TRYING NOTHING: APPRAISALS OF NIHILISM IN AMERICAN FICTION OF THE 1970s

by

Jeoffrey Steven Bull

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
Graduate Department of English,
University of Toronto

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- ABSTRACT -

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Submitted as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Department of English, University of Toronto, to be granted at the June, 1997 Convocation.

"Nihilism" denotes the conclusion that life has no meaning or purpose because no one can verify that any meaning or purpose exists. Nihilistic characters appear throughout literature; however, they are most common in European and North American fiction written since the Enlightenment. This thesis examines how five American novels written in and about the late 1960s and early 1970s--Walker Percy's Love in the Ruins (1971), Joyce Carol Oates' Wonderland (1971), Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow (1973), Robert Stone's Dog Soldiers (1974), and Don DeLillo's The Names (1982)--sample, test, and challenge both nihilism and nihilistic characters.

Chapter One begins by defining nihilism and describing fictional nihilists in novels by Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and others, then divides the five novelists under study into two camps. While all five attempt to counter nihilism by developing religious or quasi-religious interpretations of human purpose, they separate over the origins of nihilism. Oates and Pynchon are "Seekers" who criticize what they see as their culture's life-denying emphasis on conformity and reason. Percy and Stone are "Prophets" who see attacks on reason and restraint as invitations to nihilism. DeLillo tests both views, adopting neither. Discussions of Nietzsche's influence on both views and compar-
isons of the authors' statements with contemporary analyses of nihilism help clarify these different positions.

Subsequent chapters examine different novelists' appraisals of nihilism in detail. Chapter Two discusses Percy's use of Tom More's crisis of faith to dramatize the dangers of "scientism." Chapter Three deals with Oates' handling of Jesse Vogel's obsession with order and the way this obsession leads to the destruction of his family. Pynchon's call for a refutation of "a control that is out of control" and his critique of "romantic totalism" are the concerns of Chapter Four. Chapter Five shows how Stone's disturbing depictions of untrammelled hedonism refute the claims of those who believe mankind must live free of guilt and caution. The final chapter discusses how DeLillo uses descriptions of both the cult called "The Names" and characters who try to understand that cult in order to pose fiction and communion against a nihilistic refusal of all mystery.
- ACKNOWLEDGMENTS -

This thesis could not have been completed without the assistance and support of my supervisor, Professor T. H. Adamowski, Chair of the English Department of the University of Toronto. Thanks also to Professors G. Henderson and M. J. Levene for joining my thesis committee, and to the other participants in my oral examination: Professors M. J. Sidnell, Director of Graduate Studies, and R. M. Brown of the English Department, Professor R. Capozzi of the Italian Department, Professor T. Carmichael of the University of Western Ontario, and the examination chairman, Professor M. Menzinger. I can only say to all of you that I hope you get to see me some day when I'm not terrified!

All this and everything else is for Julia: "All departures, all beginnings out of the peace of nothingness are fearful"--yet here we are.
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"Nihilism" is the name given to the conclusion that one must reject out of hand all attempts to name life's meaning or purpose because there appears to be no way to prove that any meaning or purpose exists. The nihilist not only questions the idea that certain essential values govern human life—he repudiates it. He sets himself against religion, against ethics, against any constructs of human community whatsoever, because such constructs can be challenged by questioning. Looking for certainty, the nihilist finally believes in nothing as if it were something. In modern Western culture, the charge of nihilism is usually assigned by those who draw solace from the Judeo-Christian moral tradition to those who appear to disparage that tradition; however, as estimates of one's actual proximity to the essence of that tradition vary, the charge can also be made by "nihilists" against their accusers. As Robert G. Olson points out, it is common today for people to "tend to think of the nihilist not as a cynical and despairing atheist but as a robot-like conformist," battered into indifference by the baffling technological society of the West (515, col. 2). As a result, defenders of the Western heritage who call challenges to that heritage "acts of nihilism" can find themselves being accused of being nihilists because they adhere to a supposedly arbitrary moral system that buttresses a "nihilistic" technological order. For each group, nihilism serves as the perfect invective: it is both vague and menacing enough to banish others' claims while sheltering the inconsistencies of one's own views.
Human beings have always given some thought to the idea that nothing in fact exists, or that there is no purpose to life, even if only as a way to begin creating proofs--religions and ontologies--to refute such claims (see Baylis 226). However, as Karen Carr notes, use of the word "nihilism" to describe the belief that nothing matters became common only after the Enlightenment, the beginning of the modern era. She suggests that the rapid increase in use of the term after the eighteenth century signals an inherent connection between nihilism and "secular humanism" (13-14). The last two hundred years have seen doubts turn into convictions--so much so that it may be argued that a "nihilistic mood" holds control of a good deal of Western culture (see Crosby 1-7). Assessing the merits of this mood depends entirely on one's own beliefs; however, signs of such a mood do exist, and are difficult to overlook. For example, "At no period in Western history, with the exception of the Hellenistic age, have so many philosophers regarded moral statements as somehow arbitrary" (Olson 515, col. 2). At the same time, it can be argued that recent scientific discoveries and new theories of the mind suggest no correlation exists between our thoughts and the world we encounter (Novak 30). According to the philosopher Donald Crosby, the nihilistic perspective seems to be "part of the air we breathe today": he has noted that many of his students "view as inevitable, or nearly inevitable, what they see as an impending total bureaucratization and dehumanization of all life, wholesale political corruption and incompetence, universal terrorism and crime, economic collapse and environmental disaster, world population glut and famine, and nuclear holocaust" (5-6).

Perhaps students are not the best people to ask about the future: one recalls the claim of Walker Percy's Dr. Tom More that students are "a shaky dog-
matic lot" who want "either total dogmatic freedom or total dogmatic unfreedom, and the one thing that makes them unhappy is something in between" (Love 233). The signs of a nihilistic mood abroad in Western culture today may just be further proof of the universal human need to see one's own time standing in "an extraordinary relation" to the future (Kermode 94-5). Nevertheless, the current age does seem to invite--and promote--charges of nihilism. Post-Enlightenment culture has opened the way for arguments against orthodoxies of all sorts by allowing pluralistic and relativist concepts of value to take a dominant place in any discussion of right action or knowledge. While this openness has led to incredible discoveries in many fields, it has also cleared a space for radical, all-consuming doubt--for the form of reverse certainty known as nihilism. As a result, the products of the culture of this age, including its fictions, show deeper marks of the nihilist mood than those of previous ages.

Writers have always felt compelled to investigate nihilism, in hopes of finding ways to circumvent it, if not defeat it. Charles Glicksberg is correct when he states that "the nihilist strain" is present throughout literature: "From Sophocles and Lucretius to Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Dostoevski, Kierkegaard, and Tolstoy, there is scarcely an important creative figure who has not at some time been striken with the fever of nihilism. It is always there to be faced--and overcome" (15). As long as one needs to ask "why?" one will be obliged to consider the nihilists' conclusion that there is nothing to know. What is different now is the nature of the fever. The difference between the last two centuries and centuries before is that in recent times many more characters (and many more real-life figures) have adopted a tone of indifference--or even pleasure--when declaring themselves to be nihilists or driving
themselves towards nihilistic conclusions. What was once a dreaded, almost ineffable suspicion has now become an assertion, complete with a name.

For example, amongst the first figures described as nihilists—Russian radicals of the mid-nineteenth century who believed the strict laws of science would lead man to paradise—there were many who saw the name as a sign of accomplishment. The first and probably most famous nihilist in fiction, Yevgeny Bazarov, the protagonist of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1861), is proud to describe himself as a nihilist. As Bazarov's friend (and, for a time, disciple) Arkady Kirsanov tells his own father and uncle, a nihilist is a man who "looks at everything critically... who does not bow down before any authority, who does not take any principle on faith, whatever reverence that principle may be enshrined in" (94). Turgenev's nihilist is one who refuses to believe in anything except the supposedly objective facts of science. All other types of knowledge and all forms of social order, including religious faith, strike him as irrelevant. They must be repudiated; they stand in the way; they depend on faith, not facts. When Arkady's father argues that it is not enough simply to repudiate everything, because "one must construct too, you know," Bazarov replies: "That is not our affair... The ground must be cleared first" (Turgenev 123-4). It is his belief, despite a certain vagueness in his statements and actions, that out of destruction will come a world worth believing in.¹

¹Here Bazarov echoes the claims of actual Russian nihilists such as Dmitri Pisarev, who avowed that "what can be smashed should be smashed; what will stand the blow is good; what will fly into smithereens is rubbish; at any rate, hit out right and left—there will and can be no harm from it" (Olson 515, col. 1). Isaiah Berlin reports that Pisarev and his associates "proudly nailed Bazarov's colours to their mast and expressed gratitude to Turgenev for his honesty and sympathy with all that was most living and fearless in the growing party of the future"—much to the author's discomfort (36).
Those few who took Turgenev's depiction of Bazarov to be an endorsement of their aims were probably the last people to ever take pleasure in considering themselves to be nihilists. It was not long before nihilism took on the entirely negative formulation it possesses today both amongst radical thinkers and the general public. In the minds of that public, real-life "nihilists" such as Dmitri Pisarev, and Sergei Nechayev (the prototype for the cynical revolutionary Peter Verkhovensky in Dostoevsky's *The Devils*), believed in nothing but destructiveness for its own sake. Amongst fictional nihilists who have appeared since 1880 (the height of "political nihilism") the petulance and disappointed Romantic idealism which Turgenev so skillfully threaded into Bazarov's claims and manner have given way to modes of hopelessness. In most cases, nihilists are depicted either as bitter atheists struggling against despair, such as Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), or grotesque, irrational bomb-tossers out to murder moral norms, such as Conrad's "incorruptible Professor" in *The Secret Agent* (1907; cf. Olson 515, col.1). Echoing Nietzsche's contemporaneous analysis of the relationship between the demise of faith and the advent of nihilism (discussed below), the emphasis in both cases is on the dreadful results of nihilism, the dangers that come of Ivan's vision that, if God does not exist, "'everything is permitted!'" (Dostoevsky 309). Dostoevsky maintains that once God is renounced, nihilism must follow, because without the weight of divine sanction, values lose all effective force (see Woolfolk 83-4, Angelus 204). All the destructiveness, violence, and cruelty

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2See Magarshack x-xii.
3i.e., terrorist activities undertaken in the name of more or less vague visions of "scientific" reform. For a cogent history of such activities, see Crosby 9-11.
of which mankind is capable must then occur; everything is permitted. Characters like Conrad's bomber embody this "fate."

During the course of this century the understanding of nihilism in fiction has continued to evolve. For example, the moral stances essayed by characters in Ernest Hemingway's novels, and the circumstance of Jacob Horner in John Barth's *The End of the Road* (1958), suggest the difficulty of finding a ground for morals in a world in which "God is dead." Hemingway attempts to articulate a code in which it is understood that "what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after," thereby rejecting the claim that universal ethical norms are possible (*Death* 9). Nevertheless, many of his characters have much to say about "grace under pressure," and other forms of quiet courage that are not easily compatible with the hedonistic basis for values the author puts forward. Barth's Jake Horner hopes that the tenets of "Sinistrality, Antecedence, and Alphabetical Priority" can help him avoid becoming "immobilized": "If the alternatives are side by side," his rather odd therapist tells him, "choose the one on the left; if they're consecutive in time, choose the earlier. If neither of these applies, choose the alternative whose name begins with an earlier letter of the alphabet" (79-80). As Donald Crosby points out, Jake's devotions can be read as both a wicked satire of blind faith and a commentary on the problem of living in a world where one can no longer be sure if a rational basis for choosing one course of action over another exists (3-4). Jake, largely indifferent to his circumstances, is happy to use any system that will work; he feels he has no command over him-

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4E.g., Jake Barnes' distaste concerning the behaviour of Robert Cohn, and Jake's own (near) stoic thoughts about his own injury, in *The Sun Also Rises* (1925).
self or the world. Both Hemingway and Barth create characters who can find no way past what Camus calls "the Absurd": "the confrontation of [the] irrational [world] with the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart" (Myth 21). Like Camus' Mersault (in The Stranger [1942]), and Sartre's Roquentin (in Nausea [1938])--central figures in European "Existentialist" literature, Glicksberg's "literature of nihilism" (see 124f)--characters such as the two Jakes find themselves thrown back on themselves as soon as they begin to seek a means of determining right action. Their dilemmas stand as proof of the continued importance of nihilism as a theme in American literature in this century.

In Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, George Steiner (with a nod to D.H. Lawrence) suggests that one should read American and Russian novels of the nineteenth century as complementary examples of visionary writing, distinct sets of works that nevertheless display a common desire to explore what Nietzsche later called "the revaluation of all values." Great novels of both nations--War and Peace, Moby-Dick--move "beyond the dwindling resources of European realism" towards an awareness of the effects of displacing old beliefs, an awareness that also allows for "the exhilarating conviction that there [is] at stake more than a portrayal of existing society or the provision of romantic entertainment" (38-9). It can be argued that one can still encounter this visionary impetus in American literature--that is, that some American novelists still have a "Russian" compulsion to use fiction as a vehicle for philosophical argument. American writers of this sort working out of and after the 1960s appear to share one thing in common with Russian writers working out of and after the 1860s (such as Turgenev): an interest in characters who willingly attempt to undermine the social and political order. Several American novels
of and about the late 1960s and early 1970s investigate the origins of nihilistic behaviour, and the elements in American culture which may be said to stimulate such behaviour. The result is a contemporary American "literature of nihilism" that illuminates all aspects of the "nihilistic mood" of this period.

Five novels are examined in this study: Walker Percy's *Love in the Ruins* (1971), Joyce Carol Oates' *Wonderland* (1971), Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers* (1974), and Don DeLillo's *The Names* (1982). All five novels share in the heritage Steiner outlines, because all five novelists tap into the definitions of nihilism outlined above, and make the problem of maintaining values in an ungrounded time their central concern. Reflecting the particular circumstances of the late 1960s and early 1970s, these novelists mix a concern for the needs of the individual with views of the peculiar politics of the period in which they wrote. The different styles and philosophical stances with which these five approach nihilism allow the reader to experience not only the implications of the forms of nihilism discussed above, but also some sense of the way nihilistic ideas and nihilistic characters were a part of American life during and after the 1960s. Reflecting the exigencies of the time in which they were written, these novels also lean more towards prophesy and revelation than towards ways of accommodating the nihilistic mood. In doing so, all hint at the drama of the late 1960s, when it seemed to many citizens of the West that either the established powers or their antagonists--or both--were revealing themselves to be nihilists.

These writers' differing views, and points they hold in common, are better understood if one separates the quintet into two groups: call them "Seekers" and "Prophets." As this study will show, Walker Percy and Robert
Stone are representatives of the Prophets' camp, while Thomas Pynchon and Joyce Carol Oates constitute the Seekers. Don DeLillo evades any definite assignment; at once a Seeker and a Prophet, he depicts the limitations of both stances. Seekers maintain that the nihilist mood is a result of flaws in the traditional values upon which modern society believes itself to be grounded. Echoing anti-rationalist philosophers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger, they believe their culture promotes lifelessness—conformity, slavish adherence to abstract moral norms, and the devaluation of any consideration of one's emotions and desires. The only solution to this "nihilistic" situation is to seek new values that do justice to the whole life of mankind, thereby restoring the real intent of the culture's now lifeless values. Prophets, on the other hand, believe the nihilistic mood is a result of a common underestimation and rash appraisal of traditional values. In their view, the lack of restraint common to attempts to live in accord with "new values" is the cause of nihilism. Echoing suggestions made by (amongst others) Albert Camus and Lionel Trilling that there is a danger in trying to do without guilt—and trying to replace God with man—these writers prophesy that contemporary culture's experiments with undermining moral standards signal the advent of nihilism.

Even after dividing these novelists into opposing groups, it is apparent that the five novels here under examination share a central idea in common: they all examine the ethical implications of choosing to live as if values need no longer matter—and they all contain negative depictions of this choice. Each novel contains characters whose stories show how living in the late twentieth century's technological paradise can still leave one feeling "unaccommodated" and alone—lost and unsure in a world of ceaseless change that seems to continually undermine one's beliefs and sense of security. The nov-
elists' various approaches to this theme all depend on a critique of modern culture's disconnection from some religious (or at least near-religious) understanding of human life. A morality based on the ethos of Christianity is put forward not only by Percy, the one avowedly Christian author in the group, but also by the other four, even though in their public statements they are either silent or unsure about their beliefs. At the same time, all five writers challenge attempts to efface this morality in the name of world-views based solely on human desires for certainty and mastery. For example, Percy uses the doubts of his protagonist, Tom More, as a way to dramatize direct claims against what he calls "scientism," a dogmatic positivism which he sees as an impediment to faith. Stone argues against those who think mankind is better off without a sense of guilt--of "original sin," as he once offered--simply by depicting the guilt-free adventures of feckless drug-runners and self-styled Nietzscheans such as John Converse and Ray Hicks and their failure to bear the weight of things as they are. Oates uses Jesse Vogel's obsession with homeostasis and other models of order to illustrate the damage done to both oneself and life in general when reason supplants any acknowledgement of one's emotions and drives. The stories of Tyrone Slothrop, Roger Mexico, and Captain Weissmann help clarify Pynchon's call for a re-balancing of the forces of life and death back towards a holistic order that now seems out of reach due to Western culture's over-emphasis of what one character calls "a control that is out of control" (Pynchon 277). DeLillo, intrigued by all forms of order that end up stifling the life they were designed to protect, has James Axton and Owen Brademas discover the spiritual value of language--the way both communication and creative writing seem to open mankind to a more valuable sense of
the mysteries of life itself, and the value of simply being alive--by having
them encounter "The Names" habit of equating writing with murder.5

Both Seekers' and Prophets' appraisals of the sources and results of
nihilism reiterate Nietzsche's account of the rise of a nihilistic mood in nine-
teenth-century Europe. However, while the Seekers are attracted to elements
of Nietzsche's program for overcoming nihilism, the Prophets hold that this
program exemplifies the dangerous result of nihilistic beliefs--not a way past
the problem. That said, Nietzsche's ubiquity proves that it is impossible to talk
about nihilism without mentioning his writings.6 A brief overview of his
ideas is necessary in order to show both the origins of the two dominant def-
initions of nihilism in this study, and why these five American novelists of the
later half of the century make nihilism one of their central themes.

5It is interesting to note that the assumptions these writers critique are
the same values that Bazarov, Turgenev's proud nihilist, poised against the
culture of his time. "The victorious advance of qualitative methods, belief in
the organization of human lives by technological organization, reliance on
nothing but calculation of utilitarian consequences in evaluating policies that
affect vast numbers of human beings, this is Bazarov . . . . The suspicion of all
that is qualitative, impressive, unanalysable, yet precious to men, and its re-
legation to Bazarov's obsolete . . . pre-scientific rubbish heap, has, by a strange
paradox, stirred both the anti-rationalist Right and the irrationalist Left to an
equally vehement opposition to the technocratic establishment in the middle"
(Berlin 54). Bazarov is still a nihilist--but no longer a rebel; Percy and Pyn-
chon meet in their condemnation of the attitude of scientific certainty for
which Bazarov longs.

6In fact, it may not be possible to talk about intellectual life in this
century without mentioning Nietzsche. It is difficult to refute the statement
that the history of the last one hundred years has "indeed seen the catastro-
phes [he foretold,] which have toppled Europe from its prime position. Nobody
will seriously deny that this period has witnessed a horrendous confirmation
of Nietzsche's predictions . . . . His philosophy, addressing the decay of Chris-
tianity and unmasking the rise of science as a set of rapidly changing work-
ing fictions, increasingly looks like a historical turning point" (Van der Will
1016)
Nietzsche begins by leaping from the precipice Dostoevsky revealed with Ivan Karamazov's ominous statement: if God is dead, everything is permitted. Dostoevsky's anti-secularism and Nietzsche's anti-Christianity both contain a vision of a de-sacralized world; however, while Dostoevsky writes against a world that has "lost" the sacred truths, hoping to contribute to its redemption, Nietzsche celebrates secularizing forces, because they "prove" the sacred vision is "empty," defunct (Woolfolk 72). With the coming of nihilism, Nietzsche believes, comes an undermining of all belief in a "true" world, a world of objective truths. This collapse is necessary, because out of the catastrophic ruin of all sacred truths a few great men will finally arise, able to recover new strength from their confidence in the "merely apparent character [of reality], the necessity of lies"—what Nietzsche calls "a divine way of thinking" (Will 15). As this begins to occur, it must become apparent to mankind that metaphysics and religion (in particular, Christianity), the very entities set up to grant life meaning and purpose, inevitably precipitate a devaluation of themselves that negates all faith, because a "will to truth," which they themselves promote, eventually exposes the fragility and limitations—the unassailable irrationality—of all beliefs (see Will 12-14).

Drawing on the same logic as Ivan Karamazov, Nietzsche suggests that the secular humanist aims of the nineteenth century simply guarantee that "the highest values devalue themselves," leaving the thinking person with no recourse but to admit that "The aim is lacking; 'why?' finds no answer" (Will 9; see Goudsblom 6). Nietzsche does not believe Western culture can retain the moral system of Christianity without recourse to "illusions" (i.e., a belief in

7In all quotations from Nietzsche, the italics are his own.
God) outside the ken of rational thought--because handling faith according to the demands of reason must inevitably lead to the conclusion that all such truths are ungrounded, contingent constructs. Nietzsche believes the mounting mood of uncertainty arising as a result of attempts to secularize knowledge and values proves his theory that mankind is moving towards a universal, unassailable nihilism. From his perspective, there is nothing left to reconcile the frustrating difficulty of both longing for truths that possess moral force and trying to take advantage of the power of technologies that in no way depend on moral truth (see Will 9-10).

Nietzsche believes nihilism and Western metaphysics fuel each other--a theme that his successor, Martin Heidegger, also pursues. The teleological impulse, the thought that there might be an "aim" to life, is in Nietzsche's estimation not the catalyst of salvation but of nihilism. The persistent human need to reason out what makes all systems work, to answer "why?" will ensure that at some point some believer in the system must succumb to the will to truth--and this believer will become a nihilist, one who can no longer believe anything except that "he conceived such a whole in order to be able to believe in his own value." The loss of meaning and value at the hands of the will to

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8In Twilight of the Idols (1889), for example, Nietzsche vituperates George Eliot and other "English" spirits who, having rid themselves of "the Christian God . . . now believe all the more firmly that they must cling to Christian morality": "We others hold otherwise. When one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one's feet. This morality is by no means self-evident . . . . Christianity is a system, a whole view of things thought out together. By breaking one main concept out of it, the faith in God, one breaks the whole: nothing necessary remains in one's hands" (Portable 515-16).

9See Will 239-40, Portable 485-6, Heidegger, Question 109-12, and the discussion below.

10The barren alternative is summed up by Bertrand Russell's rather drastic declaration in his 1903 essay "A Free Man's Worship": "We must learn to accept the fact that the natural world is oblivious to all distinctions between
truth leads the seeker toward what Nietzsche calls the highest forms of nihilism: either the "passive" nihilism of religious zealotry, or the "active," "radical" nihilism of disgust with what is, which is the final stage of the "devaluation of all values" (White 17-18). According to Nietzsche, the passive state is not a way out of nihilism, but a delaying of the active state, which must come as knowledge-systems beat and beat upon the tenets of faith and the Christian structure of values that makes faith relevant.

The moment one finds oneself without an aim or the assurances associated with being "a mode of the deity," one invariably decides to "pass sentence on this whole world of becoming as a deception and to invent a world beyond it, a true world." The passive nihilist, the religious person, literally believes in no thing, something that is not there. "Active" nihilism goes one step further: it includes disbelief in any "true" world as well. "Having reached this standpoint, one grants the reality of becoming as the only reality, forbids oneself every kind of clandestine access to afterworlds and false divinities--but cannot endure this world though one does not want to deny it" (Will 13). One is now a nihilist: "a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought not to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist" (Will 318). Judging the world against one's own conception of what it should and should not be, one finds oneself in despair. "[T]he world looks valueless"--and this is the problem: in the vanity of one's pessimism (what Nietzsche calls one's "hyperbolic naiveté") one has decided that there is no value to life, not that the val-

 good and evil and that it is nothing but an arena of blind forces or powers that combined by sheer chance in the remote past to effect conditions conducive to the emergence of human life" (in Crosby 27).
ues hitherto held might be the wrong values (see Will 4, 14). This is the nihilistic trap hidden in the belief that man is the measure of all things.

Despite his active repudiation of the traditional canon of values, Nietzsche refused to see himself as a nihilist, because he believed he had thought through to a higher form of belief, leaving nihilism "behind, outside himself" (Will 3). The fact that that "one interpretation [of reality] has collapsed," one "considered the interpretation," is in his view no justification for acting "as if there were no meaning at all in existence, as if everything were in vain" (Will 35). Against this pessimistic logic, Nietzsche affirms that "the value of life cannot be estimated" (Portable 474)—because (as Richard Schacht points out) "its essential nature itself determines the ultimate standard of value, and because it itself, in its highest form of development, is the ultimate value" (81; see also Nishitani 44). Nietzsche's beliefs allow him to reverse the usual definition of nihilism; he can declare that "Faith in the categories of reason is the cause of nihilism. We have measured the value of the world according to categories that refer to a purely fictitious world" (Will 13). Nietzsche believes this faith is unavoidable—in fact, that it is the core value of post-Enlightenment culture; therefore, nihilism is a "fate" that must be faced. Curiosity has helped refine certainty, then thinned it, then devoured it; now mankind pushes up against what Camus calls the "Absurd walls" (Myth 10), the place where reason's ideal collides with the irrationality of reality.

"There is a crucial tension throughout Nietzsche between a free-wheeling critic, always prepared to shift ground in attacking metaphysics, and a metaphysical philosopher seeking to provide a basis for his repudiation of any such enterprise as he is practicing" (Danto 40). The latter figure—who tries to
deal with nihilism by establishing a metaphysics based on the Will to Power, Eternal Recurrence, and the need for a revaluation of all values held hitherto (see Schacht 77)—is the one whose legacy causes the writers in this survey the most difficulty. Nietzsche proposes a teleology based on the attainment of becoming, one that can replace the aim so long lacking. For example, in the famous description of the madman confronting the mob in the marketplace and telling them that "God is dead . . . And we have killed him," Nietzsche moves from stating the problem to coining a solution based on the idea that men must become gods to replace the God they have "killed" (Portable 95). The mob contains "many . . . who did not believe in God." Like many of Nietzsche's readers (both in the 1880s and today), they are comfortable atheists who fail to understand that to say "God is dead" is to insist that the "suprasensory ground and goal of all reality is dead" (Heidegger, Question 61). Their laughter confirms their thoughtlessness. The mad-man's announcement of God's death is coupled with a naming of His killers ("All of us are his murderers") that suggests, to the mad-man, anyway, that there can be only one result of Deicide: men must now "become gods" (Portable 96). Those who have killed God are now responsible for creating new values—values grand enough to take the place of those now lost.

Despite the mad-man's call, the mob does not yet seem to realize that they have taken on this task:

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. "I have come too early," he said then: "my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it
has not yet reached the ears of men . . . . This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars--*and yet they have done it themselves*" (Portable 96).

He leaves them then, because the "necessary illness" of nihilism has not yet passed; these men of the marketplace have not yet "gone through" (cf. Will 25-7). Instead, they must discover the "truth" which Nietzsche declared himself to be the first to have appreciated: "The time has come when we have to pay for having been Christians for two thousand years: we are losing the center of gravity by virtue of which we lived; we are lost for a while" (Will 20). Salvation will come, he believes, with a "Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is, without subtraction, exception, or selection" (Will 536). Only by saying "nothing is true, everything is permitted" can the real freedom and fulfillment of man come to pass (Birth/Genealogy 287; see Will 326).

Conor Cruise O'Brien notes the tensions within Nietzsche's thought which make it a basis for both the Prophet's warnings against letting God die and the Seekers' declaration that one can only find a new relevance for one's life by affirming new values. While recognizing the liberating power of Nietzsche's critique of Western morals, O'Brien also maintains that this anti-Christian message helped vindicate the Nazis--a possibility too quickly overlooked by today's "gentle Nietzscheans":

To legitimize means to free something which would otherwise be at least partly suppressed. In that sense, Nietzsche was one of the great liberators. He freed creative imaginations--Yeats, for example, might never have developed into a great poet without the Nietzschean permissions. He also freed other forces, extended the range of Machiavelli, gave the killers license and a good consci-
ence. He was sometimes frightened himself... Frightened, I think myself, of what he was actually saying, and of what his messages might effect when they reached minds which were as bold in action as he was bold in thought (63).

Recent history provides sufficient warnings against blithely declaring mankind the only maker of truths, and always "Saying Yes to life even in its strangest and hardest problems" (Portable 562). Certainly, as the discussions in the next chapters show, all the writers in this study remain aware of this danger. Still, it is the Prophets (Percy and Stone) and not the Seekers (Oates and Pynchon) who most vigorously resist Nietzsche's claim that anthropocentric values can ground an ethos that allows one to say "yes" to everything (see Woolfolk 71-2). Reflecting the dynamics of the intellectual climate of the late 1960s—a time, Lionel Trilling reports, when many were willing to entertain the idea that insanity might "be a form of rationality," and society itself might be understood to be "irrational to the point of insanity" (168)—Oates and Pynchon examine the means by which the nihilistic resentment of life which Nietzsche condemned might be overcome (cf. Norman O. Brown, ix-xii). Their quest for ways to articulate an authentic relationship with being connects them with the project of Nietzsche's self-appointed successor and one of the central theorists of nihilism in this century, Martin Heidegger.

Heidegger assails all attempts to use reason to explain "Being"—his evasive term for "the "isness" of existence, to borrow George Steiner's phrase—because, like Nietzsche, he maintains that "faith in the categories of reason is the cause of nihilism" (Steiner, Heidegger 26; see Nietzsche, Will 13). However, while Nietzsche believes he has had the "good fortune" to be the first "after
whole millennia of error and confusion" to have discovered a way back to becoming, Heidegger determines that such an effort to begin metaphysics again is simply another example of nihilist thought, another expression of the longing for mastery over the world which Heidegger calls "forgetting of Being" (Will 33; Steiner, Heidegger 28). Therefore, he makes nihilism synonymous with valuation itself, and declares that the West is in the thrall of a peculiar "technological" world-view that promotes nihilism because it promotes analysis at the expense of the call of Being (see Basic 205).

According to Hubert Dreyfus, Heidegger's writings suggest that thinking of nihilism as a state in which we have forgotten or betrayed our values is part of the problem [of nihilism]. Thinking that we once had values but that we do not have values now, and that we should regain our values or choose new ones, is just another symptom of the trouble. Heidegger claims that thinking about our deepest concerns as values is nihilism (293). Such thinking perpetuates a history in which Being is eclipsed in favour of beings--that is, the history of Western Philosophy (Stambaugh 21). What is truly "nihilistic" is the diminishment and demystification of Being in the name of reason. Being must be known without explanation: Yahweh's tautology, "I am that I am," an expression of a knowledge beyond explication, is echoed in Heidegger's statements that "Being is Being" or "Being is" (Steiner, Heidegger 153–4). Being is "in no sense to be thought of as an entity of some sort," or "to be simply identified with any element or aspect or totality of the reality that we ordinarily know" (Lovitt xv). Instead, Being is that which precedes and evades the normal human comprehension of the world by means of
analysis: "For Heidegger, Being is the very opposite of an abstraction fashioned by human thought" (Lovitt xv; see Steiner, Heidegger 35, 38).¹¹

Reason's attempts to demystify being lead to what Heidegger calls "Enframing," the transformation of the world into "standing-reserve," available for consumption (Stambaugh 31-3; Question 26-30). This "technological" behaviour "threatens revealing [of Being], threatens it with the possibility that all revealing will be consumed in ordering and that everything will present itself only in the unconcealedness of standing-reserve" (Heidegger, Question 33). Like Nietzsche's "classical" nihilism, it is an example of Western man's "imperialist subjectivity," expressed as the impulse "to dominate the earth through scientific classification and technological use" (Question 33, 152; Steiner, Heidegger 70). Heidegger sees "a fatal continuity between the assertive, predicative, definitional, classificatory idiom of Western metaphysics and that will to rational-technological mastery over life which he calls nihilism" (Steiner, Heidegger 54). The "metaphysics of will to power" and the "nihilistic clearing" of technology are signs of the "Nothing" which has befallen Being. "Would thinking in terms of values then itself be pure nihilism?" Heidegger answers his own question in asking it. Not letting "Being be Being . . . be what it is as Being itself," this "will to mastery" that is so much a part of the West's understanding of its own meaning and value is nihilistic, and the history of Western metaphysics is the history of the forgetting of Being (Question 109, 104).

¹¹Heidegger believed art (in particular, poetry) could let "truth originate," be a "Clearing" in which "Being can be"—that is, be both present to and separate from mankind (e.g., Basic 186-7). As Chapter Six shows, Don DeLillo's The Names shows signs of a similar interest in art's power to disclose an unspoken, original truth (see below).
Heidegger fears the forgetting of Being to such an extent that he is willing to make the odd-sounding suggestion that the improvement of the health and comfort of mankind will lead to "complete nihilism," an absolute separation of man, the "shepherd of Being," from Being (Basic 210): "What threatens man in his very nature is . . . that man, by the peaceful release, transformation, storage, and channeling of the energies of physical nature, could render the human condition . . . tolerable for everybody and happy in all respects" (Heidegger in Dreyfus 305). In his quest to "get past" Western metaphysics, Heidegger posits a radical re-conception of nihilism as thinking in terms of utility—period. In the "Letter on 'Humanism'" (1946), for example, he declares that it is the practice of characterizing something as "a value" that robs what is so valued of its worth: "[T]hinking in values is the greatest blasphemy imaginable against Being. To think against values therefore does not mean to beat the drum for the valuelessness and nullity of beings. It means rather to bring the lighting of the truth of Being before thinking, as against subjectivizing beings into mere objects" (Basic 228). Against the "willful self-congratulation" of installing and removing values from the world, Heidegger calls instead for "Thinking" which "builds upon the house of Being," a thinking "more rigorous than the conceptual" because it is open to the mystery of Being (Basic 236, 235; Dreyfus 309). The renunciation of modes of behaviour which have "emptied" being of Being, driven it back, such "Thinking begins only when we have come to know that reason, glorified for centuries, is the

12According to Dreyfus, Heidegger also states (in Discourse on Thinking) that the greatest danger of the Atomic age is not world destruction, but the chance that technology "could so captivate, bewitch, dazzle, and beguile man that calculative thinking may someday come to be accepted and practiced as the only way of thinking" (305).
most stiff-necked adversary of thought" (Question 112). Such thinking, he suggests, is the only way back out of "The Age of the World-Picture," the leveling of all difference due to the dominance of pre-set conceptualizations of being (Question 134). Here, then, he posits nihilism as robotic conformity to materialist evaluations of life. Against the impasse of reasoning, he suggests a more authentic, "pious" way of life must be put forward.

While remaining free of most of the entanglements of this conception of nihilism, the Seekers' views do echo a number of Heidegger's claims. For example, all of Joyce Carol Oates' novels disclose her fascination with people who are overwhelmed by the unceasing, protean energies of American life, and look to assert some kind of power over this seemingly inimical power by turning to simplistic theories and violence (Kazin 80), thereby moving closer to a nihilistic forgetting of Being.13 Wonderland, discussed in Chapter Three, offers readers a particularly compelling reconstruction of this theme, because its protagonist, Jesse Vogel, lives through and believes in theories and forms of power that may, in fact, further the chaos they are meant to refute. Wonderland depicts the attempt to evade inexplicable aspects of human personality and existence such as the emotions by turning to the easier forms of liberty offered by science and an idealization of the self. This evasion is what Nietzsche and Heidegger describe as a nihilistic dependence on deified Reason.

Writing what one critic calls "contemporary American spiritual history," Oates repeatedly displays an "awesome ability . . . to convey the morphology of searching for meaning in a dream-haunted America" (Burwell 16;

13"Proteanism" is discussed in further detail in the section on Thomas Pynchon, below, and in the chapters on Wonderland and Gravity's Rainbow.
Waller 30). Critics have noted her interest in pursuing "the quintessentially American notion of freedom and self-sufficiency" to its extreme—to the brink of nihilism, the repudiation of all values and standards (Friedman 3; Grant 6). By documenting in great detail "colliding social and economic forces, [the country's] philosophical contradictions, its wayward, often violent energies," all of which subject characters to "disorder, dislocation, and extreme psychological turmoil" (Johnson 8), Oates is able to describe a "wonderland" within which nihilism is invariably present. Wonderland attests to "the frightening plausibility yet spiritual inadequacy of the modern material account of the self" (Waller 149)—an account, as the novel shows, that depends upon a validation of control and utter autonomy at the expense of authentic community and communication.

Oates' fictional examination of the displacements caused by nihilism is backed by essays written in the same period that develop and bolster the idea that there is a nihilistic understanding of self at the center of much of American life. Born of her wish to write fiction that might "move toward a more articulate moral position, not just dramatizing nightmarish problems but trying to show possible ways of transcending them," these essays celebrate both community and a liberation from egocentrism, two ideas in synch with changes which she saw taking place in Western culture (Oates to Clemons 39). Admittedly unsystematic, pieces such as "New Heaven and Earth" (1972) and "The Myth of the Isolated Artist" (1973) are still valuable as means of measuring the extent to which Oates involves her fiction in the socio-political strug-
gles that define her times.\textsuperscript{14} They reveal the factors behind her understanding of concepts such as freedom and nihilism.

Oates' "realist" novels of the late 1960s and early 1970s try to deal with the immediate issues of the day—albeit not in as straightforward a manner as the term "realist" might suggest (see Oates to Clemons 33). In these novels, characters "are locked in history and time; they exist in and are vulnerable to American culture" (Friedman 10); at the same time, these novels attempt to articulate Oates' belief that the disturbances of the late 1960s are not a sign of a coming apocalyptic end but of the emergence of a new way of life. As Walter Clemons notes, "she [never] lost confidence in the power of narrative fiction to give coherence to jumbled experience and to bring about a change of heart" (Oates to Clemons 40). This commitment to fiction's power to discover inner meanings of the age reflects her belief that the novelist's job is to create "formalized, complex propositions about the nature of personality and its relationship to a specific culture" ("Myth" 75). She believes her time shows signs of evolving beyond "the Renaissance ideal," the Western, "I-centered" conception of human consciousness, towards a "higher humanism," an openness to the Other "in which all substance in the universe (including the substance fortunate enough to perceive it) is there by equal right" (Oates, "New" 40).

"I lived through the '60s in the United States," she has told one interviewer: "I was aware of hatreds and powerful feelings all around me" (to Clemons 38). \textit{Wonderland}, set against this upheaval, is an attempt to "sanctify

\textsuperscript{14}At the end of "New Heaven and Earth," for example, Oates aptly describes the preceding work as "totally nonacademic in its lyric disorganization" (42).
the world" by forcing up into consciousness "the most perverse and terrifying possibilities of the epoch . . . so that they can be dealt with and not simply feared" (Oates, New 7; see Johnson 10). Descriptions of these possibilities might clear a way for a positive "crisis of transition," the precursor to better days (Oates, "New" 36).

Oates' optimistic visions of societal upheaval and her insistence on transcending ego-consciousness, views which appear on the surface to match the rhetoric of the 1960s "Counterculture," do not so much echo this rhetoric as lend it complexity, and challenge some of the generalizations common to the time. In her view, "No extreme viewpoint is any longer extreme," because the old certainties have begun to mutate—not because the end is nigh and meaning, or even the possibility of meaning, has fled ("New" 37; her emphasis). New opportunities may soon exist; however, they may not be those envisaged by the Diggers. For example, when she describes the "tyrannical" demand of the Renaissance standard at work in modern culture as a voice declaring "I will, I want, I demand, I think, I am . . . . I will impose my will upon others," one prepares oneself for the usual sequel: a denunciation of modernity and technology, the twin evils said to propagate inauthentic behaviour ("New" 38; her italics). What comes, however, is quite different: Oates stands away from those who look for some way back to the garden. She criticizes the I-centered Renaissance ideal—but only in its present, attenuated incarnation. It was a bit of good fortune, she declares, that the Western belief that "I will exist" meant "I will impose my will on others," even if such a belief is outdated today. This belief has led man to develop "his intellect and has extended his physical strength by any means possible"—useful results when one considers that, "indeed, at one time the world did have to be conquered" ("New" 38). The mod-
ern world, in which the paradigm can be questioned, has only come about because the older world-view was already in place. That world-view may soon be superseded, but it is not in itself flawed or evil. Reason and nihilism are not the same thing: problems arise only when people cling to the superannuated world-view and attempt to deny that their culture's changing contexts may require a changed response.

This is quite different from the claims of those, such as Heidegger, who believe Western culture is essentially nihilistic. Oates holds that mankind's mastery of matter and creative application of technology should be celebrated, because they help us resist the brutal, effacing power of nature: "If technology appears to have dehumanized civilization, this is a temporary failing or error—for the purpose of technology is the furthering of the 'human,' the bringing to perfection of all the staggering potentialities in each individual" ("New" 38). The "more natural" past was a time of less freedom, a time when man had to "fight nature, [and forego much of] his own spontaneity and, indeed, his humanity." Oates has little time for those who insist on reiterating nostalgic views of a simpler age. They speak without understanding what reaching their ideal would mean: as she puts it, "It is only through the machine that man can become more human, more spiritual."

Nevertheless, what she seeks is a "more spiritual" life, and Wonderland is her description of the price paid by those who hold to a nihilistic faith in reason for its own sake instead of making some connection with their full natures. While she questions the dogmas of both the dominant culture and of the counterculture poised against it, looking for oversimplifications which both sides take on faith, what differentiates her from a "Prophet" like Walker Percy
is her refusal to adopt the religious certainties which he makes the basis of his beliefs. Oates pursues a monistic, holistic view of existence that makes the apparent world its only subject—and which allows her to challenge the isolating energies of both the will to mastery and a too-simple refutation of the Western heritage (see Waller 23-24). In her cosmos, happiness is possible only if mankind can link together instinct and reason, not disparage one in the name of the other. The splitting off of mind from body and self from other is no longer of real benefit, in her view, because it disguises just how "deeply related we are to one another" ("New" 41).

This kind of splitting occurs when humans grant the place of privilege to the body or the mind; therefore, she has doubts about both the Enlightenment "faith" in rational and materialist views of existence, and the anti-rationalist views of those, like members of the Counterculture, who have come to believe the body and emotions are all one needs to consider. In her view, both types of thinking make it impossible for humans to enjoy their interdependence. "As long as the myth of separate and competitive "selves" endures, we will have a society obsessed with adolescent ideas of being superior, of conquering, of destroying" (Oates, "Myth" 75).15 As long as the claims of ego dominate, separation is the norm; humans will only understand others and the world as opaque presences against which they must fight. This solipsism, a false sense of complete subjectivity and separation from life in its complexity, which occurs when one wills oneself free of all responsibilities to others, is

15Oates' ideas have much in common with current re-interpretations of thought, language and personality. For example, see Daly's discussion of Oates' affinities with Mikhail Bakhtin's idea that "I" exists only through "dialogue," the continuous meeting of our discourse with others' voices, whether we acknowledge it or not, which makes us beings of a particular time and place (158f).
the state she refers to as nihilism; and this "nihilism is overcome by the breaking down of the dikes between human beings, the flowing forth of passion" (Edge 5-7). She examines the effects of this "nihilism" by means of the "variations on an American hymn" she creates in Wonderland.16

The other "Seeker" in this survey, Thomas Pynchon, displays a greater bias in favour of the language of self-making put forward by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and all others who define nihilism as the alignment of life with the demands of reason or metaphysics. Gravity's Rainbow can be described as a primer on ways in which one can live without "Absolutes"—that is, gain what William Gaddis calls

the courage to accept a relative universe and even one verging upon chance, certainly at least in its human component, since these Absolutes are essentially childish, born out of fear of a purposeless existence and finally, out of a desperate denial of the one unacceptable inevitable outrage, the prospect of one's own death itself. Of course all this leads us into the sketchy refuge of situation ethics, old foes with new faces, because looked at another way this collapse of Absolutes going on around us may be simply another form of entropy, a spiritual entropy winding down eventually to total equilibrium, the ultimate chaos where everything equals everything else: the ultimate senseless universe. But then that, fighting that off, or succumbing to it, isn't that what Dostoevsky, what the great fictions have always been about? (77).

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16 This last phrase is taken from the title of Book One of the novel.
It may seem like cheating to put one author's words in the mouth of another, especially in the mouth of an author such as Thomas Pynchon, so famous for his silences: nevertheless, Gaddis' terms can help one make sense of Pynchon's use of nihilism. When Gaddis talks of "the courage to accept a relative universe" and the fear born of a "desperate denial" of the inevitability of death, he expresses what it means, and what it costs, to choose to live in what one of Pynchon's characters calls "the moment, and its possibilities." Again and again, characters in Gravity's Rainbow discover a power in "the moment" — or collapse, powerless and afraid, into what can only be described as a nihilistic state of despair. "Listless playthings of enormous forces" (to borrow Kurt Vonnegut's description of his own characters), they are knocked about by strong cross-cultural forces of "control": self-sustaining bureaucracies that are charged with maintaining the war and the peace (i.e., "the War" fought by other, subtler means); cartels and cabals "They" (i.e., Pynchon's technology-adept Elect) use to promote "structures favouring death"; even the powerful presence of "the Man"—the imperial Ego—in each individual's brain (Pynchon 645; 167; 712). The surrender of these characters to the power of embodied abstractions (capitalized for easy identification) testifies to Pynchon's knowledge of how difficult it is to "grow up" in the way Gaddis suggests. In this way, Gravity's Rainbow dramatizes how the longing for Absolutes that might block death's inevitable arrival remains a powerful force in Western

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17 Among the many examples of Pynchon's unwillingness to be a public figure is the famous story of how the comedian "Professor" Irwin Corey showed up to pick up the National Book Award won by Gravity's Rainbow—and was mistaken for the author (Winston 261).

18 Pynchon 159. See Cooper 103; see also Levine 116-17. NB: in order to differentiate between Pynchon's own ellipses and editorial omissions, the latter are marked by square brackets.
culture even after that culture (or so Nietzsche's mad-man claims) chose to refute the illusion of purpose and immortality offered by "God" without bothering to come up with an able replacement.

Like many other American writers whose works emerged during and after the 1960s, Pynchon has responded to this century's myriad forms of absolutism and utopian mendacity by making the nature of freedom and its price a central theme of his novels. He examines both the potential for nihilism (what Gaddis calls "spiritual entropy") in a world of too much freedom, and the nihilistic restriction of vitality, the death of what Oates calls "passion," that comes of too little freedom. Both "of" and "about" America circa 1969, even though it is set in Europe at the end of the Second World War (Ashe 60), Gravity's Rainbow documents nihilistic aspects of the models for culture proposed by both sides of "the Sixties" struggle.¹⁹ From the crowd of burned-out Banana Breakfasters in Pirate Prentice's London flat to the polymorphously perverse gang in Säure Bummer's Haight-Ashbury-style "pad" in Berlin during the Summer of Peace (and Love) of 1945, the figures and settings of the story seem impregnated with the manner and matter of groovier times, allowing Pynchon to suggest that both the war in Europe and the culture wars in America and Europe a quarter-century later are part of a larger and continuing assault on the values and power-systems upon which the West was founded (Ashe 64).

"World War II was the explosion that exhausted [Europe's] power" (Mackey 12); Pynchon's decision to set his novel of the 1960s in this earlier period of displacement, amidst "the detritus of [. . .] a European and bourgeois order [now] destroyed forever" (Pynchon 551), jibes with the sense of many in the West as

¹⁹ "The Sixties" denotes the period between (approximately) 1966 and 1971, "years of grease and passage"—and blood (Pynchon 739).
the 1960s ended that they again stood at the doorway of tremendous possibilities—possibilities either for the spirit's liberation or for what they feared would be a new era of repression and alienation. His approach allows him to work through the sort of "growing up" (or refusal to grow up) undertaken by both the so-called "Counterculture" and its opponents, thereby revealing how both these forces could be said to promote nihilistic approaches to life.

Like Oates, Pynchon is critical of inflexible and divisive views of consciousness that make stasis and the alienation of the mind from the body inevitable. Both draw on the spirit of the time for their insights—a spirit suggested by the descriptions of 1960s youth culture, politics, personality, and technology put forward by the psychologist Robert J. Lifton. Lifton's analyses of what he calls "Totalism" and "Proteanism" deliver tropes that can be used to get at both Pynchon's understanding of nihilism in American life during this period and his interest in connecting the idea of liberation of the self to the attempt to liberate the culture. Lifton believes events since World War II have undermined an essential sense of continuity which assuages the knowledge of death (History 338). As one result, during the 1960s many young people

20 Affinities noted by Lawrence Wolfley between Gravity's Rainbow and Norman O. Brown's attempts at prophetic psychology, Life Against Death (1959) and Love's Body (1966), help illustrate the novel's relationship to intellectual life in its era. According to Wolfley, Pynchon echoes Brown's suggestion that America and Europe are ill, afflicted by a "death instinct" even more powerful and important than Freud had been willing to imagine—one which, when coupled with the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the postwar years, seemed due to force the Western culture to come to terms with this unconscious instinct or face certain destruction. See also Norman Mailer's many evocations of America's "cancerous" bad faith and attraction to totalitarianism, such as his description of the "police riot" in Miami and the Siege of Chicago (1968).

21 NB: Lifton's analysis makes denial of death only part of what is at issue in culture formation: "man does not create culture out of his need to deny death (the view put forward by both Freud and Rank and many of their modern disciples, but rather as his way of living out his unique awareness that he both dies and continues" (Broken 5-6).
came to believe they had every right to reject the common culture, which appeared, despite its faith in reason and order, to have no effective way of dealing with the diminishement of "symbolic immortality"—the diminishement of ways of dealing with that implacable, "inevitable outrage" of which Gaddis speaks. The old imagery of death and continuity remained in place as if nothing had happened, while the culture was taken over by "massive and impersonal postmodern institutions" incapable of replacing the sense of security lost when technique took the place of "God" (Broken 296; History 340). As many people's sense of wholeness—of connection to their own lives and the world—broke down, a way opened for corrosive doubt.

Facing a devaluation of all previous values, some sought a new sort of "immortality," a new sense of authenticity. According to Lifton, this so-called Counterculture hoped to accept "protean" circumstances, more flexible ways of living with change. Assertively protean figures of the Sixties hoped to move from "fixed, all-encompassing forms of ideology" to more fluid "ideological fragments," beliefs that might resist becoming dogma and remain open to "the extraordinarily rich, confusing, liberating, and threatening array of contemporary historical possibilities" (History 342). "Protean Man," as envisaged by these anti-establishment rebels, possessed the sense that anything was possible; he acted without a plan, attuned to the moment, even if this meant doing away with a heritage of symbols of continuity and adopting the risk of situational ethics (Protean 8; Broken 297; History 342).

Here, of course, the ironies start accumulating: this consciously spontaneous approach was thought to be the only healthy way of living in a world under imminent threat of death; the emptying-out of all former signs was
thought to be the way back to an authentic form of "symbolic immortality" (History 344). Like Nietzsche, these figures adopted nihilism as a way through to "health." Even as a Protean paradigm for politics, social interaction, and self-creation dominated the theorizing of the Counterculture, any application of this supposedly authentic course became the basis for as absolutist a vision of being as any it was designed to oppose. Asking "the moment" to answer "Why?" meant turning it into a system. In the name of this system some sought an "evolution" of the human species which would repudiate the entire "dead" Western heritage.22 Turning towards dreams of progress, much of the Counterculture fell victim to what Lifton calls "romantic totalism," a "post-Cartesian absolutism" based on "replacing history with experience" (History 361; Lifton's emphasis). Turning revolt into "the Revolution," they lapsed into "a demand for dogma and a monolithic self" strong enough to "wipe out [ambiguity] in favour of a claim to definitive truth and unalterable moral certainty" (Protean 10).

Absolutists believe there can be "just one valid mode of being--just one authentic avenue of immortality," and come to envision their society as being divided between "those with a right to exist and those with no such right" (Broken 298). The romantic totalists of the late 1960s were no different. Organizations such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which had led the drive in America towards a more protean engagement with self and culture,

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22 E.g., consider this statement by one of the "Merry Pranksters" in Tom Wolfe's The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test (1969): "I believe that man is changing . . . in a radical basic way they're stronger. Our concept of reality if changing. It's been happening here in San Francisco . . . I believe there's a whole new generation of kids. They walk different . . . I can hear it in the music . . . It used to go . . . life--death, life--death . . . but now it's . . . death--life . . . death--life . . . " (353).
fell into romantic totalism. One faction of SDS became "the Weathermen," terrorists ready to "kill all the pigs" (i.e. White America), because they had "no right to exist"--all in the name of a radical overturning of society no other constituency in America was ready to support (see Kirkpatrick Sale 579-99). Like Pisarev and other original nihilists, they saw destruction as an end in itself. These romantic totalists sought a new and powerful myth of spiritual purity and purpose to take the place of traditional concepts of "immortality"; they found it in a fusion of political and experiential revolution, the equating of creating a perfect state with creating perfect states of consciousness. For them, Lifton shows, will and irrationality were all: the only aim was to show that the West's project could not be salvaged, because it was thoroughly infected with "death" (History 362-3).

Chapter Four of this study shows how Gravity's Rainbow retells both the story of the Counterculture's belief in protean consciousness--and the story of how many of its members tumbled into the nihilism of romantic totalism, the Bazarov-like demand for new certainties at any price. Both the raw matter of the novel itself, its appearance, its language, as well as the trajectories of its many plots, point to the book's protean inclusiveness and its attention to tensions between freedom and certainty--tensions which can lead to what the book discloses as either the nihilistic refusal of all limits, all sense of connection with the world, or the equally nihilistic renunciation of all risk, all possibility, in the name of a static security. The romantic totalism of Captain Weissmann (known also as "Blicero"), for example, read against Pynchon's attention to that spirit of maturity Gaddis promotes, reveals how Pynchon works towards new values without losing sight of the danger that such a search may bring. Like Oates, he tests the merits of a holistic appraisal of existence, be-
lieving this to be a means of resisting the nihilism born of humans' frequent recourse to a "gnostic" will to power, an attraction to "structures favouring death" (Pynchon 167). However, he does go somewhat further than Oates towards a celebration of mindlessness for its own sake, because (as Gravity's Rainbow seems to suggest) the forces of conscious control seem so entirely on the side of nihilism.

The Prophets, Percy and Stone, hold a much more pessimistic assessment of the chances for such a way out of nihilism. Their view resembles that of the French novelist and essayist Albert Camus, who took the model of nihilism offered by Nietzsche and Heidegger and examined the political and moral implications of the break they promoted. With waning enthusiasm, Camus tried to accommodate Nietzsche's theory of truth with the real world of human beings, only to end up adopting views much closer in spirit to the "religious existentialism" of Soren Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel—views, as the discussion below will show, which Percy also puts forward. Camus' movement away from the vision of new values and authenticity offered by his predecessors illustrates the validity of the choices made by Stone and Percy in their novels. Like them, Camus winces at the price of moral "weightlessness," as Nietzsche put it (see Trilling 138), and discovers instead a more difficult appraisal of how it is to be a human being who knows he is going to die.

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23 As Dwight Eddins shows, characters such as Blicero refuse contingency, decay, and metamorphosis in the name of a gnostic comprehension of being, "a surrogate order that will dominate natural cycles through artifice and stasis," even if this means turning the world into "the Kingdom of Death" (181). Cf. the discussion of Eric Voegelin, Camus, and gnosticism (below), as well as the discussions of Love in the Ruins and Dog Soldiers.
In The Myth of Sisyphus (1942), Camus explores nihilism while trying to avoid adopting Nietzsche's obsessive need to overcome it. At all times he understands nihilism to be one response to what he calls "the Absurd," the unbridgeable space between mankind's desire for a purpose and the "irrational" nature of life—but not the only response (Myth 21). As an "existential nihilist," one who believes "human existence is pointless, leading nowhere and adding up to nothing" (Crosby 30), Camus is in accord with Nietzsche's view that the need for an "aim" with which to "justify" life is itself a catalyst of nihilism (cf. WP 12). However, while Nietzsche goes on to affirm his "metaphysics of Will to Power," Camus attempts to prove that the Absurd should be the basis of a more prosaic set of values—values having less to do with a Dionysian affirmation than with a comprehension of (to borrow Unamuno's famous phrase) "the tragic sense of life." Camus' revaluation refuses both nihilism (resentment against life itself) and the ways of metaphysics.

In the Myth, Camus is still trying to contradict those philosophers, such as Kierkegaard, who have chosen to commit "philosophical suicide" by taking a "leap" away from the world as it is towards some "true" world which they feel, paradoxically, is "proven" by its absence. Instead, he invites his readers to accept the terms of their absurd existence and in those terms to discover a renewed sense of purpose (see Myth 37). "Is one going to die, escape by the leap, rebuild a mansion of ideas and forms to one's own scale? Is one, on the contrary, going to take up the heart-rending and marvelous wager of the absurd?" (Myth 52). Choosing the latter, Camus insists, is choosing to live "without appeal" --the conscious adoption of "Revolt," "the only coherent philosophical position" available in a world where the old values no longer hold and one is forced to acknowledge that "reason is useless but there is
nothing beyond reason" (Myth 53, 35). To revolt is to embrace life in all its uncertainty. The absurd man draws satisfaction not from a new ontology but from "that day-to-day revolt" which "gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance" (Myth 55).

Typifying this endless revolt is Camus' Sisyphus, who can never cease walking back down to retrieve his boulder. "Powerless and rebellious," conscious in these moments of the vastness of his suffering, what ennobles Sisyphus, as Camus envisions him, is his willingness to keep that vastness in his thoughts: "The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory" (Myth 121). His lucidity allows him to say "yes" to life—to express the self's own value and a wish to remain a maker and battler in the world. "It makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men... Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks." (Myth 123).

Yet even as Camus celebrates aspects of the Nietzschean mode of living "without God, believing in nothing," he questions the kind of complete unrestraint Nietzsche made a cornerstone of his own anti-nihilism (Duvall 955). In later writings, reflection on his first-hand experience of the Nazis' complete unrestraint during World War II leads Camus to question the complete ease with which the notion is presented by Nietzsche (e.g., WP 900; cf. O'Brien 60-63). Camus finds it more difficult to celebrate the "overcoming spirit" once he notes that Fascist barbarism grew out of a systematization of that spirit of

24 As Germaine Brée notes, a shift in mood is apparent even between the early and late sections of The Myth of Sisyphus, as Don Juan's sense of license passes into Sisyphus's determined and dutiful return to his rock (209).
revolt which he had found so attractive in Nietzsche's work and adapted to his own (Woolfolk 81). Inspired by his wartime experiences, Camus also comes to define nihilism as a contempt for accommodation, and determines that this form of nihilism has been behind the absolutist politics of this century. His response is to celebrate "rebellion" in the name of the few truths humans share in common, truths which allow each to imagine the other as himself.

The Rebel (1951) questions all attempts to put the needs of ideas ahead of human needs. Those who kill in the name of "mankind" soon become nihilists, Camus declares, because they let the urge to assuage suffering become corrupted by visions of a new and perfect world born of humans' god-like acts. At some point they begin to believe the great end they seek justifies any means needed to attain it (see Myth v-vi). Camus is here describing what Eric Voegelin calls "gnosticism," the belief that man can deliver himself from this world, which is essentially corrupt, only through his own systems of knowledge, which must be adhered to without question (8-12). Those in rebellion against their fate (what Camus calls "Metaphysical Rebellion") or against current political injustices ("Historical Rebellion") must resist the urge to turn rebellion into a limitless enterprise, unquestionable and sacred, because this urge turns the rebels' drive to save mankind into a program as tyrannous as that against which they originally rebelled. Too many of this century's rebels have become just as brutal as those whose reigns they set out to topple because they have begun to repudiate life as it is for not being what their theories say it should be. They have fallen into a nihilistic absolutism, the promethean, gnostic mistake--the same kind of thinking Lifton calls "romantic totalism."

25Voegelin cites The Rebel as a central work in the study of the gnostic aspects of European intellectual history and modern politics (7).
Oates calls a mishandling of "the Renaissance ideal," and Percy (in the discus-
sion below) calls "scientism." Such acts of nihilistic rebellion, revolutions in
the name of ends that justify any means, seem to Camus to be predominant
features of the History of the West since 1789.

Against the nihilistic unwillingness to believe in the opportunity avail-
able in unresolved revolt, Camus attempts to construct a morality of "calculated
culpability" which might shelter justice even though there is no divine guar-
antor (Rebel 297; Lazere 76). Rebellion is re-envisaged not as the demand for
"total freedom" but as a testing and retesting the effects of freedom in an ef-
sort to achieve a generative "moderation" that might hold off nihilism (Rebel
284, 301). Camus asks if, instead of letting the ends justify the means, mankind
can become "uncompromising" concerning means, and leave ends to them-
selves. "Does the end justify the means? That is possible. But what will justify
the end? To that question, which historical thought leaves pending, rebellion
replies: the means" (Rebel 290-92). Unlike Heidegger, for whom nihilism repre-
sents the essence of the history of the West, Camus looks for a way to deal
with the nihilism apparent in the real events of history, in violent battles and
acts of cruelty towards one's fellow humans.26

Walker Percy's novels make prophetic claims against what one can call
"Prometheanism," the "gnostic" belief that human knowledge can lead man-
kind toward a divine, unquestionable power. His novels are clear--often bru-

26Cf. Richard Rorty's critique of Heidegger's bizarre "ascetic"
conception of thought, his inability to "take much interest in the Holocaust"
because he believed it was merely an event in history--therefore (by his
measure of value) in no way as significant as the events of the "History of the
Forgetting of Being" (Essays 68-70).
tally clear—challenges to the forces of "gnosticism" and extremism Camus came to distrust. It is this target of his prophesy that affiliates Percy with Oates and Pynchon even as it suggests what distinguishes his views from theirs: all challenge the diminishment of the sacred and its absence from modern life; however, while Oates and Pynchon look for "grace" in human gestures of solidarity and emotional honesty, Percy takes such quests to be yet another sign that modern man refuses to acknowledge his inherently sinful nature. The 1960s were for Percy not a time in which to test new values but proof of the valuelessness of the humanist ideal.

Percy's religious faith and interest in philosophy led him to fiction, which he saw as a way of giving concrete expression to the problem of living in a time "after" God.27 Inspired by philosophical-minded novelists such as Camus and Dostoevsky, the iconoclastic irony of Kierkegaard, and his own training as a doctor, Percy decided to draw on the best of the traditions of both science and art in order to show that there is much both to fear and hope for as a result of the devaluation of all values, the simultaneous "death of God" and demise of the secular humanist ambitions of what he liked to call the "old modern world" (Tolson 184-208; Percy, Message 113-16).28 Fiction became a vehi-

27"Modern European thought focuses on 'concrete life-situations rather than abstractions,' [Percy] once explained, and it is mainly interested in 'the predicament of modern man, afflicted as he is with feelings of uprootedness, estrangement, anxiety and the like. It is quite natural, therefore, for philosophers like Sartre and Marcel to write plays and novels'" (Luschei 8). See also Coles' discussion of Percy's use of these and other "existentialist" thinkers (3-49).

28Karen Carr reiterates this view when she suggests (as noted above) that the rapid propagation of the term "nihilism" during and after the eighteenth century should alert us to an inherent connection between nihilism and secular humanism (13-14).

NB: unless otherwise noted, passages marked "(Message [pg. no.])" are from the essay in The Message in the Bottle entitled "Notes for a Novel About the End of the World" (101-18).
cle for (increasingly bitter) prophesy, a way of finding in nihilistic times some sign of a Second Coming close at hand.\textsuperscript{29}

Although this turn to faith goes against the general movement of post-World War II Western intellectual culture—a culture drawn away from theological perspectives (or believing itself to be so drawn away) by the works of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and others—Percy's novels shelter and re-envision many of the themes that obsess this culture. For example, despite projecting an understanding of morality, logic and metaphysics that refutes almost every one of Nietzsche's views, Percy's novels often echo Nietzsche's predictions concerning the limitations of humanism and the nihilistic turn it must invite. Percy's decision to use fiction to reveal the limitations and contradictions of living in a world without God can be read as ironic confirmation of Nietzsche's contention that the twentieth century is the setting for "\textit{the advent of nihilism}," the unavoidable self-destruction of all the highest moral and rational values of the West as a result of that culture's misunderstanding of faith and reason (see Nietzsche, \textit{Will 3}). However, unlike Nietzsche, who sees religion as "passive nihilism," Percy defines nihilism as a threat to the human spirit born of a combination of hubris and a failure of faith. While Nietzsche's works proclaim the coming triumph of the few great men who will learn to overcome themselves and become who they are, Percy's novels warn against such men and such a desire.

In Percy's universe, modern man, in as much as he tries to evade his birth in sin, is a nihilist; he practices nihilism by living as if he is the arbiter of all things and in no need of rescue. Nihilism is another name for the sin of pride, and a sign of man's fallen state. For Nietzsche the coming age of nihilism is a "pathological transition stage" which might lead the strong to "a divine way of thinking"; for Percy, born in the year of the Somme and a member of the generation which witnessed first-hand the Fascists' grotesque reinterpretations of such "divine" thoughts, such an age can only be taken as a sign of apocalypse (Will 14-15).\(^3\) With the advent of universal nihilism—universal sin and gnostic pride—weighing upon him, Percy works to find a new language for the Christian novel, in hopes that fiction can express his belief in the "good news" of eternal life (see Percy, Message 118).

Echoes of Dostoevsky, Nietzsche's antithesis, sound out throughout Love in the Ruins. For all its mock-heroic tone, the book's critique of life in a world of relative values reiterates Ivan Karamazov warning about the death of God. If the West has come to "the end of the old modern age," a time when "both the Judeo-Christian consensus and rational humanism have broken down" (Percy, "Diagnostic" 44), then everything is permitted; everything is (as Nietzsche says) "weightless," without the necessary power to command (Trilling 138). Like Dostoevsky, Percy insists that mankind faces a choice: either "life" (pursuing God, despite paradox and uncertainty) or "death" (pursuing mastery without limit, even to the point of despair or madness). As conscious of Dostoevsky's themes as of the value of comedy, Percy makes Love in the Ruins a

\(^3\) In one sense, both Percy and Nietzsche can be said to see nihilism as the sign that salvation may soon come—all they disagree on is the form that this salvation will take.
satiric challenge to the nihilistic death-in-life which he detects at the core of the modern, rationalist, Western way of life. It is his serious jest against forces which he holds responsible for mankind's alienation from God and its descent, in this century in particular, into what he sees as myriad forms of demonic behaviour.

Mention of Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, Alan Woolfolk's "two switchmen of nihilism," suggests the extent to which Percy draws on—and at times surrenders to—the stance of the prophet. Even his most polished novels and essays carry a smudge of rage. Speaking with The Paris Review four years before his death, for example, he announced that the current ways of the West are a nihilistic project doomed to revisit what he sarcastically called the "splendors" of Nazism. According to Percy, the "anger" evident in later works such as The Thanatos Syndrome is a response to "the widespread and ongoing devaluation of human life in the Western world—under various sentimental disguises: 'quality of life,' 'pointless suffering,' 'termination of life without meaning,' etc." (to Abádi-Nágy 154). Practices he defines as the mass utilization of death, such as abortion (the precursor, he predicts, of mass euthanasia) are evidence of a larger moral failure which so dominates the cultures of North America and Europe "that it has almost achieved the status of a quasi-religious orthodoxy." Here he calls it "The Secular Inquisition"; in other venues he uses the term "Scientism." Both terms denote a tendency to put a dogmatic call for "objectivity" in the way of "free inquiry"—the kind of inquiry which Percy

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31 In another forum Percy calls scientism "a kind of religion," declaring that "[b]oth scientism and religion have dogmas. The difference is that the former doesn't admit it" (to Hobson 96).
believes leads one to a longing for spiritual values and a sense of individual purpose, a recognition of the tragic sense of life and the value of faith.

The "Secular Inquisition's" insistence on seeing "nothing unique about the human animal even if the evidence points to such uniqueness [e.g., only humans have developed speech]," and its unwillingness "to suggest that there is a unique and fatal flaw in Homo sapiens sapiens or indeed any perverse trait that cannot be laid to the influence of Western civilization," are two signs of its dogmatic rigidity (Percy to Abádi-Nágy 154-5). They prove that the West is now as far as it has ever been from the humanistic notions of openness and individual liberty on which its citizens wish to think it is based. "The old modern world" accepts all kinds of contradictions of logic. The potential outcome, Percy fears, will be murder:

It is easy to criticize the absurdities of fundamentalist beliefs like "scientific creationism". But it is also necessary to criticize other dogmas parading as science and the bad faith of some scientists who have their own dogmatic agendas to promote under the guise of "free scientific inquiry." Scientific inquiry should in fact be free. The warning: If it is not, if it is subject to this or that ideology, then do not be surprised if the history of the Weimar doctors is repeated. Weimar led to Auschwitz. The nihilism of some scientists in the name of ideology or sentimentality and the consequent devaluation of human life leads straight to the gas chamber (to Abádi-Nágy 155).32

32 At the time of the interview Percy had already completed the passage in The Thanatos Syndrome in which Father Rinaldo Smith makes a similar claim (128). According to Sue Mitchell Crowley ([1991] 225), the phrase "tenderness leads to the gas chamber" is from Flannery O'Connor's introduction to
In Percy's estimation, both science and "the West" itself—those values upon which modern culture depends—have caved in under the weight of "scientism." He believes the dominant understanding of the individual as an organism in an environment is a poison hidden in humanism, one which is now killing this civilization. To Percy, the late stages of the twentieth century appear laden with signs that the culture is in danger from itself: as its highest values devaluate themselves, a nihilistic self-conception is set to seize control, providing opportunities for savagery.\(^{33}\)

This unwillingness to ask questions is an essential trait of "gnostic" thought. "The building of systems is a gnostic form of reasoning, not a philosophical one," says Eric Voegelin:

But the thinker can seize control of being with his system only if being really lies within his grasp. As long as the origin of being lies beyond the being of this world; as long as eternal being cannot be completely penetrated with the instrument of world-immanent, finite cognition; as long as divine being can be conceived of only in the form of the *analogia entis*, the construction of a system will be impossible. If this venture is to be seriously launched at all, the thinker must first eliminate these inconve-

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\(^{33}\) Cf. the popular jeremiads of University of Chicago philosopher Allan Bloom, who claimed (in an article published the same summer as the Percy interview) that a too-easy absorption of German anti-rationalist thought and values by American culture has turned the nation into "... a Disneyland version of the Weimar Republic for the whole family" where people overlook the dangers of "value relativism," thinking they can have "nihilism without the abyss" (see "Nietzsche" 85-86, 93).
nences [by resorting to] . . . . the suppression of questions . . . . [because] whoever reduces being to a system cannot permit questions that invalidate systems as a form of reasoning (43–4).

As Cleanth Brooks points out, there are several similarities between Voegelin's and Percy's projects: both "see modern man impoverished by his distorted and disordered view of reality"; both question utopian notions which suggest that "increasing knowledge" will allow man to step around the Fall (261, 264). Both see attempts to depict this world as a malign creation, in need of reform according to the commands of an inclusive theory, as an invitation to nihilistic fantasies about a man-made "true" world to come. As a result, it is not surprising to find that "a gnostic impatience with human limitations" (Brooks 270) and the nihilistic results of that impatience are presented in comic form in Love in the Ruins.

As Chapter Two shows, fiction provides Percy with a way to contest all gnostics' claims. He believes the novel can serve as a diagnostic tool--a new kind of technology--with which one can explore the absence or gap between what science can say and what men feel themselves to be. He calls fiction a powerful instrument "that allows us to know ourselves and how it stands between ourselves and others," thereby letting humans seek out new meanings, and the beginnings of a new world ("Diagnostic" 44–45).34 In an ill world,

34Percy claims that the "postmodern" novelist--who literally writes "after" the old modern age--must act "like the canary that coal miners used to take down into the shaft to test the air" (Message 101). If the secular dream has left men ill, then it is the novelist's job to make the diagnosis and provide some way back to health, in part by paying attention to characters "in whom the potential for catastrophe--and hope--has suddenly escalated" as a result of the "unlimited possibilities for both destruction and liberation" now available (Message 112). Ascending to the long-promised secular city at last--only to
where the sacred vocabulary is "worn out" and the secular vocabulary no longer satisfies, Percy believes the novelist can work to cure discomforts by diagnosing the causes of the illness and prescribing a cure--or at least the beginnings of a cure (Message 116). Percy calls this "sciencing," and considers it a course of action superior to scientism because it puts attention, care, ahead of adherence to a limiting, dogmatic world-view. Final meanings remain evasive as ever; however, the diagnostic novelist can begin to experiment, looking for "how it is with man himself, who he is, and how it is between him and other men" ("Diagnostic" 45).

Robert Stone is less interested in diagnosing nihilism than in doing it justice. Salvation for this world seems to him to be a much more problematic matter than Percy will admit. Without a belief in Percy's divine Arbiter, yet still willing to talk of sin and culpability, Stone is a prophet unsure of his aim or his audience.

Stone's handling of both nihilistic characters and of times in which it seems that Nietzsche was right to claim that "the aim is lacking" and "why?" finds no answer" keeps a variety of meanings of nihilism in play, never quite forcing them into the form of an absolute judgement. At the same time, Stone does not attempt to evade the demand that a judgement needs to be made when one encounters nihilistic characters and events. Roger Sale calls Stone "a find himself unaccommodated, disconnected from any sense of sovereignty--Percy's postmodern man, caged in despair, finds the world caught up in the banality of process and utility. This agonizing realization is what leads to the simultaneous calamity and opportunity of postmodern life. The moment that the secular humanist dream is fulfilled--and the self, as a sovereign self, is threatened with destruction--may be the moment when the individual discovers that he must abandon the Secular Era, and return to faith (Message 113-4). Percy believes the novelist can go with him.
nineteenth-century moralist, as eager as Carlyle or George Eliot" to judge the choices of characters or cultures—and at the same time notes that there is another element to this stance, a sense that "if aimlessness, destruction, and institutional wantonness do not preclude choice and so do not preclude judgement," then there are contingencies and complications that come with living in the modern world "that make Stone's task far different from that of any writer of a century ago" (70-71). In Stone's world one bases an ethic of right action on attention to circumstances and the slim intuition that there might be a higher value to human life—not on set abstract models of the correct way to live. What is difficult is discerning the correct way, and then having the confidence to declare it is correct. As Stone puts it: "Man is, I wouldn't say perverse, but man is only man and in a state of great perplexity, and without much sound guidance it's difficult to determine what the right thing to do is. And having determined what it is, it's difficult to do it" (to Weber 24).

In Stone's universe, a nihilist is one who acts as if humans are absolved from any responsibility for their choices because they have discovered the meaninglessness of values—what Nietzsche calls the demise of the "true" world (see Portable 485; Will 13). Dog Soldiers works through the implications of such behaviour in an effort to uncover a basis for contesting indifference. An investigation of what Christopher Lasch calls "the Culture of Narcissism"—the permissive culture of early 1970s America—the novel dramatizes what would become of life in a world of complete alienation, one where need reigns alone. There is little in Stone's view that seems inviting. What he gives his readers is "a world in which brutality and illegality are the norm and not the exception," one in which "corruption seems omnipresent, action is futile, human fellow feeling is dead . . ." (Shelton 81). All the same, Stone is not a docu-
mentarist; Dog Soldiers is not an inclusive or complete account of "scary, evil times" (see Stone, "Reason" 75). Nor was it intended to be: as Robert Solotaroff notes, Stone meshes his "fascination for . . . some of the nether reaches of experience with his continuing desire to make a large statement about life in America by implicitly claiming that the world of the novel expresses in extreme forms some negative growths in [American] culture that have been intensified" by the nation's involvement in Vietnam and other disruptive events (64). Dog Soldiers explodes the 1960s' dreams of national fulfillment and personal fulfillment by taking all such models of freedom to their nihilistic extremes.

Greenbacks and "The Greening of America"; Stone has none-too-gentle comments to make about both. In this regard his book resembles Love in the Ruins and its satire of American life; yet its real precursors are works such as Dostoevsky's The Devils or Melville's The Confidence-Man, much more bleak and fearful accounts of the human propensity to put personal "obligations" ahead of moral objections. The early 1970s, according to Stone, was a time of dying dreams in his country: "the dying dream of the Sixties in California and also the dying dream of the Great Society—all sorts of little bills were coming up due for payment" (to Schroeder 154). In conversation with Charles Ruas, Stone states that the impetus behind Dog Soldiers was his need to tell of "a whole lot of dreams that went bad," and of how "The social fabric [of America] was struck a blow, either as a result of the war or as an indirect result of the war, that it hasn't recovered from." In Stone's estimation "there was an undermining of the society, and it was partly economic and it was partly spiritual." Dog Soldiers tries to "examine the process of that blow's falling on
America. . . " (280-81), in an effort to catch that moment when the country changed (perhaps) forever.

Discrepancies between ideals and actual behaviour run throughout the book: between the ideals and behaviour of the state, as evinced by the war, and between the ideals and behaviour of those offering an alternative to the state, as evinced by the degeneration of Counterculture idealism into drug addiction and bad faith. This list attests to John G. Park's claim that Stone sees recent American history as a "history of moral failure and moral enfeeblement" with betrayal--"of self, of others, of ideals, of beliefs"--at its center (52). Out of this betrayal came a deterioration of civility, which Stone believes still besets his country. It is on this belief that he bases his novel's vision of the cultural environment as one in which citizens are caught under the dominance of appetite and by the diminishment of restraint.

The world-view of the novel reiterates many of the ideas put forward in the last chapter of Lionel Trilling's Sincerity and Authenticity (1972), a book written in response to the same sense of mounting disorder and malaise Stone confronts which also examines disconcerting contradictions hidden in Counterculture models of authenticity (as well as the model espoused by characters such as Federal agent Antheil and his lover, Charmian, "free enterprisers" both cool and full of plans). Trilling's reading of the times in light of Freud's

35Stone speaks as harshly of the Counterculture as he does of those elements of mainstream culture that got the U.S. tangled up in Vietnam and other entanglements. "[O]ne of the lessons of the 'Sixties," he has told Charles Ruas, "was that so many of the leaders of the alternative societies . . . were quite as ready to lie and as corrupt in their way as the leaders of the so-called establishment. . . . So where was the true way? It wasn't there. There was damn little one could do, and life was, as it always is, a lonely and dangerous business in the last analysis" (280).
discussion of the discontents of civilization serves as a gloss on Stone's fictional critique of the potentially nihilistic turn in 1970s America's understanding of freedom.

For example, citing Nietzsche's observation that the "death of God" announced in The Gay Science (now understood "by common consent" to have occurred) would bring with it "weightlessness," a sense that all human experience is inauthentic, therefore valueless, Trilling notes that Freud's Civilization and its Discontents seems to offer an antidote to such weightlessness by insisting upon "the essential immitigability of the human condition as determined by the nature of the mind" (156). For all its condemnation of what Freud calls the excesses of the superego, that part of the mind that demands one obey the norms imposed by others, Civilization and its Discontents can only be understood to be a defense of such excesses. For Trilling's Freud, there is no way around the discontents born of the superego's demands--no way, that is, which humans could afford to adopt. Even as Freud continued to see religion as "sheer illusion," he

was intent on rescuing one element [of it], the imperative actuality which religion attributed to life. Different individual temperaments [will have different responses to Civilization and its Discontents] . . . but all will take into account, positively or negatively, its powerful representation of the momentous claim which life makes upon us, by very reason, it seems, of its hardness, intractability, and irrationality. The fabric of contradictions that Freud conceives human existence to be is recalcitrant to preference, to will, to reason; it is not to be lightly manipulated. His imagination of the human condition preserves something--much
of the stratum of hardness that runs through the Jewish and Christian traditions as they respond to the hardness of human destiny. Like the Book of Job it propounds and accepts the mystery and naturalness—the natural mystery, the mysterious naturalness—of suffering. At the same time it has at its heart an explanation of suffering [i.e., the tyranny of the superego] through a doctrine of something like original sin (157).

In Trilling's hands Freud's psychology becomes an ontology that does justice to the tragic sense of life. This ontology provides a basis for "a faith quite unrelated to hope, a piety that takes virtually the form of pride," thereby preserving a sense of each life's authenticity and value (158). Such a stance upholds the necessity of bearing up under the superego's tyranny, living within the dialectic of Eros and death (a dialectic whose unresolved tensions contributed to the painfulness of consciousness) and recognizing (to borrow Conor Cruise O'Brien's phrase) that one cannot keep to the "myth of divine grace" in some de-theologized form "while dropping its necessary complementary myth of original sin" (O'Brien 89).

The themes of Freud's book were "profoundly alien to the prevailing ideology" of those figures (Norman O. Brown, R. D. Laing, and Herbert Marcuse are three he names) at the center of efforts in the 1960s to release the self into unbounded pleasure and greatness. Trilling suggests that the call for courage and deferred pleasures was difficult to hear amidst the clamour for "egalitarian hedonism," which was embodied in popular visions of the authenticity of madness and unrestraint (and which one can detect, to a degree, in books such
as Gravity's Rainbow--although the faith in immanence espoused by Enzian and others can be read as a refutation of hedonistic attempts to deify man).

As Chapter Five of this study shows, a need to criticize hedonism dominates Dog Soldiers, from its description of Converse's feckless decision to become a smuggler to the image of the declining commune in the mountains changed from a place of peace to a battle-ground. This need arises from Stone's own ontology (as he himself describes it to Kay Bonetti [91]), which also suggests that there can be little respite from discontents. While no longer a practicing Catholic, Stone continues to draw on the Catholic education he received as a child (and memories of his loathing for those who taught it to him [Solotaroff 3-6]) to create the same sort of basis for granting life and experience weight and value that Trilling's Freud developed by honouring the mystery and naturalness of suffering. Stone has no faith in utopian plans based on the natural goodness of man--plans that might justify narcissism and an uncritical, egalitarian hedonism. In interviews and essays he repeats that "nothing is free," and that "it is very hard for [human beings] to behave rationally, let alone well" (to Ruas 281-82). In fact, "the tremendous difficulty of setting out to act decently" despite one's own susceptibility to moral weakness and the world's unpredictable ways suggests to Stone that

We cannot simply decide to transcend and overlook [human nature] in a casual way. If we try to do that we end up compounding our situation. I mean, that's why revolutions, for the most part, turn on themselves and fail. It's why complacent moralism ends up being vapid and useless. It's why prophets almost always undo themselves and are finally revealed as agents of delusion. We have to accept the human condition for what it is (to Bonetti 96).
Stone's views concerning the "immitigability of the human condition" show him to be in sympathy with the "religious existentialist" tradition, with its emphasis on both life's "tragic" nature and the importance of accepting responsibility for one's actions (see Stone to Woods 363-64). At the same time, Stone's ontology also seems to bear the marks of contact with the works and visions of Herman Melville and Stephen Crane, the two American novelists with whom Stone shares the sense that menace, not grace, may rule Heaven and Earth. The emphasis Stone places on "theological" issues, those larger questions that come of being alive, in his interviews with Woods (361) and Bonetti (91-2), is reminiscent of the emphasis on such questions in the novels of Melville's great decade, a time when, as Hawthorne describes it, he could neither believe, "nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he [was] too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other" (Leyda 529). Similarly, Stone's declared interest in "the idea of there not being a God as a kind of dynamic absence that is a constant challenge" ("Way" 49), "the existentialist tradition of God as an absence—not a meaningless void, but a negative presence we live in terms of" (Stone to Woods 364), reflects his desire to go beyond the (straightforward) nihilism of Crane's claim that "God is Cold," happy to leave man "adrift on a slim spar" (125), beset by devils abiding both within and without.37

36 A view shared by George Packer (115).

37 Stone's comments on Crane's belief that the world is war, a "Red Universe" in which greatness comes from strength alone, read as a gloss on Dog Soldiers: to read that Henry had "been to touch the great death, and found that, after all, it was but the great death," says Stone, is to be reminded that Crane was not only a contemporary of Frost and Joyce, but also of Nietzsche and Theodore Roosevelt, men of too vigorous words, perhaps ("Introduction" xvi). As the chapter below shows, comparing Henry's experience with Converse's "exercise in reality" in the red field reveals how far removed Stone is from Crane's cosmic nihilism.
Such congruencies with Freud, Melville, and (to a lesser extent) Crane suggest that Stone's engagement with the weightlessness of experience in his own time in Dog Soldiers can be read as an able continuation of the explorations of meaning that have been at the center of Western art and thought since the Industrial Revolution. The aim of Stone's prophecy, so similar to the claims of Trilling's Freud and Hawthorne's Melville, "is not despair"; the aim is "find out how bad it gets and begin from there . . ." (Stone to Bonetti 95). In what he perceives to be not a meaningless but an enigmatic universe, Robert Stone is sounding for something upon which to anchor a belief in the greater significance of human life, something sound enough to last out a flood of nihilism. The paradox of Dog Soldiers is that its nihilistic vision of the world, the product of the nihilistic behaviour of its protagonists, finally illuminates the possibility of something more, something to believe in (cf. Stone, "Me" 233). Stone quietly but steadily indicts the "gnostic" practices of the contemporary world (as Eric Voegelin puts it) including the refusal to take "theological" questions seriously, and in doing so approaches an expression of faith.

Placing himself between the hopes of the Seekers and the pessimism of the Prophets, Don DeLillo articulates the limitations of both views while resisting the sidle into polemic that to some extent disables Percy's, Oates' and Pynchon's novels. DeLillo does not attempt to prove how nihilistic the times have become, or why certain types of people should be called nihilists. "What I try to do," he told one interviewer, "is create complex human beings, ordinary-extraordinary men and women who live in the particular skin of the late twentieth century. I try to record what I see and hear and sense around me--what I feel in the currents, the electric stuff of the culture. I think these are
American forces and energies. And they belong to our time" (to Begley 304).
What these forces and energies reveal to him is an increasing sense of uncertainty, anxiety, and dread, as well as the discomforting realization that "Final solutions, ultimate meanings are . . . not available to mankind," because the "comfort of certainty" may only have a place in artificial and closed systems, such as games--not in real life (Oriard 14).

In DeLillo's opinion, the Kennedy assassination was both the catalyst and prime embodiment of this new uncertainty: "I think we've all come to feel that what's been missing [since the assassination] is a sense of a manageable reality. We seem much more aware of elements like randomness and ambiguity and chaos since then" (DeLillo to DeCurtis 286).38 In his estimation, the culture has swung toward "confusion and psychic chaos and the sense of randomness" (DeLillo to Passaro 37). Reality has been invaded by unreal energies: "Our culture has changed in important ways since Dallas," and seems now to repeatedly reenact the "shattering randomness" and "missing motive" of that murder (DeLillo to Begley 299).

DeLillo's ability to see how his culture has turned away from its traditions of optimism and self-confidence towards chaos shows him to be in tune with the other writers in this study, writers as interested in moral and metaphysical issues as in the demands of plot and character development. Consciously working against his age and its efforts to forget itself and all it loses

as it forgets, DeLillo feels bound to report on reality as he finds it. Therefore, he has no choice but to note the randomness and dissolution he senses around him: "This is the shape my books take because this is the reality I see. This reality has become a part of all our lives over the past twenty-five years. I don't know how we can deny it . . . . What I see is suspicion and distrust and fear, and so, of course, these things inform my books . . . ." (DeLillo to DeCurtis 304). Asked by Robert R. Harris to reply to Diane Johnston's suggestion that, for the most part, novels such as *The Names* go unread because they deal with "'deeply shocking things about America that people would rather not face,'" DeLillo affirms that he tries to "confront realities. But people would rather read about their own marriages and separations and trips to Tanglewood. There's an entire school of American fiction that might be called around-the-house-and-in-the-yard. And I think people like to read this work because it adds a certain luster, a certain significance to their own lives" (26). "Making things difficult for the reader is less an attack on the reader than it is on the age and its facile knowledge-market," he once told Thomas LeClair. "The writer is driven by his conviction that some truths aren't arrived at so easily, that life is still full of mystery, that it might be better for you, dear reader, if you went back to the living section of your newspaper because this is the dying section and you don't really want to be here" (DeLillo to LeClair 28-9).39

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39"The novel's not dead," he told Adam Begley, "but I do think we're working in the margins . . . . When we talk about the novel we have to consider the culture in which it operates. Everything in the culture argues against the novel, particularly the novel that tries to be equal to the complexities and excesses of the culture . . . . [W]e need the writer in opposition, the novelist who writes against power, who writes against the corporation or the state or the whole apparatus of assimilation . . . ." (290).
While DeLillo is willing to make clear pronouncements in interviews concerning the dangers to America of "glut and repetition and endless consumption" (Passaro 77; cf. Begley 290), in his books he puts forward no overt religious or political or philosophical platform from which he (and his readers) might look down upon American culture and thunder at its ruinous ways. "Yoking together terror and wild humor as the essential tone of contemporary America" (Lentricchia 1), DeLillo does turn a critical and pessimistic eye to much of American life, but his rage is aimed at "humankind's self-destructiveness," the ways in which it gathers "itself into its own powerful and vicious circles" and false certainties, designs which only promote destruction (DeLillo to LeClair 27). At the same time, he does not forget that the urge to complete the world, to make certainty certain, is also a "real need" of mankind, an important part of being human (Mottram 96). What remains for DeLillo, then, is not the desire to create a polemic for or against belief-systems, but a desire to comprehend all aspects of how and why people need to believe and what comes of their beliefs.

The world is left to speak for itself, to a great extent; readers are responsible for their own conclusions. However, there are concerns which appear in all his novels, which one can consider the foundations of his philosophy. For example, critics have noted DeLillo's emphasis on "mystery," on something like spirituality, albeit a spirituality unsupported by any obvious religiosity (see LeClair, Loop 15). Daniel Aaron suggests that all of DeLillo's novels "seem to hint of a religious disposition or at least a hankering for transcendent answers, but DeLillo never takes the reader into his confidence, leaves few if any clues to point to his philosophy, social views, habits or tastes. He is a withholder, a mystifier, a man without a handle . . ." (306). He poses this
enigmatic celebration of mystery against the darker powers of the world. In The Names, frangible orders and uncertain possibilities exist side-by-side with examples of dehumanization, hopelessness, and chaos. This is how people live now, the book seems to suggest; instead of unities, contesting forms of certainty and uncertainty play themselves out.

Instead of opposing one habit of certainty with another, DeLillo offers mystery. As he told one interviewer: "I think my work has always been informed by mystery; the final answer, if there is one, is outside the book. My books are open ended. I would say that mystery in the general rather than the occult is something that weaves in and out of my work" (DeLillo to DeCurtis 293). In The Names, "mystery" arises from a consideration of the mysterious power of language. Many of the characters are obsessed with uncovering some inner power of language, including James Axton, the disheartened freelance writer who narrates the book, the letter-obsessed archaeologist, Owen Brademas, and the members of the cult that James—thinking he's close to solving a mystery—calls "The Names." The "nameless mystery of communication" becomes both a source of connection and of alienation, both an "offering" and a catalyst for ritualized and brutal sacrifice (Keesey 131; Names 331, 302); it provides DeLillo with a way to explore the role of theological impulses in modern, secularized society. By contrasting forms of naming—for example, Tap Axton's manipulation of the proper names of things, and its antithesis, the reductive matching of names' initials practiced by the cult—DeLillo creates an original way of speaking about the ineffable mysteries of our "fallen" world

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and our responses to it. Commingling language and religion allows DeLillo to probe the effects of nihilism—the effects of the desire to evade anxiety in the face of death by renouncing all beliefs and all mysteries.

There is no evidence available that suggests that DeLillo is familiar with what George Steiner calls Martin Heidegger's "post-theological" handling of art, philosophy, and nihilism (see Heidegger 156). Nevertheless, DeLillo's emphasis on the redemptive properties of creative discourse has an uncanny similarity to Heidegger's designation of poetry as the "Clearing" in which man comes to a comprehension of "Being." According to George Steiner, Heidegger considered "Authentic poetry" to be writing that "names," that forms a pious and lasting connection between mankind and the world. This connection is "the ultimate, probably the only, hope for a way out of the nihilism of the age"—that is, out of the "forgetting of Being" discussed above (Heidegger 145). The evasive term "Being" might here be defined as that something "more" which one can sense within the world yet cannot disclose in a definition, even though poetry can speak its name. It is. The poet names Being by discovering an original language with which to reveal the uncanny coming-to-presence of Being through the persistence of "beings," the world as it is. This language opens Being to the reader and the reader to Being while sheltering Being's mysterious and simultaneous presence and absence. It provides a meeting-place, a "Clearing," in which Being can be. Nihilism, then, is the name for attempts to freeze Being in a definition in hopes of somehow simplifying it, and thereby abolishing the mystery in which it is sheltered and met. Heidegger looked to poetry's attendance upon mystery for a word to pose against this fate.
Even though Heidegger disavowed any form of "ontotheological" thinking, there is clearly a "post-theological" aspect to his description of poetry. As Steiner puts it, in Heidegger's interpretation the poet "names what is holy; or rather, his nomination calls from hiddenness, without doing violence to it, that which is still alive in the grimed earth" (Heidegger 145). As Chapter Six shows, it is this "genius of nomination and in-gathering," as Steiner calls it, this recognition of and attention to the inscape of the world, that DeLillo also honours with both the story of Tap's story and--albeit indirectly--the story of the cult's nihilistic aesthetic. DeLillo, the "crypto-Christian and profane moralist," seems intent on resisting nihilism by establishing powerful metaphors (such as "Mystery") to put in place of the "dead" supernatural divinity that once stood at the center of Western culture (Aaron 306; cf. Heidegger 155-56). In doing so, he meets the Seekers' goal of defining new values on which to ground life while attending to the Prophets' indictment of attempts to efface the question of being with some man-made answer.

American literature perennially testifies to the ways in which the society and its citizens become fluid, many-sided--protean. At the same time, the literature contains many works that cast suspicions on this fluidity, and suggest that it harbours a propensity for nihilism. Whitman's Song of Myself is countered by Melville's The Confidence-Man; Kerouac's On The Road runs up against Barth's The End of the Road; Mailer's An American Dream must traverse the gravity of Bellow's Mr. Sammler's Planet. What all these works share is an awareness of the complex tension between freedom and responsibility upon which the republic was founded.41 By examining opposing definitions

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41For example, Richard Boyd Hauck's A Cheerful Nihilism (1971) documents a long tradition of "self-made" men (such as Ben Franklin) and
of nihilism and placing them in the context of contemporary American life, the five novelists in this study continue this heritage of tension. *Wonderland* and *Gravity's Rainbow* are countered by *Love in the Ruins* and *Dog Soldiers*--and the beliefs affirmed in all four are tested in *The Names*. Read in chronological order, these novels reveal the ways in which the contest between responsibility and license made itself a part of American fiction in the 1970s, and the different ways in which artists felt they were called on to try nothing--to sample, test, and challenge the nihilistic mood of their time.

"confidence" men (such as Melville's eponymous hero) being simultaneously celebrated and vilified in American literature, from the works of the Puritans through to the "grim humour" of Vonnegut and Barth.
Two • "I can save you, America!" Walker Percy's Diagnosis and Treatment of Nihilism in Love in the Ruins

Love in the Ruins (1971) is a satiric, prophetic novel that indicts the whole of modern secular culture for promoting circumstances that its author, the Catholic novelist Walker Percy (d. 1990), depicts as the antecedents of a nihilistic moral relativism. Reflecting his belief that the West ignores dangerous contradictions in its own project which arise from "denying any serious reality to any other way of knowing" other than science and the scientific method, the novel's comic action reveals how these contradictions can perpetuate a form of moral nihilism that Percy (echoing Flannery O'Connor) has called "tenderness" (Percy to Hobson 96; to Abádi-Nágy 155). It is "tenderness," the willful renunciation of faith in God's grace in the name of a patronizing love of mankind, which grounds modern, secular culture's evasion of the Fall and Original Sin. Percy's diagnostician-hero, Dr. Tom More, spots symptoms of a great illness within his culture's anxious and proud longing for such an evasion, and for mastery over the world (a longing he comes to see in himself as well). His adventures "at a time near the end of the world" (circa 1984) are meant to show how the claims of "scientific humanism" (or, as Percy also calls it, "scientism") can be said to devaluate both themselves and the notions of justice and reason that they are meant to defend because they undermine the Judeo-Christian precepts which give these values stability (Percy, Signposts 417).
While Percy includes some variation on this theme in all his novels, *Love in the Ruins*' scope and overtly comic tone make it the most useful single example of his approach to nihilism. Unlike its predecessors, *The Moviegoer* (1961) and *The Last Gentleman* (1966), the novel clearly shows how meaninglessness and despair are simultaneously private and public concerns; unlike subsequent works, including the novel's "sequel," *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987), it shows signs of an effort to avoid making ineffective—because absolute—charges against the age. Comic poise and wit moderate the prophet in Percy while illuminating his judgements. Both a satiric take on lives spent in the space between knowledge and wisdom, and a meditation on the meaning of being human, *Love in the Ruins* offers readers interested in the role of nihilism in American fiction a provocative re-telling of the humanist tradition and of the revolutionary hopes of "the Sixties," as well as a vision of the possible outcome of modernity. At the same time, it testifies to the difficulties and limitations faced by artists who try to use fiction to revitalize a particular philosophical perspective while working in a time when both secular and sacred certainties seem to be in doubt.

By his own admission, Dr. Tom More is either a prophet or a nut. When he is first encountered he is sitting in a grove of young pines overlooking an interstate cloverleaf, rifle in hand, his leg asleep beneath him, "broken out in hives and waiting for the end of the world" (*Love in the Ruins* [Love] 3). A self-styled "bad Catholic" and scientific genius, Dr. Tom resembles a clownish mixture of Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith, the pilgrim Dante, and Robert Jordan (Lawson 150; Allen 82): he is caught in a dark wood midway in his life's journey, obliged to chose whether to flee or fight principalities and powers, but
really possessed of more style than substance—not really all that brave or adept.

One thing he is sure of is his diagnosis of what ails the world. Using his "More's Qualitative Quantitative Ontological Lapsometer" (MOQUOL), a device which enables one to read brain-waves in such a way that they provide a scientifically precise measurement of an individual's estrangement from himself and his "soul" (for want of a better word), he has been able to plumb the sick heart of his culture. Work on the lapsometer has led him to the conclusion that the West is now set to fall before two dreadful forces: on one hand, "Heavy Sodium" and "Heavy Chloride" fallout ("chemicals," he has discovered, which affect the centers of abstraction in the brain); on the other, the modern pandemic, the nihilist mood: "the new Black Death, the current hermaphroditism of the spirit, namely: More's syndrome, or: chronic angelism-bestialism that rives soul from body and sets it orbiting the great world as a spirit of abstraction . . . [a] poor lonesome ghost locked in its own machinery" (Love 383). The product of nihilistic vanity and gnosticism, this "disease" of the mind is Percy's symbol for the malaise he wishes to defeat with this novel. Like that malaise, More's syndrome leaves his characters "divided between [their] bestial impulses, which are fueled by hatred and violence, and [their] higher powers, which are stranded in abstract consciousness. One or the other normally predominates, but in either case [their] humanity, with its inwardness, is lost" (Luchesi 206).

1 Tom LeClair notes that Percy borrowed the term "angelism-bestialism" from Jacques Maritain ("Devil" 167).
Designed as the beginnings of a cure for the Fall, More's lapsometer is supposed to help reduce the anxiety of alienation by providing a scientific means of dealing with "the very secrets of the soul, [and diagnosing] the maladies that poison the wellsprings of man's hope" (Love 7). As the novel begins, Dr. More senses that he is the only person aware of the psychic repercussions of the coming chemical-spiritual "event," the only one able to see how omnipresent angelism-bestialism, sustaining the "scientism" and generalizing "tenderness" of the culture, seems set to release a fatal dose of despair (a rejection of grace) and political intransigence (a nihilistic "faith" in violence and destruction) upon the land--and he's feeling a little bit guilty about it all. After all, he must admit that much of the momentum of this catastrophe (if it is actually taking place) has been precipitated by the misuse of his own MOQUOL--its misuse by himself, and by a mysterious, sebum-scented R & D man named Art Immelmann, who may or may not be the Devil.

Indeed, Dr. More is not well: "The truth is that, though I am a physician, my health, especially my mental health, has been very poor lately. I am . . . . an alcoholic, a shaky, middle-aged man subject to depressions and elations and morning terrors, but a genius nonetheless who sees into the hidden causes of things . . ." (Love 11). According to William Leigh Godshalk, More's obvious memory lapses and his susceptibility to mood-swings suggest that this narrator, with his "distorted vision" of things, is Percy's way of giving readers an entertaining lesson in the deterioration of modern life without being seen to be lapsing into cant (137-8). In fact, the doctor's admission of weakness makes him an peculiarly "trustworthy" guide, even if he is something of an untrustworthy narrator. The combination of his eschatological anxiety and his status as both a genius diagnostician and mental patient makes him the perfect pro-
phet for the muddled-up age of unwise science.² Both insider and outsider, Dr. More finds a way into the complexities of the modern predicament while he reveals the pitfalls that await the modern wayfarer.

Much in the spirit of Huxley and Orwell, Percy sets his novel in the near future (in this case, a little ahead of Orwell's famous year—in and around July 4th, 1983) not in an effort to describe "the shape of things to come" but in order to create a "satire on contemporary society" (Hardy 109)—in this case, on life in the "old violent beloved U. S. A." and "the Christ-forgetting Christ-haunted death-dealing Western world" at the end of the 1960s (see Bradford 840–41; Allen 77). Like Saul Bellow (Mr. Sammler's Planet), E. L. Doctorow (The Book of Daniel), and Norman Mailer (The Armies of the Night), to name three of his contemporaries, Percy creates a vision of the Western world (circa 1970) "irretrievably splintering" (Webb 66). Love in the Ruins reveals just how much a part of the mood of the beginning of the 1970s nihilism turned out to be (albeit a nihilism having more to do with style than with the Last Days). For example, when Dr. More declares that "These are bad times" in which "Principalities and powers are everywhere victorious" (Love 5), not only the Book of Revelations comes to mind: few of Percy's first readers would have been unfamiliar with the "police riot" during the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago, the Weathermen's "Days of Rage," or Charles Manson and his nihilistic form of action directe (Mailer, Chicago 187; Gitlin 403). The "Christmas Riots" of 1978 or the disturbances of July, 1983, which make up the majority of the plot of Percy's novel, are types of the radical and corrosive violence pre-

²Much of his anxiety is fueled by re-reading descriptions of the Battle of Verdun which speak of how "the hemorrhage and death by suicide of the old Western world" began (Love 47).
sent in American life during the late 1960s. Percy has simply taken every-thing one step further, in order to both ridicule the passionate intensity of his own age and to consider the deeper meanings the age seems to disclose.

In this "future" the fears of many of Percy's generation are fulfilled: "the center did not hold" after all (Love 18). While the war in Ecuador goes on without any sign of ending, all aspects of public life disintegrate, battled over by antithetical and uncompromising forces on the left and right. This civil war is an outward sign of a similar struggle inside each citizen, a similar battle between angel and beast, caused by chronic angelism-bestialism, the alien-ation of self from itself that results when modern man surrenders to abstrac-tions (see Eubanks 124). The Democrats have been replaced by the Left Party (from LEFTPAPASANE: "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, The Pill, Atheism, Pot, Anti-Pollution, Sex, Abortion Now, Euthanasia" [Love 18]); the Republicans have given way to the Knotheads--who called themselves the "Christian Con-servative Constitutional Party" until someone pointed out their acronym's "similarity to the initials printed on the backs of Soviet cosmonauts and called it the most knotheaded political bungle of the century" (Love 17-18). Both groups pride themselves on their inflexibility. A similar schism has led to the division of the Catholic Church between the ultra-conservative American Catholic Church, "which emphasizes property rights ... and plays The Star-Spangled Banner at the elevation" and the ultra-liberal "Dutch schismatics" who "believe in relevance but not God" (Love 6). The few like Dr. More who

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3Percy scholars may want to follow up on Professor T. H. Adamowski's suggestion to me, after reading an earlier version of this chapter, that this joke may have been stolen from Norman Mailer's Why Are We In Vietnam? (1967): D.J.'s father works for "4C and P," a chemical company that once called itself "CCCP ... till they found out the Red-ass Russians" used the same initials (29).
remain faithful to Rome after their fashion are "scattered and demoralized." "There are Left states and Knothead states, Left towns and Knothead towns but no center towns" (Love 18). Even in Paradise Estates, the walled suburban community where More lives amidst Left scientists and Knotheads proctologists and realtors, there is no harmony; all folks agree on is keeping the poor and most blacks out.

Among the Left scientists it is taken as a matter of course that euthanasia is a necessity for any civilized culture; the health of mankind, they believe, depends on conditioning away "antisocial" attitudes by means of electrode therapy and "Skinner Boxes." Many of the local black population have joined guerilla forces based in the nearby swamps, "from which [they] mount forays against outlying subdivisions and shopping plazas," side by side with college dropouts, "deserters from the Swedish Army," survivalists--"and even a few old greybeard Kerouac beats, wiry sourdoughs of the spirit who carry pilgrim staffs, recite sutras, and leap from hummock to hummock as agile as mountain goats"--who live on catfish and "Chocktaw cannabis" (Love 16).

These descriptions draw much of their charm and (or) acidity from their proximity to real life--to the hippie communes, rednecks with "America: Love It or Leave It" bumper-stickers on their trucks, and Black Power fighters at war with the nation, which were all part of the public discourse of the late 1960s. Divided as they are, these constituents of Percy's fictional "body politic" act out the death of the humanist tradition together: in place of complexity they champion simplified abstractions; in place of compromise they offer dogma. Dr. More's description of their discordant behaviour reflects Percy's view that there is a greater and more important force at work in a society so
riven by political discord: an all-encompassing "malaise." "The Troubles," in which race battles race, political faction battles political faction, and believers battle atheists, are a comic version of what Percy believes to be the real and desperate trouble in which Westerners find themselves: they signify the damage done by the subject/object split that has dominated modern Western experience since Descartes (Kennedy 115-16). The different factions play out a mock-epic version of the devaluation of all values held hitherto; their farce masks Percy's serious critique of the contradictions of liberal humanism.

Indeed, in the novel the intricacies of their politics are hardly handled. As Dr. More puts it, it is his invention alone ("one of the three great scientific breakthroughs of the Christian era") and not some political solution that can end the time of troubles, because (he believes) MOQUOL is capable of "bridging the dread chasm between body and mind that has sundered the soul of Western man for five hundred years" (Love 90). He is sure he "can save the terrible God-blessed Americans from themselves" by using his "lapsometer, the first caliper of the soul" to close "the dread chasm that has rent the soul of Western man ever since Descartes ripped body loose from mind and turned the very soul into a ghost that haunts its own house" (Love 58, 191). More's diagnosis is an attempt to get at the root cause of "the logic of despair that points nowhere but to suicide" (Schenker 93)--the logic that Percy believes has become an inescapable part of "postmodern" life. Because Percy holds that moral truths

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4 Percy uses the term "postmodern" in its literal sense: this is the time "after" Modernity, he believes; hence, the "postmodern" age. Affinities between his understanding of the term and that of, for example, Jean-François Lyotard, would end here. Therefore, his status as a "postmodern" writer, for all his play with (or possible mishandling of) genre conventions, actually consists of making mankind's new moral status the focus of his works--despite the claims of LeClair ("Devil," 166f) and Webb (64-66).
are the main unstable element in a life lived after the end of "the old modern age," his novel suggests that the only issue that matters is whether one will take the chance to be open again to the opportunities of faith—or fall forever, like Nietzsche's active nihilist, into a rejection of both the world as it is and any dream of another "true" world (see Will 318). Therefore, both protagonist and author act with the sense that it is a crisis in the soul—and not a political crisis—that has led to societal chaos, and work to address the soul's needs.

An insistence on seeing earthly events as signs of man's fallen nature leads Dr. More (and his creator) to make what appear on the surface to be a number of patronizing declarations about race and politics. As Cecil Eubanks points out, Percy has little time for most political reforms because they so often seem to be based solely on abstract knowledge, which means they can only perpetuate the "actual" problems—vanity and indifference to the mystery of grace—that humans are prone to in their fallen state (124-25). In Love in the Ruins, Percy exaggerates contradictions in the ideologies of both the Left and the Right to such an extent that the questions of practice—that is, of the local effectiveness of a particular view—are forgotten amongst the sometimes crude lines of caricature.

For example, during the July 4th disturbances, Dr. More comes across a number of mobs collecting to fight it out with all others in the name of one ideology or another. A mob of Knotheads collects on the outskirts of town, preparing to march on the Federal Medical complex known as "Fedville." They

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5Of course, according to Nietzsche's metaphysics of will to power, Percy's recourse to faith is also a nihilistic act. Nietzsche's version of religion without God is, for Percy, nihilism in extremis. Were they to meet, each could with good conscience call the other a nihilist.
plan to drive out (as they put it) all the "'commonists, atheistic scientists, Jews, perverts, dope fiends, coonasses--" in the name of "'America'" (Love 322). Meanwhile, "a gaggle of unruly Left students" armed with bottle-bombs and nail-studded golf balls is preparing to practice "'creative nonviolent violence'" in the name of Jorge Rojas, "'the George Washington of Ecuador,'" leader of the North Ecuadorians. The students are led by Professor Coffin Cabot, who calls America "'a cancer in the community of democratic nations.'" Only the three hundred thousand dollars per annum he earns as a scholar and public figure keeps him from heading off to humanist Scandinavia (Love 325-26). Both groups function without the restraint of dialogue, caught up in the "'angelism" or "'bestialism" that comes of refusing compromise and refusing to see the other as oneself: the "'angelic" Left students, caught up in "'romantic totalism," will kill for peace; the "'bestial" Knotheads, blinded by their own dogma, understand the world only in terms of their rage, and see their opponents only as blood enemies. Both groups put ideas ahead of a recognition of the one thing Percy believes they have in common: their birth in sin, their fallen state.

Dr. More sees the violent conflict between left and right and blacks and whites as more than a struggle for power or justice: it is a sign of an essential "'lack." That this lack is just now becoming apparent is what makes the idea of the United States at war with itself a "'tragedy"--a tragedy which is itself a sign of the tragic self-deceiving nature of the entire vain and "death-dealing Western world." It seems to More that the breakdown of things has a deeper sig-

6A rather artless allusion to Rev. William Sloane Coffin, one of the leaders of the anti-Draft movement during the Vietnam War. Percy's sympathies, apparent to any reader of his works, were not with the Anti-war party; at the same time, as this novel also suggests, he had little time for the deification of America and its "mission" in the world.
nificance than most people acknowledge. It goes far beyond politics. This belief is what leads him to ask: can it be true that "from the beginning [the U. S. A.] never did work? That the thing always had a flaw in it, a place where it would shear, and that all this time we were not really different from Ecuador and Bosnia-Herzegovina, just richer" (Love 56-7)?

This flaw is the true cause of that as-yet unresolved bit of bad faith embodied in all its awfulness when one of Dr. Tom's red-neck friends speaks, without a conscious intent to harm, of "the nigger business." For Dr. More, this "business" is the sign of a corruption inherent in the liberal humanist notions upon which the U. S. A. was founded, not just the result of a misapplication of power. It is a black joke indeed:

God saying, here it is, the new Eden, and it's yours because [you Westerners] are the apple of my eye . . . you believed in me and the outlandish Jewish Event . . . . so I gave it all to you, gave you Israel and Greece and science and art and the lordship of the earth, and finally even gave you the new world that I blessed for you. And all you had to do was pass one little test . . . . One little test: here's a helpless man in Africa, all you have to do is not violate him. That's all.

One little test: you flunk! (Love 57).

Thus Eden gives way to history and discord; the last and greatest of all human dreams is betrayed. The racial strife of the 1960s, in Percy's estimation, is simply the latest result of the spiritual failure of the West--of that civilization of which America, the New World, is the most depressing example. America, where God and politics cannot be pried apart, has ruined the sacred truth.
Any critique of the political situation that does not include such a "metaphysical" angle is, for Dr. More (and for Percy), insufficient. "So while *Love in the Ruins* chides our love affair with political pluralism; attacks the politics of the Sixties and its abstractionist slogans of peace, brotherhood and Great Societies; and inveighs against mass society and its malaise; it is America, Christ and Race that bring us tragedy" (Eubanks 125). Like many American writers before him, Percy uses his fiction to create a religious and metaphysical critique of the culture which suggests that revolutionary solutions are not solutions at all, because they do not aim for grace but instead perpetuate a nihilistic dependence on abstract answers and systems (see Schenker 96; Eubanks 128). Such solutions are no more than signs that "gnostic impatience with human limitations" can mutate into "a hubristic denial of one's own limitations and an amoral disregard for ethical systems demanding decency in the human community" (Brooks 270). At issue is nihilism—not justice.

This is the logic behind Dr. More's conversations with Uru, leader of the Bantu fighters attempting to disrupt Paradise Estates on July 4th. After his capture at the golf club by Uru and the more moderate leader, Victor Charles (another wink from Dr. Walker), More argues with Uru over the efficacy of the Bantu plan, and over the larger question of the real merits of such a "revolution." When More suggests that their scheme "won't work," Uru notes that the doctor is not simply referring to the plan for that day, as Victor supposes: "'He means we don't have what it takes, Victor. Oh, he likes you and your auntie. You're good and faithful and he'll he'p you. Right, Doctor? You don't really think we got what it takes, do you?' Uru taps his temple" (*Love* 299). "'I don't know'" is More's only reply.
The conversation that follows is stacked in favour of Percy's protagonist, containing as it does Dr. More's suggestion (challenged only with a threat by Uru) that Haiti and Liberia are two examples of how "[Blacks] haven't done very well so far" (Love 300). There is no attempt made in this passage to suggest reasons why those countries have been (and continue to be) beset by difficulties, as if no argument concerning European racism or American support for Papa Doc could really be of benefit. The clue to why neither Dr. More nor Uru explores these circumstances comes on the next page, when Uru turns in disgust from listening to Victor professing his faith in Jesus Christ and says to Tom: "'Look what you done to him'" (Love 301)—i.e., look at what White civilization has done:

"You did a good job, Doctor. It took you four hundred years but you really did a good job. Let me ask you something."

"All right."

"What would you do about it if you were me? I mean what with the four hundred years and Victor here."

"What's wrong with Victor?"

"You know what I mean. What would you do about the four hundred years?"

"I'd stop worrying about it and get on with it. To tell you the truth, I'm tired of hearing about the four hundred years" (Love 301).

Here More treats the history of racism and slavery in the United States as something that couldn't be helped and that cannot be resolved by political action alone. It is a sign of sin, of how man is born in sin. His belief is that dialogue and non-violence—a Christian turning of the other cheek—offer the
only answer, a belief he shares with Victor Charles. In a conversation three days before More is captured, Victor tells Tom that trust and a willingness to pull together have to be the basis of any real reform, and offers as proof a parable concerning the old shrimp jubilees, when redneck and black alike worked together at hauling in the catch (Love 147-8). Even if the rednecks now wouldn't be caught standing next to Victor, the memory remains a basis for hope. Victor's words reminds Tom of a conversation he once had with an elderly Jewish patient who praised all things German and suggested that German Jews would have gone along with Hitler if he had let them. Both men seem to prove that "Nothing is quite like it's cracked up to be" and "nobody is crazier than people" (Love 143f, 149).

Victor aims at local solutions, based on the opportunities born of hope. This belief makes itself evident again, when Victor refutes Uru's suggestion that the time for talking is over, declaring that "'You can talk to folks! Most folks want to do what's right!'" (303). Uru takes such thinking, such a Christian world-view, to be the whole problem: many Blacks have "'out-Jesused'" the Whites—who "'don't even believe it any more'"—and cannot resist white power as a result. People like Victor, Uru claims, are prisoners of their own faith. As such, they fail to see the general conditions of oppression, and the general need for action against those in power.

From Percy's perspective, Uru's militancy is another example of "tenderness." His "revolution" is just more gnosticism. While in no way trying to suggest that all is well and that Black Americans need not be bitter, Percy is clearly trying to prove that Uru's actions can change nothing of real importance. For all the material benefits it might bring, a revolution does not re-
solve the nihilistic state inhabited by all people who exist apart from God, lost in mere immanence. Unlike (for example) Thomas Pynchon, Percy affirms that political change cannot address the individual's crisis of sovereignty; it only masks this crisis (see Eubanks 125-26). On the other hand, Percy sees Victor's kind of attention and communication as the only justifiable basis for real reform. The *anomie* that pervades much of American life is not solved by equality or economic justice alone; middle-class American success comes with its own kind of spiritual trouble, a disconnection from the transcendent which Percy believes is much worse than poverty or injustice (see Percy to Jones 277-79). In "Notes Toward a Novel on the End of the World" Percy calls the postmodern condition one of being materially well off yet "homeless"--in all ways unaccommodated--in "the secular city" (112). Though Uru's actions might bring real political results, these are not shown to be of much account in what Percy believes to be the larger scheme of things.

When More meets Uru near the end of the novel, and is told by the guerrilla leader that the revolution is going to come with or without the doctor's help, More offers a critique of the Bantus' determination to "Take what we need, destroy what we don't, and live in peace and brotherhood" that depends on seeing beyond politics:

"Well, you're right about one thing. I couldn't help you now even if you'd let me. We're not talking about the same thing. We're talking about different kinds of trouble. First you got to get where you're going or where you think you're going--although I hope you do better than that, because after all nothing comes easier than that, being against one thing and tearing down another thing and talking about peace and brotherhood--I never
saw peace and brotherhood come from such talk and I hope you do better than that because there are better things and harder things to do. But, either way, you got to get where you're going before I can help you."

"Help us do what?"

"There is no use my even telling you because, Ph. D. or not, you wouldn't know what I was talking about. You got to get to where we are or where you think we are and I'm not even sure you can do that" (372-73).

What he's talking about is the present-day malaise; what he sees acted out in deeds such as the Bantu attacks is simply an attempt to sidestep the problem of the malaise by means of depending on an abstraction. The revolutionaries are trying for a heaven here, attempting to forget the Fall. Such discord is the outward sign of inner damage, damage no revolutionary plan can assuage nor evade for long.7

Like the battles between blacks and whites, the battles between the forces of the Left and Right, which fuel the political disturbances that make up much of the novel's plot, are simply another result of the ascent of "scien-

7At the end of the novel, underscoring the argument "that history, except for Church history, doesn't really count for much" in Percy's view (Bradford 844), Percy draws on the literal meaning of the word "revolution" to make his point plain. Dr. More reports how a fortuitous oil find on land the Bantus occupy leads to a complete reversal of roles: the Bantus, now rich, take up golf and Knothead ways, while poor whites live in refurbished slaves' quarters near the levee; in the end, the old model of living remains (Allen 99). Political discord has died down, and the old political affiliations--the compromises and patient workings of local action--are showing signs of life (Victor Charles, for example, is running for Congress as a Dixiecrat); however, the "plague" of angelism-bestialism still exists, with no cure in sight. Tom sees thing as having been turned around but not changed--because the public discourse still parrots the scientific world-view: the majority of Bantus are simply retrying the secular dream.
tism," that pattern of generalizing common to "Fedville" and the Behaviourists who work there, tender-hearted souls all. In Fedville, a misunderstanding of the powers of science leads "engineers of human happiness" to treat all mental health problems as malfunctions of the mind (Kennedy 119).8 Anxiety is understood not as a liminal state but as a flaw in one's chemical make-up that must be repaired. Unhappiness is all in the mind; no suffering is ever worthwhile. From Percy's perspective (which his protagonist shares) there is one small problem with this cheery, optimistic view of scientific progress and the nature of being human: "why?" finds no answer. Scientism invites in nihilism by closing mankind off from an "unreasonable" answer to the question that makes sense of mortality and evil: faith. This is why Percy attempts throughout the novel to dramatize the perils of living without such an answer.

Percy considers science to be a valid route to knowledge of the world, one that is different from--but not superior to--art.9 Unlike those religious thinkers and believers who have seen modern science as a threat to spiritual values, Percy believes "science properly understood [is] not a contradiction of faith"--as long as one remembers that science cannot account for everything, "including everything about the human creature" (Tolson 198-99). "Over and over again [in his writing], while asserting his great admiration for the scientific mind and scientific method, [and] his appreciation of the many benefits that modern empirical science . . . has brought to mankind." Percy insists

8Cf. Stalin's famous definition of writers as "engineers of human souls."
9According to Martin Luschei, even during his spiritual crisis and decision to leave medicine Percy never "abandoned his respect for the scientific method. He began to see instead that art--and specifically the novel--had equal value, at least potentially, as an instrument of truth" (7). Cf. Percy to Hobson 96: "the danger is not science. Science is the most beautiful, the most elegant, the most satisfying discipline . . . . I'm talking about real scientists, though--not technicians, which is what most 'scientists' really are."
that his final emphasis, and that of any thinking person, must be upon "questions which such science cannot answer" (Hardy 9). He suggests that "post-religious" moral systems, such as Kant's categorical imperative, Mill's utilitarianism, or (a more extreme example) Nietzsche's anti-rationalist celebration of will to power, must either lead "back to a dependence on the methods of science (ethics as a decision science)" at the expense of the individual's sense of his own "joyous, suffering, and perverse self" or, "potentially, to barbarism" (Tolson 199). From his perspective, no system suffices--only faith.

Even as Percy considers science a valid route to knowledge of the world, he critiques what he sees as the scientism of the Fedville types, depicting it as another example of that common American belief "that everything can be explained 'scientifically'" (Percy to Walter 232). The layman's "idolatry" of "The magical aura of science" leads to "a radical and paradoxical loss of sovereignty by the layman and a radical impoverishment of human relations--paradoxical because it occurs in the face of man's technological mastery of the world and his richness as a consumer of the world's goods" (Percy, Message 113; "Diagnostic" 42). In this culture, truth is left up to the experts, the scientists, psychiatrists, and sociologists; and life is defined in terms of generalities, broken down into general comforts and generalized processes. While many express confidence in these experts and their system-building, Percy does not. His concern is always with what "science" cannot offer: a defence of a common morality, based on the emotional truths of the self. He asks: "In view of

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10In particular, it was difficult for Percy, "who had himself experienced the attractions of Hitlerian fascism [during a visit to Germany in 1934] to see how the degradation of Nietzsche's ideas into a justification of Nazism was avoidable" (Tolson 199). Cf. Conor Cruise O'Brien's discussion of "Gentle Nietzscheans" and their de-nazification of Nietzsche (51-65; see also Ch. 5 of this study)
the triumphant and generally admirable democratic-technological transfor-
mation of society, what [then] is the ground of the novelist's radical disquiet?" (Message 109-10). His answer: "the scientist, in practicing the scientific method, cannot utter a single word about an individual thing or creature insofar as it is an individual, but only insofar as it resembles other individuals." As a result, "there is a huge gap in the scientific view of the world. The sector of the world about which science cannot utter a single word is nothing less than this: what it is like to be an individual living in the United States in the twentieth century" ("Diagnostic" 42, 43). While remaining devoted to science's "elegance and precision" Percy insists that humans remain "aware of some of its shortcomings." His model is Kierkegaard's reading of Hegel: "[Kierkegaard] said, 'Hegel told everything about the world except one thing: what it is to be a man and to live and to die'" (Percy to Ashley Brown 11).

Percy's view is that any "objective-empirical theory of man inevitably ignores the mystery of being . . . [and] must ultimately produce a schism between one's understanding of human nature and one's immediate, inscrutable, creaturely feelings," an erosion of self and individuality (Kennedy 118). Without "God," a great and mysterious arbiter, and without a way of understanding being human that is based on understanding the complexities of being human, only biological function can be said to be a ground for moral action. As a result, the goals of man can be seen in only general terms: continued improvement of the species, at whatever cost to the individual--even at the cost of that individual's death. The end is thought to justify any means. Percy joins Camus, for one, in warning against such an easy embrace of ends at the expense of means, and depicts how it can lead to nihilism, murder in the name of "truth" (cf. Camus Rebel 292).
As Robert Brinkmeyer puts it, "The theories of [these] scientists and humanists are founded on an idea of man as a powerful organism in a pliant environment; they leave no room to account for . . . symptoms of profound weakness and discontent" (82). What they cannot account for they eliminate. Fedville is full of people sidestepping perplexing questions. For example, in "Love" (where sexual responses are filmed and studied) and "Gerry Rehab" (where old people who suffer from "the St. Petersburg blues" are either re-conditioned or assigned to euthanasia centers, to be put out of their "misery" [Love 121-22]) all the staff believe "hang-ups" and "guilt" are impediments to living a normal life (Love 14). Unhappiness and anxiety are held to be meaningless and valueless, the remnants of previous poor conditioning. According to Dr. More (bad Catholic though he is) this is just the kind of thinking that erases the man in man. Without a sense of sin, a sense of being fallen, man leaves the door open for nihilism: everything is permitted. Percy is as uncomfortable with this possibility as Dostoevsky (and, as will be shown, Stone), and uses Tom's adventures to illustrate what just might come of it.

As Percy puts it in his essay, "The Delta Factor":

The scientists and humanists got rid of the Fall and re-entered Eden . . . . but in so doing they somehow deprived themselves of the means of understanding and averting the dread catastrophes which were to overtake Eden and of dealing with those perverse and ungrateful beneficiaries of science and ethics who preferred to eat lotus like the Laodiceans or roam the dark and violent world like Ishmael and Cain (Message 24).
When Max suggests that time in a Skinner box would eliminate any guilt Tom might feel about "fornication," the latter replies: "Then I'd really be up the creek" (Love 118). He is not worried about feeling guilty; he is worried about *not* feeling guilty. As he tries to explain to Max, without guilt "there can be no contrition or purpose of amendment and therefore no forgiveness of sin" (Love 116-117; see Luschei 203). His fear is that scientists, in their hurry to cure mankind of guilt, overlook the chance that there sometimes may be a very good reason for being able to feel emotional pain. Like physical pain, it may be the warning that saves one's life. It may even be the case that, as with a limb numbed by pain-killers, there may be a serious danger and risk of permanent injury in no longer being able to feel that pain. According to Tom's Catholic economy of being, the cost of such an "Eden" is far too high.

What is dangerous about a guilt-free culture, according to Percy, is that there are no longer any real restraints on human behaviour, particularly when it comes to how one person interprets another. In *Love in the Ruins* the state has come to be the arbiter of quality of life, and doctors, supposedly the defenders of life, also practice euthanasia, hoping to end "needless suffering." Percy dramatizes the dangers of too much "tenderness" of this sort with the debate in "The Pit" between Tom More and Dr. Buddy Brown of "Gerry Rehab" over the fate of one Mr. Ives, whose anti-social behaviour and resistance to conditioning makes him a candidate for assignment to the "Happy Isles of Georgia, the federal Good Time Garden" where people like him are zapped into "hypothalamic joy" for days on end, until they're "off and dreaming so blissful that they pass up meals--" (Love 121-22). Brown's argument in favour of sending Mr. Ives to his eventual death follows the usual behaviourist party line. As Martin Luschei puts it, Brown uses phrases "drawn from the Judeo-
Christian tradition," yet his point is grounded on "behaviourist assumptions" that rob those phrases of any meaning (211). He believes "It's the quality of life that counts" (Love 190); however, by "quality" he means the comfort of the organism qua organism. According to his ideology, a life spent without the comforts of "normalcy" (as determined by a careful empirical analysis of what best serves mankind in general) is a life of no value--and one that should be ended. The test of value in Brown's scheme rejects any sense that life in and of itself is its own justification, and reduces the question "what is it to be alive?" to a series of quantifiable properties.

It is Percy's contention that, in treating humans as things in this way, devaluing human life in the name of "quality of life," and other such abstractions, people such as Buddy Brown reenact the "tender" logic of those Weimar physicians who first advocated euthanasia--and in so doing set the stage for the Nazi death camps, where doctors managed mass murder and the reduction of prisoners to commodities (labour-power, soap, gold; standing-reserve). While Percy is not reticent about making such comparisons (as his remarks to The Paris Review reported in Chapter One attest), in Love in the Ruins the similarities are only implied; the contradictions in Brown's "scientific humanism" are left to speak for themselves. The failure of behaviourist logic is apparent once Mr. Ives gets out of his wheelchair and starts talking. One becomes aware that the abstract judgements of experts sure of what would make him most happy were what led him to be in a wheelchair in the first place.

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11 NB: not Nazi physicians.

12 Although Love in the Ruins depends on the comic mode for its effects, and leaves such analogies up to the reader, the approach of its sequel, The Thanatos Syndrome, suggests that Percy's understanding of the progress of American culture between 1970 and 1985 was such that he had to make the analogy explicit; see Thanatos 252-54.
place—and then almost justified his death when he did not respond in the approved manner.

More uses his lapsometer—complete with the potentially dangerous ionizer attachment provided by Art Immelmann—\(^{13}\) to determine that Mr. Ives’ paralysis and silence are not a result of a stroke but of rage at being stuck in with a bunch of Ohioans bent on shuffleboard and "Guys and Gals à go-go" just as he was about to uncover the secrets of the Ocala frieze, a "Proto-Creek artifact" bearing glyphs in an as-yet undecipherable language. With the ionizer, More reduces Ives' rage enough that he can get up from his wheelchair and speak of his discoveries. As a number of critics are quick to suggest, the great irony of More's victory in this debate is that while he does prove his point about the limitations of the "Qualitarian" reading of human behaviour and its inability to deal with the emotions in anything but a mechanical way, he does so by using a device—the MOQUOL—that is itself designed and utilized with just such a limited approach to "being human" in mind. Tom is a comic figure because he is so devoted to using science and technology to weld body and mind back together again that he fails to notice how he "unwittingly adopts an objective-empirical procedure to heal the Cartesian split" (Kennedy 120). Despite so skillfully diagnosing the modern malaise of chronic angelism-bestialism, "More is seduced by modern science, in the rather scruffy guise of Art Immelmann, into believing that if we just had the right machine and could tinn-

\(^{13}\) A name that would appeal to a WWI buff like Dr. More. As the novel proceeds, Art's "supernatural" characteristics become increasingly apparent, until it is easy to concur with Thomas LeClair that the character is a modern-day descendent of the rather shabby devil Ivan Karamazov meets in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* ("Devil" 157-8). A modern-day Lucifer, at least in the minds of Allied airmen, the real Immelmann flew like an angel and bedeviled his foes.
ker with the right brain-cells, all could be made well" (Poteat 71). Therefore, while he expresses confidence throughout the book that great good can come of his device, he fails to see the dimensions of "gnostic pride" and despair that have led him to create the MOQUOL in the first place. He never really comes to see that the device may in fact be the catalyst of the nihilism he fears.

The world Tom More faces is a type of what George Steiner calls the modern "post-culture," a world in which few believe the secular humanist dream will come true—but still fewer are allowed the comforts of faith that other times knew, a faith which holds off ironic pessimism and self-destructiveness (Bluebeard 79-81). Caught in "one of those times that hasn't been named yet" (Percy to Jones 280), postmodern humans such as More are desperate to regain solid ground. What Percy fears (and dramatizes in the novel, using the MOQUOL) is that an unwitting desperation will lead them to choose a last go-round with the already-fallen modern world, a last longing (and destructive) pilgrimage towards the promised land of scientism—a pilgrimage that will, in an age of mass murder, most likely end history once and for all.

Percy here adopts a view that may be said to touch on themes raised by Martin Heidegger. According to Heidegger, "Enframing," the detrimental de-mystification of the revealing of "Being" which reduces both man and the world to "standing-reserve," puts "real" questioning, "the piety of thought," in danger. Enframing threatens mankind with the possibility that "it could be

14Percy confirms her view in a 1973 interview: "The big mistake was in him, that he could believe he could treat a spiritual disease with a scientific device, however sophisticated" (cited in Poteat 73).
denied to him to enter into a more original revealing [openness to Being] and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth" (Heidegger Question 28). "What is dangerous is not technology," but the mind-set in which all is understood as standing-reserve, because this forces Being, mysterious, ineffable, into a final and defining world-picture. Too much is lost: "As soon as . . . man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of the standing-reserve, then he comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall; that is, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve" (Heidegger, Question 27). Man is then a thing; the uncanny, ineffable quality of being human disappears.

As George Steiner reminds us, Heidegger defines this drive to mastery over Being as nihilism (Steiner, Heidegger 54). Percy, in his "ontotheological" novels, presents the same drive to quantify mystery in the same terms, also understanding it to be a nihilistic practice. While Heidegger refuses to equate Being with God, one must agree with Steiner that there is still a "marked theological edge" to Heidegger's language in many of his essays (Heidegger 62-3)—an edge that allows one to see affinities between Heidegger's discussion and Percy's own in spite of Heidegger's rejection of the "ontotheological bias" in Western thought.15 Percy's depiction of modernity jibes with Heidegger's when it suggests that the drive to mastery and demystification of the human predicament at the root of "scientism" threaten to render all life meaningless in itself. The tropes are formed out of the same sense of dread: "Tenderness

15See also the discussion of affinities between DeLillo's and Heidegger's "post-theological" interpretations of art and human experience in Chapter Six, below.
leads to the gas chamber"; the nihilistic attempt to forget the Fall reduces mankind to standing-reserve.16

Tom, ill with the disease he diagnoses in everyone else, is as prone to Prometheus-like urges as any Behaviourist. He is the self-styled "maculate Christ" (Love 153), transfigured by despair into a "scientist-lover" of all mankind; he is the first, in his estimation, to see the real implications of present-day events, and the only person capable of saving the U. S. A. and everything else (Love 58). He dreams of winning the Nobel Prize, compares himself to Archimedes, and believes his breakthrough with the lapsometer will go down in history with Newton's Laws and Einstein's Field Theory (Love 90). Like so many reformers before him, he is so sure of his genius that he is unprepared for failure--and prone, in the moment of failure, to reach out for any means of keeping his ideas from failing.

When his peers fail to see the ingenuity of his device, Tom lapses into despair. As a result, he is easily tempted by the devilish Art into signing over his device, and using it not simply to diagnose but to (attempt a) cure. Shabby as Ivan Karamazov's devil, and happy to promote a similar form of "happiness that is despair" (LeClair, "Devil" 161), Art appeals to Tom's "promethean"--that is, both idealistic and narcissistic--desire to save mankind, promising that the

16 This comparison should not be misconstrued as an attempt to cloak Heidegger's almost complete and entirely reprehensible silence concerning the Holocaust and his attraction to Nazism behind Percy's obvious and consistent compassion for the Nazis' victims (evident, for example, in the "Father Smith's Confession" section of The Thanatos Syndrome). The aim is to take advantage of Heidegger's metaphors in order to better explain Percy's views, and to suggest how those theological themes that Percy made explicit in his works are audible (even as they are unheard by Heidegger himself) in Heidegger's supposedly "atheological" philosophy and "post-theological" writings (cf. Steiner, Heidegger 155-7).
modified MOQUOL will help humanity get past "such unhappy things as pure versus impure love, sin versus virtue, and so forth" (Love 214). The powerful "love" Art offers Tom "has its counterpart in scientific knowledge." Says Art: "it is neutral morally, abstractive and godlike." It is akin to what Camus calls Prometheus' "love" for mankind in general: the kind of gnostic "love" which leads to the "end" forever justifying the "means," no matter how atrocious those means are--the urge to save men from themselves that has allowed some to re-describe murder as kindness (see Camus, Rebel 286-90).

As a result of going over to Art's view, at least for a time, Dr. More hastens that mass collapse into "scientism" he had hoped to avert. In the Pit, his vanity leads him to use the ionizer attachment on Dr. Brown (to throw off his concentration by reducing his inhibitions) and Mr. Ives. He saves Mr. Ives' life--a worthy result, all said--but at the cost of bringing "a scientific means of grace to a secular age" (Godshalk 151). he mistakes the aims of Christ with the aims of Prometheus. The lapsometer "explains" behaviour as a function of brain-chemistry, and is capable of being used to adjust brain-patterns, conditioning away dread, guilt, and confusion. It is scientism in a box, Enframing's aid; it is proof of how Tom "is in great danger of sinning against Being" by rendering "human nature as a problem to be solved rather than as a mystery in which he himself is involved" (Howland 69, 68).

Tom's "error" also exacerbates the social problems that it was supposed to solve. Art, now free to initiate his "pilot project," starts handing out MOQUOL prototypes to everyone he can find; suddenly, Tom's diagnostic aid has become a threat, because the crowds of unwitting lapsometer users turn ion beams on each other that not only initiate chemical reactions in nearby salt deposits,
but also launch people into fits of unrestrained abstractive behaviour. In one instance, Dr. More catches Art "testing" the device on Professor Coffin's students by beaming ions at their pre-frontal abstractive centers. "Do you realize what this would do to a man, especially a student?" More asks. Art says he knows, but would like to hear Tom say it. So More does: "It would render him totally abstracted from himself, totally alienated from the concrete world, and in such a state of angelism that he will fall prey to the first abstract notion proposed to him and will kill anybody who gets in his way, torture, execute, wipe out entire populations, all with the best possible motives and the best possible intentions, in fact in the name of peace and freedom, etcetera" (Love 328). "Yeah, Doc!" cries Art, delighted. "Your MOQUOL surpasses my most sanguine expectations." This devil is happy to help sunder the bond between self and world, happy to promote the kind of abstractionist certainty to which all students, and other such "totalitarians" at heart, are prone (see Love 233). Percy is making a joke and offering a warning at the same time, and while the humour is apparent in Tom's description of students and Art's glee over the "success" of the device, the incident still illustrates the dangers of promethean vanity. The lapsometer cannot cure; any ease of mind created by "massaging" certain sections of the brain wears off after a few minutes. Unfortunately, in those few minutes the propensities for "angelic" and "bestial" behaviour latent in the Leftists and Knotheads come to the surface, thereby furthering the disunity of both the state and the self.

Working alongside Dr. More's ridiculous promethean vanity is his growing sense of despair. When readers first encounter him, it is five years after the death of his daughter, Samantha. His life since has oscillated between angelism and bestialism. Throughout the book he veers from elation to despair
and back again, unable to accommodate his anxiety—just like the typical post-modern man Percy describes, the man who has attained the secular city and now just has to figure out how to keep from blowing his brains out (Message 112). For example, at one point More recalls how, at the moment he both perfected his invention and finished his epochal article on it for Brain, he still felt so sad that he half-wittingly downed numerous gin fizzes, which, being made with egg albumen (to which he is allergic), threw him into anaphylactic shock (halted just in time by a shot of epinephrine), and then went home, watched Perry Como on TV—and tried to kill himself. His despair is grotesque:

... I became ill, suffering simultaneous depressions and exaltations, assaulted at night by longings, succubi, and the hideous shellfire of Verdun, and in the morning by terror of unknown origin. One morning—was it Christmas morning, after listening to Perry Como?—my wrists were cut and bleeding. Seeing the blood, I came to myself, saw myself as itself and the world for what it is, and began to love life. Hm, better stop the bleeding in that case (Love 97).

More gives no explanation for this action other than the story he tells, in which the reader is slowly introduced to his past, and to instances in it in which he has lolled in vanity, or in despair (the vanity of doubting God). One such instance is the crisis of faith that occurs when Samantha dies. "That's a loving God you have there," his (now also deceased) wife, Doris, says to him near the end of Samantha's life, "when the neuroblastoma had pushed one eye out and around the nosebridge so that Samantha looked like a two-eyed Picasso profile" (72). He has no reply. Like Ivan Karamazov, he is left with the impossible question: "Listen: if all have to suffer so as to buy eternal harmony
by their suffering, what have the children to do with it--tell me, please?" (Dostoevsky 286). How can one believe in a God who allows the innocent to suffer? Tom has no clear answer. His urge is to find a solution to suffering; he puts his hopes in his lapsometer--a treatment for being human.

Flannery O'Connor refused such "tenderness" because it drives one from God. As Sue Mitchell Crowley reports, O'Connor wrote that those like Ivan who "cannot believe, as long as one child is in torment," make the mistake of depending on a tenderness "which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory." The only "logical outcome is terror" (in Crowley 225). As believers from the author of Job on down have suggested, demanding an answer of God only opens the door to nihilism--because "why?" as Nietzsche suggests, will never find an answer: only faith answers. Although a believer like O'Connor (and Percy), and as a believer called upon to resist the urge to slip into such "tenderness," Tom More is not able to stick it out. Instead, he moves closer and closer to true despair, closer and closer to the nihilism of falling away from faith in God. He wants to believe: as he declares at the beginning of the novel, he still believes "in God and the whole business"; but he loves "women best, music and science next, whiskey next, God fourth, and [his] fellowmen hardly at all" (Love 6). Somewhere between faith and despair, he battles with himself. At times he is lost in the abstract reverie of Nobel Prize dreams and visions of a world saved by the magic of MOQUOL; at other times he recalls Samantha, recalls going to Mass with her, and the sense of connection he got from the practices of faith, which saved him "from the spirit world, from orbiting the earth like Lucifer and the angels" so that he could inhabit his own flesh, mortal and mysterious (Love 254).
Throughout the novel Dr. More is in danger of falling to the same level of despair and disappointment evident in a tender nihilist such as Dostoevsky's Ivan—the despair and disappointment which is also displayed by a character in an earlier Percy novel, Dr. Sutter Vaught in *The Last Gentleman* (1966). In that novel, perplexed by a similar set of circumstances—watching his young brother die, estranged from his wife, feeling that "something is wrong here"—and "Frustrated by his inability to believe," Sutter becomes "a religious man without faith" (LeClair, "Vision" 132). With Tom More he shares a tendency to move unceasingly from abstraction to lust. The difference between them is that Tom is able, at the end of his story, to make Kierkegaard's "leap of faith" and choose life over death, thereby moving away from the impulse to cast the whole world in terms of his own despair as Sutter does (and as Nietzsche suggests all nihilists do, caught up in their own resentment of the world as they find it). While Tom draws comfort from catastrophes and is prone to vine-covered daydreams of surviving the apocalypse, hoping to start over that way (Godshalk 152), he doesn't entirely give in to this mood. The book may be read as a record of the (extended) moment in which Tom makes his choice between the tender nihilism of faith in "science," that reduction of man to a concatenation of chemical processes, and the difficult "life" of faith, absurd and paradoxical, in which suffering is seen as part of being human and both the sufferer and his suffering are thought to have meaning and value.

In the last moment of July 4th, while the sodium-laden sand-traps catch fire, the Knotheads start punching the Leftists, and a yellow, lens-shaped cloud of Heavy Sodium rises over the bayou, Tom More faces his despair, sure now that all he has long dreaded has come to pass. The union is rent and will not be repaired this Independence Day (Lawson 149). He has nothing to go
back to—no wish to return to his old life, which offered nothing but "a useless longing on weekdays, World War I at night, and drunk[enness] every weekend" (Love 366). He has no future in a world so divided and seemingly without meaning. It is at this moment that he has a vision—part memory, part revelation—of his daughter. Just before she died she asked him if he had lost his faith and made him promise that he would not commit this sin against grace. "'If God gives you the grace to believe in him and love him and you refuse, the sin will not be forgiven you,' she said" (Love 374). It is in recalling these words that More begins to realize how close he has come to nihilism: he has fed on the despair her death brought him, "feasting on death" as if enacting a grotesque parody of "eating Christ" (Love 374; Godshalk 143). This is the moment when he chooses to stop feasting, and makes the leap.

Art Immelmann, lapsometer in hand, approaches, singing of "Beautiful Beautiful Copenhagen," home of good positivist Scandinavians who give out Nobel Prizes (and who seem to have forgotten their once-favourite son, Kierkegaard). At this moment Tom More has no defence against the seductive omnipresence of Art except prayer—so he uses it, praying to Sir Thomas More, his saintly predecessor and wise historian of Utopia, to "drive this son of a bitch hence." And it works. A prayer, not force, sends Art hence. In that moment faith is shown to be a viable alternative to nihilism. Percy has Tom turn away from fame and from the lapsometer and toward the risk of believing in God's grace. In this turning Tom begins to come to a new kind of knowledge about the world, something no science can explain, something that can only be known if it is believed.
The "happy ending" Percy offers readers in the epilogue upholds the merits of faith by offering some sense of what is to be gained by foregoing nihilism—that is, by attending to Dr. Percy's diagnosis of the modern condition, and beginning one's cure. Five years have passed; it is Christmas, and Tom, now poor—but married, with a family, and happy—has learned the merits of "waiting and listening": "Here's one difference between this age and the last. Now while you work, you also watch and listen and wait. In the last age we planned projects and cast ahead of ourselves" (Love 381-82). The world remains broken, and More remains convinced his lapsometer "can save the world," if he can get it right; but he is willing now to wait. He is also able to participate in confession again, at least to the extent that he can admit to some shame over his past indiscretions. What he has discovered is that it is in an authentic relationship with one's creator—not utopian schemes and a longing for mastery—that one finds satisfaction with this life. In William Rodney Allen's words, Tom discovers "that man's ability is never commensurate with his ambition, and that the progress of his life must be to see the comedy of his pride and accept without bitterness the limited world that is every man's due" (100). The emphasis in this epilogue is on the quotidian and the prosaic, which provide the tone of an anti-nihilistic way of life. Whereas Tom More began the book by saying he could save America (Love 56-8), he ends it by living in a way—simply, in harmony with nature, with his neighbours, and with God, watching and waiting—that suggests how America might come to itself again, in spirit if not literally. The ersatz suburban paradise of "Paradise Estates" is replaced with the potential for paradise that comes of faith.

On Christmas Eve, after midnight Mass, More's son joins other children in shooting off fireworks. "'Hurrah for Jesus Christ!'" they cry. "'Hurrah for
the United States!" (Love 400). The fireworks bond Christmas to the Fourth of July; the children's shouts are a reply to the political and metaphysical discord described throughout the book, a sign of potential renewal and reunion. The gentleness of the novel's end suggests that there may be an alternative to nihilism—something "more" to being human than can be known to science and the culture, something which makes itself its own arbiter; something the novel can help one intuit. This possibility was what led Percy to fiction in the first place, and it is what makes Love in the Ruins a fascinating diagnosis of the potential for nihilism in modern America. Regardless of the nature of one's own faith (or one's faith in possessing no faith), Percy's mock-apocalyptic diagnosis and treatment of the nihilistic mood can tell one much about both the role of nihilism in American fiction of the 1970s and those aspects of being alive which will continue to evade any final explanation.
In *Wonderland* (1971), the main characters—in particular, the protagonist, Jesse Vogel—live through both the many social changes that occurred in American life between 1940 and 1970 and the rise of a nihilistic mood that came with these changes. However, one should not approach the book as if it is a social history disguised as a novel: while public events do have a part in its plot, Joyce Carol Oates makes certain that these events at all times mirror and disclose properties of the characters' own quests after individual liberty—properties which allow for both the possibility of self-discovery and the danger of declining into what she calls "nihilism," the desire to will oneself free of all responsibility toward others (see Oates, *Edge* 7). Throughout, Oates depicts nihilism as a state of mind in which an obsession with autonomy and control leads one to seek mastery over oneself and the world, despite the fact that such isolated control is a delusion which finally leads one back to the very chaos one dreads. Her depiction of the inner life of Jesse Vogel suggests that the ego-centered view of the self she believes now dominates Western thought might in fact be a misrepresentation of what the "self" is, a destructive model of thinking which promotes an unbalanced understanding of life, a nihilistic over-emphasis on reason and control. A product of "the Renaissance ideal," the Western, "I-centered" conception of human consciousness, Jesse's fate reveals how obeisance to the ego can promote nihilism—a force of alienation which can only be "overcome by the breaking down of the dikes between human beings, the flowing forth of passion" (see Oates "New" 40; *Edge* 5-7).
Jesse Harte Pedersen Vogel, orphan, physician, father, lives out a peculiarly American conflict between a longing for certainty and a longing for liberty.\(^1\) In Oates' paradigm of American life, as Robert J. Fossum points out, the individual feels antithetical cravings for "an order associated with 'home'" and "a yearning for the 'road'" and freedom (50). \textit{Wonderland} explores how these cravings (call them proteanism and paternalism) collide inside Jesse, and how that collision propels him towards the form of nihilism Oates believes she writes against. The son of murder and chaos, Jesse is thrown out into a modern American "wonderland" of change, a world which refuses to stay under his control (Creighton 85).\(^2\) Diving through his own looking-glass--the bedroom window of his first father's house--wounded and orphaned, Jesse falls from the shelter of home and security he'd known (\textit{Wonderland [W]} 36),\(^3\) and spends the rest of the novel trying to regain the original shelter and freedom from time and change he'd experienced as a child and lost too soon. At war with memory and its insistence on returning past anguish to the surface, he becomes a neurosurgeon, a master of memory's home; however, he cannot es-

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\(^1\)Rose Marie Burwell suggests that Jesse's journey, important in itself, also serves as an illustration of the sort of socio-political anxieties experienced by the larger culture during the 1960s (2). However, one may agree with Joanne Creighton's suggestion that the novel goes off its rhythm whenever Jesse's situation is handled by Oates as if it epitomizes "America in the Sixties." Such parallels can seem "somewhat forced," because Jesse, a brain surgeon and self-made man, is much more an American ideal than an "Everyman" (85-6).

\(^2\)Just how apt Oates' choice of a title for her novel is becomes apparent when one considers Oates' interpretation of the \textit{Alice} books: she calls them "misanthropic." They ask the "valid and terrifying" question: "Is life really a game? "Is everybody cheating on me?" "In Carroll," says Oates, "life is a chess game; you eat one another in order to get to another square" (Friedman 95).

\(^3\)All references to \textit{Wonderland} are from the 1992 edition, which contains the revisions that Oates made to the second American and first British editions of the book as a result of her own dissatisfaction with its original conclusion (see Higdon 447f).
cape the chaotic emotions and destructiveness from which he has come, and the cycle of violent mastery that founded his suffering is renewed.

Betrayed by successive fathers' claims on his sovereignty (yet, in the end, his fathers' son, a man ready to make his own claims upon his own children) Jesse tries on different personae, hoping to find one in which he can find himself. However, unlike other characters in American literature who experience a similar rebirth through paternal violence—Huck Finn, for example—he cannot find comfort living as an unaccommodated man, an "uncannily faithful representation of [Lifton's] 'Protean Man'"; he hungers for a return to the world he knew before his "Fall" into the vicissitudes of existence (see Bender 51). Instead of seeking accommodation with his past and his present life, he looks for relief in the nihilism of isolated sovereignty: his simultaneous quests for escape and security culminate in his final persona: the reticent, passionless, dominant father. Both a protean name-changer and self-maker, able to hide his past from his wife, children and friends, and a man hungry for control and stasis, Jesse pursues a complex course that illustrates the cost and necessity of seeking some balance between change and certainty, and the ways in which the quest after such stability can lead a discomforted protean figure such as himself towards a nihilistic separation from others.

Again and again, Jesse is drawn into the orbit of surrogate fathers: his adoptive father, Dr. Pedersen; his father-in-law, Dr. Cady; his mentor, Dr. Perrault. They show him three perspectives on control and ways to attain it. Dr. Pedersen, a grotesque fusion of undigested Nietzsche and Sinclair Lewis' Babbitt, strives to claim his rightful place at the center of the universe. Dr. Cady accepts the limiting proofs of his senses—and only these proofs: he sees no
merit in anything he cannot measure or define. Dr. Perrault might take pride in standing beside Bazarov and being called a nihilist. He refuses to see man as anything more than a biochemical peculiarity, "an organism in an environment," to use Walker Percy's phrase—a concatenation of cells that struts and frets its hour under the gaze of a universe of "blind forces or powers" (to borrow Bertrand Russell's phrase again) "that combined by sheer chance . . . to create conditions conducive to the emergence of human life" (in Crosby 27).

Upholding the same root notions of individual autonomy and isolated sovereignty over the phenomenal world which Oates questions in her essay "New Heaven and Earth," these three teach Jesse to separate the mind, the ego, from the world around it, and to consider the isolated mind to be the center of meaning and power. Jesse's original father's murderous rampage "signified a total loss of control"; his surrogate fathers' lessons provide him with techniques of control—all the way from bullying domination to complete rationalism to mastery of the brain itself, "the domination of all its diseases and wayward impulses," including the "irrational" emotions (see Johnson 126-7).

Indomitably fat and certain of himself, master of a household in which his wife and children bend to his will, allowing themselves to be consumed by him even as they join him in consuming food and knowledge, Dr. Pedersen is indeed, as Greg Johnson puts it, the embodiment of "patriarchal greed and tyranny raised to a level of grotesque insanity" (120-21). His inflated form matches his inflated ego, just as his hunger for food matches his hunger for control over others and the world. Jesse, after his traumatic rebirth by violence into chaos and uncertainty, is drawn to the opportunity for stability that this new father seems to offer. In need of a respite from the difficult respon-
sibility of trying to rebuild himself, he finds solace in Pedersen's offer to turn him into "the complete form of the self [Pedersen] imagined for him" (W 126).

What Pedersen offers Jesse, in fact, is the opportunity to become another Dr. Pedersen. At war with "'the riddle of existence,'" Dr. Pedersen demands that Jesse work to become "'the human being . . . he was meant to be,'" by discovering that "'stratum of fate'" which Pedersen believes abides within all men (W 72, 67). It soon becomes clear that Pedersen sees himself as the embodied essence of mankind. Jesse joyously accepts the demand, feeling he has come in again out of the night. "Now he was never alone. Never by himself. he was not Jesse, but Jesse Pedersen" (W 80). Now he begins to grow up "into [Dr. Pedersen's] place, into [his] very being." Every word he reads sounds in his head with Pedersen's voice; and the voice renders each word "sacred" (W 95, 99).

Pedersen divides mankind into two groups, much in the manner of Nietzsche's theory of "master morality" and "slave morality" in The Genealogy of Morals: on one side, there are the masters--among whom Dr. Pedersen counts himself--who strive "'to be God, to move into that place which is God's place, to take from Him all that He will allow [one] to take'": on the other side are the slaves, the majority: members of this "'herd'" (Pedersen's Nietzschean trope) "'bump into one another in stupid crowds . . . like animals'" (W 107). It is his duty, he feels, to accept his fate by resisting the "herd" even as he tends to its diseases. Pedersen makes his autonomous self the final authority--both for himself and for those under his control. His powers as a physician simply enhance his sense that he is a fit master for all afflicted mankind. As Gordon O. Taylor suggests, Pedersen fills the void left by the "Death of God" with his own
brain, limitless and free (496). Knowing he has a god-like power to save and transform lives, to counteract Nature, Pedersen finds it easy to step from acknowledging such a power to positing himself as Fate's vehicle, the precursor of a greater age. He calls himself a "'higher man,'" and talks of "'straining outward into infinity.'" He "is less a philosopher than a theologian envisioning his own apotheosis": and Jesse becomes his "dutiful proselyte . . ." (Friedman 101).

Some Sundays, Dr. Pedersen is asked to present the sermon. Oates' description of one of these sermons reveals how the doctor combines his visions of self, nation and God into a mix that justifies any action. It is a sin, he tells his fellow parishioners, to refuse the opportunity science now offers for man to "'claim new territory, to pursue the infinite, to create maps and boundaries and lines of latitude and longitude with which to explain'" all the "'terrible darknesses and odors'" of reality. How else to confront "'the terrible silence of the universe that does not know our human language?'" (W 111). America leads this charge into the unknown, he claims, because it is "'blessed by God.'" Events of his time (Autumn 1940) suggest to him that "'There is something magical about the United States,'" and that "'This is a time of magic.'" He sees the war in Europe and the recent Depression not as calamities but as a sickness which must be suffered in order for the body of the state to grow stronger. Nietzsche, after all, called nihilism both "necessary" and "a pathological transition stage"--an affliction clearing the way for the strong to flourish (see Will 14-15, 316-19). For Pedersen, the times offer many opportunities for the strong--opportunities arising from the working out of a necessary and hygienic fate (W 107).
The doctor finds sustenance in his patients' afflictions, and feels that this gives him a right to their lives. Because he is capable of seemingly miraculous diagnoses, Dr. Pedersen is willing to risk the death of a patient before admitting he has made a mistake. "Not all his patients survive, you know," Mrs. Pedersen tells Jesse during her abortive "escape" from Pedersen's control. "Once a patient comes to him, he believes the patient is his. The patient's life is his. He owns the patient, he owns the disease, he owns everything" (W 173). One of his maxims is that "Certain people must direct wars and other people must die in them" (W 107). He has taken it upon himself to confirm his destiny as one of the directors.

In equal parts chilling and pathetic, a kitchen-table fascist, Pedersen nevertheless remains a character readers cannot simply mock or disregard. At the very least, his continued presence within Jesse's unconscious understanding of the world—as well as the ways in which Jesse's adulthood mirrors the lessons learned from the doctor—means that one has to examine his views carefully. As Oates says, there have been times when the world did have to be conquered, and Pedersen is certainly ready to do his share: he does save many lives. However, as if to illustrate the current inappropriateness of his will to power, most of his efforts go into grotesque rituals of paternal authority aimed at bending his family to his will, efforts which lead to chaos, not order. This "higher man" has his daughter Hilda, and his (quite inaptly named) son, Frederich, who have both grown fat and odd under their father's rule, create a "Map of the Day" and stick to it. Jesse also learns to follow his own map. At dinner, all three are tested against their maps and reprimanded if they have failed to live up to them. Charting and mapping their behaviour as if they were colonies of his imperial self, Pedersen does not show them a way towards
freedom but imprisons them inside boundaries he governs (Burwell 13). This turns them into "freaks," alienated and enfeebled grotesques who cannot function in the world.

Hilda, for example, although a mathematical genius, refuses to brush her teeth or change her clothes, and eats extraordinary amounts of food. She seems to believe she can wrap a layer of protective fat around the small part of herself that still possesses autonomy. Meanwhile, Frederich, styling himself a composer, pecks out monotonous tunes all day, never leaving the house; he is somehow piggish, priggish, and frail, all at the same time. Both children practice a kind of self-mutilation, the only resistance left against the omnipotence of Father. They panic when faced by the doctor's Cronus-like longing (as Hilda thinks) to "eat [them] all up!" (W 139; see also "Wonderland Revisited" 508). Like his siblings, Jesse too grows fat, eating as if he might never be full. And like his siblings, Jesse begins to lose command of himself; he is too pleased at finding himself again housed safe from the weather of the world to see the damage such enclosure is doing to his psyche. All these distortions suggest that if one is looking for the man of science Dr. Pedersen most closely resembles, one should think of Dr. Frankenstein, not Dr. Salk (see Giles 68).

Part of the destiny Pedersen maps for Jesse involves reading and memorizing elements of the philosophy of medicine. One night he has Jesse discuss the idea of homeostasis, the ability of a living organism to maintain an essential stability by being prepared to compensate for a range of adverse circumstances, as when one's metabolism slows down to compensate for a lack of food. This discussion allows entry to one of the controlling metaphors of the novel—and one of the book's most fecund and elusive ambiguities. If the living being
must be stable in order to avoid being, in Walter Cannon's words, "destroyed, dissolved, or disintegrated by the colossal forces, often adverse, that surround it," it is also true that "it maintains its stability only if it is excitable and capable of modifying itself according to external stimuli and adjusting its response to the stimulations. It is stable because it is modifiable--the slight instability is the necessary condition for the true stability of the organism" (W 105, Oates' italics). In this definition one can recognize much that is applicable to Jesse's psychological state, and to the theme of nihilism in the novel. Longing for a stability that will keep him from being destroyed by the adverse and colossal forces he faces, such as the attack of Father Harte, Jesse is in danger of losing his command of the slight instability that guarantees his health. He allows himself to be locked into a "fate" by Dr. Pedersen, a choice that leads not to a healthy stability but to a dangerous stasis, an inability to adjust to external stimuli. Like Frederich, Hilda, and Mrs. Pedersen, he is letting himself get stuck in another's final terms--which is why, like them, he finds himself becoming a freak. His swing towards an absolute stability invites not a respite from adversity but an assault by new and equally chaotic emotions, which again threaten his safety and selfhood. Dr. Pedersen does not teach Jesse flexibility: he is Cronus, not Proteus. In his effort to master his new son, he blocks out a healthy excitability--that is, Jesse's awareness of his powers of self-creation--leaving Jesse exposed to the malign excitements of feverish and inexplicable sublimations of his desire for stability. Gluttony, an overcompensation that mirrors Jesse's attempts to feast on facts in order to please his father, is the outward sign of Jesse's ill spirit. Demanding too much control, too much order, Dr. Pedersen invites deformity and disorder; as a result, his family goes mad.
Homeostasis is the goal towards which Jesse works; each father provides him with an example of how stability can be mis-defined as stasis because one overemphasizes the implications of attaining stability or instability, thereby losing that balance needed for survival in a world of "colossal forces" and unceasing change. While critics are divided over the question of whether homeostasis should be interpreted as Oates' image of ideal spiritual health or of the repressive power of families,\(^4\) it is clear that the term can help readers understand the simultaneous dread of contingency and longing for freedom evident in Jesse and other characters. In the specific context of the Pedersen family, however, there is a good deal of irony attached to Jesse's analysis of homeostasis, as it is this same need for stability in the organism (in this case, in the family unit over which Pedersen keeps control) that provokes the doctor to renounce Jesse when he finally refuses to follow orders.

After seeing Mrs. Pedersen passed out drunk—an irrefutable sign that something is wrong with the health of the family—Jesse finds himself unable to resist reaching out to her and helping her to escape. This healthy, generous response is founded on gratitude both for her love and for the warning she provides him in her diagnosis of the working out of his "fate": "you were not a freak in the beginning . . . ." (W 166). The problem with his decision to help her, thereby upsetting the family's stability, is that it leaves him again unsure, again exposed and at risk. The extent of the strain within him be-

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\(^4\)Ellen G. Friedman, for example, reads homeostasis as a metaphor for an ideal state of compassion and openness antithetical to the "narcissistic individualism" Jesse and other characters act out throughout the book (111), while Eileen Teper Bender cites R. D. Laing's definition of the family's conformist force as a "homeostatic counterpoise" that limits self-discovery as her evidence that Oates hopes to challenge the Western--and masculine--model of "health," the canon Jesse upholds throughout his life (55).
tween a longing for connection with Mrs. Pedersen and a longing for the shelter and security of Mr. Pedersen's rule is evident in the last pages of Book I. Numb with confusion, he helps his mother flee to Buffalo, and then tries to fend off a growing sense of chaos by ingesting huge meals with her and alone. He is trapped in events he cannot control because he has invested so much of himself in a defective attempt at homeostasis—that is, in a surrender to his father's will—that he now does not have a safe way out.

Instead of stability, chaos returns; he again loses his home and finds himself exposed to the world's enormous forces. When he returns to his mother's hotel room after picking up more Chinese food (he has already consumed three whole meals with her—hamburgers, french fries, chow mein . . .), he finds her gone. Dr. Pedersen has found her and reclaimed her. In a panic, Jesse leaves the letter from Pedersen he finds in the room unopened and goes out in search of more food. In a diner he eats six hamburgers, three orders of french fries, cokes, milk-shakes . . . . "What was happening to him?" he wonders. "His insides were buzzing with expectation . . . . He was so hungry; he felt sick with hunger" (W 184-5). His hunger is the outward projection of his hunger for connection with a model of control and order, even though the flaws in this model are now apparent. Panic supports the need to fill and fill his mouth, as if this might close the opening emptiness, stave off the realization that he is again unaccommodated, unmade. Other diners watch in amazement: "He would have liked to explain to them . . . explain to them that something strange had happened to him" (W 185; Oates' ellipsis). Caught between needs, he begins to break down.
For the second time, Jesse is "killed" by his father: "You have no existence," Pedersen's letter reads: "You are nothing. You have betrayed the Pedersen family... and now you are eradicated by the family... You are dead. You do not exist" (W 186). The organism, the family, has been cleansed. Tossing Jesse back out amongst the "impersonal fates" of those beyond the family's protection, Dr. Pedersen deprives his son of a chance at homeostasis, and dooms him again for a time to the feeling of being caught up in chaos, an orphan in spirit as well as fact.

It is Dr. Benjamin Cady, one of his professors at university, who next satisfies Jesse's hunger for certainty and parental authority. What he offers, instead of the safety of being swallowed up by a dominant other, are the forms of truth offered by science, rules that explain the world. What Jesse does with these truths, in the name of a desire for stability, allows readers to again examine the potential for nihilism hidden in the pursuit of comforting absolutes. As Jesse falls into a rhythm of study, feeling his body become "mechanical, predictable, very sane," he begins to equate this "personal homeostasis with Dr. Cady's vision of the body as a perfectly regulated machine, liberated from history and the mortal page of a tragic world" (Pinsker 67). As Cady tells his students, "'There is no machine as perfect as the human body, nothing like it in all creation'" (W 193-4). Contained within the perfect machine, even Jesse's spirit becomes "automated, mechanized," attuned to the physiological model of experience that Cady presents. The facts of science grant Jesse reassurance: life is no longer mysterious, it is "behaviour," quantifiable and controllable (Waller 150). "The living cell behaved, the dead cell did nothing. The living cell was godly, the dead cell a zero" (W 194). In the "sanctity" and "purity" of the lab Jesse finds a sheltering place in which to recover the sense of self and
order shattered by Pedersen's act of emotional murder. Changing his name to Vogel, his mother's maiden name, Jesse remakes himself yet again, and founds this new self upon work and forgetting, upon a willed sanity and normalcy. In his drive to order, however, he grows comfortable with a nullification of feeling, a detachment from passion.

Of Jesse's three surrogate fathers, only Dr. Cady attempts to show his "son" benign ways to examine not just life in the petri dish, but life as humans experience it. Cady is a much less willful and fearsome figure than Pedersen because his insistence upon recognizing the limitations the senses put upon humans' ability to know does oblige him to accept some sense of the elusiveness of final certainty, even as he works to isolate the mechanism of life in the cell. This is why his lectures contain what Jesse calls "'unscientific' words like destiny, beauty, creation . . . " (W 193; Oates' emphasis). This said, it is important to recall that Cady's aim is not to explore ambiguities as ambiguities: it is to establish those facts that can be known, even while being cognizant of the fact that "the world is our construction, peopled by us; it is a mystery. All we know of the world, even our most precise laboratory findings, rests on the perception of the senses, but this very knowledge cannot reveal the relations of the senses to the outside world" (W 197; Oates' emphasis). He is practical, pragmatic; his ideas and actions are the model of normalized control.

Jesse, in his troubled psychological state, pays less attention to Cady's pragmatics of knowledge than to the powers provided by the great store of facts his mentor can provide. Knowledge is gnosis --it will deliver him from his fallen state. While Cady talks of the limitations of sense-knowledge, Jesse hungers for the power and control offered by utilizing all discoveries. In
place of submission, Jesse now adopts the other extreme: he takes science to be his avenue to individual autonomy and a life safe from invasion and risk. This is what he has learned from his experiences with Willard Harte and Dr. Pedersen. Here one finds the beginning of his slide into nihilism, into a destructive misconception of what the self is and how it can inhabit the world. "Isn't the great lesson of science control?" he wants to ask Cady: "The lessons of homeostasis and cybernetics: control? What else mattered?" (W 197). If one compares this with Cannon's definition, one can see that Jesse has here lost sight of the need for a "slight instability" that can guarantee "true stability." Fearful of the risks that arise when one attempts to accommodate contingencies, Jesse seeks mastery of both the inner and outer world—especially the inner world, his "self." He longs for a perfect, inflexible normalcy, something unassailable—something symbolized by life as a doctor, with a pretty wife and everything calm. All talk of subjectivity or a margin of doubt makes him panicky: "If he had control over himself," he thinks, "then nothing else mattered in the universe" (W 197). Seeking to "[force] his future into place," he resists the unreasonable forces of passion that threaten his new order, the "sinister and unkillable" "other Jesses"—his private, therefore "unreal" self. He dreams of effacing his odd past and becoming someone else: "If he could have snipped certain neural pathways in his brain bloodlessly, he would have done it . . . but it was impossible" (W 193). The task he now sets for himself is that of attaining the isolated mastery of the mind alone, the mind that can suppress all that will not answer to reason—including his own feelings and memories.

"Trick" Monk, a fellow student of Jesse's, brilliant but unstable, draws Cady's behaviourism out into nihilism by following the possibilities of control offered by scientific, empirical, truths to their extremes. Offering a flippant
rebuttal of Jesse's almost religious devotion to the power over life that doctors possess, he sardonically calls the study of medicine a waste of time: man is just "a mouth and an anus . . . . not worth our devotion" (W 205). These are the facts—the only form of truth humans have if they see man as just a perfect machine, and not an image of some greater Maker. Jesse asks Monk if he is trying to be "deliberately stupid"; but there's a caniness in this man's desire to shock: Trick's words oblige one to recollect that the end of science is not knowledge of the value of being human but only of the biological facts. If one follows the logic of the mechanical model to its end, Trick is proven correct. Even if he's only joking, this joke allows Oates to present an example of how reason can lead to nihilism when it attempts to explain both why mankind is as it is and what purpose it might have. "Why?" finds no answer here.

As Percy suggests with his critique of "scientism" in Love in the Ruins, Reason alone appears to be an insufficient measure of being human. The example of Jesse's next father-figure, the neurologist Dr. Roderick Perrault, would seem to indicate, with even greater force than Trick's wise foolishness, how the limiting of belief to those things that can be known for certain can open the door to nihilism. Perrault confirms all of Oates' doubts concerning the viability of the Cartesian world-view, and its potential for promoting nihilism, not knowledge. Unlike Pedersen, who believed himself in touch with some greater power, Perrault is satisfied with mastery of the material realm: after all, there is nothing else. What is overcoming? What is overcome? The essential, higher "self" Pedersen strives to become is replaced in Perrault's ontology by the self as a biochemical event, unworthy of respect—an unstable element in a brain that need have no connection with its own body or the outer world (see Creighton 77-8). He takes behaviourism to its lifeless and
"logical" conclusion: "Life is pain," he tells Jesse. "Pain is life. Do you understand?" (W 325).5

Jesse does understand: Perrault is not talking of the spirit of life but of physiological facts—an ontology based solely in flesh that can be mastered. This is the kind of control Jesse has hungered after for years. The neurosurgeon's knife is in control of the brain; the result is that "Faustian control and lobotomy become synonymous terms" (Pinsker 68). Sovereignty is all, and connection—even responsibility towards the other—is just an illusion. Perrault offers what Cady could not: a way to utilize power in defense of the self.6

In Perrault's world the self is no longer uncertain, but "concentrated, fiercely, in the fingertips." As an intern in neurosurgery operating "under Perrault's guidance [Jesse] felt his own fingers drawing out of himself his deepest, numbest, least personal self, and out of the older man, power that was pure control, unimagined until this time" (W 324). He can give his mind over entirely to Perrault's will, become the great man's "'six-foot self,'" as Perrault is proud to put it, because he comes to the conclusion that "if he trusted Perrault's guidance, he would be saved" (W 325, 327). By surrendering to Per-

5 Cf. Nietzsche, in Twilight of the Idols: the Greeks' "triumphant Yes to life beyond all death and change" included saying yes to pain—"In the highest mysteries, pain is pronounced holy: the pangs of the woman giving birth hallow all pain; all becoming and growing—all that guarantees a future—involves pain. That there may be the eternal joy of creating, that the will to life may eternally affirm itself, the agony of the woman giving birth must also be there eternally" (Portable 561-2). Dr. Perrault's fruitless ontology of pain—leading nowhere but itself—is quite different from the Nietzschean call to celebrate all life.

6 For example, when Perrault talks about the need for "a relaxation of the ego, the self, the name on the card," he's not after a fuller connection with the world, such as Oates discusses in "New Heaven and Earth," but the ascent of the scientist to the role of saviour, he who decides (in a future when brain transplants are possible) which minds are worth saving and which are not. It is others' egos, not his own, he criticizes (W 354-5; cf. Creighton 81).
Perrault, for a time, as he did to Pedersen, Jesse becomes what one colleague sneeringly calls "a copy of a copy of a human being" (W 325; Oates' emphasis); but he finds this satisfying, not threatening. He shelters in Perrault's utter certainty and mastery of technique, and makes this certainty the "essence" of himself.

There is no questioning Perrault's brilliance as a brain surgeon. It is a skill that saves lives, and one that the older man is able to teach Jesse so that he too can save lives. What is peculiar about the doctor, and what makes him open to charges of nihilism, as defined by Oates, is his dehumanization of his patients and his repeated and solipsistic assertion that (his) mind is the measure of all things. Patients are cases, challenges, but no more than that. He has no time for individual dignity or for any anxiety concerning "personality." As Rose Marie Burwell puts it, he is "the most extreme personification of what Hannah Arendt has called 'science as a power surrogate'" (15)—efficient, successful, and bound tight to the extreme form of the "Renaissance ideal" which makes discrimination and separation, not connection, the motive of all action in the modern world. Lord of "His universe," which he has "shrunk to the contours of the human skull," Perrault peers out of the "sinister" whiteness of his office, "a cave flooded with light" (Taylor 499; W 345). He is solipsism embodied: alone and safe in his cave of light and grown indifferent to the rest of the world, he is Oates' paradigmatic nihilist. He is utterly bound to the illusion of the isolated self—that is, to a belief in something that in Oates' opinion does not exist—and he lives out his belief oblivious to the world as it is, the world in which meaning is born of a communion with others.
Nowhere is his solipsism more apparent than during a dinner-party conversation about the nature of personality with Jesse, Jesse's wife Helene, and her father, Dr. Cady. When the talk turns to medicine, particularly research on the brain, Dr. Perrault surprises his guests by declaring that he finds dealing with patients' personalities—as opposed to their brains—"distressing. . . . Because the personality is not permanent. It's absolutely unstable. Therefore you find yourself working with—you might say experimenting with—a substance you naively believe to be stable, when in reality it is ephemeral. An animal has as much personality as a man" (W 349). When Perrault goes on to suggest that personality is merely "a conscious system of language" that vanishes when the brain and body deteriorate, leaving only "brute matter. . . the brain and its electric impulses," even Cady demurs, and speaks of an "unconscious layer of personality," an essence. Perrault is not interested; the belief in a personality is "just a tradition that dies hard."

With the cold accuracy his profession allows he declares that "With a tiny pin in my fingers . . . I can destroy any personality in about thirty seconds, sixty seconds at the most" (W 350). He is correct, of course—perfectly correct. What is so disturbing about his statement is just this untroubled correctness. Like a Bazarov so jaded as to have lost every residue of sentiment and idealism, or like those who disclose the "essence of nihilism," as Heidegger describes it, by handling both mankind and the world as "standing-reserve," things understood only in terms of their use, Perrault does not even retain an awareness of how uncanny and mysterious it is that there is something to call "personality" at all—and not merely "nothing." That which he cannot handle, cannot pare or shape, is treated as if it does not exist. Things that defy quantification are of no importance, in his view: he need not concern himself with
them. No wonder Jesse feels "a strange thrill of certainty" hearing Perrault describe his powers. The doctor has gone down to the absolute basis of being—past even a sentimental attachment to his own and others' humanity. Jesse's wife points out just how terrible this "truth" is, how fragile human life is, and Perrault's callousness concerning that fragility— but Jesse, caught up in the pleasures of certainty, cannot help supporting his mentor's view. He has affirmed himself to those facts which are self-evident and final, leaving nothing to chance; this is why he tells her that "The truth can't be terrible." At this moment Perrault looks at him, "pleased. Triumphant" (W 350).

The "Frankenstein" theme evident in the sections involving Dr. Peder sen revives as Perrault turns his thoughts to the suitably grotesque topic of transplanting brains—that is, to how to actually achieve the mind-body split. Despite her own father's rather condescending explanation of how "the body is just a jumble of mechanical parts," parts that can be detached, moved, exchanged, Helene again refuses to accept Perrault's comfort with the futility of the self. Jesse understands things differently: Perrault asks him if a brain transplant would be so terrible, and Jesse says no, thinking: "nothing is terrible any longer" (W 352; Oates' emphasis). Nothing is wrong, nothing is out of man's reach; everything is permitted.

Oates here even allows for a little self-criticism by having Perrault go on to adopt something like her own views on the ego, albeit views that are taken to such an extreme that they come to represent an egoism far in excess of even the egocentric stance she critiques in her essays. The doctor describes any privileging of the personality as egocentric—egocentric because it supposes individuality to be an end in itself, when the brain should be available
for use by the state, no longer "private." However, depending more and more on near-religious rhetoric, as if recognizing that his physician's powers are god-like, and that, as a god, he need not answer to anyone, he goes on to describe brain transplants as resurrections: "The brains will be honored, they will be truly resurrected, the first forms of life on this planet to be really resurrected! Maybe this is what was meant by Christ's promise to us, or by that teasing little statement: The Kingdom of God is within you" (W 354; Oates' italics). Scientists, the new directors of life and death in Perrault's heaven on earth, would see to it that the "sentimental attachment" to the body can be conditioned away, so that the paradise of the immortal mind--literally immortal, maintained in body after body--would be ours. "What is the old self after all?" he asks his guests. "Only the promise of disease. And disease is antisocial, mortal, private, rebellious, eccentric, unpredictable, useless, unimaginative, unprogressive, uncomely!" (W 354).

One is here reminded again of Percy's scientists, who try to circumvent the Fall by reducing life to technique. Perrault, extending the "old modern world's" dream of the sovereign self beyond any restraint of humility, makes a travesty of secular humanists' visions of progress and reason. Like Trick Monk, he is testing his limits and finding out that, in fact, there are none. His model of the new human depends on the posit that anything mortal is immoral. The brain is understood to exist as a prisoner in the body and in the world, and Perrault takes it to be his destiny to free it. The egotism he displays here is impersonal, "but an egotism nonetheless, an eradication of the whole personality in favour of the Faustian all-conquering intellect" (Creighton 81).
Helene is correct in replying that Perrault's dreams have everything to do with power and mastery, and show little concern for what goes into living as a human being. While her words, like the doctor's, have as much to do with unvoiced anxieties and the demands of emotions as they do with reasoned argument, they still suggest that Oates takes Perrault's line to be a pathway to nihilism, not a "more human, more spiritual" life. "It's the same as murder, what you're saying. Yes, it's the same as murder [. . .] you're a killer, and it's because you want to kill that you've thought all this out, you and men like you . . . you know that no one can stop you . . ." (W 355; Oates' ellipses except []). She is speaking from passion, perhaps from exhaustion (she is pregnant) and a hatred of her husband's loyalty to Perrault, but what she says is powerful enough that Jesse draws back for a moment from the pleasures of certainty Perrault offers. Sympathy for his wife's words leads him to realize some sense of his mentor's nihilistic world-view. At that moment he feels "the terrible, open purity of his brain, which belonged to no one at all" (W 356)--no one except, to his regret, himself. At this moment he is again cast out; he realizes, only for a moment, the dehumanization that comes with fantasies of freedom from risk within the perfect control and separation of the isolated brain. In this moment of doubt Perrault becomes another failed father.

Unfortunately, the lesson Jesse takes away with him is not that Perrault's model of impersonal control is a mistake, but that he must look for another way of guaranteeing his own security—because his sympathy for his wife, like his sympathy for Mrs. Pedersen, has again left him exposed. A passion for contact and connection keeps interfering with his desire for security.

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7See "New" 38, discussed above.
This lesson is reenforced later, during his affair with Reva Denk. Uncannily, irresistibly drawn to her, he comes to realize just how strong desire is, and how this hidden, "other" Jesse is an inescapable part of his "self." His response to this discovery is to act out his rage at his lack of control: he slashes at himself with a razor until, "bleeding from a dozen places . . . streaming blood so lightly, experimentally, giddily," he has murdered his desire (W 396). The dream of order is too strong; he is repelled by the "chaos" she brings with her, a chaos typified by the abstract expressionist paintings of her lover, which she shows to Jesse one day--paintings which he thinks of as "a mockery of life, of the natural forms of life," akin to "brain damage" (W 369). Passion, he feels, reveals itself as a trap, an error.

Jesse is bound to his dream of normalcy so tightly that he cannot let go of his status, or his perfect family, no matter the force of desire within him. Home and stasis, the comfort of perfect control, are too enticing. Although he goes on to be a famous doctor, wealthy and respected, he continues to "hoard his emotions," isolating himself from others instead of opening himself to his family and the world. This is particularly apparent in his relationships with women, which repeatedly turn on his fear of their openness to emotion--a fear that leads him to retreat into the "masculine" world of rationalism and certainty. As an adult he maintains control over himself at the cost of repudiating much of the intuitive and sensual side of his personality, while over-emphasizing his powers of reason (see Burwell 4). Oates considers this kind of separation of self into mind and body, I and other, to be nihilistic: it is a denial of the powers of the imagination, and an abuse of freedom, because it signifies a turning away from an authentic passion, in which mind and body rise together, towards a selfish and silent loneliness.
If the dream of control is so dominant in Jesse, it may be because the alternative, possessing no control over oneself and others, can seem frightening in a society as alive with change as that of the United States after World War II. If Robert J. Lifton is correct in calling America a "Protean Nation," forever remaking itself, then it is not difficult to assume that such openness, such exposure to new possibilities, has to come at some cost to some of the nation's citizens, because instability tests homeostasis, and the unstable self can be overwhelmed. Readers have long noted the "protean" nature of characters in Wonderland, and the similarity between such characters and the fast-changing historical period they inhabit. Sanford Pinsker, for example, sees Jesse's "Protean changes from one surname to another" as a suggestion of Americans' "obsession" with rebirth "writ large" (61-2). A "Marivaudian Being," one for whom there is no past or future, only ceaseless change,8 Jesse is in many ways the embodiment of his nation's changes and anxieties during the late 1960s (Giles 63, 66).9

Yet Jesse finds neither satisfaction nor respite in change, even though he continually strives to find both, because he never seems to get beyond the feeling of being an exposed child, one left to depend solely on himself and survive without a home. One poignant scene early in the book shows him running back to the Harte family home, now empty, possessed by the desire to get home again, as if there will be someone there to meet him. It is a scene he will repeat, in spirit, again and again; and his home will always be empty.

8This term is taken from a story by Donald Barthelme. For a full explanation of its origins, see Giles 63f.
9A view supported by Bender (51, already cited above), and Burwell (1).
Again and again he will know that feeling he faced in the empty house, as its empty rooms seemed to "slope toward the rear of the house, toward the woods out back, and he had to brace himself firmly against that tugging, his feet out in front of him in his muddy winter boots" (W 60). As Gordon O. Taylor notes, Jesse spends the book repeatedly returning to this scene of psychological destruction, trying on different selves in hopes of discovering that one which will grant him the chance to renew the security he once knew (492). In order to feel as if he exists, "he must find new parents, a new home, a new self"; therefore, he spends his life re-inventing himself, working out his own "variation on an American hymn" (Fossum 57).

As was noted above, Jesse's surrogate fathers offer him models on which to found his conception of self, models he appropriates as he can. He uses the opportunity of taking on these different personae to begin over, refusing previous memories and pretending to have no past. For example, when he first tries to deal with the events which have left him an orphan, his immediate response--a natural response--is to try to blot out any recollection of what his father did. Living mute and without thought with Grandfather Vogel, Jesse loses himself in work. "And so, he thought, the rest of his life would pass. Sleep, waking, work; sleep, waking, work. . . . He would not have to think about his life because it would pass like this, one day after another, carrying him forward" (W 51). However, when chance leads him to recall his parents, this order collapses, and Jesse is left exposed again. He does not make the healthy turn back to the flexible stability that might come of finding a way to accommodate his experiences, but begins a flight from memory and his old name into a series of new lives and new chances to be free of fear. This is why he becomes a Pedersen not only in name but in spirit, and feels embarrassed
when his Vogel cousin, Fritz, recognizes him in the street (W 104). This is also why he never tells his father-in-law, wife or children of his old lives, not even when he faces his own daughter and her flight from personality (e.g. W 253).

Panicking at the thought of Dr. Pedersen capturing her again, Mrs. Pedersen tells Jesse of how her husband pressures her into surrendering her secrets by repeatedly whispering "What is buried will surface." (W 174). These words also seem to apply to Jesse and his life: no matter what he does, the past he has attempted to bury will eventually surface. He may be a brain surgeon, "vicariously trying to remove the 'poisonous little beads' [of memories, prolific as tumors] from his own head" (Fossum 58), and he might be an expert on the mechanism of memory (e.g. W 404), but he cannot resist the demands of the past. When his own family begins to deteriorate during the 1960s, and his stoic "passionless compassion," as Giles calls it (74), estranges him from his wife and from his daughter, Michelle, he begins to reenact the worst behaviour of both his "strange" first father and other father-surrogates. Jesse seems to want to "consume" his family, to make them a part of his system of control no matter the cost (Johnson 135). Towards his daughters, Michelle in particular, he shows only coldness, and insists on many of the forms of order Dr. Pedersen demanded of his children. "Speak only in complete sentences." he tells them. "Give us your complete thoughts" (W 423; Oates' emphasis). With his wife he can only share silence. He moves them to the center of a suburb with maze-like streets that seem designed to ensure that no stranger can take his family from him; he builds an institute and becomes "Dr. Vogel," as if to live out that fate Dr. Pedersen promised him (W 422-23). "Is it the function of the normal brain to hold the present cheaply and to honor
only the distant past?" he writes, in what appears to be exasperation, in a scholarly paper. If the evidence of his own life is just proof, then the answer is yes: what is buried will surface. As he becomes a father he falls into the manner of his fathers, replacing communication with the demands of his will.

Most damaged of all Jesse's family is Michelle (Shelley, or Shell), his second child, who embodies fate's revenge by cracking open the shell of order Jesse has finally made for himself. Shelley disappears into the drifting mass of youths who dropped out of mainstream life in the late 1960s. Choosing to destabilize the copy of a copy of homeostasis her father offers, she turns to chaos and illness. Her rebellion takes strange turns, as she moves from her father's domination to the domination of her lover, Noel, who controls her by offering her the erasure of her sense of self. Noel is her Dr. Pedersen, in a sense: she can shelter in his rule. She willingly becomes "the Fetish," led painted and naked on a beach; she tries to silence her own voice inside Noel's voice. Shedding her memories, she acts much as her father did when he willingly shed his own past and became Dr. Pedersen's property (see W 403, 419). While he ate and ate to try and blow himself up into a Pedersen, she fasts; both her body and sense of self waste away, offerings to Noel's mastery, until in the end she is not recognizable as a boy or a girl, but only a "shell" of her old self, hollowed out and "dead" (W 499).

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10The somewhat transparent symbolism of Noel's name--as Sanford Pinsker, among others, points out--calls one's attention back to Jesse's primal scene, if you will--the murders just before Christmas, 1939, from which he has been running ever since (Pinsker 69). Now his life has circled back upon itself, and he has returned, so to speak, to that original event. Chaos has surfaced again, and claimed his daughter.
According to Noel, American culture is "dead." Thinking is dead; history is dead. As Shelley tells her father in a letter, "Noel said, 'History is dead and anatomy is dead. Passion is the only destiny'" (W 421-22). Inverting the terms of Perrault's schism of mind and body, so that it is the "brain," and not the flesh, that is the enemy, Noel demands that Shelley dream back over her own memories, wipe them away, and become nothing. She begins to comply because she wants to be "free" (W 427). Ellen G. Friedman correctly calls him "an apostle of nihilism," whose call for an absolute denial of the ego, history, even of existence is so attractive to Shelley because she has chosen to deal with the awful contingency of being by not dealing with it at all (109). The solution he offers to the nihilistic egoism of the fathers is an equally nihilistic anti-egoism, hardly the "passion" Oates praises in her essays. Of course, by reversing the terms he only repeats the mistake; he is an egomaniac by other means. Following his lead in rejecting the fluid and "impinging external world," Shelley chooses self-abnegation (Friedman 96). While Jesse might wish to escape memory, even as he recognizes its tenacity, Noel wants to destroy it. Shelley turns on her father's ways by repeating them, at Noel's request. When memories come, she follows her lover's command to "Dream back over them and murder them" (W 446). She does not try to bury her memories--she'll burn them out; her weapon is a hunger for dryness and an abolition of appetite--anorexia, the anti-feast (see W 483, 496-9).

Noel and Shelley's relationship illustrates how the late-1960s' melding of the personal and the political--of philosophical differences put in the way of conflicts between parents and children--contributed to a mutation of the
quest for freedom into nihilism. Both the runaways' squalid apartment and the terrible triviality of Noel's "philosophy" do much to illuminate the negative aspects of limitless possibility (Giles 65). While Jesse's egoistic self-control receives no endorsement from Oates either here or in her essays, the opposite path—the path towards some easy transcendence which was claimed by members of the Sixties Counterculture—also fails to earn her praise. Making a travesty of those ideals Oates espouses because they are so careless with the idea of self, people like Noel are shown to be, at best, insensitive to the difficulty of simply living in the world. An effective questioning of the limitations of the "I-centered" consciousness, Wonderland is nevertheless also "a compelling conservative critique" of Sixties idealism, in which "the destruction of moral and cultural values set in motion by these lawless children" is challenged (Bender 66).

Searching for his daughter amongst crowds of war protesters and at the edges of the underground (where he finds his old associate, Trick Monk, now hailed as a poet and given over to madness) Jesse acts out much of his own fathers' paranoia and rage. As is noted above, his tendency to mimic the mannerisms of his fathers increases; but it is also at this time that he begins to think thoughts like those Willard Harte might have formed as he decided to kill his own children: "It was so hard to keep a family, Jesse thought suddenly, that maybe it was better to give up. Better to give up, erase them all, destroy them, obliterate them and the memory of them, wipe everything out." He has the power: "A father could wipe out everything he had ever done and be free.

11Turgenev, exactly a century before, also found that nihilism was more likely a product of conflicts between fathers and children than a well-developed political stance.
A clean, pure, empty being, a void . . . (W 466; Oates' ellipsis). At the same time, crowds of young protesters remind him of a metastasizing cancer, "Eating away at its own boundaries, no limits to it" (W 470). The eagerness of the youths to merge in a "communion of noise," makes him feel sick. "This strange mass consciousness revolted him. He hated it, hated all these people, even those watching from the sidewalks. So much garbage in the world! And most of it human!" (W 471).12 His need for power and his sense of powerlessness leave him locked in obsessions of an almost pathological intensity. He cannot stop demanding to know how Shelley could leave him, how she could defy his power, and the longer this question goes unanswered, the greater his panic and rage become (W 455-56). Isolated from the "unreal reality of the times," Jesse is drawing nearer to that "cul-de-sac" his own father met with when rage took the place of love (Taylor 501-2).

After finally tracing Shelley to Toronto, Jesse decides that he has to bring her home. "Better to think of her as dead," his wife tells him; but he will not. No one is going to die, not on his shift (W 485; Oates' emphasis). Walking down Yonge Street,13 he imagines that the dreams of peace of the young have only led to another war. Grubby children on the stoops, many of them American draft resisters, seem to him to have "the appearance of victims of war, photographed to illustrate the anonymity of war" (W 493). They are mute, waiting, DPs. This war imagery is buttressed by the apocalyptic tropes that begin to collect in these last pages. For example, in her last letter, Shelley talks of becoming "the White Angel of Death"; she and Noel, she writes, live

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12 Here one also hears again Dr. Pedersen's execration of the "herd" (above).
13 i.e. a "street of the young," as Oates calls it in "Wonderland Revisited" (510).
with St. John. In the squat where Jesse finds her, this St. John, pock-marked and nervous, rants that Noel wants to steal authorship of the *Revelations* from him (*W* 495). It would seem that all is prepared for a final conflagration.

Despite these presences, no such conflagration occurs. Instead, Jesse resumes control over Shelley by driving Noel away at gunpoint. In the process a questionable victory is won over both Noel's nihilism and the ruins of the past. Declaring that "nobody is going to die tonight," the claim to mastery he has used in surgery (see *W* 313), Jesse comes as an avenger to save his daughter. In the moment that he reclaims her, a feeling of great power passes through him. It is a moment of fulfillment: "how he loved this control, this certainty!" (*W* 502). In that moment one can see that he has come to Toronto not to save Shelley but to save himself--that is, to save that form of himself he has built out of reticence and will--by putting an end to her insurrection. He does save her--for himself.

When Shelley, delirious, calls him the Devil, he only replies "Am I?" He is asking the question for the reader. Although this ending is ambiguous enough that one can still wonder, the events suggest that his daughter may indeed be right. It is R. D. Laing's version of homeostasis, the soul-damaging reign of the family, that seems to be attained here, not Cannon's positive model of health in balance. One can see in this instant of exposure why Oates herself describes Jesse as "the very figure he has been fleeing since boyhood: a son of the devouring Cronus who, unknowingly, becomes Cronus himself" ("Wonderland Revisited" 508).14 Evil or honourable, Jesse, at this climax to his journey

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14 Others have suggested a much more positive reading of this scene. For example, Ellen G. Friedman believes "by denying his daughter freedom, by
through the phantasmagoria of his own personality, has come to his stasis-point. His power is complete; its damaging effects on others is clear. He has won his daughter back and lost her forever.

This is a fit conclusion for the book, because it clearly illustrates Oates' contention that static habits of control lead to self-deception concerning the interdependence of the self and the other. It shows again how Wonderland succeeds in isolating and accommodating something of what it is like to be so unaccommodated and isolated that violence and nihilism seem to be the only means of ensuring one's lonely freedom. Like George Steiner's eminent Russians and Americans, Joyce Carol Oates has made displacement her theme. Her examination of what it might mean if "everything is permitted" reveals that mastery is no guarantor of humanity. At the same time, her narrative of Jesse's flight towards stasis documents how both proteanism and a will to mastery can come to buttress an alienation so extensive that it may best be described as nihilism.

Forcing her back into the limitations of time and history, to the ironically nourishing restrictions of life lived within the bounds of family and place, Jesse finally becomes the redeeming Christ who acts on the imperative that "love demands rescue" (110-11). Despite Jesse's obvious sense of triumph in the last pages, it is her belief that in this moment he achieves true homeostasis, the antithesis of the narcissistic individualism that has long possessed him.

15Cf. W dedication page.
16See Higdon passim on Oates' decision to change the original ending into this moment of ambiguous "victory." In the first edition, after a good deal of awkwardness (including a distracting redrawing of the geography of downtown Toronto) Jesse and Shelley end up in a boat adrift in Lake Ontario. By implying that Jesse is unwittingly "at sea" instead of literally putting him there, Oates improves both her concluding pages and the overall effectiveness of the novel.
Gravity's Rainbow assays what Thomas Pynchon takes to be his time's potential for promoting both the spirit's attenuation and an untrammeled wildness—antithetical possibilities that seemed to arrive simultaneously at the door opened by the Sixties' "moment."¹ In the novel, forms of order which Pynchon understands to be forms of nihilism are poised against forms of less orderly behaviour (anarchism, "the moment and its possibilities") which the author suggests might offer a path away from nihilism, if their adherents can resist the allure of stasis and bureaucracy. In light of the novel's many descriptions of "structures favoring death"—forms of control that are said to be "out of control"—it is apparent that Gravity's Rainbow attempts to document the conflicts between figures and forces representative of what Pynchon and sympathetic critics call the West's "totalitarian" impulses and those representative of a potential new way of living with and in the world (see Poirier, "Importance" 20; LeClair, Excess 37).

In the Sixties "moment," believing that they were facing a devaluation of all previous values, some sought what Robert J. Lifton calls a "protean" way of living with change—a way of life that resisted "fixed, all-encompassing forms of ideology" in the name of more fluid "ideological fragments," beliefs

¹For example, the final image in Norman Mailer's The Armies of the Night (1969), is of America as "a beauty with leprous skin," ready in the last days of the decade to give birth—to either "the most fearsome totalitarianism the world has ever known" or "a babe of a new world brave and tender, artful and wild" (320).
that might remain open to "the extraordinarily rich, confusing, liberating, and threatening array of contemporary historical possibilities" (History 342). Their energy is what Pynchon tries to describe in the novel--including the energy of destruction some protean-minded figures unleashed as they became "romantic totalists," nihilists in all but name. Turning revolt into "the Revolution," such figures lapsed into "a demand for dogma and a monolithic self" strong enough to "wipe out" ambiguity and confirm "a claim to definitive truth and unalterable moral certainty" (Protean 10). Taking liberty to excuse any excess, mythologizing their freedom until it becomes a licence for brutality, characters such as the V-2 rocket battery commander, Captain Weissmann (a.k.a., Blicero), are the primary representatives of such 1960s-style "romantic totalism" in the novel. Using the last days of the Second World War as his structuring myth, Pynchon retells the story of the Sixties as a story of such characters' lapses into nihilism, even as he records--and lauds--the efforts of other "protean" figures of the 1960s--translated into the postwar world--to subvert the dominant powers.

Blicero, like Nietzsche's nihilist, "judges of the world as it is that it ought not to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist" (Nietzsche, Will 318), and chooses, like Turgenev's Bazarov, to cut doubt out of the question of belief. Other characters resist this temptation. For example, the "Counterforce," a collection of failures, victims, stooges, loners and eccentrics who, as the novel progresses, begin to cluster together in the name of self-defence against "Them" ("the System," "the Firm," "the Man"), attempt to create a wildly protean alternative to imposed limitations, not a new order. At the "Gross Suckling Conference" Counterforce delegates decide to combat the evolving "Rocket-state" and its self-perpetuating power by affirming the idea that "the
dearest nation of all is one that will survive no longer than you or I, a common movement at the mercy of death and time: the ad hoc adventure" (Pynchon 706). Their contingent state (in both senses of the term), and protean ambitions—although both of quite limited effect—parallel the protean ambitions of the book, both in its construction and its depictions of character, and embody the novel's critique of what Pynchon describes as totalistic tendencies that threaten all life on Earth.

The book itself reads like an "ad hoc adventure": as Tony Tanner suggests, "The reader does not move comfortably from some ideal "emptiness" of meaning to a satisfactory fullness but instead becomes involved in a process in which any perception can precipitate a new confusion, and an apparent clarification turns into a prelude to further difficulties" (70). Yet it is not without any sense of order; it makes its own order, one that attempts to be in harmony with "the moment." Just as jazz musicians such as Charlie Parker, Charles Mingus and Cecil Taylor made new forms out of a commingling of the jazz tradition, chance, and their own willingness to dare, Pynchon tries to make his novel sound out a shape-shifting power. Thomas Smith believes it typifies Richard Rorty's concept of "edification"—that is, Rorty's belief that the

2Pynchon's appreciation for jazz and what he suggests is its potential as a shelter for subversive and life-affirming powers is apparent in Charlie Parker's appearance in Gravity's Rainbow, which includes a description of how Bird's "singing" will "gainsay the Man's lullabies [and] subvert the goggy wash of the endlessly, gutlessly over-dubbed strings" (Pynchon 63-4). [The irony here, as Pynchon is no doubt aware, is that Parker asked Norman Granz to let him play with a string section, because he believed violins were a sign of propriety and distinction. This ambiguous relationship between revolutionary ability and a desire to conform echoes Pynchon's repeated attention to the value and danger of order and the eventual transformation of all rebellion into the status quo, as exemplified by the Counterforce's "sell out" (Pynchon 738-39; discussed below)]. This theme also informs the description of Mc-Clintic Sphere (Ornette Coleman and Thelonious Monk combined, it seems) in V. (see also Westerath, passim).
strangeness and playfulness of language can lead people towards "becoming new beings" (246). Pynchon works toward novel forms of order, new articulations, that seem at times to be "Indecent . . . without integrity . . . a transgression and displacement of the will to contain and control" (Mackey 10, 19-20); at the same time, his honks and shrieks, if listened to attentively, reveal a new form of control, protean and transgressive though it may be. Its chaos of details aside, Gravity's Rainbow is a carefully created work of art; one can uncover a number of linked images that augment the deeper order of the book by asserting fresh analogies, new connections (Weisenburger 7-10). What makes it "an exemplary experience in modern reading" (Tanner 70) is its commitment to a protean aesthetic which extends the potential of the novel as an art-form.

Reaching after ways to keep his language and plot attuned to "the moment," Pynchon seems to attempt to include too much in his novel: too many plots, too many facts, too many characters.3 There is no main character in the novel, in the way that Julien Sorel is the main character of The Red and the Black, or Elizabeth Bennet the main character of Pride and Prejudice. For example, the figure who at first seems to be the protagonist is Lt. Tyrone Slothrop, who journeys across the open "Zone" of Occupied Germany in hopes of finding the connection between the impact-points of V-2 rockets falling on London and his erections, which seem to presage rocket strikes. While he plays a major part in first two-thirds of the book, he fails in the end to amount to much: digressions start piling up, and Slothrop begins to scatter, losing the energy of personality he seemed to possess—even before he begins to disap-

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3 Tanner counts over 400 (69).
pear entirely (see Pynchon 490, 740). His quest becomes (to quote one disappointed reader) "a jumble of other people's quests," while the book reads as "an act of calculated hostility against my own need to find out what it [is] about" (Leverenz 230).

The traditional chronology and linearity of realistic fiction breaks down in a similar fashion. Unlike, for example, Percy's adherence to chronology (along with clearly-defined flashbacks) in Love in the Ruins, or Oates' use of impressions laid out in chronological order in Wonderland, Pynchon's time-scheme structures itself in a much less orderly manner. Each section appears unannounced, somewhat unanticipated, simply juxtaposed with its predecessor and successors. Readers are left to puzzle out where they are and to whom they are attending (cf. Poirier, "Rocket" 12). Tom LeClair, challenging the views of critics such as Charles Newman (who see all this over-production as "an inflation of discourse"), suggests that such criticism mistakes the strategic application of literary excesses for "aesthetic absolutism." By doing so, it fails to consider how the text's rhetorical and structural excesses help it to illuminate the larger interconnectedness and plenitude of earthly life (Excess 38, 67).

Another generative, protean element of the book's style is its evocative language. Judith Chambers, reading the novel against Heidegger's essays on poetry and thought, detects affinities between Pynchon's prose and the poetics of Whitman, Hopkins, Rilke, and Blake. It is her belief that, by insisting on illuminating "the still existing magic and power of language," Pynchon can turn fragments and profligate tropes into a means of reconnecting readers to an authentic and creative consciousness of experience (259-62). Even an examination of the narrative tense and number verifies Pynchon's protean im-
pulse. As both Molly Hite and Lawrence Wolfley point out, the novel is written, for the most part, in the present tense. This allows Pynchon to present readers with a renewed and open experience of events as they occur, a sense of immediacy that undermines the habits of teleology and allows for an engagement with the moment (Hite 133). History is reopened by the text, and "life"—that which is yet-to-be-determined, expansive—is reasserted (see Wolfley 887). At the same time, the twenty occasions when the narrator uses the second person further connect readers to the text by forcing them to experience events from the perspective of others, which may lead them to perceive a new, possibly overlooked angle on events which can lead to a new understanding of what occurs (Werner 200). Even unsympathetic characters such as Edward Pointsman, Slothrop's nemesis, are handled in this way.4

The protean manner of the book aside, the matter—the dynamic interaction of static and protean forces which makes up the plot—reveals a great deal about Pynchon's view of nihilism. An examination of the scope of what Pynchon in the novel defines as authoritarian forces and of the qualities of the Counterforce posed against these forces will establish Pynchon as more than merely a "manichean" sermonizer offering "nineteenth-century fantasies... of anarchic individualism, momentary utopian communities, and the cult of Nature" as a solution to "the twentieth-century complexities of bureaucracy, colonialism, markets, technology, interest groups, nations..." (Lever-

4See Pynchon 136-38: under a night of bombers "you" (Pointsman) do not awaken; but a "light tapping at the door" makes you sit "bolt upright in bed, your heart pounding in fright." Experiencing Pointsman's feelings as he dreams and wakes to news of a friend's death forces us to acknowledge our similarity to him, our similar sense of dread and longing for security under the threat of death—and the possibility that "there is no real "They" in the final analysis, only us" (Hite 144).
Although the rhetoric of a number of passages in the book seems didactic, therefore less effective than it might be, Pynchon remains an astute investigator of nihilism both as it exists within the West's current course (as defined by, among others, Heidegger) and in the romantic totalism evident in a good deal of Sixties discourse.

Pynchon's well-documented allusions to the works of Henry Adams, Norman O. Brown, and Max Weber (see, for example, Wolfley *passim*, Mendelson 175f) are just one indication of the extent to which he sees this century as one in which forces inimical to life have come to the fore. No genial critic of his culture, Pynchon shows no hesitation in making such a case in the strongest possible terms—or, at least, in having his narrator do so. For example, talking of Kekulé's famous dream of a serpent swallowing its own tail, the event which led the scientist to posit (correctly) that benzene has a ring-shaped molecule, the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* declares that this dream has been perverted by Western culture: "The Serpent that announces, 'The World is a closed thing, cyclical, resonant, eternally-returning,' is to be delivered into a system whose only aim is to violate the Cycle" (Pynchon 412). Unwilling to envision the world as self-sustaining "living critter" (as one character later describes it), not a means to an end but an end in itself, Western man approaches it as something to loot. Demanding that "'productivity' and 'earnings' keep on increasing with time, the System [removes] from the rest of the World [...] vast quantities of energy to keep its own tiny desperate fraction showing a profit," while "not only most of humanity--most of the World, animal, vegetable and mineral, is laid waste in the process." All this is done in the name of "buying time," prolonging an "addiction to energy" that arises from the notion that humans are here "Once, only once . . ." and need not wonder about what
will come after (Pynchon 412-13). The culprit here, according to Pynchon, is the "hopeless [...] one-way flow of European time" and the habits of mind that teleology promotes: both the Christian idea of time leading to an End, an escape from this life and this place, and the "post-Christian" idea of time that replicates this notion by replicating an indifference to "the actual future, our familial and tribal inheritors" and any responsibility humans may have towards them (Pynchon 724; LeClair, Excess 62).

Fear of death, in Pynchon's understanding, has "driven Westerners to dream of and pursue immortality through fundamentally hysterical but increasingly rationalized programs of consumption, codification, control and domination" (McClure 171). The result is the perversion of analysis, which in itself is not evil or nihilistic (as Oates suggests, above, when she reminds readers that "the world did at one time have to be conquered"): exploration turns into codification. "Shit, money, and the Word" have now become "the three American truths" (Pynchon 28). This negative "Trinity" of inanimateness, exploitation, and hegemony symbolizes for Pynchon the inherent nature of a "'Puritanism' abroad in the world that has turned all its force against life" (Márquez 57-8). The "Elect," the Puritans-in-spirit, longing for a hygienic freedom from sin and death, are depicted by Pynchon as being free only to obey the law, be it the law of God or the law of the overarching state (Mackey 18). Their interest is in safety—which is also, in itself, not evil, but a perfectly natural desire to confer meaning on new contexts (see Hans 269). However, their desire for safety, as depicted in the novel, has evolved into "a control that is out of control" (Pynchon 277).

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5Cf. the words and actions of Dr. Pedersen in Wonderland, including his obsession with germs and "'odours.'"
According to the Counterforce and the (more than a little paranoid) narrator, "The Firm" operates the war for its own profit. Drawing on the actual connections between companies such as IG Farben in Germany6 and major American and British firms such as Standard Oil and "icy eye" (Imperial Chemicals International), Pynchon depicts the "real" war as a diversion designed to keep citizens from noticing the actual workings of power, the higher assembly of elites that "They" require. Putting barriers between lives, turning humanity into "a machine of many separate parts, not oneness, but a complexity," "the War" becomes an inimical, absentee lord, creator of a total environment that possesses only "some cruel, accidental resemblance to life" (130-31). As the narrator puts it:

Don't forget the real business of the War is buying and selling. The murdering and the violence are self-policing, and can be entrusted to non-professionals. The mass nature of wartime death is useful in many ways. It serves as spectacle, as diversion from the real movements of the War. It provided raw material to be recorded into History, so that children may be taught History as sequences of violence [. . .] and be more prepared for the adult world. Best of all, mass death's a stimulus to just ordinary folks, little fellows, to try 'n' grab a piece of that Pie while they're still here to gobble it up. The true war is a celebration of markets (105).

6I. e., The parent-company of "IG Auschwitz"--a phrase that captures in full the grotesque nature of the Nazis' routinized inhumanity (see McLaughlin 324f).
Readers are never allowed to be sure whether the cabals and corporations are actually stringing together a complex "plot" or whether these connections are the products of the narrator's (if not the author's) increasingly paranoid imagination. This paranoia also appears in the thoughts of a number of central characters. When, for example, Enzian, the leader of the Schwarzkommando, encounters a bombed refinery, he wonders if it is "not a ruin at all. It is in perfect working order. Only waiting for the right connections to be set up, to be switched on . . . modified, precisely, deliberately by bombing that was never hostile, but part of a plan both sides--"sides?" -had always agreed on . . . " (Pynchon 520). He then is overcome by a long string of paranoid deductions, which lead finally to the conclusion that "this War was never political at all, the politics was all theatre, all just to keep the people distracted . . . " Before him is "proof" of a conspiracy between "human beings and techniques [...] something that needed the energy-burst of war." He thinks he has found another example of what the narrator calls "dusty Dracuility, the West's ancient curse"--the bureaucratized vampirism that sees to it that real blood gets spilt to keep funding flowing (Pynchon 263). At the height of this paranoid reverie, however, Enzian does pull back, and readers are reminded that "Well, this is stimulant talk here, yes Enzian's been stuffing down Nazi surplus Pervitins these days like popcorn [...]" (521-22). Left unresolved, Enzian's vision is either prophesy or paranoia; one must choose which, or abide within the interface of uncertainty between these readings.

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7I. e., Blacks from what was once German West Africa who--pardon Pynchon's paradox--end up as V-2 launch crews in Nazi Germany (talk about working for the Man!).
However, Pynchon does make it clear that, in his view, the deprivations and destruction that have come with "the [ceaseless] War" (see Ashe and Muste, above) will not lead to a better world, but only to a continuation of discomfort for all save the Elect. For example, as Roger Mexico's wartime love-affair with Jessica Swanlake wanes, he comes to realize that she is drawn away from him towards the stability and security offered by her other lover, Jeremy (a.k.a. "Beaver")—and that one appalling element of this circumstance is that "Beaver/Jeremy is the War, he is every assertion the fucking War has ever made—that we are meant for work and government, for austerity: and that these shall take priority over love, dreams, the spirit, the senses, and the other second-class trivia that are found among the idle and mindless hours of the day . . ." (Pynchon 177). Her fears, symbolized by her "Fay Wray" look (Pynchon 275), like Jeremy's attitudes, are offshoots of the "IG world view" that the novel brings to presence: a dehumanizing approach to life in which the fear of death inspires a repudiation of all risk, at the cost of growing more and more indifferent to the violence that needs to be done to the living world in order to achieve such an escape (McLaughlin 335; Hans 275). This fear is the source of the "robot-like" indifference and conformism that Olson and others make a central part of current definitions of nihilism (e.g., Olson 515, col. 2).

This dependence on misery in every circumstance of life is the product of the System's dependence on holding an irrefragable command over change. Several characters embody this drive, enacting both the totalist model of dispassionate, rational control and the "romantic totalist" drive to murder death. Three figures in particular seem to epitomize these forms of nihilism: the Pavlovian behaviourist Ned Pointsman, who attempts to convert Slothrop into the "perfect mechanism" (48); the chemist Laszlo Jamf, creator of Imipolex G,
the substance which may or may not be connected to Slothrop's abilities; and
Captain Weissmann, the commander of a V-2 battery who embodies the ways in
which romantic ideas of being have the potential to deteriorate into fascism.8

Pointsman, with his "Hands that could as well torture people as dogs and
never feel their pain." is quite willing to use Slothrop, Katje Borgesius, Roger
Mexico, and anyone else he can find in order to move himself a step closer to
fulfilling his dreams of a Nobel Prize (Pynchon 58). What drives him on is a
blind infatuation with Pavlov's physiological theories and the cause-and-effect logic on which they turn--an infatuation which Pynchon plays on both
for comic effect and in an effort to make a serious point about the limitations
of rational thought. Pointsman has difficulty seeing beyond binary opposi-
tions toward more inclusive patterns. "Like his master, I. P. Pavlov before
him, [Pointsman] imagines the cortex of the brain as a mosaic of tiny on/off
elements. Some are always in bright excitation, others darkly inhibited. The
contours, bright and dark, keep changing. But each point is allowed only the
two states: waking or sleep. One or zero" (Pynchon 55). He understands all ex-
perience in terms of dichotomies: any indeterminacy of any sort discomforts
him, even the smallest. For example, although he uses dogs in his experi-
ments, he has never had success keeping one as a pet. The one dog he did have
"irritated him out of all tolerance" because it "didn't know how to reverse its
behaviour. It could open doors to the rain and the spring insects, but not close

8 Like Tom More and the Fedville Skinnerites, and like Jesse Vogel's
three doctor-fathers, Pynchon's trio are scientists. This would seem to indicate
that it is science, with its materialist bias (The Tao of Physics aside), that nov-
elists of the 1970s perceive as the most likely source of "nihilistic" visions of
life. Then again, Bazarov was a scientist (and a doctor), too; perhaps Percy,
Oates and Pynchon are simply adhering to the tradition. As we shall see in the
discussions of Stone and DeLillo, there are also nihilists without B.Sc.s. (My
Thanks to Professor T.H. Adamowski for pointing out this similarity).
them . . . knock over garbage, vomit on the floor, but not clean it up—how could anyone live with such a creature?" (Pynchon 52).

He also finds Slothrop's supposed "rocket-dowsing" powers a frustrating and threatening annoyance. The quandary is not simply that Slothrop's map of sexual conquests fits over a similar map of rocket-strikes: the paradoxical quality of Slothrop's ability (if ability it is) is that he seems to show an effect before the arrival of the cause. He's like the V-2, itself a paradoxical instrument: falling faster than sound, its effect (the explosion) seems to come before its cause (the rocket itself, announced by its "screaming" rip through the atmosphere). He may be the V-2, in a sense: he may be the scapegoat Ned needs in order to deal with his own fear of rocket attacks. Slothrop's disruption of the cause-and-effect scheme seems to Pointsman to be reason enough to try and take the lad apart (Pynchon 90). There has to be a cause; there has to be a way of tidying up this anomaly, proving that no accident or coincidence is at work here.

He believes he can determine exactly what links Slothrop's erections to V-2 strikes if he can develop a sufficiently subtle explication of the chains of causal relationships linking rocket to penis. Never is there a thought that the physical connection he seeks might not exist, even when the evidence of Slothrop's map is called into question by the fact that some of the people mentioned on it do not seem to have ever existed (Pynchon 272f). Pointsman's goal is to use Slothrop as proof of the "stone determinacy of everything, of every soul." If he can do this, "There will be precious little room for any hope at all." As the narrator puts it: "You can see how important a discovery like that would be" (Pynchon 86). Pointsman's scientism strives to put an end to the
"fallacies" of will and chance and the dangerous potential for charismatic change, all in the name of "living rationally" (Pynchon 81). Missing the opportunity for a new approach that Slothrop's paradoxical presence offers, Pointsman works harder to affirm "'a pure physiological basis for the life of the psyche. No effect without cause, and a clear train of linkages'" (Pynchon 89). Because he won't fit, Slothrop is "a monster" over whom "we must never lose control" (Pynchon 144; see Earl 232).

Roger Mexico's probability logic, and his view that "cause-and-effect may have been taken as far as it will go," appal Pointsman; he does not want science to "strike off at some other angle." This "play" with "symbols of randomness and fright" such as the distribution of rocket-falls is quite disturbing. "Innocent as a child," Mexico seems to Pointsman to be "perhaps unaware--perhaps--that in his play he wrecks the elegant rooms of history, threatens the idea of cause and effect itself. What if Mexico's whole generation have turned out like this? Will Postwar be nothing but "events," newly created one moment to the next? No links? Is it the end of history?" (Pynchon 56). An adherent of "the Book" (Volume 2 of Pavlov's Lectures on Conditioned Reflexes, which passes from hand to hand in a closed circle of acquaintances9), Pointsman insists on forcing all mystery into Pavlov's attenuated system (Mendelson 182). A True Believer, he uses the Word to rationalize all experience, putting a dogmatic call (pardon the pun) for "objectivity" in the way of free inquiry.10

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9See Weisenburger 37. This book, as if to subvert the very claims of its owners and author, seems to have a curse on it. One by one, the circle of readers dies off, killed by bullets, disease, rocket-falls . . .

10NB., Pointsman, like Percy's Tom More, dreams of winning the Nobel Prize (see, for ex., Pynchon 141). For both characters, the pleasures of winning include enjoying the prize's power to validate their respective dreams of putting away pain by quantifying anxiety. The aims of the MOQUOL and
As if to spite Pointsman's attempts to fit together a final order for his world, the "messiness" of existence keeps upsetting his plans. People refuse to do what Behaviourist theory promises. Having met his nemesis in Slothrop—the bolt dropped in the gears of cause and effect—Pointsman falls ill, and his dreams of Stockholm fade. His totalizing system cannot compete with "Murphy's Law [. . .] that brash Irish proletarian restatement of Gödel's Theorem—when everything has been taken care of, when nothing can go wrong or even surprise us . . . something will." (275; Pynchon's emphasis). Gödel attempts to prove that no set can contain all sets; "Murphy" is sure no system can explain all outcomes. Pointsman's Behaviourist designs fail to account for this contingency (Hite 115). Chance steps in and sees to it that Slothrop evades surveillance; meanwhile, new data begins to contradict old data. Pointsman's plans begin to fragment, victims of his attempt to impose "too much structure" (Cooper 10).

Pointsman's attempts to treat Slothrop as an entirely predictable being allow Pynchon to show up those who put their faith in a mechanical model of human life, much as Percy and Oates manage to do with their scientists and doctors. However, with the constructs of Dr. Laszlo Jamf, faithful servant of the Nazis and the IG, Pynchon takes the argument up to another level. Jamf, who does not appear in the text except in other characters' recollections, has a powerful presence both in the life of Tyrone Slothrop and in the novel's examination of the nihilistic misapplication of synthesis and control.

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Pointsman's Pavlovianist analyses are the same: to quantify what it is to be human, and thereby answer Nietzsche's "Why?".
Jamf is the master of several self-sustaining systems—something of a "protean" figure, if you will. For example, at one point in his career he is a behaviourist, like Pointsman, interested in conditioning the erections of one "Baby Tyrone," (Slothrop, "sold" by his parents to the scientist for the price of a Harvard education—"sold to IG Farben like a side of beef" [Pynchon 286]). A vague memory of "the Worst Thing [ . . . ] a smell from before his conscious memory begins, a soft and chemical smell," which is somehow related to a plastic with erectile properties Jamf invented called "Imipolex G," drives Slothrop off on his unresolvable quest after the "S-Gerät," a part added by Weissmann to V-2 number 00000 (Pynchon 286, 285; 699). Jamf's genius as a chemist also leads him to connect scientific discovery with the power of the will. He comes to see the discovery of plastic as a sign that "chemists were no longer at the mercy of Nature"—a sign that mankind must now assert total control over the natural world (Pynchon 249). Chemists, he believes, must replace the order within "the hearts of certain molecules" with a man-made and impregnable new order which can transcend death and time (Pynchon 167). Joseph Tabbi notes that this "Apollonian Dream" of creating pure, clean, and indestructible new constructs seems to Jamf and other rocket scientists to lead to a way past corporeality, inconsistency, and impurity (164). However, as Pynchon also makes clear, Jamf's constructs are not designed to enhance life but to build (in the words of the ghost of Walter Rathenau) a "death-transfigured" world (166). The pun here is on "plastic": Jamf seeks something immutable, not something malleable. He takes a product of human ingenuity and turns it to the services of death—that is, of nihilism.

The novel depicts many "conscious, deliberate, organized powers" at work in the world, labouring to reduce the animate to the inanimate by blur-
ring the distinctions between these realms while reducing men to mere shells of themselves, Qlippoths out of kabbalistic legend (Cooper 53, Weisenburger 87; see Pynchon 176). Jamf is the master--therefore, the servant--of such powers. Pynchon presents him as "Their"--the Kartell's--pointman, the emblem of "Their" life-denying aims. For example, while working in Germany as a chemistry professor during the Nazis' rise, Jamf imparts a view of the chemical world to his students that includes a call to end the "heresy" of weakness and mutability (see LeClair, Excess 46-7). One feature of his approach, recalled by the narrator and Franz Pökler, an engineer who works with Blicero on the last V-2, is his "hostility, a strangely personal hatred, for the covalent bond" (Pynchon 577). It is the softness of this bond that appals him; having to accept the "sharing" of electrons is a "cosmic humiliation." How can men become "lions" if they must accept such "moderation and compromise"? Jamf's chemistry lectures become political acts, microcosmic versions of the totalitarian vision working itself to power in the streets outside his lab.

With the voice of a "fierce Nietzschean" out to proclaim that "higher" men must turn fabrications against the so-called "slave morality" of pity and interdependence,11 Jamf invites his students to storm Nature. "The lion does not know subtleties and half-solutions. He does not accept sharing as a basis for anything! He takes, he holds! He is not a Bolshevik or a Jew. You will never hear relativity from the lion. He wants the absolute. Life and death. Win and lose. No truces or arrangements, but the joy of the leap, the roar, the blood" (Pynchon 577). Behind Jamf's "National Socialist chemistry" is a yearning for mastery over the entire animate world that insists on victory at

11See O'Brien, passim.
any cost. "You have two choices," Jamf cries out in his last lecture: "'stay behind with carbon and hydrogen, take your lunch-bucket in to the works every morning [...] or move beyond'" (Pynchon 580). Replace carbon with silicon, bond the latter with nitrogen, not hydrogen: "'move beyond life, toward the inorganic. Here is no frailty, no mortality--here is Strength and the Timeless.'"

To make clear the implications of his demand, Jamf takes advantage of a pun (or is it a sign?) hidden in the periodic table: he turns to the blackboard, "wipe[s] away the scrawled C--H," and replac[es] it with "Si--N." God is dead, erased, and replaced by the inorganic, imposed synthesis. The Christian ethos is effaced and an anti-Christian ethos in which "cruelty and lying are [seen as] necessary to healthy life" takes its place (see O'Brien 56). Jamf's gesture confirms the view of Rathenau's ghost concerning the real nature of synthesis and control and their "death-haunted" aspects (Pynchon 167). It is a nihilistic act--a refutation of existence in the name of a vain resentment of the world as it exists. As Dwight Eddins has pointed out in his study of Pynchon's handling of gnostic themes in the novel, Jamf here both literally and figuratively renounces mortal bonds "in favour of a timeless absolute that is mere projection" because he (and those like him) resent the mysteries of earthly existence, the higher orders beyond human control, and would rather see these orders destroyed than live with their mysteriousness (176; see also 168).

Jamf's "National Socialist" chemistry lesson, as Molly Hite calls it, reflects the premise that "eternal relations alone are real," and that all the "varied and unpredictable manifestations of life" are of little concern, because one's attention should always be turned to discovering immutable general laws
(126). Refusing this belief, Pynchon contrasts the "totalizing conceptual structures"--the gnostic fantasies of eternity--that both Jarnf and the Fascists call for with images of appalling suffering, such as his depiction of Dora, a concentration camp situated beside the rocket-works at Nordhausen, which he brings to readers' collective attention through the eyes of Jarnf's pupil, Franz Pökler. Despite having spent the war caught up in the Apollonian "labyrinths" of rocket-design, and despite his self-willed blindness to what the Rocket could do once it flew, Pökler finally sees the price of quests for transcendence. The Rocket begins to resemble the State, and both reveal their potential for evil. As the war ends and the Nazis' branch of the System collapses, he sees Dora at last for what it is, and recognizes his own part in such "leonine" work (Pynchon 432). Attending to Pökler's insights, Pynchon reveals the nihilistic premises behind all attempts to reify conceptual unities. In Pökler's story one can find evidence of the presence of "death-transfigured" longings within the calls for "Strength, Stability and Whiteness (Kraft, Standfestigkeit, Weiße )"--within, that is, the desire to make inert plastic--and not a protean plasticity--a paradigm for all life (Pynchon 250).12

Perhaps no figure in the novel is as strangely disconcerting and intriguing as the V-2 battery commander Captain Weissmann, also known as "Blicero," white death embodied.13 Even in this book of excesses his excesses exceed all bounds. If he is understood as an amplification of the stereotypical Nazi depicted in movies and comic books, this Nazi "sadist, sexual pervert, nihilist, and murderer" (to quote Molly Hite) seems easy to categorize and refuse:

12As the narrator suggests, this affirmation of plasticity's virtues is "often taken for Nazi graffiti" in wartime Germany (Pynchon 250).
13His name is a Germanic nickname for Death, and evokes both the image of a grinning skull and of bleached bones (Weisenburger 31).
however, disturbingly protean elements of his thinking make him a "disconcertingly comprehensible" figure—perhaps even, as Molly Hite also suggests, "almost tragic" (146). His desire to transcend what he calls "this cycle of infection and death," argued in eloquent phrases backed by images and allusions out of the poetry of Rilke, recalls the romantic longing for deliverance which has dominated literature and culture in the West from the time of Shelley onward—including, as Lifton suggests, the culture of the 1960s. Blicero is a fascist, a torturer, yet he sees himself as a foe of vast, aloof forces and unassailable bureaucracies and technologies. He is master of a Rocket battery—and he is a self-made mystic who longs to make the Rocket his causeway to the divine, "a surrogate order that will dominate natural cycles through artifice and stasis" (Eddins 181). His rebellion, in another context, might be described as heroic—but there is no other context: he is a Nazi, not Ahab.

With Blicero, Pynchon puts all his readers' presuppositions about authenticity and rebellion into disorder. "In Pynchon's surprisingly sympathetic portrait, most of which concerns Blicero's dying days in Holland [as the war ends], we are often made to regard this character less with fear and disgust than with a certain nostalgia for a power that, by late 1945, was already passing" (Tabbi 171). Blicero is a romantic totalist whose drive to affirm the transcendent force of the Rocket--"an entire system won, away from the feminine darkness, held against the entropies of loveable but scatterbrained Mother Nature"—requires him to bring death to greater power in the world (Pynchon 324). He is Dedalus reborn; he is another Prometheus. He is convinced that he can overcome the sun on wings he has made himself, even supplant the gods. He exposes implicitly nihilistic properties within the dream
of greatness that drives him and his culture—properties that can only be restrained by a vigilant morality he has repudiated.

Pynchon further complicates his readers' ability to accommodate the contradictions of Blicero's romantic vision of the world by affirming many of the ideas Blicero puts forward. For example, near the end of the book, one Geli Tripping¹⁴ (a good witch) imagines the Earth as it might have been the instant it was born. In her vision, she imagines that there "was an over-peaking of life so clangourous and mad, such a green corona about Earth's body that some spoiler had to be brought in before it blew the Creation apart" (Pynchon 720). The Maker provided a spoiler: mankind.

   So we, the crippled keepers, were sent out to multiply, to have dominion. God's spoilers. Us. Counter-revolutionaries. It is our mission to promote death. The way we kill, the way we die, being unique among the Creatures. It was something we had to work on, historically and personally. To build from scratch up to its present status as reaction, nearly as strong as life, holding down the green uprising. But only nearly as strong (Pynchon 720).

As the historical analogies previously discussed should suggest, it is clear that many of Blicero's phrases would not seem out of place coming from members of the 1960s Counterculture. Blicero shares in the romantic dream of repudiating the common energy for death, the "cycle of destruction" (Slade, "Escaping" 35); however, he does not entertain anything like Geli's holist vision of forces in healthy opposition. While his mounting rage concerning

¹⁴Another Sixties pun (see Ashe 68).
"Modern Analysis," the latest form of the "cycle of death," seems to have a good deal in common with opinions held by the Counterforce (such as Osbie Feel's declaration that "We" must "piss on Their rational arrangements," "Their" perpetuation of war and alienation) it is clear that, in Blicero's case, rage leads to an unbalanced dream of total revolution, not the Counterforce's fluid rebellion (see Pynchon 639). However, the affinities between the two views are plain. This is a crucial paradox of the book: no unquestioning member of the Counterculture, Pynchon has rendered problematic any notion that one can read the novel as an uncritical advocation of "protean man." Hearing New Age pieties come out of the mouth of a Nazi must undercut any quick sense on one's part that Pynchon is a simplistic "green-minded" neo-transcendentalist (cf. Leverenz 243). Pynchon is perceptive enough to see that the "cult of feeling" and "disdain for restraint and reason" common to many in Blicero's generation in Germany--with their affection for Romantic art and culture--contributed to the slide into totalitarianism--and to see something similar to Blicero's spirit amongst many members of 1960s youth movements (see Lifton "Youth" 362). Blicero's fall into romantic totalism, which reveals the potential for nihilism inherent in such rebellion, is offered as a critique of both fascism and any extreme over-extension of the idealism of the Sixties.

Blicero's dream is to find "'the edge of the World,'" the way off (Pynchon 722). In his last soliloquy, Blicero sets out a cosmology based on the Rocket, in

15 "I have heard a number of thoughtful European-born intellectuals tell, with some anxiety, how the tone and atmosphere now emanating from young American rebels is reminiscent of that of the German youth movement of the late Weimar Republic (and the Hitler Youth into which it was so readily converted) . . . While I would emphasize the differences between the two groups much more than any similarities, there is a current in contemporary youth movements that is more Nietzschean than Marxist-Leninist . . . [a longing to replace] history with experience . . ." (Lifton, History 362).
which he presents the West as a ruin, a "Kingdom of Death." There was once
the edge--America--towards which the West could aspire; but he now recasts it
as the highest form of nihilistic and life-refuting evil: "America was a gift
from the invisible powers, a way of returning," he declares to Gottfried ("God's
peace"16), his lover and servant. "But Europe refused it. It wasn't Europe's
Original Sin--the latest name for that is Modern Analysis--but it happens that
Subsequent Sin is harder to atone for."
As Europe colonized the Earth it
"established its order of Analysis and Death," killing what it could not use.
Now, as American armies pour East across the Rhine, "the mission to propa-
gate death" is coming to a climax: "American Death has come to occupy Eu-

erope"--bringing with it only the structure of empire without the pomp, the
aesthetic charm. For Blicero, this advent can only be answered by annihila-
tion, an entry into complete nihilism, a complete repudiation of the world. The
rocket is the key to this repudiation.

Katje, herself once Blicero's slave, earlier recalls how Blicero took a
"trembling--she must say nihilistic--pleasure" in contemplating a defective V-
2 that fell back on its launcher, killing most of the crew, because it was a sign
that "they were all condemned" (Pynchon 96); at the end of the novel, the
rocket-commander comes to hope that his Rocket (now capitalized, now a de-
ity) will help found a new "Deathkingdom" on the moon, a place as pure and
cold and free of gravity as his oldest dreams (see Cooper 91). Jealous of the fe-
cundity of life, its recalcitrant and ceaseless independence from any concern
over his survival or his value, Blicero assumes he must "break out." If he can

16Note the grotesque pun hidden in this name: Blicero is Promethean--
a man aspiring to be God--and Gottfried is his "piece," his sex slave. Together,
they enact a perverse version of the union of God and man.
"leave this cycle of infection and death," be "so taken" in love that he and Gottfried "and death, and life, will be gathered, inseparable, into the radiance of what [they] would become. . . ." he can be "'free'" (Pynchon 724). Only the Rocket, masterpiece of technology, can do this for him. Blicero sacrifices Gottfried in the special V-2, 00000, in order to answer his own need for purity and immortality; by killing his lover, whose "'immortality'" rips at his heart, he thinks he is passing off the "'virus of death'" (Pynchon 723). His quest for purity will not be halted by any thought of what it will mean for others, not even by their injury or death.

It is fitting that Blicero wraps Gottfried in a shroud of Imipolex G, with its smell that recalls "sweet paralyzed childhood," because the boy, Blicero's scapegoat, is Slothrop's twin, in a sense: both are reduced to the means by which abstract ends may be met (see Pynchon 521; LeClair, Excess 64). Tucked inside the ambiguous vehicle of transcendence--the Rocket which took men to the moon in the late 1960s, but which has always been ready to serve as the vehicle of global destruction--Gottfried symbolizes the infantile desires of mankind, desires which have stimulated the growth of destructive systems of order. As Tony Tanner points out, both the Rocket and Nature are "complex systems," but only the Rocket takes from the Earth without giving back the energy it seizes (76). Like the War, another omnivorous and lethal "ecology" which leads not to perpetuation but to disintegration, the Rocket enforces not a true cycle but a closed system: it must fall, taking Gottfried--taking God-given peace--with it towards impact and cataclysm (see Pynchon 131). Blicero's solution to the "cycle of death" simply replicates that cycle. Instead of

17 Owen Brademas' description of "The Names" and their dead system poised against death also serves to describe Blicero (the last lines in partic-
humility and awareness, traits which might come of recognizing the world as "a living critter" and a generative basis for symbolizations of immortality. Blicero chooses resentment (Slade, "Escaping" 35-6): the arc of Rocket-fall supplants the rainbow and its promise. His disappointment, he believes, justifies his nihilism; he will believe in nothing that exists, will even see the world burn—if that might lead him closer to the "true" world of his romantic hopes.

If Blicero's Rocket is the icon of romantic pessimism—that is, of nihilism—in the book, it is also represented as a sign of mankind's potential regeneration. Enzian calls it the "Revealer": it shows "'that no society can protect, never could.'" It shows that no system can ever abolish death (Pynchon 728). There is no transcendence, in his view, and the Rocket is proof: "'They have lied to us. They can't keep us from dying, so They lie to us about death [. . .] Before the Rocket we went on believing, because we wanted to. But the Rocket can penetrate, from the sky, at any given point. Nowhere is safe. We can't believe Them any more. Not if we are still sane, and love the truth.'" All men, according to this vision, belong to the "preterite"; all men are equal in the eyes of the Rocket. Despite Blicero's dreams of a new order, The Rocket "restores uncertainty, undermines order and—in a sense—resacralizes the world" (Slade, "Religion" 166). Enzian has his Schwarzkommando create a religious myth of immanence out of Rocket 00001, the V-2 they build out of scavenged parts, because by doing so they can intertwine sacred and profane powers and refute Blicero's vision of the Rocket as a way to strike forever through the mask. The serial number of their creation shows that it is intended as the

[...]

ular): "These killings mock us. They mock our need to structure and classify, to build a system against the terror in our souls. They make the system equal to the terror. The means to contend with death has become death" (Names 308; see discussion below).
beginning of a new series, a way to reopen the closed system evident in Blicero's 00000. They have reversed the countdown. The 00001 becomes the icon of imagination and hope, the pillar upon which Enzian's people can found mortal hopes—the hopes of those of whom William Gaddis speaks when he talks of growing up and foregoing "Absolutes."

Intriguingly, it seems that Blicero does not die at the War's end, but is incorporated into the fast-forming American military-industrial complex. Like Jamf—who "did not move on" as he insisted all lions should, but ended up taking his lunch-bucket to America—Blicero also joins with the new power-elite (see Pynchon 580). Near the end of the novel the narrator casts Blicero's Tarot. It indicates that he (or his spirit) has gone "among the successful academics, the Presidential advisers, the token intellectuals who sit on boards of directors" (Pynchon 749). His future card is "the World"—this is what he is left with. For him, as for many characters, as Steven Weisenburger says, "there is no transcendence, no escape into the sublime empyrean." His Tarot "points up the end of his romantic desire and its translation into business, into conformity, into the cartelized state of postwar, into the threat of nuclear winter" (309-10).

By veering away from a simplistic or overtly optimistic appraisal of the protean figures and ideals he presents in his text, Pynchon lends complexity to his depiction of what he assesses as the nihilistic potential of all drives to certainty. Showing how the power of romantic anxiety over death fuels his characters' actions, he also shows readers how ineffectual many of these characters' actions finally are. Nevertheless, readers are offered no happy ending in which the supposedly evil "totalizers" are vanquished by the supposedly noble
champions of anarchy; instead, the novel ends with mankind under a missile, and the longing for the safety of controlling systems apparent even amongst the members of the Counterforce.

These rebels are "as double-minded in the massive presence of money" as everyone else, and have grown used to being "Their" doomed "pet freaks" (Pynchon 712-13). Osbie Feel's call to "piss on Their rational arrangements" has the crowd at the Gross Suckling Conference cheering--and literally pissing on a board-room full of the Elect, Pointsman included, does grant Roger Mexico some sense of vindication after finding out that his life has been manipulated to serve Pointsman's ends (Pynchon 636-37); however, this resolution to champion irrationality and to sabotage "Their" many systems whenever possible is not shown to amount to much of anything. Like Blicero, these charismatic rebels fade into bureaucracy. While Pynchon may oppose any "fiction or lie" which undermines love in the name of "work, abstraction, required pain, bitter death," he also recognizes that systems are necessary, that humans need order and reason if they wish to live (Pynchon 41; see Leverenz 235). The only total freedom is death, as Mexico finds himself forced to acknowledge (Pynchon 713). There are forms of order "in the heart of certain molecules" which cannot be transgressed or ignored (Pynchon 167).

Much of the Counterforce's energy is devoted to overturning the paradigms of decorum and sense upon which the Elect are shown to depend. They style themselves anarchists: Feel wears a tattoo of Porky Pig on his belly, which recalls an earlier image of Pirate Prentice, who leaves the Firm for the Counterforce, appearing like "young Porky Pig holding out the anarchist's ticking bomb" (Pynchon 638, 545). They revel in forms of "transgression, des-
ecration and parodic reversal" that "destabilize (however briefly) even the most apparently stable orders" (McClure 168). For example, when Mexico and Seaman "Pig" Bodine (gross foe of absolutely any form of repression) find themselves about to become the main course at a dinner party they have been lured to by "Them," (gross suckling pigs, as it were), they save themselves and break up the celebration by unloading reams of repugnant puns on the guests. The pair's grotesque game with the menu ("A choice of gangrene goulash, or some scrumptious creamy-white leprosy loaf, ' Bodine in a light singsong 'le-pro-sy [down a third to] loaf [. . .]'"") is an irreverent, life-saving act of resistance against control, albeit one of little lasting effect (Pynchon 714-17).

All the same, despite such short-term benefits, it is always apparent that "mindless pleasures" cannot hold out before the concerted energy and violence of controlling systems. As the novel concludes, the Counterforce becomes routinized, and its main figures vanish into the space after the last pages, dissolving into "the race and swarm of this dancing Preterition": their lives in the postwar world go unreported (Pynchon 738-9, 548). They have not changed the System or even redirected it--because with any loss of order comes a decrease of effective power. While they have intruded some "noise" into the System, thereby creating openings in that System which refute its hopes for perfect control and the annihilation of deviance, these moments of overturning seems as problematic a form of revolution as any which Nietzsche

18Anarchists, either serious or silly (or both) make appearances throughout the novel. Among many such figures are the Argentinean submariners looking for a new home in the decentralized Zone, Tyrone's ancestor William (whose On Preterition got him kicked out of Massachusetts), and the various dopers who pop up everywhere, including Säure Bummer, who loves Rossini because in Rossini's music love wins over plots, and the World is revealed "rushing together" (Pynchon 264-5; 555; 440).
proposes (Cooper 94): they often appear to be merely inverse forms of systematization, leading to the same longing for destiny, the same kind of "Us and Them" thinking that (as Richard Rorty suggests) the protean mind is supposed to resist (Contingency 42).

Emblematic of this disintegration is Tyrone Slothrop, who attempts to circumvent a past that seems infected by his parent's dealings with Jamf while looking at a future that seems to hold no promise. As the narrator puts it, Tyrone may still want to give America one more chance, lost as he is to her "incredible promises" of freedom, but he is losing energy (Pynchon 623). Adrift in the Zone, Slothrop begins to fade into the landscape; he lets his hair and beard grow out to Hippie proportions, and loses all connections with his former life: "he likes to spend whole days naked, ants crawling up his legs, butterflies lighting on his shoulders [. . .]." At the same time, he literally becomes harder to see. By the end of the book one finds that "most of the others [who knew him] gave up long ago trying to hold him together, even as a concept [. . .]" (Pynchon 740).

Some critics describe Slothrop's "scattering" as a kind of victory over totalitarianism: Antonio Márquez speaks of finding "solace in Slothrop's attainment of a profound sense of freedom and a trans-historical state of being" (61); Molly Hite suggests that "By fragmenting beyond containment, Slothrop ceases to be what . . . Marcuse called a one-dimensional man, wholly defined by his technological society. He becomes instead the hyperbolic embodiment of many-dimensional man, decentralized beyond control [and] . . . containment" (118). However, Pynchon's description of Slothrop is more complicated than these views suggest. Slothrop's epiphany, when he realizes "that each tree is a
creature, carrying on its individual life, aware of what's happening around it, not just some hunk of wood to be cut down," like the descriptions of the Rocket and the Counterforce discussed above, contains antitheses (Pynchon 552-3). It is not clear whether Slothrop is giving up or overcoming "Their" world. It may be that staying open to the textures and shapes of nature brings one to a deeper sense of "the mystery that suggests some meaning of which we are a part, though we cannot know it in any precise conceptual way" (Barrett 370-72); however, Slothrop's loneliness, the fact that his re-connection with the Earth and freedom cuts him off from all others, suggests that he has merely given himself over to "the All . . . without being able to maintain the integrity of the self," thereby foregoing the generative sense of connection with other humans and other patterns of thought on which the real energy of life depends (Earl 239, Pynchon 623; Slade, "Escaping" 36). Pynchon's description of Slothrop suggests that ignoring the seemingly inherent patterns that govern the ways reality insists on constituting itself is a poor way of finding an accommodation with the world (Poirier "Importance" 28). In fact, Tyrone's slide into "antiparanoia"--into no longer looking for any reason "why" whatsoever, thereby renouncing his paranoid quest after Imipolex G and Jamf's legacy--just renewal the problem of meaning in an inverted form (Pynchon 434).

Reflecting Kurt Mondaugen's Law of Personality—that "Personal density is directly proportional to temporal bandwidth"--Slothrop's scattering shows him to be lost in "presentness," and to be (in his harmless way) as lost to a sense of history as Blicero (Pynchon 509). Both latch on to a concept of experience that leads not to regeneration but to evaporation. Like any stiff idealist hunting after the transcendent and true, Slothrop rejects the contradictions of being human (which include being bound to choosing and discrim-
ination as a matter of course). He fails to achieve the protean liberation which he seems to wish to attain.

One character who does achieve something like the protean ideal of remaining open to possibilities is Roger Mexico, the statistician in rebellion against "stone determinism." As noted above, it is Mexico's assertion that science may have taken cause and effect as far as they can go. He comes to this opinion as a result of his statistics work for Pointsman, which includes dealing with probabilities and the "messiness" of systems of order. This work has also led him to conclude that all are "equal in the eyes of the Rocket"—that there is no way to declare with absolute certainty that one place is safe (Pynchon 57). Pirate Prentice calls Mexico's "Law" nothing but "cheap nihilism": like most people (particularly Pointsman) he is unwilling to accept that the randomness of V-2 hits is such that "Everyone's equal. Same chances of getting hit." For Mexico, however, any thought that there is some fixed cause for getting caught by a V-2 other than being in the wrong place at the wrong time is simply "the damned Calvinist insanity again," born of the mistaken belief that every event must be logical. His faith is in the Poisson equation: a systematic account of the distribution of events that thwarts any attempt to use it to foretell specific future trends. The more variables involved, the less sure one can be of any one thing happening next: in Mexico's realm, room is left for uncertainty, but this uncertainty is not confused with absolute relativism or any other total refutation of order. Unlike Blicero, who took nihilistic pleasure in rocket crashes because they seemed to be a sign that mankind is "condemned" (Pynchon 96; see above), Mexico finds the beginnings of hope in the impartiality of rocket-falls.
This "angel's-eye view" of the pattern of V-2 hits offers little solace for those who live under the angels. As Jessica says, "Why is your equation only for angels, Roger? Why can't we do something, down here? Couldn't there be an equation for us too, something to help us find a safer place?" (Pynchon 54). But there is no such equation, or Pynchon does not show one; there are no Absolutes. "Mexico's Poisson equation works not only for rockets falling on London," James Hans reminds us: "it is the law of life itself, and at any given moment the odds of life and death are randomly spread throughout the world. We have regularly tried to escape this fact, but the rocket puts an end to our illusions because it forces us to realize that the security we desire shall never arrive, short of death, that the rainbow of gravity can never be transcended but must be lived within" (279). The combination here of Jessica's rhetorical question and Roger's limited answer confirms Pynchon's awareness of the difficulty of living without some form of certainty.

Mexico's "other angle" on knowledge of the world was taken up in the physical sciences well before it was adopted by the social sciences (a point made by Percy's satire of behaviourism in Love in the Ruins). Its advantage, as a system, is that it allows for some measure of "irrationality" or absurd chance even while generating experientially sound and useful posits concerning the shape of coming events. The randomness of events, their uniqueness, remains part of a larger, more enigmatic order (Earl 237, 234-5). This is a more mature approach to the complexity of the experienced world than the "paranoid" style of totalizing thought, because it does not attempt to discount the energies of change and possibility insisted upon in Murphy's Law. The "wealth and diversity of secular history" gain a hearing in Mexico's world; as
Molly Hite suggests, his design means that all apocalyptic views, rigidly paranoid, are undermined—for a moment, anyway (157).

As he comes to distrust and reject "Their" plans for him, Mexico begins to act out the implications of the equation in which he believes. Daring to take the opportunity to love Jessica—and then engaging in random strikes against the War when it pulls her away from him—he becomes an able traveller in the "excluded middle" between Pointsman's zero and the static one (Pynchon 177). Mexico learns to survive on the interface, challenging both the linear rationalizations of the zero and the stultifying diminishment of the self in the absolute "One" of Nature (Slade, "Escaping" 36). Chance becomes his talisman.

As Louis Mackey points out, the Counterforce depends on chance as a form of grace: the declaration of the Gross Suckling Conference seems to ask for a "state of grace" (pun intended), in which "everything is gratuitous and free, if also without future and without promise"—something, that is, like the definition of grace offered in the Gospels (17-18). Like Enzian, they do not differentiate between God and the workings of chance—that is something they cannot afford to do. The only "edge," in fact, that the Counterforce has in its battle with the forces of control is what Bodine calls "'that grace,'" the ability to go on even if no "'right reasons'" seem to hold, simply in the name of letting some life into the System. "'The physical grace to keep it working. Courage,

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19 In a similar manner, Enzian's Schwarzkommando, seeking to honour immanent—not transcendent—truths, are described at the end of the book as attempting to get across Germany by riding "the interface, like gliding at the edge of a thunderstorm . . . all the way to the end between armies East and West" (Pynchon 731).
brains, sure, O.K., but without that grace? forget it" (Pynchon 741). With such statements Pynchon has his sympathetic characters affirm the value of protean fluidity, a responsiveness to "the contingencies and occasional joys of being" (Smith 253). Concentrating on small acts of kindness such as Pökler's gift of his wedding ring to a Dora inmate, or Bodine offering Slothrop a good-luck charm—a bit of cloth dipped in John Dillinger's blood—Pynchon affirms that these chances allow characters some relief from the absolutism of their anxieties and some chance at self-creation (Werner 198). Of course, the satisfactions of accident and contingency are so much smaller than those born of the Firm's offer of certainty, definition, a sense of accommodation, and affiliation with something immortal—but they exist (Cooper 108). They allow for some turn away from the "weightlessness" of Blicero's lunar "Deathkingdom" towards a sense of human purpose and life's value. Almost "holy" and wholly gratuitous, they are gifts that some characters, such as Roger Mexico, are glad to receive.

Pynchon uses Mexico and the strategies of the Counterforce to affirm the contingent and protean nature of selfhood. Like those figures whom the philosopher Richard Rorty praises for rebelling "more strongly against the fear of death than other men and women do" even as they lack "a fundamental ground . . . a reassuring certitude . . . beyond the reach of play" (Contingency 24-5), Pynchon's characters affirm their distinct and unique individuality by recognizing both their connection with others and the ways that the contingencies born of life in a community and the world shape their individual lives. Handling "truth" as a contingent entity formed during a creative appraisal of experience—not found intact and autonomous "out there"—characters such as Mexico manage to hold on to their "other angle": "I don't want to get into a
religious argument with you," he tells Pointsman at one point, "but I wonder if you [Behaviourists] aren't a bit too—well, strong on the virtues of analysis. I mean, once you've taken it all apart, fine, I'll be the first to applaud your industry. But other than a lot of bits and pieces lying about, what have you said?" (Pynchon 88). Mexico believes Pointsman espouses "sterile" and divisive assumptions that fail to leave room for the opportunities of chance, a "poeticized" contact with the experienced world (see Slade, "Escaping" 30, Earl 236; cf. Rorty 23f).

No one can say for certain exactly where the V-2s will fall; one can only predict their fall and plot the subsequent pattern of hits. This is not nihilism—this is an adult acknowledgement of the potential freedom of events. No life can be discerned in all its complexity before it has passed, as one is limited to predictions and probabilities—and to admitting that mysteries remain. The so-called "grace" of accidents and chance keeps mankind from the stone determinacy Pointsman longs to proclaim. Unwilling to be reconciled to the idea that truth is not "out there" and death will remain beyond human control, Pointsman suggests that possibility ushers in nihilism—and in his hyperbolic naiveté furthers the gnosticism of scientism and romantic despair. The novel takes Mexico's side in the debate over determinism by drawing the reader's attention to the fact that "There is always something new and unknown to deal with in our lives," something which leaves mankind only one freedom: the opportunity to make "the commitment to confront the unknown, give form to it, and to reevaluate our forms as we continually confront the unknown" (Hans 281). Pynchon's story acknowledges the difficult course such freedom before mystery demands; so many characters fail to get free. What is more likely, the story suggests, is that one will succumb to the nihilism of distrust-
ing the reality of the world--the nihilism common to those who will themselves to believe in nothing and posit the valuelessness of the world rather than acknowledging the mysteries of mortality and imperfection (see Nietzsche Will 12-13).

Perhaps the only "immortality," to use John Muste's phrase, is "the immortality of not knowing when [one is] to die" (17). Such a "faith" is difficult to adopt and harder to accommodate. One leaves oneself bound by the thought that this "indifferent" universe may be all one will ever know (Rorty, Contingency 40). The question asked by Gravity's Rainbow is whether it is possible to continue as a culture with only this brittle and mortal model of immortality, and without some illusion of a divine future and purpose (see LeClair, Excess 61, Cooper 98). Nihilism comes to the door when dreams of immortality are threatened: while recognizing the guest's arrival, Gravity's Rainbow also illustrates how a more protean accommodation of contingency's effects may clear a space for "that grace" which bars the way to despair. "They" may now be immortal, as one of the Counterforce's mentors warns (Pynchon 539-40); "They" may maintain "Their" nihilistic "structures favouring death" in perpetuity; but "that grace" remains, inconsistent as chance and as powerful. It is this affirming flame, dim as it is, to which Pynchon attends in his novel.
Almost all of the characters in Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers* (1974) choose to live according to the demands of their most immediate desires. They spend much of their time contesting or negating limitations on their actions imposed by ethical objections. In the end, few of them fare well or invite readers' support. As Joan Joffe Hall suggests in her review of the book, there is no character for whom one can feel any sympathy: they all "deserve their own misery" (30). None of them is really capable of living in accord with Stone's pessimistic assessment of the world—a world in which one can find few bases for an ethic of right action other than attention to circumstances and the slim intuition that there might be a higher value to human life. Their feckless hedonism fails them; it soon gives way to nihilism. According to Stone, it is hard to find an equitable way to live, and hard to find the confidence in oneself to stick to the course. As he told Bruce Weber: "Man is, I wouldn't say perverse, but man is only man and in a state of great perplexity, and without much sound guidance it's difficult to determine what the right thing to do is. And having determined what it is, it's difficult to do it" (Weber 24). Refusing to believe in utopian plans or in the natural goodness of man—that is, in any vision of human nature that might justify hedonistic desires—Stone creates a world in *Dog Soldiers* that proves that "nothing is free," and that "it is very hard for

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1 Hall also feels that Stone's unflagging depictions of corruption constitute a flaw in the novel, as they abolish any opportunity for empathy and connection with what goes on.
human beings] to behave rationally, let alone well" (Stone to Ruas 281-82). In fact, in Dog Soldiers, no one does well at all.

John Converse is the figure upon whom the largest share of Stone's censure falls. After almost being killed by South Vietnamese jets as they strafed and bombed their Cambodian allies during a battle against the Khmer Rouge, Converse, a freelance journalist lurking at the edges of the Vietnam War, finds himself experiencing "a certain difficulty in responding to moral objections" (Dog Soldiers [DS] 40). Under fire, he felt powerless: "the world of things transformed itself into a single overwhelming act of murder." Terror left him without illusions, "a soft shell-less quivering thing encased in 160 pounds of pink sweating meat" (DS 24). Out of this experience of "his own desperate emptiness"—an amplification of vague dissatisfactions with himself he'd brought to the war—he latches onto the idea of smuggling heroin into the United States, a plan proposed by Charmian, a beautiful acquaintance he wishes to impress. He believes smuggling will be "something"—something "real," something that will restore his sense of personal power (DS 25, 56). This is what he desires more than anything, desiring it with an intensity sufficient enough to overwhelm any moral qualms he might feel, at least for a time, even if it cannot relieve his fear.

The process by which Converse dispels moral objections reveals much about both his own damaged ego and the ways in which Stone sees such damage as a model for the way the Vietnam era saw hopes deteriorate into nihilistic cynicism. Converse is not turned into a world-weary cynic by any single event. This posture is one he seems to have held for a long time, something that has evolved in him slowly. Some unexplained and slow pulse of fear
haunted his swerve away from literature into writing for his father-in-law's scandal-sheet; in his decision to become a smuggler this fear manifests itself in its full form. His "difficulties with reality" are not solved by going to see the Great Death in Vietnam (DS 23-4). Instead, after Krek, after "the Red Field," that "exercise in reality" in which he discovers himself to be empty and powerless, he joins Charmian's circle, the "Constantly Stoned," and adopts their cool lack of affect. Knowing there will be "no book, no play" coming out of his time in Saigon, he accepts her offer of a part in a heroin smuggling operation as if this might be the sort of risk and expression that could take the place of the words he no longer seems able to write.

Moral objections remain a concern, for a time. They seem to him to be a necessary part of what one could call his "aesthetic of action"--his sense that proper behaviour has rules of form one should follow, even if one does not really seem to have the ability to feel that they are important. "Crime" and "Right Action" increasingly seem to him to be no more than names of parts of a game. As Maureen Karagueuzian puts it, Converse is not unlike someone playing at believing in the kind of "nihilistic" disillusionment and claims to personal autonomy Hemingway espoused in The Sun Also Rises. However, he's a shabby Jake Barnes and Charmian is no Lady Brett; this is a very different world, and, as Dog Soldiers' unrelenting attention to failure and menace confirms, one in which "the Hemingway ideal is no longer, perhaps never was, functional." It shows itself to be a weak ethic that "leads to situations like Converse's and like Vietnam" ("Irony" 67-72).2

2When asked by Karagueuzian about his opinion of Hemingway, Stone replied that "Hemingway was a very, very good technician," but, "on the level of ideas, I think he was very trivial. I see Hemingway as really not a very wise or insightful man . . . . I mean, he never came close to writing something like
John is an amateur nihilist: feckless, he falls headlong into an escalating series of terrible mistakes. His first, it seems, is forgetting about the meaning of what he says. "When Converse wrote thoughtful pieces [on the war] for the small European publications which employed him, he was always careful to assume a standpoint from which moral objections could be inferred" (DS 40). He understands his readers and the tasty self-righteousness they crave. Even though his trip to Cambodia has made it difficult for him to respond to moral objections, he can say "that he knew a good deal about them." All around him, in fact, are examples of objectionable events: children blown up in the streets, napalm attacks—even the weird massacre of lizards by a previous resident of his room. He can even acknowledge that there are "moral objections to people spending their lives shooting scag." He knows this. Without such moral objections "the value of human life would decline. It was important that the value of human life not decline" (DS 40). He knows; it's just that he can't really care enough any more to act in accord with this knowledge.

This knowledge provokes no feeling in him except fear. Nothing within him or without him offers any basis upon which to turn this knowledge into action, or any sense that moral action would be worthwhile or even safe. All he has are habits of right action, not morals—habits of mind that can be changed by being reduced to a part in an argument, argued down, and discarded. He knows that "the value of human life [will] decline" for him once he starts dismantling his habits, but he can't help it. After the events near Krek, 

all he has is irony; a word like "value" is only funny. In his opinion, his encounter with the "reality" of the red field is proof that one should only believe in the real powerlessness of moral objections, because in this reality, such objections are weightless, ungrounded, and a trap.

Not surprisingly, Converse starts coming up with ways to reply to the moral objections he is no longer willing to trust. Such objections seem irrelevant if not idiotic. He recalls a film he saw in which a termite hill was destroyed in order to save farmland. "Soldiers with flamethrowers came behind the bulldozers scorching the earth and burning the termites and their eggs to black cinders. Watching the film, one felt something very like a moral objection. But the moral objection was overridden. People were more important than termites" (DS 40-41). From this memory Converse draws the lesson that "moral objections were sometimes overridden by larger and more profound concerns"; one sometimes had to take "the long view." Of course, Converse also knows that if one gets too used to taking the long view one loses touch with any human reference point. This is an error, an easily avoided error. But does it matter? What a quaint idea, he thinks: imagine imagining that it matters. The war will serve him as an excuse for nihilism: "In the red field, when the fragmentation bombs were falling out of what appeared to be a perfectly empty blue sky, he had experienced no moral objections at all" (DS 41). After such an experience of utter powerlessness, such a confirmation of what he takes to be the sheer murderousness of things, he believes moral objections are no more than words.

It is at this point that he recalls the last time such objections seemed to matter to him: one day in Vietnam the army used its helicopters to try to kill
every elephant in the country, believing this would slow down traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This "Great Elephant Zap" was so colossally mad that "even the chopper crews who remembered the day as one of insane exhilaration had been somewhat appalled. There was a feeling that there were limits." To Converse, the facts of the world seem clear enough after such an event: "if the world is going to contain elephants pursued by flying men, people are just naturally going to want to get high" (DS 42). There it is, as the grunts say: the answer is the thing itself. He believes this rationalization releases him from any moral objections; he'll move the dope. Any remaining qualms about his choice now seem to him to be no more than a form of vanity, a misinterpretation of things as they are.

He thinks the weight will offset his feeling of weightlessness--and with this belief he accommodates himself to nihilism. If any discontent remains after his decision, it is the product not of guilt but of fear, the fear of one who recognizes the absolute correctness of the world's tendency to hurl itself "screeching and murderous at his throat" whenever it wishes (DS 185-6). This is the way the world is, he thinks. What he chooses to do in this world, by his estimation, is of no real importance. What he does, as Stephen Knox points out, is confuse his own fear with metaphysical truth. He is not an "alienated hero" or noble outlaw--he's a feckless dilettante who rationalizes his own need to feel powerful by positing that "the world" leaves him no basis for action but that fear. The nihilistic, apocalyptic stance he chooses to take is a convenient way of ducking responsibility for his actions (Knox 64). Worse yet, from his perspective, is the fact that his amateur nihilism does not even bring him the release from anxiety and responsibility that he sought.
Marge, his wife, joins him in the smuggling plan out of a similar disinterest in moral strictures. She writes him a letter, which he receives the day he picks up the dope, in which she suggests that choosing whether or not to smuggle scag depends on one's personal needs, not moral difficulties: "I'm prepared to take chances at this point and I don't respond to the moral objections. . . we'll just be occupying a place that someone else will fill fast enough if they get the chance" (DS 39). She loves "all that [is] fateful" (DS 25), so she likes the idea of giving herself over to fate by joining in an illegal enterprise. An urge to experiment with drugs influences her in the same carefree way. Adolescent folly leads her to take Dilaudid and then call her father to tell him all about it (DS 69-70), just as adolescent carelessness leads her to be unprepared for the arrival of the heroin or what might happen once she gets it. Her excursion into the dope universe allows her to escape both figuratively and literally from responsibility into an "infinite space," a sea of blissful forgetting (DS 72).

In the "eight years since Vietnam Day," when she marched against the war and faced the Oakland Police, much of Marge's idealism has given way to self-interest and hedonism. As Emory Elliot points out, a believer in dreams of national renewal such as Marge must be doubly susceptible to pessimism once those dreams began to fail (201); indeed, for Marge, disappointed romanticism has devolved into resentment, a state that can easily turn into cynicism and moral decay. Marge no longer pays much attention to her own life--choosing, for example, a job in a porno theatre over working at Berkeley because the

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3Solotaroff (64) has confirmed with Stone that this is an error, and should read "six years"--which would set the novel in 1971, a more likely date, considering the events Converse witnesses in Vietnam.
former requires less effort and lets her play at defying mainstream values. This simplification, later exacerbated by her addiction to the heroin she helps smuggle in and the kind of certainty it offers, makes her an apt example of "the extreme shift from reform efforts to narcissism that has been ascribed to the post-Vietnam years" (Elliot 202).

Marge finds that the heroin is a perfect substitute for a system of beliefs that hasn't paid off: "You have it or you don't. You have it—everything's O.K. You don't, everything's shit. It's yes or no. On or off. Stop or go" (DS 171). Her poem to the dope, which she recites after doing up, is Hopkins' "Heaven-Haven," his words of praise for a novice nun taking the veil (see Solotaroff 61-2). It's an aptly grotesque allusion: she has found a new home and a new master. Like her husband, she has found escape from the difficult choices demanded by things as they are, from the hardness of life, in subsuming moral objections beneath personal need. Acting as if her actions do not matter, because she is absolved by "fate" of all responsibility for those actions, she chooses what Stone understands to be the way to nihilism.

There is little in the world in which she lives, or in the world of Krek, that would seem to invalidate such a choice, and Stone does not attempt to suppose that he can condemn the Converses' decisions out of hand. After all, they are citizens of the world they know. The ironic, disturbing images of faith around which Stone sets his story, such as Hopkins' poem, or the missionary with whom Converse chats while on his way to pick up the dope (DS 6), further accentuate the sense of universal violence and chaos in the book. Stone's cutting irony accentuates the dankness of the Converses' confused attentions to the forms of moral behaviour. Form and content combine to indict both the
characters and the culture in which they live—a culture that is easily understood to be the extension of American culture circa 1970 into the regions of nihilism.

The third party in the scam, Converse’s old friend Ray Hicks, is intrigued to find the couple is involved in a dope deal: "I thought you were a moralist. You and your old lady—I thought you were world-savers. How about all these teenyboppers OD-ing on the roof? Doesn't that bother you?" Converse replies that they have "dealt with the moral objections" (DS 54). All things considered, Hicks finds that their change of view matches up with the world as he understands it. A long-time citizen of the dope universe—first as an idealist, a member of group of Zen acolytes called "E'rrHho's," "Those Who Are," then as a realist, a dope-dealer and participant in the Los Angeles scene—Hicks is not put off by their plan, only by the thought that he might have to take the fall if they mess up and the deal goes bad. He goes along with the plan for no other reason than that it looks to be "interesting and kind of scary," a chance to stir up "a little adrenalin to clean the blood" (DS 55); he too is guided solely by personal need—in his case, the allure of doing something illicit, and seeing other "good people" do the same. Converse once described Hicks to a mutual friend as "a psychopath." He calls Hicks’ rereading of the Portable Nietzsche (which they’d both once read together) "piquant." Not surprisingly, Hicks takes some pleasure in seeing Converse squirm under the weight of the weight (of the dope—and the danger) he has brought down upon himself: "It occurred to Hicks that there would be absolutely nothing dishonourable in ripping him off. He would have brought it on himself. Perhaps he would think it was piquant" (DS 53).
The immediacy of his pleasure and the way it guides his actions is the reader's first clue to just how much of Hicks' power to choose is based not on moral strictures but on uncontrolled emotions, usually the product of ill feelings towards some person or situation. Hicks likes to think of himself as a warrior, a master of the jungles of Vietnam and America. Appropriately enough, the cynicism and worldliness of his speech recall the phrases of the detectives in novels by Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, those self-styled authorities on the urban jungle: if asked, they might also have described Los Angeles as a place where, when "you go out for a Sunday spin, you're a short hair from the dawn of creation" (DS 164). In his heart he believes he is a samurai, "a student of Zen" (DS 75). Yet he is also dangerously naive, as feckless in his way as Converse. Stone makes the absurdity of Hicks' self-description apparent from the first instant, when he declares that "Even dealing," Hicks "endeavored to maintain a spiritual life" (DS 75).

Hicks fancies that he has beliefs that help ground him in an absurd world—a world exemplified by the bit of folly he calls "the Battle of Bob Hope," a firefight in which the squad he commanded, sent out into the jungle as punishment for sneaking off to a USO show, was massacred (DS 75-6). Taking the battle to be a "reprisal" by the gods or whatever force controls the universe for his failure to keep rigid discipline, Hicks falls back upon the ways of the warrior, the discipline needed to control "the world of objects" (DS 76). However, as Robert Solotaroff shows, Hicks' idea of Zen is hopelessly confused by a more primal, Nietzschean drive for mastery and revenge (74). Again and again, he fails to attain the detachment and clarity demanded by the samurai code, Bushido. For Ray, impulse is all: he is much farther from Zen than he supposes. Careless impulsiveness leads him to carry the dope, to flee with
Marge when the deal goes wrong, and to try and defeat the corrupt Federal agents who come after him. "Hicks' impulsivity may be amusing or dashing or horrifying--depending on the circumstances--but it is not Zen" (Solotaroff 74).

"In the end," he thinks, as he faces the choice of getting out of the blown deal or heading for disaster, "there were not many things worth wanting--for the serious man, the samurai. But there were some. In the end, if the serious man is still bound to illusion, he selects the worthiest illusion and takes a stand" (DS 168). He has already decided that there is no measure or value in things in themselves--that it is all illusion. Right action consists of consistency, of sticking by your chosen illusion. However, Hicks is not even true to his premise: the "illusion" is not part of an effort to break through to a greater truth but the pretext for an adventure accepted with no thought of its cost to others. When he takes his stand he rationalizes devoting himself to the pleasures of personal need at the expense of moral objections: "If I walk away from this, he thought, I'll be an old man--all ghosts and hangovers and mellow recollections. Fuck it, he thought, follow the blood. This is the one. This is the one to ride till it crashes" (DS 168). Therefore, while Hicks is the antithesis of Converse--in that he puts will, not fear, ahead of every other consideration--the result of his choice is the same: chaos. His fantasy of action, what his roshi, Dieter, later calls his "samurai fantasy--an American one" (DS 272), traps him in a world of irresponsibility and "fate," just as "long views" trap Converse in a world of fear. Although his later actions on the mountain (when he saves Marge and John's lives) are not necessarily the result of personal need alone, some dimension of ignorance concerning the cost of his actions to others remains in everything Hicks does.
Few figures in the novel bother trying to take moral objections seriously or living within the limitations such objections create. There are no "good guys" around any more; everyone looks for an angle. The representatives of the "Establishment," such as Antheil the Federal Agent and Charmian (who turns out to be Antheil's lover), live entirely without affect. They understand the rules of murderousness in ways Converse, a dilettante, an amateur, cannot—and they resist lapsing into the kind of sentimental fellow-feeling to which Hicks is sometimes prone. They are perfect creatures, suited to life in a world ruled by the simple logic of need and power, a world in which heroin, the symbol of "ultimate need," is the measure of all things (Stone to Karagueuzian 250; see Solotaroff 61).

As several critics note (see Karagueuzian, "Irony" 72, Solotaroff 55), the only clear exemplar of moral action in the book does not even figure in the plot, as he only appears in Converse's memory, and then only for an instant.

4 Antheil, after finding Hicks' body in the desert, declares that "If you stuck with something . . . outplayed all adversaries . . . then the bag of beans at the end of the rainbow might be yours after all" (340). Shelton calls this a "parody of the American dream" (80). It is certainly an example of the sort of vitiating rationalization necessary to put the satisfaction of one's desire for wealth ahead of any consequence of that desire. As the perfect operator in a world where power is the only value, Antheil naturally sounds like a character out of Horatio Alger at the end: he's in tune with the world as it is, aware of opportunities. Hicks, who let his warrior's mask slip, is dead.

5 The theme of need interested Stone even before he went to Vietnam and saw the prevalence of drug use and drug dealing going on there—a burgeoning enterprise that in its malign effects also seemed to the author to be an embodiment of the cost of America's involvement in the war: "Before I went to Vietnam, I had the idea of somebody in possession of something that represents ultimate need. The Vietnam War was an event of such widespread consequences that it was very much on my mind, along with the idea of possessing something, of a person putting himself in the position of possessing this thing in a kind of feckless moment and having to bear the consequences. When I went to Vietnam and, as it were, saw the war, things became clear to me as a result of what I saw" (Stone to Karagueuzian 250).
He is Ken Grimes, a Conscientious Objector who went to Canada, but then returned to work as a front-line medic, and died during a fire-fight in the Ia Drang Valley. Converse, facing the possibility of his own death at the hands of Antheil's deputies, finds himself thinking of Grimes and the medic's personal motto, a line from King Lear: "Man must endure his going hence even as his coming hither" (first hearing it, Converse told Grimes that it was "a hell of a motto for somebody who was twenty years old" [DS 261]). At one time Converse had even toyed with adopting it himself, but did not find strength enough inside to hold to it. Nevertheless, "Grimes had provided him a solitary link with an attitude which he publicly pretended to share--but which he had not experienced for years and never fully understood. It was the attitude in which people acted on coherent ethical apprehensions that seemed real to them" (DS 261). Such beliefs seldom helped these people avoid doing confused, ineffectual things--the things Converse himself had done and continued to do because of his abdication of moral responsibility--yet he felt (and feels again, for a moment) that such people might be on to something, so he held Grimes and others like him "in a certain--perhaps merely superstitious--esteem."

Of course, esteem was not enough to stop Converse from using Grimes' story to score cheap points in dispatches back to the World, an act of bad faith which he readily acknowledges even as he recalls the "pride in humanity" he felt as he reflected on Grimes' bravery; and it certainly does not seem to inspire Converse to act well under the shadow of his own going hence. However, the example is available, and like the more ambiguous example of Hicks' desert walk at the end of the novel, it testifies against the main characters' retreat into blind need and indifference. At the same time, as Stone is careful to remind his readers, it is a weak testimony no matter one's hopes for it, particu-
larly when it is read against the mass of events in the book, all of which attest to the universality of moral failure and murderousness. The unhappy ironies of Grimes' story are boiled down to a discomforting image: moments after recalling Grimes' strength, Converse finds himself thinking that Smitty, one of the dopers-turned-narcs he's travelling with, "bore a physical resemblance to Ken Grimes." Taking the Long View again, Converse wonders at the "ruffianly sense of humour things had... to compose themselves now into a Grimes, then into a Smitty" (DS 279). Everything's Smitty again.

What Converse can never understand is the value of suffering—the value of bending against the world as it is, even while one is fully aware of the consequences. Nevertheless, one may argue that Converse is a central figure in a novel that seeks to honour that harder choice. As the overview in Chapter One shows, Stone may no longer be a practicing Catholic, but he still speaks in interviews and essays of the meaning of retaining some sense that mankind is imperfect—fallen—just as the Old Testament says. Claiming a basis for right action that does not omit some sense of "the essential immitigability of the human condition," Stone responds, like Freud in Civilization and it Discontents, to "the momentous claim which life makes upon us, by very reason, it seems, of its hardness, intractability, and irrationality" (see Trilling 156). Both the analyst and the author take an essentially pessimistic view of human life, one that "preserves something—much of the stratum of hardness that runs through the Jewish and Christian traditions as they respond to the hardness of human destiny" (see Trilling 157). Behind Dog Soldiers' scathing irony is a world-view that seems to draw strength from "a faith quite unrelated to hope, a piety that takes virtually the form of pride"—beliefs that preserve a sense of each life's authenticity and value. Like the author of Job (and the author of The Myth of
Sisyphus), Stone "propounds and accepts the mystery and naturalness—the natural mystery, the mysterious naturalness—of suffering" (Trilling 158).

What lends Dog Soldiers its powerful, prophetic anger is the author's decision to reveal the hard "truth" of things as they are through the actions of characters who utterly fail to keep faith in themselves. It is an exaggeration to state, along with Thomas Myers or Philip Beidler, that Stone aims to show how an evil has lurked inside American culture from the start—only to be revealed by the Vietnam War (198; American 113). Nevertheless, events in the novel suggest that Stone is concerned with matters of more cosmic import than the lives of a few dilettante hipsters. His characters' nihilistic attempts at living as if they are not responsible for their actions may be in tune with the spirit of their time, but such figures also appear to belong to a parable of nihilism, a more significant warning.

The novel begins and ends with direct allusions to Job's whirlwind, and Stone has been known to suggest that "the myth of original sin is onto something" (DS 7, 337; Karagueuzian, "Irony" 72; Stone, "Way" 39). While Stone qualified his comment about original sin almost immediately by insisting "I wouldn't want it to be thought that I represent a position of comfortable despair" (like that upheld by Converse), it is important to see that Dog Soldiers has a great deal to say about "original sin," and that it has much in common with Freud's darker views of how one learns to live with civilization and its discontents. With its many examples of lives lived in what Kierkegaard in The Sickness Unto Death calls "the despair that is ignorant of being despair," Dog Soldiers reads as an attempt to affirm a sense of the value of living even as one recognizes the hard way demanded by things as they are, "the tremendous
difficulty of setting out to act decently" in light of finding ourselves "beset by our own natures which are imperfect, and by a world which is imperfect" (Stone to Bonetti 95-6). Stone's declared interest in "the idea of there not being a God as a kind of dynamic absence that is a constant challenge" ("Way" 49) confirms that his aim "is not despair"; the aim is "find out how bad it gets and begin from there . . ." (Stone to Bonetti 95). His nihilistic characters and pessimistic view of human possibilities are, in the end, a means of revealing the possibility of something more, something to believe in (cf. Stone, "Me" 233).

John Converse, unlike his creator, stops at nihilism. In the red field he becomes "it," flesh possessed by the thought that fear is the only basis of human existence. Fear is "the basis of his life. It [is] the medium through which he perceive[s] his own soul, the formula through which he [can] confirm his own existence. I am afraid, Converse reason[s], therefore I am" (DS 42). The dope smuggling may feel like "the first real thing" he has done since coming to Vietnam (DS 56)—something worth celebrating with a half-giddy and consciously adolescent toast to Nietzsche and faded dreams of warrior mastery—but fear soon returns, the only real thing.

Some time spent renewing his acquaintance with the reality he'd perceived at Krek--courtesy of Danskin and Smitty and the lit ring burner of a kitchenette stove--is enough to restore Converse to his earlier, simplified appropriation of Descartes. The red field becomes "the Red Field," the reigning memory. A few scenes after his encounter with Antheil's "friends," that memory obtrudes upon his thoughts in its full glory, and Converse gives in to the "logic" of the experience. His growth as a character, save for that tantalizing
moment at the end of the novel when he recalls Ken Grimes, effectively ceases.

"In the course of being fragmentation-bombed by the South Vietnamese Air Force, Converse experienced several insights; he did not welcome them although they came as no surprise" (DS 185). As a dabbler in Nietzschean metaphysics (at one time he was Hicks' guide to The Portable Nietzsche--the name really does say it all) Converse should recognize both how obdurate things as they are can be, and that one must cultivate a sense of amor fati concerning this hard way which all humans are bound to follow. But he cannot, because the lesson of Krek, as he sees it, is that the contest with the world is over--and the humans have lost. The fate of mankind is fear, not becoming. His God is "things," things inimical to human life; this God is not just absent--he's cold. Hence Converse's first insight while under fire: "the ordinary physical world through which one shuffled heedless and half-assed toward nonentity was capable of composing itself, at any time and without notice, into a massive instrument of agonizing death. Existence was a trap; the testy patience of things as they are might be exhausted at any moment" (DS 185). This universe has a mind and manner, he assumes: it is not just a concatenation of forces but a planned incursion against John Converse. Like Nietzsche's nihilist, who in his "hyperbolic naiveté" confuse his personal dissatisfaction with metaphysical truth (Will 14), Converse now "knows" that existence is a trap designed to catch--John Converse. He becomes a narcissist by other means, one who continues to believe, as he strives to live without will, that he remains the universe's prime concern.
As Robert Solotaroff notes, Converse's Nietzschean views make it easy for him to recognize the "moral right of superior force," and with it the "absolute correctness" of his situation (68-9); however, Converse omits the Nietzschean corollary of amor fati, the need to embrace menace and peace with the same spirit of delight. As a result, he becomes a nihilist both in the sense Nietzsche offers (i.e., as one who resents the world of becoming) and in the sense in which the term is most commonly used today (i.e., as one who believes in nothing, is spiritually dead, poisonously cynical). In

the single moment when the breathing world had hurled itself screeching and murderous at his throat, he had recognized the absolute correctness of its move. In those seconds, it seemed absurd that he had ever been allowed to go his foolish way, pursuing notions and small joys. He was ashamed of the casual arrogance with which he had presumed to scurry about creation.

From the bottom of his heart, he concurred with the moral necessity of his annihilation (DS 185-6).

From then on he can neither pretend to be a self-aggrandizing übermensch nor continue to believe he possesses some basis for hope and free will. The defeat of his ideals, combined with his continued vanity, leaves him sure that there is nothing to believe in save believing in nothing. Converse knows himself to be "a little stingless quiver on the earth." He's "a funny little fucker," suited only to be "a living dog"--"the celebrated living dog, preferred over dead lions" (DS 186). And he'll "soldier on"; "Living dogs lived. It was all they knew." He later goes along on Antheil's expedition to take back the dope, and even lies to Marge to try and flush out Hicks. From his perspective, he has no choice: this is his fate. As he now knows, "'It's all true . . . . Character is fate'" (DS 126).
Converse's nihilism may be the result of his fear, his inherent bad character--or it may just be the case that the way the world is makes it impossible for him to be anything but a nihilist. Roger Sale's idea that Stone is both a nineteenth-century moralist, looking to judge characters, and enough of a witness to these complicated times to recognize the difficulty of acting well at all at any time, certainly seems correct when one reads it in light of Converse and his choices. As Hicks warns Converse, "it's gone funny in the states" (DS 57); when the book moves from the "nihilistic . . . collection of atrocities and absurdities" in Vietnam, as John McClure puts it (99) to a California where that same sense of chaos remains--in fact, as one senses that the two places have a great deal in common--one realizes the extent to which Stone encases Converse in a world of menace and mendacity. It is a world suited to the circumstances Converse has chosen for himself, the nihilism he has made for himself. Nevertheless, events such as Hick's heroic walk at the end of the novel oblige one to wonder whether this world of menace Stone depicts is the world in truth as he believes it must be--as Shelton and Myers suggest--or the "true" world that Converse's nihilism helps foment (see Shelton 81, Myers 199). As one of Stone's "ironists," (to use George Packer's model), Converse "fails not only out of poor judgement and incompetence," but because he can't "believe fervently enough and [is] paralyzed before greatness" by an unimpeachable

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6McClure's single criticism of the book is that it handles the war in Vietnam in this way, putting "metaphysical denunciations" up in place of a reasoned political critique of American and North Vietnamese actions. Of course, he's speaking from a political position far to the left of Stone's own, if I understand the author's views correctly. For example, in one conversation Stone adopts V.S. Naipaul's pessimistic definition of politics ("the problem is not that there isn't any right or wrong, it's that there isn't any right") in order to explain his own view of the nature of the war in Vietnam (to Ruas 279-80; see also Bull [forthcoming]).
certainty that all action is futile (117). John may be right—or he may just resent his own failings. It is an error, however, to see his nihilism, his belief in the futility of belief (paradox and all), as a clue to Stone's own beliefs. Instead, one can see, in Converse's reaction to his "fate," Stone's ability to present readers with the full complexity of the problem of faith.

The potentially dynamic absence of a ground for belief is for Converse proof that all is "whirl," beyond his or anyone else's control. Russell Davies is correct when he senses in Converse's manner "a will-less craving for a kind of universal alleviation" (585). Converse finds it in a fatalism based on his own fear and powerlessness. "'I don't know what I'm doing or why I do it or what it's like'" he tells Marge at the climax of the novel. "'Nobody knows. That's the principle we were defending over there. That's why we fought the war'" (DS 307). Freedom, as defined by Converse, is a proposition entirely divorced from responsibility. His cynicism, which, like his wife's carelessness, is the product of disappointment over faded dreams, allows him to see irresponsibility as the American way. It is the same mind-set that allows him to get into heroin smuggling in the first place, a mind-set that ignores the place of choice in human action, and one's responsibility for the outcome of one's choices.

At one point Marge, echoing her husband's fatalism, says she wishes the heroin could go back "'to wherever the hell it emanates from.'" Hicks, proving he possesses a somewhat more honest understanding of motive and responsibility, is quick to reply that "'It doesn't emanate. People make it'" (DS 110). Here, and throughout the book, Stone makes it clear that there is always a choice between good and evil—and the outcome of that choice cannot be ig-
nored (see Karagueuzian, "Irony" 70). No sidle into apocalyptic rhetoric and certain despair annuls the characters' parts in messing up their own lives and the lives of others, nor does it explain away the political and social decline Stone makes the background of the book. It is not enough to say, as Converse does, that being in Vietnam "fucks up your perspective" (DS 126). One went there, one did not simply wake up to find oneself there, in some "Vietnam" or another. As Stephen Knox notes, Dog Soldiers contains a rejection of "the easy way of apocalypse" because it illustrates how moral disasters occur when one overlooks one's immediate--and contingent--reality in favour of long views and the chance to embrace "history as undifferentiated metaphor" (62). The novel attempts to renew a sense that one must commit oneself to the real world, difficult as that commitment might be (Roger Sale 62). It may be, as Stone writes in "Me and the Universe," that all heads are "filled with murderousness" and "there is no cure for this"; however, this does not exempt anyone from retaining a sense of obligation (233). The Converse's fall into fatalism is a lesson in the weaknesses of nihilism, and a type of the weaknesses of the forms of nihilistic fatalism that, for many, replaced idealism as the Sixties palled. Against such all-embracing nihilism, Dog Soldiers offers the first words of renewal; but to get to them, readers must move through nihilism to its end.

"It's funnier there in the states": of great interest to Stone in all his novels is the gap between the idealism of the United States and the cold realpolitik of its actions around the world. By his estimation, the tension between ideals and reality is an essential part of the experience of being an American. As he tells one interviewer: "The United States is a country which has always liked to see itself as representing a certain moral position. At the same time, the United States and the people in it are very aware of the ways in
which this claim to high moral purpose is compromised" (Stone to Bonetti 93). The Vietnam War proved particularly damaging to the American psyche. Stone feels, because the popular dream of the Great Society, espoused by mainstream America, was so obviously contradicted by the sort of uncivil conduct that occurs in wartime. The gap between politics and morality became uncomfortably apparent (cf. O'Brien 34-5, 56). Vietnam, Stone's paradigm of this gap, was such a corrupting force "that even those honestly involved in it were involuntarily contributing to the corruption of American society all the way through. What was worst in America was acted out" (Stone to Ruas 279). At the same time, on the other side, "so many of the leaders of the alternative societies . . . were quite as ready to lie and as corrupt in their way as the leaders of the so-called establishment" (Stone to Ruas 280). As a result, the United States, caught between idealism and the pragmatics of world power, entered a period of confusion. The national sense of mission led, in Stone's estimation, to Vietnam; the visions of national renewal propounded by figures and groups of varying merit led to the drug culture. These missteps meet in the three keys of scag Converse sends home from the war. In an increasingly "funny" America it is heroin, not heroism, that reigns.

Emblematic figures representing the Law (Agent Antheil) and the Counterculture (Hicks' old roshi, Dieter, a.k.a. "Doctor Dope") allow readers little sense that any good at all has come to America from living through the Sixties. Both the mainstream and the adversary culture are presented as places of chaos and danger where arbitrary laws benefit the powerful at the expense of the weak. While Stone's involvement with Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters in the early 1960s would suggest that he leans towards the side of the "Seekers" in any tussle with the Man, nowhere in Dog Soldiers are readers given any sense
that the social experiments of the late 1960s have led to anything like salvation. 7 Converse, Marge, and Hicks all have had some level of involvement with Counterculture activities—and this has not done much for their powers of judgement. Other figures in the groovy world, such as Gerald and Jody (who are "fundamentally" revolutionaries, and wish to do up in order to have an authentic experience of the heroin life) and Eddie Peace (with a finger in "'All the warped shit that goes down'") are comic, pathetic, and scary all at the same time (DS 194, 141). On the other side are people like Antheil (who "looked rather like a sympathetic young dean of an eastern liberal arts college"), people who know how to work the system with the kind of precision and style one expects to find only amongst leading gangsters (see DS 206-14). They are the most corrupt figures in the book, as Frank Shelton notes, these upholders of the law who have seen the business opportunities available in the drug culture (74-5). If the world of Those Who Are is a mess, so is the "rationalized world, the Weberian world" (McClure 100). As Converse's landlord in Saigon puts it, everywhere it's "Sheeka-go" (DS 38).

Dieter's case, in particular, reveals Stone's sense that untrammeled, idealized optimism can only end in misfortune and a turn toward nihilism. On the run from Antheil, Hicks takes Marge and the heroin to his old Zen master in hopes of selling it to him. Here Stone commingles antitheses such as "heroin" and "Zen"—grasping and letting go—to create an image that epitomizes all the "dreams that went bad." Ray finds Dieter still living in his mountain commune on the Mexican border—but little is left of what had been

7See Weber 22-4. Tom Wolfe's The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test (1968) contains the following—for my purposes, interesting—lines: "—and Kesey can hear Bob Stone telling him, 'Nietzsche is up in Heaven now, Ken, saying 'I dig what you're doing—but don't read my books'"—" (288).
there before, both in spirit and in fact. "'I went down all the rivers,'" Dieter tells Marge. "'Like a prospector. I knew all the gurus and poseurs. Fuji. Mount Athos. . . . But I succumbed to the American dream'" (DS 271). Those Who Are had meant to take notions of rectitude and self-reliance modeled on the Emersonian tradition up the next step towards transcendence: as Dieter says, "'When I came I was naive. I believed all the old bullshit. Innocence. Energy. I believed it so much that for a while it came true for me'" (DS 272).

The problem with this aim was also what made it great: in his naiveté he counted on something from human beings that they rarely come up with, and then only for moments—he counted on some essential goodness appearing in a world where goodness is not essential.

As several of Stone's comments above suggest, the author has little sympathy for those who hope to overlook the "original sin" of imperfection and darker impulses (cf. Stone to Bonetti 96). Not surprisingly, Those Who Are turned out to be less than they supposed themselves to be because their self-deceptions did not prepare them for (to borrow Converse's term) "reality." Dieter tells Marge of his one little error: "'it occurred to me that if I applied the American style . . . if I pushed a little, speeded things up a little, we might break into something really cosmic'" (DS 272). All it would take, he thought, would be "'a little push, a little shove, a little something extra to shake it loose.'" So, like Leary and Kesey and other self-styled Ecstatics of the time, he tried to force Utopia, using drugs as a short-cut to transcendence. He "'ended up as Doctor Dope,'" an anti-roshi, a dealer in need—one who abets grasping. The Pranksters' last song goes like this: "WE BLEW IT!" (Wolfe 368). Dieter can come in on the chorus.
Seeing Hicks again makes Dieter wonder if they can start over, but Ray is no longer "the natural man of Zen." He just wants to move his weight. The effort of learning the skills he needed stay alive in the dope universe has cost him most of his idealism. This is a world, as he knows, in which "The big ones eat the little ones," and pleasures--such as the pleasure of staying alive--only belong to the strong (DS 164). Dieter's lessons on will and purity have done nothing to enrich Hicks' thoughts about the ways of the world--thoughts founded on rough experience and some exposure to Nietzsche, Science Fiction, and the moral universe of Mickey Spillane (DS 74). All he has gained is a vocabulary for rationalizing his frequent surrenders to an omnivorous rage (DS 74-6). His personal need to conquer everything, prove himself master, just in case something or someone tries to turn him around again the way they did when he was a kid, disrupts his sense of proportion. He carries this weight inside; it the psychic counterpart of the "weight," the bag of dope, he carries unto death.

Hick's weight is now the measure of all things. For example, when Eddie Peace brings Gerald and Jody to the meet, instead of real dealers, and then hits Ray when Ray curses him for doing it, Ray is unable to keep himself in check. "The blood," the need of his own anger--which is as addictive as scag or fatalism--takes over. The scene is a set piece for the theme of need and obligation, one in which readers can see the cost of both dilettantism and indifference. Gerald and his wife, resembling the Converses but with more ready cash, enjoy both wealth and an affection for what Tom Wolfe called "Guerilla Chic." They are open-minded, sophisticated: "We're not here to judge [Gerald said]. There's such a thing as personal necessity. Maybe it's beyond moral areas" (DS 191). Doing something real, such as doing up, shooting heroin, is such a
personal necessity. Wanting to write about drugs, Gerald feels he cannot "'approach it as a project if I haven't paid my dues'" (DS 190). Ray, enraged by the couple and by Eddie's slap, decides to give Gerald the total heroin experience. Without any sign or attempt to reconsider his impulse, he give Gerald an overdose that probably kills him (DS 199).  

Marge's first impulse is to help the man. She recalls "something about salt," how it's supposed to help offset the effects of an overdose. She starts for the door "with an idea of obtaining salt. Borrowing it from a neighbour. A cup of salt for an OD" (DS 200). It may be, as Stephen Knox observes, a "pathetically inadequate response to the enormity of evil," but it is also a sign that some compassion may still exist, and that one can still respond to a specific "real situation" in an ethical way (67). In the end, however, it is only a sign. Ken Grimes came back to the war for the same reason Marge looks for a cup of salt--but like Grimes' return, Marge's search proves futile; both vanish beneath the weight of things as they are. Hicks refuses to allow even a thought of her small kindness. "'There ain't no salt,'" he tells her, and pulls her away (DS 201). 

His reasons for what he does to Gerald are not reasons at all: he justifies his behaviour with rationalizations that are based on his own sense of disgust with the chaotic ways of the world. Everything he says reflects his ceaseless

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8Most critics believe Hicks sets out to kill Gerald with the shot. Stone, on the other hand, says he tried to write the scene so that Gerald's fate--and Hicks' intentions--would be less clear-cut. Although he's "unsympathetic . . . brutal to the point of being murderous" towards Hicks, he "didn't really mean him to kill Gerald. Gerald . . . is not supposed to die. I didn't make that clear enough. I left it open. I should have been more specific. In my mind, anyway, Gerald doesn't die" (to Schroeder 157).
need to act against that chaos with chaotic actions of his own. His sense of self-possession masks a propensity for uncontrolled folly that leads him to initiate nihilistic acts. Gerald might be "a Martian" from whom Hicks, "A Christian American who fought for [his] flag," should not have to take anything; Eddie Peace may well have been trying to score some weight without paying for it; but the real reason Hicks does Gerald in, he himself finally admits, is that Eddie hit him (DS 202). Marge cannot believe it: "'Are you three years old?'" she asks him. "'I was drunk,'" he tells her: "'It seemed like a good idea.'" "Marge trie[s] to experience Gerald's overdose as a good idea. It [is] not the way she [is] used to looking at things" (DS 203).

Hicks even tries to use the war to justify what he's just done, as if the absurd and arbitrary brutality of that situation explains why he chose to knock Gerald over--as if there is some obvious connection between the first days of the Tet Offensive and deciding to murder someone because he is a "Martian" and his friend might be trying to pull a scam (DS 203). Here Hicks does no better than Converse does when he tries to use the Great Elephant Zap as the justification for dope-smuggling. Hicks declares that, because people get on an Air America transport in Hawaii, fly to Vietnam, and die, all in the same day, he has every right to kill "Martians" looking for junkie authenticity they can write about and sell. It really is "funny" in Ray's world--funny enough that Marge can't find the strength to continue arguing with him. Everything is whirling.

Yet Hicks is still a seeker after something greater, at least in his private fantasies concerning himself. A residuum of Those Who Are and their naive desire for greatness remains within him. He possesses the virtue of endu-
rance, "the last virtue, presumably, which will be left for man to claim" (Davies 585). There are moments during his battle in the hills with Anheil's men and his march in the desert when he seems to embody the strength of Camus' Sisyphean "Absurd Man," whose "revolt" and endurance of an eternal failure "gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance" (Myth 55). As Stone says, "Hicks is really extending—he is actually having a shot at greatness, at power, at true virtue, the old Roman virtus. He is really trying for that" (Stone to Schroeder 157). His decisions, from the time he takes the heroin aboard his ship until the last pages of the novel, are all a mix of mindless, dangerous spontaneity and an innocent sense of justice, a longing to be seen to be acting correctly. George Packer notes how Stone consistently and mercilessly probes Americans' native innocence, "gone 'funny' in the Sixties funhouse," but never gives in to the urge to despise that innocence as Graham Greene did, because it is that innocence that brings wonder, even as it brings folly, into the world.9 If America is sick, "its sickness grows out of its greatness"—a greatness which includes "innocence on a grand scale" (Packer 118). Hicks is a paradigm of this American innocence. Both a psychopath and a friend, both Marge's protector and the one who feels pleasure when he gets her hooked on heroin, he precipitates both disasters and saving moments in the book (see DS 167). His dream of winning, which one critic compares to Ahab's obsession with the whale, leads him to act in appalling and remarkable ways (Elliott 204). He oscillates between nihilism and an openness to the possibility of redemption (Stone's idiosyncratic "not-Catholic-yet-theological" notion of redemp-

9see Stone's "Gin and Nostalgia," a highly critical review of Greene's The Human Factor (and of most of Greene's œuvre), a book which in Stone's estimation is "all fatuous fake moralizing and who needs it?" (83).
tion)—an openness that seems to exist in those moments when he tries to take up the weight of the world instead of merely toting the dope.

Unlike most characters in the book, who are either entirely rapacious or wound tight in fate and surrender, Hicks does have an ideal. As several critics note, Hicks' code of right action is analogous to the famous ''Hemingway Code,'' that aesthetic disguised as a morality upheld by Hemingway's protagonists (see Shelton 76, Karagueuzian, ''Irony'' 71f., Parks 55). Both codes honour individual courage and dignity; both celebrate the appearance, the style, of rectitude. However, while some characters in Hemingway's fiction, such as Jake Barnes or Lt. Henry, do seem to understand that there is also a complicated, difficult—even unstylish—quality in behaving (as Stone says) "rationally, let alone well," Hicks, with his confused version of the Hemingway code, does not. In fact, he is no better at playing out the Hemingway ideal than Converse; he also shows little grace under pressure. He "is a Hemingway character without Hemingway's romanticized treatment and with all the imperfections showing" (Shelton 76)—that is, Stone's vehicle for testing the presumptions of the Code, presumptions which continue to fund the American ethos of rugged individualism.

The contrast between Hicks and Ken Grimes in the novel allows one to see the flaws in so rigidly adhering to one's private code that "it becomes something beyond morality, something more important than life" (Stone to Ruas 283). Grimes is Hicks' doppelgänger. Unlike Ray, Grimes tries to find a selfless way to live in the world—not a selfish, isolating code. He dies helping others; Hicks does what he does because he loves the adventure of following the blood and riding the wave until it crashes. What the crash will do to any-
one else is not his concern; the show is all. That said, Hicks does have something in common with Grimes that Converse can never have: he is still an idealist, and still does choose to act in the world instead of giving in to it. "[A]bsolutely determined to be true to himself and to what he perceives to be his code," he must "look crazy to someone as relativistic as Converse" (Stone to Ruas 280). This determination, for all the folly it causes, still allows for the possibility of truly virtuous action, the sort of action Converse, soldiering on, cannot begin to attempt. On Dieter's mountain, and in the desert march that follows, one can see Hicks essaying just such an action, ambiguous as his true motives and their merits remain. At the same time, both Hicks' ability to endure in the world he finds himself in and Grimes' quick exit from the narrative suggest how Stone keeps his readers aware that, in this world, moral imperatives are often no match for contingencies, and certainly no certain shelter from the vicissitudes of being.

For Hicks the world is an "arena of combat"; the only way he knows to act against it is as a warrior, true to his code. He's a product of the ethos celebrated by writers such as Stephen Crane--a man who seeks after some undefined grace in a contest with existence. Stone does not reject this ethos out of hand; as his introduction to *The Red Badge of Courage* suggests, one can say many complimentary things about it (see xv). There is something stirring about the idea of warring against the immitigability of the human condition and believing you can end victorious. Yet he is also aware that Crane--and Hemingway--spoke of and for a time which espoused a model of heroic innocence that it has become increasingly easy to question. In *Dog Soldiers*, war is grotesque, too real. "Moral adventures" in a weightless world lead to nothing of more merit than the Great Elephant Zap. At one point Converse describes
the Vietnam War as "'the place where everybody finds out who they are'" (DS 56). Hicks, once again illustrating his more realistic perspective, comments on the blindness of this claim by saying, "'What a bummer for the gooks.'" As John McClure remarks, Dog Soldiers does not let its readers forget the larger price paid for moral adventures by both the innocent and the adventurer (98). The warrior way is shown to be no way out of the complexities of life. Instead, Stone honours the search for the numinous, even believes it is his duty as a writer to honour that search, because it is something "that a great many educated people today don't take very seriously," something the culture tries to obviate at every opportunity (Stone to Bonetti 91-2; to Woods 361). Yet he also keeps readers aware of the dangers of that search, the ways it can be perverted into an enterprise in mere style--the kind of quest Hicks undertakes.

The code Ray lives by gives him a strength that other characters do not possess, yet it blinds him to the complexities of each situation. Marge is fascinated by the simplicity of heroin: you've either got it or you don't. Hicks has a similar fascination with the simplicity of his code: it's me or them, win or lose, eat or be eaten. When Dieter tries to throw the heroin off a cliff, hoping to save Ray from his "Lone Ranger" and samurai fantasies, Hicks is unable to figure out what is up, and assumes that the roshi is trying to turn him around. The heroin is "'all illusion and false necessity," Dieter tells him, trying to pull the pack away. "'It's suffering human ignorance. It's hell! . . . You're wired into grasping. You've got to fight'" (DS 312). However, Hicks has no time for sermons; he knows the score: "'Dope got you up this mountain, Dieter, and you figure dope's gonna get you down. Dope is what you're all about, man. You think I don't know the difference between what's real and what's not? You think you're going to bluff me out of my good shit and con yourself another
mountain with it?" (DS 313). It is Eddie Peace all over again. Ray, who had once thought of just dumping the stuff, now calls it his, and will fight to keep it (see DS 168). Dieter is drunk; Dieter is Doctor Dope; Dieter can't be serious. So as Dieter runs out into the night, Hicks takes aim and he fires, proud that "None of them could take him off."

Dieter on the cliff-edge is back-lit like "a little man running against the trees"--like one of the Viet Cong Hicks killed in the war. One shot brings him down. As he is shot, he does throw the drugs towards the cliff, just as he had said he would. In amazement Hicks realizes that "[Dieter] was running for the edge and he threw it" (DS 315). Hicks is surprised, but does not feel guilty when he discovers that Dieter was telling the truth. "Damn it," he thinks. "if you're going to make a gesture you have to have some grace, some style, some force. You have to have some Zen. If you act like a drunken thief, and people haven't seen you for a while, they're likely to think that's what you are." So much for Dieter; he had no style. The roshi dies because he fails to live according to the code--that is, he fails to appear to be performing the right action, fails to follow the aesthetic Hicks uses for an ethic. The obliquity of Saigon and L.A. has also penetrated this holy place, or so Hicks assumes. Even if he suspects that the simplified responses of his code, a necessary survival skill in the Asian and Californian jungles, may not work in all situations, this knowledge comes too late. He is committed. He is bound to his illusion. And Dieter is dead.

Ironic allusions in the last section of the book underscore the absurdity of Hicks' quest and the deterioration of valour in general. Early on, Converse reconnects with Douglas Dalton, a fellow reporter, once a member of the
Abraham Lincoln Brigade in Spain, but now a ruined drunk and hack writer. In the course of their conversation Dalton sings a fragment of a Republican song: "There's a valley in Spain called Jarama.' It went to the tune of 'Red River Valley.' He stopped after the first line" (DS 132). Then he recalls fighting Franco's Moroccan troops and thinking it quite exciting to be like Roland at Roncesvalles, facing the Moors—until they started pretending to surrender, and stabbing those who believed them. As Hicks, wounded, climbs back up to Dieter's keep after his firefight with Antheil and the other agents, he searches his mind for a song on which to concentrate so he can stay alert. It has to be simple, "because you would be hearing it for hours over and over and it could drive you out of your mind when the pain got to it." He chooses "Red River Valley" (DS 309). The paucity of honour in his whole enterprise is summed up by that reprise. Hicks is excited to think that he is finally one of the "good guys," "the little man in the boonies," blasting out "the big sound of Charles" and holding the pass (see Karagueuzian, "Irony" 66). Roland saved Christendom; Hicks saves the dope—and the feckless Converses, whose name means "turned around." Scag is his Spain.

On the other hand, there are other allusions that suggest another, less nihilistic sense of how things might be understood, and that support the "glimmers of transcendence" (as Stone calls them) that seem to begin coming through the irony and chaos of the last scenes (see Stone to Bonetti 103). One of the most important involves the dope itself. There are many names for heroin: "scag," for example, a name used often in Dog Soldiers—also "H," "dope," "stuff," "shit," "smack"; many names. Another is "salt" (Lewin 184). This is perhaps a more obvious nickname than most, if one recalls that both salt and refined heroin are white, granular substances that dissolve in water.
No one in the novel uses this nickname for the drug, but salt appears on two important occasions as a sign of an alternative to the constructs of the world over which the heroin seems to rule: when Marge looks for a cup of salt for Gerald, and when Hicks sets out across the salt-flats towards the border with the heroin on his back. To draw on Robert Solotaroff's image, if the heroin is "some malign deity" ruling the novel, akin to the Gnostics' Demiurge, the cold and evil false image of God that is attempting to complete mankind's destruction, then salt, on these two occasions, stands as its antithesis—a sign hidden in the heroin that illuminates the possibility of grace, the possible transformation of suffering into a path to redemption.\(^{10} \) It can be argued that in these images of salt one discovers Stone's belief that both he and the reader must begin asking what it is that stops them from taking "theological" questions seriously—particularly in a world in which "'there ain't no salt'" for an OD.

The word "salt" contains connotations that oblige one to recall both the heroin's dominance over the world of the novel and certain images out of the Christian heritage that are meant to validate a sense of purpose even as they speak to the "natural mystery" of suffering and the need to find some "weight"

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\(^{10}\)See Solotaroff 61-6. Reading interviews with Stone in chronological order reveals his increasing interest in "gnostic" conceptions of existence, i.e., the thought that we are not just fallen creatures but inhabitants of a cosmos ruled by demonic forces, not simply a stern God (e.g., Stone, "Way" 49, Stone to Ruas 289). Father Egan, in A Flag for Sunrise (1981), spends his time creating such a gnostic account of human experience. Stone himself comes close to gnosticism when he presents the world as a dangerous, unkind place; however, he resists recreating what Voegelin describes as the gnostics' "cure" for this world—their vision of a world redeemed by "knowledge"—and instead populates this world with characters who consistently surrender to their worst impulses. As the discussion above suggests, like Camus, Stone suspects that humans who act as if they can take the place of God cannot do so without unleashing the more monstrous parts of themselves (see Bull, passim). [Thanks to Prof. Mark Levene for alerting me to Stone's abiding interest in gnosticism and his use of gnostic themes in his novels].
for experience if it is to be borne. For example, in Jeremiah 17: 5-6 God tells the prophet: "Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord. For he shall be like the heath in the desert and shall not see when good cometh; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, in a salt land and not inhabited." In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5: 13), Christ says to the assembled crowd: "Yea are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under the foot of men." Both passages attest to the promise of salvation and the suffering that comes of alienation from that promise. Without some grasp at something more, some attempt to surpass the boundaries of the world as it is--without faith--one's life has no savour, but is instead revealed as an unaccommodating wilderness, a dead place.  

One has already seen Marge looking for "a cup of salt" for Gerald, and being told by Ray that "'there ain't no salt'" (DS 200-201). At the climax of the book, in contrast, there is salt: the whole world is salt. Here the sense that salt is an alternative to heroin undergoes a stricter test, one which does justice to the ambiguous solace that comes with inhabiting "reality" instead of escaping into scag evasions. In the desert, fleeing with the heroin from Dieter's mountain towards the highway, trying to keep Antheil distracted so Marge and John can get away, Hicks discovers that the earth tastes of salt. He is in the Bad Place, the 20 miles of desert between himself and rescue, wounded and carrying weight he cannot bear much further: "As he looked over the salt, it began

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11See Stone to Karagueuzian 256 on his frequent reading of the Bible. As he told another interviewer, "Whenever I'm starting a book, I read the Bible a lot" (Stone "Way" 38).
to glow"; one recalls Charmian describing the way the unwrapped heroin seemed to be "'burning with an evil glow'" (DS 323, 11). At this moment Hicks is "filled with terror," and wonders "What kind of place is this?" Yet he makes himself go on. "Never mind . . . the questions. This is home. We walk here . . . If you don't like it here, then walk away. Nobody's gonna do it for you."

Hicks had no salt for Gerald, but in this salt desert, itself recalling the world of "salt"--the world ruled by smack, which is in every sense a "salt land and not inhabited"--the possibility exists that he will find a cup of salt for his own overdose on the values of his code and the dope universe. On the floor of the desert he faces his own need and finds a "glimmer of transcendence," what George Packer calls "an ecstatic glimpse of meaning that's like a reproach to the ironists' [i.e., the Converses'] fallen world of 'things'" (117). Flashes of memory and pain descend on Hicks, pulling apart his illusions of mastery, forcing him to look at himself and feel the weight he carries. As the salt burns his eyes an hallucination of himself as a child runs along beside him, "a turned-around kid who made up stories," who cringes and whines (DS 325). He makes Hicks angry: "'Look where we are kid, we're walking on salt, nobody gets us out of here but me. The people are over on the other side of those goofy and we don't need a single one of the sons of bitches.'" In one of Stephen Crane's poems a voice tells the speaker, wandering in a desert, that "It is no desert" (45). Even after the speaker notices all the features around about--"The sand, the heat, the vacant horizon"--the voice insists "It is no desert." What it is, as it is in this scene--for Hicks and for anyone--is the world as it is and as it must be faced. It cannot be faced with style alone, only with a knowledge of a difficulty and pain that scag cannot drive hence. The desert
Hicks walks is no desert, but salt—that is, a crystalized essence, a limen, a chance... and a hard road home.

His rage is enormous, his paranoia unceasing: he feels surrounded by "Every goddamn race of shit jerking each other off.... Two hundred million rat-hearted cocksuckers in enormous cars.... They're mean and stupid and greedy, they'll fuck you for laughs, they want you dead." The memories of humiliations keep coming, and the will to go on starts failing him. He tries to "remember what this is for," but it grows increasingly difficult. There is "Absolutely nothing out here, he thought, but me and the mountains and the salt. Nothing to manipulate, nothing to work with but the [train] tracks [he's following]" (DS 327). The mountains are no good to him, as Dieter's experience shows; and he alone is not strong enough. A self-styled master of the world of objects, he finds himself with nothing to master. All that leaves him is the salt.

It is at this moment that he attempts to move beyond himself, beyond his need. He makes a gesture like Dieter's; he savours the salt. All along he has imagined a triangle and kept it before his mind's eye. It is a receptacle for his pain, part of an old meditation technique. As he walks, it seems less and less able to do what he wants it to do. The pain does not stop. Then "It occurred to him that he might make the triangle larger." At that, pain fades, and he starts to believe he can carry more pain, "infinite amounts of pain. Far more than his own" (DS 327-28). He imagines that he can also carry other people's pain, and starts imagining he's taking on the weight of the pain of all his former selves, of his mother, of the children he saw injured in Vietnam. Excited, he starts yelling across the desert: "'All you people, Let it go! Let it go, you hear!
I'm out here now. I got it." In this moment he does seem to have blundered his way to "something like spiritual heroism and redemption" (McClure 102). Despite the futility of his march--a march undertaken to save the heroin, after all, that symbol of his need to believe he controls the world of things even though things really control him--one must admit that he does seem to come "portentously and immensely alive" (Solotaroff 79), at least for a moment. In choosing to look beyond himself, Hicks is able to find a new and stronger sense of purpose--again, at least for a moment. What remains is that state Trilling called "a faith quite unrelated to hope, a piety that takes virtually the form of pride." This is how he endures his going hence.

"So there was always a reason, he thought. There had always been a reason. You never know until the moment comes and there it is" (DS 329). The last three words are the most important: the short-timers' cosmic shrug, "there it is," epitomizing the cosmic silence to which Converse surrenders, is here turned into a statement of affirmation. Imagining he's talking to John and Marge, Hicks tells them that he doesn't "know how it works" but that he doesn't have to. Without his knowledge, he has here called into question Converse's declaration (cited above) that no one knows what they're doing or why--and that this "principle," the meaninglessness of all acts and the inexplicability of all things, is "why we fought the war" (DS 309). Here one can see Stone making nihilism eat its own words--by writing in such a way that both an abridgement of hope and an overestimation of mankind are avoided, yet a vision of hope remains.

True to his agnosticism, Stone keeps Hicks' epiphany brief, and makes Antheil's victory, not Ray's breakthrough, the concluding image of the book.
The weight stays on Hicks; he literally can't get the pack full of heroin off his shoulders. The pain comes back, worse than before; he has to give his "illusion" back (DS 329-30). All he's left is "the thing itself": "So much for the pain carrier . . . . the lover, the samurai, the Zen walker. The Nietzschean" (DS 330). "In the end there was only the tracks." In the end he has to stop and fall to the salt floor of the world, which keeps its mystery still.

Out of what seems to be the nihility of things as they are—which Hicks on his walk has reopened with his intuition of something greater—a moment of moral judgement also comes to John and Marge. Stone's agnosticism leads him to keep their perceptions confused and ambiguous, but something does seem to come to them that hints at another possibility beyond the fate of nihilism. Stone has suggested that "Marge and Converse, even in their extreme condition, have an insight" (Stone to Karagueuzian 250): "They have made a series of discoveries, they are seeing more clearly, and the chance for them to bring that insight to bear is definitely there." It is made, of course, in the feckless manner in which Converse in particular has made all his discoveries: over Hicks body he suddenly blurts out, perhaps out of awe at Hicks' endurance, that "'In the worst of times there's something'" (DS 336). "'There's smack,'" Marge retorts: it still reigns. Yet "'There's us,'" as well—"'Everybody,'" Converse said. 'You know'" (DS 337). His wife may again be right when she replies that this is "why it's so shitty'"; however, as witnesses to Hicks' moment, readers may not feel obliged to cling to nihilism as she does. Like Stone himself, when asked about religious faith, they may neither believe nor be comfortable in their unbelief—they may also hold that "the good news and bad news, both, is that we have only each other" (to Chapple 36).
Even the last scene fails to dismantle a sense that there is "more," "something." The corrosive irony of previous sections now turns on one of those who has seemed best able to survive in its midst, and leaves readers a hint of justice. Antheil recovers the heroin and then reinstates the logic of the dope universe by recalling the old dictum of the strong: "if you think someone's doing you wrong, it's not for you to judge. Kill them first and then let God do the judging" (DS 342). In light of past events, he finds the statement funny, and wants to share it with his associate, Angel, a corrupt Mexican policeman. He begins to translate it into Spanish, but recollecting that he is miles from anyone or anywhere, alone with a professional like himself, he thinks "better of it" (DS 342). It isn't much, but it is something, an ironic point of light that dims Antheil's victory and reminds one of the cost of his sort of mastery.

Asked about the seriousness and almost unremitting darkness of his novels, Stone has declared that he does not "write to dispirit people" but deals with difficult and uncomfortable things in order "to give them courage, to make them confront things as they are in a more courageous way" (to Woods 366). Against the sense that a nihilistic renunciation of any sense of responsibility is the only way to live in the world as it is, it is often only the artist's diligent testing of the grounds for faith and doubt that can provide us with a basis for resisting despair. Here the power of imagination makes itself plain. By so completely evoking a world that has given in to nihilism, Dog Soldiers reveals that there may be a way to get beyond that fate. If the world is salt, the novel suggests, the world may yet be a weight worth bearing.
SIX  •  Answers for the Desert: Mystery and Nihilism in Don DeLillo's The Names

Written at the end of the 1970s and attesting to the changes in ideals and values that took place during that decade, Don DeLillo's The Names (1982) offers a suitable place to end this study of nihilism in American literature of the time because it contains an appraisal of both Seekers' and Prophets' definitions of nihilism--an appraisal that manages to keep between the extremes of both views. While Wonderland and Gravity's Rainbow draw on aspects of the anti-rationalist account of authentic existence epitomized by the writings of Nietzsche and Heidegger, and Love in the Ruins and Dog Soldiers warn against the "weightlessness" caused by just this sort of anti-rationalist thinking, DeLillo's novel allows both approaches to test themselves against a consideration of the value--both positive and negative--to modern, secularized society, of "post-theological" accounts of existence (cf. Steiner, Heidegger 155-56). At the same time, DeLillo puts forward a description of the power of art similar to that offered by Heidegger in works such as "The Origins of the Work of Art" and "The Question Concerning Technology." The Names examines art's ability to create a Clearing that refutes nihilistic appraisals of Being and the world. The result is that DeLillo appraises nihilism by creating his story of both Tap Axton's story and Tap's father's reception of that story--as well as (albeit indirectly) by telling stories about the nihilistic aesthetic of the cult known to some characters in the novel as "The Names."

Described by Daniel Aaron as a "crypto-Christian and profane moralist" (306), DeLillo seems intent on establishing powerful metaphors to put in place
of the "dead" supernatural divinity that once abided at the center of Western culture (cf. Heidegger, Basic 155-56). One of these is "Mystery"--a spirituality unsupported by any obvious religiosity (LeClair, Loop 15). As he told one interviewer: "I think my work has always been informed by mystery; the final answer, if there is one, is outside the book." (DeLillo to DeCurtis 293). In The Names, mystery is DeLillo's dominant trope. Mysteries fuel the plot of the novel and help it make more disturbing probes into the meaning of being.

The central mystery of the book involves the power of naming--the spiritual need words satisfy when they enable one to connect oneself to the world. In his consideration of this mystery, DeLillo addresses many of the ideas that Heidegger put forward in his discussions of the relationship between art and nihilism. As George Steiner tells us, Heidegger considered "Authentic poetry" to be writing that "names," that forms a pious and lasting connection between mankind and the world. This connection is "the ultimate, probably the only, hope for a way out of the nihilism of the age"--that is, the only way out of modern culture's nihilistic "forgetting of Being," its loss of contact with the mysterious sense of some necessary, inexpressible essence that grounds existence (Heidegger 145). Even though Heidegger disavows any form of "ontotheological" thinking, and refuses to equate "Being" and "God," there is clearly a "post-theological" aspect to this description of poetry. As Steiner points out, it is Heidegger's belief that "The poet names what is holy; or rather, his nomination calls from hiddenness, without doing violence to it, that which is still alive in the grimed earth" (Heidegger 145). It is this "genius of nomination and in-gathering," this attention to the inscape of the world (to borrow Hopkins' unabashedly theological trope), that DeLillo honours with his novel when he makes the mystery of naming its central concern.
Names lead to an investigation of ontologies and nihilism. For example, one cannot say for sure that the cult at the center of the book has a name. The novel's protagonist, James Axton, believes the cult's name is "Ta Onó̄mata" ("The Names"), a phrase he sees painted on a rock in a desolate part of the Peleponnese; however, his hunch is never corroborated by DeLillo. Neither James nor his friend, Owen Brademas, who both meet members of the cult, get them to divulge their secret name. The impossibility of "naming" the cult extends to trying to discover the meaning of its members' actions—the problem that obsesses the main characters of the novel and binds them to each other. Both problems come to symbolize the cult's own repudiation of a humble and authentic connection between mankind and Being in favour of effacing all attempts at creating meaning. Cult members concern themselves solely with the symmetry of matching initials. Blocking out names' meanings and connotations by concentrating on this simplest affinity, they silence the kind of sensed knowledge of something "more" that exists in real communication—which (as James says) "yields up the mystery that is part of [ordinary] things, the nameless way in which we sometimes feel our connection to the physical world" (The Names [Names] 32). The cult instead reduces names to the alphabets they contain, and all deeper connections to mere coincidence. As a result, language and nihilism meet when the cult members take the chance similarity of initials to be a sign that validates beating another victim to death with hammers. The letters match; the names do not matter, nor their bearers—only the completion of the program, the matching and the death. This program of simplification makes a travesty of all expression by reducing creativity to accident. It mocks mankind's faith in words and the hope that words might "speak," might mean something. Thus, the initial mystery of the cult's pro-
gram opens out into an examination of "mystery"—and of the refutation of all mystery that is nihilism.

The cult turns meaning into an empty game. However, this is only one of the many games being played in and by the novel. Game-playing and its part in humans' comprehension of the world has long been a part of DeLillo's aesthetic. As Michael Oriard notes in his discussion of DeLillo's novel about football and nuclear war, *End Zone* (1972), DeLillo is intrigued by the allure of rules, the "comfort of certainty" that comes with being inside the game, on the field. In the increasingly complicated modern world, one in which individuals can come to feel as if they are "subject to forces over which they have no control in a society that is moved toward unknown ends by unknown agents," the structures of the game offer a sense of relief (Oriard 16). DeLillo himself puts it this way:

People whose lives are not clearly shaped or marked off may feel a deep need for rules of some kind. People leading lives of almost total freedom and possibility may secretly crave rules and boundaries, some kind of control over their lives . . . . Games provide a framework in which we can try to be perfect. Within [their] limits . . . we can look for perfect moments or perfect structures. In my fiction I think this search sometimes turns out to be a cruel delusion (DeLillo to LeClair 21).

The "irredeemably heterogeneous aesthetic texture" of all of DeLillo's books is a game played with genres, tones, and readers' expectations that invites readers to search for perfect readings (Lentricchia 1); it also provides the opportunity for cruel delusions. From its title on, *The Names* plays with
the desire to "name," to make sense of why what happens happens. James Ax- 
ton, for example, works to make sense of his own life and marriage, the world 
of expatriates and political turmoil in which he works, and the possible pur- 
poses of the so-called cult, around which the plot of the novel and characters' 
lives seem to orbit like planets around a darkening star. The title is itself a 
challenge to readers: is one to consider it an invitation to sort out the names 
and solve the mysteries--or a warning that one must recognize the limitations 
of all naming as a result of the difficulty of pinning down the world in words? 
The title is a noun nominating nouns, those sets of letters and sounds one uses 
to knit oneself to the world; yet the book so named often evades such naming 
and knitting. Characters' motives are alluded to, but never fully defined, while 
the world of secrets and the hidden meanings and etymologies of words feature 
prominently in the book. Readers are put into a word-game in which they do 
not know all the rules, one in which some of their habitual expectations con- 
cerning the playing-out of the game of reading are challenged and subverted. 
Mystery becomes a part of the game.

The connection between DeLillo's games and nihilism is that the most 
enigmatic, mysterious figures in the novel, the members of the cult which 
may or may not be called "The Names," prove to be working on a nihilistic 
game that involves keeping meaning apart from language. They play "match- 
the-letters" and act as if it can explain the world. Part of what draws James, 
Owen, and the others to the cult is that it invites everyone who encounters it to

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1 Cf. *Names* 286: "Owen was gravitationally bound to the cult, as an object 
to a neutron star, pulled towards its collapsed mass, its density."

2 For example, James does not realize until the end of the novel that he is 
unwittingly involved with the CIA, because "The Company" uses the risk- 
assessments he helps write to make decisions about U.S. policy in the Middle 
East (315).
complete it, solve it. For many characters, the blank surface that the cult shows the world stimulates an urge "'to satisfy a pattern, or find a pattern, or fit together the elements of a pattern'" (Names 80). Even though they are first encountered by Owen living in the barren center of the Greek island where his archaeological team is excavating Minoan ruins, the cult members are not tourists nor antiquarians: their purposes remain puzzling even after Owen and James begin mapping them out. "It turned out in the end they were interested in the alphabet," James tells readers, "Not history, gods, tumbled walls. . . . The alphabet itself. They were interested in letters, written symbols, fixed in sequence" (Names 30). They talk to Owen of the essence of letters, of moving away from translation and communication towards an intimacy with the shapes alone. Then, for no apparent reason, they beat an old man to death, and disappear. While cult members do not seem possessed by what James calls "'righteousness,'" an urge to murder in the name of political and religious certainties such as Americans (circa 1980) were soon to encounter in Iran, nor by the "'consumer fantasy'" of North American-style murderers ("'People shooting from overpasses, barricaded houses. Pure image'"), this killing may not be "'senseless'"--or so Owen speculates. "'Perhaps they fear disorder. . . . The old man . . . may have been a victim of some ordering instinct'" (Names 115-16). Perhaps, he speculates, the murder was the product of a quest for safety "'from chaos and life.'" Yet the motivation for this "ritual" still seems elusive. Kathryn wonders if the murder might be a human sacrifice, a plea to the gods. Owen declares that they never struck him as "'god-haunted people'": "'where's the ritual in their sacrifice? Old man hammered to death. No sign of ritual. What god could they invent who might accept such a sacrifice, the death of a mental defective?'' (Names 116).
The cult's practices are bizarre, senseless; yet in conversations with James and Owen towards the end of the novel, cult members affirm again and again the sensible nature of their acts. They take it as a given that their practices make sense. At the same time, origins and final aims are not offered for analysis. The group's blankness, its openness--analogous to the open regions (deserts, Greek islands, bare mountains) it occupies--takes hold of character and reader alike (see Mottram 80). The missing motive lures Owen, James and James' friend Frank Volterra into a game of devising explanations. Their game promotes readers' typical game of noting similarities and hunting out meanings--creative acts that, like the characters' play with the meaning of the cult, suggest that existence itself possesses some meaning. The only problem is that, as the pieces are assembled, it becomes apparent that "The cult's power, its psychic grip," arises solely from its lack of apparent motive, not from any essence. There is "No sense, no content, no historical bond, no ritual significance" to what cult members do. Emptiness forms the whole of their allure: "Owen and I had spent several hours building theories," says James at one point, "surrounding the bare facts with desperate speculations, mainly to comfort ourselves. We knew in the end we'd be left with nothing. Nothing signified, nothing meant" (Names 216). The cult's negations suggest that there is no meaning to be had in this world.

By documenting the nihilism of empty pattern-making, DeLillo discloses the obsessiveness and danger that may arise when one tries to "satisfy a pattern." In his novel, the urge to complete a pattern can lead one far from attention to the real condition of the world. Pattern-making often becomes its own reward, and its own justification--and the result can be murder. Yet DeLillo also reveals how creating order out of the tumble of experience can lead
one away from destruction. Contradicting the cult's nihilistic appraisal of meaning, the story of Owen Brademas' life and the story of that story, as told by Tap Axton, both show how the creative accidents of the imagination, the ways the mind turns coincidences into a meaningful pattern, can also become a source of comfort. Meaning may remain uncertain, but the creative mind can find a way to live with uncertainty that the cult's obliteration of all connection fails to disclose.

Part of the allure of the cult for James Axton is the way his encounters with it seem to bring some sense of larger significance to his life, and demand of him many of the skills he requires in his job as risk-assessor for "The Northeast Group"--skills he also uses to defend himself against the stresses of self-revelation. He shares a good deal with the cult, in terms of personality and circumstance. For example, he too is homeless, an expatriate on the move through some of the more barren places of the world. The nomadic cult, shifting "about the Middle East and India like an eerie, tattered mirror image of the multinational executives" with whom James associates, shares the executives' interest in signs that seem to confirm essential patterns (Wood 27). Both groups seek the reassurances of "insider knowledge" shared amongst initiates using a "private" language--and both groups live as if they are outside history and responsibility

"We were a subculture," James suggests, "business people in transit, growing old in planes and airports . . . . We knew where martial law was in force, where body searches were made, where they engaged in systematic torture, or fired assault rifles into the air at weddings, or abducted and ransomed executives" (Names 6-7). James' job is to determine the threat to Ameri-
can and European corporations' interests in the Middle East caused by political turmoil. His job, in effect, is to take a calm look at chaos whenever and wherever it occurs, quantify it, and pass this intelligence to his clients. Under the instruction of one Rowser, his direct superior, who has "a gift for numbers and a temperament that [enables] him to separate mathematical techniques and actuarial science from the terrifying events he [culls] for his figures" (Names 45-6), James enjoys a kind of Olympian detachment from the (human) figures he watches and assesses. As one of James' friends likes to put it, "It is like the Empire. Opportunity, adventure, sunsets, dusty death." At one point James tells Kathryn, without seeming to note the level of detachment needed for this kind of involvement, that he finds his job "interesting because it involves people, waves of people, people running in the streets" (Names 34). The "serious" nature of his work is what excites him, the feeling that he's right on top of "history" (Names 97-98). While he is a witness to events, he is also safely separate from them, left by the nature of his job to adopt a passivity before events that makes it easy to lose sight of all the implications of this "history" unfolding around him. Believing himself to be "in no way responsible for the political unrest" even though (as Douglas Keesey suggests) his data allows multinationals to continue their exploitation and destabilization of the region, he fails to see how these companies are managing chaos for their own gain (117). It is not until he discovers that Rowser's firm has ties to the CIA, and that he himself has been an unwitting accomplice of "the Company," that he begins to see himself as culpable, involved and responsible.

Until then, he believes he can live outside politics--both the politics he deals with at work and the politics of his disintegrating marriage. Like his friends in Athens, James behaves as if he is responsible only to himself, and
feels he is allowed to retain a certain ignorance of the place to which he has come. "I was beginning to think of myself as a perennial tourist," he notes at one point. "There was something agreeable about this. To be a tourist is to escape accountability. Errors and failings don't cling to you the way they do back home . . . . You are granted immunities and broad freedoms" (Names 43-4). His wife, on the other hand, literally lays her hands upon the earth: she works at Owen's dig-site, learns Greek, speaks the names of things, and attains an intimacy with her island that is in direct contrast with her husband's life spent skimming over surfaces--spent flying in and out of ancient lands. As Thomas LeClair suggests, James is an island-hopper, jumping from Greek islands to islands of wealth and civility in Athens such as the Kolonaki district and the National Gardens, and then to airports, islands of sterile order set amidst third-world complexities: "Axton's life and the lives of other aliens are a continual "doing of the islands" of the Middle East. The new colonialism of multinational commerce has been made as attractive as tourism by huge salaries and generous fringe benefits" (Loop 181-82). While Kathryn is also sticking to her island, she seeks an simple intimacy with it that further accentuates her husband's inability to make commitments.

While he can accommodate risk in the abstract, he is careful to avoid it in his private life. His carefulness, reticence and defensive cynicism are the cause of his separation from Kathryn. The turns of their conversations and his talks with Tap often suggest the extent to which she has recoiled from his unwillingness to trust others and commit himself to the responsibilities of such trust. For example, when Tap, with a child's over-serious sense of things, asks if he was born during the Vietnam War, his father's humourous reply--"'Don't sound so depressed. You're not scarred for life, I don't think'"--slips
into an indirect reminiscence of marital tension: "'It was our favorite war, your mother's and mine. We were both against it but she insisted on being more against it than I was. It got to be a contest, a running battle. We used to have terrific arguments'" (Names 184). Whenever Axton travels to her island he finds himself both seeking some sort of reconciliation and renewing such disagreements. For every moment of "nameless" knowing there are bitter words haunted by past battles. He takes her continued idealism--devoted now (with telling symbolism, perhaps) to her work at the ruins--to be an act against him; she sees risk analysis as a form of blindness and smugness. "'I know you've always arranged your life around things you couldn't possibly fear losing,'" she tells him during one fight. "'The snag in your plan is your family. What do you do about us? . . . It's your present occupation I despise. I would hate your life. I would hate doing what you do'" (Names 127). His reply is to target her need to be within a "world": "'... I'll tell you how you think. I'll tell you exactly. You need things to be committed to. You need belief. Tap is the world you've created and you can believe in that. It's yours, no one can take it from you. Your archaeology is yours. You're a wonderful amateur. I mean it, the best . . . . It's your world now. Pure, fine, radiant'" (Names 128).

As John McClure notes, Axton believes he can "locate himself beyond such needs," and tries to live as the beneficiary of the spiritual freedom of "what we now think of as a postmodern mode" (136). James acts as if he were a tourist visiting his own life, absolved from deeper commitments. DeLillo plays with the close similarity between this detachment and the meaning of nihilism as Percy and Stone present it--that is, nihilism as a disconnection from responsibility and an inability to bear the weight of the world. At one point James' fights with Kathryn had involved a list of attributes he had imagined
she might use to describe him, a list which came to be known as "the 27 De-
pravities." He recalls this list now that they are separated. The qualities he
gives himself in the list are those of a "post-modern man": by his own nomi-
nation he is self-satisfied, uncommitted, politically neuter, and afraid of taking
responsibility (Names 16-17; see Keesey 123-4). The list documents a half-
heartedness and lack of passion in James that holds possession over his char-
acter throughout most of the novel. These features of his mood are what make
him susceptible to the cult's promise of complete simplification and alienation.

The narrative, with its testimony concerning the list, the lingering
fights over trust and commitment, and his interest in and pursuit of "The
Names," shows how James slowly works to overcome an inner aridity, this
colder view of the world that for a time aligns him with the nihilistic aims of
the desert-dwelling cult. The life and fate of Owen Brademas, who comes much
closer to vanishing into the cult's nihilistic world-view, provides James with
an example of the costs of the kind of alienation he has begun to practice. For
James, Owen is a sort of mirror and doorway, a way of coming to recognize im-
portant things about himself. Like James, Owen is living out his grief: "He
seemed to be in touch with grief, as if it were a layer of being he'd learned
how to tap. He expressed things out of it and through it. Even his laughter had
a desolate edge. If it was all sometimes too impressive, I never doubted the un-
sparing nature of whatever it was that haunted his life" (Names 19). It is
around and through his elusiveness that James and Kathryn begin to speak to
each other again, glad to have a chance to circumvent "the bloody leftovers of
eleven years." (Names 20). At the same time, along with this space for the
couple's togetherness, Owen also brings mysteries and the pressures of self-

Owen offers James the chance to look at and play with order. Order is a constant fascination of the older man. "Owen Brademas used to say that even random things take ideal shapes and come to us in painterly forms. It's a matter of seeing what is there. He saw patterns there, moments in the flow." (Names 19). These he calls "the mind's little infinite" (Names 76). His job, after all, is to find patterns: as an archaeologist specializing in ancient writings, he has spent his life translating stone tablets, finding ways to make them speak to him. Yet the "form of conversation with ancient people" he'd once enjoyed is no longer enough. It gives way to a mystic's infatuation with the letter shapes themselves: "I've begun to see a mysterious importance in the letters as such, the blocks of characters . . . the alphabet itself. I find this all I want to know about the people who lived there!" (Names 35-6). The feel of the marks made by a sharp tool in the stone or clay and the abstract beauty of the letter-shapes seem "strange and reawakening," somehow more worthwhile.

The cult members display the same sort of "unreasoning passion" for "the alphabet itself" (see Names 30; Keesey 125). Their passion leads them to create their program, the brutal and simple symmetry of matching name and placename--and murdering the name-bearer with hammers, picks, and other ancient writing tools (LeClair, Loop 192). Owen's curiosity concerning the shapes, and "The Names"--analogous to James' curiosity concerning political goings-on--blinds him to his potential complicity in undesired and harmful events. Increasingly intrigued by the cult, yet keeping his inquiries "di-
vorced (in his mind) from any human context," Owen sets himself up (says Matthew Morris) for entry into "some life-denying connection" (116).

Such a connection is first suggested by one story Owen tells: how Rawlinson, a famous epigraphist, had a Kurdish boy climb a sheer rock face and copy down the ancient script carved there, because that script was the key to translating a then-unknown language. At times literally hanging from the letters by his fingertips to do the job, the boy risked his life for knowledge—but only Rawlinson's name, not the boy's, stayed in history. Kathryn calls this "a political allegory," but Owen insists that what really matters is that Rawlinson found a way to "'satisfy a pattern!'" that would answer "'a great secret'" (Names 80). DeLillo leaves it to the reader to decide if this is "imperialism" or an acceptable requirement of man's quest for knowledge. Such a drive to satisfy patterns may be the only way that mankind can gain knowledge of benefit not just to epigraphists, but to all.\(^3\) For Owen, however, the need for order outweighs any complaint. Later, in the desert with the cult, his willingness to let his curiosity get in the way of fellow-feeling becomes much more apparent.

Owen's obsession with the cult has similarities to other obsessions documented in the novel, such as the obsession with security that enthralles James' boss, Rowser. This man becomes obsessed with, then buried in, "the customs and attitudes of the secret life" (Names 46). He can't stop playing his game.

\(^3\)Cf. Percy on penicillin and Oates on "the Renaissance ideal"—or Pynchon's Blicero on "Modern Analysis" and Stone's Converse on the way that Vietnam lets Americans discover themselves (above): the ambiguities remain. For a criticism of DeLillo's frequent reticence about making clear political assertions of any sort, see Kucich 334-37.
James thinks, at one point, that Rowser cannot live without his fix of upheavals: "I imagine him stranded [by a lay-over] in Goose Bay. Big empty remote innocent Labrador. Scraped-clean-by-the-wind Labrador. No politics, no risk. The place would be an offence to him, a white space he could not know through numbers. He would die there, gesturing" (Names 51).

James recalls meeting Rowser for the first time at a foreign investment seminar in Washington where all the voices, "all these regional accents converged on the same sets of words. The language of business is hard-edged and aggressive, drawing some of its technical cant from the weapons pools of the south and southwest, a rural nurturing in a way, a blooding of the gray-suited, the pale, the corporate man. It's all the same game, these cross-argots suggest" (Names 47). With their attenuated names for the world, such technocrats, says James at another point "are the infiltrators of ancient societies. They speak a secret language. They bring new kinds of death with them" (Names 114; see LeClair, Loop 198). Just as the businessmen and expatriates and archaeologists and cult members all have their own languages and habits, so are they all caught inside their own obsessions, and cut off from other parts of life. All are diminished by seclusion within supposedly "private" languages and worlds—worlds that match, in design, if not intensity, the cult's sense (to quote one member) that "The world has become self-referring," a trap from which "there is no escape" (Names 297).

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1This theme had a part in DeLillo's work even before The Names. As Norman Bryson noted in a 1980 article on DeLillo's novels, "The mark of madness in DeLillo is to surrender before discursive pressure, to embrace without irony a dialect--any dialect--that promises to pattern the chaos of city and world" (154).

5DeLillo is well aware of the comic qualities of such jargons, as books such as Ratner's Star (1976) and White Noise (1985) attest. See also the vignette in The Names involving Charles Maitland's son, the mathematics genius, whose
Owen's obsession does retain some connection to the larger world. "'I've always believed I could see things other people couldn't,"' he tells James at one point. "'Elements fall into shape. A design. A shape in the chaos of things. I suppose I find these moments precious and reassuring because they take place outside me, outside the silent grid . . . . I believe I'm safe from myself as long as there's an accidental pattern to observe in the physical world'" (Names 172).

In these moments his "radiant" pain gives way to the feeling that he is in touch with some fundamental ontology, some greater design. There is a spirit of religious need in Owen's perceptions, an attention to the mystery of Being, even though his interest in deeper structures always contains the potential for unleashing a will to perfect order he later recognizes as "the priestly, the aloof, the cruel"—a will evident, in its most extreme and destructive form, in the activities of the cult. Unfortunately for him, it is this will that dominates much of his life. Owen is almost destroyed by his obsessive identification with the cult's quest for what they call "an alphabet of utter stillness" (Names 292), and the cult members' "painstaking" and ritualized "denial of our elemental nature" in the name of "A death by system, by machine-intellect" (Names 175). Their control of letters and lives so matches his own desire to control himself and escape the mysterious incursions of others' voices that he almost succumbs to the cult's promise of an end to uncertainty, just as James, attracted by the commanding idioms of commerce and power, almost succumbs to a separation from other, important, parts of his life.

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work is so complicated he will not even speak its name (an echo, of course, of the cult's unwillingness to speak its own name): "'It refers to itself and only itself,'" explains his father. "'It's the pure exercise of the mind. It's Rosicrucianism, druids in hoods. . . .'"(163-4).
DeLillo contrasts the cult's private language and the hieratic jargons of trade and control with "demotic" speech (including demotiki, Modern Greek). Such "earthy" talk is usually eschewed by idealists and zealots. Demotic speech includes those conversations alluded to above in which James and Kathryn find ways to hear each other again, and discover a "nameless" and mysterious fullness. Other examples are found in DeLillo's descriptions of Greek life. For example, in a taverna in Athens one night, James notices two Greek men singing together: "As with people in conversation, these men appeared to go beyond the soulful routine woe of the lyrics. . . . For the rest of the song they looked at each other, strangers, to something beyond. A blood recollection, a shared past. I didn't know" (Names 64). In the moment of shared telling they seem to discover something more. These singers disclose the antithesis of the cult members' "alphabet of utter stillness"--that alphabet which contributes not to life's fullness but to a denial of life. As the novel progresses, James learns from his wife and for himself to listen to the demotic voice (including, as will be shown, the playful "voice" of his son's re-telling of Owen Brademas' story), even though it speaks of less certain forms of order. Owen, on the other hand, never seems to discover the same power to attend to this voice: something in him retains "an illusory belief in language's capacity to explain all" (Bryant 22).

Another figure drawn to the cult's opaque, attenuated world-view is James' old friend, the auteur film-maker and ascetic, Frank Volterra. Like the cult members, Frank is obsessed: in his case, the obsession is with "Film. This is what there was, to shoot film, cut film, screen it, talk about it" (Names 109). There are to be no compromises that might diminish the aims of his art, no matter the cost. "His drive to make movies was so powerful," James says, that
"we couldn't help feeling anxious hopes on his behalf." Something in the commitment and violent sincerity (for lack of a better word) of the cult grabs Volterra's attention the moment he hears about them. "[T]he idea of these people, this mad scene being played out in a vast beautiful silent place," seems to take him over (see Names 117-18).

It is the logic of their project (again, for lack of a better word) that draws him to them: "These small figures in the landscape. Brademas says these people are stalkers. They pick a victim and they watch. They wait for something. There's a particular logic!" (Names 140). It is the logic of seeking purity—which leads to pure form, and the "uncompromising" film he longs to make. What also compels Frank forward is his asceticism, which is stimulated by the blank face the cult shows the world, the missing motive for their actions. To borrow the observation of Vosdanik, an expert on the mysteries of the Holy Land whom Volterra meets in Jerusalem, "Wherever you will find empty land, there are men who try to get closer to God" (Names 149); like Owen and James, Volterra sees the cult as an "empty land" (in his case, an empty screen) he needs to fill if he is to get closer to "God"—to some more complete and uncluttered understanding of the world. Frank is a film-sadhu, a film-monk, sensing the promise of meaning in a devotion to form. For some reason, he supposes that a similar desire drives the cult.

While tracking the cult in the Mani (a desolate region of the southern Peloponnese), James and Frank discuss the connection between the cult and film. Out of this conversation DeLillo creates an evocation of both the religious intensity of Volterra's quest and the "weightlessness" of its product, the way film contributes to modern culture's self-conscious self-referentiality, the
constant self-devouring born of "'constantly watching ourselves'" (Lentricchia 21-22). Volterra observes that, like the desert, the Mani is a terrain true to the codes of American film. "'The desert fits the screen,'" he explains. "'Low horizontal, high verticals. People talk about classic westerns. The classic thing has always been the space, the emptiness. The lines are drawn for us. All we have to do is insert the figures, men in dusty boots, certain faces. Figures in open spaces have always been what film is all about. American film'" (Names 198). The movie screen, as he sees it, is a continuation of the frontier: an empty space aching to be filled, a mystery needing an answer. The allure of film is its ability to tap into this desire.

Film's simplifications seem to bring something pure and mysterious to presence: Volterra talks of "'People in a wilderness, a wild and barren space. The space is the desert, the movie screen, the strip of film, however you see it. What are the people doing here? This is their existence. They're here to work out their existence. This space, this emptiness is what they have to confront'" (Names 198). Hiding their meaning, their purpose, inside obscure rituals that do not coalesce according to any religious or political aim, the cult members appear to possess a purified abstractness and opacity that is akin to film. This openness is taken to be an invitation to enter and name—to create meaning. Volterra, like any artist, is something of an "imperialist," imposing an order of his devising upon what he sees as empty space, unmanipulated material: therefore, he finds the cult attractive.

Volterra believes their simplicity invites purely formal interpretations and makes them perfect material for the form of pure cinema he longs to create. He describes them and their actions to James as a working out of a grace-
ful structure: "Four or five interesting and mysterious faces. A strange plot or scheme. A victim. A stalking. A murder. Pure and simple. I want to get back to that. It'll be an essay on film, on what film is, what it means . . . . Forget relationships. I want faces, land, weather" (Names 199). He assumes that their project is a product of creative thought, an aesthetic act, and re-imagines the cult as aesthete-ascetics like himself, artists for whom form is its own content. As he tells James, "The life they lead out here, what they do, seems so close to something on film, so natural to film, that I believe once I talk to them they'll see it's an idea they might have thought of themselves, an idea involving languages, patterns, extreme forms, extreme ways of seeing" (Names 200).

In his mind, they embody and illustrate the claim that this is "the filmed century": "The twentieth century is on film. . . . You have to ask yourself if there's anything about us more important than the fact that we're constantly on film, constantly watching ourselves. . . . I can't believe these people won't instantly see they belong on film. Instantly." Their entire being, as he understands it, is made up of mannered gestures, movements made for the mirror, prayers in code. This is the god Volterra (like Owen, obsessed with "those beautiful shapes"), turns to for release. Because "Film is not part of the real world," as he tells James later--because it seems to raise mankind up into "the public dream" of liberty from the difficulties and responsibilities of inhabiting reality's disordered forms--it is the perfect medium for the cult's "holy" act of secular transcendence, their longing (or so Volterra believes) "to vault into eternity" (Names 203). Like Owen, he is using their blankness as a space upon which to paint the portrait he needs to see. Because he does not know that all their actions are based on coincidence--"The letters match"--he misinterprets their life in deserts as a quest for fullness, and their murders as offerings. Here again, DeLillo gives the reader proof of the dangers inherent in looking
too long for a pattern, as well as a sense of the naturalness—even necessity—of
such looking. Frank mistakes the cult's indifference to all mystery for contact
with mysterious knowledge, and their silences for a drive akin to his own as-
ceticism. The result is an unwitting defence of nihilism.

Andahl, Frank's contact in the cult, provides a better picture of what the
group is after. For them, he tells James, the Mani is a place free of gods and
history. "The rest of the Peloponnese is full of associations," he says. "The
Deep Mani, no. Only what is here. The rocks, the towers. A dead silence. A
place where it is possible for men to stop making history. We are inventing a
way out" (Names 209). Like the desert landscapes in which Owen encounters
other cells of the group, the Mani is perfect in its emptiness. It does not sig-
nify, does not bear meaning; it offers a stillness and silence in which the cult
can wander. The active mind, intent on discovering meanings, can "read into"
such barren places what it will. The cult, acting against imagination, turns its
hammers on signification; it is drawn to the blankness of deserts, not the pos-
sibilities. It takes apart language, the code one uses to make oneself at home in
the world. Its inexplicable project mocks any sense of aesthetic judgement,
thereby mocking any sense of—or desire for—meaning. No gods means no
hope; no history means no purpose: the sum of these decisions is nihilism.

If this drive to simplify all experience, as Andahl playfully acknowl-
edges, is madness, it is also an extreme amplification of the mood of all who at-
tempt to stake out designs upon the world. If film, literature—all art—tap into
the desire for order, it is because they are approximations of the simple truth
the cult has discovered: structure satisfies; enigmas lead to fear. Such fear
seems to justify madness even as it justifies art: "Madness has a structure,"
tells James. "'We might say madness is all structure. We might say structure is inherent in madness. There is not the one without the other'" (Names 210). In place of an openness to the mystery of Being, the cult offers the closed, complete structure of madness. "'Our program evokes something that you seem to understand and find familiar,'" Andahl suggests, "'something you cannot analyze. We are working at a preverbal level, although he use words, of course, we use them all the time. This is a mystery'" (Names 208). "'Extreme, insane, whatever you wish to call it in words'"--such definitions do not matter. He knows, because he feels it, that their project is "'right. Inevitable and perfect and right.'" One cannot understand the cult. One can only know that they are right.

Film, for all its contributions to "weightlessness," to vicious circles of self-consciousness, simplification and homogeneity, can at least be said to involve some measure of discernment, and even in its power to frame and reduce subjects it can be said to possess a power to bring one into contact with others (cf. LeClair, Loop 27).6 This ambiguity is evident in Del Nearing's description of Volterra's plans for the last scene of his film about the cult. She tells James that Volterra plans a shot of a cult murder, from a still helicopter, that "'ends close-up, with the men in a circle, hair and clothes blowing, after they finish the killing.'" (Names 249). She says Volterra wants to shoot this scene with no soundtrack: "'He wants the frenzy of the rotor wash, the terrible urgency, but soundless, totally.'" Terror and beauty are to merge, the artifice of the set-up is supposed to mix with the "authenticity" of the victim's death and the absence of words. James refuses to believe Frank would go through with such a scheme

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6The ambiguity of the photographic image is an important theme of DeLillo's Mao II (1991)--See Bull passim.
(in fact, Del may be lying). The cult's project, however, does not allow for such ambiguity. As members of the cult know, the need for structure can become its own end; it can bring on a kind of madness—because men will go far indeed to satisfy the needs of a pattern, or find a pattern, or fit together the elements of a pattern.

The self-enclosing nihilism of the cult becomes fully apparent in the last sections of the book, when Owen tells James a long story about his time with a cult cell in the Indian Desert. Wandering to sites of Sanskrit inscriptions and allowing himself to be drawn toward the cult, which he knows is active in the northern desert, Owen finds himself surrounded by a surfeit of voices and names that makes it impossible to find "the mind's little infinite." As James puts it, "Precision was one of the raptures he allowed himself, the lynccean skill for selection and detail, the Greek gift, but here it was useless, overwhelmed by the powerful rush of things, the raw proximity and lack of common measure" (Names 280). His discomfort with the massed faithful around him suggests how much he desires a place of silence and privacy. This desire draws him to the cult and the break past confusion it seems to offer. As a child, he had fled from his parents and their ecstatic speaking in tongues, their uncontrolled language (Tap retells this story at the end of The Names). As an adult, he feels uncomfortable contemplating or encountering "masses of people driven by the same powerful emotion," caught up in "reverence, awe, and dread" (Names 24; see Keesey 124). At the end of the book, when he observes "the scriptural rage . . . present in the lettering" on the walls of the temple at Rajsamand, he hears in himself the same rage to carve out a place of silence amidst the chaos of the world by turning words into opaque tools of command, stilling their connotations (Names 284).
"If Brademas stands for the purely aestheticized reader, consuming texts without receiving messages, the cult is the purely aestheticized writer, inscribing without communication" (LeClair, Loop 192). Indeed, the empty brutality of cult members' "philosophy" matches the "writing"--the inscriptive blows--with which they set down their private, inexplicable language on the bodies of their victims. "'The desert is a solution,'" one particularly charismatic member of the cult tells Owen. It is "'Simple, inevitable. It's like a mathematical solution applied to the affairs of the planet'" (Names 294). Cult members' assertions concerning the "logic" of their enterprise, its "clean" and "valid" repudiation of decay, reveal that they have made resentment of mystery their only enterprise. As Douglas Keesey suggests, they "have braved the desert and 'discovered who they are'--people who are going to die. But their response to this discovery is not to place a greater value on life; instead, they have been so horrified by the realization that they feel compelled to bring death on at once, to kill others and themselves; they have lost the will to live" (Keesey 126). The letters match: the cult members kill. They declare that this act, as empty and desolate as the desert, is the only "interesting" thing they do.

It is a perverse art for art's sake. The mystery of the absence of meaning, that for so many people initiates an urge for exploration--even as it leads to obsession, the secular twin of the holy man's urge to escape the "fallen" world--does not lead them to ask questions, because they have their answer: the desert is the answer. It offers them the nihilist's certainty, the absolute repudiation of mystery. Placing this answer in his novel allows DeLillo to show how, in a "weightless" time, a time without gods or God, style, structure, symmetry--extended into a will to "forget" Being--can easily be mistaken for
purpose. Facing the mystery of our existence, the cult responds not with humility but with absolute arrogance, presenting (as Michael Wood put it) "the arbitrary, the meaningless not as chaos and confusion but as heartless, pointless pattern" (27).

Their victim is someone Owen knows, a desert dweller and holy fool named Hamir Mazmudar whom Owen encountered days before. This man has wandered to the town of Howa Mandir; the letters match. Even though he knows the man, Owen says nothing, and does not try to intervene in the cult's plans. Owen's silence while the cult members prepare to complete their program has its origins in his childhood encounter with glossolalia, speaking in tongues--memories of which come back to him as the cult members leave. "Indeed, the juxtaposition of Owen's childhood memory of farmers speaking in tongues with the . . . murder . . . implies that his isolation, paralysis, and flight in the face of the former [described in the Tap's story] is the cause of, or at least psychologically resonant with, his weak and irresponsible reaction to the latter" (Morris 117; see also 116). Owen recalls the day a preacher called on his parents and the congregation of their church to "speak with the tongues of angels." "Get wet," the preacher said: "Let me hear that babbling brook. What am I talking about but freedom? Be yourself, that's all it is . . . . Jump in, get wet" (Names 306). Some were drawn to the call, even Owen's parents; but for Owen the call only seemed to open the way for dreadful, uncontrollable emotions. The "terrible holy gibberish" of the congregation caught up in the preacher's promise seemed to offer only a dangerous loss of precision, a blurring of the line between meaning and meaninglessness (Names 308). Too much freedom was promised, too much risk; the voices of the believers disturbed the cosmos with questions that do not have answers outside faith. Like
Jesse Vogel in Oates' *Wonderland*, Owen feared the "other" self, untrammled and unpredictable, who might emerge out of ecstatic language. Years later, hiding in a grain-bin from the cult members, Owen still feels this fear; however, he also begins to see that the promise of an answer, which the faithful believed lay hidden in the supposedly meaningless sounds, is as much a human necessity as it is a disturbing enigma. "Those were plain and forthright people, thought the man crouched in the dark. Those were people who deserved better. All they had to reconcile them to exhaustion and defeat was that meager place in the wind" (*Names* 307). The untranslatable holy noise that told of their passion, although outside his ken, might contain a power of reciprocation that the cult members, with their empty, meaningless ritual offered to silence, can only parody.

The cult's program is so entirely without meaning that one cannot even say for certain that its meaning is that it lacks meaning. As Owen admits to James, "'[their] killings mock us'" because "'They mock our need to structure and classify, to build a system against the terror in our souls'" (*Names* 308). Faced with the mysteries of mortality and the terror these mysteries can provoke, the cultists can only "make a system equal to the terror." There are no compensations in their scheme: as Owen puts it, for them "'the means to contend with death has become death.'" Here DeLillo echoes Heidegger's definition of authentic being: instead of accepting their "freedom towards death," cult members, like the "They" described in *Being and Time*, refuse what Heidegger calls "'a bracing awareness of [their] finitude'" (Steiner, *Heidegger* 106-7). Here one must recall the slogans of the cult: members talk of "no gods, no history," of "an alphabet of utter stillness" which is "the opposite of history" (*Names* 209, 291-92). By killing, cult members turn from attempts to live
in time to attempts to murder time by murdering meaning. They clear a way for nihilism, not for a deeper connection with Being, because they put the emptiest possible pattern in place of the great mystery of communication. And what is worse, they do it unconsciously: they really "intended nothing, they meant nothing. They only matched the letters." (Names 308). DeLillo sees to it that even the need to see a pattern of pattern-mocking is mocked by the refusal of the cult's acts to relinquish a sign of some final purpose and meaning. Its ways, from every direction, lead nowhere.

James Axton's obsession with the cult arises from the fact that, to some degree, he seems to be able to decipher their actions. He is the one, for example, who discovers that the letters match. This is the only part of his life over which he feels some control (Names 300). A mood of uncertainty dominates his thoughts. What he needs, as an alternative to the cult and his aimlessness, is some proof of the value of hope. Such proof comes to him in the last pages of the novel, which show him finding words with which to name his fears and desire in the story his son, Tap, is writing for him. A re-telling of Owen's childhood encounter with glossolalia, Tap's story, with its tone poised somewhere between the childish and child-like wisdom, and its ingenuous ingenuity of form (akin to the utterances of the tongue-speakers) seems to possess a power that pulls James away from obsession and despair.

For one thing, Tap's work with names contradicts the cult's emphasis on the empty similarity of initials. He is interested in whole words, not the first letters, and constantly checks with his father, his mother Kathryn, and Owen, to see that he is using words properly. His writing is a kind of home-making, in that it keeps James and Kathryn talking to each other, and brings Owen into
the family. All the adults use the chance to talk about his writing as a meeting place in which they renew their feelings for each other. James, in particular, finds that Tap's stories raise his mood and allow him to get away from the habits common to the weightless and nomadic existence both his job and the cult perpetuate. At the same time, Tap's writing is another form of archaeology, analogous to his work washing the pot-shards his mother and Owen uncover. He may only have fragments to work with, but he is attempting to help restore them to something like their original form. Digging into both Owen's hidden life and the hidden meanings of words with his "Spirited misspellings," Tap somehow make the words new again, and make James "see how [the words] worked, what they really were." In Tap's hands these words become "ancient things, secret, reshappable" (Names 313).

Much of the writing seems to uncover "curious perceptions about the words themselves, second and deeper meanings, original meanings." In fact, his creative misprisions are "original" in both senses of that word: the words seem to be simultaneously "old" and "new," a bridge back to a sense of continuity and a bridge forward to hope. By leaving the misspellings in, "out of exuberance and sly wonder and the inarticulate wish" to delight his father, Tap finds "the spoken poetry in those words, the rough form lost through usage" (Names 313). What these mistakes do, in fact, is break through time, and tap into something "more." The pun on his name--also heard when James describes how Owen seems to have learned how to "tap" into another layer of being (Names 19)--reveals Delillo's ambitions for this figure and his words: a tap on the shoulder gets one turned back the right way; a tap sets a letter in a tablet or on a typed page; a tap, opened, lets off pressure--and lets water flow forth that can change deserts.
The subtleties of Tap's text reveal DeLillo's skill as an artist, his power to order, adjust, and influence us with words. At the same time, the example of Tap's novel preserved in the last section of the book, "The Prairie," is "Childs play" (sic). Even as it reveals some spirit of wisdom beyond mere saying, it is also part of a self-conscious fiction "by" a fiction that tells us about the power of fiction--and the power of accidents. What is intriguing and laudatory about the way DeLillo creates Tap's writing is the way in which that writing sounds out the "mystery of communication" audible both in conversations and glossolalia. Unlike the cult's fixation on the coincidental matching of initials, Tap's exuberant accidents speak; they are haunted by emotions. This is the result of the way readers are allowed to join in the act of creation: DeLillo's text of James' text of Tap's text is written in such a way that it must be read to oneself before its genius for recovering the original, spoken poetry of language become apparent. Such speech in the silence of one's mind causes one to experience the spirited discovery James describes. The pages speak. This is their originality; and this is why the piece is worthy of being said to "name," not merely reflect, reality. DeLillo has created a poem in the sense in which Heidegger used that term, one that reveals poetry's power to clear a way for Being (see Steiner, Heidegger 22-4, 144-45).

If one takes the cult's empty system-building to be a type of nihilism, one can see DeLillo's understanding of art, symbolized by Tap's story, as a creatively "post-theological" re-definition of both the essential immitigability of the human condition and the need to experience a valid--albeit frangible and temporary--release from suffering. DeLillo, echoing Owen Brademas' claims for "the mind's little infinite," recently told an interviewer that "strict-
ly in theory, art is one of the consolation prizes we receive for having lived in a difficult and sometimes chaotic world," because it shows us meaningful patterns "that elude us in natural experience" (DeLillo to DeCurtis 304). Even though DeLillo grants equal privilege to both gratuitous play and aesthetic discernment in his fictive reproduction of Tap's story, there are similarities between Tap's attention to the chance for new orders, discovered "by accident," and the work of Heidegger's Poet who "names" by discovering his or her original voice. Tap's story, like that of Heidegger's poet, is an attempt to reveal "man's ostracism from Being and the gods, and simultaneously, a statement of this very condition whose truth and lyric power give assurance of rebirth" (Steiner, Heidegger 141-2). Unlike the nullifying patterns of the cult, Tap's book shows us how, as Steiner puts it, "in the midst of a nihilism and waste of spirit of which his own vulnerable social and psychological status make him the most acute and also the most endangered of witnesses, it is the poet who, supremely, perhaps even alone, is guarantor of man's ultimate Heimkehr ("home-coming") to the natural truth, to a sanctified hearth in the world of beings" (Heidegger 142). "The chapter's eccentric content and form argue for illogical expression in an illogical universe through words that satisfy expression of feeling through intuition rather than reason," says Paula Bryant. By doing this, DeLillo's play with language demonstrates "the potential for human freedom inherent in the deliberate disordering and recreation of languages" (16-17).

Tap's protagonist is "Orville Benton," Owen Brademas re-named; the letters match. Unaccommodated, "tongue tied!" and unable to "yeeld" to "the worldwind" of voices speaking in tongues around him, Orville stumbles from a Pentecostal revival hall onto the barren prairie, where he finds "Hisfait [is]
signed." Unable to get back to the secure world he had once known, he runs across a heath as storm-torn as Lear's into a life "worse than a retched nightmare"--into "the nightmare of real things, the fallen wonder of the world" (Names 335-39). He is exiled to a world of mystery, a world without final answers. This story brings James Axton back a little way towards equilibrium. Its archetypal images of mankind's "fallen" state and of a life spent separated from hope (or Being, or God) have the power to lead James away from just such a separation and back towards the sense of accommodation and hope he had lost when his marriage failed. Tap's gift turns James from the attractions of the cult and its reductive reading of the world towards a reverence and excitement for life he had thought he had lost forever.

James' last appearance in the book sums up this change. The book begins with his declaration that, although he has lived in Athens for a year, he has never wanted to go to the Acropolis: "So much converges there," he says. "It's what we've rescued from the madness. Beauty, dignity, order, proportion. There are obligations attached to such a visit" (Names 3). Near the end of the book, just after reading Tap's chapter (and just before readers encounter it) James changes his mind, and decides to climb up. His impression of the place is different than he had thought it would be: "I'd seen the temple a hundred times from the street, never suspecting it was this big," he says. "this scarred, broken, rough. How different from the spotlighted bijou I'd seen" (Names 329-30). In the Parthenon James is astonished by "so much space and openness, lost walls, pediments, roof, a grief for what has escaped containment" (Names 330). The gods have fled--or nearly so. Out of his astonishment comes knowl-

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7Cf. the list of concerns that James says Owen obliged him to face: "Memory, solitude, obsession, death. Subjects remote, I thought" (20).
edge: "the Parthenon," he tells us, "[is] not a thing to study but to feel. It [is not] aloof, rational, timeless, pure." Although they are literally above the city—and ancient—the buildings of the Acropolis remain "part of the living city below." Instead of the separateness, "the sacred height," James finds "human feeling" emerging from the stones . . . . a cry for pity . . . . [an] open cry, this voice we know as our own."

The ruins are a Clearing, and offer up a pious, open call for reconciliation with the world. Like Heidegger's example of the Greek temple in "The Origins of the Work of Art," the Parthenon both conceals and brings to presence "the God" because it both "opens up a world and . . . sets this world back again on earth," thereby bringing us closer to what is, closer to Being, without silencing the mystery of real things (Basic 167-8). The ruins' power is evident in the way their presence helps reveal the mystery of communication. Around James, "people in streams and clusters, in mass assemblies" gather, talking. "Everyone is talking" (Names 331). This talk, in the end, is an essential act of piety, the act of connection that offers comfort, because it connects individuals with "the fallen wonder of the world." The place and the voices come together to bring mysteries to presence. Here words—even the sound of words spoken aloud—have meaning, and seem to bring some meaning to existence. "This is what we bring to the temple," James concludes, "not prayer or chant or slaughtered rams. Our offering is language." As an offering of language, not to language, these voices house mystery—thereby sheltering Being, letting it be.

This offering, like the author's own offering of "The Prairie," wards off nihilism by expressing a reverence for the fallen wonder of communication.
Something both holy and wholly human is put in place of a mood of despair. Like his predecessors in this study, DeLillo makes a space in his fiction for a "religious" impulse to put in the way of nihilism. Keeping to a way between the antithetical forms of condemnation called down by both Prophets and Seekers on modern secularized culture and its nihilistic ways, DeLillo still puts in a word against alienation and in favour of a re-connection with the full significance of being a human being who knows he is going to die. The Names is a mysterious gift offered to those who are willing to turn away from the allure of nihilism.
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