American Impotence: 
Narratives of National Manhood in Postwar U.S. Literature

by

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Graduate Department of English 
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Abstract

“American Impotence” investigates a continuity between literary representations of masculinity and considerations of national identity in the works of five postwar novelists. In particular, I illustrate the manner in which Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, John Updike’s *Couples*, Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning*, Joan Didion’s *Democracy* and *The Last Thing He Wanted*, and Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* challenge the patterns of daily life through which a single figure is imagined to be the essential agent of American polity: namely, the self-made individualist, characterized by manly virtues like dominance, aggression, ambition, mastery, vitality, and virility. More specifically, this project examines the manner in which the iconicity of men helps sustain a narrative of “imperilled masculinity” that at once privileges an impossible identity, situated in the representative nucleus of postwar democracy, and forecloses other modalities of political life. Observing the full meaning of the word “potency,” I elucidate the interrelationships between narrative forms, masculine norms, and democratic practice. Ellison’s work ties the maturation of African American boys to the impossibility of full participation in civic life, for instance, while in Updike’s *Couples* the contradictions of virile manhood
manifest in the form of a fatalism that threatens to undo the carefully cultivated social boundaries of early sixties bohemianism; in a variety of ways, *The Public Burning* and *American Psycho* represent the iconic nature of masculinity as a psychic threat to those men closest to it, while Didion’s female protagonists find themselves flirting with the promises of a secret agency linked to imperial adventures in Southeast Asia and Central America. In the cultural context of the Cold War, these novelists demonstrate how intensified participation in national fantasies of potency and virility is inevitably disempowering; as an alternative, this dissertation seeks to consider impotence as dissensus detached from the mandates of hegemonic masculinity.
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Introduction
The Politics of Potency

This dissertation concerns itself principally with manhood as political metaphor or, more precisely, with that metaphor’s complicated articulation in American fiction from the second half of the twentieth century. By reading iconic masculinity together with politics in the works of five postwar novelists, it investigates the mimetic centrality of a masculine value system to democratic practice and the exercise of power in the United States more generally. The authors examined in this study—Ralph Ellison, John Updike, Robert Coover, Joan Didion, Bret Easton Ellis—engage in an ongoing debate about the relationship between men and the nation during the years of the Cold War. In a variety of ways, and from a variety of perspectives, they reproduce, scrutinize, and often challenge the persistent patterns of daily life through which a single figure is imagined to be the essential agent of American polity: namely, the self-made, rugged individualist, characterized by such manly virtues as dominance, toughness, aggression, ambition, mastery, vitality, and virility. In short, these novelists contend with the ever-potent male, a symbolic Adam\(^1\) whose sexual, economic, and creative energies together seem to

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\(^1\) E. Anthony Rotundo speculates about the genesis of these values when he points out that “when influential thinkers of the late eighteenth century pondered the growing claims of the self, they thought
define and delimit the shape of national identity for all citizens. More precisely, my argument in what follows assumes the unliveable nature of such an idealized subject position to be axiomatic. I focus on the manner in which the very iconicity of normative manhood helps sustain a narrative of “imperilled masculinity” that at once privileges an impossible social identity—situated as the representative nucleus of postwar liberal democracy—and forecloses other possible modalities of political agency. If this study of American literature has a polemical or prescriptive edge, it lies in an assertion that the intensified participation in national fantasies of potency and virility is inevitably disempowering; as an alternative, “American Impotence: Narratives of National Manhood in Postwar U.S. Literature” seeks to consider impotence as a mode of dissensus that detaches itself from the anxiety-driven mandates of masculinist political values.

“National manhood” is Dana Nelson’s term. In the context of her monograph about gender, race, and nation from the early days of the republic to the mid-nineteenth century, she argues that “the antidemocratic structure of national manhood” produces an ideological impasse that “blocks white men from being able efficiently to identify socioeconomic inequality as structural rather than individual failure” and, moreover, that such an impasse “entails a series of affective foreclosures that block those men’s more heterogeneous democratic identifications and energies” (ix). From the beginning of the revolutionary period onward, compulsory membership in a nationalized brotherhood of white men brings about the internal fragmentation and self-division of white masculine identity, which Nelson claims results in the need to assert “stability through multiple, only of the male self. From the start, individualism was a gendered issue.” In an early American context, this led to conditions in which “American men erected a new political system in which power flowed upward from the individual man” (17) and, moreover, in which “[t]he dominant concerns were the concerns of the self—self-improvement, self-control, self-interest, self-advancement” (20).
multiplying calculations of otherness” (63). According to Nelson, this is the case because iconic manhood represents “an impossible identity—impossible in the sense that it is an always-agonistic position, making it difficult for any human to fit into a full sense of compatibility with its ideal construction” (28). The vicious circularity of this form of masculinity lies in the fact that powerlessness results in the abdication of democratic responsibility by way of perpetual societal re-investment in the symbols and values of white masculinity—these investments in turn leave citizens more disempowered and more likely to further displace their political agency onto the idealized American Adam. Tracing this pattern of democratic practice to contemporary representations of the American presidency in Hollywood films like Air Force One and Contact, for instance, her afterword suggests that “[a]s we look to [the figure of the President] to provide for us a cleaned up, unifying, safely virtualized sensation of democratic contact, we miss what we might otherwise be working out, in a far richer disorderly way, all around us” (237). Although my project differs in scope and breadth from Dana Nelson’s, her focus on the melancholic structure underlying the collectivization of national manhood teaches us that collective investment in ideals of potency are constitutively productive of a parallel political impotence felt both by normative white males—who cannot hope to live up to its mandates—and the various others onto which their anxieties, fragmentations, and self-divisions are displaced. Like other recent studies of self-made manhood in the United States, including E. Anthony Rotundo’s American Manhood and David Greven’s Men Beyond Desire, Nelson implies that “normative males may not be as safely, contentedly, or predictably normative as they may appear” (Greven 226).
Although it can be said that narratives of imperilled masculinity represent the immediate topic of these readings—and some of the studies discussed throughout this introduction certainly focus more rigidly upon the narrative entanglements of this kind of gender trouble and state authority—what I’ve endeavoured to observe throughout this project are the interrelationships between many broader aspects of the life of the citizen-subject that the rubric of democratic practice might imply. By employing a terminology of “practice” I mean not primarily the functioning of institutions, or even the sometimes petty electoral or legislative contests between parties that tend to dominate media representations of political theatre in our time; rather, what concerns me is a whole range of everyday norms and behaviours—some contested and others conventional, some public and others private, some actively pursued and others passively accepted—that have come to define what I will be calling the citizen-subject. These practices certainly might include overt political activity like voter participation, collective demonstration, or military or civic national service, but my chief interest lies in those attitudes that may not seem immediately political in nature, attitudes and life-activities that are usually described as belonging to social, personal, or private spheres of life: religious belief, artistic production, parental and familial activity, shopping habits, sexual mores, gender stereotypes—even, to lay my cards on the table, the anxieties surrounding male prowess and reproductive capacity that my title, “American Impotence,” implies. I take this position because I take it to be true that, as Slavoj Žižek has put it, “there is no proper content of politics: all political struggles and decisions concern other specific social spheres.” We’ll see in many of the texts that I analyze here that political practice often represents an itch of sorts, an uncomfortable intrusion into a circumscribed enclave of
private life, or even an anarchic injunction that violates the hegemonic foreclosure of
democratic representation implied by national manhood. Moreover, these texts frequently
feature characters who can never quite live up to the requirements of this idealized
masculinity, despite their affluence, education, or political savvy. As the “purely formal
principle of antagonistic struggle” (Žižek 291), therefore, politics proper often constitutes
the intrusion of a struggle for democratic inclusion into those spheres that have been
traditionally closed off from it. What we might call “real” politics is, in other words,
anathema to an ideal of manhood that often sustains itself through the suppression of
social otherness and the foreclosing of national destinies.

Kate Millett’s controversial claim in Sexual Politics that “sex has a frequently
neglected political aspect” (xix) informs this study as well, if mostly in spirit. Though her
work has been criticized for its reductionism, her arguments in favour of studying the
political content of sexual activity as it is depicted in several works of contemporary
literature shares with mine an assumption that the representation of masculinity in
postwar literature directly reflects the structures of power operating at a national level.
As a classic of second wave feminism, her book founds its claims about patriarchy on a
broader definition of politics as “power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby
one group of persons is controlled by another” (23). Such a formulation has become
central to identity politics in our time. In contrast, the fiction that I wish to discuss—
including some overtly political novels like Robert Coover’s The Public Burning and
Joan Didion’s Democracy—dramatizes in a more direct way American manhood’s
uncomfortable yet indelible association with state activities and questions of political
being. Politics, in this sense, still carries its narrower definition as the art or science of
government in the readings that follow. My goal isn’t to expose the hidden patriarchal assumptions of contemporary literature so much as it is to show how postwar novelists are actively engaging the ideological intersections of iconic manhood and democratic practice. Insofar as power can be thought of as a summation of force relations, we can identify in these works of literature a frequent slippage between questions of democratic representation in the sphere of public authority and the themes and tropes of gender.

To speak of national manhood in terms of its potency (or impotence) is to use a word with several concurrent meanings, all of which remain in play in the deployment of masculine norms across American democratic practice. Commonly, for instance, “potency” refers to the operation of power, or is sometimes even synonymous with it. The term can refer to state authority, but more importantly it reflects a give-and-take that allows Michel Foucault to define power as a “multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization” (History of Sexuality 92). The usefulness of this definition of power to my study of masculinity rests not only in its relational nature but also in the emphasis Foucault puts on the relatively heterogeneous qualities of this “moving substrate,” the “ceaseless struggles and confrontations… disjunctions and contradictions” (92-3). Contrary to the claims of his critics, the later works of Foucault do not disallow the possibility that resistance can bring about social change: “We must make allowance,” he writes, “for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power,

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2 Along with a few other denotations that I do not discuss here, The Oxford English Dictionary’s lengthy entry for “potency” includes “[p]ower, powerfulness; ability to accomplish or affect something; authority, influence”; the “[a]bility to achieve erection or ejaculation in sexual intercourse; virility”; and “[p]otential, potentiality, possibility; capability of development or of becoming.”
but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (101). The discourse of potency, in this light, denotes the equally creative and destructive capabilities of power, a quality rhetorically tied to Adamic productivity and authority in determining historical and political outcomes. To lay claim to power in terms of its potency is to attempt to seize the instabilities at the heart of power itself, to assign myriad social others to fixed hierarchical positions and thereby limit or eliminate the dynamics of resistance that Foucault describes. As a discourse that attempts to eliminate socioeconomic struggle by foreclosing political possibilities outside those constructed in the name of national manhood, it’s not surprising that the articulation of power as a knowledge system tends to privilege the biological, demographic, and sexual norms “that can be applied to both a body one wishes to discipline and a population one wishes to regularize” (“Society Must Be Defended” 253).

To elaborate, the values of potency central to heteronormative masculinity reflect the contradictory nature of monolithic political power—its denial of the “moving substrate” of resistances that threatens it—as when Foucault claims in an interview that “[i]f it is true that so many power relationships have been developed, so many systems of control, so many forms of surveillance, it is precisely because power was always impotent ” (Foucault Live 184). The disciplinary rhetoric of mastery may assert an unimpeachable and impenetrable authority based on the values of dominance and productive force that it itself makes central—but, as Dana Nelson’s study suggests, these claims to potency,

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3 According to E. Anthony Rotundo, in the earlier days of the republic there were two competing conceptions about “manliness and the male sphere. One trusted the unchecked operation of men’s nature to be self-correcting and to create the greatest social good. The other envisioned ungoverned manhood as a socially destructive force” (25).
always supposedly revelatory of the impotence of citizen-subjects, in fact tend to signal a more fundamental impotence at the heart of national manhood’s vicious circularity.\textsuperscript{4}

Potency’s second significant denotation lies in the conceptual dichotomy of potentiality and actuality first elaborated by Aristotle in his \textit{De Anima}, \textit{Physics}, and \textit{Metaphysics}. The link between this abstract dichotomy and postwar political discourse may not be immediately apparent, but it can be made more clear if we remind ourselves that Aristotle’s definition of the city-state—and, famously, man as a political animal—depends upon this causal distinction as one of its central metaphors: “We may now proceed to add that the city is prior in order of nature to the family and the individual. [...] We... see that the city exists by nature and that it is prior to the individual,” he writes, “For if the individual is not self-sufficient when he is isolated he will stand in the same relation to the whole as other parts do their wholes” (\textit{Politics} 11). Though arguably the individual is conceived by Aristotle as both constituting and constituted by the polis, as R.F. Stalley points out the philosopher’s analogy of the individual with a “stone hand” that loses its meaning when separated from “the whole body” suggests “that one could not be a man at all without being part of the \textit{polis}” (xii). This claim is in line with Aristotle’s account in Book Theta of the \textit{Metaphysics}, in which he argues that “there can be no question but that actuality is prior to potentiality” (272) in both substance and time. He organizes actuality and potentiality into a familiar teleology in which “the end is the actuality, and it is for the sake of this actuality-end that the potentiality is brought in”

\textsuperscript{4} Foucault’s reflections on the Cold War are interesting in this regard: “The workings of contemporary political power are such that atomic power represents a paradox that is difficult, if not impossible, to get around. The power to manufacture and use the atom bomb represents the deployment of a sovereign power that kills, but it is also the power to kill life itself. So the power that is being exercised in this atomic power is exercised in such a way that it is capable of suppressing life itself. And, therefore, to suppress itself insofar as it is the power that guarantees life” (\textit{“Society Must Be Defended”} 253).
Though his reworking of the Platonic theory of forms is too complicated to be summarized here, what’s important is how that which is actualized (the whole or end) gains priority over the substance from which it is made. This same line of reasoning applied to contemporary politics suggests the existence of an ends-based ideology through which the citizen-subject exists as the becoming of the nation, a part to its pre-determined whole; this way of thinking about politics constitutes an abolition of freedoms and resistances incompatible with the regime of hegemonic manhood. I’m not the first to make this connection between manhood and politics in these works. Tracing the connections between masculinity and power through Aristotle’s body of work, for instance, Wendy Brown’s *Manhood and Politics* argues that politics “has been more exclusively limited to men than any other realm of endeavor and has been more intensely, self-consciously masculine than most other social practices” (4). In this light, she traces the manner through which “Aristotle subverts his own rich understanding of what it means to be human in his effort to structure individual and collective existence according to a hierarchy of values in which manhood, defined in a narrow and alienated fashion, is at the top” (8). If, as Brown argues, “politics has historically borne an explicitly masculine identity” (4), then the mandate of potency seems to be at play in his application of the distinction between actuality and potentiality to political life.

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5 When Aristotle, deeply suspicious of the masses, writes in the same breath in his *Politics* that “the city is prior in the order of nature to the family and the individual” and that “[a]ll things derive their essential character from their function and their capacity” (11), he is making an argument coterminous with the distinctions he draws in his *Metaphysics* between the part and the whole. This analogy between his metaphysical and political philosophy allows him to naturalize a claim that the *polis* (city-state) has priority over the individual, transforming the latter into the grounds of possibility for the former. Only those who take part in this actuality are deemed to be political subjects. It’s from political application of series of hierarchies that he can conclude, in a series of sentences that have never ceased to influence political philosophy, that “[t]he man who is isolated, who is unable to share in the benefits of political association, or has no need to share because he is already self-sufficient, is no part of the city, and must therefore be either a beast or a god” (*Politics* 11). As Roland Barthes once put it, all of this “causality is artificial, false; but it creeps, so to speak, through the back door of Nature” (*Mythologies* 131).
Aristotelian political theory—so conceived anyway—seems to be built upon the same hierarchical structures that subordinate the possible agencies of otherness to an idealized exercise of male force that is linked to the city-state. However, all of this begs the question: what is the status of impotence? How might it represent one of those points of resistance that Foucault asserts are part of the processes of power?

In “On Potentiality,” Giorgio Agamben makes the ties between political potency and this dichotomy of potentiality/actuality explicit by arguing about how “the concept of potentiality has never ceased to function in the life and history of humanity, most notably in that part of humanity that has grown and developed its potency to the point of imposing its power over the whole planet” (177). In analyzing Aristotle’s legacy, he emphasizes that the philosopher dismissed the Megarian claim that “all potentiality exists only in actuality” (180) because it renders the distinction between the terms nonsensical. The potential of a child to become an adult is an example of this naïve understanding.6 Agamben laments that “[i]n the philosophical tradition... Aristotle’s statement [against the Megarians] has gone almost unnoticed”—it makes it seem that he “uttered a banality or a tautology” (183). The subsequent privileging of potentiality has led, he claims, to a misapprehension of both Aristotle’s ontology and politics. In making an argument for re-reading this work, Agamben suggests that Aristotle isn’t particularly interested in “generic potentiality” either, such as the child’s potential to become a concert pianist, or President of the United States—or even, culturally speaking, a man or woman. Instead, the version of potentiality (“existing potentiality”) that Agamben believes Aristotle found so compelling is “the one that belongs to someone who... has knowledge or an ability”

6 As Daniel Heller-Roazen explains, Agamben’s claim is that “[f] if potentiality were always only potential to be (or do), everything potential would already always have been actualized; all potentiality would always already have passed into actuality, and potentiality would never exist as such” (16).
Based on a person’s capability, this potentiality is originally an impotentiality because it’s only by “not-doing” that it is preserved from simply becoming an actuality. Conceived as a faculty in this manner, impotentiality implies a degree of freedom—and its default state is one of refusal, an unanswered and even unheard demand awaiting our response. From a political standpoint, then, we can infer what Giorgio Agamben calls “the act of impotentiality”:

To be free is not simply to have the power to do this or that thing, nor is it simply to have the power to refuse to do this or that thing. To be free is, in the sense we have seen, to be capable of one’s own impotentiality, to be in relation to one’s own privation. This is why freedom is freedom for both good and evil. (183)

As Nelson intimates and Foucault confirms, the deployment of masculine values across democratic practices regularizes potency by making impotence a site of anxiety for those white males who’ve traditionally held positions of power in American politics. Clearly opposed to the notion of impotentiality as the faculty that authorizes actualities—whether this reading is authentically Aristotle’s or a strategic misreading on Agamben’s part is inconsequential in this regard—national manhood promotes values that cast impotence as a failure of subjects to live up to a norm of male performance, thereby transforming the unfulfilled capacity of citizen-subjects into evidence of their apparent personal incapacities. Impotence, so conceived, becomes a failure of agency rather than what I would like to assert that it is: precisely the exercise of agency.

As Agamben’s slip from “potentiality” to “potency” in the first passage above implies, a concern with power can be mapped onto a history of sexual dysfunction as well. This is obviously our third denotation and, as the least abstract of the three, the one
most likely to work its way directly into American literature. Today, the most colloquial use of the term “impotence” signifies a sexual dysfunction by describing what more modern medical discourse identifies as either “infertility” (the inability to contribute to conception) or “erectile dysfunction” (the inability to sustain an erection). In order to suggest its importance to gender politics, Susan Bordo has pointed out the curiously enduring use of the word by medical researchers: “Frigidity... went by the board a long while ago,” she notes, “But ‘impotence,’ no less loaded with ugly gender implications, remained the term of choice” (60). In the case of either meaning, it’s obvious that impotence denotes masculine inadequacy, a failure of productive forces or sexual performance. Thinking of all three denotations together—allowing for a certain semantic slippage—we can see how collective investment in masterly recitals of national potency generate and mask anxieties about performance that are at once related to questions of gender, sex, and politics. As sociologist Michael Kimmel illustrates, “[m]en with sexual problems are rarely gender nonconformists, unable to or unwilling to follow the rules of masculine sexual adequacy. If anything, they are overconformists to norms that define sexual adequacy by the ability to function like a well-oiled machine” (The Gendered Society 230). He recognizes that an identification with the vicious circularity of norms contributes to impotence itself, going so far as to cite medical studies that propose cultural components to these dysfunctions. Impotence is not merely a failure of the body but also an expression of an affective impasse similar to that discussed by Nelson in National Manhood. We can see that the self-perpetuating idealization of male potency produces a phobic relationship between men and impotence. The more that an individual man conforms to the impossible standards of hegemonic masculinity, the more he is
disempowered by it—and thus the more he feels pressured to conform. In this light, performance becomes a method of demonstrating one’s successful manhood, even in cases where “a man’s penis may simply be instructing him that his feelings are not in synch with the job he’s supposed to do” (Bordo 68). Reading narratives of imperilled masculinity as pseudo-biological fantasies—fables about the collective exercise of male power in the nation—reveals a series of contradictions in the attempt to contain the matrices of resistance, contradictions implied by impotence and this fear of otherness. In literature, in fact, sexual impotence often serves as a metaphor for a more general political powerlessness. To wrest the term “impotence” from its negative status in the rhetoric of national manhood is to suggest that impotence might oppose the vicious circularity of national manhood by recognizing itself to be a mode of freedom that might “grant... [or refuse] the existence of what is actual” (Heller-Roazen 17).

Although it’s possible to approach what we might describe as a thematic unity between power and male potency in terms of metaphysics or political philosophy, clearly for our purposes it will be best to keep thinking within the realm of narrative while noting the dynamics through which the delimitation of political subjectivities is semantically tied to the production of both social and literary narratives of imperilled masculinity. According to Pierre Macherey, for instance, insofar as it is plotted along a causal chain, the traditional work of literature is governed by a necessity that “is evident

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7 In Philip Roth’s recent end to the Zuckerman series, Exit Ghost, the formerly promiscuous protagonist’s impotence (brought on by prostate surgery) is mirrored in a lengthy scene in which he and a group of younger men and women watch the results of the 2004 presidential election: “To them,” waxes Zuckerman, reflecting on his own condition as well, “Bush Junior’s was never an administration but a regime that had seized power by judicial means. They were meant to be reclaiming their franchise in 2004, and horribly they didn’t, leaving them with the feeling, along about eleven last night, not only of having lost but in some way or other of having been defrauded again” (98).
primarily in the fact that not a word in the text can be changed” (52). On the other hand, he notes, a text must generate interest by creating “novelty,” a sense that anything can happen, what he describes as the “continuous presence of possibility within with the narrative” that “compels precisely because it seems that it might have been different” (53). The complexity of literary works derives from the mobile processes—the interplay of necessity and novelty—that condition the plot: a novel is neither a product of pure intention nor entirely transcendent of it, he claims. In contrast, I contend that what Joan Didion likes to call “political fictions” often function in the opposite manner: they constitute socio-political narratives that attempt to force necessity onto the pure novelty of democratic entitlement. Although Macherey warns about confusing necessity with fatality, potency describes a formal assumption about narrative in which this is the case. As in the Aristotelian model of potentiality that casts citizen-subjects as the becoming of a national actuality, such potent narratives subordinate individuals to predetermined outcomes—while at the same time they preserve the promise of agency in imagining an Adamic masculinity that is, in fact, impossible. Impotence, in this light, denotes the failure of these explanatory forces of narrative to fully circumscribe us, and it suggests that actuality or power is always subject to alternative sites of agency, alternate plot lines. If literature can be said to have a political role it may be to remind us that, as Ralph Ellison once put it, “politics is the art of the possible, but only of the possible” (83). The emphasis on “only” is his, but I’d like to claim it for myself as well.

To take a couple of recent examples of how the narrative and mythic qualities of masculinity have inspired studies of literary form, Bordo’s *The Male Body* makes much of the narrative possibilities of male sexual practice, as does *Images of Bliss*, Murat
Aydemir’s recent book on ejaculation, which makes much of the narrative dimensions of sexual climax: “[E]jaculation forges narrative,” claims Aydemir: “As an irreducible happening, bringing about change and consequence, it forces narrators, focalizers, and characters to come up with accounts of what is about to happen, what is happening, and what has happened... [a]s persistent irritants, ejaculation and sperm trigger all kinds of plotting: remedial, recuperative, digressive, questioning, subversive” (xix). Aydemir shows how the conventional movement of plot from rising action toward climax and dénouement—Gustav Freytag’s pyramid is taught to elementary school children—maps neatly onto conventional sexual experiences as well. No doubt, to think of alternative modes, means, and locations of ejaculation might forge other kinds of narratives as well. Bordo, in a similar fashion, describes the centrality of the phallus to be evidence of “biometaphors” or “biofantasies” that “enhance the body part with a promise (in this case stimulating words) of sexual satisfaction or power” (47). Her concern is with the socio-symbolic nature of phallic language, the ways in which rigid manhood is rearticulated by borrowing from the conceptual schemes of “names of heroic or mythic status,” “power tools,” and “weaponry.” Though I’ve endeavoured to approach impotence in light of the broader meanings laid out above, and I discuss representations of physiological dysfunction only occasionally, my project is founded upon a similar assertion that the narratives of national manhood shape political possibility. Many of the works analyzed here can be said to be critiquing the values of hegemonic masculinity by dramatizing a narrative/sexual dysfunction of penetration, explanatory force, resolution, or revelation.

By linking narratives of masculinity-in-crisis to what Dana Nelson calls an “institutionally productive melancholy” (205), moreover, I seek to demonstrate how both
the form and content of postwar literature can engage and deflate the masculine values of American polity. At the same time, this study resists the disciplinary narrative that has made George Kennan’s “Long Telegram” on the containment of the Soviet threat a dominant touchstone in readings of Cold War literature, the kernel of a set of critical assumptions that Steven Belletto has recently described as a “routinized reading generator” (152). Although Alan Nadel’s classic of the discipline, *Containment Culture*, has a role to play in some of what follows—especially in illustrating the relationship between gender and the struggle between superpowers—I’ve avoided obsessively employing U.S. foreign policy as a critical lens. On the one hand, I see imperilled masculinity as a transhistorical phenomenon, built into modern cultural forms of hegemonic manhood insofar as it functions precisely by distancing the lived experiences of men from the ideals it sets out. The studies of Nelson, Greven, or Rotundo all demonstrate that American manhood has, since its inception, been threatened by a multitude of instabilities and internal contradictions. On the other, it’s not unreasonable to claim that many of the authors discussed in this study situate national manhood in terms of historical experiences: Ralph Ellison’s work ties the maturation of African American boys to the impossibility of full participation in civic life during the middle parts of the century, for instance, while in Updike’s *Couples* the contradictions of virile manhood manifest in the form of a political fatalism that threatens to undo the carefully cultivated social boundaries of early sixties bohemianism; in different ways, *The Public Burning* and *American Psycho* both represent the symbolic or iconic nature of masculinity as a psychic threat to those men closest to it, while Joan Didion’s female protagonists find themselves flirting with the promises of a “secret agency” linked to
American imperial adventures in Southeast Asia and Central America. As recent studies and essays by Nadel, Kimmel, and Kyle A. Cuordileone make clear, “[t]he Cold War and the ‘race for space’ introduced an intractable national competitiveness” between superpowers that became “the testing ground of an insecure and compulsive masculinity” (Kimmel History of Men 101). Any historicizing I do here is a reflection of an author’s own attempt to make sense of his or her times through sometimes dense historical archives. In the case of this project, the Cold War is context not cause.

Finally, when writing about representations of masculinity, especially in the larger context of a white middleclass value system, there’s also always a danger of reproducing what Nina Baym once attacked as the “melodramas of beset manhood” that often characterize attempts by literary studies to define an essential American experience. According to Baym, this convention produces criticism in which fiction becomes “representative of the author’s literary experience, [a] struggle for integrity and livelihood against flagrantly bad best-sellers written by women” (130). She identifies, for example, how “the transference of the American myth from the Adamic hero in the story... to the Adamic creator of the story” is governed by a drama in which the limitless potentiality of the masculine artist is threatened or curtailed by a thoroughly feminine society. As a consequence, the roles of a woman “in the drama of creation are like those allotted to her in a male melodrama: either she is to be silent, like nature; or she is the creator of conventional works, the spokesperson of society” (138). Such fallacies serve to obscure not only the historical importance of female authors in the United States, but also the complexities of masculinity itself as a social signifier by rendering all deviations from the Adamic norm of creation symptomatic of a crisis in both gender and
representation. Whether queer, or of colour, or just not that into football, in other words, any man who doesn’t adhere to a previously delimited notion of what it means to be manly or macho comes to stand in for a deeper problem of national creative powers. Since one of my goals in writing about impotence is to undo the stigma attached to male weakness or vulnerability and thus to resist the phallic metonymy through which impotence might imply a malfunction of the whole man and nation, this dissertation will obviously not subscribe to such melodramatic notions of American experience. Indeed, I hope that the following distinction has already been made: by discussing narratives of imperilled masculinity, my aim is not to argue about how an empirical truth of gender is reflected in literature, but rather to illustrate how such imperilment itself functions as a social narrative productive of gender. Most of the postwar novels that I examine in the following chapters have been selected because they problematize the problem in this fashion: they signify upon (and sometimes critique) the thematic entanglement of masculinity and politics. Insofar as this project is organized around the elaboration of conceptual metaphors that give shape to our cultural and political assumptions, therefore, I’d like to give any sociological or historical pronouncements a wide berth—although I am tempted to add that I suspect masculinity has never really been in crisis, in the sense that crisis lies in its very constitution, as seems to be the case in all norms. It suffices to say that the full meaning of potency as a political narrative lies in the analogue that it establishes between the lives of individual men and the nation as a whole. As a

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8 By noting how Patrick Bateman’s resemblance to a norm of masculinity begins to threaten his very existence, chapter five of this dissertation argues that norms evince a certain tautological fatality by suspending reflection in the name of sensory self-evidence: in Ellis’s novel, to live up to a norm is to become its dead letter. See also Dana Nelson’s account of the productive melancholy at the heart of white fraternalism in National Manhood: “White manhood hides its many losses from itself: it is a nearly impossible (however nationally/institutionally productive) subject position to achieve and to maintain, and its human costs are high” (203).
consequence this analysis will consider how American fiction represents the conditions of possibility for masculine agency in light of reproductive, political, and strictly aesthetic modes of being.

In the first chapter, “Ralph Ellison and the Aesthetics of Protest,” I chart the author’s struggle to represent a legitimate initiation into manhood for African American youth. More particularly, I claim that his unwillingness or inability to do so is evidence of the built-in limitations of the version of social liberalism that Ellison espoused in many of his essays and speeches. By reading broadly—taking examples from some of his earliest short stories (“That I Had the Wings,” “A Coupla Scalped Indians”) as well as from *Invisible Man* and his unfinished second novel—I observe the frequency with which his fiction works to couple the maturation of male protagonists with an entrance into the public sphere. In each of these texts, however, the crossing point into manhood is either qualified by ambiguity or is altogether absent, while the possibility of civic participation in national politics is characterized by similar compromise or impossibility. Reading masculinity, race, and politics together as a thematic unity will thus allow us to consider the limits of Ellison’s sometimes trite Emersonian optimism about U.S. democracy. In the case of *Invisible Man*, for instance, we’ll see how the narrator’s adult life begins with an act of public address—the speech he gives after participating in the Battle Royale in the first chapter—and then subsequently takes the shape of a series of encounters with politically motivated crowds. Arguing against a critical tradition that interprets the novel as a celebration of heroic or existential individualism, I seek to illustrate the manner in which the suspended ending of the novel constitutes a textual
breach, a space in which the values of Adamic manhood can be relinquished in favour of a perspective founded upon an inability to ever fully realize the democratic ideal. Despite the fact that Ellison’s own readings of *Invisible Man* sometimes align the novel with the nineteenth century Bildungsroman, then, the narrative is neither individualist nor wholly given to exceptionalism; rather, it enjoins us to reconsider the democratic process as one innately based upon our inability to accomplish our own ideals of inclusion. In this sense, at least, it is a text that complicates rather than resolves the relationship between the individual artist and his audience.

By reading the invisible man’s assertion that his “world has become one of infinite possibilities” as a negation of established hierarchies and political entitlement, I show that Ellison’s refusal to articulate a programme of dissent for his protagonist in its final pages demonstrates that nothing has been decided insofar as structures of power in the United States are concerned. As an assertion of the undetermined subjectivity of the individuals, such possibility represents a declaration of impotence, an unwillingness to become an object or instrument of political change. Thus impotentiality is asserted by Ellison against an elite, whether mainstream or politically radical, who would determine reality by “putting the world in a strait jacket” (566). This thesis allows us to properly understand the author’s much later claims that his novel is founded upon “fictional vision of an ideal democracy” (*Invisible Man* xxx) and, elsewhere, that “the true subject of democracy is not simply material well-being but the extension of the democratic process in the direction of perfecting itself” and “the most obvious test and close to that perfect is the inclusion—not assimilation—of the black man” (*Territory* 110-1). Using this kind of evidence of the author’s sustained appraisal of polity, I argue that far from being an
apolitical writer he directly engages with the problem of an individual’s responsibility to the masses. Ellison is not a consistent thinker by any stretch, and yet I think the author’s well-documented dislike of mass movements like the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) stems not so much from an affirmation of postwar liberalism or humanism as it does from a desire to see the dispossessed as the always emerging subject of democracy rather than as an object or instrument of socioeconomic revolt. In Ralph Ellison’s peculiar strain of bleak or melancholy liberalism, then, it’s our failure to live up to our democratic ideals, signified in Invisible Man by the protagonist’s inability to act in the novel’s suspended conclusion, that becomes the grounds for new causes yet to be articulated. By refusing to make manhood a viable endpoint for his narrative, he implies the existence of modes of self-empowerment predicated not on mastery and force but on a refusal to master and to be forceful.

The three essays that make up the middle portion of this study are all situated around a specific series of questions about the theme of potentiality: how do metaphors of potency manifest themselves as national fantasies of empowerment? Why is the relationship of either individuals or communities to national politics so often represented as an uncomfortable one? What do literary narratives of masculinity-in-crisis have to teach us about the nature of postwar political discourse? My intention in exploring these subtopics is not to produce a linear narrative—an unfolding story with beginning and end—so much as it is to suggest several possible perspectives on national manhood. In this sense, my goal is to offer less a hermeneutics of transcendence than a field of contention. In taking up works by Updike, Coover, and Didion I explore some productive

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9 See Sacvan Bercovitch’s “The Music of America” in The Rites of Assent for a discussion of the scholar’s relationship to the subject and an argument for non-transcendence.
differences between authorial representations of politics and manhood in order to show how it has become a subject worthy of debate. For instance, “Crisis Theology and the ‘Garden of Private Life’ in Updike’s *Couples*” explores the manner in which the author’s discomfort with sixties counterculture is reflected in his best-selling novel from 1968. In his memoir, *Self-Consciousness*, for instance, Updike reflects upon the discovery that, contrary to his own assumptions about his longstanding liberalism, the opinions he held about Vietnam and the administrations of both Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon were “out of step with [his] editorial and literary colleagues” (117). This realization forced him to re-evaluate his “impression that political concern was vapid and played small part in the civilized life” because Vietnam “made it impossible to ignore politics, to cultivate serenely [his] garden of private life and printed artifact” (129). Written and published in the same period that he was struggling with the dilemma represented by this intrusion of politics into his Edenic privacy, *Couples* explores the manner in which such feelings of radical helplessness during the Kennedy years were expressed as a kind of “political fatalism.” This fatalism made necessary the elaboration of a middle-class enclave that strictly divides the adulterous couples of Tarbox, Massachusetts from national concerns. As is typical of much of Updike’s work, the ambiguous entanglement of religious themes and sexual ones drives a query of the psychological and social consequences of postwar secularity. By taking the novel’s two epigraphs—from liberal Protestant theologian Paul Tillich and Russian Poet Alexander Blok—as hints that a consideration of democratic practice underlies this seemingly apolitical narrative, I argue that his novel traces a moment of cultural reaction, one that’s constitutive of postwar sociality but which had also already vanished from national consciousness by the time Updike sat down to write
about it during the late sixties. More particularly, I focus on the theological valences of the central homoerotic relationship between Piet Hanema, the virile homebuilder whose acts of adultery constitute the bulk of the story, and Freddy Thorne, the local dentist whom he cuckolds. Male pride and physical potency become the stakes in a Manichean rivalry between the two, culminating in a “bargain” in which Freddy agrees to secure an abortion for Piet’s mistress in exchange for a night with his wife. My reading of the novel explores Updike’s representation of how perception of national life became fatalistic during the Cold War and thus, like Freddy himself, tied to death. I argue that Updike represents an existential crisis of masculine agency grounded in the recognition that mainstream politics in the United States has assumed the role of one of the primary features of religious faith: namely, Godly omniscience. In this cultural context, Piet is forced to renegotiate the relationship between his once vigorous masculinity and the coming counterculture that so baffled the author.

In contrast to Updike’s staging of his own discomfort with national politics, the third chapter reads Robert Coover’s radical satire of the Rosenberg trial as a parable of power meant to critique the masculinist political spectacles of Cold War America. Beginning with a consideration of the debt that The Public Burning’s exaggerated, bawdy depiction of the McCarthy era owes to the illustrations of artists like Herbert Block (“Herblock”) and Theodore Geisel (“Dr. Seuss”), it interprets the novel’s infamous final sequence—in which then Vice President Richard Nixon is unwillingly sodomized by Uncle Sam—as an allegorical tableau vivant or editorial cartoon. This caricature, I argue, implies that a brutal imposition of consent lies behind the relationship between an individual incumbent and the sovereignty signified by both the presidency and Uncle
Sam himself. Indeed, I seek to illustrate the manner in which Coover’s narrative, by parodying a heteronormative convention that links sexual penetration to power, seeks to critique the masculine ethos behind the “symbolic presidency,” to use Barbara Hinckley’s term for “a particular set of expectations about the office that are held by the public, described by journalists and teachers, and encouraged by the presidents themselves” (130). I unpack the theological, nationalistic, and sexual norms through which these expectations are created and tailored, linking them to questions of sovereign power and collective pleasure-taking. At the same time, I analyze how Richard Milhous Nixon—our narrator for fifteen of the novel’s thirty-three episodes—comes to embody the contradictions of media-based politics to become, according to Coover himself, “something of an icon (frightening or endearing) for our times.” As the author puts it, he’s “an outcast, a freak of sorts and set apart. A clown trusts no one because he does not really share in the human enterprise” (“Tears of a Clown” 81-2). It’s curious, however, especially given how much his liberal and radical critics despised him, that the sections of the novel narrated by Nixon evince more sympathy than we might expect. For the author, he represents both a figure of ridicule and a sympathetic interlocutor. He’s comparable to one of Shakespeare’s fools insofar as he becomes something of a proxy for both author and reader in a political world that is otherwise devoid of reason. Coover recognizes in both his fiction and the real man an “intuitive wisdom” that derives from being “as close to power as to nothingness” (81-2). Along these lines, I argue that this depiction of Nixon deliberately straddles the divide between caricature and psychological complexity—performance and authenticity—in such a way that he necessarily becomes the locus of the author’s critique of political spectacle. The paradox lies in the fact that
Nixon’s uncanny performance of selfhood and masculinity seems to make total credulity impossible—and yet he also seems to pursue a falsified sense of self with sincerity. This inherent quality of caricature, I argue, is tied to Nixon’s uneasy manhood and self-professed “susceptibility to love” insofar as both undercut the masculinist logic at the heart of Uncle Sam’s cold warrior persona. While the rest of Coover’s America seems wholly credulous of the fictions of national manhood through which the state functions, therefore, Nixon can’t help but undercut their faith in Uncle Sam and the United States. Ultimately, Nixon’s emergent desires for Ethel Rosenberg allow him to imagine an alternate outcome to the real history of the trial and execution, to “to step in and change the script” (363) that calls for her destruction—and thus they allow him to resist the “manifest dust-in-yer-eye” (9) that legitimates American anticommunism. In this light, the tragedy of the novel comes about with the reassertion of historical fact: though Coover’s fictional version of Richard Nixon has the potential to become something different than his historical counterpart, the violence of the concluding rape sequence reminds us that we are ultimately ruled by what we choose to believe in.

If *The Public Burning*’s critique of postwar politics is oriented around how empty spectacles of national manhood are produced in the name of national fantasy, “Joan Didion, Masculinity, and the Frontiers of the Monroe Doctrine” asks about what happens beneath the polished surface of officialdom. In much of her writing from the seventies onward, the austerity of Didion’s prose—rooted equally in the influences of Ernest Hemingway, the promotion copy she once wrote for *Vogue*, and the techniques by which Tom Wolfe defined the New Journalism—serves to underline how an evasive rhetoric of “plausible deniability” has come to define a strain of postwar democratic practice. From
an analysis that shows much of Didion’s nonfictional work to be focused on the specific literary qualities of political discourse—what she calls the “story lines and plot points” that legitimated the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Reagan doctrine—I move on to show how the paranoid styles and themes of the national security apparatus saturate her fictional works from the period as well. Consequently, my argument involves exploring a productive tension between nonfictional works like *Salvador, Miami*, and *Political Fictions* and her most recent novels, *Democracy* and *The Last Thing He Wanted*. I’m interested in the manner in which her fiction maps the rhetorical strategies of plausible deniability onto conventional genres of romance and family drama and, as a result, how the desirability of her male characters is inflected by and interlinked with the clandestine projects of the Cold War. On the one hand, the author’s nonfiction frequently condemns an American *Realpolitik* grounded on government dissembling, identifying it as part of “the last true conflict of cultures in America, that between the empirical and the theoretical.” She perceives growing indecipherability in mainstream political discourse, resulting in a condition under which

we are talking, increasingly, not about ‘the democratic process,’ or the general mechanism affording the citizens of a state a voice in its affairs, but the reverse: a mechanism seen as so specialized that access to it is correctly limited to its own professionals... to that handful of insiders who invent, year in and year out, the narrative of public life. (*Collected Nonfiction* 744-6)

On the other hand, however, *Democracy* and *The Last Thing He Wanted* both thematize an equally pervasive attraction to the insider qualities of such political fictions by making depth a condition of desire itself. Significantly, both narratives feature disastrous yet
sexually charged relationships between female protagonists and men associated with American national security. To put it another way, Janis P. Stout has argued that Didion’s “social criticism draws much of its ironic pointedness from its echoing of the very tones of the rhetoric she judges to be specious” (147) and yet in the case of these two works the specious evasiveness of plausible deniability is represented as an appealing position to take. For these women the evasive qualities of postwar espionage become analogous with self-preservation, or even with privacy itself. Moreover, in noting that the attraction to these agents of American imperialism is shared by her heroines and intrusive narrators alike, I argue that this linking of desire to deep politics is narratological as well as sexual in nature. After all, Didion herself has more than once confessed an attraction to concrete facts that suggests an attempt to reconcile her moral disgust with modern politics and her desire to get beneath the surface. Unlike the other analyses in this dissertation, my goal is to consider how national manhood is represented in terms of sexual object choice.

Finally, the dissertation concludes with a reading of Bret Easton Ellis’s American Psycho as a “civics lesson,” by which I mean to suggest that this controversial novel explores the difficulties of imagining a critical, political agency in an age of widespread mediation. While protagonist Patrick Bateman is easily (and justifiably) vilified as a figure of murderous Reaganite affluence, the author’s conflation of the serial killer with a critique of mass culture implies an uneasy tie between a rage directed at women and social others and the impotence of cultural critique. My chapter opens by showing how a fundamental split between Bateman and the world that he inhabits is reflected in the interplay of his internal monologue—in which he despairs about how “[r]eflection is
useless [and] the world is senseless” (374)—and the banalities of his everyday existence. It becomes apparent that his inability to articulate the former leads to the propagation of violent fantasies of social control in which he murders all those incapable of living up to the hegemonic manhood that he represents. The impotence at the heart of Bret Easton Ellis’s narrative is thus at once the failure of such hegemonic masculinity to assert social control over myriad others and the impotence of a particular form of cultural critique that seeks only to expose the brutal undercurrents of late capitalism. In other words, at the novel’s heart lies a web of contradictions between the privileged membership of national manhood and the pseudo-Nietzschean heroics and freedom dream of the cultural critic.

Because Ellis constructs his narrative around what Roland Barthes described as the fashion system—“a semantic system whose only goal is to disappoint the meaning it luxuriantly elaborates” (287-8)—it’s necessary to show throughout the chapter how this disappointment of meaning is reflected in the tautological structure of Bateman’s iconic manhood. Although he embodies many of the traits that Mark Seltzer describes in his influential study of serial killers, I argue that the fantasy structure of the novel suggests that what Seltzer calls “wound culture” is represented as yet another layer of his fantasies: namely, a desire to penetrate the vapid surfaces of everyday life and discover some source of authenticity within the viscera of the nation. We might think of Bateman as something of a serial-killer-cum-cultural-critic, then. In this light, I conclude that readers circumvent the novel’s vicious circularity by redefining impotence not as the dyadic opposite of potency but rather as a capacity for self-determination outside of the dictates of actuality. Relinquishing potency constitutes a break with the causal metaphors that make actuality/potentiality a governing force in masculinist narratives. Although
*American Psycho* seems devoid of political content, therefore, its vacuity reflects the manner in which consumerism displaces national politics as the citizen-subject’s primary concern. If *Invisible Man* imagines a world in which its narrator must seek refuge from the forces of social conformity in the underground, then *American Psycho* explores the hegemonic centre of a culture that more forcefully tries to transform its most privileged citizen-subjects into mere signifiers of itself.

I’ve endeavoured to be somewhat idiosyncratic in approaching this topic in order to sample a broad range of responses to hegemonic masculinity and to suggest the interrelatedness of a variety of social, political, and private practices. As with any study, there are many other authors whose works I might have considered, whether the Jewish-existentialist masculinities posited by writers like Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, or Philip Roth, or works by Cold War playwrights like Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee that frequently tie the performative aspects of manhood and the domestic sphere to the national imaginary. This list also does not include the literary tradition of critiquing both white and non-white masculinities that emerged from identity politics or second wave feminism, nor does it note works like Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon* or Alice Walker’s *Meridian* that consider and critique marginalized or reactionary forms of black manhood. This list could get longer, but in the broadest of terms what I’ve endeavoured to identify in all of the texts and authors that I do get to discuss is a concern with the narrative, sexual, and political dimensions of national manhood, but any study that seeks to describe the normative values of the so-called centre risks not only its reification but the proliferation of unwritten chapters that will puncture claims to comprehensiveness. Literary depictions of alternative masculinities,
which themselves might lay claim to roles in the fantastic-mimetic constitution of the United States, come to mind as such a supplement to my critique. Given my attempt to privilege impotence, however, it shouldn’t be surprising that my approach has been to resist feeling threatened by this risk and, rather, to acknowledge it as the necessary impotentiality in the formation of an object of knowledge.

The central lesson we should retain in evaluating the fantasies of national manhood is the allure of credulity that manifests in our seemingly unlimited cultural attraction to depictions of potent men. I’ll assert throughout that our subscription to the narratives of national manhood is not predicated on manipulation or ignorance but on the legitimate allure of its promises to abolish the itch of democratic responsibility. Joan Didion puts it beautifully in an essay from *The White Album*:

> We tell ourselves stories in order to live. The princess is caged in the consulate. The man with the candy will lead the children into the sea. The naked woman on the ledge outside the window on the sixteenth floor is a victim of accidie, or the naked woman is an exhibitionist, and it would be “interesting” to know which. We tell ourselves that it makes some difference whether the naked woman is about to commit a mortal sin or is about to register a political protest or is about to be, the Aristophanic view, snatched back to the human condition by the fireman in priest’s clothing just visible in the window behind her, the one smiling at the telephoto lens. We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the “ideas” with
which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience. (Collected Nonfiction 185)

My own sense is that to the extent that our consciousness may be governed by stories that we no longer recognize as such—deep metaphors that shape how we act and interpret in the world—literature cannot help but teach us things about practical politics. Though this quotation from Didion has on occasion been featured in the syllabi of undergraduate writing workshops because it seems to suggest a vital symbiosis of life and narrative that makes both sound more interesting than they sometimes are, we’d be prudent to keep the ambivalence of her statement in mind: the imposition of the narrative line makes life possible, perhaps, but it also suspends the telling of other tales. Such stories save us from confronting the inscrutable, uncomfortable realities of contemporary American polity by rendering our actualities absolute and necessitous. Like all of the texts that I examine here, Didion’s work often illustrates the degree to which narratives of imperilled masculinity constitute an imposition of sorts, one that perpetuates an impossible dream of living in a world in which the work of politics has already been done for us by some imaginary American Adam, our hero.
Chapter One
Ralph Ellison and the Aesthetics of Protest

If I was the president
Of these United States
Said if I was the president
Of these United States
I’d eat good chocolate candy bars
An’ swing on the White House gates—
Great—God-a-mighty, man—
I’d swing on them White House gates!

—Ralph Ellison, “That I Had the Wings”

A remarkable number of the short stories that Ralph Ellison wrote between 1937 and the publication of *Invisible Man* in 1952 thematize the unlikely aspirations of black children or young men by employing flight as a conventional metaphor for their desires to rise above the confining circumstances of a racialized upbringing. Four such stories catch Buster and Riley, boys growing up unattended by their working class families, at play on summer afternoons. In “Afternoon” (1940) and “Mister Toussan” (1941), the pair imagine what it would be like to have the wings of an eagle, and they play-fight and shadow box in imitation of their idols, men like Toussaint L’Ouverture and Jack Johnson. For these boys, both larger-than-life figures represent models of manhood:
Buster’s exaggerated tales about the Haitian revolutionary who “whipped Napoleon” (26) mark the possibility of overcoming his own subordination to white people, while Jack Johnson’s heavy weight title represents a promise to Riley that one day he too may be big enough and strong enough to fight against an abusive father. These stories both suggest the childlike idealization of adulthood in which physical might and liberation are equated, but such beliefs are also quickly undercut by the harsher realities of the adult world around them, as well as the necessity of violence that such means of liberation imply. In “That I Had the Wings” (1943), the ambiguity of aggressive manhood comes to the fore when Buster and Riley attempt to teach chicks to fly by tossing them off a roof in makeshift parachutes. In this instance, the cautionary analogy of flight and liberation evolves an ironic edge because, unlike the young robins that inspire this experiment or the eagle that Buster imagines in “Mister Toussan,” these baby chickens will never fly. The case is not a problem of unrealized potential but rather of incapacity, and as a consequence the education that the boys foist upon the chicks brings about their Icarian demise. In this light, Ellison no doubt wants us to read this category error (the assumption that all birds can fly) back onto the boys themselves: despite their desires for the autonomy of manhood, their probable fate is to be less like their heroes and more like the adults around them in Oklahoma. Like flightless chicks, in other words, their existence has predetermined limitations that they’ve yet to realize, and the experiment thus unwittingly replicates their own condition. Most ominously, the story ends with a

10 Although an anachronism, the fate of Jack Johnson serves as a reminder of the distance between the boys’ idealization of him and the realities faced by all African Americans in the twentieth century. In 1946, the former heavy weight champion was killed in a car crash after racing wildly away from a diner in Raleigh, North Carolina, where he’d been refused service. His death lends a bitter irony to Riley’s boyish faith that “wherever [Johnson] is, ain’t nobody messing with him” (43).
flash of vengeance when Riley is attacked by Ole Bill the rooster, whose spurs draw blood. “For awhile they were flying” (61), he laments through his pain.

If Ellison intends readers to interpret this part of “That I Had the Wings” as a naturalist fable about the plight of marginalized American youth, the dead fowl might caution against removing individuals from the particular sphere of society into which they are born, and Ole Bill himself might suggest the inevitably disastrous consequences for doing so. However, it’s worth noting that doom is guaranteed not only by heredity or circumstance here but also by the failure of the parachutes designed to overcome these defects. What’s at issue instead, therefore, is the miseducation of the boys themselves, the failure of society to properly model black manhood as they approach maturity, as well as the ultimate price they will pay to live with a desire for liberty in a world that will continue to refuse it. Indeed, the full meaning of this incident is anticipated earlier in the story, when Riley is caught singing a rhyme (quoted above) about becoming President by his Aunt Kate: “If I was the president / Of these United States,” he sings. This “sinful verse” is blasphemous to Kate insofar as it takes the Lord’s name in vain, a fact that Riley relishes, but it’s also odious because it imagines the possibility of a black boy in the White House. When she chastises Riley, Kate warns him of the response such an entitled attitude might elicit from the community: “What yuh think would happen to yo po ma if the white folks wuz to hear she wuz raisin’ up a black chile whut’s go no better sense than to talk ‘bout bein’ president?” (47). A song about swinging on the White

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11 I’m alluding to Carter Woodson’s The Mis-Education of the Negro, a controversial text in which Woodson argues that the education of blacks was encouraging a culture of self-hatred. Although I can find no direct mention of Woodson’s polemic in Ellison letters or essays, its cultural importance to the Negro movement of the 1930s (and the fact Ellison reviewed Woodson’s The Beginning of Miscegenation of the Whites and Blacks for New Masses) makes it extremely likely that he was aware of its argument. At the very least, it should be taken as evidence that the indoctrinary possibilities of a liberal education were a concern among the black intellectuals of Ralph Ellison’s day.
House gates is the stuff of childhood daydreams, perhaps, but like L’Ouverture or Jack Johnson it defies the impositions of existing authority, whether of God or “white folks,” by occupying a site of white supremacy. As an example of Ellison’s habitual play with the dialectic of black and white, the picture he draws of an immaculate whiteness marred by sticky chocolate fingerprints lampoons the official sterility of politics by transmuting the literal and symbolic centre of the United States into the playground of a black boy’s unrealized imagination. Aunt Kate, born into slavery and living with Jim Crow, finds it easy to imagine the dreadful penalty of such thoughts. As one in a series of antebellum figures in Ellison’s fiction, she has trouble understanding the restlessness of these “lil’ nineteen hundred young’uns” (61) altogether, telling Riley, “Ahm ole as Ah is today jus cause Ah didn’t let them kinda sinful thoughts worry ma min’” (48). As part of a generation of youths, on the other hand, Riley has yet to learn the same lessons as his Aunt Kate, which is precisely why Ellison is interested in him. It’s only naïveté itself that allows Riley to ask an important question about democratic entitlement: why shouldn’t a black boy grow up to become President? “That I Had the Wings” suggests that Buster and Riley’s passage into manhood is qualified by the limitations that miseducation will place upon their political imaginations, a system that forces them to choose between the “sinful thoughts” of the outsider or a theological complacency with which elders like Aunt Kate have traditionally secured peace of mind.

Ellison’s concern with the entrance of African American men into the public sphere is also evident in Invisible Man and the manuscripts for his unfinished second
Although sprawling and fragmentary, the latter’s moral and thematic compass is oriented around the life and career of a U.S. Senator, Adam Sunraider, whose racial identity as a white man is put into question when he is shot on the senate floor. The mystery of his identity is never fully resolved, however, because his paternity remains unknown: instead, the narrative works backward from the assassination to his birth in an attempt to locate an originary moment of authentic racial categorization, confronting the epistemological gaps that reflect the insubstantiality of the colour line. Along the way, the novel fixates upon his maturation as well, asking about the internal and external bases of his transformation from Bliss, a light-skinned boy brought up as a Negro by Reverend Hickman, into a race-baiting Senator from Massachusetts. Politics here is clearly a mode of passing, of self-emancipation, a way for Sunraider to empower himself in a white world that is no more a reality than the scam movies he directs as Bliss. Invisible Man, likewise, picks up where the Buster-and-Riley stories in Flying Home leave off, with an end to childhood and the entrance of a young man into public life, but it repeats the archetypical story of lost innocence in each of its episodes as well as through an overall narrative arc in which the protagonist grows progressively disillusioned with both mainstream and radical politics—the trajectory of the novel is one of repeated defeat.

The prologue promises to account for how this ambitious man came “to be so blue” (14)

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12 The manuscript has been published twice after Ellison’s death: in a heavily edited form in 1999 as Juneteenth and more comprehensively as Three Days Before the Shooting... in 2010. Unless otherwise noted, I will refer to Juneteenth because, thanks to its editor, it provides a more coherent narrative.

13 One of Ellison’s notes: “The point to stress has to do with what Bliss learns from his scam, and this has to do with the relationship between the movies and politics, and the American’s uncertainty as to his identity as an area exploited by the movies and politics alike...” (Juneteenth 359).

14 It should be noted that these stories are not in continuity, although they share themes, characters, and settings. This emphasis on lost innocence, however, is compounded by John F. Callahan’s editorial decision to arrange these stories in a sequence that “follows the life Ellison knew and imagined from boyhood to youth in the twenties and early thirties to manhood in the late thirties and earlier forties” (xxiv) in Flying Home and Other Stories. We can take Callahan’s decision as evidence of the strong autobiographical impulse traditionally ascribed to Ralph Ellison’s fiction.
with a direct address to the reader from a “hole in the ground” in which he reflects upon his isolation: “I believe in nothing if not in action,” he says, “Please, a definition: A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action” (13). Although the invisible man asserts that he is “neither dead nor in a state of suspended animation” (6), however, what is taken for granted throughout is that he has not yet acted: in the narrative present, and at novel’s end, “overt action” seems imminent but it has not yet occurred. One quality that *Invisible Man* shares with *Juneteenth* is thus that its author seems unwilling to fully define (or, in this case, even name) his central character and so any programme of future action remains unstated. Its blind spot is the future that it posits for its protagonist, the manner and shape of his re-entry into the nation.

In “On Initiation Rites and Power,” an address first delivered to a freshman English class at West Point in 1969, Ellison declares that the narrator of *Invisible Man* must learn through his blunders that “American society cannot define the role of the individual, or at least not that of the responsible individual” (*Territory* 49); that he must become his own father, as one character in the novel puts it (154); and that the goal of the American artist is “to keep trying to reduce to consciousness all of the complex experience which ceaselessly unfolds within this great nation” (55). It’s apparent from this concern with experience that Ralph Ellison believes that *Invisible Man* constitutes an example\(^\text{15}\) either of the *Bildungsroman*, a narrative of formation and initiation tied to bourgeois individualism, or the *Künstlerroman*, a sub-genre depicting the development of an artistic consciousness specifically. This explains, for instance, why Ellison furnishes the novel with a Joycean subtitle (“the portrait of the artist as a rabble-rouser”)

\(^{15}\) For more evidence that Ellison perceived his novel in this manner, as well as a discussion of the complications of this viewpoint that is complementary to my own, see the introduction to Jim Neighbours’ “Plunging (Outside of) History: Naming and Self-Possession in *Invisible Man*.\)
in an interview with *The Paris Review (Shadow 179)*, and why elsewhere he describes its narrator as “a voice issuing its little wisdom out of the substance of its own inwardness—after having undergone a transformation from ranter to writer” (57). As an essayist inclined to celebrate postwar liberalism and defend the autonomy of art from ideology, he subscribes to the Enlightenment dictum that the work of art, to quote Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, “brings harmony into society, because it fosters harmony in the individual” (215). Indeed, the central assumption his essays share with Idealist thinkers like Schiller and Kant is that aesthetic experience promotes the principles of morality and liberty. Like Carter Woodson, who suggested Negro autodidacticism as an alternative to official channels of education, Ellison believes that the cure for miseducation is an imperious cultivation of the self. However, while Woodson’s *The Mis-Education of the Negro* also ultimately argues for the radical restructuring of society from the top down, Ellison’s meliorism values an individual’s capacity to improve his or her society from the bottom up. Frequent returns to the themes of ambition, maturation, and education in his essays and fiction hint that Ellison thought a great deal about this problem. My hypothesis is simply this, however: if we can accept that Ralph Ellison is concerned not merely with the aesthetic education of a young man but with the specifically political modalities of his being, then there are points at which his representations of developing masculinity must negotiate with the impotence and uncertain agency of African American men in a power structure favouring whites. The story of Adam Sunraider’s political corruption or the dead chickens lying at young Riley’s feet are just a couple of examples of a melancholic substratum underlying the affirmative liberalism expressed in many of Ellison’s essays. As a writer of fictions, he
stages a struggle to bring his democratic ideals to life insofar as he returns time after time to an irreconcilable break between boys and men in the public sphere. By reading in light of this divide, we’ll see how a novel like Invisible Man might itself be characterized as politically impotent, although I’d ultimately like to suggest that this may not be such a bad thing after all.

“A Coupla Scalped Indians,” the last of the Buster-and-Riley stories, begins with the boys alone in the woods, listening to the music from a nearby carnival. On several levels, this adventure represents the beginnings of manhood for the boys, and as a result it has a tone more ominous than Ellison’s earlier stories. The lights of the Ferris Wheel in the distance seem to beckon with the ambiguous promises of adult life, for instance, but first the boys must push on through the unformed darkness of the forest. Dressed as Hollywood versions of “Indians” and carrying a copy of the Boy Scout’s Handbook, the two are returning late from a day of competition after completing “the running endurance test, the swimming test, and the cooking test” (65) on their own. All the while, Riley’s genitals ache because the boys have been recently “scalped” (or, rather, circumcised) and they haven’t had time to heal: “The doctor had said that it would make us men and Buster had said, hell, he was a man already—what he wanted was to be an Indian. We hadn’t thought about it making us scalped ones” (67). In the second half of the story, Riley separates from his friend and must press on alone through the yard of old “Aunt” Mackie, a mysterious folk figure and subject of local superstition. Mackie comes to represent a final test of courage before they will reach safety. 16 Thinking back to what

16 Without a doubt, as part of a tradition that has long associated American individualism with masculinity, the handful of important female characters in Ellison’s fiction are not individuals but rather stereotypes
birds symbolized in “That I Had the Wings,” we might see a link to themes of lost innocence in the half-cooked sage hen that Buster tosses to distract Mackie’s guard dog, “a swift leaping form snatched backward by the heavy chain” that “mouth[s] savagely on the mangled bird” (73). Sneaking through her yard, Riley comes upon a naked woman dancing and drinking wine in the lamplight, and when it turns out to be old Mackie herself he is caught watching. So begins his initiation into adult sexuality, a confrontation with the ambiguous forces embodied by a woman who’s wizened, wrinkled face seems incongruously joined to a girlish and desirable figure. After forcing him to kiss her and to fondle her breasts, she inspects his bandaged penis when the pain of an erection brings him to tears. She soon realizes that her “regular li’l chocolate hero” (77) is eleven years old and, fearing reprisal, threatens to “fix” his family if he tells anybody about his molestation. Riley wonders what harm she could do to his family, since he has none, but this realisation only seems to increase her power over him as he loses “the courage of [his] manhood” (79). The story ends with him in the dark, moving once more toward the light and music from the carnival and asking himself, “Where was that other scalped Indian; where had Buster gone?” (81).

Unlike the other stories featuring the boys, this one is written in the first-person, a modification that Ellison made when planning to adapt the episode for his second novel. Although he never did, the change in perspective implies not only a possible

symbolically linked to the protagonist’s development as a moral agent. See Claudia Tate’s “Notes on the Invisible Women in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man” and Shelly Eversley’s “Female Iconography in Invisible Man” for compelling discussions of this issue. For more on the subject, see chapters three and four of this dissertation, which examine women in relation to political impotence.

17 This fact also explains the differences between this story, in which Riley has no family, and the others, in which he does. See Callahan: “In a batch of notes from 1954 or 1955, Ellison referred to ‘A Coupla Scalped Indians’ as a Buster-and-Riley story, but before publication in 1956, he dropped Riley in favor of an unnamed narrator, perhaps because he thought he might blend the story into the Oklahoma chapters.
textual connection between Riley and *Juneteenth*’s Bliss Hickman but also the fact that, for Ellison, adulthood necessarily constitutes the emergence of a self-consciousness. While Riley’s manhood is belittled by Aunt Mackie’s claim that he has been “pruned” (78) by the doctor, his re-emergence into the woods locates him on the very edge of maturity. Unsupported by a friend from whom he takes extra courage, for Riley finding his way to the carnival will clearly mean finding a source of inner strength. However, as in the final chapter of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, one of Ellison’s literary touchstones, all is not well here. Much like when Huck and Tom Sawyer set out “for howling adventures amongst the Injuns, over in the Territory” (307), in “A Coupla Scalped Indians” what appears to be child’s play produces an ironic historical continuity between the conditions of black and native Americans. Buster’s comments about circumcision suggest that there is a distinction between becoming merely a man and becoming an Indian—in fact, playing Indian represents an aggressive model of adulthood18 that embodies the frontier qualities of the Territory, Ellison’s home state of Oklahoma. The role appeals to them for the same reason that they idolize Toussaint L’Ouverture and is equally compromised by history: it stands for self-reliance, physical potency, and liberation, all the while skirting the structures of white power. By reading circumcision as an act of scalping, however, Ellison imports into the problem of manhood a history of genocide in the American West, implying that becoming a man is always either an act of subjugation or hopeless rebellion for these African American

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18 See E. Anthony Rotundo on the history of these kinds of games: “boys relished the role of the Indian—assumed by them all to be more barbarous and aggressive—as much as they did the role of the settler. These settler-and-Indian games allowed boys to enter and imagine roles that were played by real adult males. Such imitative play was a vital part of boy culture...” (36).
youths. Buster and Riley can never be true Indians, only “scalped ones,” because their circumcision defines manhood as a form of symbolic castration. The Territory no longer signifies liberation, as it seems to for Tom and Huck, but only the spread of civilization across the continent. And as with Twain, who likely left the sequel to _Huck Finn_ incomplete because his sympathies would not allow his protagonist to find himself through the slaughter of native Americans, Ellison perceives fatal ambiguities at the threshold of masculinity.\(^\text{19}\) Although “A Coupla Scalped Indians” is a complete work, therefore, by leaving Riley on a liminal plane linking wilderness and the carnival Ellison will not or cannot represent a crossing into adulthood.

The violence of initiation plays a significant role in Ellison’s Bildungsroman as well, especially insofar as _Invisible Man_ attempts to work through the author’s suspicions about miseducation and conformity after his protagonist enters the public sphere in the “Battle Royale” chapter. In that opening chapter, his manhood is announced in the form of a speech he delivers on social responsibility, as well as the college scholarship he receives for his efforts. However, his autonomy is deflated by forced participation in a boxing match with other black youths as well as the mockery that the wealthy white townsfolk turn against him. Much discussion of the novel accepts this paradigmatic reading\(^\text{20}\) of the Battle Royale sequence as a microcosm of race and gender relations in the South. A better example of how miseducation continues to define the narrator, however, is _Invisible Man_’s eleventh chapter, roughly its midpoint, which recalls his experiences after an accident in the mixing room of Liberty Paints leaves him debilitated

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\(^{19}\) _Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer among the Indians_. See Paul Delaney’s “‘You Can’t Go Back to the Raft Ag’in Huck Honey!’: Mark Twain’s Western Sequel to _Huckleberry Finn_.”

\(^{20}\) No doubt because this reading supports both heroic and more pessimistic readings of the novel. The best recent version of this reading appears in Daniel Y. Kim’s _Writing Manhood in Black and Yellow_.

and confused. Indeed, the sequence represents a blank space or pause\textsuperscript{21} between the novel’s first half, in which the pursuit of his ambitions means conforming to the expectations of society, and its second half, in which he re-enters Harlem and allies himself with a radical socialist organization, the Brotherhood. The explosion at Liberty Paints in the midst of a labour dispute is the culmination of a slow descent (literally, he’s in a basement) away from the channels of opportunity for African Americans. Expelled from his college for upsetting a white patron, the narrator is finally reduced to grunt work before being knocked unconscious. As in the case of Aunt Kate’s estimation of Riley, Ellison suggests here that the defeat of the invisible man at Liberty Paints might be the failure of a generation: Brockway, the elderly man who engineers the accident because he suspects the invisible man is after his job, says, “I tole ‘em these here young Nineteen-Hundred boys ain’t no good for the job” (226).

Although such disastrous reversals of fortune are common enough in the Bildungsroman, and do much to temper a narrator’s naïveté, the surreal sequence that follows suspends narrative convention in order to more closely examine the process and spirit of miseducation in an abstracted form. In the hospital, his doctors propose an electroshock lobotomy that will be delivered by applying “pressure in proper degrees to the major centers of nerve control”:

...the result is as complete a change of personality as you’ll find in your famous fairy-tale cases of criminals transformed into amiable fellows after all that bloody business of a brain operation. And what’s more, ...the patient is both physically and neurally whole. [...] The patient will live as he has to live, and with absolute

\textsuperscript{21} Edith Schor describes the two halves of the novel as “accommodation” and “revolt.” See her \textit{Visible Ellison: A Study of Ralph Ellison’s Fiction} for a more detailed summation of the novel than I provide here.
integrity. Who could ask for more? He’ll experience no major conflict of motives, and what is even better, society will suffer no traumata on his account. (232)

The bewildered “patient” listens as this biomedical fantasy imagines for him a future free of all concern, in which his motives and desires will trouble society no longer: “I wasn’t sure whether they were talking about me or someone else,” he recalls, recognizing the breadth of their intent, “Some of it sounded like a discussion of history” (232). The period, after all, was the heyday of electroshock and lobotomy procedures in the United States, with more than sixty thousand such lobotomies performed between 1936 and 195622, and here it constitutes a scheme of social control coterminous with slavery and Jim Crow. Like so many of the episodes in *Invisible Man*, the eleventh chapter represents a nightmarish inflection of the racial encounter between narrator and nation, and yet here it plays out on the level of cognition and consciousness itself. This is why far from offering respite from the demands of visibility, the optics of race are at their most invasive in the hospital, taking on the properties of a “bright third eye that glow[s] from the center of [the doctor’s] forehead” (227). Indeed, the chapter is finally characterized by ontological confusion when the invisible man is rendered incapable of recalling even his own name. He finds himself distinguished in pseudo-medical jargon as a “primitive instance” contrasted to the “advanced conditions” of “a New Englander with a Harvard background” (231), precisely the line that Bliss Hickman crosses in *Juneteenth*: a racist codification of black and white along a scale based on evolution, class, and education.

These therapeutics clearly represent a method of curtailing the potential for rebellion in unruly or “primitive” individuals who might be at odds with society,

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22 See Feldman and Goodrich: “This ray of hope in an otherwise bleak situation for mentally ill patients provided the driving force for more than 60,000 psychosurgical procedures performed between 1936 and 1956” (654).
although it’s noteworthy that the doctor speculates on its applicability to upper-class whites as well as marginalized subjects. The scepticism of one of his colleagues is grounded in the procedure’s obvious historical precedent: “‘Why not castration, doctor?’ a voice asked waggishly, causing me to start, a pain tearing through me” (232). In fact, there seems to be an anxiety concerning “bloody business” throughout this chapter: the hospital is a zone of sterility, after all, and its version of whiteness is clean and “clinical” (236), scrubbed of a history of bloodletting that defines the colour line in the United States. Not one drop of blood will be admitted here; instead, the miracle of electricity seems to promise a method of lobotomizing the patient without knife or needle, without any violence at all, but his pain and these comments remind us that the dominant logic here is still not healing but rather castrating. Throughout, in fact, Ellison figures therapy as the imposition of power in which health becomes equated with a kind of conformity. As such, the accident at Liberty Paints and the anomie that follows allow the narrator to re-experience his infancy as a process of subjugation or even subject formation.23 There is, for instance, the “distinct wail of female pain” (231) which he recalls hearing as he entered the hospital, suggesting the cries of a mother giving birth: “my mind was blank,” he recalls, “as though I had just begun to live” (229). His disorientation, reflected in prose emphasizing impression and sensation, is the result of his incapacity to distinguish himself from the world around him, which he describes as “the vast whiteness in which I myself was lost” (234). Cards bearing phrases asking “WHAT IS YOUR NAME?” and

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23 Given the Freudian undercurrent of the novel, and particularly the influence of *Totem and Taboo* on Ellison, what is striking is the manner by which the novel’s critique of social control parallels Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic model of the mirror stage, which during the late 1940s and 1950s was transforming from a description of a moment in early childhood into a theory of subject formation. See Douglas Steward’s “The Illusion of Phallic Agency: *Invisible Man, Totem and Taboo*, and the Santa Claus Surprise” for a discussion of Freud’s influence on Ellison.
“WHO ARE YOU?” suggest the intercession of language working to “organize the vagueness that drifted through [his] head” (235). More importantly, his origins as a southern Negro are put to him as well: “WHAT IS YOUR MOTHER’S NAME?”; “Where were you born?” (236-7).

These questions about his identity constitute a proliferation of signifiers that re-entrench him in the social world: their supposedly curative role is indistinguishable from a disciplining one. They define and delimit his existence, and once the connection to language has been re-established, he is taught the true meaning of liberty: “I could no more escape than I could think of my identity. Perhaps, I thought, the two things are involved with each other. When I discover who I am, I’ll be free” (239). Although we might be tempted to interpret this passage positively, in context the more likely interpretation of this self-assertion speaks to the ideology of consensus. It means internalizing a predetermined identity, just as when, after a brief interview with a company official, he admits: “I had the feeling that I had been talking beyond myself, had used words and expressed attitudes not my own, that I was in the grip of some alien personality lodged deep within me” (244). An earlier version of this chapter\(^\text{24}\) ends with him emerging naked onto the streets of Harlem, having escaped from the staff and their machines by slipping through a hole that he finds in the hospital basement. Ellison, however, clearly retreated from this triumphant representation of self-emancipation in order to depict a more compromised re-entry into society. Instead, in exchange for his

\(^{24}\) Published as “Out of the Hospital and under the Bar” in *Soon, One Morning*. Although Ellison’s note says that he cut the sequence because of “considerations of space” (243), the changes he made clearly also allow for a more prolonged struggle in the novel’s second half.
freedom, the invisible man signs away his rights to take legal action against Liberty
Paints, a gesture (writing his name) that constitutes a final demonstration of docility.

As it stands, therefore, the hospital sequence hints that the invisible man inhabits
a world in which his words can never quite be his own. In seeking a cure for his anomie,
the biomedical fantasy of lobotomized citizen-subjects highlights how the novel
undercuts its own formation narrative by making obvious the compromises of African
American adulthood. At every moment, the double timeframe of the novel (narrative
present and retrospective past) determines the limits of the narrator’s future, and yet the
ideological process through which society curbs modes of individuality incompatible
with itself is thrown into relief as a result. I wish to use the term “counterfactual” here to
suggest the many bypassed alternatives envisioned for the invisible man throughout the
novel, those fates which are counter to the present from which the story is told. The
lobotomy is one such example: “The patient will live as he has to live, and with absolute
integrity. Who could ask for more?” A counterfactual conditional is an if-then statement
that indicates what would be the case if its antecedent were true. It suggests a speculative
mode of reasoning, like that employed in works of historiography and literature that
attempt to posit other outcomes to historical events: “If x would have happened, then so
too would have y.” Counterfactuals may seem to belong to the genre of science fiction, in
other words, but to a certain extent they are implicit in all narrative because causality is
the conceptual framework of storytelling: to emplot events along a chain of causes and
effects necessarily presumes the possibility of other outcomes. In the case of Invisible
Man, the maturation of Ellison’s protagonist is never secured because the counterfactual
mode dominates his existence. By imagining for the narrator a future free of concern by
way of medical intervention, chapter eleven thus toys with the distinction between what Pierre Macherey calls the “necessity” and “novelty” of the plot, the impression that a narrative gives that “other words might have been spoken, things might have happened differently” (53). In the adventure stories of Jules Verne that Macherey uses as exemplary texts, uncertainty generates the excitement of novelty despite the necessity that drives the narrative toward an inevitable conclusion. In the retrospective present from which Ellison’s narrative of formation is told, however, there is no such illusion of uncertainty and thus counterfactuals are doubly marked. On the one hand, they might represent the heuristic false starts in a model of experience that presumes the necessity of error, serving a didactic purpose. On the other hand, however, such counterfactuals are never quite novel precisely because the narrator’s fate is already known. Rather, they illustrate how potentiality itself becomes a site of ideological struggle and how miseducation or conformity impose limits upon it. 25 Ellison’s underground constitutes an anomaly, a break within the necessity of maturation. We should keep in mind that the narrator ends up there, after all, by plunging down an open manhole (556). Whether imagined by the invisible man or by those around him, all possible futures circle this particular drain. In light of this structural twist, these counterfactuals represent contact

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25 An argument could be made that this is evidence of the influence of one of Ellison’s literary “ancestors,” Henry James, who thematized potentiality in a more overt manner in “The Jolly Corner.” Significantly, in the preface to the New York edition of the collection in which it appears, James ties the theme of his story to the counterfactuals of its production, describing how in looking through one’s notebooks “we chance on some idea we have afterwards treated; then, greeting it with tenderness, we wonder at the first form of a motive that was to lead us so far and to show, no doubt, to eyes not our own, for so other; then we heave the deep sigh of relief over all that is never, thank goodness, to be done again. Would we have embarked on that stream had we known? – and what mightn’t we have made of this one hadn’t we known! How, in a proportion of cases, could we have dreamed ‘there might be something’? – and why, in another proportion, didn’t we try what there might be, since there are sorts of trials (ah indeed more than one sort!) for which the day will soon have passed?” (xxiv)
points between the will of the individual and the demands of society, moments in which the imposition of power is transparently tied to a contested future.

Reading *Invisible Man* as a novel of formation therefore presents us with a significant impasse to the goals Ellison sets out in “On Initiation Rites and Power” and his other essays. It would be inattentive not to notice that the pattern of the traditional Bildungsroman is at work here, of course, because each episode of the novel presumes an accumulation of experience, but, as Franco Moretti cautions, it may be true that education “fuses external compulsion and internal impulses into a new unity until the former is no longer distinguishable from the latter” (16). It’s clear from close inspection of sequences like the above that the author’s suspicions about miseducation extend to the formal presuppositions of the Bildungsroman as well, creating narrative conditions in *Invisible Man* in which maturity and manhood are always compromised. Whether imagining himself to be a race leader or a radical, Ellison’s protagonist constantly makes his readers aware of the delusions of novelty and thus forces us to think about how the future itself is constructed as an ideological narrative. Facing expulsion, for instance, he finds himself locked into a counterfactual mode that comes to dominate his life: “I stood in the darkened doorway trying to probe my future if I were expelled. Where would I go, what would I do? How could I ever return home?” (133). For those critics who want to read him as an heroic storyteller, or as a politically naïve “ranter” who has become a writer by way of his blunders, the underground may seem to function as a teleological site in which he finally manages to account for the complexity of his experiences and thus comes to define himself. Crucially, however, the underground has no future of its

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26 In “Brave Words for a Startling Occasion,” Ellison admits that “the chief significance of *Invisible Man* as fiction... [is its] experimental attitude, and its attempt to return to the mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy which typified the best of our nineteenth-century fiction” (*Territory* 102).
own and, paradoxically, is not anticipated anywhere in the plot except as the negation of all other futures. In *Invisible Man*, the contradictions of maturation are thus never fully resolved, and Ellison does much to highlight the points at which the logic of formation is most qualified. Similarly, just as the earlier Buster-and-Riley stories evince a certain ambivalence toward romantic manhood, at the end of “A Coupla Scalped Indians” Riley remains suspended in an ambiguous in-between space, as if he can’t go back and can’t go forward because a crossing point can never be fully articulated. What all of this suggests, in a national context, is the impossibility of a model of black manhood predicated upon full civic participation, at least insofar as for African American men entering the public sphere always implies symbolic castration by way of the internalization of an already limited political role. If this is the case, however, why does Ellison so frequently gesture toward the promise of future action, toward a politics to come? Or, to put it another way, why does his fiction of formation bother failing at all?

Almost forty years after publishing “That I Had the Wings” in the summer of 1943, Ralph Ellison returned to the dilemma posed by Riley’s “sinful” verse (about becoming the President of the United States) in his introduction to an anniversary edition of *Invisible Man*. “What, if anything,” he asks in it, “is there that a novelist can say about his work that wouldn’t be better left to the critics?” (xvii). In that spirit, he proceeds by giving an account of the production of the novel and discusses the influences and experiences that shaped its final form. More importantly, he describes the mood in which he set out to write the novel as one attuned to the political possibilities of the individual.
Thinking about how “Mark Twain had demonstrated that the novel could serve as a comic antidote to the ailments of politics,” he claims that he came to believe that a novel could be fashioned as a raft of hope, perception and entertainment that might help keep us afloat as we tried to negotiate the snags and whirlpools that mark our nation’s vacillating course toward and away from the democratic ideal. There are, of course, other goals for fiction. Yet I recalled that during the early, more optimistic days of this republic it was assumed that each individual citizen could become (and should prepare to become) President. (xxx-xxx)

For the most part, Ellison uses the anniversary introduction to recapitulate the democratic faith that he had already laid out in “Brave Words on a Startling Occasion,” the speech he delivered after Invisible Man received the National Book Award in 1953, as well as in “On Initiation Rites and Power.” In a statement that directly contradicts what was the dominant critical tradition of interpreting Invisible Man as a largely apolitical novel, however, the section that follows an abrupt “yet” calls upon a constitutive moment in which the United States imagined itself populated by “politically astute citizens who, by virtue of our vaunted universal education and our freedom of opportunity, would be prepared to govern.” In particular, the “unlikely possibility” of a black man in the White House being alluded to here is an expression of how a “fictional vision of an ideal democracy in which the actual combines with the ideal and gives us representations of a state of things” (xxx) informs the shape of this narrative. The introduction constitutes an

27 See Ross Possnock’s “Ralph Ellison, Hannah Arendt, and the Meaning of Politics.” By examining a quarrel between Arendt and Ellison over her interpretation of the Little Rock incident, Possnock argues that Ellison sought to “retir[e] the idealist dichotomy that sets the political against the aesthetic, a familiar habit of mind all too alive in the still canonical conviction that a flight from the political characterizes Ellison’s thought” (214). The essays included in Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope: A Political Companion to Invisible Man, edited by Lucas Morel, and The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison, edited by Possnock himself, are both very good examples of how far criticism of Ellison has come.
authorial re-reading of the novel after a long period of time and may not reflect his original intentions, of course, and certainly I’ve suggested the ways in which many of his other essays are not quite in sync with the outcomes of his fiction, yet Ralph Ellison’s forty-year commitment to swinging from the White House gates makes it likely that this vision of democracy haunted his Bildungsroman from its inception. Given how consistently he ties his protagonist’s maturation to an entrance into civic life, it wouldn’t be a stretch to claim that the break between youth and manhood reflects a specifically political problem. Riley’s blasphemous verse and its repetition in this introduction reveal grounds of possibility that seem necessarily foreclosed to African Americans in a power structure that favours a white middleclass.

In Ellison’s fiction, the contradiction between the representative ideal, in which each and every citizen is expected to potentially partake in the function of the state from the highest level down, and the reality of race relations in the United States is not merely an historical fact to be ameliorated through steady liberal reform but also a stopper on political imagination itself. It reminds us that, despite their sometimes vast ambitions, Ellison’s characters grow up in a world in which entering the public sphere is a form of ideological subjugation, and in which their role as citizens may be curtailed or otherwise transmuted by apathy, complacency, cynicism, or outright rebellion. As a symbol of entitlement, the executive branch of government represents the foreclosed potentiality of Ellison’s young men, like Riley and Bliss Hickman, and we should read the breakdown of Invisible Man’s narrative of formation in this light as well. The underground in which the narrator is finally suspended signifies a lack at the heart of democratic entitlement, the lower frequencies in which the claims of the dispossessed are spoken. In linking the
development of “conscious, articulate characters” (xxx) to the ideals of democratic society, it could be said that Ellison is simply making another argument for the aesthetic education of young men. However, noting the manner in which his fiction resists representing an end point of that formation, it may be more productive to perceive the ideality that the presidency represents as an innately compromised one. This explains, for example, why in the epilogue to *Invisible Man*, the narrator remains vague about the new forms that his agency might take, despite having supposedly reached a higher degree of articulacy through his experiences: “...what is the next phase? How often have I tried to find it! Over and over again I’ve gone up above to seek it out.” An heroic interpretation of this ending risks mistaking the place where Ellison’s character ends up with the ideal itself. His “world has become one of infinite possibilities,” true enough, but not because of the triumph of liberal individualism. It’s not true that he believes his future to be open to infinite forms of agency but, instead, that the problem of possibility is asserted against a societal elite who would determine political reality by “putting the world in a strait jacket” (566). No doubt infinite possibility has the quality of a negation of hierarchy, therefore, demonstrating that nothing has been decided insofar as structures of power are concerned. On its own, this assertion could be said to constitute a political gesture, and yet it would be a mistake to miss the fact that his confrontation with the world has led to an abstraction from it that has not ended by novel’s end.

“Democracy” is not a stable term28 nor does Ralph Ellison pause to define it, but he does argue in “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks” that its “true subject... is not simply material well-being but the extension of the democratic process in the

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28 Dana Nelson, for example, describes “the hollowed-out quality” of the term (223). See also David Hiley’s *Doubt and the Demands of Democratic Citizenship* or C. Douglas Lummis’s *Radical Democracy* for some contemporary examples of how political philosophers choose to define it outside of state forms.
direction of perfecting itself” and that “the most obvious test and close to that perfect is the inclusion—not assimilation—of the black man” (Territory 110). It may seem tautological to suggest that democracy is its own subject in this manner, but this mode of self-constitution gives means precedence over ends, favours a politics of causes over one of effects. In Ellison’s fiction, then, democracy always alludes to an empty space opened between a reality and ideality of the nation, which is to say that its “direction of perfecting itself” is identical to the structure of irreconcilability that separates youth and manhood. As we’ve already seen, this is more than mere analogy: the two communicate a shared conceptual core insofar as citizen and nation are linked in a project of unfinished perfectibility. It’s worth recalling that in the hospital sequence, for instance, the invisible man comes to stand for the “traumata” (to use a term that his doctor employs) that individuality itself poses for democratic societies, the torsion generated by the conflicting interests of a nation’s citizenry. Indeed, as a “primitive instance” he finds himself reduced to an embodiment of the outsider more general than racial categorization would imply. Clearly, the doctor’s wish to lobotomize him reflects a conformist fantasy in which society is finally stabilized through the suppression of its citizens and thus in which this empty space of democratic promise is sutured over by a disciplining hand. Born of a desire for social stability, it constitutes the anti-democratic impulse at the heart of race and class relations in the United States. Insofar as he resists reducing democracy to a stable historical form, however, Ralph Ellison shares a series of assumptions with French philosopher Jacques Rancière, who argues that “[d]emocracy is not a political regime” but rather “a rupture in the logic of the arkhē, that is, of the anticipation of ruling in its disposition” (Dissensus 31). I take this characteristically obtuse statement to mean
that Rancière wants to redefine democracy outside of determinable schemes of state forms, that as a “rupture” or excess in an existing social order democracy is that which resists definition.\textsuperscript{29} In his own field, for example, he has been critical of political philosophy because it seeks to establish an origin (\textit{arkhē}) of sovereignty in which those in power are destined to satisfy their own pre-established criterion of legitimacy: by reducing the political sphere to a specific mode of existence, such an “archipolitics” establishes the grounds of its own entitlement. From Ellison’s point of view, archipolitics might be another name for the strait jacket against which his protagonist struggles, an attempt to foreclose the potentiality of black citizens. By refusing to articulate a programme of dissent for his protagonist, and thus by leaving the passage into manhood forever incomplete, \textit{Invisible Man}’s epilogue resists the narrative necessity and ideological allegiances that govern the Bildungsroman precisely in order to avoid the problem of “the anticipation of ruling in its disposition.” In his anonymity, the narrator is an unknowable figure of democratic partaking, embodying an as-of-yet unrealized entitlement up against forces of legitimation.

Crucially, what this narrativization of democracy as the formation of the individual shares with Rancière’s work is not only a model that resists a positive definition but a concern with the Kantian “disinterestedness” of the aesthetic in relationship to it, that “purposiveness without purpose” by which Kant’s \textit{Critique of Judgment} famously repudiates arguments about the direct utility or morality of the

\textsuperscript{29} To elaborate, Jacques Rancière argues that of the seven titles of democratic man described by Plato in the \textit{Laws}, titles which grant authority to individuals on the basis of kinship or natural superiority, one represents a significant challenge to the legitimacy of those who govern. If for Plato politics begins with the assertion that the laws of nature are superior to the laws of kinship in legitimating power, the seventh title, “the ‘favour of heaven and fortune’… the choice of the god of chance” (\textit{Hatred} 40), is a foundational contingency that forces state power into constant renegotiation of its qualifications. By repressing chance in his republic, Plato asserts instead that the sixth title, based upon the right of the wise over the ignorant, is most just, preparing the way for the philosopher king.
beautiful. Because, to use Rancière’s words, authentic politics is always “an intervention in the visible and the sayable” (37) at the same time that it constitutes a struggle of the unrecognized for equality, he argues that art must remain indifferent to human affairs, must refuse to serve an archipolitical function if it is to be considered properly political at all. The importance of aesthetics in Rancière’s writing is that politics is a re-distribution of the sensible, of *aesthesis*, “the faculty of sense, the capacity to both perceive a given and make sense of it” (“Aesthetic Dimension” 1). Both art and politics thus force the re-figuration of “what is to be done, to be seen and to be named” (*Dissensus* 37), producing a “fabric of common experience in which... new possibilities of subjective enunciation may be developed” (142). By representing the problem of African American entitlement, in which the grounds of possibility for some citizens are shown to be at a distance from an ideal embodied by the capacious figure of the President, Ralph Ellison’s fiction avoids instrumental rationality in a similar fashion. Instead, the anniversary introduction invites us to re-read *Invisible Man* in light of another counterfactual: we’re invited to imagine a world in which black youths are afforded the same degree of opportunity as whites; in which his narrator is not expelled for offending a white patron, because no such conditions exist; and perhaps in which he succeeds in becoming a public figure and is eventually elected to a position of power. This reading of *Invisible Man*, in other words, unreads the text. In literature, moments like these are precisely the point at which the reader’s desires might diverge from those of the artist, where a desire for more narrative trumps the fetishistic closure of a complete work of art, but to say that authors also don’t sometimes provoke this speculation would be a mistake.  

30 *Invisible Man* uses the

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30 We could add to the list of uncritical styles of undergraduate reading recently generated by Michael Warner (in “Uncritical Reading”) the propensity to speculate about characters and events beyond the
counterfactual potentialities of narrative in order to “make the invisible visible or to question the self-evidence of the visible” (Dissensus 141), to use Rancière’s own language of visibility. Much like Riley’s sinful verse, it constitutes an imaginative occupation of a site of power, by which I mean not only that it imagines an ideal version of the United States but also that aesthetic imagination itself becomes entangled in politics insofar as it intervenes in questions of representation. This can only happen, however, if the novelty of narrative remains unfixed, if Ellison’s fiction refuses the articulacy or self-consciousness it seemingly promotes. Ellison’s ideals are in this sense beside the point: it is our failure to live up to them, signified by the invisible man’s impotence to act at novel’s end, that becomes the grounds for a new democratic cause yet to be articulated. As the invisible man himself says, “[t]he end was in the beginning” (562). Like the novel as a whole, this statement might have once appeared to be an expression of narrative fatalism but signifies its opposite: the invisible man’s end, his only purpose, is to begin anew.

According to socialist intellectual Irving Howe, who generally admired Ellison’s novel, the “infinite possibilities” of its ending is chief among the faults of Invisible Man. On the grounds that “it breaks the coherence of the novel and reveals Ellison’s dependence on the post-war Zeitgeist,” for instance, he rejects “the sudden, unprepared and implausible assertion of unconditioned freedom with which the novel ends” (115). We’ve already seen that mistaking the narrator’s proposition about the infinitely possible for a triumphal assertion of unconditional freedom obscures how Ellison’s fiction
manoeuvres across the irreconcilability between an ideal vision of democracy and the harsher realities faced by African Americans. In fact, it’s clear that Ellison’s subsequent participation in the dispute over the efficacy of literary protest\textsuperscript{31} reveals in him an impulse toward redefining the relationship between art and political dissent along similar lines. Responding to Howe’s criticism in “The World and the Jug,” he disputes the injunction that literature must be subservient to the political or ideological goals of African Americans, even in times of relative crisis. Accordingly, for him “protest is not the source of the inadequacy characteristic of most novels by Negroes, but the simple failure of craft, bad writing... [motivated by] the desire to have protest perform the

\textsuperscript{31} The debate about protest literature that prompted “The World and the Jug” is discussed at length in essays by Larry Neal and, more recently, Norman Podhoretz. Attacking the centrality of \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin} and \textit{Native Son}, James Baldwin wrote in “Everybody’s Protest Novel” that such novels give way to “sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, [which] is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel” (10). He declared that “[t]he failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended” (17). He was particularly uncomfortable with the militancy of Wright’s novel, claiming that “hatred smoulders through these pages like sulphur fire” (16) and denouncing its protagonist, Bigger Thomas, as an ugly inversion of Stowe’s Uncle Tom. For young Baldwin, the novels of black Americans needed to transcend protest and to develop a humanizing aesthetic beyond naturalism’s detached sociological focus. Essentially both a denunciation of American naturalism’s sociological approach to African American experience and of the sentimental portrayal of black experiences for white audience prevalent in much literature of protest, he argues that “[b]elow the surface of this novel there lies, as it seems to me, a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy” (22). He repeated this polemic more directly, in “Many Thousands Gone,” claiming that “\textit{Native Son} finds itself at length so trapped by the American image of Negro life and by the American necessity to find the ray of hope that it cannot pursue its own implications” (32).

Socialist critic Irving Howe responded with dismay to these accusations: “To write simply about ‘Negro experience’ with the esthetic distance urged by the critics of the fifties, is a moral and psychological impossibility, for plight and protest are inseparable from that experience” (114). In an essay responding to Baldwin, Howe argues that it is precisely the force of Richard Wright’s anger that gives the novel its power as “a work of assault rather than withdrawal” (103). He takes issue with the very idea that literature is capable of the distance Baldwin desired, noting his “reluctance to accept the clenched militancy of Wright’s posture as both novelist and man” (109). Howe sought to defend naturalism against Baldwin’s position, which he argued constituted “a post-war liberalism not very different from conservatism” (109). \textit{Native Son}, he suggested, transcends the old-fashion genre to which Baldwin wishes to relegate it: “Naturalism pushed to an extreme turns here into something other than itself, a kind of expressionist outbreak, no longer a replica of the familiar social world but a self-contained realm of grotesque emblems” (104). Ellison’s inclusion in the debate is partially the result of the similarity Howe perceived between Ellison’s opinions and those of Baldwin on the subject of aesthetics. Dismissing \textit{Go Tell It On a Mountain} as “an enticing but minor work” and \textit{Giovanni’s Room} as “a flat failure,” he asserts that “[t]he Negro writer who has come closest to satisfying Baldwin’s program is not Baldwin himself but Ralph Ellison” (110-12).
difficult tasks of art” (Shadow 137). Ellison is not making a case for autotelism, at least not in the sense that the “art for art’s sake” credo of nineteenth century aestheticism is conventionally understood to be a total rejection of the political role of art. Instead, he believes that “true novels... are ritualistic and ceremonial at their core” (114) and thus that they serve a definitive social purpose, and he characterizes artistic endeavour not simply as important in itself but as a specific labour among many: “the book,” he says, “is the result of hard work undertaken in the belief that the work of art is important in itself, that it is a social action in itself” (137). Crucially, therefore, this insistence that art is “important in itself” is a defence against those that would judge it based upon its explicit political value. Other essays from the same period confirm the fact that Ellison doesn’t reject protest so much as render it secondary to “seizing from the flux and flow of our daily lives those abiding patterns of experience which… help to form our sense of reality and from which emerge our sense of humanity and our conception of human value” (Territory 242). According to him, literature must “seize” the universal in order to challenge the moral evasiveness that characterizes the value systems of American mass culture in the postwar period. It may bring about social and political change in this manner. Motivated by a desire to preserve this specific impartiality of art from those who’d ask it to be directly political, therefore, he asks of commentators like Howe:

Why is it that sociology-oriented critics seem to rate literature so far below politics and ideology that they would rather kill a novel than modify their presumptions concerning a given reality which it seeks in its own terms to project? (Shadow 108)
His own work, unsurprisingly, seeks “not to escape, or hold back, but to work through; to transcend, as the blues transcend the painful conditions with which they deal” precisely because he believes that “the work of art... is a social action in itself” (137). This is obviously not the apathetic transcendence of someone unconcerned with politics. Instead, what’s at issue here is a series of misunderstandings stemming from Ellison’s account of democracy: for Irving Howe, political action is ultimately restricted to a given reality in which democracy is imagined to be a specific form of government in whose name (or against which) dissent is often levied, whereas Ellison’s aesthetic reintroduces reality to its ideal in order to suggest that democracy constitutes only an unending gambit of inclusions. Howe’s politics is always conditional, in other words, while Ellison’s fiction is very much about disrupting the “presumptions concerning a given reality,” no matter how radical they may seem, in order to further democracy’s horizon of perfectibility.

Another source of confusion about Ellison’s aesthetics of protest might be the fact that in *Invisible Man* collective demonstration becomes a significant source of dissonance insofar as it’s often represented in a negative light. On the one hand, for instance, the novel is frankly suspicious of those who’ve learned to manipulate the masses for their own ends, groups like the pseudo-socialist Brotherhood. Throughout the narrative, Ellison conjures up a series of cynical conmen, progenitors of *Juneteenth’s* Adam Sunraider like Doctor Bledsoe, Brother Jack, or B.P. Rinehart, all of whom pragmatically exploit the desires of others for their own material or political gain. On

32 Given that Ellison once claimed that B.P. stands for “Bliss Proteus,” Rinehart might have a lot in common with the protagonist of *Juneteenth*. For Ellison, Rinehart is an ambiguous force, at once seductive and dangerous, “part-God, part-man, no one seems to know he-she-its true name, because he-she-it is protean with changes of pace, location and identity” (Shadow 46). In *Invisible Man*, he is a figure explicitly identified with cynical reason, and, although he becomes a temporary source of liberation, the lifestyle and
the other hand, the most legitimate moment of maturation comes when the narrator learns that his oratorical talent allows him to shape the raw emotions of the masses into acts of public dissent. Watching the eviction of an elderly couple in Harlem, he realizes that

[s]omething had been working fiercely inside me, and for a moment I had forgotten the rest of the crowd. Now I recognized a self-consciousness about them, as though they, we, were ashamed to witness the eviction, as though we were all unwilling intruders upon some shameful event; and thus we were careful not to touch or stare too hard at the effects that lined the curb; for we were witnesses of what we did not wish to see, though curious, fascinated, despite our shame, and through it all the old female, mind-plunging crying. (264)

This passage traces a flow from a hermetic individualism that wilfully “forgets” others altogether to a recognition of a collective self-consciousness by way of an inexplicable “something” that bridges the divide of alienation between the narrator and the crowd. A shared sense of shame constitutes the foundation of a spontaneous community, in fact, and he soon recognizes himself as a conduit for forces beyond the immediate, forces which speak out on behalf of the evicted couple and other dispossessed Harlemites. By conquering his reluctance to identify with this group (“they, we…”) in order to articulate the politics of race and class behind the eviction, his speech attacks the authority of the policemen who are overseeing it: “You heard him, he’s the law. He says he’ll shoot us down because we’re a law-abiding people. So we’ve been dispossessed and what’s more, he thinks he’s God” (273). Asserting a common sense of dispossession, in fact, he declares the crowd to be law-abiding not to in order to curb their behaviour but to

form of liberation that he represents must be rejected by the protagonist because in making truths out of lies it can claim no authenticity for itself.
highlight the manner in which the violent imposition of power, their symbolic castration, has demanded the suspension of liberty in the name of law. By calling attention to the hierarchical assumptions that place these citizens in service of the law rather than the other way around, he rejects the capitalistic regime of the senses offered by the marshal and his thugs, in which political entitlement is equated with possession. Throughout this sequence, his attempt to renegotiate poor Harlem’s relationship to its wealthy landlords is about asking the crowd to hear the unheard and see the unseen, to overcome shame and recognize that their inherited dispossession is not a necessity. In other words, he rejects the imposition of consensus, that which Rancière characterizes as “an agreement between sense and sense... [or] between a mode of sensory presentation and a regime of meaning” (Dissensus 144), in order to question the self-evidence of white, middle-class hegemony. In doing so, no doubt, the narrator asks the crowd to count themselves among a new political singularity, one which will partake in the constitution of the United States rather than be interpellated\(^\text{33}\) by it. Ralph Ellison’s aesthetics of protest are thus directly articulated in the divide that this sequence implies between an ideal of inclusion and the reality of black dispossession.

Undeniably, the resulting chaos of this sequence implies that rabble-rousing might be a dangerous activity if pursued for the wrong reasons, at least insofar as it threatens the integrity of the self with the groupthink of mass movements, the dissolving of individuality into collectives in which a new consensus (and, perhaps, new modes of exclusion) is always formed. In this fashion, Ellison is suspicious about the way

\(^{33}\) See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)” in Lenin and Philosophy, particularly later sections on interpellation in which he describes how “ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing’(163).
radicalism slips too easily toward totalitarianism, a lesson of democratic practice of the utmost importance after the rise of fascism in the first half of the twentieth century. As a result, the narrator must learn that his encounters with the crowd are predicated upon a responsibility to them as emerging political subjects. For example, this underlying tension is described later in the novel when he notes what he calls the “boiling” or “simmering” emotions of the crowds gathered at Brother Tod Clifton’s funeral: “Why were they here? Why had they found us? Because they knew Clifton? Or for the occasion his death gave them to express their protestations…? Did it signify love or politicized hate? And could politics ever be an expression of love?” (445). He recognizes that the vicissitude of this crowd is rooted equally in impulses of love and hate. For Ellison, in fact, the talents of his protagonist lay in a rapidly maturing ability to address this unformed menace, not to directly politicize but rather to aestheticize these nebulous feelings in ways that challenge the self-evidence of daily realities in postwar America without giving way to hatred or resentment. In this light, it’s not surprising that his interaction with crowds eventually precipitates an awakening: “I had been transformed, and now, lying restlessly in bed in the dark, I felt a kind of affection for the blurred audience whose faces I had never clearly seen.” The narrative of formation, which the novel works so hard to disassemble, is thus at its most legitimate here. Consequently, it’s only in the style of his relationship to others that the invisible man achieves any sense of wholeness, of manhood: “If they could take a chance with me,” he asks, “then I’d do the

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34 Although the emergence of Ellison’s anticommunism is well-documented by scholars like Barbara Foley, I’d suggest that his target is more broadly all modes of totalitarianism. Foley takes the fact that “notes accompanying Ellison’s draft of the novel... contain multiple allusions to Brotherhood members as ‘communists’” (34) as evidence of a buried attack upon the CPUSA (Communist Party of the United States of America) in the novel, but we could also take Ellison’s effort to distance the Brotherhood from existing radical groups to mean that he wished to generalize about mass movements in the twentieth century.
very best I could. How else could I save myself from disintegration?” (346). This fear of
disintegration registers a degree of selfishness because it reveals he has personal stakes in
addressing the crowd, but, more importantly, this passage also indicates a bilateral
relationship that might otherwise be obscured. His integrity as an individual emerges
only from his dedication to a larger community, from discovering a way of relating to
others that is not characterized by alienation, manipulation, or contempt.

If *Invisible Man* represents an interminable lesson in civic life, then it’s ironic that
the notion that Ralph Ellison most wants his invisible man to learn is the very one that
nearly derails his very first public speech after the Battle Royale, when, in a moment of
unconscious resistance against his condescending white patrons, he allows his tongue to
slip and equates “social responsibility” and “social equality” (30-1). Responsibility and
equality make up the very foundation of his speech-craft, defining his relationship to his
audience as one in which they are both his equals and those to whom he is responsible. In
the manner that it suggests an oratorical ethos, this slip allows for the preservation of a
distance between the individual and the collective that does service to them both because
to be responsible is neither to disintegrate into the crowd nor to manipulate them for
political ends. Moreover, responsibility is one of the words that shadows the novel’s final
hundred or so pages as well, often countering the doctrine of the Brotherhood that tells
the invisible man that individuals “don’t count” (285) and that they are “politically…
without meaning” (440). Tempering this instrumental rationality of political ends, in
which individuals are to be sacrificed for the sake of revolution, his sense of
accountability to the masses refutes Brother Jack’s repeated admonition that those
dispossessed elders that he defended on the Harlem streets are “like dead limbs that must
be pruned away so that the tree may bear young fruit or the storms of history will blow them down anyway” (284). Instead, public speaking constitutes an aesthetic re-organization of collective impotentiality into an accounting of the complexities of national experience, and, as an aesthetic of protest, it implies that any regime of self-evidence must be challenged by dissensus for the purposes of democratic perfectibility.35

In this light, we might also think of “The Little Man at Chehaw Station,” a late essay in which Ellison addresses “The American Artist and His Audience” by way of an autobiographical sketch about “the enigma of aesthetic communication in American democracy” (6). In it, Ellison recounts how his music instructor, Hazel Harrison, responded less than sympathetically to his complaints when Tuskegee faculty members harshly criticized him for not playing his best during a recital. Harrison, he recalls, told him how he played like “some kind of confidence man with a horn” and warned, “you must always play your best, even if it’s only in the waiting room at Chehaw Station, because in this country there’ll always be a little man hiding behind the stove” (4-5). This “little man” represented for young Ellison an anonymous figure of accountability, in a relationship that the author describes as one of “antagonistic cooperation” (7) between artist and audience. Although he links this mode of cooperation to the function of democracy in this essay, in Invisible Man it’s also directly tied to demonstration and dissent. Manhood, in this sense, no longer constitutes the necessary endpoint of a journey toward empowerment or liberation, especially since Ellison’s fiction repeatedly demonstrates how entering the public sphere is often nothing more than a form of scalping. Instead, becoming a man signifies a mode of relating to others, of observing the

35 Jacques Rancière writes that “democracy implies a practice of dissensus, one that it keeps re-opening and that the practice of ruling relentlessly plugs” (Dissensus 54).
“little man” of democratic practice. It never concludes but, rather, seeks to include. The conceptual metaphor of potentiality that governs the deployment of both power and heterodox masculinity is exposed in an uneasy but productive relationship between the invisible man and society. He learns to turn away from a politics grounded in instrumental reason by repeatedly conjuring an unrealized ideal vision of the nation that proves exceptionalist rhetoric to be, at best, illusionary.

If the image of chickens in parachutes from “That I Had the Wings” is not enough evidence that Ellison sometimes employs the trope of flight as an ironic counterpoint to the unlikely aspirations of his characters, the second chapter of Juneteenth provides us with an example of the trope of flight that may be even more on the nose. In that chapter, Adam Sunraider’s Icarus-like ascent to the centre of national power in Washington, D.C. is parodied through an encounter with the heraldic eagle on the Great Seal. As he delivers a speech on the “nation’s demand for citizen-individualists” (23) from the Senate floor, he looks up to discover the eagle has “ripped from its moorings and [is] hurtling down toward him with the transparent insubstantiality of a cinematic image that had somehow gone out of control” (10). This hallucinatory eagle bears down upon him with “sphinxlike eyes” (11) that clearly signify the riddle at the heart of American democratic entitlement. Lost in resentment, however, the Senator sees the bird only as a Coleridgean symbol of guilt thrust upon him from an outside source: “For whose hidden interests and by what manipulation of experience and principle would they hang the bird on me?,” he wonders (12). This statement reflects his cynical nature, one in which political principles are reduced to manipulation and thus in which no ideals can be trusted—he fails to
recognize the source of guilt as his own, in other words. After all, he’s busy delivering a seductive speech that draws on the rhetoric of U.S. exceptionalism but that quickly devolves into a racist attack upon the upward mobility of African Americans, whose “crass and jazzy defiance of good taste and the harsh, immutable laws of economics, lies in their faith in the flexible soundness of the nation” (23). No doubt many of the same principles of responsibility outlined in *Invisible Man* are on display here, albeit in an inverted fashion. Though much of this speech is in line with Ralph Ellison’s own beliefs, Sunraider is shown to be a cold-hearted manipulator of ideals, and he promotes not only their utility as commodities but also their built-in obsolescence: “we are a consumer society,” he declares, “but the main substance of our consumption consists of ideals. Our way is to render ideals obsolescent by transforming them into their opposites through achieving and rejecting their promises” (16). Unlike the author, for whom ideality is always a melancholic measure of democratic lack, then, Sunraider submits his political ideals to the objective logic of consumption, of entertainment, in which they are to be achieved and then discarded. As an inversion of Ellison’s own position, his corrupted logic suggests that it is not only the content of ideals but their form (or style) that must be contested, that new politics emerges not from bland utopianism, whether cynical or naïve, but rather from the consideration of ideality and futurity as the narrative production of struggle.

Of course, all of this discussion might still lead us to ask the same questions of efficacy posed by Irving Howe back in the sixties: isn’t *Invisible Man*’s opened-ended nature, its unwillingness to commit to outlining a formal politics, merely inaction by another name? Needn’t art be either explicitly ideological or else wisely give up on the
project altogether? Like Melville’s Bartleby, a figure whom for many readers represents a model of democratic non-participation, we might wonder whether the invisible man’s ambiguous hibernation suggests the self-mortifying impulse of a frustrated agency, political or otherwise.\(^{36}\) Given his impotence at novel’s end, of course, the answer to this last question may be a resounding yes, but it’s also here that the break between aesthetics and real politics that Ellison maintains in “The World and the Jug” finds meaning. Whether they offer closure or not, whether they kill off their protagonists or lead them to some capitalist equivalent in wealth and happiness, all fictional narratives necessarily terminate. Civic life, on the other hand, proceeds ever onward, its novelties intrude upon us daily until death. Although not quite a form of symbolic suicide, then, the suspended fate of Ellison’s protagonist does in fiction what cannot be enacted in real life: it retreats to a sphere in which the future is forever “held up,” in both senses of the phrase. Those who would argue that art has nothing to tell us about political practice often miss this doubling back of autotelism upon itself: done well, an aesthetics of protest makes visible the shared narrative assumptions that drive practical politics, loosening the hold that conceptual metaphors of power have on everyday cognition. At its core, literature may be a mediation of economic relations, but this relationship does not preclude a constitutive role as far as political consciousness is concerned. The entanglement of practical politics (profession of politicians; positivist object of political science) and “the political” (vague

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\(^{36}\) Giorgio Agamben, for example, argues that Bartleby “dwells so obstinately in the abyss of potentiality and does not seem to have the slightest intention of leaving it. Our ethical tradition has often sought to avoid the problem of potentiality by reducing it to the terms of will and necessity. Not what you can do, but what you want to do or must do is its dominant theme. This is what the man of the law repeats to Bartleby. When he asks him to go to the post office (‘just step around to the Post Office, won’t you?’), and Bartleby opposes him with his usual ‘I would prefer not to,’ the man of the law hastily translates Bartleby’s answer into ‘You will not?’ But potentiality is not will, and impotentiality is not necessity; despite the salutary impression that the books give him, the categories of the man of the law have no power over Bartleby” (Potentialities 146).
subject of political philosophy) takes place on the plane of aesthesis, in which the self-evidence of democracy can be challenged. Our new century’s re-envisioning of Ralph Ellison as a political writer is an important one, therefore, precisely because it undoes a critical inheritance that attempts to reduce what was always political to an autonomy. Interpreting his fiction in this way suggests that politics cannot function practically without first existing as a fictional vision. What the bulk of Ellison’s work—composed over a half a century—has in common is the manner in which it confronts the pervasive yet fallacious myths of “Adamic definers, namers and shapers of yet undiscovered secrets of the universe” (23), as Senator Adam Sunraider puts it while securing his own entitlement. The structuring metaphor of Adamic manhood is denied, except insofar as its representation makes obvious the qualified nature of American citizenship. In the next chapter’s discussion of John Updike’s Couples, we’ll abandon the development of the individual man for the ostensibly monogamous pair, returning to the problem of political agency in light of “the post-pill paradise” (52) of early nineteen-sixties America. In it, I’ll argue that Updike’s seemingly apolitical text demonstrates the psychic strategies through which politics are occluded from middle-class life. It will be worthwhile keeping in mind throughout this dissertation, however, a lesson discerned from closely reading Ellison’s fiction: the plight of the political actor, balanced precariously between conformity and cynicism, may lie in the acceptance of a degree of impotence.
In the previous chapter, my analysis focused on the problem of conformity and miseducation that the young protagonists of Ralph Ellison’s fiction face when confronted with a nation bent on reducing African American citizens to articulations of a particular political destiny. The abundant evidence that Ellison’s stories sought to tie manhood to an entrance into the public sphere might prompt us to ask why, for several decades, dominant readings of *Invisible Man* presented us with a curious occlusion of its political content. Given how frequently the author addresses contemporary American polity in his essays, in fact, we might wonder why such readings perceive this novel as an outright rejection of political possibilities in favour of aesthetic ones. As we’ve seen, the fact that Ellison saw black participation in government as deeply compromised is clear, and yet so much of his work seems driven to represent this horizon in light of the poetic potentials of an ideal democracy. Although since the publication of the manuscripts of his second novel much work has been done to revisit *Invisible Man* in precisely this manner, Ross Possnock’s complaint half a decade ago in *The Cambridge Companion* about the enduring image of him as “a politically disengaged mandarin and high modernist” (1) continues to suggest a puzzle: what are we to make of a critical complicity to preserve
Ellison’s aesthetic project from his social liberal beliefs? What impulses drove his early readers, even possibly Ellison himself, away from political claims? It’s perhaps less surprising that John Updike has been received in a similar manner. Rather than politics, it’s said, his work tends to focus on an earnest mixture of sex and spirituality, on what Kathleen Verduin calls “the mythic resonance of day-to-day experience” (61), and like Ralph Ellison he’s often considered to be out of step with the postmodern ironies of his more radical contemporaries. While the absence of political content in Ellison’s work is debated, however, Updike recognizes and often thematizes his own discomfort with the postwar political scene. His 1989 memoir, Self-Consciousness, for example, details how he was forced to re-evaluate his “Eliotic” conviction that “political concern was vapid and played small part in the civilized life” when domestic protests over Vietnam “made it impossible to ignore politics, to cultivate serenely [his] garden of private life and printed artifact” (129). Detailing a dinner party quarrel with Bernard Taper and Philip Roth, he explains that his frustrated defence of “poor Johnson and his pitiful ineffective war machine” (126) prompted him to question his “distance as an artist” (142) from the nation: “There are two ways to live happily with a government,” he writes, “to accept or to snub it, to identify with it and rejoice in its policies, or to ignore it as an

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37 Ralph Ellison’s own defence of the beleaguered Johnson comes in “The Myth of the Flawed White Southerner” (1968). Although Johnson and his vision of “the Great Society” were initially popular, by the time this essay was published it was clear that the changes promised by such reforms in welfare and civil rights weren’t happening fast enough for African-Americans grown rightly impatient with the unkept promises of desegregation and, alternately, were happening much too fast for a white middle class majority who were watching their standard of living erode and blamed federal policy. Under these conditions, disenchantment regarding Johnson’s mismanagement of Vietnam split the Democratic party between a “Peace Plank” left and a moderate centre, effectively ending an age of postwar liberal consensus. Significantly, it’s at this moment that Ellison chose to write his defence of the beleaguered Johnson. Injured by assertions from other intellectuals that “[he] had ‘changed’ or sold out to the ‘establishment,’” allegations which he admits in the essay had cost him “a few friends” ( Territory 77), he nonetheless risks further censure in order to praise Johnson “as the greatest American President for the poor and for the Negroes” (87). The conflict in Vietnam, however, remains unmentioned.
unworthy brawl that has nothing to do with one’s self. I could manage neither” (144). As Roth pointed out at the party, despite claiming to have his “back to the wall in a world of rabid anti-establishment militants,” Updike himself was “the most aggressive person in the room” (126-7).

In what follows, then, I’d like to consider Updike’s best-selling novel from the late sixties, Couples, as an exploration of this intrusion of national concerns into the serenity of this “garden of private life.” Insofar as the author’s admittedly “tangled position” (135) about the anti-war movement is representative of a significant cultural shift, one that effectively broke the back of the Democratic party in 1968, it will be productive to read his semi-biographical depiction of the private lives of a group of middle-class couples in Tarbox, Massachusetts as a reflection on broader societal tensions. Although Couples is a nostalgia piece set in the headier days of Kennedy’s Camelot, in exploring a bygone period of sexual licentiousness it simultaneously brings to light the causes and symptoms of a radical political helplessness, in addition to the strategies by which a circle of ostensibly monogamous pairs attempt to distance themselves from the nation by making “a church of each other” (7). Though the author’s career-spanning fixation with the ties between adultery and Christianity is certainly present here, my point is that the narrative engages in a kind of paraleipsis: politics represents a marked omission in his novel, invoked through the denial that it should be invoked. As such, Couples itself can be interpreted as a “garden of... printed artifact”

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38 Although Updike claims to abhor orthodoxies of all kinds, he voices political opinions very much in line with American conservatives at the end of the 1960s: “Under the banner of a peace movement, rather, war was being waged by a privileged few upon the administration and the American majority that had elected it” (131). It’s hard not hear echoes, for instance, of Nixon’s “Silent Majority” speech in this attempt to identify radicalism as an assault against an emerging majority.

39 A fictional stand-in for Ipswich, where the Updikes resided in the 1960s and 1970s.
that, through narrative, mirrors the difficulties of maintaining a “lifestyle we might call genteel bohemian” (*Self-Consciousness* 122) in the “superheated Sixties” (134).

As textual hooks, the novel’s two epigraphs⁴⁰ are the obvious place to commence an analysis of the author’s ambivalent representation of democratic practice, especially given that the erudition they imply has a strong influence on his fiction: accompanying lines from Alexander Blok’s poem “The Scythians” is a passage from “The Effects of Space Exploration on Man’s Condition and Stature” by Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich. Taken together, these quotations betray real anxieties about the disappearance of two paired symbols of authority in the U.S.: Christianity and democracy. It’s significant, for instance, that Updike selects the following words from Tillich to introduce *Couples*:

> There is a tendency in the average citizen, even if he has a high standing in his profession, to consider the decisions relating to the life of the society to which he belongs as a matter of fate on which he has no influence—like the Roman subjects all over the world in the period of the Roman empire, a mood favorable for the resurgence of religion but unfavorable for the preservation of a living democracy. (50)

Tillich’s essay seeks to gauge the effects of the space age on human agency and democratic freedom, as well as the manner in which it “has changed tremendously the

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⁴⁰All of Updike’s early novels have at least one epigraph, from sources as diverse as the Bible, Wallace Stevens, Jean-Paul Sartre, and the transmissions of Russian cosmonauts. Updike argued for the importance of epigraphs in suggesting the meaning of his work. In an interview with Jeff Campbell in 1976, he claims that they are “[q]uite important, really, and I’ve read very few reviews or critical articles that seem to me to take the clues that the epigraphs mean to offer. I tend to discover the epigraphs at some point in the work in progress. I don’t think that a book has to have an epigraph. In fact, maybe it’s a little fussy for a book to have an epigraph—*War and Peace* doesn’t have one, and so on—a book should be its own. On the other hand, I’ve enjoyed other people’s epigraphs, and if I find a quote that seems to me to hit it, as a sort of mystical offering given to me, I used it” (*Conversations* 84).
cosmic frame of man’s religious self-evaluation” (48). As a progression of the Copernican de-centering of humanity, he argues that space exploration furthers the “objectification” of Earth, which “becomes a large, material body to be looked at and considered as totally calculable,” and, moreover, that the “aim to go forward for the sake of going forward” implicit in it leads to a culture of “indifference, cynicism, and despair” (45). This crisis of purpose betrays the estrangement of what he calls the “human predicament,” in which our collective potential is left unsatisfied by the “horizontal line” of scientific progress. “These spiritual dangers, however, should never lead to a decision to give up,” he writes in his even-handed manner, “[f]or danger is not a reason to prevent life from actualizing its potentialities” (46). Rather, Tillich’s faith rests in the fact that someday progress will be tempered by a return to the “vertical line” of spirituality when “space exploration will be judged in the light of the meaning of life in all its dimensions” (51). In the meantime, he concludes in the very sentences that precede Updike’s selection that

[a]n aristocracy of intelligence and will to power has developed in the West as well as in the East and equalized to a considerable degree the two originally opposite social and political systems. Space exploration in the democratic world strengthens the antidemocratic elements, which are present in every democratic structure. (50)

Bound up in the ideological divide of the Cold War, then, for Tillich the space race signals not the realization of life’s potentialities but the ascendance of a political and intellectual elite over a powerless majority. Anticipating the collapse of liberal consensus, he thus seeks to account for the growing feelings of political helplessness that
would come to define the period. Like its technological sibling, the intercontinental ballistic missile, the space rocket becomes a symbol of destinies outside of the average citizen’s control—a matter of fate ripe for the re-emergence of God.  

Although stripping Tillich’s words from the context of space exploration might indicate that Updike wishes to generalize about “a mood favorable for the resurgence of religion but unfavorable for the preservation of a living democracy,” there’s an important qualification here implying a measure of doubt. *Couples* counters Tillich’s analogy of Rome and postwar America by juxtaposing these statements about the “antidemocratic elements” of society with the second epigraph, lines from Alexander Blok’s “The Scythians” (1918) that imagine alternate roots of modern civilization:

We love the flesh; its tastes, its tones,  

Its charnel odor, breathed through Death’s jaws. ...  

Are we to blame if your fragile bones  

Should crack beneath our heavy, gentle paws?

41 As a contemporary of Karl Barth, whose pronounced influence on Updike has been much discussed, Tillich seeks a dialectical correlation of the secular and sacred in a manner that would strengthen our understanding of both without effacing distinctions between them. In *The Protestant Era*, for instance, he describes the inability of secular discourse to provide an ontological ground for being: “Little is left of our present civilization which does not indicate to a sensitive mind the presence of this vacuum, this lack of ultimacy and substantial power in language and education, in politics and philosophy... in the life of communities” (60). For Tillich, human potentiality is that state of “dreaming innocence,” which he associates with the story of Adam and Eve before the Fall. Actualization follows after original sin and is therefore tied both to earthly history (the “horizontal line” of progress) and to human mortality. He thereby allegorizes the Garden of Eden and Fall of Adam, central themes in *Couples*, in metaphysical terms: “Man is caught between the desire to actualize his freedom and the demand to preserve his dreaming innocence. In the power of his finite freedom, he decides for actualization” (*Systematic Theory* 35). Tillich is sympathetic to this desire for actualization, and grace is for him the dialectical sanctification of human actuality by way of God’s transcendence, “not a return to dreaming innocence nor a rejection of those potentialities which have been actualized... [but] rather their union on the level of eternity” (Williamson 22). This willingness to implicate God in the finitude of the everyday distinguishes him from Barth, and, not surprisingly, Updike in fact believes that the two thinkers represent “the poles...of possible theologies in the ‘50s and ‘60s” (*Conversations* 254).

42 These lines come from page iii of *Couples*. Subsequent lines come from a different but relatively contemporaneous translation by Robin Kemball.
The intertextual coincidence of the Russian poet and Tillich on the opening page implies that the tendency of citizens to perceive the nation as a sphere over which they have no control hasn’t resulted in a resurgence of religious faith, which might eventually act as counterweight to blind progressivism, but instead a proliferation of alternatives to both religion and democracy itself. In other words, the materiality of flesh here, paired with the discomfiting interplay of sensuousness and death implicit in this description of Scythian cannibalism, shifts Couples away from Tillich’s optimism that human nature will revolt against self-actualization without God. Blok’s Scythians are not Americans but Russians, after all, celebrated in ironic observance of a nineteenth century convention that portrayed Russia as the paganistic place “where Europe...flows back into Asia” (321), as Nietzsche put it in Beyond Good and Evil. In Blok’s recovery of the power implicit in such superstitions about the East, the speaker in the final stanza implores the capitalist West, “[f]or the last time – Old world, come to! The feast / Of peace-fraternal toil awaits you / ...And our barbarian lyre invites you” (120). As both an invitation and a warning, then, the poem anticipates the ideological deadlock of the Cold War, forecasting the victory of Soviet Russia as the “New America.” Written on the lintel of Updike’s novel, Russia signifies not the revolutionary fervour that it might have for Alexander Blok, but a threat of otherness (fleshy, immoral, uncivilized) to the democratic, moral, and religious fabric of the United States.

According to Updike, who never resisted commenting on his own work, “the main thing [about Couples] was the sense of sex as something brutal, crushing, barbaric even” (Conversations 86). Elsewhere he claims that the thrust of the novel is denouncing “a religious community founded on physical and psychical interpenetration,” while at the
same time, with reference to the destruction of the Congregational church in its final chapter, it asks: “what else shall we do, as God destroys our churches?” (33). This unwillingness to entirely condemn adultery thus stems from the impasse of an estranged position, one which proposes a fatalistic intersection between perceived failures of mainstream religion and the ontological inefficacies of middle-class sexual liberation. Neither, according to Updike, sufficiently addresses the contradictions of living in the modern world. Reading quotations like the above, it’s easy to see why Raymond Mazurek\textsuperscript{43} asserts that “the very impulse to suspend references to political conflict is a fundamental part of [Updike’s] appeal” (159). His concerns, rather, seem to be largely spiritual in nature, and most critics have followed these authorial cues by reading this novel as “about sex as an emergent religion” (\textit{Conversations} 52). As a result, his paraleiptic engagement with the contradictions of contemporary American democracy has been largely overlooked, even though they clearly lie at the heart of the novel’s problematic. It would thus be wise to keep in mind that, in relation to the existential and theological registers that seem to dominate the narrative, the author makes an assertion about the state of the nation by pointedly passing over it.

As we learned in the last chapter’s discussion of democracy, actualized power attempts to reduce citizen-subjects to signifiers of existing regimes. The political fatalism that Tillich describes (and which Updike represents in \textit{Couples}) clearly implies a conflation of national politics and existential anxieties concerning negative categories like death, otherness, nothingness, and non-being. Social narratives constitute a method

\textsuperscript{43} His claim about \textit{Rabbit Redux} might hold true for \textit{Couples} as well, namely that “despite the trappings of the political novel, it does not provide the understanding or analysis which is possible in that subgenre” (153). Even though \textit{Couples} is less overtly a political novel than \textit{Rabbit Redux}, I would like to maintain that the impulse to suspend the political sphere that Mazurek identifies is a theme inseparable from existential and theological concerns in the novel.
of bolstering the self against this void of meaninglessness, of producing private meanings in lieu of nationalist ones. In the novel, however, biochemist Ken Whitman sums up the authorial dilemma at the heart of Updike’s narrative in describing the specimens that he studies in the lab: “they die. That’s the trouble with my field,” he says, “Life hates being analyzed” (33). This is an artistic as well as theological point: as Tillich suggests, the world ultimately shrinks away from human understanding. In other words, the author recognizes the fallacy of producing a naturalistic analysis of sixties America that laments the absence of God’s perspective by attempting to usurp it. The irony of non-comprehension in the novel thus lies in the fact that any attempt to represent contemporary life may be a denial of godly revelation, which is why (as we shall see) the author refuses to take up a position but rather restricts himself to irresolvable non-positions. As an alternative, he queries the failure of mainstream religion to account for the political and social complexities of twentieth century life, much like the “theology of crisis” (to use Emil Brunner’s term) from which he borrows, while at the same time refusing himself the comfort of an imaginary aesthetic or technological alternative. In this light, tied to an antidemocratic substratum built into American polity, power takes on the threatening properties that Tillich’s essay on space flight attributes to the objectification of Earth: as seen as if from above, a perspective that for most of human history has been restricted to God, the citizen is reduced to a specimen in a Petri dish, and Updike is unwilling to replicate this form of omniscience as narrative. Set against

44 Brunner’s book *Theology of Crisis* was published in 1929. According to Alfred Duhrssen’s “Capitalism and Crisis Theology,” it “postulates the absolute heterogeneity of God and man. We cannot say of God even that he is, since he is beyond both existence and non-existence. We may ask of certain persons or things whether they exist or not, but it is irrelevant to ask this about God. He is the Absolute Other, something devoid of all properties or predicates, a kind of abyss which draws from us a holy shudder. This absolute other, by its very vacuity, is somehow identical with the same: we experience it as the dark, inmost ground of the world” (233).
radical helplessness, in fact, his apparent anti-secularism is grounded in the assertion of a godly omniscience that must be conceived of as both unknowable and absolute. The aptly named Whitman thus makes what must be read as the work’s central aesthetic and theological assertion: “If a clever theologian ever got hold of how complex [life] is, they’d make us all believe in God again” (33).

Although focused chiefly on the infidelities of its Dutch-American protagonist, Piet Hanema, Couples is more accurately described as an attempt to represent the social ecology of a sexually liberated circle, made up of several married pairs whose social and sexual entanglements become overwhelming by design. They are Piet and Angela Hanema, Freddy and Georgene Thorne, John and Bernadette Ong, Bea and Richard Guerin, Eddie and Carol Constantine, Harold and Marcia “little-Smith,” Janet and Frank Appleby, Matt and Terry Gallagher, Ben and Irene Saltz, and Foxy and Ken Whitman, “the new couple” introduced in the novel’s very first line. As a replacement for fifties ideals of familial duty and hard work, this group has tried to “improvise here a fresh way of life” based on “ideals of truth and fun” (106) and, above all, sexual licentiousness. As the Whitmans quickly learn, in fact, Tarbox is a social enclave in which the women have, as Foxy puts it, “push-me-up bras and... get-me-out-of-this-giggles” (39) and newcomers are judged on their willingness to “swing” (49). Piet attributes this behaviour partly to

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45 See, for instance, pages 124-9 of Edward P. Vargo’s Rainstorms and Fire: Ritual in the Novels of John Updike or Alan T. McKenzie’s short article, “‘A Craftsman’s Intimate Satisfaction’: The Parlor Games in Couples.” Responding to the conventional critical claim which dismissively sees Updike’s work as mere naturalism, Tony Tanner writes that “Updike’s prose does give the impression of being a somewhat rococo version of fairly conventional naturalism, but at its best it is edged with dread. This dread stems from related sources: a terror at the sense of the infinite spaces in which the world tumbles, and the horror which attaches to what he thinks of the Darwinian demonstration that ‘the organic world, for all its seemingly engineered complexities, might be a self-winnowing chaos’” (275).
boredom and partly to a lack of imagination, both of which seem based upon attaining a
degree of affluence: “The men had stopped having careers and the women had stopped
having babies. Liquor and love were left” (12). No doubt, this community represents a
particular moment of uncertainty in U.S. social history, after the decomposition of the
conservatism of the McCarthy era but before the decline of the middle-class standard of
living and the rise of sixties counterculture. Writing a half-decade after this setting,
Updike knows that radical changes are in store for American culture that will ultimately
make this Tarbox lifestyle impossible; by novel’s end, his couples will have been
displaced by newcomers, a generation that “formed a distinct social set, that made its
own clothes, and held play readings, and kept sex in its place, and experimented with
LSD, and espoused liberal causes” (454).

Although it might be tempting to read the novel as focused exclusively on the
private lives of the middle class, national events penetrate Tarbox in a variety of ways,
especially when they involve the presidential couple, John and Jacqueline Kennedy. Over
drinks, for instance, the group discuss “the ubiquity of the federal government,
Kennedy’s fumblings with Cuba and steel, the similarity of JFK’s background to their
own, the differences, their pasts, their fathers, their resentments” (138). Dinner party
conversations frequently turn to politics as well. The day after the assassination, Bea
Guerin cries and admits that she “loved him” though she “could never have voted for
him” (305). Late in the novel, this idea is elaborated by Foxy Whitman when she writes
from St. Thomas claiming to have met new friends who think JFK “was too much like
the rest of us semi-educated lovables of the post-Cold War and might have blown the
whole game through some mistaken sense of flair.” Musing on the subject, she attributes
Kennedy’s failure as a political leader to a generational incapacity: “somebody like us...wasn’t fit to rule us, which is to say, we aren’t fit to rule ourselves, so bring on emperors, demigods, giant robots, what have you” (449). What’s worth noting here is not only that Foxy voices Paul Tillich’s thesis about political fatalism (“emperors, demigods, giant robots”) but also that the thousand days of the Kennedy administration that frame the novel are stripped of political consequence and rendered inert by a generation who see him as too much like themselves to be a capable leader. In Updike’s novel, the New Frontier cult of personality that K.A. Cuordileone has argued “shaped a heady liberal nationalism based on fantasies of liberal potency” (172) is shown to be a cult of personalization, then, one that makes the promiscuous Kennedy easy to identify with but hard to believe in. The disconnect between national decision-making and the lives of these couples, compounded by the global stakes of the Cold War, generates a sense of radical helplessness that can only be countered by strategies of containment. In other words, the crushing otherness of the state is at odds here with the genuine appeal of Kennedy’s Camelot as a spectacle of private life. More effective as a mythical figure of male potency than as president, one could say, JFK’s attraction for these couples is located in his sexual swagger rather than his liberal policies.

Foxy’s attitude is symptomatic of the abdication of responsibility by an entire generation, a pattern of disavowal Updike sees as definitive of the postwar middle-class and their gardens of private life. Some of the citizens of Tarbox have more immediate connections to the outside world, and yet the same process of re-contextualization takes place. At the novel’s midpoint, for instance, Piet is told by his wife that Ben Saltz (the only Jewish member of the Tarbox circle) has been fired, possibly for a breach of
confidentiality at work. He “miniaturized... [f]or the space program,” Angela reminds him, but “[i]t was secret exactly what” (245). Although the incident conjures up the old spectre of the Red Scare, as well as the extraordinary lengths the American government went to in protection of national security, the author does so only to deflate its relative importance to these couples. “Piet [hears] about Ben’s losing his job from three directions” (244), but each version of the story is motivated by interests quite distant from Ben’s professional link to competition between superpowers. Whereas Irene Saltz defensively announces that her husband is “changing jobs,” Piet speculates, and Angela later corroborates, that nights of “swapping off” sexual partners with the Constantines “ran him ragged” (245) and weakened his performance. The third direction, Foxy’s “rather different story,” comes fourth-hand to Piet from Carol Constantine by way of Terry Gallagher and doesn’t deny the fact that the couples were spending too much time together but instead shifts the blame to the Saltzes themselves, who “just moved in on them” (248). The telephone games these couples play with one another thus distort the potentially disturbing content of the original message. To take another example, John Ong, a Korean defector who works at MIT, is also connected to a vague Cold War project that becomes secondary in a structure of gossip: “If they ever dropped an H-bomb on Tarbox it would be because of him. Like the Watertown arsenal,” Angela tells Foxy, “But you’re right. He’s not sexy” (59). The confidential nature of the careers of Saltz and Ong exaggerates the enforced divide between the private and professional lives of all men in the town, between what is “sexy” in Tarbox and the rest of the world. Their ties to a postwar national security apparatus become the stuff of gossip, which in turn comes to define a protocol of enclosed sociality cut-off from broader outcomes. History penetrates
their lives only in fragments, like the cut-out image of “a Russian spacedog” that adorns the desk of one of Piet’s daughters, along with a collage of images “including Sophia Loren, Queen Elizabeth II of England... a Pakistani mother bewailing the death of her child by earthquake, Jacqueline Kennedy, a vocal group called the Beatles” (283).

Paradigmatic of the obtrusive historical allusions in the novel, such images become limit markers of a community intent on setting itself apart.

As in the case of Updike’s use of Tillich and Blok, re-contextualization represents the chief manner through which Tarbox creates private meaning out of national events. These examples show how paraleipsis loosely describes the manner in which the novel stages its evacuation of political content, simultaneously invoking broader historical movements and showing how they are pushed aside or otherwise incorporated into private melodramas. As D. Quentin Miller notes, John Updike’s “characters feel powerless when it comes to changing the larger world, so they test the limits of their power in their individual, private worlds” (20). Consequently, the volatility of the Cold War, “lying just below the consciousness of the characters, is potentially dangerous and constantly in flux, not unlike their extramarital relationships” (31). Though I see such behaviour as less a symptom of trauma caused by the possibility of nuclear war than of a broader cultural climate with a variety of lurking social causes, Miller has a point in drawing our attention to the reassertion of individual power implicit in the strict lines these characters maintain between themselves and the nation. If a Cold War technocratic plutocracy endangers American citizens with ontological dread by reducing them to insignificant specks, sexual liberation becomes the means of making a Petri dish into the Edenic centrality of Adam and Eve. We fail to understand the author’s point about “sex
as an emergent religion” unless we recognize that this process of encapsulation is not one of profanation or even secularization but rather a rendering sacred, a setting apart, of collective sexual interpenetration. It’s not quite hedonism, but what we might call “Edenism,” the delimiting of new middle-class paradises in which human potentiality is restored and the knowledge of good and evil is contained by sexual capital.

Given his doubts about Paul Tillich’s assertions, it’s not surprising to discover that the author represents Christianity as a vestigial social practice in Couples.\(^\text{46}\) In this light, the most ambiguous symbol of mainstream religion’s failure to provide genuine ontological or historical understanding in the novel is the golden rooster that sits atop the local Congregational church. At first, it’s described as a passable substitute for divinity, at least for the children of the town, who we’re told share a common feeling that “if God were physically present in Tarbox, it was in the form of this unreachable weathercock visible from everywhere. And if its penny [eye] could see, it saw everything spread below like a living map” (17). Indeed, “salvaged from the previous church and thus dated from colonial times,” the weathercock’s ability to withstand “hurricanes, lightning, or repairs” (16-7) seems to imply the unshakeable force of the Church, its ability to adapt to changing national climates as well as its panoramic perspective on the petty concerns below. It’s significant, also, that such a perspective is shared by the novel’s old-fashioned omniscient narrator, which can see what “the cock could have observed, in dizzying perspective,” the “dotlike heads of church-goers” against which the “red head”

\(^{46}\)Unlike Barth, who fiercely defends God’s absolute otherness from humanity, Tillich’s writing, in the strictest sense, is apologetic in nature: it seeks a rational basis for faith compatible with contemporary sensibilities. He is “a mediator in a world of fragmentation” (Picked-Up Pieces 123), as Updike calls him in a brief and not altogether positive review. “He saw himself as a bridge between the Church and those outside it,” he warns elsewhere, “[b]ut a bridge has no content, just traffic” (Hugging the Shore 830).
(17) of protagonist Piet Hanema eventually stands out. Above all, the rooster mediates both divine and naturalist omniscience in the text, though the problematic nature of this perspective in contemporary America quickly becomes apparent. The narrator interrupts the flow of Tarbox gossip with a deliberate awkwardness that suggests such omniscience is at odds with the enclosed lifestyles the couples are attempting to cultivate:

‘When you and she get yourselves straightened out, I’d adore to see you again. You’re the love of my life, unfortunately.’ Frank could not escape the impression she was asking him to get a divorce. Meanwhile, our advisory capacity in Vietnam was beginning to stink and the market was frightened, frightened yet excited by the chance of expanding war. Basically business was uneasy with Kennedy; there was something unconvincing about him. (158)

As an aside, “meanwhile” imagines events taking place simultaneously but also markedly elsewhere. The collective pronoun—in its talk of “our advisory capacity,” of foreign policy and economics—reports the state of the nation, reminding the reader of a socio-political backdrop disappeared in the personal melodramas of the Tarbox circle. If such tangents are meant to inform our interpretation of Frank Appleby’s marital troubles—by suggesting that Frank is as unconvincing as Kennedy, perhaps, or by producing an analogy between marriage and the conflict in Vietnam—it’s clearly a unilateral move on Updike’s part. The opposite of topical allegory, then, in subordinating the historical to the personal it highlights how the Applebys are reluctant to define themselves as citizens. Passages like this one imply goings-on over which they have no control and no understanding but which have a definitive impact upon their lives.47

47 The second part of the novel opens with a similar passage: “They belonged to that segment of their generation of the upper middle class which mildly rebelled against the confinement and discipline whereby
The novel’s narrator thus takes on the same properties that make the rooster an object of veneration for the town’s children, and, like them, we assume that its analytic perspective is unquestionable, godlike. And yet the jarring effect of such interruptions also reminds us that such “objectivity” is incompatible with the encapsulation of the Tarbox circle. The author is quick to impose limits on this perspective for theological reasons as well in order to demonstrate that neither godly nor authorial omniscience can exist in an unambiguous state in postwar America. Along these lines, Jonathan Culler has recently argued against the concept of omniscience altogether, writing that “[t]o assume that the only alternative to the knowledge permitted ordinary persons is the infallible awareness of a god is to treat the omniscience of a god as something given and known” (25). Pointing out that such narrators are never quite all-knowing, he argues that it is the idea of omniscient narrative rather than the diverse practices to which the name applies, that should sadden or outrage us. Our habit of naturalizing the strange details and practices of narrative by making the consciousness of an individual their source, and then imagining a quasi divine omniscient consciousness when human consciousness cannot fill that role, generates a fantasy of omniscience, which we then find oppressive. (32)

wealth maintained its manners during the upheavals of depression and world war. Raised secure amid these national trials and introduced as adults into an indulgent economy, into a business atmosphere strangely blended of crisp youthful imagery and underlying depersonalization, of successful small-scale gambles carried out against a background of rampant diversification and the ultimate influence of a government whose taxes and commissions and appetite for armaments set limits everywhere, introduced into a nation whose leadership allowed a toothless moralism to dissemble a certain practiced cunning, into a culture where adolescent passions and homosexual philosophies were not quite yet triumphant, a climate still furtively hedonist, of a country still too overtly threatened from without to be ruthlessly self-abusive, a climate of time between, of standoff and day-by-day, wherein all generalizations, even negative ones, seemed unintelligent” (105).
While this analysis is correct in identifying the manner in which omniscience has become a blanket term for a variety of disparate techniques, however, Culler doesn’t account for texts that might deliberately query the “fantasy” he denounces. No doubt, it’s worth noting, Updike is a writer who’s particularly aware of the attraction to omniscience as well as its potentially oppressive nature. Discussing Dickensian narrators in an interview with *The Paris Review*, for example, it’s not surprising to find him admitting that although it’s “a somewhat dead convention... I feel that something has been lost with this authority, with this sense of the author as God, as a speaking God, as a chatty God, filling the universe of the book” (Plimpton 449; qtd. in Neary 146). Like Culler, he recognizes that omniscience makes assumptions about the nature of God’s perspective as “something given and known.” It’s an idea that, given his theological position, both comforts and repulses him insofar as it implies that God’s perspective is somehow calculable. While Culler’s discussion of omniscience can’t help but pause to denounce “a president who espouses Total Information Awareness” (22), Updike still recognizes the appeal of its “lost” explanatory force, the comfort it once provided. Put differently, his position is an argument with (rather than for or against) omniscience. He opposes a pattern of appropriation of religious discourse by political forces, but he also seeks to understand why these conditions exist during and after the Cold War.

It’s significant, then, that the “fantasy of omniscience” in *Couples* is constantly marked as such. His deliberate employment of it reflects the broader themes of the novel insofar as identifying the narrator with the weathercock immediately dispenses with this chatty God as a possible explanatory force. The tawdriness of the rooster’s perspective, not to mention its implicit ties to capitalism, is first signalled materially by the smallness
of its eye, “a copper English penny” (16), and its “gilded” (17) exterior. It’s then repeated more forcefully when the church is burned to the ground in what William Pritchard calls “a prime example of [the] author-god taking out his vengeance on a scene he’s been witnessing below” (143). The impoverished nature of modern churchgoing is made obvious when after an inspection of the wreckage the church proves to be “not only badly gutted but structurally unsound: a miracle it had not collapsed of itself a decade ago.” The weathercock, though salvaged, is brought down to earth: “The swarming children encircled...and touched the dull metal. The sky above was empty but for two parallel jet trails” (457). Much like during the game of golf that Piet and Roger Guerin play during the Cuban Missile Crisis, then, the sky is left not quite empty here, taking on the paranoiac properties of an omniscience usurped by unfriendly forces. Under these conditions, neither weathercock nor naturalistic narrator provide the comfort they once might have, becoming instead complicit in a worldly knowledge system that Updike finds bankrupt. Unwilling to trumpet any secular alternative, however, he leaves his characters with the Tillichian dissatisfaction of this not-quite-empty sky, and they develop games and strategies to help them ignore its implications. Along these lines, Pritchard may be onto something when he calls the church’s destruction a parody of

48 From a biographical standpoint, the destruction of the Congregation church in Ipswich clearly resonated with Updike: “Our church affiliation, what with my wife’s indifference and my own Barthian dandyism, was less than half-hearted... occupying a precious old example of Carpenter Gothic built in 1846 and ignited by lightning on June Sunday in 1965” (Self-Consciousness 142). Elsewhere, he confesses: “I have never felt closer to the bare bones of Christianity than on those bleak and drafty Sunday mornings, with the ghosts of frock-coated worshippers and patient carpenters making up for our sparse attendance. That church is gone; a lightning stroke burned it down on a dark June day in 1965; one hundred and nineteen years old, it had stood longer than any of its four predecessors on the site” (Hugging the Shore 66-7).
49 During that game, Piet recalls that “[t]hey teed off into an utterly clear afternoon and between shots glanced at the sky for Russian bombers” (223). Since we know our history, these jet trails do not signal the arrival of those dreadful bombers—but as a replacement for God they certainly do promote another perspective on the world below, namely, the objectifying view of human calculability that Tillich tied to the political fatalism of a world split between two well-armed ideologies.
cataclysm: if early readers of *Couples* found its climax to be heavy-handed, it’s because it represents an assertion of authorial force that calls attention to itself as fantasy. Too deliberate to be believed, the power of the author-god’s vengeance is circumscribed in fiction. Updike thus appropriates the traditions of nineteenth century omniscience only to highlight the profound insufficiency of objective narration as a substitute for an absent God. Without leaving the stratosphere, then, he establishes a narrative perspective that presumes an objectivity but is devoid of real revelation. Again, the rhetorical structure of paraleipsis makes political data into a symptom of a lament for faith.

Because it also stands for the newly surfacing religion of licentiousness, the rooster’s dimension as a conventional symbol of sexual potency highlights one result of a religious impasse in which omniscience no longer offers spiritual comfort. Hence, it may be significant that, despite being diminished in stature by the fire, the cock still survives, perhaps to find its way atop a new structure. Read in this twofold way, its textual destabilization as a symbol of authentic religiosity mirrors the painful inadequacy of mainstream religion to account for global and domestic conflict in the modern world. In terms of the narrative, the burning of the Congregational church locates us squarely in the realm of a post-religious consciousness in which the old rituals are no longer a sufficient guard against the malaise that Tillich describes. Moreover, this is a problem of exegesis as well because it’s no longer possible to interpret the cock innocently, to see it purely in light of its divine significance as announcing the resurrection of Christ. Instead, it’s subject to our dirty thoughts.  

[50] In fact, its coxcomb and the line of sight it establishes

[50] Both *Couples* and *Self-Consciousness* are conscious of the theological implications of life’s so-called “dirty truths.” In the former, Piet admits to a trepidation rooted in Freddy Thorne’s “hyena appetite for
between narrator and protagonist inevitably link it to red-headed Piet, the novel’s chief adulterer, a man who regularly attends church but also jokes that his “amazing virility” is produced by a “stiffening sense of sin” (8). This supplanting of symbolic value is made possible by the similarities that the author perceives between religion and sex but also by their mutual occlusion of political concern: in both cases, national matters represent a point of discomfort insofar as they signify forms of individual impotence. Although faith once consoled with the denial of the earthly and the promise of revelation, then, Updike recognizes that sex suspends what Tillich calls the need for the “vertical line” altogether. By beating a hasty retreat to their sexual garden of earthly delights, in other words, the Tarbox circle attempt to repress the anxieties born of this modern fatalism.

The centrality of sexual practice among the novel’s couples is not represented as a cohesive philosophy of life, even if it does sometimes serve a unifying function in the community. Sex can have its heretics as well as its orthodoxies, after all, and the author is careful to distinguish characters by their varying attitudes toward it. Marshall Boswell, describing John Updike as a “novelist of moral debate”\(^{51}\), defines his work in terms of “a dialectical approach to religious issues in which defining oppositions do not resolve into a satisfying synthesis but rather remain in sustained tension and ambiguity” (“Novel of Moral Debate” 43). If we take him to be correct, then on the level of character the basic dialectical antagonism established in Couples must be between Piet and Freddy Thorne, who voice two opposing pseudo-theological approaches to sex. Piet, whose name we’re dirty truths” (21). On the other hand, Updike describes in his memoir the “theological animus” that “down-dirty sex and the blood mess of war and the desperate effort of faith all belonged to a dark necessary underside of reality... they must be faced... and even embraced” (135).

\(^{51}\) Writing about the Rabbit tetralogy, Boswell has done much work in a series of essays to illuminate Updike’s debt to Søren Kierkegaard’s use of religious paradox. Of particular interest is his deployment of irony in which contrasting perspectives on theological questions are represented without any authoritative resolution, remaining open to challenge and awaiting God’s grace for final disclosure. “The debate... must go on after the book is over,” concludes Boswell, “go on, namely, within each reader” (51).
told early on rhymes with both “sweet” and “indiscreet” (27) and which is spelled to suggest his piety, is Updike’s foremost litmus of what I have called “Edenism.” Figured as being “too thick in the conscience” (125) to enjoy his pleasure seeking without also feeling guilty, he struggles with the incompatibility of his faith and his erotic desires and is thus central to the novel’s staging of spiritual crisis. In contrast to this attempt to sacralise human sexuality, Freddy Thorne argues for the opposite mode of reconciliation: namely, appropriating the vestigial rituals of faith into more properly hedonistic atheism of the bedroom. While for Piet cunnilingus is Eucharistic (“To eat another is sacred” (435)) and to be treated with profound respect, therefore, in Freddy’s more ugly estimation “to fuck is human; to be blown, divine” (148). These kinds of statements abound, as Updike counterpoises the baroque of Piet’s sexuality with the burlesque of his rival. Piet’s sexuality is deeply felt, whereas in Marcia little-Smith’s opinion “sex is all talk with [Freddy]” (126). He extols a form of high blasphemy based around sex, but he’s also incapable of the hyper-promiscuity that characterizes his rival.

In comparison to what’s described as Freddy’s “evangelical humanism” (407), then, it’s not surprising that Piet is one of the few in their circle who still attends church. Indeed, he wonders “what barred him from the ranks of those many blessed who believed nothing... To break with faith requires a moment of courage, and courage is a kind of margin within us, and after his parents’ swift death Piet had no margin. He lived tight against his skin, and his flattish face wore a look of tension” (20). The fleshly trope of a man barely contained within his own skin reflects religious sensibilities grounded in embodiment and its associations with both pleasure and suffering, life and death. This boundary is a recurring theme in much of Updike’s work, of course, and is negotiated
here through the satisfaction of Piet’s sexual appetites as well as through prayer.⁵² Although he teeters on the brink of what he sees as a courageous non-belief, he turns to the church to provide structure and context for his existence. While Updike clearly sympathizes with this position, however, under Karl Barth’s influence he recognizes at the same time that God may have a demonic side, that God is also non-being, and thus that He may be unwilling to provide the kind of comfort Piet seeks.⁵³ Hence, although the author gives specific reasons for why Piet is more spiritually estranged than others, his protagonist’s faith is associated with weakness because it’s based on the denial of his own mortality. The immediacy of death makes atheism an uncomfortable proposition for Piet because it cannot help but reduce life to a chemical process. More introspective than any other character, however, he’s well aware of the existential nature of these fears: “It’s not practical death I’m worried about,” he explains to Foxy, “it’s death anytime, at all, ever” (270). In this light, omniscience is suspect, and organized religion offers only limited spiritual relief; thoughts of death plague him, making him desperate to assert his own vitality in whatever avenues he can find. He dreads the meaninglessness that death signifies and tries to escape it, but both John F. Kennedy’s assassination and John Ong’s eventual demise from cancer serve in the narrative as reminders of “tides of life [that] swing up to God for slaughter” (259). As figures contaminated by the Cold War, lives

⁵² See, for example, Kathleen Verduin: “Updike’s protagonists... typically replay the definitional crisis recounted by the author: arrested by a fear of death, they assert Christian orthodoxy, usually to a religiously indifferent audience” (62).

⁵³ At his most orthodox, Barth has no use for any politics of a fallen world, seeing such systems as corrupted human inventions best left to themselves, and consequently he argues for non-participation or “not-doing” in the political realm. On the other hand, Tillich sees an earthly politics united, tempered, and eventually sublimated into divine law; though he rarely speaks directly on the subject, he sees God as an active participant in history. It is in this spirit that I read Paul Tillich as one dormant influence in Couples. I argue that Updike negotiates a position between these poles: he seeks to establish personal distance from democratic polity, but in his will to understand the world he is unable to write without considering what Tillich calls “actualization.” All the while, the return to innocence, in which the United States is figured nostalgically as a lost paradise, remains a central desideratum of his work.
caught up in an indifferent political machine, the deaths of these men remind Piet that the entanglement of life with politics necessarily signifies human finitude.

Politics represents the opposite of Adamic empowerment in Couples, then. Along these lines, Updike states in Self-Consciousness that for years afterwards reminders of the Vietnam war would revive his “sense of shame, of a lethal stickiness, of a hot face and stammering tongue and a strange underdog rage about the whole sorry thing” (148). There’s something disconcerting about the intrusion of government policy into his private life, something “lethal” even. Like Piet, in fact, Updike claims that it undermined his sense of himself as a man, “isolat[ing him] from adult depths” (149). “My earliest sociological thought about myself,” he confesses, “had been that I was fortunate to be a boy and an American. Now the world was being told that American males—especially white, Protestant males who had done well under ‘the system’—were the root of evil. Law-abiding conformity had become the opposite of a refuge” (145-6). Indeed, Updike is always seeking such refuges in this way. Asked about his tendency to conflate male sexual performance and religious certainty in works like Couples and A Month of Sundays, for instance, he admits in an interview that “[i]n sexual encounter, you get the kind of confirmation of your own existence and tremendous intrinsic worth that you don’t get elsewhere, except maybe in your mother’s arms when you’re an infant. So it’s not surprising that churches are sexy places” (Conversations 256). Sex, he says, is “a tribute to our bodies and animal selves” and religion is “a tribute to our mental and (some would say) spiritual selves,” but “[b]oth are inextricable from human vitality” (246). Though he places no further emphasis on it, then, it’s noteworthy that infancy is the primal confirmation of existence to which sex and religion are both compared and that
the practices of adult masculinity are uniquely tied to expressions of agency that might thus be incompatible with it. In *Couples*, the author genders spiritual as well as sexual encounters, even existentialism itself, by codifying it as a specifically masculine crisis grounded in the failure of Adamic potency.\textsuperscript{54} Infancy denotes the ambivalent condition of accepting passivity in favour of “confirmation of your own existence,” a way of trading agency for spiritual certainty. Consoling his daughters with the thought that their dead hamster might be in heaven “going round and round in a wheel,” for instance, Piet worries that the women in his life are attempting “to search out something he had buried in himself” and “to uncover and unman him, to expose the shameful secret, the childish belief, from which he drew his manhood” (77). The belief in an afterlife that authorizes his vital masculinity is paradoxically based on a secret softness, a childlike vulnerability determined by the fact that it simultaneously signifies his wilting fears of death.

As a reaction against this condition, Piet’s faith becomes coupled with demonstrating not only his vitality but his virility. Throughout the narrative, female bodies become for Piet a new temple: “Prayer and masturbation had so long been mingled in Piet’s habits,” says the narrator, “that in hearing the benediction he pictured his mistress naked” (22). Similarly, it’s for religious reasons that he admits that he “love[s] pregnant women” (249), and it’s certainly part of the reason for his attraction to Foxy Whitman, who’s carrying Ken’s child when their affair begins and from whose lactating breasts Piet nurses (313). After impregnating her himself, he tells her that adultery is a way of “getting out in the world and seeking knowledge” and, finally, that

\textsuperscript{54} In *Self-Consciousness*, Updike admits that “politically, I expected dovishness and liberal sentiments in women, as part of their nurturing, pitying nature. In the long haul of nearly a quarter-century between my wedding vows, I was more than once attracted to women to the left even of my first wife, and once had to control a shudder of revulsion when an adored beauty confided to me, from her side of the bed, an intention to vote for Goldwater” (135).
what they’ve learned is that “God is not mocked.” This position sums up the belief that John Updike shares with Piet “that there was, behind the screen of couples and houses and days, a Calvinist God Who lifts us up and casts us down in utter freedom, without recourse to our prayers or consultation with our wills” (415). Piet longs for a version of faith tied to potency, but Updike recognizes what he denies, that in this network of contradictions life and reproduction are inseparable from death and decay, that to invoke power is always to invoke its opposite, that Piet is struggling with degrees of surrender.

It’s thus significant that the trajectory of Couples forces upon Piet a recognition that his garden of private potency is always subject to intrusion. Unlike the professionals I’ve already discussed, in fact, both Piet and Freddy Thorne have careers based around the community and tied to combating forms of entropy. Aside from making “a career of screwing other men’s wives” (359), Piet works as a contractor:

All houses, all things that enclosed, pleased Piet, but his modest Dutch sense of how much of the world he was permitted to mark off and hold was precisely satisfied by this flat lot two hundred feet back from the road, a mile from the center of town, four miles distant from the sea. (5)

Not surprisingly, he mourns the loss of the Congregational church because the “carpentry in there can never be duplicated” (444). For him, the act of building implies nostalgia for traditional family structures, as well as for a well-delineated divide between the public and private spheres. It seems the “lightly supporting symmetry” (6) of houses appeals to him for many of the same reasons that women’s bodies do: he sees both as centres of stability linked to an ideal version of the United States as a direct expression of God’s will. Dedicating himself to restoration work, he’s uncomfortable with the modernizing
practice of “burying the world God made” (83) and eventually splits from his partner in construction, Matt Gallagher, because the latter is interested only in the profit generated by new tracts of suburban ranch houses. Cast in theological terms, what he sees as Gallagher’s hypocritical “corrupting [of] whole hillsides” while “secur[ing] his wife and only child behind a wall of Catholicism” (93) is insufficiently respectful of the sublunary world as God’s creation. Piet laments that “[e]ach modernization and restriction [in Tarbox] presented itself as part of the national necessity, the overarching honor of an imperial nation” (387). In contrast to Gallagher, his worldview recalls Max Weber’s famous description of the Protestant “idea of the necessity of proving one’s faith in worldly activity” (74). As Weber puts it, “[h]e gets nothing out of his wealth for himself, except the irrational sense of having done his job well” (33). From a Weberian perspective, the homestead and its bedchambers might be said to represent for Piet the centre of this practice; a model of sexualized worldliness that is also meant to manifest an eternity in which politics have no place.

While Piet perceives his job as the careful carpentry of one demonstrating his election and thus guaranteeing his immortality, Freddy Thorne is a dentist, a career that the author makes central to the plot. Known for loving messes, for going “beyond all bounds of order” (148) at parties, and for being “professionally obsessed with decay” (242), it’s not surprising that he travesties his rival’s sanctifying eroticism with a sexual amoralism that refuses the consolations of vitality. Contrary to Piet, in fact, he’s described as “slippery and womanish” (126), “a plump fuzzy-minded man with a squint and an old woman’s sly mouth” (407), not just unsexy but at times barely human. Wearing a snorkelling suit to a party, he strikes the others as vaguely androgynous, a
“curvaceous rubber man...arisen from another element” (226). His “hairless” face is described as becoming monstrous when he gets angry, transforming into “the underside of some soft eyeless sea creature whose mouth doubles as an anus” (359). This anus-mouth serves a scatological purpose, to be sure, and becomes associated with both the atheism and ontological nothingness that Freddy voices and Piet has learned to fear. His sexuality is based not on excessive demonstrations of virility, but rather a necessitous revelling in decay and dirty truths. By matching Freddy to Piet, then, the author imbues this dentist with the characteristics of mortality that the other man seems psychically organized to refuse; insofar as they both speak for an emergent religion based upon sex, the two men are playing the same game with very different rule sets.

Despite Piet’s promiscuity, however, Freddy is clearly the leader and charismatic provocateur of the Tarbox circle, “the local lord of misrule” (154) as Donald Greiner describes him. As principal party planner, he’s legitimately invested in the life of the group in a manner different than a menacing characterization might imply. For him, the group dynamic conjures “[a] magic circle of heads to keep the night out” (7); he believes them to be “all a conspiracy to protect each other from death” (299). The narrator goes on to describe Freddy as having been “unable to let go of a beauty he had felt, of a goodness the couples created simply by assembling” (145). Indeed, his interests seem uniquely tied with the perpetuation of a particular version of middle-class bohemianism with which Updike characterizes the early sixties. With a bedside bookshelf full of light pornography and works by Sigmund Freud, Henry Miller, and Sappho, he weaves a poetic worldview out of “modern psychology and myths” (277) and speaks with “oracular care” (237) about human desire, in which he locates the group’s salvation. He
delivers sermons on the subject, in fact, aggrandizing himself in terms of his courageous daily confrontations with meaninglessness and speaking for a turning away from the preservation of tradition in favour of the chaos of sexual revolution: “In the western world there are only two comical things,” he declares at the height of his hubris, “the Christian church and naked women. We don’t have Lenin so that’s it” (146). Unwilling to believe in God and ideologically incapable of believing in Lenin, like Piet Freddy turns to “naked women” as sites of sexual capital that might sustain society.

The key to understanding the negotiation between the two men clearly lies in the fact that Updike demonstrates more sympathy for the dentist than we might assume. In denigrating himself, Piet frequently assumes that his rival’s atheism derives from an existential courage to face harsh truths of non-being, a view bolstered by Freddy’s own party-time performances of what Theodore Ziolkowski has called “sociodontia.” Explaining why teeth ceased to be symbols of beauty and potency after the nineteenth century, Ziolkowski describes how “decaying teeth [came to] represent with increasing frequency society as a whole and not just the esthetic or moral agony of the individual” (19). From the dentist’s perspective, likewise, teeth become not just indicators of existential agony, against which his satanic amoralism is merely an anaesthetic, but indicators of a collective confrontation with Tillichian impotence. They imply not only that such agony is an inevitable part of the life of a community but that this condition necessitates the existence of the community itself as a “magic circle” against it. As the group’s dentist, Freddy thus delves into the dirty, sociodontic truths they would deny not simply to shock but also in order to strengthen—no doubt, this explains why he’s particularly obsessed with Piet himself. During a parlour game (called “Wonderful”) in
which each person is asked to describe the one thing that they find most astonishing, for instance, his answer is “the human capacity for self-deception” (240). Asked to elaborate, he immediately turns to orthodontic tropes, recalling patients who come to him, after months of incredible agony, “with teeth past saving” (241) because they are unwilling to admit to themselves that they need assistance: “Losing a tooth means death to people; it’s a classic castration symbol,” he concludes, “They’re scared to death of me because I might tell the truth” (241). A little absurdly, perhaps, telling the truth becomes linked to existential dread, castration, and dentistry, and by extension so too does Freddy. He perceives his job in terms of a masterful confrontation with nothingness; in this way, the plucking of teeth past saving signifies the sociodontic vigilance of the self-castrating man. Though Freddy imagines his dentist-persona bravely facing death head-on, however, what he learns from his practice is not too distant from Piet’s own dreadful realization: namely, that “[w]e don’t die for one second out there in the future, we die all the time, in every direction. Every meal we eat breaks down the enamel.” Betraying his own fears and revealing a part of himself that he has in common with his rival, Freddy claims to smell “Big Man Death… between people’s teeth every day.” The contradiction worth keeping in mind, however, lies in the fact that the ubiquity of death also excites him because, as he puts it, “[d]eath is being screwed by God” (370). For Freddy, sex is not the denial of death but its invocation. He recognizes that narratives of potency, whether religious or sexual in character, only mask a constitutional powerlessness.

Thinking in terms of the relationship between their shared anxieties about impotence and the “antidemocratic elements” of national politics, there’s no doubt that
neither Freddy Thorne nor Piet Hanema engage Paul Tillich’s “human predicament” of radical helplessness directly. Both men perceive the U.S. as a sphere over which they have no control, and historical events like the Cuban Missile Crisis or the assassination of John F. Kennedy represent only fatalistic signifiers of their mortality, more evidence of “Big Man Death” to be repressed. In light of the thinning out of religious faith, each man employs a different model of sacralised sexuality in order to cultivate a lifestyle disconnected from the ideological tumult of the times. As Freddy himself describes it, “We’re a subversive cell. [...] Like in the catacombs. Only they were trying to break out of hedonism. We’re trying to break back into it. It’s not easy” (148). To put it another way, his anti-revolutionary stance concedes that, despite their relative affluence, the Tarbox circle cannot influence the chaotic happenings of the early sixties; and, as an alternate, the group recoils “back into” hedonism. Notably, such an attitude is not incompatible with the one that Piet inherits from his Dutch-American background and a family who “had been excluded from, and had disdained local power.” “His family,” the narrator tells us, “had been Republican under the impression that it was the party of anarchy; they had felt government to be an illusion the governed should not encourage. The world of politics had no more substance for Piet than the film world” (387). Though Piet clings to the vestiges of his Lutheranism even during sexual intercourse, Freddy Thorne’s blasphemous position mocks these vestigial desires for revelation, recognizing how uneasy they make Piet. The problems being worked out in such passages reveal as much about John Updike as they do his protagonist insofar as they reflect the same difficult relationship to polity that characterizes his memoirs.55 Although Piet is

55 Indeed, his interest in dentistry as a measure of character is so deep that he includes a dozen pages of his own dental history in the memoir, concluding with a tongue-and-cheek meditation on the ties between
biographically closer to him, however, as Marshall Boswell’s comments suggest the
dialectic opposition between Piet and Freddy culminates not in the defeat of one side of
the argument but a “hideous bargain” (374) struck between them, a suspended resolution
of the latter’s anxieties that reflects also the author’s dilemma in the demand that he take
a political position on the conflict in Vietnam. Along these lines, the novel reaches its
crisis point when, in exchange for putting Piet’s latest mistress, Foxy Whitman, in touch
with an abortionist, Freddy demands one night with Piet’s wife: “Surely, old friend,” he
goads, “we’ve gone beyond money as a means of exchange” (358). This same-sex
exchange between Piet and Freddy makes them yet another couple, the novel’s central
one in fact, establishing a relationship not merely by way of the double triangulation of
sex with each other’s wives but also through the abortion itself. As a symbolic gesture
that ultimately undoes Piet’s obsession with god-given vitality, the procedure produces
something of an uneasy resolution to the novel.

Even before this crisis occurs, however, there’s much to imply an inevitable
sexual coupling of the two men, even if their desires culminate not in sex but abortion. In
*Between Men*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes the “bond of cuckoldry” as “an
asymmetrical relation of cognitive transcendence” that defuses homosocial anxieties,
noting that this relation is “necessarily hierarchical in structure, with an ‘active’
participant who is clearly in the ascendancy over the ‘passive’ one” insofar as “the
cuckold is not supposed to know that he has been cuckolded” (50). In the case of

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sitting still in the chair and facing down death in the trenches of World War I. Citing his own guilt at
having been 4-F, the suffering Updike endured from bad teeth becomes an “earned wound” that authorized
his “animal stoicism” and calmed his anxieties about endorsing war (161-2). In fact, *Couples*’s Freddy
Thorne bears a striking physical resemblance to Updike’s long-time dentist, “Ernie Rothermel, the tennis-
playing son of our family doctor, a tall balding man with a wisp of mint to his breath and an air of having
not much wanted to be a dentist” (154).
Couples, by establishing a secondary love triangle (Freddy-Angela-Piet) to match the first (Freddy-Georgene-Piet) and negate another (Ken-Foxy-Piet), Piet and Freddy together share in the “relation of mastery to other men” that Kosofsky claims comes with “success in making this transaction... a willingness and ability to temporarily risk, or assume, a feminized status” (51). Freddy’s womanish nature derives from his professional associations with castration, although it’s only after consummating the exchange, when Angela consents to sleeping with him to get her husband out of trouble, that he’s revealed to be physiologically impotent as well. While “his genitals [lie] in her hand like three eggs, boiled and peeled and cooled,” Angela contemplates the sweetly “injurable” nature of body parts that are so “[c]ommitted to venture,” comparing him (as we’re invited to) with her husband: “She hadn’t dreamed men could be this calm with women. She could never have held Piet so long. Even asleep” (369). Significantly, her interpretation of Freddy’s genital vulnerability, heretofore concealed beneath a torrent of sexualized speechifying, reveals much about the nature of his manhood, which is not precisely oral but rather what his own popular Freudianism56 might call “anal expulsive.” Freddy’s cruelty, his scatological love of exposing others to dirty truths as an act of desire, are so deeply tied to his sexuality that it’s difficult for him to grasp a more normative sexuality. Indeed, as someone whose sexual bravado is almost entirely predicated on performance, he’s immediately put-off by the physicality of a naked Angela, who he’s idealized for her iciness, a detachment from the taint of sex:

That Angela, the most aloof of women, whose shy sensitive listening had aroused in his talking tongue the eager art of a drill probing near pulp, should harbour in

56 The Tarbox couples use Freud in day-to-day conversation: “Clearly she was never allowed to work through homosexual mother-love into normal heterosexuality. Our fist love-object is the mother’s breast. Our first gifts to the beloved are turds...” (163).
her clothes the same voracious spread of flesh as other women afflicted Freddy, touching his way across the smooth skin black as lava, with the nausea of disillusion. (369)

Though some readers have described this disillusion as a misogynistic reaction\(^{57}\) to Angela’s own desiring nature, Updike’s language here also indicates how her feminine “spread of flesh,” far from representing the intense stimuli that it does for Piet, strikes Freddy as an unconscionable embodiment of reproductive sexuality. After all, this half of the bargain may be an act of revenge but it’s also motivated by a veneration for her unworldly aloofness. Soon afterward, the central struggle of his character is revealed when he’s pressed into gossiping with her because she recognizes this verbal component to his sexual desires. He explains to Angela the rivalry between Piet and himself as “male versus female” (370), admitting that he thinks of himself “as female” and that he “want[s] to be everybody’s mother” and “have breasts so everybody can have a suck.” “Why do you think I drink so much?,” he ventures: “To make milk” (371). By figuring himself as a woman, then, Freddy demonstrates a nurturing instinct that might seem incompatible with his satanic nature but which also connotes an attraction to Angela’s vulnerable husband: “Clearly I’m homosexual,” he admits, “But then, of the men in town, who isn’t, except poor old Piet?” (370).

Given his propensity for theatrics, it’d be a mistake to take Freddy exactly at his word here, yet his words do recall a description of Piet from earlier in the novel:

> You are a paradox. You’re a funny fellow. A long time ago, when I was a little boy studying my mommy and my daddy, I decided there are two kinds of people

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\(^{57}\) For instance, see Suzanne Henning Uphaus’s *John Updike*: “Freddy suffers a disillusionment that reveals his self-deception to us, though not to him. Angela’s sexual willingness embarrasses him, her flesh dismays him. [...] The disillusionment causes Freddy to be impotent” (64).
in the world: A, those who fuck, and, B, those who get fucked. Now the funny thing about you, Petrov, is you think you’re A but you’re really B. (237)

The gendering of mommy and daddy in these comments is mapped onto the active/passive dynamics of who gets fucked by whom. Among myriad possible configurations of human sexuality, the transitive connection of these As and Bs, of those who fuck and those who get fucked, implies a fairly normative sexual pattern based upon a man penetrating a woman. This gender-mapping hints at Freddy’s desires insofar as, according to this dynamic, men can only “get fucked” by other men by taking on the “mommy” role. Although Freddy wishes to be the “mommy” in this scheme, however, his description of Piet as “really B” implies that as the “daddy” he also gets screwed—perhaps by Freddy, yes, but also by God, by death, or by “the counterthrust of time” (336) that opposes his vitalistic pursuit of fertile women. If one repressed modality of Piet’s sexual desire is to suckle at his mommy’s breast and thus to find the “confirmation of his own existence” that Updike describes in infancy, then Freddy wishes to be her surrogate; and yet, given what we know of the latter, Piet would be nursing precisely on the dirty truths of death and decay that generate sexual pleasure for Freddy and make him so repulsive to Piet. Along these lines, Boswell has written about more overt moments of male-male desire in *Rabbit is Rich*, claiming that the appeal of anal sex for Harry Angstrom is that it “does not involve the planting of ‘seed’ into the fertile ‘mud’ of the female womb, nor does it lead to the production of fallen human beings, each of whom is stained from birth with the taint of original sin” (“The World and the Void” 170). As his choice of words suggest, the underlying motif here is what I’ve called Edenism. The contradiction Angstrom recognizes is that paradise is lost not merely to original sin but
also to the inevitability of new beings and new deaths. We could say that the coupling of Adam and Eve gives way to the multiplication of life upon which the laboriousness of earthly politics is predicated. In the case of Couples, then, Freddy’s willingness to secure the abortion is tied to an anal sexuality. It short-circuits the invocative paradox that plagues Piet, in which his claims to masculine vitality are concurrently disempowering insofar as they also summon thoughts of his own mortality. Each man benefits from this cuckolding arrangement insofar as they both get to risk feminization at the hands of the other without risking impregnation. Piet’s anxieties regarding the contradictions of his manhood are resolved by acceding to the bargain, allowing himself to “get fucked” and thus proving his sexual mastery over death itself. Freddy, on the other hand, gets to spend the night with Angela, masturbating onto her belly after a night of chit-chat, and thus demonstrates his manhood by cuckolding his rival while at the same time taking on the “mommy” role in nurturing his ontological toothache. It’s not surprising, then, that the tightening of their homosocial bond undergoes an alteration indicative of a new conjugality in the narrative: “[Piet] felt his heart vibrate with the nervousness of love, as if he and Freddy, the partition between them destroyed, at last comprehended each other with the fullness long desired” (398).

58 In The Human Condition, Hannah Arendt clarifies how the suspension of the political might be implicated in this bargain when she writes that “the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting,” concluding that “natality, and not mortality, may be the central categorical of political... thought” (9). For Arendt, who describes the same retreat into the private sphere that Updike depicts, politics properly speaking rests on inauguration, affirmation, and action. Of course, Arendt’s fear is the social displacement of the political realm, and her solution in turning to classical political theory is to insist upon the strict and deliberate separation of the public and private. The mandate of feminism and other emergent rights movements in the postwar period, on the other hand, was the politicization of the social, a move counter to the enclave-establishing motives of the middleclass but also to the antidemocratic formation of a ruling elite that Arendt’s critique cannot accommodate and for which she has been justly criticized.
Of course, at the heart of this bargain is what Freddy calls a “little pelvic orthodonture” (407), the abortion itself, which is meant to nullify the danger adultery poses to the monogamies of Piet and Foxy. Far from finding it intolerable as we might expect given the degree to which he venerates the reproductive powers of the women in his life, however, Piet at first prays for outside intervention from the divine: “God who kills so often, with so lordly a lightness, from diatoms to whales, kill once more, obliterate from above, a whip’s flick, a finger down her throat, erase this monstrous growth. For Thine is the kingdom” (346). After the operation, in overriding God’s will with his own, he finds that Freddy, Foxy, and himself have all become empowered by participating in negation of life, that “they had become gods moving in the supernature where life is created and destroyed” (375). The mastery of death is clear here: through homosocial Edenism, the couples are able to re-establish what Georgene Thorne once called “the post-pill paradise” (52) in lieu of one sanctified by God with the command that they go forth and multiply. Most importantly, just as the destruction of the Congregational church may be a parody of a cataclysm, what’s significant about the melodramatic crisis surrounding the illegitimate child is how insignificant it proves to be: after all, Ken Whitman quickly discovers the truth, both couples are divorced in a fairly painless manner, and Piet ends up married to his former mistress. In fact, the novel begins with the Hanemas in the bedchamber discussing the Whitmans and ends by describing the formation of another couple (a repetition of the first, the Hanemas) out of

59 The first entry of Jack De Bellis’s John Updike Encyclopedia, titled “Abortion,” argues that “Updike uses the subject of abortion often because it forces his characters to face moral choices, and thus abortion helps to define character” (1). This is certainly true of Rabbit Run, his primary example, in which Angstrom impregnates a young prostitute and then is forced to choose between allowing the child to be born or returning to his wife and son. In Couples, abortion strikes a different chord since it becomes central to a homosocial economy of male bonding rather than to the moral revelations of a single character.
the destabilization of monogamy. It’s much more significant, therefore, that Foxy’s illicit pregnancy becomes the turning point in Piet’s faith, bringing about his rejection of the church in the novel’s final chapter. These ties are diminished in the novel’s closing chapter not because of moral shock but because the author wishes to remind us of the price of the bargain these middle-class couples have made in escaping into hedonism. Establishing a homoerotic coupling between men provides a method of transcending political fatalism without turning to faith, a form of conjugality without natality. The inadequacy of modern religion is overcome not through the reassertion of omniscience but rather through the suppression of the desire for transcendence altogether. The author hints about the return of the repressed, however, when he describes Piet’s new job “as a construction inspector for federal jobs, mostly military barracks, in the Boston-Worcester area” (458). Updike’s looming crisis over Vietnam is thereby anticipated by the novel’s final moments.

The cover of the April 26, 1968 edition of Time magazine features a portrait of “Author John Updike” in a green turtleneck, behind him his home in Ipswich, along with the banner announcing “The Adulterous Society.” The accompanying article’s defence of the publication of Couples in post-Lady Chatterley America sums up what I think is the major gesture taking place in the novel by describing Piet Hanema’s experiences of “the astonishing luxury of fornication with eager women behind bedroom walls apparently opaque to the fierce eyes of his Calvinist God.” Updike’s nostalgic representation of an American middle-class enclave, ostensibly private yet bordered by translucent bedroom walls, sets itself against the emergence of sex as an alternative to religion and yet can
find no respite from the “antidemocratic elements” of the Cold War. Although *Time* seems dedicated to demonstrating that the novel is more than “an upper-middle class *Peyton Place*” by characterizing it as a moralistic “lament for the pampered, wayward millions of today,” Updike’s goal is also to demonstrate the impossibility of keeping national politics at bay. Contained within Tarbox’s Edenic instantiation of the apolitical is the real issue of the adulterous society for Updike, which has little or nothing to do with the immorality of violating marital vows nor the triumphalism of a supposedly emancipated sexuality. Rather, he charts its total erasure of political fatalism, co-opting the language of “liberation” and “radicalism” in the name of personal pleasure-taking just as Freddy declares an “escape into hedonism.” For the protagonist of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, conformity could still be imagined wholly in the paranoiac mode, as that which is imposed from without and thus as that which threatens the individual. It’s figured as the frightening otherness at the centre of institutionalized power, as in the lobotomy scene at Liberty Paints. Resistance to power so conceived is, at the very least, a possibility. In *Couples*, conformity becomes deterministic, and individualism becomes uncoupled from the exercise of agency in a public sphere. The “astonishing luxury” of which the anonymous reviewer in *Time* speaks refers literally to Piet’s capable and authorized promiscuity, against which apparently no bedroom wall can stand, but metaphorically it signals the middle class’s capacity to forget not only about politics but about the very process of forgetting. This position appeals to Updike on a fundamental level, but he rejects it nonetheless.

The novelist’s anti-secularism isn’t a reassertion of doctrinal religiosity. Rather, it’s more poignantly grounded in the recognition that politics in the United States has
subsumed the structure and hence the authority of one of the primary features of faith: omniscience. The world he imagines coming into being at the very end of Couples is a world in which neither God nor political agency can exist comfortably, and instead the two are abolished so that Piet’s bohemian lifestyle can persist. Sensible to Updike’s nineteenth century literary antecedents, David Lodge compares Tarbox to the utopian community of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Blithesdale Romance, itself a fictionalization of the Transcendentalist Brook Farm. He concludes that, as in the work of Hawthorne, “the note of celebration is checked by irony, the utopian enterprise fails on a communal level, and the struggle of life against death is ambiguously resolved” (238). As I see it, however, the novel’s uneasy resolution isn’t so much a symptom of the failure of this utopian gesture as it is an indicator of the inherent contradictions of the middle-class desire to establish an enclave against the outside world in the first place. Though frequently associated with radicalism, in other words, there’s little inherent in the concept of utopia restricted to the overthrow of existing society. Fredric Jameson, for instance, writes that “[s]uch enclaves are something like a foreign body within the social... they remain as it were momentarily beyond the reach of the social and testify to its political powerlessness, at the same time that they offer a space in which new wish images of the social can be elaborated or experimented on” (16). The relationship to Updike’s nostalgic vision of bohemian gentility to the troubled times in which he wrote Couples suggests just such an experiment but only insofar as the “wish image” implies a middle-class desire to relinquish political responsibility. Like Invisible Man, after all, Couples concludes with deliberate disappointment. On the one hand, its circular return to springtime, as well as Piet’s remarriage to Foxy, bear a superficial resemblance to a
traditional comic plot; indeed, as others have pointed out, the novel’s references to the liturgical calendar imply that it’s structured upon a Christian narrative of death and renewal. On the other hand, however, its ending is devoid of any revelation insofar as it constitutes a repetition of the beginning—and an impoverished one, considering that Piet seems to have lost his faith altogether. By novel’s end, Updike has moved his reader closer to a world in which no personal engagement with the nation is conceivable, in which no dialectic between domesticity and nation can be perceived.

Although Updike’s biographical ties to his protagonist are many, there’s one in particular that I’d like to look at in closing this chapter because it illustrates the author’s ambivalent relationship to politics. Like Piet, he admits that his non-revolutionary stance is intimately tied to his Lutheran upbringing. In Self-Consciousness, for instance, he recalls that “Luther had told the ‘murdering and thieving hordes’ [‘die räuberischen und mörderischen Rotten’] of rebellious peasants to cease their radical turmoil and submit to their Christian princes.” Citing Paul Tillich twenty years after selecting his “The Effects of Space Exploration on Man’s Condition and Stature” as the epigraph for Couples, Updike defines Martin Luther’s “positivistic authoritarianism,” in which the power of the state is perceived as divinely willed insofar as it makes love possible through the suppression of chaos and evil. In Luther’s Germanic rejection of revolution, in fact, Updike sees a mandate for warfare: “The world is fallen, and in a fallen world animals, men, and nations make space for themselves through a willingness to fight” (130).

Though he denies that such a position made him a conservative, he considered himself at

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Edward Vargo, for instance, points out that “by taking us from Palm Sunday of 1963 through the next Spring, Updike gives us the liturgical cycle of this church” (130). See also Schiff: “The novel’s plot is thus circular in that the couple from the opening scene, Piet and Angela, have now dissolved and been replaced by the couple that emerges at the end, Piet and Foxy” (69).
the time neither a dove nor a hawk but rather a “non-dove,” one who could see the reasons for the war as well as the reasons against them. By self-consciously taking a non-position (non-dove and non-radical), he reflects upon the ambivalent nature of national politics as well as his investment in the democratic majority. The value of a text like *Couples* lies not directly in its politics but in its acknowledgment of the frustrations of political life for an American middle-class, although at the same time it refuses to acquit them (or the author himself) of responsibility. Indeed, by refusing to produce a caricature of their indifference, he brings to light the various strategies by which national concerns are occluded from everyday life as a consequence of political fatalism.61 His account of the period in which he produced *Couples* reveals that he was conflicted about the political content of his work, incapable of writing about social life in the United States without its inclusion but uncomfortable with it precisely because it signified a deep-seated fatalism and a concealed brutality: “At heart,” he admits, “all I know about my political attitudes is that enough verbalized antiestablishmentism and right (that is, left) thinking, like some baby hogging attention with its blind pink confidence of being lovable, arouses in me a helpless itch to open the discourse to other possibilities” (151).

The nation is that very “itch,” that baby hogging out attention, an otherness that intrudes upon our daily lives, producing an irresolvable condition of discomfort. As we’ve seen, it constitutes his novel’s “not to mention,” a paraleipsis or bracketed world beyond the middle-class enclave that aches like an abscessed tooth.

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61 Boswell describes Updike’s use of “mastered irony” “whereby the writer masters his/her material in such a way that the positive meaning emerges as an indirect product of the differential play of those carefully arranged oppositions” (“Novel of Moral Debate” 44).
Recounting the three days leading up to the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for conspiracy to commit espionage on June 19, 1953, Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning* features Richard Milhous Nixon in a leading role as part-time narrator, with several other American presidents waiting in the wings: Hoover, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson are all seen or heard around Washington, D.C. or in other spheres of the political elite. Indeed, the novel’s broader satire of Cold War politics and popular culture clearly orbits the executive office, the place where the two so often mix in mediated spectacles of national power. Not content to merely scorn particular office holders, however, Coover borrows the visual tropes of influential postwar cartoonists like Theodor Geisel (“Dr. Seuss”) and Herbert L. Block (“Herblock”) in order to lampoon the high seriousness of the presidency as a symbolic institution. In this manner, his novel places itself in a long tradition of using editorial cartoons to explode a species of secular reverence encircling the figure of the President as a kind of *pater familias*. As in “The Cat in the Hat for President,” a precursor novella\(^\text{62}\) in which Coover

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\(^{62}\) Published in *The New American* in 1968, republished by Viking Press as *A Political Fable* in 1980. All citations in this chapter refer to the latter. Its narrator, campaign manager for a fictional candidate, voices Coover’s primary source of discontent: “Sometimes I think there aren’t going to be any actual elections in
depicts Seuss’s famous feline orchestrating a victorious electoral campaign in 1968 before being set alight by an angry mob, his main parodic strategy in *The Public Burning* involves a metafictional mixture of history and folk mythology. Familiar figments of American nationalism (like “Uncle Sam”) or postwar capitalism (like “Betty Crocker”) are given material autonomy in the novel’s cartoon reality, playing the part of actors in the pageant and carnival surrounding the trial and electrocution of the Rosenbergs. Along these lines, the most significant alteration made to the official history of the execution is its surreal transposition from Sing Sing penitentiary to Times Square, “The Heart and Cock of the Country” (164), where a raucous stage show has been orchestrated by Uncle Sam with the execution as the main event. As Sam describes it, cobbling together his phrases from centuries of American exceptionalist rhetoric, the execution “is to be a consecration, a new charter of the moral and social order of the Western World, the precedent on which the future is to be carn-structed to ensure peace in our time” (81). In this manner, the novel works to level the distinction between symbolism and reality: imaginary beings are brought to life as empowered agents of national sovereignty, while historical figures like Nixon are transformed into helpless caricatures of themselves.

From this perspective, it’s worth considering the novel’s final sequence, in which Richard Nixon becomes the object of a violent act of sodomy in order to secure his future candidacy: “So jes’ drap your drawers and bend over, boy—you been ee-LECK-ted!,” Uncle Sam commands, “...E pluribus the ole anum, buster, and on the double” (530). Like Herblock’s famous caricatures of Nixon for *The Washington Post*, by closing *The November*, that instead this goddamn thing is going to just keep on expanding and expanding, until taking an actual vote is going to be about as meaningful as pausing to pick a flower in a stampede” (65). See Louis Menand’s “Cat People: What Dr. Seuss Really Taught Us” for an example of *The Cat in the Hat* read as an allegory of Cold War culture.
Public Burning with this final allegorical tableau the author summarizes his appraisal of Richard Nixon as a political leader. Read as an editorial cartoon, albeit one too dirty to find its way into mainstream newspapers, it implies not only that Nixon was willing to do almost anything in the name of securing power, but also, more radically, that contact with such power is inevitably predicated upon the brutal imposition of consent. Left “swollen and stuffed like a sausage” by Sam’s ideological ejaculate, his disturbing post-coital epiphany (“I... I love you, Uncle Sam!” (533-4)) reveals that the consummate politician must endure vacancy, must make himself truly passive, in order to make way for the histrionics of public life. More importantly, the historical Nixon’s well-known resentment of slander is duplicated by the novelist throughout, as is his tenuous hold on manhood, and during this rape scene we’re invited to squirm as Nixon relinquishes both to participate in a fantasy of American global supremacy. Clearly, this image works because gender serves as a conventional metaphorical ground between penetration and political power. It’s ironic, then, especially considering that it constitutes the pathway to the presidency, that to be penetrated by Uncle Sam is to become subservient to the external, colonizing sovereignty that he represents. Speaking in a mixture of political, theological, and mythological malapropisms, Uncle Sam is an obvious symbol of

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63 Herblock dogged Richard Nixon throughout his career, and he becomes in The Public Burning something of an invisible antagonist, one of a series of adversaries whose mockery haunts the paranoid Nixon. Stephen J. Whitfield points out that Herblock first caricatured Nixon in an editorial cartoon for the Washington Post in 1948, and, significantly, that image shows a young Nixon, then a Congressman pursuing Alger Hiss on the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), “burning the Statue of Liberty as though she were a witch” (115). In Six Crises, Nixon rages against an “utterly unprincipled and vicious smear campaign”: “Bigamy, forgery, drunkenness, insanity, thievery, anti-Semitism, perjury, the whole gamut of misconduct in public office, ranging from unethical to downright criminal activities—all these were among the charges that were hurled against me, some publicly and others through whispering campaigns which were even more difficult to counteract” (70). See also Virginia Carmichael’s Framing History: The Rosenberg Story and the Cold War for a discussion of the links between these “smears” and the anal wordplay employed in Robert Coover’s novel.
presidential empowerment: he elects each incumbent (a word used throughout in both its political and Calvinist sense) and even comes to share a body with him through the mock-theological rites of “Incarnation.” By making the embodiment of sovereignty the focal point of the reader’s homophobic anxieties, Robert Coover ensures that our reaction functions as a litmus for the degree to which the American presidency has come to represent a posture of compulsive masculinity, defined in a narrow fashion that valorizes potency, might, aggressiveness, mastery, and competition. The Bakhtinian underpinnings of the representation are hard to miss insofar as the novel’s parody of the presuppositions of national manhood renders corporeal the portentous rule of sovereign power. In other words, *The Public Burning* employs an established tropic analogue between politics and masculinity to make the executive branch of government a target of popular ridicule. Its three day trajectory traces the emergence of a new political era, one doubly signified by the destruction of the Rosenbergs and the candidacy of Richard Nixon.

Typically, readings of the novel focus on the metafictional and metahistorical schisms generated by sequences like the one above. They tend to argue that Robert Coover troubles our epistemological certainty about historical events and highlights the role played by ideology in the construction of national identity.65 In a special 1982 issue of *Critique* dedicated to the novel, for example, Tom LeClair writes that it “attempts to displace historical synthesis, the reductive order of the probable, with a ‘living’ performance, a teeming circus with verisimilitude and ‘terrible conjurations’ that history leaves out” (14). In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon extends this insight

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65 Not surprisingly, *The Public Burning* is considered an important example of postmodern literature in both Brian McHale’s *Postmodernist Fiction* and Hutcheon’s *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. See also Ramond A. Mazurek’s “Metafiction, the Historical Novel, and Coover’s *The Public Burning*” and John Ramage’s “Myth and Monomyth in Coover’s *The Public Burning*” for some earlier examples of metafictional readings.
in order to define “historiographic metafiction.” She argues that Coover’s novel “juxtapose[s] what we think we know of the past (from official archival sources and personal memory) with an alternate representation that foregrounds the postmodern epistemological questioning of the nature of historical knowledge” (68). Although I take these statements to be true enough, my interest here is more specifically the ways in which the novel interrupts presidential symbolization not merely by way of a postmodern concurrence of fact and fiction but by imagining its presidential narrator as that which he actually was, but which the simplifying logic of that symbolism seems to disallow: namely, a desiring subject with whom readers are invited to sympathize. Coover’s Nixon can be said to be represented realistically only in a relative sense, of course, and no doubt any compassion for him is undermined by his hypocrisy and deceitfulness; even so, it is significant that he constitutes our point of critical distance from the cartoons and chaos of the rest of the narrative. What metafictional readings tend to obscure, therefore, is that the scandal of The Public Burning lies not in the fact that it dares to fictionalize a living president, nor even that it transforms him into a caricature—Nixon is, after all, among the most caricatured men in American history. Rather, what’s scandalous about the novel is how it “factualizes” him: its representation of Richard Nixon penetrates the reverential miasma of presidential symbolism, the man’s own characteristic mendacity, and the caricatures and crass nicknames (“Iron Butt,” “Gloomy Gus,” “Poor Richard,” “Tricky Dick”) that his puffy cheeks and elongated nose invited from his critics. Far from rehabilitating his historical image, then, Robert Coover’s recovery of sympathy for this fictional duplicate of Richard Nixon makes possible an important consideration of how
the media-saturation of the public sphere abridges our political existence, rendering us, as Nixon himself will repeatedly put it, “fatalistic about politics” (296, 482).

In what follows, I wish to consider the manner in which the author employs caricature to lampoon the fiction-making function of what Barbara Hinckley has described as the “symbolic presidency,” an interpretation of the executive branch of the American government that perceives the President of the United States as “the initial point of contact, general symbol of government, and orientation point from which the rest of the government is perceived” (10). In this light, for instance, the rape of Richard Nixon concludes a pattern of carnival in *The Public Burning* through which reverence for the executive gives way to physical degradation. Because a representation of presidential masculinity lies at the core of the novel’s critique of politics, in fact, it will be worth asking to what degree national manhood is subverted by positing narrative and historical outcomes not predicated on a politics of male potency.

During the pageant that takes place in Times Square before the execution, a veritable parade of caricatures (wearing “shiny papier-mâché heads modeled from official portraits”) appears in order to sanction the destruction of the so-called “atom spies.” In this sequence, the author employs a litany of nicknames, from a variety of archival sources, to create textual grotesques that are at once historical figures and figments of a cultural imaginary:

George Washington, the American Fabius, so-called, brushes himself off and leads out all the other Presidents: His Rotundity the Machiavelli of Massachusetts, Long Tom the Sage of Monticello, Withered Little Apple-John,
the Last of the Cocked Hats, Old Man Eloquent, King Andrew, Little Van the
Red Fox of Kinderhook, Old Tippecanoe and Turncoat Tyler, too, Young
Hickory the Sly, Old Rough and Ready, the American Louis Philippe, Yankee
Purse, Old Buck the Bachelor, the Illinois Baboon, Sir Veto, the Butcher, the
Fraud of ’77 and his wife Lemonade Lucy, the Evangelist, the Gentleman Boss,
the Stuffed Prophet, Cold Ben, Prosperity’s Advance Agent, Tiddy the Bull
Moose, High-Tariffs Fats, Dr. God-on-the-Mountain, the Mainstreeter with the
Soft Heart, the American Primitive, the Great Humanitarian, Old Again and
Again and Again, and Give ’Em Hell Harry. (423-4)

To unpack this succession requires the reader to know of scandal and eccentricity rather
than of policy, to know that Madison was four inches shorter than average, for instance,
or that Hayes’s wife (“Lemonade Lucy”) banned alcohol from the White House, or that
FDR was infamous for the phrase “again and again and again.” Coover thus sets about
“miming the high drama of building a nation and taking over the world” (424) in a
parodic mode, disfiguring the dignified in order to mock the hierarchical power
structures at the heart of American democracy. At the same time, the parade ridicules a
presumed patrilineal continuity between past and present, the manner through which a
mythological image of “George Washington, the American Fabius” has come to be
perceived as the progenitor of a line of founding fathers. The monstrosity of these figures
calls attention to how such reverential images of past presidents are dreamt up in service
of contemporary political ends. Indeed, if reverence is generated for the paternal figure of
the President through the production of serial archetypes, then Coover’s caricatures
represent merely the distortion of a distortion, a collapsing of representation upon itself
in such a way that fiction’s predominance becomes obvious. Moreover, by staging this
drama as pre-show to an execution, the narrative alludes to the fact that such myths
helped to authorize the Rosenberg travesty. At parade’s end, after all, the author
discovers a very real president, Dwight David Eisenhower, whose refusal to grant
clemency marks the novel’s darkest moment.

Barbara Hinckley’s *The Symbolic Presidency* might help us unpack this parody of
executive power in light of the political, theological, mythological, and masculine tropes
that are clearly at play in the production of these archetypes. Thinking about how George
Washington’s “Farewell Address” secured his role as “the nation’s first democratic hero”
by repeating the themes of modesty that had characterized his presidency, for instance,
she defines “political symbolism” as:

> The communication by political actors to others for a purpose, in which the
> specific object referred to conveys a larger range of meaning, typically with
> emotional, moral, or psychological impact. This larger meaning need not be
> independently or factually true, but will tap ideas people want to believe in as
> true. (7)

For Hinckley, therefore, symbols like the presidency are not mere instruments for
communicating with “emotional, moral, or psychological impact” but also manifestations
of public desires: they speak to wished-for national outcomes that are guaranteed by the
figure of the President. The genesis of the symbolic presidency in George Washington’s
address is located in his staging of an archetype, the simplification of his self-image to
qualities of the “common man” that he knew would appeal to citizens. Like Coover,
whose depiction of Uncle Sam suggests that symbols might themselves become
malevolent political actors, Hinckley recognizes that “[i]n the drama of politics, actors, setting, dialogue, and themes of action all contribute to the total symbolic effect” but also that such symbols “carry on a life of their own, often outliving their original purpose... [they] can give false comfort and distract attention from problems that need to be faced” (7). In this light, Coover’s novel implies that the reason that incumbents have been ripe for caricature is precisely because to be a successful politician is to be always already engaged in the production of such wish-fulfilling archetypes. His depiction of the papier-mâché presidents, for instance, cuts to the heart of the matter by showing how the symbolic presidency is an empty abstraction, a nonsensical parade of grotesque forms, the mask of state power itself. The novel’s version of Nixon thus eventually learns that his own features are not a weakness but “one of the consequences of power” insofar as politicians need “[s]omething to set [them] apart.” Consequently, he concludes that “people respected the almost magical force emanating from archetypes, no matter what sort, or who put them there. Or maybe the caricature came first and the face followed...” (187). By giving the caricature precedence over the face, then, he recognizes that a candidate must appear presidential before assuming the office, and, additionally, he appears to anticipate his own enfeeblement at the hands of Uncle Sam. Indeed, as an immortal being directing the nation’s fate from above, Uncle Sam seems to exist in The Public Burning primarily in order to parody a government in which symbolic archetypes are considered more important than individual political actors.

By describing the presidency as “a particular set of expectations about the office that are held by the public” (130), then, Hinckley might attribute too much control over the shape of the nation to its citizens. As a result, her programme for reforming the
executive in our own time is perhaps unsophisticated, if refreshingly straightforward:

“Americans... need to think more carefully about the kind of presidency they want,” she concludes, “since they will probably get the one they ask for” (148). She perceives the democratic practice of individuals to be a constituting force in politics, but she fails to consider how symbols mobilize mythology in service of the ideological constitution of citizens and their desires. According to a bulleted list that she generates, American presidents are perceived as “identical to nation; identical to government and powers of government; unique and alone; [and] the moral leaders of the nation” (135) despite their relative lack of supremacy as heads of state. However, she recognizes that this metonymic (or synedochic) capaciousness comes with a price: the preservation of the infallibility of the executive office as “identical to nation” demands the sacrifice of the individual incumbent wherein “[t]he ‘new’ beginning is repeated by each president” and “[t]he past is symbolically abolished with each inauguration” (133). Her specific concern is that presidential archetypes idealize the past, making it unfeasible that an incumbent will learn from the mistakes of his predecessors. The result is a distorted presidential historicity: Washington and Lincoln represent ideals of the presidency, for example, while the administrations of Grant, Harding, and Nixon constitute mere aberrations to be forgotten (147). Accordingly, each incumbent is “symbolically abolished” after his term in office, leaving us with a model of democratic leadership that excludes the influence of individuals.66 Though apt, these conclusions do not give full weight to the implications of

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66 In a passage couched in irony, the Presidential historian who narrates Updike’s *Memories of the Ford Administration* speculates that “perhaps it lies among the President’s many responsibilities to be unconvincing, to set before us, at an apex of visibility, an illustration of how far short of perfection must fall even the most conscientious application to duty and the most cunning solicitation of selfish interests, throwing us back upon the essential American axiom that no divinely appointed leader will save us, we
a symbol that has become truly autonomous, that carries on an immortal life of its own, and it’s precisely this constitutive reflexivity that is dramatized in *The Public Burning*’s caricature of executive power. To the degree that it can be read as an argument with the simplifying logic of presidential symbolism, the novel derides the manner in which collective desires become invested in the deployment of abstracted archetypes. As in Updike’s *Couples*, politics in Coover’s United States has become so disengaged from real democratic practice that the result for the majority is a feeling of radical helplessness. In this manner, he illustrates how a crisis of political agency was resolved during the early years of Cold War by participation in the patriotic rites and rituals that Uncle Sam orchestrates—while at the same time the author hints at the fact that the more one participates in such fantasies of national potency, the more one’s agency is, in fact, limited or compromised by consensus.

As is often pointed out, the title of *The Public Burning* alludes to the rites in which the integrity of a community is secured through the expulsion of a scapegoat. Given Hinckley’s insight into the manner in which an ideology of novelty drives the symbolic abolishment of past incumbents from collective memory, it’s clear that to be sacrificed in the narrative are not only Julius and Ethel Rosenberg but also Richard Nixon himself. Morally, of course, we shouldn’t make too much of this equation, but it does suggest that both concluding moments in the narrative constitute an eschatological spectacle. Along these lines, the narrative employs wordplay to render theological language indistinguishable from that derived from popular or political culture, often blending righteous apocalypticism with the language of sexual climax. For instance, must do it on our own. Of all the forty-odd, handsome Warren Harding was in a sense the noblest, for only he, upon being notified that he had done a bad job, had the grace to die of a broken heart” (352).
Coover does so by duplicating Eisenhower’s first inaugural address in one of the novel’s three “intermezzos,” giving it a new title borrowed from the Dead Sea Scrolls: “The War Between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness.” In this speech, cited verbatim except for the insertion of line-breaks to make it resemble prophetic verse, President Eisenhower proposes a reductive re-envisioning of the Cold War as a Manichean struggle between transhistorical forces: “We sense with all our faculties / that forces of Good and Evil are massed and armed and opposed / as rarely before in history” (149). The juxtaposition of this speech with a millennial war manual clearly satirizes the manner in which the symbolic presidency has linked itself to the execution of divine will. Although Nixon finds the “conversion of Dwight David Eisenhower” disingenuous, then, he recognizes its genius in legitimating “the immanence and immutability of Uncle Sam”:

Jefferson’s phrase “We hold that all men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights” was like a tic with him, kept coming to his tongue. But it wasn’t the unalienable rights that interested him, it was the endowment by a Creator. “Thee Cree-AY-torr!” It was as though he’d never really believed in God until he discovered Him there in the Declaration of Independence. (184)

By employing parody to literalize many of the assumptions present in the theological rhetoric of American politicians, the novel explores the consequences of credulity.67

In a similar fashion, the term “Incarnation” is employed throughout to describe the relationship between each President and Uncle Sam, “né Sam Slick, that wily Yankee Peddler who... popped virgin-born and fully constituted from the shattered seed-poll of

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67 See Kathryn Hume’s “Robert Coover’s Fiction: The Naked and the Mythic,” John Ramage’s “Myth and Monomyth in Coover’s The Public Burning,” and Molly Hite’s “‘A Parody of Martyrdom’: The Rosenbergs, Cold War Theology, and Robert Coover’s The Public Burning” for examples of how religious and mythological archetypes have been discussed in relation to Coover’s work.
the very Enlightenment” (6). According to Molly Hite, in effect this mode of “succession is a religious mystery... Incarnation is the guarantor of Presidential authority, in that it is the means by which the divine speaks through the human” (93). In this light, there’s little doubt that Coover’s parody of the presidency is meant to recall “the dogma of a political Incarnation” (445) that Ernst Kantorowicz charts in his history of the emergence of modern secular politics, The King’s Two Bodies. In this influential work from the postwar period, the scholar describes how the spectacle of the sovereign body secures patrilineal succession. 68 Centuries ago this happened when after the death of a sovereign his effigy was used to incorporate his persona ficta (legal being), establishing a dynastic continuity (and perpetuity of power) beyond the lifetime of a single ruler. During the funeral of Edward II, for example, the king’s “normally invisible body politic was... displayed... [as] a persona ficta—the effigy—impersonating a persona ficta—the [immortal] Dignitas” (421). The juxtaposition of these two bodies, the king’s corpse and the immortal effigy (itself a symbol of undying sovereignty) “appears like an illustration of the doctrine expounded over and over again by mediaeval jurists” that Kantorowicz translates as “‘The incumbent of a Dignity may decay, the Dignity itself is nonetheless forever; it does not die’” (435-6). In the parodic world of The Public Burning, on the other hand, the ritual relationship between the corporeal body and the symbolic effigy is both inverted and made real. As the living symbol of American power, to put it simply,

68 Even with the waning of monarchical forms of government, sovereignty remains a defining characteristic of political authority. Though a history of the medieval doctrine, it can be argued that The King’s Two Bodies reflects Kantorowicz’s experiences both as a refugee who fled Frankfurt after the ascension of the Nazi party and as a scholar in the United States during the heart of McCarthyism. The book opens, in fact, with the author’s brief commentary on the loyalty oath University of California faculty were forced to take. Kantorowicz refused, moving to Princeton in the final years of his life. See his “The Fundamental Issue: Documents and Marginal Notes on the University of California Loyalty Oath” for more on this issue.
Uncle Sam can be said to constitute the “immortal effigy” that Kantorowicz describes, while each incumbent clearly becomes a disposable vessel for his Incarnation.

As Hinckley notes, it will be recalled, because an incumbent can only hold the office for two terms, he’s “symbolically abolished with each inauguration” so that his power may be transferred to a legitimate successor. Echoing Kantorowicz’s thesis, then, the continuity of power in the U.S. is preserved by maintaining a distinction between the symbolic ideal of the President and the actual person occupying this position. It’s a case of Uncle Sam’s two bodies, we might say, which explains why as a living *persona ficta* of sovereignty he has no corporeal form of his own. When Nixon describes this “top-hatted Superhero” (262) or “Superchief” (341) emerging “freshly shazammed out of the fretful old General” (83), he suggests an uneasy colonization of individual consciousness by a superpower.69 Indeed, the novel’s ending reveals that this “sudden brutal invasion of the Presence” (161) overrides the will of the candidate altogether, leaving him wholly complacent. As Nixon puts it, “inquiry, self-consciousness, impeded the process. Maybe Uncle Sam needed vacuity for an easy passage” (31). Incarnation thus travesties talk of a candidate coming to *occupy* the executive office by turning the incumbent into the fleshy habitat of a living symbol of sovereignty. The result is a diegetic world in which fictions of sovereign power govern the state, and hence in which human agency has no real place: “Only Uncle Sam is real,” Nixon explains, “there’s no one over his shoulder. An awkward situation, though—he had nothing to believe in except himself” (233).

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69 Although he’s been compared to Superman or to “Captain America” (Gass xi), Uncle Sam is more like golden age superhero Captain Marvel, who emerges out of paperboy Billy Batson whenever the teenage boy cries out, “Shazam!” Unlike Superman, who assumes the identity of “Clark Kent” as a disguise, Captain Marvel and Batson were sometimes represented as two independent beings, with the implication that the muscle-bound superhero is uncomfortably crammed into the body of the teenager. Most later versions of the comic do away with this particular piece of mythology.
True to his historical counterpart, the Richard Nixon of *The Public Burning* craves becoming a “conductor” for Uncle Sam’s power, “something that existed in the universe like electricity” (175). Nonetheless, our sense is that there’s something off about him, as if he alone truly recognizes (and embraces) the nothingness that he describes lingering over Uncle Sam’s shoulder. However tentatively, this incredulity allies him with the reader and lends the sections he narrates a critical edge absent from the rest of the narrative. After all, according to Coover’s obituary for Nixon, what drew the novelist toward giving him the role of narrator was “his proximity, in June of 1953 when the Rosenbergs were executed, to power, a proximity that paradoxically kept him remote and isolated like a fool at court, tolerated by the General but not included in his retinue” (82). Indeed, he says in an interview with Larry McCaffery that it was only after 1969 that he began to take notice of Nixon’s “peculiar talent for making a fool of himself” (75). Like his Shakespearean antecedent, then, Nixon’s power as fool lies in the recognition, as Jan Kott once put it, “that the only true madness is to recognize this world as rational” (136). According to the author, then, he’s “an outcast, a freak of sorts and set apart... he does not really share in the human enterprise.” To put it another way, he’s a figure whose rationality derives from a deep emptiness of character that equips him to thrive in an equally empty political sphere.70 In this light, the author describes this characteristic as Nixon’s “intuitive wisdom... meaning: it takes one to know one” (81-2).

Given the line that he straddles between reason and nihilism, therefore, it’s not surprising that the Vice President’s narrative is divided between empty avowals of what

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70 We could map this Nixonian parody onto Mikhail Bakhtin’s contrast between parody that is “directed against isolated negative aspects of reality” versus that parody directed “against all reality, against the finite world as a whole” (42).
Mark Twain lampooned as the religious rhetoric of “preforeordertination” (122) and an antinomian awareness that that history precedes without any determining logic, and thus that he might “step in and change the script” (363) at any time. He can proclaim that “the difference between us and the Soviets” is the “central idea... to look for what works in an essentially open-ended situation; theirs is what’s necessary in some kind of universal and inevitable history. Free individual enterprise versus the predestined structure...” (407).

On the one hand, he paradoxically claims to be wholly credulous of the Calvinist doctrine that authorizes Uncle Sam’s existence, and he shares a “feeling” with the rest of the nation “that everything in America was coming together for the first time: an emergence into Destiny” (95). On the other hand, however, he also suspects “[t]here was no author, no director, and the audience had no memories—they go reinvented every day! ...perhaps there is not even a War between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness! Perhaps we are all pretending!” (362). In calling attention to the illusionary nature of American politics, then, he’s able to voice some important questions—Coover’s own, no doubt—about the contradictions of a “free world” that seeks to define itself in terms of divine will and manifest destiny:

Does Uncle Sam groom his Incarnations from birth... or does he play it more impulsively, adjusting to the surprises that come along? [...] ... Does the voter, entering the polling booth, exercise his own free will, or is he too the captive of some larger force—and if the latter, is that power exercised upon him directly by Uncle Sam, or more subtly through some sort of force field that even the American Superhero cannot entirely control? (161)
By making Uncle Sam an undeniable demigod in “the solemn unfolding of the American miracle” (9), Robert Coover reminds us that we’re ruled by what we choose to believe in, that symbols and fictions determine real outcomes, and that in the sphere of American politics it’s the production and gratification of collective desire and not direct force through which sovereign power is most often exercised. For this reason, Uncle Sam is granted the autonomy of the political symbol that Barbara Hinckley’s study so dreads, highlighting the impotence of citizens to really “think more carefully about the kind of presidency they want.” The iconic image of this deification of American destiny—those famous posters in which he wags his phallic finger in our face—sums up the injunction of political fatalism nicely: it doesn’t matter what you want, says Coover’s twisted version of Uncle Sam, “I WANT YOU.”

“We hold that all men are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights” is the way that this sentence from the Declaration of Independence is supposed to conclude, but in The Public Burning it’s been cribbed and cut short in service of a dirty pun on endowment that suggests the self-evident truth that all men owe their sex organs to God’s will: “We hold that all men are endowed by their Creator” (151, 184). The omission of the final words, a parody of Dwight Eisenhower’s own striking exclusion of the phrase in his first inaugural address, speaks to the novel’s critical position on the role that an archetypal masculinity has played in the formation of the contemporary symbolic presidency. In its all too easy equation of political entitlement with bio-fantasies of male reproductive empowerment, Coover’s America is one in which the preamble has become an index of sexual endowment. Indeed, the absence of another important clause (“that all
men are created equal”) implies the importance of measuring what Uncle Sam calls “the old flagpole” (318), a measurement that distinguishes the men from the boys, the hard from the soft, the savvy politicos from the lame duck candidates. Although its specific valences may change, therefore, what remains consistent about an Incarnation of Uncle Sam is his ability to demonstrate the virtues and values of manliness. This emphasis on phallic measurement clearly stems from the conflation of potencies, a semantic slippage between questions of power and virility that marks a tradition of male domination in all branches of U.S. government and culture.

In this light, the anal penetration of Richard Nixon by Uncle Sam similarly renders the symbolic aspects of the American presidency corporeal via narrative, incarnating the symbolic presidency in another possible sense of the word as well: Coover renders it carnal, eroticizes it even, and by doing so he aligns it with a metaphoric substratum of sexual gratification he believes to be present in Cold War politics. His narrative thereby pushes toward the “orgasmic fusion” (493) of the novel’s twin climaxes: the public execution of the Rosenbergs and Uncle Sam’s ideological act of sodomy. While we’ve seen how the latter is clearly sexualized insofar as it constitutes an act of presidential pleasure-taking, it’s perhaps more surprising that the former event is also anticipated by a nation’s “randy” awakening from “the foment of strange gamy dreams with prodigious erections and enflamed crevices” (163), of which the omniscient narrator tells us that “none, curiously enough, has used his or her aroused sexuality on a mate [because] it’s as though, somehow, that’s not what it was all about” (164). In the words of Judge Irving Kaufman, the Rosenbergs stand accused not only of treason but of having “sought nothing less than the ultimate impotency of Uncle Sam” (351). This fact
is made more explicit when Uncle Sam maligns a group of clemency protestors as among those who act to “wound and disease the body politic like thorns in the flesh and other eroginous zones!” (496). The cultural cliché that informs this style of punning has been described in simple terms by Susan Bordo: “Unlike other disorders,” she observes in The Male Body, “impotence implicates the whole man, not merely the body part. He is impotent.” Consequently, according to Bordo, because “‘[p]otency’ means power... it’s correct to say that the machine we expect men to perform like is a power tool” (59). By incarnating the symbolic presidency, rendering corporeal in the hoary old figure of Uncle Sam the assumptions of national manhood, The Public Burning extends this paranoid metonymy to the United States itself, producing a grotesque allegory in which anti-communist anxieties take on sexual characteristics. By literalizing the body politic, in fact, fears of erectile softness are transmitted into the realm of foreign and domestic policy. Employing paronomasia and double-entendre does something more than ape the phallic tropes that informed political rhetoric during the Cold War, therefore, nor is the author merely interested in a cultural diagnostics that might attribute an upsurge of masculinist attitudes to the threat of communism—although many good scholars have done much to suggest that this was often the case. As Barbara Hinckley notes, in presidential speeches the “primary actor [is]... the collective pronoun ‘we’. The word becomes a way of saying that president, nation, and people are synonymous and may be used interchangeably” (39). In Coover’s narrative, likewise, the body politic is imagined to share its erogenous zones with the nation’s citizens. Presidential potency thus becomes

71 See, for instance, Alan Nadel’s Containment Culture, K.A. Cuordileone’s Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War, or David Savran’s Communists, Cowboys, and Queers.
a horizon of collective desire that extends from penis to individual man to nation, and back again.\textsuperscript{72}

Along these lines, Coover’s depiction of President Eisenhower warps the persona that made him a popular leader into a caricature of paternal manliness. We’re told that he’s perceived by the public not only as “the Man Who Won the War, but... also a man of the people, born and reared on the lonesome prairie, a man who knows what it’s like to sleep under the stars, listening to the howling of coyotes and the lowing of little dogies” (240). He was thus chosen by Uncle Sam as “the workaday abode for the spirit of the race” (184) because of the “useful nostalgia” (32) of his cowboy roots and wartime heroics, as if Sam “just wanted to get inside all those old memories again, experience for himself once more the dusty heat of a lazy summer day on the prairie” (162). Clearly, these fantasies create, as Dana Nelson has put it, “a false and unhealthy nostalgia for a uniform, brotherly state of unity and wholeness that never in fact did or even could exist” (204). Hardly immune to this longing, in fact, Congress finds it easy to rally around Eisenhower like a posse, legitimating the executions of “the A-bomb rustlers.” “[It’s] time to strap on your shootin’ irons, boys,” commands the third-person narrator in the generic language of \textit{Gunsmoke} and \textit{High Noon}, “give the Sheriff a hand!” (237-8).

Coover’s interest here clearly lies in the manner in which the conventional nature of public symbols of manhood are used to rally the nation behind dubious causes. The iconography of the Wild West locates Eisenhower’s appeal in his ability to role-play the American patrician, a father figure unafraid to use force to protect the nation from evil-

\textsuperscript{72} See Arnold Weinstein’s \textit{Nobody’s Home}: “To regard the dictates of ideology as (also) an erotic code is to effect a scandalous fusion of realism, to invert public and private, to suggest that the august politics of the nation flow from (toward?) our sexual fantasies, to give uncommon density and clout to our term ‘body politic’” (247).
doers. According to Nixon, then, “[t]his... was what made Eisenhower great, this was why he was our President: he knew how to kill” (258). His military decisiveness, with its contempt for the petty debates of career politicians, registers hesitation or dissent about the Rosenberg case as liberal sentimentalism, cowardice, or treachery—and in any case as thoroughly effeminate behaviour. As a figure in the national imaginary, he appears to represent the unsophisticated answer to Cold War unrest, a vector of collective potency. According to the narrative, “the true source of his power was summed up... in the big badge Uncle Sam wore last fall on his blue lapel: I LIKE IKE. Uncle Sam seemed to want Eisenhower like a child wants happiness” (162). As a presidential incumbent, the appeal of Eisenhower’s masculinity lies in its relative straightforwardness in a rapidly complicating age: whether cowboy, war hero, or preacher, the archetype sets the United States squarely on the side of Good in Uncle Sam’s Manichean morality play.

During his own fateful encounter with the mystery of Incarnation, Richard Nixon “recall[s] Hoover’s glazed stare, Roosevelt’s anguished tics, Ike’s silly smile” (533) and realizes the degree to which the process constitutes an evacuation of the self. Ironically, the independence that made General Eisenhower an appealing leader in the first place is erased when he becomes President: he has resigned himself, we’re told, to being “Uncle Sam’s new real-time disguise” (230). We can see that a familiar series of interlinked binaries form here between thought and action, complexity and simplicity, effeminacy and manliness. In each case, Eisenhower becomes an obvious figure for what Alan Nadel has influentially described as “containment culture,” and hence he assuages national insecurities through “internal security, internationalism by global strategy, apocalypse and utopia by a Christian theological mandate, and xenophobia...by [a violent form of]
courtship” (Containment Culture 14). In each case, as Nadel puts it, the threat of this otherness is eliminated by establishing “clear, legible boundaries between Self and Other – the narrative of the American cold war takes the same form as the narratives that contain gender roles” (26). The execution, for instance, is depicted as something of a gangbang, mandating a collective cultural participation in the penetration of female (or, in Julius’s case, effeminate) insolence and Communist otherness.73

In contrast to the certitude of this beloved patriarch, Richard Nixon’s manhood is questionable throughout, despite frequent assertions of vim and virility. By representing Eisenhower as nothing more than an empty caricature, the author suggests that Nixon’s sense of himself as a leader is likewise predicated upon convincing others of his unwavering masculinity. For instance, Nixon seeks to become Eisenhower’s successor by recasting the General’s combat mentality into a heroics of rhetorical performance more suitable to the modern cold warrior: “I’m a rhetorician, not a general,” he claims, “and for me that’s power” (224). Trumpeting his questionable victories in “American adversary politics” (31), he claims to revel in a “gutter-brawl” with little concern for the reasons behind it because “nobody gave a shit about the bill itself, it was a straight-out power struggle, raw and pure, like a move in chess” (46). For this ideological opportunist, then, “politics is a dirty, combative, dangerous game” (32), a chance to prove his might in a public arena. Even the tone of the chapters narrated by Nixon replicates his historical counterpart’s propensity for exaggeration, employing allusions to

73 Indeed, the desires of the crowd watching the execution are plainly focused upon Ethel rather than her husband because the very idea of putting a woman to death is sexually stimulating. The power structure underlying rape is evident because her resistance to becoming an object of erotic fixation in this regard is further “disquieting and exciting” (513).
or borrowing directly from the often ridiculous tone of *Six Crises*. Licking his wounds after a close defeat by Kennedy in 1960, it’s in this book that Nixon attempts to revisit moments of political failure or personal shortcoming as “the exquisite agony which a man might not want to experience again—yet would not for the world have missed” (xvi). When Coover’s version of Nixon recalls the fund scandal, in which his campaign financing was (erroneously) called into question by the *New York Post*, he can’t help but boast: “[W]hat I did would affect not just me alone, but the future of my country and the cause of peace and freedom for the entire world” (308). This line is taken verbatim from Nixon’s book (102). Other passages also parody this tendency to call up history in defence of a dubious greatness: “I’m a lot like Lincoln, I guess, who was kind and compassionate on the one hand, and strong and competitive on the other” (49); “There’s a popular tendency to ridicule my tastes and call me square, but history will show I was one of the few Americans of my time who really knew how to eat” (141); “In a concentration camp, I not only would survive, I would probably even prosper” (291). Above all, it’s clear that Nixon wishes to be seen as a man made strong in the furnaces of experience. His crisis-management approach to life is itself a rhetorical performance of self-making, an attempt to turn himself into a legitimate presidential candidate by trumpeting an unqualified masculinity. In contrast to Eisenhower’s matter-of-fact style, however, he perceives his “weakness” to be “getting over-intellectual in [his] speeches” (266). He ruminates on the necessity of abandoning complexity itself: “This was the central problem as one rose higher in the echelons of national power: how could one continue to isolate and define the essential debate, keep it clean from diffuseness and

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74 As John Ramage writes, “*Six Crises* [thus] follows the pattern of a [B]ildungsroman... Nixon relies on tacit identifications between himself and Eisenhower, apparently hoping that his readers will notice similarities between the two unbidden” (*American Success Rhetoric* 120-1).
mind-numbing paradoxes?” (234). Insofar as to be intellectual is to be considered effeminate, then, his assertions of manhood are devoid of content, figurative routines meant to align him with the ideological simplicities of postwar America.

If Richard Nixon’s unwavering masculinity is the message being marketed to the electorate, then the narrative often counterpoises these boasts with his anxieties in order to lend him a self-consciousness and adolescent vulnerability incommensurable with the aggrandized virility he espouses. For example, he’s frequently represented brooding over the “fat cheeks” and “duck-bill nose” that draw so much mockery from his opponents and made him an unpopular choice with the girls back home in California. Although he consoles himself with the knowledge that Lincoln was similarly unattractive, he laments that “[c]artoonists had had a heyday with [his face]. Not even Julie Rosenberg, who had a genuinely sinister mug... had had to take the kind of punishment [he’d] taken from Herblock and the others.” As a figure concerned with appearances, he’s especially sensitive to caricature, the manner in which “Herblock always showed [him] as a jowly, wavy-haired, narrow-eyed tough... and with suggestions of some bad odor about [him], like a little boy who’d just filled his pants” (186). This resentment is linked to his lack of popularity with the opposite sex at Whittier College, young women who “admired [him] for [his] brains and leadership, but... [who] wouldn’t get in the back seat” (142). Unmanned by Herblock and paranoid about bad odours, he confesses that he “never could get used to kissing [women] on the mouth—I thought I could smell my own [breath] and worried that they did, too” (290). Nixon is represented as a sexually stunted individual, then, whose eventual marriage and future erotic experiences seem qualified by his inability to fully participate in the experience of phallic pleasure-taking. As with
his political nihilism, there’s something a bit too studied about his approach to intercourse, as if he’s working hard to convince himself that he likes it: “Something a lot of people don’t understand about sex,” he suggests, “it’s something you’ve got to study just like you study anything else—musical instruments, foreign languages, poker, politics, whatever” (55). Although this clumsiness is indicative of pratfalls typical of his role as a political clown in Coover’s parody, however, this self-professed “susceptibility to love, to passion,” his private fears of “too much intimacy” (297-8), can be taken at face value: because the novel so neatly ties sex and politics together, this susceptibility signifies his incapacity to unselfconsciously participate in the collective fantasies that drive the witch-hunt at the novel’s centre. Our gut reaction may be to laugh at him, of course, but to do so would merely align us with the many people who do so in the novel itself, characters themselves compromised by their unwavering credulity toward Uncle Sam. To the degree that the totality of The Public Burning is caught up in an erotic display of national power, in other words, Richard Nixon’s struggle with sexuality might signal our only escape from the telos of American exceptionalism.

Along these lines, novelist William Gass claims in his introduction to the text that “one of the profound ironies of Coover’s achievement” is that his “Richard Nixon is a rich and beautifully rendered fictional character” while “[t]he real Richard Nixon is a caricature.” According to Gass, “the rhetorical range and energy of the fictional figure, the psychological complexity of his personality as pictured,” distinguishes Coover’s creation from its historical source, with his “pandering curse-laced drivel and Lionel-sized two-track mind” (xii). Although hardly dispassionate, Gass’s words reveal a curious duality to the popular perception of Nixon that the narrative exploits in producing
its sympathetic fictional duplicate: on the one hand, there is the sheer revulsion that his “abject inauthenticity” (Cuordileone 171) stirred-up in liberal critics; and yet, on the other hand, we have the strange fascination these same people discovered in the very air of the undecidable that surrounded him. For example, according to Garry Wills, the Esquire journalist whose Nixon Agonistes informs much of Robert Coover’s novel, the real Nixon evoked something called “Herblockism – the reverse of being star struck.” If to be star struck means to be enchanted or bewitched by celebrity, then its reverse implies not simply the breaking of the spell, in which reality would merely reassert itself, but rather a sense of the uncanny. Wills thus describes “some unintended syncopation – nor mere duplicity... but multiplicity” that leant Nixon a curious “lack of focus” (11) on the campaign trail in 1968. According to Coover’s obituary, the historical Nixon’s “public smile was like a mechanical problem he could not quite master, as though he were pulling a dummy’s ‘SMILE’ string and the mechanism was broken, making the result seem artificial, half-cracked, and menacing” (“Tears” 82). Wills notes, moreover, that because of these “caricature features... [...] [Nixon] must be aware that people vote for him despite his appearance; he speaks, always, across a barrier.” He imagines that “[t]o carry that barrier about with one, to be that barrier, must introduce a painful complexity into one’s approach toward fickle things like television and reporters” (18-9). Likewise, Rick Perlstein’s recent appraisal of the Checkers Speech sums up this undecidable element of Nixon’s politics in other terms: “[T]his wasn’t just an act. And it wasn’t just sincere. It was a hustle; and it was from the heart. It was all those things, all at the same time” (40). Coover’s depiction of Nixon works through this series of paradoxes: were such presentations of sincerity by Nixon “half-cracked” because they were insincere? Or
did the necessity of performance itself merely cloud a genuine desire to be sincere? Is it sincere or insincere, after all, to be an awful performer of sincerity? As Lionel Trilling put it in one of his final works from the same period, the emphasis modern life places on performance means that “we sincerely act the part of the sincere person, with the result that a judgement may be passed upon our sincerity that is not authentic” (11).

What I want to suggest, then, is that for reader and author alike taking the risk of identifying with Nixon, taking him seriously, might also pose a question about his capacity for good insofar as he seems to be at odds with the spectacle around him. Until the novel’s conclusion, in fact, we’re allowed to imagine a version of Richard Nixon who might act differently than his historical counterpart, whose intuitive wisdom about the performative falseness of society might allow him to alter the national scripts of the Cold War rather than cynically kowtowing to mainstream politics. In this light, it’s important to keep in mind the degree to which the focalization of *The Public Burning* through Nixon has been balanced between representing what Gass describes as “the psychological complexity of his personality as pictured” and making him into a caricature. He’s a figure of folly modeled on the Shakespearean fool, to be sure, and yet we’re also privy to his anxieties, his juvenile indignation, and his innermost ambitions and desires. The result is that as our proxy in an otherwise absurd version of the United States Nixon’s travails become our own. As Coover claims, the ambiguity of the fool who we count on to “step in from time to time to drop his pants and set off a rocket or

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75 See Trilling’s *Sincerity and Authenticity*: “It is surely no accident that the idea of sincerity, of the own self and the difficulty of knowing and showing it, should have arisen to vex men’s minds in the epoch that saw the sudden efflorescence of the theatre. A well-known contemporary work of sociology [by Erving Goffman] bears the title, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*—we can suppose that the Hamlet of our day says: ‘I have that within that passeth presentation.’ In this enterprise of presenting the self, of putting ourselves on the social stage, sincerity itself plays a curiously compromised part. Society requires of us that we present ourselves as being sincere, and the most efficacious way of satisfying this demand is to see to it that we really are sincere, that we really are what we want our community to know we are ” (10-11).
two and bring the show back down to earth” (“Tears” 82) lies in the fact that he is most like us. In straddling the divide between sincerity and insincerity, he embodies the contradictions of modern, media-based politics.76 During the rape sequence, he realizes that his fate is tied to everybody else’s: “This... this is not happening to me alone, I thought desperately, or tried to think, as he pounded deeper and deeper, destroying everything, even my senses, my consciousness—but to the nation as well!” (532). To this end, the novel explicitly resists the necessity of history by imagining through Richard Nixon an emergent agency that might resist “the lie of purpose” (363) by refusing to participate in the sexualized spectacle of the execution. There exists in this version of Nixon a speculative history, a counterfactual outcome to the trial that subverts the tropes of predestination behind Cold War nationalism.77

It’s important to note that The Public Burning is not a plea. Although it does argue that Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were railroaded for reasons much bigger than the theft of nuclear secrets, it’s not suggesting that they were wholly innocent.78 Indeed, what becomes clear in the novel is that the author believes they themselves fell into the same dubious performance of world-historic roles that Coover thinks came to characterize mainstream political discourse in postwar America. This is perhaps one reason why some

76 Several other commentators have noted the degree to which Richard Nixon has become an icon of popular culture. In “Richard Nixon as a Comic Figure,” for example, Stephen J. Whitfield points out that “[i]f a voter had been forty-six years old or younger at the time of Nixon’s resignation from office in 1974, in only one election was the opportunity to cast a ballot for or against him unavailable” (114). John F. Keener’s “Writing the Vacuum: Richard Nixon as Literary Figure” similarly argues that “Nixon became opaque, synthetic, and abstract not because cultural depictions of him were lacking but because they were superabundant, easily outnumbering those of any single figure in our modern national literature” (130).
77 See my discussion of counterfactuals in the second section of chapter one.
78 Several testimonials have come to light that suggest that Julius and Ethel were indeed Soviet spies, although the extent of their guilt may be somewhat limited by the relative lack of importance of the secrets they stole. What’s remarkable about the trial, however, is how swiftly it was decided that this husband and wife should be put to death, and then how quickly it disappeared from the national imagination.
readers have assessed his depiction of the Rosenbergs as less than compassionate and his novel as less than humane: the narrative reflects the historical fact that Julius and Ethel, as well as their lawyers and their supporters, worked very hard to disseminate a particular series of images meant to counter the accusations of espionage by altering the grounds of signification. In this sense, the couple are depicted as promoters of their own ideological martyrdom, as when Nixon reads a letter from Julius to his lawyer, Manny Bloch, bearing a postscript in which “Ethel wants it made known that we are the first victims of American fascism” (110). When Nixon eventually arrives at Sing Sing in an ill-fated attempt to rescue Ethel from her fate, he learns from Warden Wilfred Denno—who Coover has said was an early candidate for role of narrator—more about this “habit of behaving in what they probably think of as, well, symbolic ways—you know, acting like they’re establishing historical models or precedents or something” (407). Denno notes that the two would carry on “almost like they were speaking to a vast audience” (408) and that they would meet the press as if stepping out from the wings of a stage. From the perspective of a prison administrator, his comments suggest a wedge between the ideals of the Rosenbergs and their followers and the reality of their circumstances: “We don’t think much about history and ideological conflicts and long-range notions about the destiny of man in a place like this” (408), he admits. Although it might seem that this depiction of the couple weakens the novel’s indictment of political theatre by abstracting it from those historically responsible for the execution, however, it’s more valuable to recognize the manner in which Coover takes up the problem of universal complicity in

79 For more on the creative genesis of the novel, see Larry McCaffery’s interview with Coover in “As Guilty as the Rest of Them.” In it, Coover claims that “[w]ith Uncle Sam at the center of it, it was loud and fast and driven by a lot of highwire acts and rhetoric to match, and I realized I needed a quieter voice as contrast or balance. I considered using Sing Sing Warden Denno, for example; also the executioner. Various comedians came to mind” (118).
order to raise an important question about national fantasies of power: if even the
Rosenbergs themselves became actors in the drama that would lead to their deaths, what
finally distinguishes fiction from reality? What is ultimately recoverable from such
witch-hunts and show-trials if not innocence?

The possibility of actions that are undetermined by either the Calvinist mandates
of manifest destiny or the pseudo-erotic practices of national power drives the novel
against the symbolic presidency. Nixon perceives that, much like the struggles to which
he is accustomed, this execution has been engineered in the service of national catharsis,
and he comes to pity the Rosenbergs for their amateur performances in it: “Applause,
director, actors, script,” he realizes, “yes, it was like—and this thought hit me like a
revelation—it was like a little morality play for our generation!” (119). The affective
bridge that the narrative imagines between Nixon and Ethel represents the clearest
example of how Coover employs the problem of desire in order to recuperate the
possibility of democratic agency from a political fatalism based on blind faith or cynical
reason. Significantly, it’s an act of interpretation—the Vice President’s re-reading of the
Rosenberg letters (“She could as well have been speaking to me” (131)) and court
transcripts—that sparks his counter-historical desire to interrupt the trial and execution.
Mimicking the author’s own archival pursuit of the truth, in fact, Nixon becomes
obsessed with sorting out the facts of the trial from its carefully constructed fictions,
discovering that “[i]f you walked forward through all this data, like the journalists, like
the FBI invited everybody to do, the story was cohesive and as simple and true as an
epigram” but if you read “backwards, like a lawyer, the narrative came unraveled” (131).
Further in, he muses: “What was fact, what intent, what was framework, what was
essence? Strange, the impact of History, the grip it had on us, yet it was nothing but words. Accidental accretions for the most part, leaving most of the story out” (136). In this manner, the author’s unlikely protagonist begins to see more of the elements absent from the official history of the trial, including affective connections between himself and Ethel: their impoverished family backgrounds, their shared aspirations in theatre, and their yearning to alter the shape of society for the better. Recalling his own (exaggerated) poverty and struggles in early manhood, he begins to imagine himself in Ethel’s position, and vice versa. This boundary-collapsing identification culminates in an autoerotic fantasy in which he imagines himself as having had come to her rescue when the police turned fire hoses on a crowd of rioting communists on Bleecker Street in 1931. In this counter-historical narrative, which Nixon recalls in the present tense as if to suggest the imaginative reliving of it, the two flee to Ethel’s room, where they strip from their wet clothing and begin making love: “I draw you close into loving arms and warm you with my warmth” (318), she says as she steps out of her clothes, an odd phrase that his imagination has appropriated from her letters to Julius.

Nixon’s “problem with girls” (290) seems to temporarily vanish, then, when he discovers that “[i]n spite of all our obvious difference, we had a lot in common” (313). His autoerotic narrative (a sexy version of what could have happened) thus becomes the grounds for imagining events that might happen outside of a nationalist scripting that demands her destruction. In light of the mimetic equation of political and sexual pleasure-taking implied throughout, we can thus read such Nixonian autoeroticism as a solitary act of defiance against a conformist collectivization of sexual pleasure. The unproductive spilling of his seed, in other words, counters the climactic climaxes of
Uncle Sam’s pageantry with the infinitely repeatable supplement of the solitary onanist. When Sam eventually catches Nixon pleasuring himself, he’s thus warned: “Remember, you shall have joy, or you shall have power... but you cain’t have both with the same hand! These repeated abuses and usurpations ain’t such as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for flyin’ the flag!” (330). Uncle Sam clearly plays the part of the concerned parent here, chiding an embarrassed child for pleasuring himself. His pseudo-theological injunction, framed both in the language of the Declaration of Independence and nineteenth century anti-masturbation literature, demands the unhanding of the “flag pole” in the name of its symbolic transubstantiation into a phallic instrument of power. And yet there’s irony here too, no doubt, in the fact that some of Uncle Sam’s words also come from the diary of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who when given the choice between power and joy, clearly chooses joy. In a narrative that makes the satisfaction of “prodigious erections and enflamed crevices” a central quality of the Rosenberg electrocution, Nixon’s masturbatory enjoyment subverts the desires invested in public symbols by taking possession of his own pleasures, producing private counter-fantasies. The Nixonian wank thus threatens to break down the orgasmic logic behind realizing the “untransacted destiny of the American people.”80

While Nixon’s desires for other women are always qualified by a self-consciousness born of their obtuseness, the clumsiness that characterizes this awakened longing for Ethel Rosenberg is clearly founded upon the possibility of sexual experiences

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80 In this light, he’s comparable to Diogenes, the philosopher whose infamous acts of masturbation in the market place constituted an attempt to banish the moral distinction between public and private: Michael Warner claims in his essay “Public and Private” that Diogenes’ actions reveal the moral values encoded into the public/private distinction, that “it is not just a distinction but a hierarchy, in which the space of the market or the assembly is given a special importance,” and that “being in public is a privilege that requires filtering or repressing something that is seen as private” (22-3).
outside of the expectations that have convinced him that sex is “something you’ve got to study” to get ahead in life. Throughout the novel, cultural assumptions about Communist licentiousness are opposed to the rigid sexual codes of postwar conservatism, as when Nixon considers the possibilities of anal sex: “Still, think of it like the last meal, a final...ah, well, that was an idea, no risk of pregnancy either. Something I’d always been curious to try. Not with Pat, though. [...] The Rosenbergs had no doubt tried everything” (147). Along these lines, Alan Nadel describes how Cold War discourse often mandates a gaze which “universalizes the pervasive possibility of deviances—in gender roles, in en-gendered violence, in sexual promiscuity, in hiding and spying—and hence the need for commensurate and reciprocal surveillance” (*Containment Culture* 26). Implicit within the condemnation of Communist deviance, Nadel suggests, is temptation: the United States perceives Russia “as backward maiden, evil seductress, and rival suitor” (32), and at each turn the Cold War rhetoric of containment attempts to efface the mutualities and attractions that threaten to break down the strict series of moral binaries dividing the two. Ethel, in particular, stands in for the Communist subversion of an ideology predicated upon masculine values of penetration and sexual climax. Nixon’s encounter with the mysterious “Phantom” of Communism—Uncle Sam’s ideological antagonist—involves the conflation of seductive women like Ethel and spy craft. Disguised as a foul-mouthed cabbie, the Phantom describes growing up in the same neighbourhood as Ethel, whom he claims used to dance at the local burlesque house:

...we thought it was *innocent*—ya know, just dirty sex, twirlin’ her tits, suckin’ up quarters with her cunt, things like that. We didn’t realize she was suckin’ up more than quarters, and then flushin’ it all straight to Russia! You read about it, Nick:
she had A-bombs up there, Jell-O boxes, Red herrings, passport photos, Klaus Fuchs, the Fifth Amendment—sh*t, she could probably get a whole fuckin’ P-38 up her snatch and have room for Yucca Flat and the Sixth Fleet to boot! They say there was a ray gun in her navel, a walkie-talkie hid in her G-string, and a camera stuffed up her ass—when she spread her cheeks at us, we always heard this click and thought she was blowin’ kisses at us out her rectum. (272)

Ethel’s body is both alluring and dangerous, then, fleshy and mechanical. This figuration implies the infiltration of postwar American innocence, the threat of seduction by a societal other that demands the hardened national response. Her vagina and rectum literally become dark, metonymic passageways back to the Soviet Union, sites where the superpowers struggle for dominance. According to the Phantom, in fact, Ethel’s sexual provocation undermines not only the good old American tradition of appreciating “dirty sex” but also the phallocentric logic through which the nation itself operates: “I’m lucky to have a cock left at all,” he remarks, conflating the two registers, “she subverted the goddamn thing to ribbons” (271).

To desire Ethel is to admit attraction to subversion, therefore, to risk crossing the border lines of containment that divide the wholesome from the supposedly perverse. Consider the following passage of the anti-history that results from Nixon’s visit to Sing Sing, which would read like an excerpt from a trashy novel if it weren’t for the fact that the “I” here is Richard Nixon and the “she” Ethel Rosenberg:

It fell out through my broken fly then, as big as I’d ever seen it, throbbing like the breast of a wounded bird. I hardly recognized it. She slapped my hands away from the buckle playfully and unhooked it, whipped the belt apart, snapped my
pants down to my ankles. She tried to pull them off my feet, but they were getting tangled. (444)

Molly Hite points out that this encounter borrows its banality from popular melodramas and that Nixon’s devotion to Ethel is not to be taken seriously because “[t]he real Ethel Rosenberg” is perceived only as a “sexual stereotype constructed by popular magazines, movies, and soft-core pornography” (97). Her critical assessment of him follows: Nixon’s desires are constituted from the detritus of mass culture, and they signal his continuing collusion with American popular culture. But we might ask, what do passages like this one do to the reverential symbolism surrounding the presidency? Given the degree to which I’ve suggested Coover invites us to see Nixon as a sympathetic figure as well as a comic one, we can read the sequence in a more generous manner by noting how this shift in style acts as demarcation of our entry into a private fantasy divorced from the pleasure-taking promoted by Uncle Sam. The “wounded bird” here isn’t just any penis, after all, its Dick’s dick, and, absurd as they might be, these are his desires laid bare. As with his masturbatory fantasizing, then, the discomfiting exposure of the presidential penis employs vulnerability as the sounding point for his humanity. Although ostensibly hard, his genitals remain bodily, an articulation of his desires; it never crosses over into the symbolic to become a phallus, never gains the rigidity of a signifier or archetype of executive power. We might even say that it remains laughable, but this does not mean it should not be taken seriously. Bordo notes, for instance, the parodic potential of this depiction because “the penis—capable of being soft as well as hard, helpless as well as proud, emotionally needy as well as a masterful sexual performer—also haunts phallic authority, threatens its undoing” (95).
Because they constitute an autoerotic counter-narrative, Nixon’s desires transgress the official history of the Rosenberg trial and oppose the presuppositions of postwar power insofar as “to step in and change the script” (363) that calls for her destruction—to supplement it with an erotic fantasy—is to resist the rhetoric of “manifest dust-in-yr-eye” (9). Indeed, it’s significant that his attempt to win over Ethel is partially predicated upon this claim: “We’ve both been victims of the same lie, Ethel! There is no purpose, there are no causes, all that’s just the stuff we make up to hold the goddamned world together—all we’ve really got is what we have right here and now: being alive!” (436). While Hite reads the fact that “Nixon can proclaim the end of ideology in the tones of inflamed adolescence” as more evidence of “his immersion in mass culture,” we might again recognize an assertion of partial autonomy in this “boundary confusion” (97-8) between the Vice President and Ethel Rosenberg, especially insofar as his heroism here is always marked as a little absurd. It’s worth reminding ourselves, after all, that Nixon’s dubious performance of manhood is characterized throughout the novel by impotence and malfunction and, moreover, that even here he will fail to convince her that his desires are genuine. Nixon’s an uncanny public actor, never in sync with the logic of the American narratives he attempts to inhabit. Coover’s parody perceives in both the historical figure and his fictional duplicate the possibility of destabilizing the sexual-theological narrative that will lead to Ethel’s death by making it impossible to consider seriously. We’re not supposed to find Nixon sexy, in other words, we’re supposed to laugh—because, as Leo Bersani once put it, “[p]arody is an erotic turn-off” (208). For most readers, Nixonian masturbation is the narrative equivalent of a cold shower. The narratives of national manhood that propel an anti-communist script toward climax or
revelation is deflated by his premature expenditure, and the perpetual conflation of the erotic and political registers in Cold War discourse is turned against itself. Nixon’s wasted seed thus contests the rhetoric of potency by arresting an Adamic logic of mastery that lies at the core of the symbolic presidency, setting solitary pleasures against the performances demanded by a conformist public sphere.

Along these lines, the scatological intersecting of anal penetration and predestination is anticipated early in the novel when Nixon confesses “that with Uncle Sam nothing was mere happenstance, you had to listen to him with every hole in your body” (81). Although Nadel argues that the impetus of containment demands that we “keep the narrative straight” (33), we need to be careful about mapping our experiential assumptions about real life sexuality directly onto the symbolic universe of the novel. In this light, I’d suggest that we should read Richard Nixon’s misdirected desires for Ethel as symbolically “queer” at least insofar as they constitute a deviation from the normative motives of masculinist national power. Conversely, the non-consensual encounter between Nixon and Uncle Sam that concludes the novel constitutes a brutal reassertion of epistemological straightness. Considering that anal penetration has often been perceived of as a transgressive form of sex specifically because of its non-reproductive qualities—or even, Bersani suggests, its allegiance with death—we can see how sodomy itself is “straightened” by Uncle Sam when it becomes a method of subjugation and ideological impregnation: “I felt like a woman in hard labor,” Nixon confesses afterward, “bloated, sewn up, stuffed with some enormous bag of gas I couldn’t release” (533). Given the narrative and symbolic dimensions of this encounter, it’s significant that the novel concludes as it must: namely, with the execution of the Rosenbergs and the rape and
future presidency of Nixon. The problem faced by a text that mocks a theological rhetoric of “preforeordestination” is that it must attend to the consequences of remaining credulous. Despite its dedication to fabulation, the tragedy of this piece of historiographic metafiction lies in the fact that its narrative trajectory finally coincides with historical fact. The possibilities once represented by Coover’s Nixon, in other words, are cancelled out by the real actions of his historical counterpart. Left hollowed-out by Uncle Sam’s patriotic thrusting, he’s not a credible narrator by the closing paragraphs, his consciousness having been destroyed to make way for an ideological stuffing apposite to the Oval Office. Our sense of irony at novel’s end—predicated on a homophobic conflation of penetration with the abdication of mastery—is that the politics of potency prove to be ultimately disempowering. This sexual encounter implies the penetration of subjectivity by a system of national symbolism, as Nixon finally realizes when he complains that “it felt like he was trying to shove the whole goddamn Washington Monument up my ass!” (532).

In a four-star review of Rob Reiner’s The American President, Roger Ebert considers the problem of creating “a witty and warm romance” about the executive, noting that “[m]any of the film’s big laughs come from the president’s difficulties in doing simple things in ordinary ways.” The relationship between a widower President and his girlfriend depicted in the film is driven by “[t]he inevitable strategic questions

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81 In the end, the author dares to name names: the second-to-last chapter concludes when a crowd of historical figures who surge forward to throw the switch on Ethel’s electric chair is “led by young Dick Nixon, followed by Joe McCarthy, Herb Brownell, Bill Knowland, Lyndon Johnson, Foster Dulles and Allen, Engine Charlie, and Estes Kefauver...” (517). We’re invited to read the rape as a consequence of this betrayal. Insofar as postmodernism implies that credulity, in good faith or bad, is a choice that American citizens make, The Public Burning implies that predestination is nothing but a self-fulfilling prophecy.
(like whether the power of ‘the most powerful man in the free world’ extends to his bedside prowess)” that according to Ebert “are part of the general embarrassment that both feel because the presidency, in a sense, comes between them.” Praising Reiner for his deference to “the moral weight of the presidency,” Ebert laments that “[w]hen I was growing up, ‘thepresidentoftheUnitedStates’ was one word, said reverently, and embodied great power and virtue. Now the title is like the butt of a joke; both parties have lessened the office by their potshots at its occupants” (27). More recently, an article by Linton Weeks posted on the National Public Radio website, entitled “TMI, Mr. President! TMI!,” asks of the current American President:

...does our increasingly informal relationship with the man in the White House – not just President Obama, but any sitting president – diminish our respect for the man and reverence for the office? Should we leave the uncovering of private and behind closed-doors habits to historians?

The image accompanying the article shows Barak Obama with a busted lower lip, as if this marker of a presidential wound always risks a double signification: on the one hand, it might confirm the requisite toughness of a powerful man, and yet on the other it always contains the suggestion of his fallibility. It’s an odd claim to make, after all, that knowing a leader better might “diminish our respect,” but what both this statement and Ebert’s review make clear is that representations of the American president always seem to evince a tension between caricature and symbol that I have been discussing. Reverence, a word usually reserved for the sacred, appears in both passages, and it suggests our contradictory relationship to the presidency in an age of increased mediation. Our respect for “Mr. President” or “the man in the White House” seems to be predicated on a
politicized version of masculinity, and yet that very masculinity opens him up to ridicule. Thinking of the hullabaloo surrounding Bill Clinton’s sexual liaisons, Bordo proposes that “not even—no... especially not—the President of the United States is actually permitted to have ‘parts’ that are even remotely considered private” (25). I’ve identified a number of ways in which *The Public Burning* parodies the American presidency as a symbolic institution by literalizing, corporealizing, and rendering public the gender assumptions that lie behind political discourse. It shows, Bordo says, that manner in which the phallus is always haunted by its flaccid, uncanny double. The carnival of Coover’s novel makes the *persona ficta* of sovereignty visible to scrutiny by inflating it to ridiculous extremes of male embodiment. It’s more than simple parody, however, precisely because it resists the temptation to caricaturize its version of Richard Nixon; rather, by setting him apart from spectacles of mainstream power, it imagines in the undecidable nature of his being new political outcomes divorced from predetermined national storylines.
Chapter Four
Joan Didion, Masculinity, and the Frontiers of the Monroe Doctrine

As the fairly recent publication of Where I Was From in 2003 suggests, Joan Didion’s biographical tendency to dwell on the American Southwest shapes a lifetime of work. A pervasive sense of geographical and historical situatedness has drawn the most far-flung of her narratives back toward the dubious frontier sensibilities by which she characterizes her home state of California. In “Notes from a Native Daughter,” an essay that first appeared in Holiday in 1965, she claims that “it is characteristic of Californians to speak grandly of the past as if it had simultaneously begun, tabula rasa, and reached a happy ending on the day the wagons started west,” but her central point is that life for the descendents of the original pioneers in the Sacramento Valley “was [also] suffused with the conviction that we had long outlived our finest hour” (Collected Nonfiction 131). Although this leitmotif has received a fair amount of critical attention, it’s less often noticed that Didion recognizes that the American frontier is not only a spatial or historical category—something that Frederick Jackson Turner famously claimed began to exist in the national imaginary only as it was dying out—but also a rhetorical element of the expansionist mandate behind U.S. exceptionalism during the Cold War. As someone

82 A version of this chapter is forthcoming in Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction. Published here with permission from Taylor and Francis.
who entered adulthood at the moment when Eisenhower’s presidency was about to give way to the “New Frontier” reforms promised by John F. Kennedy, in other words, Didion senses in postwar foreign policy many of the same continuities and contradictions that characterize Western expansion. A product of postwar liberal consensus, the New Frontier speaks not only to the contest between superpowers to enter outer space but also to the frontiers of a democratic expansion set against the menace of Soviet encroachment. In this regard, it’s not surprising to learn that while the early essays collected in Slouching Toward Bethlehem and The White Album tend to focus on the cultural wilderness of the Southwest—querying everything from the drug addicts of Haight-Ashbury to Las Vegas weddings to the Manson Murders—from the late seventies onward she finds a related subject in “collateral glimpses of life on the far frontiers of the Monroe Doctrine” (The Last Thing 10). In these later works, President James Monroe’s 1823 foreign policy decision—to regard attempts by European countries to colonize or interfere with the sovereignty of other states in the Western Hemisphere as acts of aggression against the republic itself—becomes tied to anticommunism and a history of covert government involvement in South and Central America, Asia, and the Middle East. Didion’s work often draws parallels between her post-frontier experiences in the Sacramento Valley, where “boom mentality and a sense of Chekhovian loss meet in uneasy suspension,” and the attendant complications of a democratic nation that actively interferes with the self-determination of other states. For her, the relationship between Cold War interpretations of Monroe’s doctrine to actual democratic practice thus mirrors the original journey to California, “one of those trips on which the destination flickers chimerically on the horizon, ever receding, ever diminishing” (Collected Nonfiction 131).
In responding to the question “Do you vote?” put to her by Sara Davidson in a 1977 interview with the *New York Times Book Review*, the author describes her interest in political discourse in terms equally pessimistic about the democratic process:

In the life of the body politic the actual movement is going on underneath, and I am interested in what’s going on underneath. The politics I personally want are anarchic. Throw out the laws. Tear it down. Start all over. This is very romantic because it presumes that, left to their own devices, people would do good things for one another. I doubt that that’s true. But I would like to believe it. (*Essays and Conversations* 15)

By “what’s going on underneath,” she means the uneasy compromises of national security through which democracy continues to function in the late twentieth century. As this statement suggests, the conspiratorial storylines that she produces in her later work often probe a surface/depth model of polity in which official utterances are measured against real happenings abroad. These texts imagine that the deployment of political fictions about national greatness serves to mask the “actual movement” of power across a global theatre. Her nonfiction from the period illustrates the manner in which an intelligence industry rhetoric of “plausible deniability” has come to denote a specific mode of discourse meant to disguise the more egregious steps the U.S. government has taken to support sympathetic regimes. Her later novels, on the other hand, adapt the theme of national security to conventional forms of storytelling. In what follows, I’ll argue for reading these works of nonfiction and fiction together insofar as her most recent novels, *Democracy* and *The Last Thing He Wanted*, collapse the distinction between literary plots and those cooked up for clandestine purposes. Literary scholars
like Thomas Mallon, Tim Parrish, and Michael Tager have identified “compromised democracy” as a significant theme in these texts, and several important studies have illustrated the importance of gender in Didion’s body of work as a whole, but I’d like to extend and entangle these insights in order to illustrate how her fiction explores relationships between men and women not simply in terms of gender politics but of a gendering of politics. To put it plainly, these novels map the normative binary of feminine/masculine onto the paranoid surface/depth model of geopolitical subterfuge. Given her focus on the literary qualities of contemporary political discourse, we can turn the tables by showing how Didion’s fiction adapts her approach to the rhetoric of plausible deniability to the subjects of traditional storytelling. In this manner, what she confronts by thematizing strategies of discursive evasion may be her own attraction to comprehending the empirical depths of political life, a authorial desire that I’ll argue manifests in her novels in the surprising figures of sexy male operatives.

Before turning to the novels themselves, however, it’s worth pausing to observe the degree to which the interplay of fact and fiction that Didion first cultivated as a form of New Journalism in the nineteen sixties is translated into a method of engaging with the similarities between literary modes of storytelling and the cover stories of covert operations. It’s widely accepted that the term “plausible deniability” was first used by CIA Director Allen Dulles to describe a mode of informal command during the early years of the Cold War, mandating a split of state activities into those given official sanction and those which could be denied to avoid diplomatic incident, political embarrassment, and legal accountability. During the Cold War, deniability allowed the
American national security apparatus to take direct or indirect action against Soviet-backed factions abroad in the name of the Monroe Doctrine, while leaving little or no evidence to support future allegations of wrongdoing. Although this type of policy allegedly involved the neutralization of records that might implicate the chain of command, what Dulles once identified as a “circumlocutious approach” to language—in which words and phrases must be carefully selected to evade fixed meanings—was also important to producing conditions of denial. For the sake of maintaining the plausibility of this denial, orders would be given in such a manner that they could be interpreted in a variety of ways, or sometimes a desired goal would be stated and operatives would then act in a manner that was tacitly condoned but officially condemned. In either case, the structure of plausible deniability remains one that leaves the language of authority open to interpretation.

By performing rhetorical analyses of the circumlocutions that make modern geopolitics possible, Didion’s nonfiction examines how such strategies of discursive evasiveness function to produce an interpretive openness in bad faith, obfuscating political realities by creating conditions for misunderstanding where none exist. For example, 1983’s Salvador is a meditation on the ineffectiveness of anticommunist “Americanization” in the diverse geographical, political, and social contexts of the Americas. In it, Didion scrutinizes the diplomatic idiom through which Ronald Reagan’s administration evaded liability for atrocities committed by a U.S. sponsored regime in El

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83 Much of the information about Allen Dulles in this paragraph comes from Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s Robert Kennedy and His Times and the author’s attempt to find an answer as to whether someone associated with the Eisenhower presidency had engineered Operation Mongoose. Of the Kennedy years, Schlesinger cites William R. Corson, a “veteran intelligence officer” who claimed that plausible denial had by that time “degenerated to the point where the cover stories of presidential ignorance really are fact, not fiction” (488).
Salvador. The imperialistic suppositions of the administration’s foreign policy—which, by citing the Monroe Doctrine, sought to rollback the spread of communism by funding capitalist-friendly rebels and governments—are treated in this odd travelogue as anathema to real comprehension of the political climate in Central America. Her ethnographic analysis of the diplomatic culture in the region concludes that “the American effort in El Salvador seemed based on auto-suggestion, a dreamwork devised to obscure any intelligence that might trouble the dreamer” (*Collected Nonfiction* 400). In *Miami*, she similarly treats the “colliding fantasies of Miami and Washington” surrounding the Bay of Pigs as further confirmation of the prevalence “of plots and counterplots and covert dealings involving American citizens and American institutions, of attitudes and actions which had shadowed the abrupt termination of two American presidencies and would eventually shadow the immobilization of a third” (417-21).

Hearkening back to the 1974-75 Church Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, which investigated a long history of illegal practice by the CIA and FBI after Richard Nixon’s resignation, the failed invasion of Cuba is taken in Didion’s text to signify an insidious policy of official evasion and denial that would surface again during the Watergate and Iran-Contra affairs. As the event most associated with the inability of officials to cover their own tracks, and thus in which the discursive mechanisms of plausible deniability are most exposed to scrutiny, “the midnight hour when John F. Kennedy sent down the decision to preserve deniability by withholding air cover” (417) is a paradigmatic moment in which Allen Dulles’s “circumlocutious approach” became tied to the fate of a thousand Cuban rebels.
For Didion, plausible deniability is as much a matter of style as it is a method of obfuscation. By contrasting differing interpretations of Kennedy’s “broken promise” to the anti-Castro guerrillas after the failed invasion, she thus notes that comprehending what happened demands “a certain fluency in cognitive dissonance” (476) because official “ways of speaking” are characterized by “words from a language in which deniability was built into the grammar, and as such may or may not have had a different meaning, or any meaning” (472). In contrast to retrospective accounts from the President’s inner circle, she shows how the narrative of la lucha (the struggle) sustains alternate readings among Miami Cubans, “the main story line for what el exilio continued to see as its betrayal, its utilization, its manipulation, by the government of the United States” (505). As her choice of words suggests, this approach to demystifying the machinery of “Washington dreamwork” (472) is concerned with the persuasive effects of its narratives. She focuses less on events themselves than on the “story lines” generated by deniable language and, more often than not, gestures toward the manner in which collective desires are entangled in the ways such political stories are told and understood. For example, Didion points out that Dulles codified the men of Brigada Asalto 2506 as a “disposal problem” (465) in order to legitimate the eventual abandonment of their cause; she cites a declassified intelligence memo in which an anonymous author reflects on the danger of sounding too committal in the “frequent resort to synecdoche” and “figurative” language in official discussions about “disposing of” or “doing something about Castro”

84 The author spends much time in Miami analyzing official accounts of the Bay of Pigs decision presented by the diarists of Kennedy’s New Frontier, especially Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.’s A Thousand Days and Robert Kennedy and His Times. She sees the former as “an essentially antihistorical work in which the entire matter of the Cuban exiles is seen to have resolved itself on an inspirational note in December of 1962” (469). Schlesinger avoids blaming Kennedy for the invasion in both texts, but he does dedicate an entire section of his book on Robert Kennedy to the question, “Who authorized the CIA to try to murder foreign leaders?” (485).
and, later, she even alludes to Anglo-American poet W.H. Auden, describing Kennedy’s promissory speech to the surviving rebels in 1963 as “the rhetorical expression of a collective wish; a kind of poetry, which of course makes nothing happen” (518). In each case, her critique of this discourse centers around how the “plots and counterplots” of deniability function as a “kind of poetry,” a literature of national fantasy inviting divergent interpretations depending upon one’s disposition.

Bringing her considerable talents as a journalist to bear on official rhetoric, then, Didion develops a model of political discourse in which official, media-based story lines disguise the deeper practices of national security, the place where she imagines something closer to actual history happens, and thus where something closer to real political agency might exist. Whether discussing the civil war in El Salvador, the Bay of Pigs, or the 1988 Democratic primary, she illustrates how political narratives are “made up of many... understandings, tacit agreements, small and large, to overlook the observable in the interests of obtaining a dramatic story line” (754). As Tim Parrish has written in his analysis of the ties between Didion’s work and Henry Adams’s *Democracy*, such narratives “conceal how disconnected the claims of democracy and even history are from day-to-day political reality” (168). In the aptly titled *Political Fictions*, Didion outlines the manner in which democratic practice is overridden by melodrama:

> When we talk about the process... we are talking, increasingly, not about “the democratic process,” or the general mechanism affording the citizens of a state a voice in its affairs, but the reverse: a mechanism seen as so specialized that access

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85 Didion’s conception of history appears to be at once agential and contingent, the accidental accretion of myriad political motives. As the narrator of The Last Thing He Wanted puts it, “I still believe in history to the extent that I believe history to be made exclusively and at random by people like Dick McMahon” (33).
to it is correctly limited to its own professionals... to that handful of insiders who invent, year in and year out, the narrative of public life. (744)

The perversity of a government that interferes with the sovereignty of other nations in the name of democratic self-determination leads to the proliferation of imaginary storylines meant to conceal the contradictions of the Monroe Doctrine.\textsuperscript{86} For example, she recognizes in the staging of electoral theatre or the perpetuation of White House scandal an attempt to conceal constitutive problems with accepted government practices. Such a narrative process replicates the structure of plausible deniability insofar as it keeps state activities and historical outcomes open to interpretation. To all but those professional insiders who know how it really happens, democracy comes to mean, simply, “believe what you will.” As she asserts in Miami, therefore, plausible deniability’s rhetorical tendency toward openness guarantees “there has always been room... for everyone to believe what they need to believe” (473). If the Cuban exiles were encouraged to believe they’d been betrayed by Washington, so be it; what Didion calls an “inexorable Caribbean progress from cause to effect” (520) still determines a series of events they see terminating with the overthrow of Fidel Castro.\textsuperscript{87} And if the American electorate could instead employ Allen Dulles or other officials as scapegoats with regard to their botched intelligence and military operations, so much the better: she watches again and again for symbolic closure in the moment “when the levers would again be pulled and the consequences voided and any lingering morbidity dispelled by the enthusiasms, the energies, of the new team” (547). She considers such dreamwork to be grounded upon

\textsuperscript{86} See Jay Sexton’s The Monroe Doctrine: Empire and Nation in Nineteenth-Century America for a recent discussion of the paradoxical nature of the “fusion of imperialism and anticolonialism” (5) implicit in Monroe’s policy.

\textsuperscript{87} Didion sees the bombings and assassinations committed by hard-line exiles in the 1970s as evidence that the narrative of \textit{la lucha} will have “consequences we have not yet seen” (462).
forms of public wish-fulfillment that actively suppress the paradoxes of a democratic nation engaged in antidemocratic activity. Like many other ideological demystifiers in the twentieth century, however, she is also haunted by the possibility that behind her own critique lies the significant danger of compromise or complicity.

As in her earliest novels, *Democracy* and *The Last Thing He Wanted* borrow significantly from the conventional genres of romance, the intergenerational drama, and the novel of manners. They replicate the domestic and sexual relationships that make these kinds of stories possible, the hurly-burly of everyday life that constitutes the material of literary conflict. Fellow journalist John Leonard describes her return to such plots as something of an obsession, and he believes her novels to be revelatory of Didion’s nature as a “closet romantic” in this regard: “She is a declared agnostic about history, narrative, and reasons why, a devout disbeliever in social action, moral imperatives, American exemptions, and the primacy of personal conscience,” he writes, yet “[o]ver and over again in her novels, wounded women make strange choices in hot places with calamitous consequences” (xiii). By juxtaposing such melodramatic storylines with the media-driven fictions of officialdom, these later novels illustrate the manner in which the mechanisms of desire behind political theatre distort our perception of reality. To put it another way, her concern in these texts is with a peculiar postmodern condition in which our heavily mediated existence means that people have lost track of the empirical aspects of everyday life. She illustrates the way public life forces individuals to “jettison [the] cargo” (52), to borrow a line from *Democracy*, of personal memory and political reality alike.
What Janis P. Stout identifies as a “strategy of reticence” in Didion’s prose permeates these later novels as much as it does her earlier fiction, albeit in a different form. If, as Stout claims, her broader purpose in employing a literary style built upon blanks, vacancies, and silences is to “assert an epistemology of limitation” (149), in Democracy and The Last Thing He Wanted such reticence also alludes to those strategies of evasion employed by the American intelligence industry—a rhetoric of uncertainty that we’ve seen serves an obfuscating purpose by keeping each statement open to myriad desire-driven interpretations. Stout’s analysis suggests that what’s troubling about these later political/romantic thrillers is that for Didion’s protagonists the evasive practices of national security are made analogous with the very conditions of their desire: namely, feminine self-expression and self-preservation born of an audacious refusal to speak. To put it another way, Stout argues that Didion’s “social criticism draws much of its ironic pointedness from its echoing of the very tones of the rhetoric she judges to be specious” (147) and that, in contrast, her use of reticence reflects a “specifically female quality of experience and with particular reference to femaleness” (149). Yet in these later novels any moralizing is tempered by the uncomfortable collusion between these two versions of discursive evasion. After all, chief among the romantic object choices that her female protagonists make are their sexual partners, rugged individualists whose associations

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88 Democracy and The Last Thing He Wanted resemble her earlier novels insofar as they are punctuated by acts of violence that come to suggest the explanatory limits of narrative itself, they each features an alienated heroine caught between personal remoteness and a responsibility to others, and they sometimes use metafiction to make visible the act of storytelling. A Book of Common Prayer is very much a transitional text in this regard: set in the fictional Central American country of Boca Grande, it also alludes to arms dealing and American intelligence agencies, although they are not elements central to the plot as they are in her later works. According to Katherine Henderson, “in each of her three major novels the heroine nurtures the fantasy that she need not be assertive or reflective to gain happiness and success, since these rewards are an inalienable right of the well-bred American citizen” (8). See also Thomas Mallon’s “The Limits of History in the Novels of Joan Didion” for an effective example of the comparative approach using her first three novels.
with national security make them de facto guarantors of those feminist strategies of uncommunicativeness that Stout claims structure Didion’s prose.

In what must be seen as an odd move on the part of the author, then, the guarded realities of her heroines are linked to the clandestine projects of the Monroe Doctrine and the men who carry them out. Although she’s often considered a chronicler of the lives of hard-bitten women, I wish to concentrate on the manner in which her representation of men as objects of desire signals the difficulties of this feminist allegiance with Cold War subterfuge. The masculinisation of the national security apparatus is anticipated in foreign policy rhetoric dating as far back as George Kennan’s 1946 “Long Telegram” on containing the Soviet threat, a document that has become central to discussions of gender and sexuality in Cold War studies. 89 Thinking of the ties between the policies that Kennedy adapted from earlier forms of anticommunism and the political legacy of the Monroe Doctrine, however, we need only consider the degree to which his New Frontier sought to set itself apart from supposedly “effeminate” versions of postwar liberalism through a rhetoric of masculinity that privileged actions over words. While the previous generation of liberals—represented in the popular imagination by New Dealers like Eleanor Roosevelt and Adlai Stevenson—were perceived as “eggheads” or “bleeding heart” sentimentalists, President Kennedy’s crew countered Republican attacks with a version of liberal manhood characterized as aggressive, courageous, and masterful. K.A. Cuordileone points out in Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War that by trading on the norms already at play in the rhetoric of the frontier and “overcompensating for the timidity that had been associated with the liberal

89 See the opening chapter of Alan Nadel’s Containment Culture.
establishment... Kennedy and the consensus liberals shaped a heady liberalism based on fantasies of liberal potency” (172). He goes on to note that “[t]he flip-side of the sexual willfulness of the New Frontiersman was always his bold aggressiveness, the ‘ballsiness’ of the liberal cold warrior” (201). If spies at home were often discussed in terms of their perverse effeminacy—an attribution that implied the persecution of suspected homosexuals during the McCarthy era—espionage abroad clearly bore none of this stigma. As with the Cold War’s most famous fictional spy, James Bond, Western operatives penetrating dangerous territory, guiding counterinsurgencies, or seducing enemy agents were perceived as hyper-masculine practitioners of democratic “ballsiness.” The men in Democracy and The Last Thing He Wanted are no exception, cold warriors used to acting on behalf of muscular anticommunism.

Hearkening back to the place where the pioneer spirit ineluctably hits an ocean, however, we can see how the post-frontier sensibility of Didion’s work constitutes an encounter with finitude incompatible with the expansionist tendencies of this form of nationalized manhood. Didion denies the pragmatist claims of New Frontier “ballsiness” insofar as she recognizes that American exceptionalism constitutes a fantasy about the unlimited nature of state power. 90 Indeed, the paradox of the Monroe Doctrine lies precisely in an ideological rigidity based on masculine frontier values, its inability to recognize that people might choose a political system other than the one it represents and, moreover, its contradictory eagerness to impose that very system on them in the

90 Picking up on the masculine ethos of the hard and the soft, K.A. Cuordeleone compares Kennedy to William James’s idea of the “tough-minded” pragmatist set against the “tender-minded” idealist: “Kennedy’s liberalism has often been called pragmatic, which in the political parlance of the day meant that one was not beholden to any ideological preconceptions but was rather rational, flexible, and instrumental, concerned with the achievement of results... [...] The pragmatist accepts the extant system and its flaws and seeks to accomplish things from within, using the governmental tools at his disposal and always with an eye toward ends, not fanciful ideals” (217).
name of non-interference and self-determination. Its democratic nature is thus clouded by the dictates of a chivalric interventionism, what Carroll and Lee describe in *American Masculinities* as a “perceived obligation to protect republican liberty among (or to bring it to) the nonwhite and ‘feminized’ peoples of the Americas and the world” (88). In Didion’s later novels, the thematic unity between masculinity and expansionism establishes itself precisely within the breach of this paradox. On the other hand, because she finds spectacles of mainstream politics so debilitating, there is always a lingering attraction to the discursive evasions of intelligence in her work: in the case of her heroines, the clandestine represents an escape from public life itself, a recuperation of a more “authentic” agency that exists beyond the scrutiny of other people; in the case of her autobiographical narrators (and, thus, perhaps Didion herself) geopolitical subterfuge indicates a site of paranoid knowing, where “what’s going on underneath” can be apprehended and finally mastered. By imagining a depth to politics in which real political agency exists, then, these paranoid narratives don’t merely critique the masculine norms structuring national security; rather, they engage with the cultural and political conditions that make such masculinist fantasies of state power so appealing to us in the first place.

The love triangle in *Democracy* maps her protagonist’s sexual object choice onto the divide between a naïve version of mainstream politics and the pragmatic mandate of national security that perceives violence to be a necessary evil in seeding global democracy and containing Soviet expansion.91 On the one side of the triangle, we have

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91 Arguably, this relationship replicates the love triangle in Henry Adams’s novel of the same name. I’ve resisted performing a comparison because it has already been done in Tim Parrish’s “After Henry Adams: Rewriting History in Joan Didion’s *Democracy.*” In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion credits the title to her husband, John Gregory Dunne: “John named it. I had begun it as a comedy of family manners with the title *Angel Visits*, a phrase defined by *Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* as ‘delightful
Inez Victor’s charismatic husband, Harry, a professional liberal senator in the vein of John or Robert Kennedy. Although Inez’s family are long-time patricians from Honolulu, and thus she’s used to time in the spotlight of American exceptionalism, Harry’s campaign for a Democratic presidential nomination puts the couple so frequently in front of the camera that she develops strategies of reticence in order to deal with the media: “Life outside camera range had become for Inez only a remote idea,” we’re told, “something she knew about but did not entirely comprehend” (66). As the other man, then, the appeal of Jack Lovett for Inez lies in his affiliation with secrecy, including an “extreme practicality” (89) that matches the Realpolitik of the era and a profession in intelligence that is “tacitly understood by most people who [know] him, but not discussed” (40). Throughout the novel, Didion maps the distinction between Harry Victor and Jack Lovett onto three decades of anticommunist policy. For example, the difference between each man’s interpretation of the conflict in Vietnam becomes emblematic of the differences between them as objects of desire: Inez recalls “Harry saying over and over again [in his campaign speeches] that Americans were learning major lessons in Southeast Asia,” whereas Lovett admits in response “that he could think of only one lesson Americans were learning in Southeast Asia... A tripped Claymore mine explodes straight up” (99). The two men thus represent the two sides of President Kennedy himself: handsome and charismatic, Harry suggests the public face of Kennedy’s administration and voices the exceptionalism of a crumbling liberal consensus, while Jack Lovett is a ruthless pragmatist operating outside of public view and beyond the scope of a single administration in places like Cuba, Cambodia, and...
Vietnam. The adulterous meetings between Lovett and Inez are similarly likened to forms of espionage, a penetration of Harry’s political spin into zones of top secrecy. According to the intrusive narrator—a fictionalized version of Didion herself—their relationship is founded on the fact that they are “equally evanescent, in some way emotionally invisible; unattached, wary to the point of opacity, and finally elusive” (84).

As somebody who Inez guesses is at any time likely to be “running a little coup somewhere” (34), in fact, Lovett is one of the subterranean political actors that Didion vilifies in works like Miami and Salvador, and yet in Democracy he becomes an object of fixation for Inez and this “Joan Didion” alike. While the plot reaches other crises, after all, the heart of the novel lies in the narrator’s attempt to uncover this covert relationship between Inez and Lovett.

Set a decade later, The Last Thing He Wanted works to “call up the particular luridity of 1984... the counterfeit machismo of it, the extent to which it was about striking and maintaining a certain kind of sentimental pose” (54). Against the geopolitical backdrop that inspired Salvador and Miami, Didion depicts another desire-driven movement from the surface of publicity to the underside of intelligence. Along with the masculine pronoun in the ambiguous title—which may refer to either the heroine’s father or her lover but in any case implies the dangerous act of interpreting male desire—the “counterfeit machismo” of Reagan’s foreign policy signals an association between masculine norms and a government policy that supported anticommunist counter-insurgents across the globe. In fact, the novel’s plot is spurred by a request from Elena McMahon’s ailing father that she shepherd one final weapons deal on an unnamed

92 According to Stout, this “thinely fictionalized Joan Didion” is “a persona in only the most circumstantial of ways” (175). Didion goes so far as to include the same biographical facts that can be found in her memoirs.
Caribbean island. As a man who made a career in intelligence during the sixties, Dick McMahon establishes a generational continuity in the novel between the policies of Kennedy and Reagan. Significantly, his last request prompts Elena to quit a job as a reporter following the latter’s re-election campaign; as an alternative to reporting on mainstream politics, helping her father seems to promise that “she would get no spin, no counterspin” (26). However, by taking her father’s place Elena quickly becomes the front for an assassination plot by American operatives, one that will legitimate the eventual deployment of U.S. troops to the island. The other man to whom the pronoun in the novel’s title might refer is the American diplomat—and, it’s revealed, target of the assassination plot—attempting to protect Elena when this transaction goes awry. Like Jack Lovett, Treat Morrison is represented as another rugged individualist, “a mover, a shaker, a can-do guy, someone who appeared to thrive on negotiation, on dealing... the very stuff that defines a successful social operator” (138). The narrator frequently notes “his ability to move from end game to end game without becoming inconveniently identified with any of them” (158). As in Democracy, then, the author draws a comparison between a man’s cool ability to insert himself into a “situation” and her heroine’s evasive nature, although Elena is likened “a clandestine agent who had so successfully compartmentalized her operation as to have lost access to her own cut-outs” (152) while Morrison is a seasoned professional. Ultimately, it’s her fortuitous encounter with Morrison that exposes (and nearly derails) the assassination plot. This story is “a romance after all” (209), the narrator reminds us twenty pages from the novel’s end.

In the case of both works, a romantic narrative ultimately merges with a secret one, and the strategies of reticence employed by Didion’s heroines are paired with men
who’ve mastered the open-ended language of plausible deniability. The relationship between Elena and Morrison, for instance, constitutes a textual vanishing point that seems to challenge the narrator’s ability to account for events or actions. As in *Democracy*, since we know the outcome in advance the heart of the narrative lies in a metafictional attempt to impose coherence onto the unknown. Along these lines, the attractiveness of men like Lovett and Morrison lies in an association with the deep substructures of the national security apparatus and, hence, their capacity to shape the future of the United States in an age of struggling superpowers. Acting in the name of the Monroe Doctrine, they’re represented as agents in both senses of the word. Possessing authentic knowledge of contemporary geopolitics, they suggest an escape from the spin of mainstream political life. If their alluring masculinity may be matched to a particular political climate, it’s clearly one in which the democratic process has been reduced to a smokescreen for an elite group of information specialists who can claim to know better. Though a direct line can be drawn between *Salvador* and *Miami* to the fiction that Didion produced during the same period, by filtering geopolitical struggle through the lens of desirable manhood these novels do what her nonfiction cannot: they allow her to flirt with the dangerous desires embodied by men like Lovett and Morrison, reject the sexiness of this (secret) agency, and posit as an alternate a resurfacing in the form of a worldliness disengaged from the masculinist divide between surface and depth.

Because many of its metafictional features derive from a desire that is at once narratological and sexual in nature, it’s significant that *Democracy* opens by highlighting
an act of storytelling between lovers. When Jack Lovett shares his experiences of watching atomic tests from the Pacific atolls during the first years of the Cold War, he tells Inez that the sight of the sky at dawn was “[s]omething to behold... Something that could almost make you think you saw God.” At the same time, he emphasizes the impossibility of describing the event because “the sky was this pink no painter could approximate, one of the detonation theorists used to try, a pretty fair Sunday painter, never came close” (11). As a way of speaking, his words constitute an evocation and a denial—an evocation of deniability. Echoing the claims of political pragmatists about the unaccountable complexities of geopolitics in the struggle against communism, his description of the blast privileges the direct experiences of the insider over the second-hand transmission of archival knowledge. The novel thereby opens by foregrounding the difficulties of narration itself, employing a complicated timeframe that distances the false surfaces of public enquiry from the sublime and secret truths of U.S. national security:

He said to her.

Jack Lovett said to Inez Victor (who was born Inez Christian) in the spring of 1975.

But those events in the Pacific, Jack Lovett said.

Those shots around 1952, 1953.

Christ they were sweet. (13)

Short, consecutive paragraphs are typical of Didion’s approach in Democracy. On the page, they isolate not only the act of telling (“He said to her”) but also the decades long

93 See Janis P. Stout’s discussion of Democracy in Strategies of Reticence for a fuller catalogue of these techniques than I will provide here. Stout claims, rightly, that Didion “wields the spaces on the page in what is almost at times an assault on the reader. She carves out chunks of blank paper and poises them there as a meaning (that is, signifying) void in the spatial form of the novel” (148).
relationship around which the story unfolds. In this fragmented form, such words and phrases imply an asynchronous charting of their romantic liaisons onto the history of postwar U.S. imperialism. Many phrases are repeated more than once in order to mark the organizing impulse at work in the narrative, one that draws connections outside of perceivable temporal schemes. While this prismatic layering of names, dates, and places—the narrator’s retrospective present, outside Honolulu in the spring of 1975, Jakarta and Bien Hoa in 1969, the Pacific atolls in 1952-3—might at first seem to suggest a transcendence of the subject, by beginning with the sublime pinkness of the sky before a nuclear blast Didion announces the existence of experiences that resist her mimetic compulsions. Speaking from the historical and geographical context of the Pacific atolls, where the U.S. military first tested the hydrogen bomb, Lovett’s description of the sky calls to mind what Robert Wilson describes as a “nuclear sublime,” “an impossible-to-articulate horizon” in which we are “dwarfed by the sublime of nuclear power that threatens to annihilate the lyric ego into star-flames—atomic radiance without form or end” (60). In this light, the painter’s inability to capture the pinkness of dawn signifies the unspeakable or redacted phenomena of national security itself, those lost technocratic narratives to which Didion herself is attracted. It insinuates not only the traumatic nature of nuclear war but the empty spaces left behind by strategies of government dissembling. Although Lovett quickly deflates his own romanticism by emphasizing the practical reasons why “not much got written down on those islands”—because, he says, “the point of the pen would go right through the paper”—he admits to importance of deniability to their relationship by exposing the manner in an earlier gesture of affection also served as a cover story for clandestine activities: “I remember I
told you I was in Manila,” he tells Inez, “I remember I brought you some little souvenir from Manila, actually I bought it on Johnston off a reconnaissance pilot” (12). From the beginning, Didion hints that the illicit sexual relationship between Inez Victor and this older man is predicated upon the discursive evasions of Cold War geopolitics.

Jack Lovett is an information specialist and systems thinker, and his experiences on the frontiers of the Monroe Doctrine have taught him a kind of political empiricism based around the most correct evaluation of all forms of data. We’re told that Jack Lovett did not believe that accidents happen. In Jack Lovett’s system all behaviour was purposeful, and the purpose could be divined by whoever attracted the best information and read it most correctly. A Laotian village indicated on one map and omitted on another suggested not a reconnaissance oversight but a population annihilated, $x$ number of men, women, and children lined up one morning between the maps and bulldozed into a common ditch.

Mining data for its use-value involves stripping it of its unnecessary affective properties, taking away any human variables (“$x$ number of men, women, and children”) that are deemed threatening or unnecessary. We’re told that he thinks in terms of “state” and “non-state actors,” of “M-16s, AK-47s, FN-FALs, the everyday implements of short-view power” (36-7). In the later phases of their relationship, Inez similarly notices while discussing the evacuation of U.S. troops from Vietnam that “[c]ertain words and phrases kept recurring” in his speech. The narrator lists a number of them for us: “Fixed-wing phase. Tiger Ops. Black flights. Extraction. Assets” (195). Such catalogues remain locked in the inscrutable argot of the intelligence industry, and in this case it’s only with the narrator to guide us that we can even begin to make sense of his words: “By assets
Jack Lovett had seemed to mean aircraft, aircraft and money,” she explains, “It was increasingly imperative to develop your own assets because without private assets no one could guarantee extraction” (196). Here, then, is the empirical depth of contemporary politics that Joan Didion’s journalistic writing wishes to penetrate: Lovett’s cold warrior hermeneutic reveals a substratum of actors and assets that determine real, if often brutal, outcomes abroad. Passages like this one hint at the entanglement of reticence and deep politics through the give-and-take of data exchange between lovers; they illustrate the manner in which the interpretative openness of deniability provides cover for clandestine operations and illicit desires alike. Lovett’s ability to coolly evaluate knowledge and act accordingly is grounded on a professional mastery that both Inez and the narrator find attractive.

As a diplomat in the State Department, Treat Morrison is represented as a less mysterious figure than Jack Lovett. Nonetheless, he’s also someone who has built an entire career on remembering the details that might turn out to be wild cards, using them, playing them, sensing the opening and pressing the advantage. Unlike Elena, he had mastered his role, internalized it, perfected the performance until it betrayed no hint of the total disinterest at its core. (155)

Lovett may be the creature of another age in which intelligence operations underwent little scrutiny, but Morrison shares with him a focus on the utility of information. As our interpreters, both of Didion’s narrators model a similar, if tentative, desire to strip narratives down to their empirical core, to just the facts.⁹⁴ The “not quite omniscient

⁹⁴ Given the degree to which Didion makes her own presence felt, it could be said that the act of composing a viable narrative of the affair constitutes the central arc of the novel. “Call me the author,” she writes in Democracy, alluding to Melville’s famous opening line from Moby Dick, and then immediately follows it up by comparing herself to another literary precedent: “Let the reader be introduced to Joan Didion, upon
author” (5) of *The Last Thing He Wanted*, for example, echoes Lovett’s sentiments in announcing that she rejects the determinism of experience and character implicit in the “writer persona” and is “increasingly interested only in the technical” (73-4). While the women in these novels—protagonists and narrators alike—try to match these information specialists in decoding their words, however, it’s always men who seem to be in possession of the skills, knowledge, and emotional detachment necessary to the task. The paranoid surface/depth model of polity central to these two novel is thus founded upon the masculinisation of depth itself, in the establishment of a subtextual language (deniability) that privileges penetration and mastery. Lovett and Morrison are represented as chivalric defenders of the female right to reticence, securing feminine self-determination only through the imposition of hegemonic masculine norms. This fact is hinted at, for instance, when the latter’s relationship with Elena is characterized as an “intervention” (208). Moreover, just as Elena is put into danger precisely because of what she does not know—her inability to grasp “the game... the plot... the setup” (158)—the narrator characterizes her own enterprise as “process[ing] the information before it vanished altogether” (5), a “reconstruction” or “revisionist view of a time and a place and an incident about which, ultimately, most people preferred not to know” (13).

As with many of the “systems novels” or “masterworks” that Tom LeClair describes as a subgenre of the postmodern novel, then, it could be said that *Democracy* and *The Last Thing He Wanted* trade on “the two extremes of low and high information, whose character and doings much will depend of whatever interest these pages may have... So Trollope might begin this novel” (16). Instances like this one serve to remind readers of the damage narrative might be doing to its subject in making it coherent. We learn to rely on the narrator, to trust her claims to being an insider, because the immediate disruption of linearity produces an atmosphere of uncertainty insofar as it makes the parsing of text an immediate challenge.

95 As Tim Parrish writes, “Didion’s attempts as a character to read Jack Lovett—to find his presence and hand in the seemingly insignificant details of the newspaper accounts—model the reading strategy that Didion as an author would have her readers acquire” (180).
redundancy and overload, to register the contemporary significance of information [and] to represent the kinds of information that are used to master man” (14). While LeClair’s examples in The Art of Excess have a tendency to overwhelm the reader with the white noise of mass culture in order “to critique a culture’s prodigal waste” (17), however, Didion’s sparse, paranoid narratives take an alternate route by circling the empty spaces and silences generated by policies of plausible deniability. The metafictional thrust of Democracy, for instance, represents an attempt to cobble together a coherent romantic storyline from archival fragments including a series of photographs, videotapes, and newspaper articles with which this fictional version of Didion assumes her readers are familiar. She casts a “prolonged spell of suspended judgment in which a novel is written” as a kind of journalistic pursuit bolstered by “props” and “totems,” including: “Object (1): An old copy of Who’s Who, open to Harry Victor’s entry. Object (2): A framed cover from the April 21, 1965, issue of Newsweek... [...] Objects (3) and (4): two faded Kodacolor snapshots” (108-9). On the one hand, much of what we learn of Inez Victor’s life in Democracy is indistinguishable from the media frenzy that surrounds her family and Senator husband. This is what Stephen Jarvis calls “the text’s ironic realism, which assumes the reader has already heard much of the story through the media and networks of rumour” (97). On the other hand, Inez’s adulterous relationship with Jack Lovett remains “less a conscious presence than a shadow on the scan, an undertone” (Democracy 86) in the text, relegated to the subtext of exchanged glances and not quite coincidental encounters. With him dead at novel’s end, it’s not surprising that Inez continues to resist the narrator’s attempt to uncover their story since deniability is so central to the affair itself. The novel resists closure not simply in order to trouble
convention, however, but also to highlight the author’s own participation in a fantasy of information mastery implied by a masculinisation of deep politics.\textsuperscript{96}

According to LeClair, information mastery is the result of “the white male’s luxury of examining the whole of American or multinational culture from within, from the perspective of full membership” (29). The paranoid surface/depth reading of geopolitics comes to represent a method of perpetuating masculine norms by delimiting a space of deep politics in which knowledge is tied to the secret agency of men. More frequently objects of knowledge than wielders of it, it’s not surprising that Didion’s female characters are unable to participate. Denied membership, they are forced instead to rely upon extremely limited archives or, more often, upon men in order to piece together coherent narratives. Jack Lovett appeals to Inez\textsuperscript{97} precisely because they’re “equally evanescent, in some way emotionally invisible” (84), and Morrison appeals to Elena McMahon because they are considered “equally remote” and share what the narrator describes as a “core dislocation in the personality” (154). Indeed, her protagonists are more often coached in the art of publicity—the careful presentation of

\textsuperscript{96} If the story is difficult because of the narrator’s self-professed investment in the affair and the people involved, it’s equally true that Democracy is “a hard story to tell” (15) in practical terms because the data is so limited. When Didion describes “a study in provincial manners, in the acute tyrannies of class and privilege by which people assert themselves against the tropic” as “the shards of the novel I am no longer writing” (22-9) in the text’s second chapter, she draws attention to the fragmentation that will follow. Her technique is compared to a waterfall, a “self-correcting maladjustment of stream to structure” (18) that implies the disorders of contemporary society cannot be understood without the imposition of narrative structure.

\textsuperscript{97} Inez’s own version of denial (or reticence) appears in the postcard she sends to Billy Dillon, her husband’s campaign manager, explaining her reasons for remaining in Kuala Lumpur after Jack Lovett’s death: “Colors, moisture, heat, enough blue in the air” (16, 232). The narrator admits that this message leaves her with “no unequivocal way of beginning” (16). She’s left with only images and words that “tend to deny the relevance not only of personality but of narrative, which makes them less than ideal images with which to begin a novel, but we go with what we have” (17). Although it’s possible to recognise an assertion of force in “speaking to whomever she wants to when she wants to, stating her reasons in her own terms and with an edge of mockery” (Stout 183), the list that she provides for her husband’s campaign manager reflects code words and cover stories that she’s learned from Jack Lovett. Though “[s]he seemed to have renounced whatever stake in the story she might have had, and erected the baffle of her achieved serenity between herself and what had happened” (216), the author doesn’t hesitate to draw a direct line between the protagonist’s reticence and her lover’s role as an intelligence operative.
surfaces—in the name of preserving cover than they are taught to actually penetrate it: Lovett’s souvenir from Manila is both a token of affection and an alibi for his activities; we’re told in *The Last Thing He Wanted* that Elena “had trained herself since childhood not to have any interest in what her father was doing” (37), using euphemism or silence to conceal his associations with national security; and both women learn the value of a well-timed “no comment” when confronted by the press. In this manner, the author contrasts her female heroines with a version of “American manhood” that David Greven has described in *Men Beyond Desire* “as both a gendered identity and a cultural monolith, makes sense of itself through an ever-vigilant system of defenses against being recognized as potentially available, looked at, appraised, scrutinized, discerned, desired” (10). These words describe the specifically masculine quality of plausible deniability, one that is at once endlessly penetrating dangerous territory and—in striking parallel with what Janis P. Stout describes as a strategy of reticence—refusing to become an object of scrutiny. Given the ties between these men, their lovers, and Didion’s narrators, her readers end up with a situation in which telling the difference between feminist reticence and masculine evasiveness becomes a difficult task. The author maps these romantic narratives onto the geopolitical interventionism of the Monroe Doctrine, linking the agency of her cold warriors to an attraction shared by her protagonists and narrators alike. In doing so, however, she hints at the dangerous nature of the masculinist fantasies of secret agency implicit in surface/depth models of understanding the world.

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98 For instance, in *Democracy* Inez is instructed by her husband’s campaign manager on dealing with the press: “It’s a game, Inez, it’s tennis...” (52). Likewise, in *The Last Thing He Wanted* Didion is concerned with the presentation of self before the media: “No comment, as the people who were actually on the ground were trained to say if asked what they were doing or where they were staying or if they wanted a drink or even what time it was” (57).
As a reflection of Didion’s post-frontier sensibilities, it makes sense that
*Democracy* and *The Last Thing He Wanted* are ultimately novels of failure, of
disappointment, of impotence. Not only are the romantic relationships at their cores
relegated to subtext, but the “rush of narrative inevitability that usually propels a novel
toward its end” (*Democracy* 233) is markedly absent, leaving us with anti-climax in both
cases: Lovett, Morrison, and Elena end up dead and Inez in self-imposed exile in Kuala
Lumpur. Surprisingly, the lens through which the narrator examines the relationship
between Elena and Morrison in the concluding chapter of *The Last Thing He Wanted* is
an article from *The New York Times Magazine* “about a conference, sponsored by the
John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, at which eight members of the
Kennedy administration gathered at an old resort in the Florida Keys to reassess the 1962
Cuban missile crisis” (225). What seems to appeal to her about this real piece of writing
by J. Anthony Lukas is the image of a group of New Frontiersmen reliving the Kennedy
administration’s proudest moment during the late nineteen eighties. Lukas seems
particularly amused by the aging figures themselves, opening with jokes about *Geritol,*
pointing out their wrinkles and liver-spots, and musing about the inevitable fate of men,
like Maxwell Taylor and Dean Rusk, too ill to attend. The vision of an elderly Ted
Sorenson swimming with “beguiling dolphins” is employed throughout the article to
juxtapose the high seriousness of the Cuban Missile Crisis with an incongruous present
of American kitsch. “The hotel was pink,” says Didion’s narrator, picking up on this
juxtaposition, and yet “[t]here was a winter storm off the Caribbean” (225). Clearly, in
these closing moments Didion is once more playing with a model that divides the surface
of political fictions from the deeper realities of the Cold War. The shabbiness of the
resort and its denizens is contrasted to an ineluctable storm that threatens to sweep away the moribund frontier myths of American greatness. Incorporating the conference into her fiction, however, she illustrates how John F. Kennedy’s circle were themselves participating in masculine fantasies of empowerment and control. There is little doubt, of course, that this group of geriatrics were once practitioners of geopolitical mastery—after all, they helped to define an era’s policies and carried the United States deeper into a series of proxy wars with the Soviet Union. Yet the narrator recognizes in these old men—their counterfeit machismo undone by age and incongruous surroundings—a feebleness that betrays the myth of secret agency behind the surface/depth model of politics. Significantly, reading the article prompts her to imagine Treat Morrison and Elena McMahon also in attendance at the conference in the pink resort—although they’re both, by this point, dead. She imagines Morrison escaping to a room upstairs where Elena awaits and in which “there would have been no reason for the conference, no incident, no subject, no reason at all: Just file and forget.” It seems that this meeting is one last fantasy or counter-fantasy—the narrator’s own—in which she allows herself to envision a place of refuge from the approaching storm. “I want those two to have been together all their lives” (227), she admits, using grammar that exposes the allure and impossibility of evading the problem of politics altogether.

Thinking of the same men described by J. Anthony Lukas, K.A. Cuordileone notes that in the Kennedy years “questions of policy were reduced to issues of style, self-presentation, and masculine character” (182). Didion’s latest novels demonstrate how

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99 It’s hinted throughout that Dick McMahon’s fate is ultimately tied to Kennedy’s: “...Elena McMahon’s father, the man in the house in Sweetwater but much younger, retrieves the cardboard roll, its ends closed with masking tape. He cuts the masking tape with an army knife. He takes out a piece of paper. Suspend all activity, the paper reads. Report without delay. November 22 1963. Dick McMahon’s footnote to history” (italics in original 31).
policy and masculinity are joined together in a worldview based on a presumed divide between the femininized surface of mainstream politics and depths of real geopolitical agency. Just as revelations about the Iran-Contra affair lie behind her evaluation of Kennedy’s decision to abandon the anti-Castro cause in *Miami, Democracy* and *The Last Thing He Wanted* imply that the intelligence industry continues to be defined by an evasive form of manhood—at once impenetrable, aggressive, and invisible—that is predicated upon the mastery of information and *Realpolitik*. It’s not prescience or prognostication that causes her to write about the storm off the Florida coast but rather a sense that the masculinist suppositions of the cold warrior continue to structure American doctrine. In this manner, for instance, *The Last Thing He Wanted* captures what the author calls “the particular luridity of 1984” as a “period during which a significant minority among the population at large appears to have understood how government funds earmarked for humanitarian aid might be diverted” to fund anticommunist contras and “during which no information could be without interest” (54-6). Identifying a talent that she shares with a “significant minority” of these operatives, however, she admits that these arms-dealers and spies “are at heart storytellers, weavers of conspiracy just to make the day come alive, and they see it in a flash, comprehend all its turns, get its possibilities” (55). Part of the “counterfeit machismo” of the era, she submits, rests in the production of the conditions of plausible deniability, the dreamwork necessary to overcome the paradoxes of American democratic imperialism. In other words, what the far frontiers of the Monroe Doctrine have taught Joan Didion about storytelling is that the ambiguity of the writer inevitably lies in how
The imposition of a sentimental, or false, narrative on the disparate and often random experience that constitutes the life of a city or a country means, necessarily, that much of what happens in that city or country will be rendered merely illustrative, a series of set pieces, or performance opportunities. (Collected Fictions 713)

Like her nonfiction from the period, the scattered archives of her novels foreground the manner in which democracy sustains itself by concealing the signifiers of its internal contradictions. Like many of her heroines, Didion’s attraction to depth is the result of living in a world where such fictions have compromised our access to the democratic process, and yet the deflationary nature of these narratives finally implies that the surface/depth model she finds so appealing is yet another layer of the dreamwork itself, a gendered divide in which insider information depends upon membership in an imaginary masculine brotherhood. In exploding the romantic fantasy behind sexy male agents like Jack Lovett and Treat Morrison, her work thereby queries the nature of the author’s own desire to understand “what’s going underneath” the body politic.

Along these lines, Didion’s “Why I Write”—a brief essay that steals its title from George Orwell—explains that “writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying listen to me, see it my way, change your mind. It’s an aggressive, even a hostile act... an invasion, an imposition of the writer’s sensibility on the reader’s most private space.” In it, she notes that such aggressiveness may be disguised “with veils of subordinate clauses and qualifiers and tentative subjunctives,” features that her own style avoids, but that “there’s no getting around the fact that setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully” (5). We’d be right to interpret these opening lines as an
assertion that representation always does damage to the autonomy of its subject. Her statement that narrative constitutes an “imposition” or “invasion” also has political significance, especially if we read it in conjunction with her suspicions about how the language of denial provides cover for American imperialism. How might Didion continue to write about the nation without participating in the paranoid logic of such dreamwork? How might she avoid playing the secret bully or else reproducing the surface/depth model of masculinist politics? One possible solution to this impasse is that Didion alludes to George Orwell in “Why I Write” to reject his belief that good writing is predicated on self-effacement and perhaps even to deny herself the direct political impulses that he claims made his best work possible.\textsuperscript{100} Quarrelling from the outset with his famous assertion that good prose must be like a “windowpane” (1085), she points out that the appeal of his title lies in the fact that it contains “three short unambiguous words that share a sound” (5): namely, “I,” the first person pronoun. ). In this light, the author recalls how distracted she became as an undergraduate studying Hegel at Berkeley:

When I say that I was wondering if the lights were on in the bevatron you might immediately suspect, if you deal in ideas at all, that I was registering the bevatron as a political symbol, thinking in shorthand about the military-industrial complex and its role in the university community, but you would be wrong. I was only wondering if there lights were on in the bevatron, and how they looked. A physical fact. (5-6)

Although ostensibly grounded in the same empirical facts that obsess Jack Lovett, this example is a loaded one. Didion reconciles herself with the potential hostility of writing

\textsuperscript{100} For more on Didion and Orwell, see Tager: “The plot of Democracy illustrates Orwell’s claim from his essay ‘Politics and the English Language’ that the misuse of the language contributes to sloppy thought and misconceived action, and that indefensible acts require misleading language for justification” (183).
by attempting to make the act of storytelling inherently counter-ideological: “Why did the oil refineries around Carquinez Straits seem sinister to me in the summer of 1956?” she later asks of herself, “Why have the night lights in the bevatron burned in my mind for twenty years?” (6). Despite her efforts to refuse the bevatron as a signifier of the military industrial complex, this data becomes productive of questions about the accepted truths of American geopolitics, global capital, and the extreme steps taken in defence of national security. She notes that her own work wrests the phenomena of geopolitical struggle—a particle accelerator on a university campus, “a newspaper photograph of a hijacked 707 burning on the desert in the Middle East” (8)—from their conventional implications and thus from their role as political fictions. Instead, she attempts to approach them as autonomies stripped of preconception: “The picture tells you how to arrange the words and the arrangement of the words tells you, or tells me, what’s going on in the picture. Nota bene: It tells you. You don’t tell it” (7). By marking her own position as one that is always compromised, and by avoiding the temptation to attempt to claim mastery of “what’s going on in the picture,” she demonstrates how the apprehension of such phenomena might become the stuff of a political consciousness that refuses to master the distinction between surface and depth. In doing so, Democracy and The Last Thing He Wanted make something like information impotence their style, implying that geopolitical expansionism is itself a reaction against a deeper sense of growing national insecurity as well as an anxiety regarding the opacity\textsuperscript{101} of data in an increasingly complicated world. She rejects the false open-endedness of deniability, in

\textsuperscript{101} Her willingness to acknowledge this deficit ultimately sets her apart from information specialists like Lovett or Morrison, who has more confidence in his ability to uncover the truth even after failing to save Elena’s life: “Had he been concentrating, everything else would have fallen into place,” he tells the narrator near the end of his life, “This is textbook stuff. A, B, C. One two three” (185).
other words, for more tentative styles of evasiveness. To put it plainly, Didion leaves herself no position of transcendence or refuge by admitting that “setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully” (5), nor does she deny her own desire to comprehend “what’s going on underneath” the body politic; instead, throughout her work from this period she confronts the dreamwork behind America’s frontier mentality with its inherent limitations.
Chapter Five
Civics Lessons from Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*

In “End of the 1980s,” the fifty-fourth chapter of Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, murderous protagonist Patrick Bateman imagines the cultural wasteland of his present in the apocalyptic terms of one wholly alienated from contemporary society. It’s a passage worth quoting verbatim here because it so clearly announces his nihilism:

…where there was nature and earth, life and water, I saw a desert landscape that was unending, resembling some sort of crater, so devoid of reason and light and spirit that the mind could not grasp it on any sort of conscious level and if you came close the mind would reel backward, unable to take it in. It was a vision so clear and real and vital to me that in its purity it was almost abstract. This was what I could understand, this was how I lived my life, what I constructed my movement around, how I dealt with the tangible. This was the geography around which my reality revolved: it did not occur to me, *ever*, that people were good or that a man was capable of change or that the world could be a better place through one’s taking pleasure in a feeling or a look or a gesture, of receiving another person’s love or kindness. Nothing was affirmative, the term ‘generosity of spirit’ applied to nothing, was a cliché, was some kind of bad joke. Sex is
mathematics. Individuality no longer an issue. What does intelligence signify? Define reason. Desire—meaningless. Intellect is not a cure. Justice is dead. Fear, recrimination, innocence, sympathy, guilt, waste, failure, grief, were things, emotions, that no one really felt anymore. Reflection is useless, the world is senseless. Evil is its only permanence. God is not alive. Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in…this was civilization as I saw it, colossal and jagged… (374)

As a model of manhood, Bateman is hardly an exemplary figure: even if we discount the brutal murders he describes throughout as the daydreams of a diseased mind, there’s very little in the novel to suggest redeeming qualities. Like most of Ellis’ protagonists, in fact, he’s locked into an aimless post-adolescence, an anomie unmitigated or even exacerbated by privilege and celebrity. Bateman is twenty-six, for instance, but much of the above seems cribbed from the collective angst of a youth culture that is disaffected by the hypocrisies of previous generations and yet at the same time clumsily negotiating a position at society’s centre. In this sense, he’s an eighties version of Holden Caulfield, making similar proscriptions against a culture of phoniness that choke out of Salinger’s boy-protagonist.102 As in The Catcher in the Rye, it’s also undeniable that there’s a legitimate critique of the political climate of the day being focalized through Bateman, one that repeatedly bumps up against his inability to coherently articulate the reasons for his split with society. Despite the ugly nature of his sadistic fantasies, in other words, he persists as the novel’s visionary centre: while those around him seem blandly contented

102 According to Alan Nadel, Salinger’s Caulfield “manifests two drives: to control his environment by being the one who names and thus creates its rules, and to subordinate the self by being the one whose every action is governed by rules. To put it another way, he is trying to constitute himself both as subject and as object; he is trying to read a social text and to write one” (Containment Culture 73).
with their upper-middleclass lifestyles, he claims to have penetrated the hypocritical miasma of everyday life, to have discovered a permanent “evil” that lies at the dark heart of contemporary American civilization. Whether real or imagined, his second life as a serial killer seems to be staked upon a realization that, beneath the surfaces of mass culture, his existence is devoid of meaning. As a mode of performance, to kill is to call up the existence of a political unconscious driven by hatred and brutality.103

To complicate matters, Ellis hints that Bateman’s visionary transcendence is unsustainable by setting “End of the 1980s” in a café named “Nowheres.” Here two voices, both belonging to Bateman, intermingle: with one voice, he unmasks the world “as he sees it” in a series of monologues addressed to the reader; with the other, he participates in the culture he abhors by attempting to dissuade his secretary, Jean, from a misguided infatuation. Bateman’s uncertain agency is evident here in the wavering between these two narrative strands. “You shouldn’t fawn over him… I mean… me” (472), he forces himself to say: “I know my life would be… much emptier without you … in it” (476). Paradigmatic of the play between the banal and brute in the novel as a whole, the chapter oscillates without demarcation between this soapy melodrama and the monologue that interrupts it. This oscillation suggests that an internal monologue which wants to make claims about the precedence of exteriority (the “surface” of mass culture) in everyday life risks abolishing itself to realms where it cannot speak. To put it more simply, Bateman’s nihilism renders critique itself pointless insofar as he is attempting to reason with a constitutionally unreasonable world. This is also suggested by the fact that, aside from a few slips of the tongue (like “decapitated” for “decaffeinated” (372)) and

103 Bateman might also be compared to Robert Coover’s version of Richard Nixon in this regard. The two share not only a relationship to nothingness that borders on nihilism but also a crisis of agency predicated on the inability to distinguish between sincerity and performance.
silences marked by Ellis’s ellipsis-heavy prose, he can speak only in the empty language of surfaces. The wasteland that he describes in his monologue is reduced to mere platitudes, one barely worth saying aloud: “Appearances can be deceiving,” he insists. Jean’s dismissal, bolstered by the sincerity of someone fatally in love, comes easily enough: “I don’t think they are deceiving,” she tells him, “No, they’re not… That’s simply not true” (378). Bateman claims to inhabit a society given over to the primacy of surfaces, but, according to his own statements, even the confessional frequencies directed at the reader drown in the senseless white noise of mass culture: “[T]here is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me… There has been no reason for me to tell you any of this,” he announces, “This confession has meant nothing…” (377).

Naturally, despite the controversy surrounding its publication, it’s quite possible to read American Psycho as a straightforward argument for seeing mass culture as a collective tragedy in which the unreality of the commodity in late capitalism has generalized to include the individual as well. Along these lines, Bateman himself can certainly be interpreted as “a condensed symbol for capitalism” (255) itself, to use

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104 It will be recalled that chapter one focuses on the unnamed protagonist of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, who, after briefly trying on the identity of the con-artist in one of the novel’s final sequences, recoils from the chameleonic “Rinehartism” that allows one man (Bliss Proteus Rinehart) to inhabit a nexus of contradictory personas and then allows the invisible man himself to transform into this man simply by donning his wide-brimmed hat and green lenses. In that sequence, the act of speaking becomes an issue when the invisible man finds himself compelled to perform this misidentification: “Why am I talking like this?,” he asks, after uncharacteristically starting a fight with a colleague who fails to recognize him, “Why am I acting from pride when this is not really me?” (480-1). Though liberating, this version of invisibility fails as substitute for the recognition that the narrator craves; instead, it compounds his sense of having no fixed identity. Though some critics focused on Rinehartism as a source of dynamism available to the trickster figure, it’s also among the final stages of the disillusionment for the narrator. There is a certain symmetry in concluding with Ellis’s American Psycho, for while Ellison’s unnamed narrator is confounded by the dissimulating powers of this “illusionment” (549), Bateman believes the world to be entirely compromised by it. And if it can be argued that the invisible man consoles himself with the knowledge that he broadcasts and is heard “on the lower frequencies” (572) for and by the “you” of his readers, Bateman is left speaking into the void without the hope of being heard.
Stephen Busonik’s phrase. To take another example, Mark Seltzer suggests that the novel “advertises, and trades on, the analogies, or causal relations, between... two forms of compulsive repetition, consumerism and serialized killing” (65). For him, Bateman signifies the bargain the iconic citizen-subject (that is, the normative white, heterosexual male) has struck with mass culture in the second half of the twentieth century: unlimited privilege for the price of self-determination. That said, the reader’s relationship to Bateman is more contradictory than this simple reading might suggest. Ellis wants to cast his protagonist as the symbolic extremity of late capitalism, to be sure, and yet Bateman often presents himself as the last reasonable man in a world given over to madness. In describing a world that isn’t precisely what it appears to be, he brings to light the underbelly of contemporary middle-class society, what Fredric Jameson means when he describes postmodern culture as a “superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world” (5). The irony is that in American Psycho critique can only represent itself as impotent, as incapable of full self-representation, and in so doing it necessarily replicates the problem of praxis that radical cultural critics have faced in the twentieth century. How can Bateman speak back to the culture that forms and encompasses him, which employs him as a fixed sign of itself? Why must he always react through the performance of violence, as critic-cum-serial-killer? Against Bateman’s vision of a culture doomed to meaninglessness, in what follows I’ll ask to what extent Ellis’s novel asks us to re-evaluate, even re-imagine, political agency in light of an alternate version of individual disempowerment. It may seem odd to reread a narrow vision of postmodernity rather than turn to a text that more optimistically attempts to represent dissent in an age of globalized consumerism, but that
is precisely the point: if power in the U.S. frequently operates through a de-politicization of everyday life, the vacuous text must be challenged upon the grounds of its own (and hence our own) apparent vacuity.

Though in the third part of this essay I’d like to complicate the novel’s polemic, the fact that *American Psycho* directs its energies towards the indictment of affluence and consumerism as the dominant cultural logic of Ronald Reagan’s America is undeniable. Rather than reciting some of the instances that have already been read as evidence of this thesis, however, it makes sense to illustrate the manner in which Ellis’s hermetic narrative works to systematize cultural bankruptcy. In this light, perhaps the most apparent manifestation of the penetration of consciousness by mass culture is dialogue and narrative that frequently borrow from the vernacular of the consumer: popular and

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105 The best recent summaries of the novel’s troubled publication history are by David Eldridge and, with a greater focus upon its reception in England, by Elizabeth Young (85-93). In seeking to defend it from the ferocity of the initial censure and call for censorship, or to account for its continued mainstream popularity, or simply to find in it some modicum of thematic order, the conversation surrounding Bret Easton Ellis’s third novel has so far produced an oddly uniform dissensus. Whether the critical strategy is one of dismissal or reclamation, over twenty years and a dozen articles the text has accumulated a surplus of generic qualifications: it has been described as a “postmodern novel of manners” (Stubblefield 118), an example of contemporary black humour or of the postmodern Gothic (Applegate; Heyler), and more recently, by Naomi Mandel, as a “novel of the contemporary extreme.” Philip Simpson describes it precisely in terms of the negation of traditional generic convention in the name of an epic consumerism: “In the traditional sense, *American Psycho* contains no plot or characters of any substance. Instead, [it] presents one epic catalogue of designer brand-names and products after another” (148). Alternately, though I believe his diagnostic essay risks conflating fictional characters and the psychologies of real individuals, Berthold Schoene, arguing for a symptomatology of modernity behind protagonist Patrick Bateman’s masculinity, writes of a text that is less a novel than “a case study of the predicament of a particular type of man within a specific socio-historical context” (381). Mark Storey similarly sees the novel as not a unified first-person narrative at all but rather “an uneasy chorus of voices, each one representing elements of a dominant masculinity” (61). Even Mary Harron’s adaptation, if taken to be yet another appraisal of Ellis’s notorious work, re-encodes Bateman into the familiar narrative of the thriller or slasher film, distilling Ellis’s commitment to punishing tedium into a few comical sequences, extending the novel’s lax detective plot over several scenes, and heightening those aspects of the novel that satirize the masculinist follies of defunct Reaganite yuppie culture. As Marco Abel writes, “[b]y magnifying the novel’s satirical aspects, Harron emphasizes that Ellis’s violent novel really represents a critique of the social rather than constituting a mindless glorification of violence” (141).
pornographic film, daytime talk shows, catalogues, instruction manuals, menus, lifestyle and music magazines, and the “trusty Mr. Zagat” (32) that Bateman totes wherever he goes all serve as discursive wellsprings in this regard. Taken together, this consumerist heteroglossia replicates the basic logic of fashion, the demystification of which Roland Barthes traces in *The Fashion System*, his structural analysis that describes “a semantic system whose only goal is to disappoint the meaning it luxuriantly elaborates: the system then abandons the meaning yet does so without giving up any of the spectacle of signification” (287-8). By imitating this abandonment of meaning, Ellis’s text argues that the “spectacle of signification” constitutes a central dynamic of postmodern culture. Bateman, who becomes the subject *par excellence* of this kind of knowledge system, describes others almost exclusively in terms of the designer labels they wear, imitating what Barthes calls the “written clothing” of fashion magazines as well as the captioning voice that accompanies models down the catwalk:

I’m wearing a lightweight linen suit with pleated trousers, a cotton shirt, a dotted silk tie, all by Valentino Couture, and perforated cap-toe leather shoes by Allen-Edmonds. Once inside Harry’s we spot David Van Patten and Craig McDermott at the table up front. Van Patten is wearing a double-breasted wool and silk sport coat, button-fly wool and silk trousers with inverted pleats by Mario Valentino, a cotton shirt by Gitman Brothers, a polka-dot silk tie by Bill Blass and leather shoes from Brooks Brothers. McDermott is wearing a woven-linen suit with pleated trousers, a button-down cotton and linen shirt by Basile, a silk tie by Joseph Abboud and ostrich loafs from Susan Bennis Warren Edwards. (30-1)
As if to emphasize the importance of these brand names as signifiers of social status, labels like Valentino, Gitman, Bill Blass, Brooks Brothers, and Joseph Abboud are tangled up in the text with the proper names of individuals like David Van Patten and Craig McDermott. By establishing fashion as its dominant knowledge system, *American Psycho* represents the commoditisation of language, subjectivity, and consciousness into the form of the label and brand.\(^\text{106}\) It’s the designer names themselves, rather than any lingering materiality, the appropriateness to particular contexts, or their instrumentality, from which their value is derived as markers of distinction. By tying each character to a series of brand names, the novel suggests that the fashion system, the immutable mutability of modern life, precedes individuals as one articulation of social order.

As Roland Barthes warns when he describes contemporary myth as de-politicized speech, then, in *American Psycho* fashion “purifies [things], it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of myth” (*Mythologies* 148). Ellis’s fashion system tags clothing with a label (typically in the novel with possessives like “by” or “from”)

\(^\text{106}\) Fashion is not limited to clothing, but saturates almost every object choice that Bateman makes. Perhaps the most important symbol of the “spectacle of signification” is the “original” David Onica print hanging, apparently upside-down, in Bateman’s pristine apartment: “It’s a six-foot-by-four-foot portrait of a naked woman, mostly done in muted grays and olives, sitting on a chaise longue watching MTV, the backdrop a Martian landscape, a gleaming mauve desert scattered with dead, gutted fish, smashed plates rising like a sunburst above the woman’s yellow head, and the whole thing is framed in black aluminum steel” (25). This painting and its artist are real. Onica is known for his work with serigraphy or screen-printing, a descendent of the woodcut but also the same process commonly used to print images on T-shirts, hats, and compact discs. His art is thus largely equivalent to photography in its mechanical reproduction. Throughout the novel, Bateman lies about its value, inflating the price paid for it to extremes. Suggesting a connection between Bateman and the author, this ekphrasis reproduces some of the cultural insiderness for which Bateman and his friends are villified, Ellis uses the painting to signal to those savvy enough to know it, mostly fellow members of the New York Brat pack, that Bateman’s worldview is decidedly twisted: for instance, “dead, gutted fish” hardly describes the cartoonish fish-bones of Onica’s actual painting. Though many of the other clues in the novel that Patrick is an unreliable narrator are more obvious, there’s an interesting tension here and elsewhere in Ellis’s novel between condemning the ritual of belongingness of the fashion system and rewarding readers who are savvy (or wealthy) enough to be in on the joke.
and drains it of any lingering connection to historical modes of production. It creates as an alternate a desire-perpetuated, capital-generating machine not dependent on any logic but its own. As Victor Ward, the male model protagonist of Ellis’s *Glamorama* reminds us when he asserts that sometimes “Out is in [and] In is out” (17), the distinctions that fashion makes in the novel are often arbitrary in nature, flattening the distinction between inside and outside, depth and surface. Though its referent remains what is “in” and what is “out” at any given moment, fashion is, almost by definition, constantly undergoing change. Of course, this mutability serves a higher order of the social “insider” precisely because to live in fashion is to exercise a mastery of appearance in the present moment—this is what Barthes calls “the very special temporality of Fashion” (*Fashion System* 288). With endless iterations of the binary of in/out, in other words, fashion sustains a hermeneutic regime that rationalizes a hierarchy to which its values are arbitrarily attached. For Bateman and friends, not surprisingly, style not only allows for the shaping of appearances but becomes a repeatable signifier of male mastery. Whereas in the opening chapters of Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* protagonist Robert Jordan proves his worth to the illiterate leader of the Spanish guerrillas, Pablo, with his careful appraisal of an injured horse, for instance, Bateman and company demonstrate their own authority by imagining entries in the *GQ* “Question and Answer” column: “Is it possible to wear tasseled loafers with a business suit or not? […] Now are rounded collars too dressy or too casual? Part two, which tie is best with them?” (31-2).

In this manner, *American Psycho* attempts to dramatize how the fashion system transforms living subjects into objects of scrutiny. As a consequence, the spectacle of

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107 Such magazine talk has nothing to say but itself, and it speaks of nothing but its own authority to speak. Barthes explains that “if the magazine did have something to say, it would enter into an order whose very goal would be to exhaust something” (288).
signification becomes the cultural logic for a variety of distinctions in the social present: “Individuality,” as Bateman puts it, “[is] no longer an issue” (374). Whenever his colleague at Pierce & Pierce, Luis Carruthers (a suspected Jewish homosexual) appears in the narrative, for example, he is marked as not quite belonging, and this distinction is justified by way of fashion choice rather than by his distance from the conservative norms of the elite: “Carruthers is wearing a lamb’s wool sport coat, a cashmere/vicuña cardigan sweater, cavalry twill trousers, a cotton shirt and a silk tie, all from Hermès. (‘How tacky,’ Evelyn whispered to me; I silently agreed.’)” (143). The bracketed past tense, grammatically out of place in a novel so often violently confined to the present, hints that this distinction has arrived before Carruthers himself: fashion takes on the qualities of interpellation. The fact that it’s the tackiness of his clothing that throws Carruthers’s belonging into doubt bolsters a patina of tolerance superficially espoused by Bateman and his friends. His queerness and Jewish heritage test the limits of visibility and have the potential to signify a politics, while the clothing that he wears is visible on the body yet signifies only itself. For Barthes, the tautological structure of the fashion system, in which a self-reinforcing logic of surfaces authorizes a model of judgment, is thus “a double murder” that kills both rationality and language: “[t]autology creates a dead, a motionless world,” as Barthes puts it (Mythologies 152-3). We can see how in Ellis’s novel, fashion becomes an alibi for discrimination, a displacement of distinction from the field of identity to that of social canniness.

108 Patricia Stubblefield writes of the work as a postmodern novel of manners in which “being seen, becoming the object of gaze, equates with presenting one’s credentials and demonstrating one’s worthiness to join the social group—and to remain in that group” (142). Her deliberate slip from passivity (being, becoming) to activity (presenting, demonstrating) reveals the operational logic beneath this act of distinction.
In the novel, at least, fashion represents the “murder” of interiority itself. It sublimates all political violence levied against people like Carruthers into an apparently harmless mode of visibility. Predictably, those who cannot participate in this code at all, who cannot become even an object of gaze, suffer a worse fate than he does: they’re rendered virtually unintelligible, they disappear altogether. The many homeless figures in the novel are desperate to signify, holding signs or speaking words that Bateman refuses to register and which no doubt reflect the visible invisibility of the underclasses of New York in the 1980s. When Bateman sees a “bum…in the street, with a sign that says something completely illegible,” he can only respond fashionably: “That dude needs a facial real bad,” he remarks. In response, his pal Tim Price jokes that Bateman should “[t]hrow him [his] tie” (51). Typically, Ellis implies that Price’s callous reaction to poverty differs only by degree from more literal forms of violence, institutional or otherwise, literalized by Bateman’s fantasies. Shortly afterward, the first murder he commits takes place in the doorway of an antique shop where he encounters another homeless man (“Al”) holding a misspelled sign: “I AM HUNGRY AND HOMELESS PLEASE HEP ME” (128). What is striking is the manner in which he ignores the hand-painted sign and instead registers that Al is wearing

some kind of tacky-looking lime green polyester pantsuit with washed-out Sergio Valente jeans worn over it (this season’s homeless person’s fashion statement)

along with a ripped orange and brown V-neck sweater stained with what looks

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109 This explains Ellis’s references to advertising and music from the Broadway adaptation of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*—replaced only toward the end of the novel by equally disquieting advertisements for a version of Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera*, starring Sting. Both cases suggest that poverty is itself reduced to the fashion of the Broadway season. Bateman can debate whether the New York cast recording is as good as the London recording, but, like the illegible sign, he cannot read or respond to the ubiquitous face of Hugo’s Éponine (actually it’s originally an image of Cosette, whose role is minimized in the adaptation) as a signifier of real, existing poverty or suffering in his time.
like burgundy wine. It seems he’s very drunk—either that or he’s crazy or stupid.

(129)

Though only a single label is discernable, a castaway from the elite no doubt, Bateman reads Al’s homelessness itself as part of a “fashion statement.” When paired with his assumptions that a homeless man must be either drunk, crazy, or stupid, fashion as a hermeneutic proves generalizable to the point of absurdity. Bateman is struggling to make the man intelligible, but identity itself depends upon a luxury to which Al has no access. To real suffering he can only offer the platitudes of Reaganism, a series of clichés stripped of socioeconomic implications: “You’ve got a negative attitude. That’s what’s stopping you. You’ve got to get your act together. I’ll help you” (130). Not surprisingly in a novel that seeks to trace a psychopathology of social norms, however, hostility toward social others like Al emerges almost spontaneously as Bateman’s half-hearted gesture of kindness turns to insult before he stabs the man to death with a serrated blade. “I’m sorry,” he says before driving in the knife, “It’s just that… I don’t know. I don’t have anything in common with you” (131). It’s clear, then, that the tautology of fashion structures the social and linguistic codes by which Bateman and his circle make sense of their society.\(^{110}\) The ultra-violent murder sequences that punctuate the banal series of social encounters that make up the rest of the narrative stage in more literal terms the force of authority and male mastery that lies behind deciding who is “in” or “out.”

\(^{110}\) Walter Benn Michaels argues that *American Psycho* “is a novel in which the world is fundamentally organized by class rather than by culture and in which people’s behaviour represents their relation to money” (150-1). He’s half right: what should be obvious, rather, is that Ellis represents class only as a political signifier muted by the fashion statement. It demonstrates how class gives way to its vapid contemporary double, classiness.
In some ways, Mark Seltzer’s anti-profile of the serial killer as “the mass in person” applies neatly to Ellis’s fiction, especially insofar as “the empty circularity by which the serial killer typifies typicality” (107) is a repetition of the deadening tautology that characterizes fashion. Seltzer himself makes this connection, arguing that

the fashion victim has...emerged as something of a model trauma victim... referring in part to the traumatized look of the fashion model on the runway: to the stylized model body on display, a beauty so generic it might have a bar code on it; bodies in motion without emotion, at once entrancing and self-entranced, self-absorbed and vacant, or self-evacuated; the superstars of a chameleon-like celebrity in anonymity. (271)

One function of the murders allegedly committed by Bateman must be the production of such fashion victims, the staging of the “stylized model body on display” by way of a vacating or flattening out of identity—or “the replacement of the soul,” as Seltzer puts it, “with knowledge systems, expert and scientific” (107). In the case of Al, murder is the macabre reduplication of fashion’s rendering as arbitrary the distinction between what is in fashion (or, rather, inside the body) and what is out (or outside). For Seltzer, the serial killer, like Patrick Bateman, is the ultra-typical subject (the “statistical person”) of what he calls America’s wound culture, “the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and open persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound” (1). Like a postmodern version of Baudelaire’s flâneur, he moves through the crowds and engages in an “absorption in typicality and melting into place [which] is bound up with [a] form of self-evacuation or devivification: a drive to make interior states audible, visible, and controllable” (191). There are several other attributes accounted for by
Seltzer that we can take for granted in *American Psycho* as well: Bateman’s facelessness suggests the chameleonism that makes the psycho “not similar to someone or something but *just similar*” (127); the numbness that he feels reflects “the psycho-dispassionate dissociation of the serial killer” (182); his obsession with filming and re-watching his later murders is evidence of a “*mimetic compulsion*” (45) that collapses the distinction between representation and identity; his narcissism signifies a “resurgent egoism” that “arms itself against the ‘democratic’ anarchy of the masses and the passions both” (144); his speech is punctuated by the “personalized pop-psychology and pop-sociology” (115) of the serial killer manifesto; and, finally, the sheer density of his monologues suggests a “commutability of word counts and body counts” that Seltzer argues “provides one register of the way in which the life process and the technological process have come to indicate each other in machine culture” (40).

We should not forget, however, as I’ve insisted in my introduction, that at the same time Patrick Bateman occupies the only position of critique made available to us. However juvenile his manifesto might be, it encloses the novel and, more importantly, determines our perspective on this cultural wasteland at the “End of the 1980s.” Though it has been largely ignored as inconsequential, then, I want to suggest that the problem of whether or not Bateman is committing the murders that he describes or merely engaged in fantasy gains increasing importance if we read it in this light. The existence of “*wound culture*” is Bateman’s critical fantasy as well as Mark Seltzer’s, in other words; it constitutes the wishful thinking of the serial killer as well as the cultural critic. After all, Bateman tears open bodies and exposes the traumatic wound to no avail. The supposedly violence-addicted public that Seltzer describes in his book never bothers gathering
around the spectacle of violence, nothing is exposed, no traumatic “switchpoint” (254) forms between personal and public desires. Indeed, the very boredom the novel inspires in its readers suggests that the text refuses to become an atrocity exhibition altogether.\footnote{This is what Marco Abel claims when he describes “the text’s simultaneous potential for boring and horrifying its readers, a potential that the novel achieves precisely because it proves that horror and boredom…exist as affects next to each other…” (147).} Seltzer argues, succinctly, that “[s]erial killing is...represented as at once an horrific departure from normalcy and as abnormally normal: wounds to an idealized and intact American culture that is at the same time seen as a wound culture” (6). Despite Patrick Bateman’s insistence through word and dastardly deed, however, the wound (and, by implication, wound culture as a critical concept) never presents itself as anything more than fantasy. In other words, evidence of the “traumatized intimation, at the level of the subject, that his interior states are nothing but outer or social forces and fantasies turning outside in” (128) never successfully manifests, as “sub-political class protest” (135) or anything else. His crimes are always ambiguous and mysteriously victimless: “like in some movie,” says Bateman, “no one has heard anything, has any idea of what I’m talking about... no bodies have been found” (367). The ambiguity of these moments is always open to interpretation insofar as it may or may not reveal Bateman to be merely imagining the horrible acts that he describes.\footnote{In a nod to \textit{Psycho}, blood “looks like [and might be] dried chocolate syrup” (30); a real estate agent selling the apartment of a supposed victim treats him oddly, yes, but without alarm (369); an overly friendly police detective investigates the disappearance of that same victim, Paul Owen, who later apparently turns up alive and well in London (388).} What this lack of evidence also suggests, however, is that the character of society in \textit{American Psycho} is basically anti-traumatic, anti-wound. As Seltzer predicts of his own theory when he describes killings as “a failed series of attempts to make the content of the act and the fantasy of the actor, act and motive, perfectly coincide” (64), then, the real of the body, once the last bastion of
cultural criticism, vanishes back into the vicious circularity of simulation. Bateman’s monologues reveal that he would like nothing more than to live in a wound culture, but the wound, like that “desert crater” in lower Manhattan he describes in “Nowheres,” cannot pierce the immaculate shell of the de-politicized present.

Bateman’s double role as serial killer and cultural critic is mirrored by a contradiction between fascination and repugnance present in much of Ellis’s work. As Michiko Kakutani’s scathing review of Glamorama decries, Ellis spends “much time (in this novel and every other book he’s written) chronicling a world he seems to recognize as shallow, mercenary, cynical and meaningless—a world he glamorizes as much he debunks” (“Fashion Victims”). Rather than coming down on one position or another by insisting that Bateman is the villain or an anti-hero, we might preserve this contradiction. He kills, yes, but his alienation from society, not to mention the nihilism that emerges as a result, puts him at least superficially at odds with mass culture. As we’ve seen in the case of Al, the murders he claims to commit invite interpretation as deliberate parodies of mass culture’s attempt to disguise its inherent brutality beneath a veneer of affluence. But what possible value can theoretical dissent have if it merely alienates Bateman further from the world in which he lives? If he cannot participate in the tautology of fashion, if he must insist that appearances deceive, or that the banality of fashion itself is a style of violence, then he insures his own alienation and, as a consequence, critical impotence. In “Myth Today,” Roland Barthes is surprisingly candid in describing the modern mythologist (his version of the cultural critic) as a tragic figure: “For him, tomorrow’s positivity is entirely hidden by today’s negativity. All the values of his undertaking appear to him as actions of destruction: the latter accurately cover the former, nothing
protrudes.” There is a deep disappointment in his admission that “[t]o decipher the Tour de France or the ‘good French Wine’ is to cut oneself off from those who are entertained or warmed up by them” (157). Discussing the domestic argument or “scene,” a much older Barthes would also later confess in his memoirs that

[Language is impotent to close language—that is what the scene says: the retorts engender one another, without any possible conclusion, save that of murder; and it is because the scene is entirely bent on, aims toward this ultimate violence, which nonetheless it never assumes (at least among ‘civilized’ people), that it is an essential violence, a violence which delights in sustaining itself... (Roland Barthes 159).

The cultural critic, even one without tolerance for violence, thus shares this in common with the serial killer: he dwells in negativity, risking nihilism, and his writing ultimately constitutes a “failed series of attempts to make the scene of the crime equivalent to the scene of the fantasy” (Seltzer 64). Every repetition of critique reveals an impotence in language that hazards the stirring up of further violence.

So, insofar as he embodies Ellis’s critique of mass culture, Bateman shares the qualities of serial killer and critic. Given the primacy of fashion over identity, it’s not surprising that the reader knows almost nothing about what he actually looks like. We might picture the face on the book cover, or Ellis’s own photo on the back or inside flap, or perhaps the face of actor Christian Bale, who portrayed Bateman in Mary Harron’s 1999 adaptation—but there are few textual clues to help us imagine him. In their trendy restaurants and nightclubs, he and his friends mistake one colleague for another, and Bateman is at times misidentified as Marcus Halberstam, an error to which he responds
with acquiescence: “For some reason it doesn’t really matter,” he confesses, “and it seems a logical faux pas since Marcus works at P&P also, in fact does the exact same thing I do, and he also has a penchant for Valentino suits and clear prescription glasses” (89). Encounters like this one suggest an evacuation of identity tantamount to that described by Seltzer as abnormal typicality, yet we can go further by contextualizing Bateman as a specific kind of cipher in democratic practice. In laying out her theory of infantile citizenship, for instance, Lauren Berlant discusses the “iconicity” of a “symbolic national body [that] signifies as normal” in terms that might be helpful in this regard: “In mass society... iconicity is intensified by commodity culture’s marketing of normal personhood as something that places you in the range of what is typical in public and yet is personally unique” (36). Reproducing the national imaginary of the eighties, the novel assumes that we already know what Bateman signifies even if we have no idea what he looks like: he is the privileged white American male, representative of the citizen-subject to the point of nullity. If what is normal is defined as what should simply be taken for granted, as what should not be thought, then the over-socialized subject, like the serial killer, disappears into his own typicality. And fashion, so conceived, generates subject positions that are privileged but also mimetically empty: robbed of passions, these individuals become the perfect parts of a national whole scrubbed of dissent.

Unlike his colleagues, however, Patrick Bateman is also capable of asking, if only to himself: “If I were an actual automaton what difference would there really be?” (343). This constitutes the central tension of the novel: Bateman perceives the world with the negativity of the mythologist, but he cannot disengage himself from his own abnormal normality. To be representative is to become the dead letter of consumer culture: like the
“double murder” of Barthean tautology, the commodity killeth, as Berlant suggests in comparing normative national identities that are “dead, frozen, fixed or at rest” to dead metaphors that “no longer seem figural, no longer open to history” (60). Bateman is torn between typicality (an identification with institutional power) and a desire to assault the hierarchical structures that support it. This schismatic role criss-crosses the function of the mythologist and the serial killer. Bateman’s narrative becomes a “melodrama of uncertain agency,” as Seltzer puts it, but so is his critique of consumer culture. In one sequence, after his fiancé, Evelyn, fails to respond appropriately to his claim that he wants to “bring a Harrison AK-47 to [their wedding] ceremony,” he realizes that “she doesn’t hear a word; nothing registers… My essence is eluding her” (127). In another, his secretary looks over his crossword to discover that he has “already filled in every space with either the word meat or bone…” (257). What relatively few commentators have noticed is that all of this is replicated on the level of the novel’s critique: American Psycho as a whole fills the vacuous spaces of the postmodern superstructure with the signs (“meat or bone”) of its own brutal nature. For Ellis as well as for Patrick Bateman, violence becomes an act of self-assertion meant to counter the vicious circularity of the presentation of the self. As grotesque as they often appear, these fantasies of “meat and bone”—fantasies, following Seltzer, of a wound culture still capable of being fascinated and repulsed by things lurking beneath its own surface—should be read as the desperate recuperation of lost interiority.

To summarize, Patrick Bateman’s double role as serial killer and critic produces a melodrama of uncertain critical agency. He doesn’t struggle with the impotence of the
subaltern to speak out in the lower frequencies; for him, the problem seems to be rather one of resisting a system of knowledge that forces subjects to appear as appearance. In choosing to represent a privileged subjectivity that alternately trembles and revels in its own vacuity, Bret Easton Ellis debilitates all kinds of mass cultural fantasies about affluence and the pursuit of happiness. At the same time, however, this characterization of the serial killer as the voice of reason betrays a violent undercurrent to that very critique. Why does the impotence of the critic eventually necessitate, in fantasy at least, reactionary violence? Why these apocalyptic desires? The site at which the thematic unity of masculinity and political agency is most rigid, and the focus of the rest of this chapter, lies in its depiction of male sexuality. Though Bateman is not impotent in any physiological sense, conventional encounters do pose a problem in a manner that revisits the cultural logic of fashion: authentic desires are subsumed by the system of objects that surrounds him. What’s worth noting is the frequency with which sexual encounters are characterized as moments of weakness, in which successful climaxes are rare. After a failed attempt to seduce his girlfriend while “she stares passionlessly at the wide-screen Panasonic remote-control television set” (23), for instance, Bateman is at home masturbating: “thinking about first Evelyn,” he says, “but right before I come—a weak orgasm—about a near-naked model in a halter top I saw today in a Calvin Klein advertisement” (24). The orgasmic substitution of an advertisement for Evelyn’s “cold breast[s]” (23) is meant to suggest the manner in which spectacle appropriates desire. That the Calvin Klein model is only “near-naked” in his fantasy is a hint of the deadening nature of the image because Bateman finds himself powerless to imagine the model in any scenario except as she appears in the advertisement. An attempt to sleep with
Carruthers’s girlfriend is similarly punctuated, as the two make a futile attempt to sustain an erotic moment crowded by signifiers of ‘safe sex’ that Ellis italicizes for emphasis:

Patrick: “‘Where is the goddamn water-soluble spermicidal lubricant?’” (102)

Courtney: “Is it a receptacle tip? Get off me.” (103)

Courtney: “Do you think you’re turning me on by having unsafe sex?” (104)

This results, according to Bateman, in “an orgasm so weak as to be almost nonexistent… as I literally wilt out of her.” The image of a penis wilting (suggesting a flower and, by way of a conventional metaphor, a vagina) deepens our sense of Bateman’s castration. In this context, her demand for safe sex is less the expression of genuine concern than lip-service to some of the clichés of sexual education. Moreover, he perceives Courtney’s attitude as itself spermicidal, hostile to his potency in its very unsexiness, leaving him with a “limp shrunken dick” (105). In depicting Courtney and Evelyn as beautiful women voided of some kind of “authentic” sexuality that he craves, with whom any sexual encounter is what Guy Debord would have called the “illusion of encounter” (152), Ellis clearly intends his readers to share in Bateman’s anti-orgasmic frustrations.

There is more to the representation of sexual desire in the novel than simply the extension of the logic of the fashion system into the bedroom. We might consider how disconnected the privileged world of Evelyn and Courtney is from the political and social realities of sex and sexuality in the late 1980s: for instance, Ronald Reagan’s infamous policy of denial concerning AIDS and HIV\(^\text{113}\) emerges in the text in the form of the attitudes of Bateman’s Yuppie friends. They joke about a woman who thinks that “AIDS is a new band from England” (34) and have educated themselves about the disease only

\(^{113}\) He did not speak publicly about AIDS until 1987, “by which more than 20,000 had died from the condition” (Thompson 22).
insofar as they can claim to be unlikely candidates for contracting it: “It’s like zero zero zero percentage whatever…” (46). Sex, as Bateman says, is “mathematics” (374), not desire and certainly not politics. AIDS becomes a paranoiac sign that haunts the novel, but its significance is repeatedly evacuated of social and political content, limited to apolitical anxieties about personal welfare. In another sequence, for instance, Evelyn’s cultural myopia results in a disastrous misreading of the Silence = Death Project, the New York campaign which sought to bring to light official policies of denial and that “linked the plight of homosexual men and women in the US to a history of marginalization, death and indifference” (Thompson 23). “Silkience Equals Death?,” she asks Patrick: “Are people having problems with their conditioners or something?” In one sense, Evelyn’s misreading is justifiable: she is used to seeing corporate names and logos, rather than protest messages, printed on posters and t-shirts. At first, Bateman’s correction seems like it should be taken more seriously: “No, that’s absolutely wrong. It’s Science Equals Death,” he replies, disgusted, “Jesus, Evelyn, only you could confuse that and a hair product” (331). His own interpretation of Silence = Death slips characteristically from the register of reality, through the language of consumerist citizenship voiced by his vapid girlfriend, toward an apocalyptic vision of the twentieth century in which the primary scientific enterprise has been the mass production of death. The re-inverted pink triangle that accompanied the words “Silence = Death,” after all, alludes to badges worn by suspected homosexuals in Nazi concentration camps, but its message has been misread from two positions: the apathy of Evelyn’s depoliticized reading of “Silkience Equals Death” (death to split-ends, perhaps) and the dystopian
register of Patrick’s critical assumption that science inevitably brings death, progress barbarity.\textsuperscript{114}

The problem should be obvious at this point: although these two readings are indicative of the worldviews supposedly at odds in the novel (ignoramus-consumer and serial-killer-cum-critic), the latter still merely transforms an accusative slogan into a bald statement of the inevitability of mass murder. Such a reading evacuates the slogan of transformative power in favour of an apocalyptic version of manifest destiny devoid of agents or justice. Silence = Death argues that utterance might be a key to survival, whereas “Science Equals Death” signposts the immanence of catastrophe in an apolitical present. It’s important to note that, contrary to what we might assume, Bateman does not belong to the conservative right either: although he apes the Biblical language that surrounded the so-called “gay plague” in the 1980s, it’s not a matter of moral calamity so much as the inevitable collapse of civilization into the chaos that underlies it. Whether worrying about other men watching him workout at the gym (68), attempting to strangle Luis Carruthers in the bathroom (159), or telling a Bloomingdale’s clerk who he believes is hitting on him that “I’ll see you in hell” (179), Bateman certainly avows a troubling homophobia in line with the attitudes of the political right and his Yuppie friends, but his profession of conservative values, like his sporadic pleas for liberal tolerance, prove as nihilistic as his obsession with toothpaste. “I just want everyone to know that I’m pro-family and anti-drug,” he announces, unbidden and without cause, at the Yale Club (157). Non sequiturs like these are meaningless: slogans like “pro-family” become brand

\textsuperscript{114} This statement constitutes a naïve version of the central argument of Adorno and Horkheimer’s \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}, which describes the culture industry as a vicious circle in which “[b]oth escape and elopement are pre-designed to lead back to the starting point. Pleasure promotes the resignation which it ought to help to forget” (142).
names, clichés tangled up in other clichés, just as Silence = Death advertises shampoo for Evelyn. In the novel, “Science Equals Death” poses the same problem for agency as “Silkience Equals Death,” becoming the slogan of a nihilist who “feels infected, like gasoline is coursing through his veins instead of blood” (349) and who “want[s] no one to escape” (377).

In this light, there’s also something anti-reproductive (or even destructive) about sexuality in the world in which Bateman lives. For example, the apocalyptic language built into the conservative conception of AIDS links it to what Lee Edelman has described as a figurative hostility to “reproductive futurism.” Edelman claims that, so conceived, “AIDS… reinforces an older connection, as old as the antigay reading imposed on the biblical narrative of Sodom’s destruction, between practices of gay sexuality and the undoing of futurity” (19) and that this figuration of futurity “impose[s] an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity…by casting outside the political domain…the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations” (2). In this light, the rhetoric surrounding AIDS can be said to signal a nexus of depoliticizing values that link national destiny to sexual reproduction in a variety of symbolic configurations: the nuclear family, the foetus, the child, the Adamic male, et cetera. In imagining himself as somehow “infected,” if not with AIDS then with some other nebulous postmodern malady, Bateman poses himself (despite his homophobia) in a similar manner, as a figuration of the death drive.

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115 Edelman’s polemic argues for embracing “the figural burden of queerness” (22), in which queer subjects stand in for a Freudian death drive that society as a whole attempts to repress, so that queer theory might begin “dismantling... futurism as fantasy” (28).
In practicing the science of death, he makes imaginative use of razor blades, power drills, axes, and chainsaws in assaulting women throughout the novel, but most significant perhaps is the coat hanger he employs as an instrument of torture. If, along with AIDS, dead children and undone families are often invoked as a national nightmare image, then the hanger (notably, also a thing upon which fashion hangs) must connote the violence of abortion. Bateman’s use of it to torture two prostitutes, non-reproductive women, thus ambivalently repeats the malice of a culture that venerates the unborn as symbols of futurity. When Bateman brings another of his girlfriends for an abortion, he sadistically instructs his driver to leave “a doll, a rattle, a teething ring, [and] a white Gund polar bear… sitting in the backseat for her” after the procedure. He justifies this psychological cruelty to the reader by claiming that “[t]his is no time for the innocent” (382). It’s her innocence, then, her inability to perceive the world as it really exists, that he attempts to terminate: abortion and its associated symbols become the means by which Bateman seeks to rupture the cultural fantasy of reproductive futurism. Similarly, in one of the more disturbing chapters of the novel, Bateman also deftly murders an unwatched little boy at the Central Park Zoo but, puzzlingly, finds it less satisfactory than “taking the life of someone who has hit his or her prime, who has the beginnings of a full history… whose death will upset far more people whose capacity for grief is limitless than a child’s would.” It’s impossible not to imagine the aborted foetus when Bateman describes the dead boy, “[t]his thing before [him], small and twisted and bloody [that] has no real history, no worthwhile past, nothing is really lost” (299). Along these lines, Lauren Berlant writes of the “still perfection” of the celebrity foetus, threatened with “violation by bad mothers and unjust nations,” that it helps
reimagine America as a place where, paradoxically, the body is safe, but only as a stereotype. This is a political fantasy of the end of history, in a realm of postpolitics, beyond everyday life, maternity, racism, law, regulation; it is represented as a possibility for us by the hyperspace of mass culture, whose very commitment to pleasure produces a clean, well-lighted decontextualized celebrity. (123-4)

In “On Potentiality,” Giorgio Agamben similarly uses the child as an example of the Aristotelian distinction between “generic potential” (“that a child has the potential to know, or that he or she can potentially become the head of State”) and the “existing potential” of an architect’s ability to build or a poet’s to write poems: “The child…is potential in the sense that he must suffer an alteration (a becoming other) through learning. Whoever already possess knowledge, by contrast, is not obliged to suffer an alteration” (Potentialities 179). What the impressive arguments of Berlant about the infantalization of citizenship make clear is that the foetus and child have become symbolic of the generic potentialities of the nation: the child is no longer subject to “a becoming other through learning” because the citizen-subject is already realized as iconic destiny of the child.¹¹⁶ In drawing a teleology, then, this inverted relationship between child and adult signifies the termination of any real futurity insofar as the future is configured as an actuality in the process of being realized. What these insights spell out is the manner in which Bateman’s acts of violence become critical gestures directed

¹¹⁶ Like every other murder he imagines, no calamity comes of the little boy’s death. Though conservative rhetoric often figures children as our most precious commodity, Bateman finds the truth less satisfying. Despite the collective shock whenever a child dies, killing adults is “much worse (and more pleasurable)” because its “capacity for [causing] grief” is far greater. The symbolic child is already dead, according to Berlant, and the real child makes a “puny” (299) target. Like the assault on the homeless man, the murder reveals itself as one in a series of failed attempts at recuperating meaning and asserting critical agency. As anodyne, he considers murdering the child’s mother but is forced to quit the scene, eating a coconut Dove Bar instead while imagining the coming end as “a hole, widening in the sun” (300).
against this iconic futurity. In other words, murder tests the limits of the national body’s safety by seeking to wound it, to draw a crowd to the scene of violence, but at the same time, because they are locked into the ambiguity of fantasy, they never quite manage to substantiate the bankruptcy of mass culture.

The disappointment when the wound fails to show, when the waves of grief fail to manifest, after killing the boy is evident when Bateman admits, “I walked away, my hands soaked with blood, uncaught” (300). Suspended in the ambiguity of fantasy, each murder paradoxically compounds his uncertain agency, leading to progressively desperate assertions to the contrary. His desire for witnesses to his crimes thus implies the “empty circuit of identity in celebrity—a self-identity bound to the mass witnessing from which it suffers” that Seltzer argues “makes up one face of the serial killer-profile” (137). In this light, many of the novel’s most horrifying sequences are characterized by a tone that grows ever more rhetorically insistent. In the second chapter titled “Girls,” for instance, Bateman replicates an earlier threesome. Although the narrative of pleasure-taking progresses from pornography to slasher film, the same over-determined language of fantasy characterizes both:

Elizabeth, naked, running from the bedroom, blood already on her, is moving with difficulty and she screams out something garbled. My orgasm had been prolonged and its release was intense and my knees are weak. I’m naked too, shouting, “You bitch, you piece of bitch trash” at her and since most of the blood is coming from her feet, she slips, manages to get up, and I strike out at her with the already wet butcher knife that I’m gripping in my right hand... (289)
Overwhelming in its mechanical commitment to detailing bodily positions and movements, passages like this one employ persistent present tense verbs and temporal adverbs in order to maximize their efficiency as causal narrative. Indeed, the phallic metonymy of penis and butcher knife is reflected in the narrative’s penetrative force. Along these lines, Walter Benn Michaels has described this narrative progression from making women orgasm to making them scream as an attempt “to guarantee their sincerity” (70), but it’s worth also noting that neither method proves satisfactory.

Bateman initially feels as if he “just embraced that first line of cocaine, inhaled the first puff of a fine cigar, sipped that first glass of Cristal” (132), but after later murders he finds the pleasure he receives from killing short-lived indeed: “I’m weeping for myself, unable to find solace in any of this, crying out, sobbing ‘I just want to be loved,’ cursing the earth and everything I have been taught” (345). These murders are best interpreted not as satirical replications of the serial disappointment of consumer desire, but rather as evidence of his troubled insistence of self-mastery, of critical agency, against his own nihilistic worldview. After using a starved rat to assault a woman, he confesses: “I can already tell that it’s going to be a characteristically useless, senseless death, but then I’m used to the horror. It seems distilled, even now it fails to upset or bother me.” And to “prove it” (329) to himself, prove that he can handle it, he dismembers her with a chainsaw in as horrifying a manner as possible. Guaranteeing female sincerity is perhaps part of the goal, but he also wants to prove to himself the radical separation between his surface and interiority, one which will protect him from the senselessness he perceives around himself. While in Nowheres with Jean, his words take on a similar braggadocio:
My conscience, my pity, my hopes disappeared a long time ago (probably at Harvard) if they ever did exist. All I have in common with the uncontrollable and the insane, the vicious and the evil, all the mayhem I have caused and my utter indifference toward it, I have now surpassed. (377)

It’s a double surpassing he insists upon, then: he has overcome both his humanity and its loss. Utterly dispassionate, he insists that he has become what Seltzer calls “the ‘devoided’ and predead subject, for whom pleasure has become bound to the endless persecution of pleasure and to the endless emptying or voiding of interiors, in himself and in others” (109). For Bateman, murder is chiefly a rhetorical strategy, then, the deliberate insistence meant to signify the transcendent nihilism of an emptied self that is, paradoxically, also the only critical agency still operating in the novel.

Of course, this position is more than a little problematic. If Patrick Bateman’s performances in American Psycho are geared toward overcoming a mass cultural lack that leaves both his masculinity and agency in doubt, after all, they’re also clearly part of a reassertion of potency predicated upon a hegemonic manhood founded on dominance, narcissism, and sadism. By making him the critical centre as well as the villain of his novel, therefore, Bret Easton Ellis illuminates the ties between cultural criticism and a gender politics that locates (male) authenticity in the violent penetration of dubious social otherness. On the other hand, impotence, as Giorgio Agamben makes clear, need not be conceived of as the obverse of agency: “To be free is not simply to have the power to do this or that thing, nor is it simply to have the power to refuse to do this or that thing,” he tells us, “To be free is... to be capable of one’s own impotentiality, to be in relation to
one’s own privation. This is why freedom is freedom for both good and evil” (183). To clarify this difficult statement, Agamben is claiming that impotentiality is not the dyadic opposite of a potentiality but rather as a potential not to be actualized. In imagining ourselves as agents who are capable of creating our own ends independent of existing political actualities, we open ourselves to radical, non-relational potentialities, to what he calls a “form-of-life” emerging but not yet actualized or predictable in any knowledge system.117 It could be that as critic-cum-serial-killer Bateman repeatedly mistakes his impotence for a lack of agency rather than its possible source, and that, like a finger-trap, the struggle to assert his hegemonic potency in the face of this misunderstanding merely concretizes the snare. In other words, his self-fulfilling critique is really an anti-critique, birthing the world it denounces insofar as his nihilism makes violence possible, even desirable. Progressing toward the outbreak of violence like the impotent language of Roland Barthes’s domestic scene, each gesture becomes a futile reiteration of actuality.

And so the question finally worth asking in light of American Psycho is actually quite simple: is Patrick Bateman really as menacing as he would like us, his reader-confessors, to believe? Should we take him seriously? The gravity with which commentators sometimes approach the novel, though no doubt also a side-effect of its controversial publication, suggests to me a significant miscalculation: behind the violence and misogyny, Bateman’s melodrama of agency is tacitly absurd. For Ellis, after all, he’s a figure of pitch-black satire that is often easily mistaken for seriousness itself.

117 Because impotence is precisely that which threatens political fatalism with contingency, its literary representation in various guises can be revelatory of this “coming” politics insofar as it allows us to see the human not as a reification of nativity or nation but rather as a possibility of differential self-creation. As Agamben writes in a precursor to Homo Sacer, “[i]f there is today a social power [potenza], it must see its own impotence [impotenza] through to the end, it must decline any will to either posit or preserve right...” (Means without End 113). Theories of simulation or mediation no doubt offer valuable critiques of the motivated manipulation by states and corporations, but in their tendency toward becoming theories of false consciousness, they risk quelling the excess of agency inherent in democratic practice.
He rarely seems like a reliable narrator, either, although his perspective is the dominant one. Even laying aside the crazed hallucinations of death and destruction that colour his world, for instance, even small details like his middlebrow attempts at music criticism in the chapters about *Genesis, Whitney Houston, and Huey Lewis and the News* are both tasteless and substantively erroneous. If errors are meant as cues to the fraudulence of our narrator, then they might also signal the cracks in the underpinnings of a narrative production of a self; every time that readers recognize one of Bateman’s mistakes it renders suspect his insistence of self-mastery. It’s his critical perspective itself, we realize, that constitutes the real fantasy of the novel.

In the afterglow of murdering Al, Bateman wanders into a *McDonald’s* in Union Square and orders a vanilla milkshake. His encounter with an indifferent minimum-wage employee is instructive: “‘Extra-thick,’ I warn the guy, who just shakes his head and flips on the machine” (132). Far from assenting to his demonstration of aggressive manliness, this anonymous McDonald’s employee refuses to acknowledge Bateman’s demand for an extra-thick shake. Neither man has the ability to select the thickness of the milkshake and, with the indifferent flip of a switch, Bateman’s warning therefore becomes yet another frustrated but now thoroughly ridiculous repetition of his inability to signify. In fact, he fails to convince others of his menace throughout the novel. When other people do finally acknowledge that he is a “total maniac” (363) or a “madman” (382), after all, it

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118 For example, he makes several suspect remarks about Phil Collins’s song writing abilities, calls an Elvis Costello album *My Aim Was You* rather than *My Aim Is True* (353), knows Hank Williams only as somebody who is not a regular member of the *News* (356), and so on. So why, then, if even these fairly banal details are incorrect, is it necessary to take seriously his much more unlikely claim that he is a “fucking evil psychopath”? They might signal less Bateman’s instability or the cracks in his elitist pretensions and more the rhetorical underpinnings of a narrative production of self—each moment that we recognize one of Bateman’s mistakes is a moment that we are reminded of our specific relationship to him as reader-confessors, in other words. This is a different query than the unanswerable one of whether the murders he commits are real, therefore: it concerns his intentions in confessing them, real or not.
is not for bloody murder but rather for not ordering hash browns at a particular restaurant or, even more ludicrously, for offering Tim Price an almond. When he leaves a frantic confession on his lawyer’s answering machine, he receives a similar response. Harold Carnes, mistaking him for a colleague, simply doesn’t believe him:

‘Davis,’ he sighs, as if patiently trying to explain something to a child, ‘I am not one to bad-mouth anyone, your joke was amusing. But come on, man, you had one fatal flaw: Bateman’s such a bloody ass-kisser, such a brown-nosing goody-goody, that I couldn’t fully appreciate it.’ (387)

Bateman would have us believe that his murderous “essence” is evading Carnes, but it’s possible to bring our suspicion up a level and read the confession as part of a frustrated attempt at recuperating meaning and agency that merely deepens its own entrapment. Our position might therefore share in Carnes’s incredulity.

A re-evaluation is in order. If read simply as mass cultural critique, American Psycho allies itself with the conservative, censorious voices that sought to mute it, and its vision of consumerism results in a fairly trite condemnation of late capitalism as a system of objects. As Elizabeth Young warns, approached in this manner, Ellis’s novel may be a reactionary one: “Behind [Bateman] lies the conventional nostalgic vision of a lost world where actions were not random, where emotion was authentic and where everything once made sense” (120). Carla Freccero echoes this sentiment as well when she warns that critics complaining of the lack of depth in Ellis’s novel risk replicating “the desperate monstrosity of the psychopath… that somehow truth must be there, lurking beneath a surface” (51). There are other serious issues as well. Given infinite space, I could no doubt show in greater detail how Bateman’s critique conceals gender assumptions that
tend to valorize the authentically masculine; given that, as I have argued, this constitutes a granting of the actuality of national manhood, it is not surprising that his actions take on the repressive properties associated with those traditionally in power. In *After the Great Divide*, Andreas Huyssen famously argues that within modernist critique “mass culture is somehow associated with women while real, authentic culture remains the prerogative of men” (47) and thus “fear of the masses... is always also a fear of woman” (52). In this manner, to see impotence as the result of the inherently emasculating properties of commodity culture is to argue that women are inherently figures of impotence. Awash in the clichés of consumer society, no wonder Patrick Bateman is misdirected toward the extermination of women and the poor as symbols of mass culture falsity and weakness. As Seltzer says of the serial killer’s abnormal normality, his position is essentially antidemocratic. For James Livingston, this style of critique also “reanimates and validates a certain kind or range of (male) subjectivity” (23) that is predicated upon the “small producer,” the “natural rights of property” of the male freeholder (24), and “the integrity of the [bourgeois] household” (19). This is not a matter of denying the mass cultural ties between the rise of feminism and a new style of capitalism but instead of daring to see these economic and social transformations as potentially beneficial—or at least not necessarily pre-determinedly bad. With this in mind, Livingston asks an important question that cultural critics rarely voice: “Don’t we then need some way of appreciating the comic potential and redeeming value of the post-artisanal market society that entails proletarianization, corporate bureaucracies, scientific management, and consumer culture?” (33). In denying the possibility of either sexual

119 Huyssen suggests that the philosophical roots of these binaries lie with Nietzschean heroics that are reminiscent of Bateman’s vision of himself: “the artist-philosopher-hero, the suffering loner who stands in irreconcilable opposition to modern democracy and its inauthentic culture” (50-1).
climax or meaning, Bateman might be unwilling to fully locate his narrative in the conventional “tragic” narrative of mass culture propagated by some modernist thinkers, and yet he’s also incapable of finding the funniness that Livingston describes.

Given these issues, it’s in the reader’s ability to differ with Bateman, to disagree not about the predominance of the commodity but rather about its repercussions, that American Psycho finally gestures toward a breach in the cycle of apathy or rage.\(^\text{120}\) It would be a mistake to deny that global capitalism is not in many ways precisely what he and many others have said it is, but that is certainly not all there is to the story. By conflating serial killer with critic, and thus by revealing that both the wound and wound culture are fantasies signalling a failure of imagination, the novel posits a recuperation of agency in a world that threatens the contours of individuality itself with the homogeneity of mass culture and normalizing demands of hegemonic, masculinist citizenship. In this light, Bateman’s struggle at the “End of the 1980s” might be a precursor to what Simon Critchley has recently called a “motivational deficit at the heart of liberal democratic life, where citizens experience the governmental norms that rule contemporary society as

\(^{120}\) The manner in which Ellis might intend us to read American Psycho is as a narrative of cultural desensitization taken to extremes, wherein what Bateman describes as his “severely impaired capacity to feel” (344) produces an unlimited capacity to act (or, at least, to imagine himself acting) without sympathy or remorse. Tim Price, whose sardonic speeches in the opening and closing chapters represent the only other voice of even mild discontent, and who represents a textual analogue for Ellis himself in more than one novel, baldly states the problem of desensitization as such: “[Y]our reaction to the times is one of total and sheer acceptance, when your body has become somehow tuned into the insanity and you reach that point where it all makes sense, when it clicks” (5-6). The second person pronoun, directed at Bateman in a taxicab, obviously includes readers in its indictment as well, and tuning in and clicking is the language of television and radio, two straw men of the culture wars, blamed for limiting our attention spans, narrowing our horizons, and inundating us with cultural dross that transforms our children into psycho killers. Understandably, there is obviously something very conservative about his thesis against consumer culture, though the Left has been as guilty of it as the Right. Like the fashion system discussed in the first half of this chapter, Price’s speech goes so far as to naturalize class disparity not in terms of existing economic disparity and dispossession but rather in terms of the total, chattel-like acceptance of the world as it exists, a tuned-out culture of poverty: “[W]e get some crazy fucking homeless nigger who actually wants—listen to me, Bateman—wants to be out on the streets, this, those streets, see, those” (6). Price, like Bateman with Al, sees the commodity as having penetrated subjects so deeply that the homeless desire what were once class positions as if they are now fashion statements.
externally binding but not internally compelling” (7). Insofar as he is a symbol of this emerging cultural zeitgeist for Ellis, for instance, the figure of President Ronald Reagan casts a deep shadow over *American Psycho*. Three pages from the end Tim Price refigures the outgoing President as the original national psychopath: “I don’t believe it. He looks so… *normal*. He seems so… out of it. So… *undangerous,*” Price declares, “He presents himself as a harmless old codger. But inside…” Though he doesn’t finish the thought, Patrick Bateman completes the sentence with “two words” that he believes Price is unwilling to speak: “*doesn’t matter*” (397). Certainly that is one interpretation, and Bateman’s hermetic narrative attempts to confine his readers to it. If true, all that he has learned in the course of the narrative is that, by analogy with the president, his secret identity as serial killer is rendered invisible by his privileged iconicity, just as global capitalism’s violent nature is concealed by fantasies of a pristine national future.

“Futility,” he tells the detective investigating the disappearance of one of his apparent victims, “is… hard to deal with” (276). For him, impotence can only be thought of as futility, as incapacity, to be refuted as violently as possible or sublimated into consumer choice. The problem of this style of critique is that its melodrama merely reproduces the very motivational deficit it attempts to vilify: if everything is assimilable, then why bother resisting? Bateman struggles without end, and while he hints that he has come to terms with his condition and the world around him, the novel offers no definite solutions.

121 Because the politics in *American Psycho* presents itself as a vacuum, his motivations are often misdirected, participating in what Critchley describes as the “active nihilism” of the terrorist or fundamentalist “who seek[s] a violent destruction of the purportedly meaningless world of capitalism and liberal democracy” (38) rather than reengaging in the necessary re-politicizing of everyday life through functional dissent. Indeed, Ellis’s next novel, *Glamorama*, deals with the ties between affluence and terrorism directly, depicting a group of models who (inspired by Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*) commit random acts of violence against the wealthy and the beautiful.
Still, we’d be remiss not to notice that the two words that Bateman uses to finish Price’s sentence about Reagan are neither the only ones that are possible, nor even the most likely. It must be significant that the context of the quotation above suggests Price is claiming that beneath the facade of normalcy the President is the very opposite of undangerous. Accordingly, it’s very important that the sequence with which I opened my discussion doesn’t conclude with Patrick Bateman’s vision of a world without agents. Instead, he briefly entertains the possibility of a relationship with Jean, who in her denial of his apocalyptic vision of reality actually “seems stronger, less controllable, wanting to take [him] into a new and unfamiliar land” disconnected from his rage or apathy:

it’s almost as if she’s making the decision about who I am, and in my own stubborn, wilful way I can admit to feeling a pang, something tightening inside, and before I can stop it I find myself almost dazzled and moved that I might have the capacity to accept, though not return, her love. I wonder if even now, right here in Nowheres, she can see the darkening clouds behind my eyes lifting…

(379)

Seltzer writes that “[the] notion of the self as effect or empty category has of course become something of a standard in recent cultural criticism” (68), but Bateman’s similar paranoia as serial killer “that others are creating [his] fate” (370) is here inflected positively, through Jean, as the possibility of surrendering the determination of “who I am” to another in an entirely different manner. He considers granting her actualization of him by not not being the “sweet” and “shy” (378) young man she has mistaken him to be. It’s a faculty, a freedom, to be something other than an angry young man. Ingrained
in his “capacity to accept...her love” is a realization of the freedom of that impotentiality that Agamben describes as a freedom for both good and evil.

In closing, though, let’s leave the serial killer behind altogether to consider the figure of the child once more. And, at the same time, let’s return also to Roland Barthes, who admits that “[h]e has always regarded the (domestic) ‘scene’ as a pure experience of violence, to the degree that... the scene always inspires fear, as though he were a child panic stricken by his parents’ quarrels” (159). These are two versions of impotence according to Barthes: one generating anger and the other fear, one the impotence of language to halt an escalation that it simultaneously compounds and the other the impotence of the child (with whom he identifies) to arrest the quarrel in its entirety. How, then, does the child stop the scene? What critical faculty does he exercise if not participating in the violence of the quarrel itself? Barthes tells us that secondary to fantasy of smashing myth is the processes of re-mythologizing, refusing to give into the deadening nature of the tautology: “the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an artificial myth: and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology” (Mythology 135). It might be for similar reasons that Patrick Bateman is granted another vision, this time of a starving boy in “the southern deserts of Sudan”:

... a child with a face like a black moon lies in the sand, almost dead, eyes unblinking, grateful (stop and imagine for an instant a world where someone is grateful for something) none of the haggard pay attention as they file by, dazed and in pain (no—there is one who pays attention, who notices the boy’s agony and smiles, as if holding a secret), the boy opens and closes his cracked, chapped mouth soundlessly, there is a school bus in the distance somewhere and
somewhere else, above that, in space, a spirit rises, a door opens, it asks “Why?”—a home for the dead, an infinity, it hangs in a void, time limps by, love and sadness rush through the boy... (379)

Though his eventual answer to the question may be the wrong one, this passage is worthy of closer attention than it has received by readers obsessed with Ellis’s more violent scenes. By capturing Bateman’s attention, this child ruptures the scene of language, ceases to be an icon for the potential of an existing social order, and takes on the mythological properties of an impotence that is also an injunction, a call to responsibility possible only in the full light of freedom. Unlike the iconic child that scholars like Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant have described, this counter-mythological vision of the Sudanese boy represents not a pre-determined national future but rather becomes an “infinity” of possibilities. Briefly, tentatively, the novel stages the birth of an ethically-situated civic life here as a “home for the dead, an infinity,” an act of witnessing. It’s here, and only here, that the wound begins to show through. A modification is in order, then: it’s not, as the science of death declares, no future that we want, but rather many futures, a democracy of competing futures even; we want a proliferation of futurities grounded not in confining metaphors of causality, which in the end are merely alibis for inaction, but in a potentiality that survives our struggle for agency. “THIS IS NOT AN

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122 As evidence that Bateman draws back from this epiphany, we need only look at his response to the boy’s question, “Why?,” which recurs on the novel’s last page: “…though I’m very proud that I have cold blood and that I can keep my nerve and do what I’m supposed to do, I catch something, then realize it: Why? and automatically answering, out of the blue, for no reason, just opening my mouth, words coming out, summarizing for the idiots: “Well, though I know I should have done that instead of not doing it, I’m twenty-seven for Christ sakes and this is, uh, how life presents itself in a bar or in a club in New York, maybe anywhere, at the end of the century and how people, you know, me, behave, and this is what being Patrick means to me, I guess, so, well, yup, uh...” (399).
EXIT,” the novel’s pessimistic, Sartrean\textsuperscript{123} closing line, means precisely that, but the transcendence promised by an exit—or by putting down the disagreeable book—is also no longer our only option.

\textsuperscript{123} As is often pointed out, Bateman and the reader are thereby sealed within a hermetic text that opens with Manhattan recast as Dante’s \textit{Inferno} (“Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter Here is scrawled in blood red lettering on the side of the Chemical Bank” (3)) and concludes with signage meant to warn us, before we put the book back on the shelf, that “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT” (399). Given that the former is a clear reference to hell, it’s extremely likely that the final lines allude to Jean-Paul Sartre’s own version of it (“L’enfer, c’est les autres”; often translated as “hell is other people”) in \textit{No Exit}.
Conclusion
The Impotence of Criticism

Much of Bret Easton Ellis’s autobiographical novel *Lunar Park* revisits the production of *American Psycho* from the point of view of its author. In it, a newly sober “Bret Ellis” is attempting to turn his life around after years of public debauchery, settling down to raise a son whose paternity he once denied. Though the novel begins with an account of his years as a reckless celebrity of New York’s literary “Brat Pack,” this longstanding pattern of life is shattered when Ellis notices a series of paranormal phenomena during a Halloween party: a carpet that suddenly changes colour, a strange protoplasm smeared across doorknobs and carpets, and a mysterious (and familiar) party guest wielding an axe and wearing a blood-stained Armani suit. As a fictional proliferation of the author himself, the mysterious return of “Patrick Bateman” at the party is at once tied by the narrator to the ghost of Ellis’s late father, a mysterious undergraduate called Clayton (named for Ellis’s other autobiographical double from *Less Than Zero*), a spectral presence haunting the home on “Elsinore Lane,” a living doll called Terby (backwards, we’re told, for “Why Bret?”), and the cultural legacy (another kind of haunting) of *American Psycho* itself. When a series of murders striking in
similarity to those painstakingly detailed in the earlier novel occur near the quiet suburbs in which he lives, the fictional Ellis admits:

I did not want to go back to that book. It had been about my father (his rage, his obsession with status, his loneliness), whom I had transformed into a fictional serial killer, and I was not about to put myself through that experience again—of revisiting either Robert Ellis or Patrick Bateman. (160-1)

Even if we ignore Ellis’s generic allusions to Hollywood horror staples like Poltergeist and The Amityville Horror, we’re still soundly in the realm of fiction in Lunar Park, as the author reminds us by maintaining the pseudonyms of his earlier fiction (“Camden College” stands in for Bennington), by giving a detective the same name (“Donald Kimball”) as an investigator in American Psycho, or by signalling the artificiality of autobiographical narrative more directly: “You’re not a fictional character, are you, Mr. Ellis?” (164). As a roman à clef, however, Lunar Park enters into dialogue with American Psycho, opening up to scrutiny both society and the author’s own dark fantasies, ones that drove the production and reception of that earlier narrative. A key feature of the novel lies in Ellis’s attempt to come to terms with the family resemblance to his killer that is suggested above, perceiving in Patrick Bateman attributes that he shares with his dead father, including a desire to escape from the hegemonic structure of society that fuels an unspeakable anger. As he describes it, “the murders and torture were in fact fantasies fueled by his rage about how life in America was structured and how this had – no matter the size of his wealth – trapped him. The fantasies were an escape” (161). As we’ve seen in the last chapter, as acts of escapism the horrific crimes imagined by Bateman constitute reassertions of masculine agency, the desperate brutality of an
animal sniffing out the contours of its cage. And yet, because that cage represents “life in America” itself, the particulars that make Bateman a perfect fictional analogue of Robert Ellis also make him a style of everyman insofar as he represents the anxieties and self-division the iconic male discovers as he approaches a mass cultural society’s impossible centre. His impotence and his anger might be our own, in other words.

In any case, the author reveals in *Lunar Park* that he had been treading carefully around the implications of such an identification with the serial killer and with his father both. Haunted by the possible role the novel played in murders committed by Canadian serial rapist Paul Bernardo, for instance, Ellis admits that “after the killings in Toronto it was no longer lurking—it was real, it existed, and it tortured me” (161). He’s confronted with the possibility that what he thought of as metaphor, as pure fiction, might resonate with legitimate psychopaths in a matter he did not intend. Like many of those who accused him of encouraging violence toward women when the book was first published, the author finally acknowledges the potential dangers of confronting the brutal undercurrent of national manhood: namely, that to conjure it up might be to perpetuate it, draw it out, make it real. Like Didion’s *Democracy*, after all, *American Psycho* constitutes a vehicle for exploring and challenging a deep agency underlying the United States in the late twentieth century, but in doing so it gets uncomfortably close to identifying with it. Near *Lunar Park*’s conclusion, the fictional Bret Ellis sets about exorcising the Patrick Bateman who’s been haunting him and his career by sitting down and producing “a story in which he was uncreated and his world was erased” (367).

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124 Although the majority of his crimes were committed before its publication in 1991, the prosecution claimed Paul Bernardo used his well-thumbed copy of the novel as a kind of “murder manual” informing the rape, torture, and murder of his victims. See Rachel Giese’s “*American Psycho* Returns to Stalk Toronto” for a summary of the fallout of this assertion.
Crucially, he performs this rite through the production of more fiction, by imagining his character caught up in an apocalyptic conflagration on a New York pier. In this manner, he attempts to suppress the connections to his creation, and yet, despite this ritualized performance of authorial authority, he finds himself unable to completely erase Bateman’s psycho-social legacy: “Even as he is consumed by flames he says, ‘I am everywhere’” (369). Ubiquity, then, is the situation of the American psychopath: he cannot be wholly exercised from the national imaginary precisely because he represents an impulse of violence at the heart of the iconic male who has been historically imagined to be its only authentic agent. *Lunar Park* reveals that Bret Easton Ellis believes in confronting the worst through his fiction, but he pays the price for this exploration insofar as he learns of his own complicity in social violence. It’s only by acknowledging Bateman as a part of himself, a realization paralleled in the novel by the fact that he eventually comes to pity his father for his alienation, that he’s able to reconcile himself to the indelible nature of the killer impulse: “*But he was curious, and he lusted,*” a voice inside him asks, “*Was it his fault that he had abandoned his soul?*” (368). As in *Poltergeist*, in fact, the novel offers a false climax, a false exorcism, followed by an upsurge in haunting, in order to remind us that we’re never quite safe from Bateman, that he’s not merely a ghost but a revenant, one who returns time and time again.

Bret Easton Ellis himself seems tamer somehow in *Lunar Park*, more critical of his own excesses and more reconciled to taking up the role of responsible, loving father and thus adopting the bourgeois family values that seem to both tempt and disgust the nihilistic Bateman throughout *American Psycho*. Since the nineties, in fact, it’s typically said that representations of masculinity in American literature have become more self-
conscious and more gentle, if not entirely benign. Recently, for instance, a controversial essay in the *New York Times* by Katie Roiphe identifies a divide between those men (Updike, Bellow, Roth, and Mailer) she dubs, though not without irony, “the Great Male Novelists of the last century” and “the heirs apparent [who] have repudiated the aggressive virility of their predecessors.” Responding to David Foster Wallace’s attack on John Updike’s *Toward the End of Time* as a work of narcissism, Roiphe attempts to debunk this new generation’s apparent enlightenment by demonstrating the “flowering of a new narcissism: boys too busy gazing at themselves in the mirror to think much about girls, boys lost in... the noble purity of being just a tiny bit repelled by the crude advances of the desiring world.” Discussing Updike’s *Couples*, for instance, she laments that the “fluidity of Updike’s Tarbox, with its boozy volleyball games and adulterous couples copulating alfresco, has disappeared into the Starbucks lattes and minivans of our current suburbs, and our towns and cities are more solid, our marriages safer.” While “the new purity, the self-conscious paralysis, the self-regarding ambivalence” of white male writers like Wallace, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Franzen, David Eggers, and Benjamin Kunkel might seem to bring relief from the often sexist depictions of women that Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* helped bring to light, Roiphe implies that something is lost in the transaction insofar as “an abiding interest in the sexual connection” seems to have disappeared altogether—and, as she points out, “sexism in the work of the heirs apparent is simply wiler and shrewder and harder to smoke out.” Ellis’s *Lunar Park* makes him something of a transitional figure in this regard, the reformed literary bad boy whose work has exhausted its petulance in favour of a deprecating self-examination that occasionally borders on self-parody.
Despite this apparent sea-change from aggressively sexual orientations to the self-reflexive vanities of a “noble purity,” however, it’s important to note that the narratives and tropes of national manhood continue to be a dominant framework for these newer representations of manhood and that, moreover, masculinity clearly remains locked into a narrative condition of personal imperilment. We can see, for example, Michael Chabon attempting to work out the connections between the political climate of his upbringing and the condition of being a father in his recent book of essays, *Manhood for Amateurs*. Thinking about a previous generation of men, he recalls:

> My father, more or less like all men of his era, class, and cultural background, went for a certain amount of spasmodically enthusiastic fathering, parachuting in from time to time with some new pursuit or project, engaging like an overweening superpower in a program of parental nation-building in the far-off land of his children before losing interest or running out of emotional capital and leaving us once more to the regime of our mother, a kind of ancient, all-pervasive folkway, a source of attention and control and structure so reliable as to be imperceptible, like the air. (14)

The novelist’s comparison between his father and the United States is idiosyncratic, perhaps, but not entirely illegible in a cultural climate in which masculine values of potency, dominance, and virility structure a national paternalism that is both foreign and domestic in nature. For a late baby boomer like Chabon, the entanglement of fatherhood with foreign policy seems a natural fit, in fact. He sees his role as father as representative of a new political age in which “concepts of intimacy, of authenticity and open emotion” are not evaded with “a certain tentative abruptness” (15) but rather worked out through a
series of neurotic negotiations in which no act of fathering is free of scrutiny. In seeking to elaborate upon his own role as a father and “amateur” man, in other words, Chabon still constantly gestures toward political manhood, as in his essay on steroid use: “I’ve never seen a man who seems more comfortable than Jose Canseco with who he is—not with who we think he is, like George W. Bush, or with his best idea of himself, like Bush’s predecessor” (148). In Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom*, similarly, the novelist’s queries about the rhetoric of liberty are mapped across the final decades of the twentieth century, but much of the plot tracks back to the sexual rivalry between Walter Berglund and Richard Katz. A fairly typical Oedipal struggle between Berglund and his son, Joey, is bound up with neoconservative war profiteering and the American invasion of Iraq. One way to read this mapping is as a de-politicization, especially insofar as national concerns are collapsed into family drama, effectively erasing the economic and material conditions that actually govern historical events. Another, however, is to claim that such imaginary resolutions often betray the lie of national manhood by demonstrating how our assumptions about politics are sometimes predetermined by gender tropes: Walter and his son are reconciled, Franzen’s use of irony makes clear, while injustices in the Middle East continue. If Roiphe’s identification of writers like Chabon and Franzen as the “heirs apparent” of writers like Updike and Norman Mailer is correct, it might indicate a shift in the melodramas of beset manhood from texts that actively identify with national power to ones that attempt to distance themselves from these dynamics. And the danger is that it might ultimately forget, like Updike’s Piet Hanema, its own slice of Patrick Bateman. In either case, manhood remains a vector of tropic mediation between

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125 Richard Ohmann, in his important analysis of canon formation between 1960-75, argues that “[a] premise of this fiction—nothing new to American literature but particularly salient in this period—is that individual consciousness, not the social or historical field, is the locus of significant happening” (210).
the private lives of the middleclass and a rapidly globalizing deployment of power, and the problems of polity are inevitably still cast as anxieties of impotence.

According to some advice from William Germano’s *From Dissertation to Book*, an academic monograph is expected to “conclude” whereas the best most dissertations can ever manage is to “stop” (131). A dissertation about irresolution, about failure and impotence, a dissertation that actively pursues a degree of arbitrariness in order to escape instrumental reason, is doubly unlikely to offer any unassailable conclusions. As we’ve seen in my studies of Didion and Ellis in particular, the acts of writing, reading, and interpreting literature are founded upon the principles of penetration and mastery that risk taking on or perpetuating the masculinist impulses they attempt to critique. I’ve thus endeavoured throughout this study to avoid easy inversions of those hierarchical binaries upon which critical turns are often founded. No sunny gestures of surface-reading or open-ended interpretation can wholly absolve us from our continued participation in systems of power predicated on potency, but they can make us aware of the necessity of cultivating this uneasy relationship to politics. Recalling Ralph Ellison’s definition of democracy as an “antagonistic cooperation” (7) between artist and audience, perhaps, we might think about the necessity of recognizing our own aversion to politics and our own desires to master the democratic torsion of modern life. My goal has not been to condemn manhood nor to rail against its critics, but rather to plumb its fictional—and thus ideological—core and demonstrate the manner in which hegemonic masculinity lingers to challenge to the proliferation of other, less constricted masculinities.
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