dangers of attempting to typify the victims are evidenced by Farred’s approach to analysing the murders; as Pelaez notes, in subsuming all the female victims to the category of *maquiladora* workers, he neglects other victims’ experiences and misses many of the causes of the crimes.<sup>57</sup>

Rather than the motives of a single perpetrator, a key factor behind the violence of Santa Teresa is the devaluation of the lives of the predominantly female workforce of the *maquiladoras*. These workers are underpaid and easily-replaceable, and they live in a socio-political framework which privileges the economic above all else. Their societal value is defined by their economic value, and so they are considered insignificant by society as a whole in much the same way that they are insignificant and replaceable to their employers. However, this economic devaluation does not work independently, but operates in interaction

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<sup>56</sup> Even if, as Rodríguez claims, Klaus Haas is a viable primary suspect as “a sinister German giant [who] embodies the specter of global powers” this would be an allegorical rather than typical relationship between character and meaning, as the Santa Teresa murderers themselves are neither global powers nor predominantly German. Rodríguez, “Fear, Subjectivity, and Capital,” 354.

<sup>57</sup> Farred incorrectly identifies all the victims as *maquiladora* workers and he, along with Rodríguez, ascribes the murders almost purely to neoliberal capitalism, saying that the murders take on a political aspect due to this. This reading is the target of Peláez’s critique. Peláez does not deny that neoliberal capitalism is significant in creating the conditions for the murders, but notes that Farred’s reading oversimplifies the factors involved, largely ignoring the gendered nature of the killings and re-establishing precisely the kind of private-public, political-apolitical distinction between forms of violence that 2666 deconstructs by showing a continuum of violence towards women. See Farred, “The Impossible Closing,” 695-97; Peláez, “Counting Violence,” 36-38.

with a dominant sexist culture to further an already existent dehumanisation of women as objects for male use. At one point a character notes that “it was immediately clear by their clothes that [some girls] are factory workers” and is told that he “could sleep with the girls” if he wants to (2666, 377). Economic devaluation is tied to an assumption of sexual availability that does not take into consideration the desires of the women themselves. Such sexist logic is not restricted to Mexico; two of the male critics repeatedly visit prostitutes and one even states that “whores are there to be fucked” (83), reducing a prostitute from a person to purely a function of their economic-sexual relation to men.

It is in prostitution, in Santa Teresa and beyond, that the combination of both sexist and economic exploitation, and the devaluation this entails in the dominant culture, is most clearly visible. The designation of a woman as a “prostitute” is frequently used to dismiss murders as insignificant in Santa Teresa, and at one point, this designation is even implicitly used by police to justify their own rape of women.<sup>58</sup> Lalo Cura – himself the product of generations of rape dating back to 1865 (555-58) – stumbles across his colleagues “raping the whores from La Riviera [because] it looked like they bumped off another girl” (401). That the police officers commit rape within a police station demonstrates how institutionalised and normalised this attitude to women is, with the economic devaluation of large numbers of women feeding into the devalued status of women as a whole. This potent combination of sexism and neoliberalism goes beyond any single character, combining with many other factors, material and ideological, to create the conditions for the crimes. While the worst violence takes place in Santa Teresa, 2666 demonstrates that the violence is a global problem that is the product of a complex mix of cultural and ideological factors.

The challenge to typicality presented by the complexity and scale of neoliberalism is augmented by another element: the question of intent on the part of the dominant socio-political order. Whereas the violence of Sammer was the deliberate aim of the hierarchy of which he was a member, with this aim being clearly communicated down a chain of

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<sup>58</sup> As Driver notes, despite the anonymity of the victims in death, “their status and value in society are clearly marked: they are migrants, dark-skinned women, and *maquiladora* workers, and their clothing and makeup is exquisitely detailed and catalogued to provide evidence that they are potential prostitutes [and so] exist outside the realm of acceptable citizen who merit a police investigation.” Driver, “Más O Menos Muerto,” 54.



command, the situation in Santa Teresa is more complex. The crimes are the product of multiple overlapping interests, none of which individually have the mass murder and rape of women as their end goal. The aim of the corporations is to maximise profit through exploiting cheap labour, preventing unionisation, and minimising expenditure. The aim of the ruling elites of Mexico is to maintain the status quo that benefits them in both wealth and status, as seen in their focus on money over crime during Kessler's visit (593). Both of these groups perfectly demonstrate the pursuit of self-interest valorised by neoliberalism.<sup>59</sup> The reasons for the actions of the numerous complacent police officers vary, from indifference, to sexism, to desire for personal advancement, to self-interest of other varieties. The reasons of the perpetrators themselves are harder to typify, not only because so few of the killers are actually seen, but because even those that are caught have a variety of motives, or an apparent absence of motive, for their individual acts of violence. Mass-violence towards women is generally incidental to the actual aim and intent of the actors involved in creating the conditions for the violence in Santa Teresa or carrying it out. This does not make the violence any less *caused*, but the lack of a visible hierarchy and intent, in fact the disparate and systemic nature of power as an interaction of multiple self-interests, makes tracing the factors creating and enabling the violence difficult, especially from the point of view from any individual victim or perpetrator.

As the novel illustrates, the harm of neoliberalism lies in the ramifications of its ideology, its interaction with other exploitative discourses, and the difficulty in tracing the cause of harmful events, as much as in its immediate material effects. But it is precisely these harmful elements that make exploration so difficult narratively for a genre like the *Bildungsroman*, as these elements undermine the narrative mechanisms on which the genre depends.

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<sup>59</sup> “[T]here is one and only one social responsibility of business – to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase profits”. Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 133.

## Narratives of individualism and narratives of neoliberalism

The limitations of typicality present a problem for any attempt to explain the systemic effects of neoliberalism through a *Bildungsroman* narrative. However, with the explanatory capacity of typicality undermined, and with the difficulty of establishing a historical-social context for events, another problem arises. Like the novels analysed in the previous chapters, *2666* explores the way that the individual focus of the *Bildungsroman* risks feeding into the logic of neoliberalism.<sup>60</sup> An individual focus risks not only failing to explain social and political conditions, but misattributing cause to individuals and seeking individual solutions to systemic problems. As *2666* demonstrates, such misattribution and pursuit of individual solutions could potentially lead to complicity in the systemic violence of neoliberalism that it seeks to solve, even when carried out with the best of intentions.

There are several narratives within *2666* that illustrate the risks of individualisation – a large number is necessary to avoid relying heavily on typicality to explore the issue – but here I have selected examples that each show a different aspect of the problem. First there are Fate and Rosa from “Fate”. Taken alone the outcome of “Fate” is positive: Rosa is rescued from a potentially dangerous situation through heroic violence by Fate (323-24), and together they escape to the US (342-44). The focus on individual characters here provides a feeling of resolution through the positive outcome for these characters, but such a feeling is totally inappropriate given the continuing mass-violence in Santa Teresa. Not only did Fate not prevent the men threatening Rosa from threatening someone else, but his individualised intervention does nothing to solve the conditions that enable the violence. The litany of corpse-descriptions in the following section, “Crimes”, demonstrates this fact, deliberately undermining any positive feeling derived from the end of “Fate”.

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<sup>60</sup> The individualising logic of neoliberal ideology is explored in-depth in the introduction to this thesis. As Harvey explains it, under neoliberalism individuals are fundamentally assumed to be actors that “make rational economic decisions in their own interest”, with all agents generally presumed “to have access to the same information [with] no asymmetries of power or of information”. The assumptions underpinning the neoliberal model of human behaviour have profound effects on the conception of human social activity, effectively disregarding the possibility of environmental factors and reducing all explanation to the traits of the individual actors immediately involved in any interaction. See Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 68.

The reality of the failure of individual solutions is also demonstrated by many of the narratives within “Crimes”, two of which are particularly useful here: Lalo Cura and Azucena Esquivel Plata. Cura seems poised to become an avenging angel of historical violence against women. As mentioned earlier, he is the product of generations of rape and abandonment (2666, 555-58), and in his first job heroically and calmly saves the wife of his employer in a gunfight while two other guards flee (394-96). He self-educates, rigorously pursues investigations on his own, and challenges the sexism of his colleagues; when he overhears another officer telling sexist jokes about abuse, Cura challenges him to a fight (554). However, Cura’s investigations never amount to anything, and when he ultimately witnesses his colleagues raping prostitutes he does nothing. It is notable that Cura’s solutions are frequently violent as well as individualised, and, specifically, violent in the mould of the traditionally masculine action-hero. This suggests that his solutions are a product of some of the same ideological frameworks as the problems they seek to solve.

Esquivel Plata offers a different model of individual power. She is a high-ranking female politician who is driven to investigate the murders by the disappearance of her old friend. As a powerful woman, she challenges the dominant masculinity of Santa Teresa, and she leverages charisma and institutional power rather than the action-heroism of Cura and those like him. Although she is initially motivated by personal reasons, she quickly takes notice of the broader violence of Santa Teresa. In this way, she seems ideally positioned to present a solution to the crimes. But her approach fails too. The journalists she employs go missing, her political power appears unable to achieve anything but personal privilege, and in being embedded in the Mexican state, she, too, is potentially compromised. The model of a single authoritative political figure, working from above, is ultimately no more capable of effecting change than an action-hero.

Both Cura and Esquivel Plata demonstrate the frustration of individual attempts to resolve the crimes, and even Kessler, who was able to identify the social causes of the violence, can do nothing to solve these problems. However, it is the American Sheriff, Harry Magaña, who demonstrates not only the failings, but the potential dangers of an individualised approach to systemic problems, especially an approach that emphasises the

power and justness of an individual acting alone. Taking this individualised approach even further than Cura, who at least has a partner, Magaña gets involved in the crimes of Santa Teresa when a girl from the US goes missing. He embarks alone on a personal, unofficial investigation/mission of revenge, attempting to track down the last known whereabouts of anyone connected to the girl. Not only is Magaña's approach individualised, but his motivation is, too. For him the problem is not mass femicide but that an American citizen that he knew has gone missing. But due to this focus on revenge for a single woman, Magaña becomes complicit in exactly the kind of sexist violence of which the crimes are symptomatic. He asks a prostitute for information, and although she gives it to him, he does not believe her. He whips her with his belt and then before "she [can] scream [he covers] her mouth with one hand and push[es] her down on to the bed, [saying, ] if you scream, I'll kill you" (2666, 416). Although he is only seeking information, the connotations of sexual violence in his actions highlight his complicity in the broader problems of Santa Teresa. His approach is ultimately futile; upon tracking a potential suspect to a house, Magaña stumbles upon what appear to be dead bodies, is surprised by two men, and promptly vanishes entirely from the narrative (448-49).

The majority of 2666 avoids making extensive use of both typicality – with the exception of "Archimboldi" – and allegory. However, it is the issue of literary representation and individual narratives that provides the clearest example of a symbolism or allegory, one which spans the entire text. Reiter is not only the subject of a *Bildungsroman*, but is also an author, and so on multiple levels is a representative of literature. The critics establish Reiter, who they know as Archimboldi, as an individual of great significance. They not only analyse his work intensely, but spend much time searching for Archimboldi himself, travelling as far as Mexico. In doing this, they imbue the goal of finding him with a sense of symbolic power. The narrative tension established in "Critics" by the search for Archimboldi is sustained across the rest of 2666 by its lack of resolution. Small references to Archimboldi appear in "Amalfitano" and "Crimes", although less so in "Fate". In "Crimes", for instance, Haas, who is later revealed to be Archimboldi/Reiter's nephew, tells a prisoner that "a giant is coming

and the giant is going to kill” them (2666, 481), evoking the image of the mysterious Archimboldi once again.

“Archimboldi”, the final section of 2666, seems poised to resolve this narrative tension, and superficially appears to amplify Archimboldi’s significance. Reiter is the only character who has a section devoted entirely to his life story: a full *Bildungsroman*. In his youth he has a quasi-magical relationship to the ocean; during the war he is described as huge in stature and fearless of death; and later in life he becomes aware of the political violence of the Nazi regime and, although he is unable to prevent it, he punishes a perpetrator of this violence. However, there are also things that work to undermine Reiter’s importance. He writes under a pseudonym, Benno von Archimboldi, that is deliberately nonsensical in its mixture of linguistic naming conventions. Although in practice the critics are searching for Reiter, the symbolic distance established between the reality of the author and the object of their hunt suggests that they are searching for something in him that does not exist. Additionally, the most significant and informative events of Reiter’s life are not his own experiences, but rather the experiences of others that are communicated to him, first through Ansky’s diary and then in Sammer’s confession. Most importantly, and as explored earlier, his narrative undermines the idea of teleological development. Despite this, the importance placed on him by the critics’ search still seems to suggest that his travel to Mexico will be deeply significant. Instead, Reiter vanishes on a deliberately anti-climactic note, the narrative of “Archimboldi” ending before Reiter heads to Mexico, leaving the reader with no more information than the critics in the first part.

In searching for Archimboldi the critics are searching for fundamental knowledge in the form of a single individual. But in this search, they fail to notice the context in which they exist, the significance of events all around them, and the meaning of their own actions. Pelletier and Espinoza, the two most active male members of the group, remain unaware of their embodiment of global sexism in their interactions with women, sexualising and devaluing them. Nor do any of the critics recognise the significance of the crimes of Santa Teresa, in which the secret of the world is said to be hidden. Symbolically, then, the search for Archimboldi/Reiter, and the foolishness of this search, is a commentary on the dangers

facing the *Bildungsroman*, and other genres relying on typicality, in the era of neoliberalism. This commentary works in conjunction with the multiple individual narratives embedded within *2666*, such as those of Kessler, Fate, Cura, Esquivel Plata, and Magaña. The *Bildungsroman*, as a literary form depending on an individual narrative, is at risk of tying into elements of the logic of neoliberalism, and potentially exacerbating the factors that lead to systemic violence.

*2666*, then, offers a complex critique of the *Bildungsroman* genre in the neoliberal era and some of the fundamental elements on which it depends. While some elements of the genre may have always been problematic, the *Bildungsroman* can still serve as a valuable way of narrativising socio-political problems, such as totalitarian violence in the 20th century. However, the rise of neoliberalism presents new challenges to the genre and its narrative logic. The first challenge is in the lack of a shared socio-historical context against which narrative events can be read, and the difficulty of establishing such a context. The second challenge is the limitations of typicality as a tool for socio-political exploration in the face of new, complex social problems and the systemic, rather than hierarchical, manner in which neoliberalism functions. With these fundamental elements compromised, the *Bildungsroman* faces the possibility of exhaustion, of becoming a genre that not only fails to explain neoliberalism but potentially fuels it. This potential for failure arises because the genre relies on a form of narration that is both capable of misrepresenting the problems neoliberalism presents and is vulnerable to incorporation by the individualising logic of neoliberal ideology. *2666* suggests that the *Bildungsroman* must be used carefully in the contemporary era and that a new form of the genre, or perhaps a new genre entirely, is required to take up the socio-political function the *Bildungsroman* once fulfilled. That new genre might look very different to the *Bildungsroman*, and a lot more like the multi-faceted and complex text that is *2666*.

## Conclusion

The *Bildungsroman*'s capacity for socio-political exploration and critique has been profoundly challenged by the rise and dominance of neoliberalism. At every stage of neoliberalism's rise new problems for the genre have presented themselves. The nature of neoliberal ideology, the functioning of neoliberal power, the hegemony of neoliberal common sense, the global reach of neoliberal systems and ideas: all these factors and more have rendered the contemporary political moment particularly difficult for the *Bildungsroman* to address.

Authors have adopted a variety of methods in their attempts to salvage or reclaim the genre's political capacity and explore the difficulty of growing up neoliberal. These attempts have not always been successful, often revealing new ways in which neoliberal ideology aligns with and is aided by the core logic of the *Bildungsroman* or creates political conditions which undermine the functioning of this core logic. But in both their successes and failures, the different approaches to the *Bildungsroman* explored in this thesis have all revealed something about the functioning and complexity of neoliberalism. *The Dispossessed* attempted to rehabilitate and reclaim the genre for radical political ends, revealing how the core ideas that allowed for this attempt also aided the ascendance of neoliberal ideology. *Infinite Jest* proposed using the genre as part of an attempt to find a way out of the trap of isolation so prevalent in the heyday of neoliberalism, but ultimately demonstrated the limitations and failings of such an approach. *Oryx and Crake* embraced the parallels between the logic of the *Bildungsroman* and that of neoliberal ideology, using these parallels to launch a scathing critique, and to demonstrate how new literary forms are needed to narrate alternatives to the neoliberal worldview. *2666* explored and expanded on the core logic of the genre, using the *Bildungsroman* in conjunction with other genres to articulate a complex historical argument, and again positing the necessity of alternative or hybrid forms in order to properly explore and counter the new socio-political formations of the neoliberal era.

Each progressive attempt at redeploying the genre at each point in the history of neoliberalism has achieved a great deal. However, they have also demonstrated that the options available for addressing neoliberalism through use of the *Bildungsroman* have become increasingly limited. This is especially the case with regards to using the genre to posit alternatives. With *2666*, the genre appears to be exhausted of much of its capacity for socio-political critique. This is not to say that the genre is dead by any means. There seems to be nothing so conducive to an art form's survival than being pronounced dead, and for a variety of other social or political problems, the genre may still hold a great deal of potential. On the issue of articulating critiques and alternatives to the dominant socio-political (neoliberal) system, however, the genre, especially in its less-hybrid forms, is severely limited. *Oryx and Crake* and *2666* both address these limitations and have to articulate their critiques through increasingly complex manipulations or hybridisations of the genre.

However, *2666* was published in Spanish in 2004, and by the time it emerged in English translation in 2008 a massive political upheaval was underway. At the moment of the genre's apparent exhaustion, the socio-political system which had caused this exhaustion in turn found itself exhausted. The 2008 financial crisis presented the first serious challenge to neoliberal hegemony in its history. For all the cracks that had been beginning to show throughout the 2000s, it was the 2008 crash, the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, that made the crisis of neoliberalism decisive. The economic promises of neoliberalism were shown to be false. Its ironclad theories and faith in the market were shown to be flawed. The arbitrariness and unfairness of the economy, especially the financial sector, was revealed in a way that could not be denied. The vast majority of the population were and remain badly affected economically by the crisis, and its material impact has contributed to widespread disaffection and discontent.

Although there was widespread protest in the wake of 2008, the more radical political movements that emerged in the immediate aftermath, a particularly well-known example being the Occupy movement, did not have clear and long-lasting impact on the political status quo, although the organisations and energies often live on in modified form. On a superficial level, the neoliberal norm appeared to return after the crash, but there have been



gradual changes, and the long-term effects cannot be ignored. Some, like Will Davies, have detected a new form of neoliberalism in the changed policies that have gradually emerged from governments since the crisis, but given the broader political changes we are seeing this could be the stopgap adjustment of an ideological system in terminal decline.<sup>1</sup> It is even possible that we are witnessing a terminal crisis not just of neoliberalism, but of capitalism more broadly, but much remains open to possibility.<sup>2</sup>

At present in much of the Western world we are seeing a resurgence in popularity of socialism on the left, a union of old-school post-war socialism and the culture and energy of a newly politicised younger generation. Leadership is often being offered by figures of the older generation, such as Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn, with support coming from grassroots movements dominated by the young. Simultaneous to this change on the left, there has been the rise of a right-wing, authoritarian, conservative populism, often combining elements of cultural conservatism with religious, nationalistic, and racial identitarianism. These conservative elements work in conjunction with an economic approach that, while in some degrees more protectionist in rhetoric, is largely recognisable as a variation of classic neoliberal policies – tax cuts, reduced government spending, reduced regulation, a focus on security and defence – albeit one with an altered ideological justification. The struggle between these two broad approaches is becoming increasingly apparent, revealing and/or creating deep societal division. Key flashpoint political events, such as the UK referendum on leaving the European Union and the US election of Donald Trump, have served to further exacerbate and reinforce this divide. Which side of this struggle, if any, will emerge dominant is unclear. The dominance of Keynesianism grew out of the Great Depression, and later World War Two. Neoliberalism rose in the wake of the 1973 oil crisis and in the context of the Cold War. What will ultimately come from the 2008 financial crisis politically is unclear.

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<sup>1</sup> Davies, “The New Neoliberalism.”

<sup>2</sup> The idea of such a terminal crisis has long been a central part of certain theoretical frameworks, being central to world-systems theory critics, for instance, since the foundational work of Immanuel Wallerstein, but these long-term predictors have recently been joined by a large number of critics from other backgrounds. See, for example, Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End?*

Beyond the purely political, increasing amounts of attention are being paid to the role new technologies will play in the future of society and politics, particularly in the form of automation, computing, and artificial intelligence. The last fifty years have seen unprecedented rates of technological advancement, and some argue that they will contribute to transformation of society beyond capitalism, notable examples being Paul Mason's *Postcapitalism* and Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams's *Inventing the Future*.<sup>3</sup> What effect these technologies will have likely depends not only on the technologies themselves, but on the system in which they emerge. But whatever does come from future technological and political developments, it will likely present a new set of challenges and issues for the *Bildungsroman*

The emergence of capitalism and the rise of print media played a central role in creating the novel form. And early capitalism provided not only the conditions for the creation of the *Bildungsroman*, as a genre of the novel form, but also served as the subject matter for the genre's core focus. A large-scale political transformation in the wake of neoliberalism, combined with new technologies, may provide similar conditions. It may allow the emergence of new forms, or hybridisations of forms, that engage with the core questions of the *Bildungsroman* – youth, growing up, socialisation, the individual – while allowing new approaches to exploration and engagement with systemic, large-scale cultural and political issues. Alternatively, this political shift could provide the conditions for a resurgence of the *Bildungsroman* in a more recognisable form, bringing the genre back to relevance through novel deployments or through engagement with new dominant issues and ideologies that render the core logic of the genre more viable. It may open up different spaces for the genre, side-lining the problems which have challenged the genre in the age of neoliberalism or make the core issues and approaches of the genre more pertinent.

In the 1960s, Paul Goodman worried about the youth of America growing up disaffected within the organised system of society. He argued that the rigid, bureaucratic, and utilitarian society that he saw all around him had nothing to offer the young, failing to

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<sup>3</sup> See Paul Mason, *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (London: Allen Lane, 2015); Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work* (London: Verso, 2015).

provide for their material and spiritual needs in its focus on organisation, and suppressing the greatest aspects of human potential. The neoliberals appeared to offer an alternative. They provided a social vision shaped around freedom, promising to allow the fullest possibility of human action and to unlock the constructive potential of individuals through free markets and private property, freeing people from the dullness, inefficiency, and inhibition of post-war society. Yet the novels examined in this thesis reveal all too clearly the real consequences of this vision, a heavy emotional and physical cost for those living and growing up under neoliberalism, a far cry from the excellence envisioned by Goodman in his call for societal change. But the neoliberal order is now in decline. Whatever emerges from the uncertainty of our current political moment, both artistically and societally, for now the possibility and potential remains for a new generation to grow up after neoliberalism.

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