BLISSFUL REALISM: SAUL BELLOWS, JOHN UPDIKE, AND THE MODERN/POSTMODERN DIVIDE

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DEDICATION

To Heather, Finn, and Milo
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the reaction of many post-WWII American authors against the modernist privileging of form. These authors predicate their response upon what I call “blissful realism,” a term which reflects an unlikely conflation of the critical work of Roland Barthes and Georg Lukács. I argue that Saul Bellow and John Updike are exemplars of a larger post-war contingent, including Flannery O’Conner, Bernard Malamud, Joyce Carol Oates, and John Cheever, to name a few, who use the liminal space between the waning of modernism and a burgeoning postmodern sensibility to complicate and critique modernist formalism while exploring (and often presciently critiquing) the nascent ontological inclinations of postmodernism. The characters within their novels endeavor to declare and maintain their autonomy by, through, and against their contact with a cold reality and defining ideological structures. This tension is mirrored in the aesthetic project of the authors as they work by, through, and against modernist strictures. This dissertation also offers a comparison between Bellow and Updike and the work of Ralph Ellison and Vladimir Nabokov in an effort to distinguish and delineate blissful realism from “late modernism.” The concluding chapter posits that recent “post-postmodern” work draws heavily on its blissful realist predecessors. Many contemporary authors’ concerns with subjective autonomy, authenticity, and notions of transcendence, in spite of postmodern declarations to the contrary, offer different sensibilities and political possibilities that turn away from irony, play, and image toward agency, meaning, and morality.
INTRODUCTION

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.

– Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text

Great realism, therefore, does not portray an immediately obvious aspect of reality but one which is permanent and objectively more significant, namely man in the whole range of his relations to the real world, above all those which outlast mere fashion. Over and above that, it captures tendencies of development that only exist incipiently and so have not yet had the opportunity to unfold their entire human and social potential. To discern and give shape to such underground trends is the great historical mission of the true literary avant-garde.

– Georg Lukács, “Realism in the Balance”

In the concluding chapter to Aesthetics and Politics, a collection which traces the realism/modernism debate between the thinkers and writers Georg Lukács, Theodor Adorno, and others, Fredric Jameson writes, “In these circumstances indeed, there is some question whether the ultimate renewal of modernism, the final dialectical subversion of the now automatized conventions of an aesthetics of perceptual revolution, might not simply be … realism itself!” (“Reflections” 211). The “circumstances” of which Jameson writes are those of a co-opted and
exhausted modernism. Written fourteen years before his *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), in this essay Jameson finds the revolutionary not in a nascent postmodernism—postmodernism becomes rather a capitulation to and vital participant with capitalism in his view—but in the possibility of a resurgent realism. If we see modernism, as Jürgen Habermas puts it, “revolt[ing] against the normalizing functions of tradition,” and “liv[ing] on the experience of rebelling against all that is normative” (5), what happens when that aesthetic has become the norm? A return to realism might be the most “revolutionary” move a writer could make.

While it is tempting to read Jameson’s declaration as tongue-in-cheek, my argument rests on this premise: that the realist fiction of the post-WWII period was not, as John Barth has argued, a kind of “pre-modernism” (“Replenishment” 195), but rather a reaction to and rethinking of modernist aesthetics. Authors of what I am calling “the divide” (in reference to the modern/postmodern divide) return to a formal realism,¹ but one that absorbs and utilizes the aesthetic innovations of modernism, resituating the mimetic, paradoxically, as “avant-garde.”

The divide is not, however, to be equated with the term “late modernism,” but is a break from that tradition as well.²

¹ I am, of course, referring to Watt’s “formal realism,” the “narrative embodiment” of “the premise, or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience, and is therefore under an obligation to satisfy its reader with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms.” Yet, “Formal realism is, of course, like the rules of evidence, only a convention; and there is no reason why the report on human life which is presented by it should be in fact any truer than those presented through very different conventions of other literary genres” (32 italics mine).

² Jameson writes in the conclusion to *Postmodernism*, “And we should probably also make some place … for what Charles Jencks has come to call “late modernism”—the last survivals of a properly modernist view of art and the world after the great political and economic break of the Depression, where, under Stalinism or the Popular Front, Hitler or the New Deal, some new conception of social realism achieves the status of momentary cultural dominance by way of collective anxiety and world war” (305). Authors of the divide were less concerned with social realism and its attendant politics, however, and more with an aesthetic response to modernism. The term “divide” should be distinguished, too, from Huysssen’s “Great Divide.” While Huysssen’s term refers to “the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture” (viii), similar to Fiedler’s conception of the “gap” (see his “Cross the Border – Close the Gap”), my discussion of the divide focuses more on specific aesthetic markers that are not necessarily
This dissertation aims to describe, then, a distinct shift in the poetics and function of the novel during the divide, a period between modernism and postmodernism spanning roughly the years from the end of the Second World War until the end of the nineteen-sixties. The project of many novelists during this period was to recognize the formal innovations of high modernism while simultaneously embracing a social need for a return to a realism that addressed the desire for a positive humanist position after the atrocities of the war and the Holocaust. As Malcolm Bradbury notes, “After 1945 the novel showed every sign of reasserting its realistic potential, its moral and social concern, its sense of life as progress. The lessons of the great moderns … had been taken, but they were assimilated back into a spirit of relative realism, and technical and epistemological questions were not strongly pressed…” (10). Furthermore, these writers anticipate and reject a nascent postmodern sensibility and aesthetic (one which was not yet fully formed, but lurked around the historical corner), along with its critical associate, post-structuralism. Divide novelists acknowledge the high modernist primacy of form but do not grant it autonomy or privilege. They resist and complicate the modern(ist) concept of alienation as well as the postmodern(ist) notion of a protean and performative subjectivity, calling instead for a return to an understanding of the possibilities and responsibilities of the autonomous individual and the artist as they attempt to negotiate the trappings of societal and ideological structures. Instead of retreating to the safe havens of form or tradition, however, they recognize

3 This end was chosen in part due to the publication of The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy in 1970, a collection of presentations given at Johns Hopkins University in 1966, during which Derrida delivered “Structure, Sign, and Play,” ushering in the age of post-structuralism. (Tellingly, the paperback version, first published in 1972, reverses the title to read The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man, indicating a post hoc recognition of a shift to post-structuralism.) That same year (1966) saw the publication of Lacan’s Ecrits and Foucault’s The Order of Things, while Kristeva’s Desire in Language was published in 1969. While this is a critical and not an “aesthetic” marker, the effect that this shift had on the production of literature is undeniable; the critical and philosophical shift is certainly reflected in the postmodern work that follows. The period delineates, however, only a starting point for these writers. That is, authors of the divide continue to write and publish well past this date.
and appreciate the necessity of confrontation with hard reality; their aesthetic elevates objective reality through prose, celebrating the subject/object split through their characters’ interaction with the outside world. In short, they practice what Roland Barthes has described as the dialectic of the “two realisms”: “[T]he first deciphers the ‘real’ (what is demonstrated but not seen); the second speaks ‘reality’ (what is seen but not demonstrated); the novel, which can mix these two realisms, adds to the intelligible of the ‘real’ the hallucinatory tail of ‘reality’” (Pleasure 45-46).

I have chosen the term “blissful realism” to instantiate this dialectic of the relationship between modernism, postmodernism, and writers of the divide through Barthes’ notion of “jouissance,” or “bliss,” and Georg Lukács’ defense of “critical realism.” In his critique of modernism in Realism in Our Time, Lukács accuses modernists of distorting reality so that a shared reality, one that reflects man as a “social being” involved in a shared historical consciousness, becomes impossible. Reality is conceived, instead, as a “nightmare”:

> The negation of outward reality is not always demanded with such theoretical rigour. But it is present in almost all modernist literature. … Lack of objectivity in the description of the outer world finds its complement in the reduction of reality to a nightmare. Beckett’s Malloy is perhaps the ne plus ultra of this development, although Joyce’s vision of reality as an incoherent stream of consciousness had already assumed in Faulkner a nightmare quality. (25, 31)

Lukács’ “critical realism” rejects a mainly subjective understanding of the world (one which he sees as the main shortcoming in modernism)⁴ and promotes the realist writer’s connection with the “objective world” which he shares with others as a “social being.” While this stance is admittedly problematic—“objective reality” is and will always be a thorny philosophical

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⁴ Lukács writes, “The uncritical approach of modernist writers—and of some modern philosophers—reveals itself in their conviction that this subjective experience constitutes reality as such” (Realism 51).
issue—it is the tenor of Lukács’ argument the blissful realists adopt. Their response to modernism is less antagonistic than Lukacs’, but depends upon the premise of a shared objective reality to substantiate their aesthetic project. This mollified dialectical attitude is reflected in an unlikely concession by Lukács himself, in which he admits that the critical realists had an interest in, and concern for, the formal experimentation of modernism, and expressed the conviction that they had many basic attitudes in common. The reason is not far to seek. Many of these experiments are, in effect, reflections of contemporary reality. If realistic writers sympathize with these experiments, and are stimulated thereby to widen the scope of realism, it is with the aim of finding new means to deal with contemporary subject-matter. (50)

What the blissful realists convey is a sense that, as Lukács argues, an objective world exists, and that our relationship with that world, our “social being,” is the central concern of their fiction. Their formal approach is not that of a bliss that arises from a “zero degree” of writing—writing that is purely of and for itself—but rather in direct dialectical relationship to the world which they are describing.

Barthes, echoing this dialectic, argues for an aesthetic that lies between the categories of texts of “pleasure,” which produce bourgeois, passive enjoyment, and texts of jouissance, or “bliss,” as defined in the epigraph above. He seeks a middle ground between the mimetic and the strange space of “crisis” that defines a text of bliss:

Now the subject who keeps the two texts in his field and in his hands the reins of pleasure and bliss is an anachronic subject, for he simultaneously and contradictorily participates in the profound hedonism of all culture … and in the destruction of that culture: he enjoys the consistency of his selfhood (that is his

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5 See Adorno’s “Reconciliation under Duress” for a specific rebuttal to Lukács’ argument.
pleasure) and seeks its loss (that is his bliss). He is a subject split twice over, doubly perverse. (14)

This subject, either the writer or reader of the text of bliss, is one who finds the middle ground between the mimetic (a “presence” of pleasure) and “the void of bliss” (22). In Barthes terms, he finds the “seam” between intelligibility and non-intelligibility. Through this seam, “the reader can keep saying: I know these are only words, but all the same… (I am moved as though these words were uttering a reality)” (47). Authors of blissful realism, then, walk a fine line between privileging the signifier and the signified: their prose brings attention to itself as artifice (signifier) yet it is always in the service of an objective reality (signified).

We can clarify this concept slightly using Vladimir Nabokov’s use of the same term. In his afterword to Lolita, Nabokov writes, “For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm” (314-15). Though similar, the nuanced difference between Barthes’ and Nabokov’s conceptions of bliss underlies the difference between modernism and postmodernism and the divide that lies between. Nabokov’s conception privileges a mediation between the reader and his participation and understanding of the world, while Barthes’ is enclosed within the solipsistic enjoyment of the reader—Barthes’ relationship works only between text and reader and the world is excised or neglected, except, maybe, as a negative from which the reader is trying to extricate and isolate him or herself. According to Barthes, “Representation … is embarrassed figuration, encumbered with other meanings than that of desire: a space of alibis (reality, morality, likelihood, readability, truth, etc.)” (56). Comparing this last parenthetical with the one from Nabokov above—“(curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy)”—Nabokov seems to walk the

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6 I discuss Nabokov’s conception of bliss in regard to Lolita more fully in Chapter 3.
line between Barthes’ differentiation of pleasure and bliss; he finds the seam. Whereas Barthes’ notion of bliss is abstract and unrepresentable, ineffable and “impossible,” Nabokov’s is more social, humanist, and perhaps even moral, as “curiosity,” “tenderness” and “kindness” imply: it is combinatory of the hermetic work of art and the social one.

In order to illustrate this notion I have chosen to work with two exemplars of the divide: Saul Bellow and John Updike. Updike and Bellow are often considered quite different writers: one the gregarious “homespun” Jew from Chicago with a love of grit and the colloquial; the other a Pennsylvanian Calvinist whose polished prose, in the critics’ eyes, often overshadowed the depth of his thinking. Indeed, in his 1980 study *The Practice of Fiction in America*, Jerome Klinkowitz writes that most American authors since the 1950s were “affected by the realism debate,” and while some “substituted … secular mythology … for the deeper symbology of the modernists,”

> [o]thers, most notably Saul Bellow, have moved directly to the exposition of morality, to the extent that some accuse Bellow of bypassing fiction entirely for essays, conversations, and debates. At the opposite extreme has been John Updike, whose own lush stylistic sensuosity [sic] at times obscures his story’s action. Such an overbalance of the stylistic, it is claimed, creates literary decadence; having nothing to write about, Updike writes anyway, his lack of substance disguised by a thick sauce of adjectives, adverbs, and nouns. (7)

The difference between Bellow’s polemical prose and the “thick sauce” of Updike’s (though both are, as I shall argue, more nuanced than this) provides an interesting juxtaposition that delineates the aesthetic boundaries of blissful realism. Furthermore, my choice of these two particular authors is due to the fact that 1) they have fallen out of critical favor and thus my
project is, in part, recuperative, and 2) they have both passed away in recent years and their oeuvre is freshly cemented. More importantly, while both were strong believers in the power and necessity of realistic narrative, they held most of their modernist precursors in high regard.

In a 1978 interview with Charlie Riley, for example, Updike states, “The true novelist is in love with reality. He is a mediator between reality and the reader, and not simply someone who operates in a world of printed words. I suspect that once a writer loses that almost childlike wish to celebrate reality, he begins to churn out unnecessary books” (Plath 150). At the same time, while writing *The Centaur*, Updike “had *Ulysses* in my head at all times” (179). Moreover, Updike states about bliss:

> I find that the main charge, let’s call it, that I get out of writing is when I feel I’ve gotten something down accurately. The main *bliss*, whether I read Henry Green or Nabokov or Proust or Tolstoy, is the sense that they’ve described precisely a certain moment of experience, whether it’s a dress, a chair, or how a person’s face looks” (210, italics mine).

For Updike, then, the writer’s main concern is not with words’ relationship to one another or the author’s subjective consciousness (though this is certainly a vital component), but the allegiance these words have to the physical world which they are used to describe. Bellow, for his part, tells Gordon Lloyd Harperin in 1966, “Realism has always both accepted and rejected the circumstances of ordinary life. It accepted the task of writing about ordinary life and tried to meet it in some extraordinary fashion” (Cronin 69). And he writes after the publication of *The Adventures of Augie March*: “…I wanted to invent a new sort of American sentence. Something like a fusion of colloquialism and elegance. What you find in the best English writing of the twentieth century—in Joyce or E.E. Cummings. Street language combined with high style”
When comparing Joyce’s composition style to Bellow’s, Daniel Fuchs, Bellow’s most lucid critic, argues, “Though all novels are contingent on both, Bellow’s are the result of discovery rather than invention. This implies a subordination of imagination to the real world, a reversal of the modernist order” (55). Updike’s and Bellow’s projects, then, were neither devoted solely to aesthetic innovation nor to a strict adherence to a mimetic reflection of reality. They were attempting to trace Barthes’ “seam” between the pleasure of realism and the bliss of aesthetic innovation while maintaining a Lukácsian allegiance to the “social being” of their characters and the authors’ social relationship with and responsibility to their audience.

Another complementary component clarifies blissful realism further still. It is nothing new to discussions of the novel and is, according to Ian Watt, one of its founding principles:

> Although different novelists have given different degrees of importance to the internal and the external objects of consciousness, they have never completely rejected either; on the contrary, the basic terms of their inquiry have been dictated by the narrative equivalent of dualism—the problematic nature of the relation between the individual and his environment. (295)

This detail—one which is usually manifested in divide novels via a constant battle between the protagonist and outside forces that would try to either take away his/her autonomy or manipulate his/her identity—mirrors the aesthetic concerns above. That is, the tension created as the authors attempt to faithfully and artfully reflect and limn a reality that is both present and other is usually doubled by their protagonists’ struggle to maintain their subjectivity in a world that would take it away. The authors’ participation in an aesthetic tug of war between faithful representation (realism) and aesthetic transcendence (bliss) mirrors their main characters’ attempt to walk the line between subjective control and objective contingency. This central theme is nicely
summarized, though in a different context, by Iris Murdoch. In her 1959 essay “The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited,” Murdoch outlines and resituates the romantic conceptions of the “sublime” and the “beautiful,” which are close in kind to “bliss” and “pleasure,” respectively, in a twentieth-century milieu. Murdoch discusses the dominant paradigms of the novel in the fifties—modernist and social realist—and the need for a novelistic middle ground. She writes:

> Our social epics lack creative vitality, and are more concerned with exploration of institutions than with creation of character. While in our metaphysical novels, which represent what is best and most influential in our literature, the hero is alone, with no company, or with only other parts of himself for company. … To solve [the problem of the individual within the work] by denying freedom to the fictional individual either by making him merely part of his creator’s mind, or by treating him as a conventional social unit, it is likely to be a sort of failure. (265, 266)

This passage illustrates the thematic tension discussed above but resituates it in terms of social realism or naturalism (“social epics”) on one hand and modernism or existentialism (“metaphysical novels”) on the other. She concludes, “A novel must be a house fit for free characters to live in; and to combine form with a respect for reality with all its odd contingent ways is the highest art of prose” (271 italics mine). By trying to “cross the border” and “close the gap,” to appropriate and resituate Leslie Fiedler’s famous phrase, between aesthetic

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7 Murdoch’s essay was in part a response to frequent declarations of the “death of the novel” in the fifties, declarations often stemming from the waning power of modernism in the arts and the critique of the “realist” novels that I am defending here. For a comprehensive discussion of this mid-century concern, see Hicks.

8 Fiedler famously writes in that essay, “Reversing the process typical of Modernism—under whose aegis an unwilling, aging elite audience was bullied and cajoled slowly, slowly, into accepting the most vital art of its time—Post-Modernism provides an example of a young, mass audience urging certain aging, reluctant critics onward toward abandonment of their former elite status in return for a freedom the prospect of which more terrifies than elates them. In fact, Post-Modernism implies a closing of the gap between critic and audience, too, if by critic one understands “leader of taste” and by audience “follower.” But most importantly of all, it implies the closing of the
foregrounding and mimetic representation, a gap doubled by their protagonists’ autonomy and the world’s empirical contingency, the blissful realists create a new aesthetic space that allows for both readerly “bliss” and active, critical, and meaningful interface with the social and political realities of the given world.

In addition to Lukács’ critical realism, perhaps the most accurate articulation of how I am using the term “realism” is put forward by critic J. P. Stern. In *On Realism*, Stern traces the historical dialectic of realism and idealism and applies it to literary movements over the past few centuries. His formulation of “proper realism” “doesn’t ask whether the world is real, but it occasionally asks what happens to persons who think it isn’t” (31). Stern proposes that realism walks the middle ground between language and reality, something he refers to as creating the “middle distance” between the ideal and the real, between cognition and the empirical, between an acceptance of the fact that yes, our understanding of the world is, *in part*, a discursive construction, but that there very much is a reality outside of this construction that has actual collective and personal consequences. ⁹ He continues:

> If a writer is content to abandon an overall meaning in favour of *faits divers*, he will be a mere reporter on the margins of literature. … If, on the other hand, he allows the meaning to exceed the concrete details, underscoring their intimatory function at the expense of their referential function—the making at the expense of matching—he will be moving toward symbolism. … The balance between

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⁹ One is reminded here of Kermode’s “Men in the midst,” who “make considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, by the provision of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle. … But they also, when awake and sane, feel the need to show a marked respect for things as they are; so that there is a recurring need for adjustments in the interest of reality as well as of control” (17). That is, they must oscillate between the ideal and the real.
coherence and correspondence or between the middle distance and close-up, or again between symbolism and realism, may be achieved in more ways than can be enumerated. (122-23)

Stern’s “proper realism,” then, argues for a middle ground between emphasis on the signifier or the signified.

Further complicating this idea and blurring these lines, in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger suggests that the avant-garde, which he distinguishes from modernism, was in fact attempting to move beyond aestheticism (modernism) in order to “organize a new life praxis from a basis in art” (49). He argues, via Herbert Marcuse, that both bourgeois realism and modernism are removed from “life praxis”:

Values such as humanity, joy, truth, solidarity are extruded from life as it were [in modernism], and preserved in art. In bourgeois society, art has a contradictory role: it projects the image of a better order and to that extent protests against the bad order that prevails. But by realizing the image of a better order in fiction, which is semblance (*Schein*) only, it relieves the existing society of the pressure of those forces that make for change. They are assigned to confinement in an ideal sphere.

He continues further on: “For the (relative) freedom of art vis-à-vis the praxis of life is at the same time the condition that must be fulfilled if there is to be a critical cognition of reality. An art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize it, along with its distance” (50). In the first passage, Bürger excludes modernist art from his conception of the avant-garde since its hermeticism engenders social and political apathy. In the second, Bürger excludes realist novels from the avant-garde art since, by nature, they are
participatory in the culture industry and therefore part of the “art industry” that the avant-garde critiques. This contradiction, the inability of art to make social change because of its relative safety in the “institution of art,” acts as a palliative instead of a revolutionary spark. Critic Astradur Eysteinsson agrees, writing in *The Concept of Modernism*:

Modernism can be seen to emerge because realism, as a form of historical thinking, is felt to deal inadequately with secularized reality *in its own terms*, so to speak. Even though realism may be highly critical of capitalist reality (as many nineteenth-century realists were), it evinces a tendency to reproduce the narrative structures and the symbolic order that form the basis of this society and its ideology. (208, italics original)

What authors of the divide react against, however, is an understanding that the autonomy of art during the modernist period, the hermetic nature that removed itself from “life praxis” as a way of preserving something outside of bourgeois, capitalist culture, was faulty and inadequate from the start. That is, while bourgeois realism may have reproduced and justified bourgeois narratives, at the least it was involved in political and social concerns that allowed for direct critique.

This brings us full circle to the Jameson passage with which I began. Blissful realism presents a third possibility regarding the concept of Bürger’s avant-garde. As Bürger himself points out, the avant-garde must fail. Art that breaks from the institution of art and attempts to restore it to “life praxis” can only work once, for then it is co-opted by the very institution that it was rebelling against. This illustrates the problem of a teleological conception of art in general—the idea that revisiting realism is, in fact, an artistic and aesthetic regression.\(^\text{10}\) This

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\(^{10}\) Even if we maintain a teleological stance, as we know from Hegel, the dialectic moves in starts and stops, and often picks up things from the past that it had once discarded.
opinion was echoed during the advent of postmodernist fiction. In what has now become bedrock for any literary analysis of postmodernism, John Barth, in “The Literature of Exhaustion,” writes:

In the first category [of technically old-fashioned artist] I’d locate all those novelists who for better or worse write not as if the twentieth century didn’t exist, but as if the great writers of the last sixty years or so hadn’t existed. Our century is more than two-thirds done; it is dismaying to see so many of our writers following Dostoevsky or Tolstoy or Balzac, when the question seems to me to be how to succeed not even Joyce and Kafka, but those who succeeded Joyce and Kafka and are now in the evenings of their own careers. (67, italics original)

These “technically old-fashioned” artists include writers such as Bellow and Updike. Barth’s statement is swept up in the ideology of the avant-garde— the idea that in order to be good, literature has to be moving forward; it has to be new, by the Poundian imperative. Yet, in his follow-up article, “The Literature of Replenishment,” he writes, “The ideal postmodernist novel will somehow rise above the quarrel between realism and irrealism, formalism and ‘contentism,’ pure and committed literature, coterie fiction and junk fiction” (203). Paradoxically, he can here again be referring to Updike and Bellow. Writers of the divide often returned to the tenets of nineteenth-century realism, yet their projects find the dialectic between “formalism” and “contentism” of which Barth writes.

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1 Bürger’s Theory of the Avant-Garde illustrates that the “new,” however, is not necessarily an “avant-garde” declaration. Writers like Barth, who, by his own admission is attempting to move beyond modernism, remain within the purview of “art as institution.”

12 This is an interesting paradox, since one of the premises of postmodernism itself is the lack of a teleological history. The kind of historical movement and “improvement” that Barth describes here is antithetical to a postmodern understanding of the postmodern “end of history” as put forward by Francis Fukuyama in The End of History and the Last Man (1992). Or, as Linda Hutcheon writes, “…there is also a contradiction at the heart of postmodernism: the formalist and the historical live side by side, but there is no dialectic” (100).
This is not to say that blissful realists were “more” avant-garde than the modernists, however; as Bürger illustrates, the avant-garde is certainly a much more complicated and nuanced category than that. I mention this, instead, to counter the idea that the blissful realists at mid-century were either an aesthetic or political regression. On the contrary, as we shall see, their aesthetic stance was one that tried to find a middle ground between modernist innovation and mimetic allegiance to the reality of the objective world.

Though I have intimated my understanding of the terms “modernism” and “realism” above, these terms (as well as late modernism and postmodernism) are often bandied about as if their definitions were accepted universally, which is certainly not the case. With an argument such as this, I am forced to agree with Jameson’s first “maxim of modernity” that “we cannot not periodize” (Singular 29). To that end, what was modernism? What was/is postmodernism? I am less concerned here with their corollary historical terms “modernity” and “postmodernity,” though they have a substantive, symbiotic, generative relationship to each other.

At its inception, modernism was a response to the “bourgeois realism” of the nineteenth century. As Baudelaire famously stated, modernism found it necessary to reflect the new ephemeral nature of life with artistic forms more appropriate to the subject matter, and ones that could do their best to “hold the centre” in such a chaotic and fleeting world. According to most theorists, this was a reaction against the systematizing and reifying nature of Enlightenment thinking—of the belief that rational thought, in and of itself, was capable of correcting and improving the world. As Weber and others have argued, modernity’s inception saw the

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13 Though the current fashion is to pluralize modernism into “modernisms,” emphasizing the fact that modernism was by no means a monolithic movement and often its goals were multi-faceted and contradictory, my aim here is to lay out the most popular and accepted tenets of literary modernism, tenets to which the authors of the divide responded.

14 In his “The Painter of Modern Life,” published in 1863, Baudelaire famously writes, “Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is the one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immutable” (qtd. in Harvey 10).
secularization and rationalization of the world, a subordination of belief to the principles of the
Enlightenment. With the growing distrust of the principles of the Enlightenment, however,
modernist artists turned to art as a new vessel into which humanity could place their faith.\footnote{This is the argument set forth in Horkheimer and Adorno’s \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}, in which “Enlightenment’s mythic terror springs from a horror of myth” (22). The authors continue, “With the spread of the bourgeois commodity economy the dark horizon of myth is illuminated by the sun of calculating reason, beneath whose icy rays the seeds of the new barbarism are germinating” (25).}

Enlightenment had lost the power to critique itself, and the loss of this power was exacerbated (according to modernists) by the implicit collusion of bourgeois realism. What was ostensibly “missing,” then, from bourgeois realism was 1) a critical perspective above and against societal norms (i.e. capitalism, Enlightenment rationality, etc), and 2) the ability to properly reflect the inconsistencies, transitoriiness, and nuances of a properly “modern” era.\footnote{According to Bradbury and McFarlane: “[T]he period we are calling the Modern shows us not the mere rehabilitation of the irrational after a period of ordered Realism, or for that matter the reverse, a period of Classicism after a phase of Romanticism, but rather a compounding of all these potentials: the interpenetration, the reconciliation, the coalescence, the fusion—perhaps an appallingly explosive fusion—of reason and unreason, intellect and emotion, subjective and objective. … It is the image of art holding transition and chaos, creation and de-creation, in suspension which gives the peculiar concentration and sensibility of Modernist art…” (48).}

John Barth’s succinct summation of modernism from “The Literature of Replenishment” is helpful here:

\begin{center}
The ground motive of modernism … was criticism of the nineteenth-century bourgeois social order and its world view. Its artistic strategy was the self-conscious overturning of the conventions of bourgeois realism by such tactics and devices as the substitution of a “mythical” for a “realistic” method and the “manipulation of conscious parallels between contemporaneity and antiquity” (Graff is here quoting T.S. Eliot on James Joyce’s \textit{Ulysses}); also the radical disruption of the linear flow of narrative, the frustration of the conventional expectations concerning unity and coherence of plot and character and the cause-and-effect “development” thereof, the deployment of ironic and ambiguous juxtapositions to call into question the moral and philosophical “meaning” of
\end{center}
literary action, the adoption of a tone of epistemological self-mockery aimed at
the naïve pretensions of bourgeois rationality, the opposition of inward
consciousness to rational, public, objective discourse, and an inclination to
subjective distortion to point up the evanescence of the objective social world of
the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie. (199)

He goes on to add to this characterization the modernists’ romantic understanding of the
alienated artist as anti-hero and savior, as well as modernism’s “foregrounding of language and
technique as opposed to straightforward traditional ‘content.’ … It is enough to say that one
cardinal preoccupation of the modernists was the problematics, not simply of language, but of
the medium of literature” (199). Modernists turned from an outward mimesis, then, toward an
inward, self-reflexive concern with the medium itself.

The preeminent contemporary defender of modernist aesthetics is, of course, Theodor
Adorno. In his article “Reconciliation Under Duress,” he writes:

Art and reality can only converge if art crystallizes out its own formal laws, not
by passively accepting objects as they come. In art knowledge is aesthetically
mediated through and through. Even alleged cases of solipsism, which signify for
Lukács the regression to an illusory immediacy on the part of the individual, do
not imply the denial of the object, as they would in bad theories of knowledge, but
instead aim at a dialectical reconciliation of subject and object. (160)

He continues further on, “Art does not provide knowledge of reality by reflecting it
photographically or ‘from a particular perspective’ but by revealing whatever is veiled by the
empirical form assumed by reality, and this is possible only by virtue of art’s own autonomous
status” (162). Adorno’s defense of formalism in modernism stems, clearly, from the desire to
keep autonomous art free from the shackles of the bourgeois in order to maintain a critical distance and provide an untainted vessel into which truths of our particular time and experience could be held and displayed. And yet the “dialectical reconciliation of subject and object” alluded to above is not far from our conception of blissful realism and its dialectical nature. If Adorno’s main concern was the co-opting of the aesthetic by the barbaric culture industry,\(^\text{17}\) then it follows that he promote a hermetic aesthetic practice. But the passage above hints at the recognition of the intellectual necessity of the phenomenal world. Realism becomes a necessary critical tool, despite its potential complicity in bourgeois reification, in order to understand and reflect the realities of lived experience.

What, exactly, is the “bourgeois realism” against which Adorno and others railed? To begin with the latter word, realism, at its heart, is a representational understanding that words on the page are reflecting some sort of reality. The aporia of the mimetic contract is that it purports to have a one-to-one correspondence between the representation and the thing being represented (sign = signified). This, of course, raises the Kantian problem of the subject/object relationship in which our understanding of the world is always a mediated one; that is, our cognition of the world is predicated on a symbolic understanding of it (Lacan) and therefore subject to and predicated upon our own subjective influence. As a result, the loss to any form of “realism” is immeasurable—one can never adequately reflect the real world; therefore, aesthetically, realism is an inadequate measure of artistic possibility and representation. Instead, let art begin with the artist, returning to Romantic notions of authorship and creation. Modern artists can “create the world”—that is, their representation of it is “more true” and “distinct from” than that of any attempt at “realistic” representation.

\(^{17}\) See “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” from his *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. 
If, indeed, most modernists and their defenders were reacting against “bourgeois realism” as a form that both supported and invigorated a capitalistic system responsible for the reification of individuals, then, as a truism, the first word deserves more attention. The *OED* defines “bourgeois” (the noun form) in this way:

A citizen or freeman of a city or burgh, as distinguished from a peasant on the one hand, and a gentleman on the other; now often taken as the type of the mercantile or shopkeeping middle class of any country; 2a) In communist or socialist writings: a capitalist; anyone judged to be an exploiter of the proletariat; 2b) A socially or aesthetically conventional person; Hence to shock the bourgeois, to behave unconventionally, to utter novel opinions.

Certainly we can see here that the last definition (2b), the one implying an avant-garde reaction, is applicable to the modernist movement, and reflects many of the modernist tenets articulated above. The former definitions, however, connote an affection for the working-class; that is, if modernist art was “against” the middle class and middle class ideology and stagnation, then it must align itself with the proletariat since 1) the aristocracy was no longer a viable economic category and 2) to align an avant-garde movement with the rich would undermine its progressive nature by aligning it with the old-garde, as it were. Yet modernism and its critical antecedents were anything but “popular” in nature. Indeed, modernism’s opacity engendered the necessity for a new class of specialized interpreters; the proletariat would have trouble coming to an understanding of Eliot’s *Wasteland* or Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Since we are focusing here on the novel, however, what arises is a conflict of interest within the genre itself. In fact, if one agrees with Ian Watt, then the novel is very much a “bourgeois” art form: “[The new availability of leisure] may have altered the centre of gravity of the reading public sufficiently to place the middle class as a
whole in a dominating position for the first time” (48). The novel form therefore filled a niche—the rise of a literate middle class, or a growing bourgeoisie. The nineteenth century saw this population multiply, and the rise of the formal realism of the novel was cemented. Jameson reflects, however:

Nothing is, indeed, more idealistic than the notion that a given thought-form (representationality, for instance, or the belief in the subject or in the referent) is always and under all circumstances ‘bourgeois’ and ideological, for such a position—which seems to me that of the Tel Quel group, among others—tends precisely to isolate the form of thought (or its equivalent, the form of discourse) from that practical context in which alone its results can be measured. (“Ideology” 239-40)

What, then, does the novel do if it attributes its success, at least in part, to the rise of the (bourgeois) middle class? How does it rebuild or move forward without its foundation? It must resort to a change in its formal characteristics. The novel’s “novelty,” then, no longer springs from its break with traditional form and a commitment to formal realism, but instead breaks from formal realism and turns toward a concern with form (albeit new forms—Robbe-Grillet’s “New Novel,” for instance). Paradoxically, it ceases to be a novel. Authors of the divide, and blissful realists particularly, attempt to reclaim the social realism of the novel’s inception and classification as a genre and infuse that notion with the formal discoveries of modernism. 18

While the distinction between the aims of modernism and realism seem, if not entirely stable, at least relatively and theoretically clear, the transition to “late modernism” and postmodernism

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18 While the inherent heterogeneity of the novel is also part of its characteristic understanding as has been articulated by Bakhtin (see “Epic and Novel,” especially pg. 39 which discusses the “novelization” of other genres), my argument rests on the premise that even if the novel is an example of heteroglossia, its foundation is one that, if we are to still refer to a work as a “novel,” must be recognized.
is less so. As aforementioned, the term “late modernism” is often used to categorize work produced in the divide. Unlike late modernism, however, which was still heavily invested in the project of modernism and the avant-garde in general, divide work rejects this project for a renewed aesthetic, social, and personal investment in realism. In one of the first works to look at this particular period, Marcus Klein refers to the divide as a period of “accommodation”:

> By “accommodation” I mean to refer to a mood in the best of our contemporary literature, the mood that occurred when rebellion had exhausted itself, when suddenly the manner in which the individual—the intellectual, the writer, any man—might meet society was no longer so certain, when there was no politics to speak of and when there were no orthodoxies to speak of to restrict one’s freedom, and when all theories of society had been shattered. (29)

Though published in 1962, Klein’s *After Alienation* shows a prescient understanding of a turn toward the postmodern—one that is reminiscent of Jean-Francois Lyotard’s famous description of postmodernism as “an incredulity toward metanarratives.” In the book Klein looks at work by Bellow, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Wright Morris, and Bernard Malamud, each of whom I would place under the category of the divide (although I shall complicate Ellison’s relationship with blissful realism in chapter three). Klein’s understanding of the period, however, is insufficient, perhaps because he lacks the kind of theoretical perspective of what was to come in the next thirty years both in regard to literature and criticism/theory (Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*, for instance, would be published in 1967, and Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* would not be published, astonishingly, until 1979).

Two more recent books outline the theory of late modernism with the advantage of having postmodernism and post-structuralism in their theoretical purview. In his 1999 book *Late*
Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the Two World Wars, Tyrus Miller argues that late modernism ranged historically from the 1920s through the 1930s, and cites Wyndham Lewis (of whom Bellow was a great admirer), Djuna Barnes, and Samuel Beckett as exemplars. For Miller, writing of this period weakens the relatively strong symbolic forms still evident in high modernist texts. It reopens the modernist enclosure of form onto the work’s social and political environs, facilitating its more direct, polemical engagement with topical and popular discourses. From the point of view of external context, it also registers the ways in which intense social, political, and economic pressures of the period increasingly threatened the efficacy of high modernist form. (20)

While Miller’s argument is historically and politically similar to what I’m suggesting here, his emphasis on laughter as a kind of ironic undermining of modernist gravity (one reminiscent of Bakhtin’s) does not reflect the same engagement with the literature that I’m considering or for which I’m arguing. Instead, the turn in the divide is less toward social commentary and engagement (which is more akin to socialist realism) and more toward the combination of accepted transcendent human truths via the combination of polished prose and reflective human experience.

More recently, Robert Genter’s Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America (2010) argues for a historical late modernist period, one that involves the work of Kenneth Burke, C. Wright Mills, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison. Genter categorizes the late modernists as a post-WWII group of thinkers, artists, and writers who were unwilling to abandon the literary and cultural revolution begun in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by their modernist precursors … [and
who] argued not only that the nature of the aesthetic form needed to be rethought in an age of mass media but that the general assumptions about the nature of subjectivity needed to be updated. (4)

This is accomplished, however, not via a return to an understanding of the political possibilities of realism, but rather a Burkean understanding of rhetoric and communication theory. Genter also theorizes a secondary category of late modernism, one which, in the vein of Irving Howe, Lionel Trilling, and Cleanth Brookes, he terms “romantic modernism,” and includes in it the Beat Generation, Norman Mailer and Saul Bellow. While there are many affinities between Bellow’s work and the romantics, Bellow actually undermines many of the romantic theoretical and aesthetic premises in his work. Genter’s understanding of Invisible Man and Ellison’s attempt to bridge the gap between high modernism and the social will be discussed in chapter three, as I compare Ellison’s “late modernism” with the blissful realism of Bellow.

Turning to postmodernism, my emphasis of its relationship to the divide regards its conceptions of fiction (that is, the discursive understanding of our experience and our reality as a fiction or “discourse”), of subjectivity, of history, and of aesthetics. To ground my discussion of postmodernism I will focus on four texts, two theoretical/ Marxist and two of literary criticism, but all foundational: Fredric Jameson’s Postmodernism, or, The Logic of Late Capitalism; David Harvey’s The Condition of Postmodernity; Linda Hutcheon’s A Poetics of Postmodernism; and Brian McHale’s Postmodernist Fiction. Before taking a closer look at these, however, let us begin with a general summation of the tenets of postmodernism offered by Terry Eagleton:

By “postmodern,” I mean, roughly speaking, the contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and the possibility of objective knowledge.
Postmodernism is sceptical of truth, unity and progress, opposes what it sees as elitism in culture, tends towards cultural relativism, and celebrates pluralism, discontinuity and heterogeneity. (After 13)

Eagleton’s reading derives from Lyotard’s “incredulity toward metanarratives,” and within this purview, of course, lies Marxism, psychoanalysis, reason or Enlightenment thinking (per the modernists), or any other structured understanding of reality. Instead, postmodernism’s focus turns toward discourse and our understanding of how these discourses shape our reality and our subjectivity. Divide authors presciently see this particular turn and try to reground our understanding of history, our subjective being, and our relationship to reality.

Jameson and Harvey, as good Marxist critics, are critical of postmodernism, but it is through their critique that we can better understand its marked characteristics. Harvey writes:

But postmodernism, with its emphasis upon the ephemerality of jouissance, its insistence upon the impenetrability of the other, its concentration on the text rather than the work, its penchant for deconstruction bordering on nihilism, its preference for aesthetics over ethics, takes matters too far. It takes them beyond the point where any coherent politics are left, while that wing of it that seeks a shameless accommodation with the market puts it firmly in the tracks of an entrepreneurial culture that is the hallmark of reactionary neoconservatism. … Worst of all, while it opens up a radical prospect by acknowledging the authenticity of other voices, postmodernist thinking immediately shuts off those other voices from access to more universal sources of power by ghettoizing them within an opaque otherness, the specificity of this or that language game. (116-17)
Harvey’s critique here relates to the authors of the divide and their anticipation of this kind of postmodern sensibility, and to the overemphasis of plurality at the political expense of both the autonomous subject and the ability to work effectually with an ideological political system. Like Harvey, divide authors tend to offer up alternative narratives (though they generally shy away from Marxism) in order to reground the subject within political and ideological space. That is, they work through ideological structures and attempt to reaffirm the individual’s ability to work within and against them almost to the point of freeing oneself from them.

Jameson’s argument runs along similar lines. Like Harvey, his critique of postmodernism is aimed particularly at its accommodationism: the postmodern movement attempts to forego metanarratives for the sake of plurality, but it implicitly becomes part of the narrative of late-capitalism nonetheless. In regard to a postmodern understanding of art’s relationship with reality (an understanding which, again, this dissertation hopes to complicate), Jameson writes:

[The door that shuts out the “presence of the referent”] is, however, a door that is likely to remain closed for some time. For better or for worse, art does not seem in our society to offer any direct access to reality, any possibility of unmediated representation or what used to be called realism. For us today, it is generally the case that what looks like realism turns out at best to offer unmediated access only to what we think about reality, to our images and ideological stereotypes about it.

(Postmodernism 150)

This is, in part, what divide literature, and blissful realism in particular, attempts to overcome: it anticipates and understands the linguistic turn, and rejects it in favor not of a naturalism that is preoccupied with objects and determinism, but rather an acknowledgement of some kind of dialectic between a structural and an autonomous, subjective, and personal understanding of the
world and reality. Jameson’s opinion that “it is diagnostically more productive to have a
totalizing concept than to try to make one’s way without one” (212), that we have replaced other
totalizing narratives with the narrative of capitalism and, particularly, late capitalism, is
illustrated throughout Bellow’s work by what he calls “reality instructors” (read: discourse) in
his novels and interviews, and certainly the entirety of Updike’s *Rabbit Angstrom* tetralogy sees
Harry, the protagonist, constantly confronting a world that would take away his autonomy. Part
of this project aims to illuminate, then, the different positive metanarratives that the protagonists
adopt, and whether or not those narratives are sufficient in the (post)modern world.

Literary critics Hutcheon and McHale discuss the relationship of postmodern fiction to
history and subjectivity respectively. Hutcheon understands postmodern fiction as
“historiographic metafiction” which complicates our understanding of history. Drawing from
Nietzsche, she writes:

>[W]hat postmodernism does is to contest the very possibility of our ever being
able to *know* the “ultimate objects” of the past. It teaches and enacts the
recognition of the fact that the social, historical, and existential “reality” of the
past is *discursive* reality when it is used as the referent of art, and so the only
“genuine historicity” [this is Jameson’s term] becomes that which would openly
acknowledge its own discursive, contingent identity. (24, italics original)

Hutcheon suggests that postmodern fiction’s self-reflexivity brings attention to narrative’s own
construction and its position and function in regard to history. This leads (in theory) to the
reader questioning his own “causal” or teleological relationship to history, both in regard to
epistemology and ontology. The divide’s relationship to history is grounded, I think, in a
premise that accepts the discursive nature of history, but also recognizes its very real
consequences. Jameson’s famous dictum that “History is what hurts” (Political 102) is applicable to the divide’s conception of history and experience, particularly after World War II, as very real things.

McHale is mainly concerned with the relationship of subjective ontology to postmodernism and the literature of the period. If, he argues, modernism’s preoccupation was one with epistemology—how do we know what we know and how does language function in that understanding—then postmodernism’s concern is one of being: with the breakdown of the *cogito*, how do I now understand my own subjectivity? His conception of postmodern fiction as providing a platform that elucidates “an anarchic landscape of worlds in the plural” is problematic, however. The entire premise of McHale’s discussion of ontology and postmodern fiction’s questioning of a stable existence is predicated on the fact that fiction can be applied to real life—that is, when I close a book, do the theoretical premises explored in that book apply to my existence in the real world? This is something that blissful realists anticipate and reject. McHale’s use of the Derridean concept of *sous rature* and metalepsis (“the violation of ontological boundaries”) is interesting in regard to the literature itself: yes, in his novels Paul Auster explores the problematics of language and writing and its relationship to truth and subjectivity. But this, of course, is not a new idea (*Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy* come to mind), and it seems to break down the moment that we close the book and are asked to cook dinner. In other words, and this is the question that divide novels anticipate and with which they contend, it seems like a relatively easy thing to articulate a theory of the subject that removes an immanence and rests solely on discursive construction, but this feels unsatisfactory to the individual who sits, exists, and considers this. Postmodern literature becomes a language game that undermines the importance of the subject. Anticipating this dilemma, Lukács writes, “Every
human action is based on a presupposition of its inherent meaningfulness, at least to the subject. Absence of meaning makes a mockery of action and reduces art to naturalistic description” (36). Or, by extension, abstraction to the point of meaninglessness. He continues:

Since human nature is not finally separable from social reality, each narrative detail will be significant to the extent that it expresses the dialectic between man-as-individual and man-as-social-being. It is these tensions and contradictions both within the individual, and underlying the individual’s relation with his fellow human beings … that must form the subject-matter of contemporary realism. (75)

Like divide authors, Lukács foresees a breakdown of the importance, relevance, and agency of the individual within the social world. It was the project of the blissful realists, then, to reject this breakdown and restore the centrality and importance of the individual in society not through solipsism, but his interaction with the objective world.

Bellow and Updike approach this project differently: one with colloquial brilliance, in the American realist tradition, and the other with the polished aestheticism of, say, Henry James or Marcel Proust. One is considered a writer of ideas but lacking polish, the other all polish and lacking in depth. The truth is, of course, that they each possess both, and it is this interplay between narrative and form, between story and sheen, between realism and bliss, that this dissertation will explore.

Each author was caught up, whether he wanted to be or not, in the main theoretical discussions of the modernist and the nascent postmodernist movements (since both wrote very much past the period of the divide as I have delineated it, yet stayed, for the most part, true to its project; they were able to respond to modernism as it waned and postmodernism in its full force). Each of their novels, in some way, deals with issues of epistemology, subjectivity, history,
transcendence and immance, and the problematics of realism. Their attempt to make the kind of
dialectical move of which Bürger writes and the “radical” notion of realism Jameson suggests is
evident throughout their body of work. In addition, Bellow and Updike pay particular attention
to the individual and his/her possibilities and limitations in a world which tries to determine
his/her subjective presence via discourse and in which critical theory seems to accept and
promote the understanding of this construction. In a world devoid of a master narrative, Updike
and Bellow write, in a very American vein, about the possibilities of transcending these
structures via one’s own will. In many ways they react to the modernist understanding of angst
and alienation with a reaffirmation of the power, instead of the powerlessness, of the individual.
Moreover, they struggle against the postmodern concept of the plurality and fracturing of the
subject and argue instead for a Lukácsian understanding of the ironic necessity of a unified and
totalized character, despite its impossibility, which moves through ideological, political, and
social structures.

The following chapters examine these particular issues as closely and comprehensively as
possible. I have chosen to work only with Bellow’s two most highly regarded novels, *The
Adventures of Augie March* and *Herzog* in chapter one, and Updike’s *Rabbit* tetralogy, *Rabbit
Angstrom*, in chapter two. Chapter three looks at two texts that many consider “late modernist”
as a way of juxtaposing and elucidating their differences and connections to blissful realism.
Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* illuminates some of the modernist tendencies against which
Bellow was reacting. Looking at some of the postmodern elements of Ellison’s novel will also
shed light on how Bellow predicted the direction of the literary, cultural, and social climate. The
second half of that chapter examines Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*. Nabokov’s work helps
elucidate Updike’s complicated relationship with modernism and postmodernism. The
concluding chapter looks forward, using the tenets of blissful realism to critique some contemporary fiction, specifically Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* (2001) and *Freedom* (2010), and Jeffrey Eugenides’ *The Marriage Plot* (2011). Current fiction, labeled “New Sincerity” by some and “metamodernism” by others, utilizes the reinvestment in realism that Lukács discussed and attempts to “move beyond the void” of much of the literary production during the postmodern period. These writers adopt artistic and critical positions that are reflective of those of the blissful realists, with the added understanding and complication of trying to move beyond postmodernism. Franzen, for instance, writes, “Indeed, the essence of postmodernism is an adolescent fear of getting taken in, an adolescent conviction that all systems are phony. The theory is compelling, but as a way of life it’s a recipe for rage” (“Mr. Difficult”). The main criticism of postmodernism by this new group of contemporary writers is that it provides no narrative other than anti-narrative, which is itself a narrative, and not a good one. If we see post-structuralism and postmodernism as Hegelian steps, ones of critical importance (in both senses of the phrase), then is it not time to move past them and work through other possible narratives to challenge those in place? Or, as Gerald Graff puts it:

[I]t must be said that we defenders of the other critique of humanism, those who think that it is not the ideals of Enlightenment liberalism that need to be attacked but rather the failure to put them into practice, have not done an effective job of articulating and elaborating our position. What might be a useful third party position, an alternative both to the apologists for things as they are and the standard avant-garde opposition, has virtually no effective existence as yet.

(“Humanism” 504)

This “third party position” is that of the blissful realists.
CHAPTER 1: “MARVELOUS QUALITIES VAGUELY COMPREHENDED”: THE ADVENTURES OF AUGIE MARCH AND HERZOG

Not everybody can be seduced by the promise of bliss.

– Saul Bellow, “The Distracted Public”

How can novels, by telling lies, convert existence into being?

– Frank Kermode, The Sense of an Ending

The voyage is completed: the way begins.

– Georg Lukács, The Theory of the Novel

In his article “The Thinking Man’s Wasteland” (adapted from his National Book Award acceptance speech for Herzog), Saul Bellow writes:

The separatism of writers is accompanied by the more or less conscious acceptance of a theory of modern civilization. This theory says in effect that modern mass society is frightful, brutal, hostile to whatever is pure in the human spirit, a waste land and a horror. To its ugliness, it bureaucratic regiments, it thefts, its lies, its wars, and its cruelties, the artist can never be reconciled.…

…But what has [the writer] to say for himself? Why, he says, just as writers have said for more than a century, that he is cut off from the life of his own society, despised by its overlords who are cynical and have nothing but contempt for the artist, without a true public, estranged… He dreams of a golden age …
Well, this is no age of gold. It is only what it is. *Can we do no more than complain about it?* … Isolated professionalism is death. Without the common world the novelist is nothing but a curiosity and will find himself in a glass case along some dull museum corridor of the future. (20 italics mine)\(^{19}\)

Bellow’s now famous “anti-wastelander” position echoes many of Lukács’ sentiments in regard to modernism and elucidates two of his, and the blissful realists’, crucial critiques: that the common modernist complaint against an alienated and alienating world is an unproductive one, and that the often hermetic “isolated professionalism” of modernism, one which avoids the “common world,” makes art an obsolete and unnecessary endeavor. Bellow reacts against what he feels is an infected cultural body, one which prefers to complain about and withdraw from the world rather than represent and, if possible, glorify it.

Indeed, Bellow’s belief in the necessity to include the “common world” to prevent creating an artistic “glass case” is an implicit defense of realism, and a rejection of art-for-art’s sake as described in the previous chapter. This stance is manifested in his prose by a celebration of the world through verbal saturation. If Updike, as we shall see, “hymns” reality (Plath xiv), Bellow overwhelms us with it. Take, for example, this, from *The Adventures of Augie March*:

> In the cage we rose and dropped, rubbing elbows with bigshots and operators, commissioners, grabbers, heelers, tipsters, hoodlums, wolves, fixers, plaintiffs, flatfeet, men in Western hats and women in lizard shoes and fur coats, hothouse and arctic drafts mixed up, brute things and airs of sex, evidence of heavy feeding

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\(^{19}\) He has further said in an interview, “But modern literature was dominated by a tone of elegy from the twenties to the fifties, the atmosphere of Eliot in *The Waste Land* and that of Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Sensibility absorbed this sadness, this view of the artist as the only contemporary link with an age of gold, forced to watch the sewage flossing in the Thames, every aspect of modern civilization doing violence to his (artist-patrician) feelings. This went much further than it should have been allowed to go. It descended to absurdities, of which I think we have had enough” (Cronin 68).
and systematic shaving, of calculations, grief, not-caring, and hopes of
tremendous millions in concrete to be poured or whole Mississippis of bootleg
whisky and beer. (41)

Bellow’s love of and respect for objective reality is born out by its conspicuous presence on the page; the list-like approach, a deluge of hard nouns and visceral verbs, aggressively forces reality upon the reader. Bellow moves deftly between this energetic saturation and precise linguistic control, however, in an attempt to fuse a hearty realism with a formal delicacy. According to Bellow, “Maybe civilization is dying, but it still exists, and meanwhile we have our choice: we can either rain more blows on it, or try to redeem it” (Cronin 77-78). As the passage above illustrates, Bellow chooses the latter.

This chapter looks closely at the Bellow novels most representative of these vocational, cultural, intellectual, and aesthetic concerns. *The Adventures of Augie March*, published in 1953, and *Herzog*, published in 1964, speak to the main preoccupations of the divide and illustrate Bellow’s response to modernism as well as his anticipation of postmodernism. Formally and thematically, the novels challenge the accepted characterizations of each period only to espouse a turn toward blissful realism. In doing so they undermine a burgeoning sense of a loss of self—whether articulated by modernist/existentialist notions of nausea and the void or nascent understandings of the postmodern fracturing of subjectivity—and call for a return to a Lukácsian notion of the self that is subjectively autonomous yet interactive with, and reactive to, the social, empirical world. This sense of self is doubled by Bellow’s concern with both the autonomy and authority of the text and its necessary collaboration with the social in order to produce a work of art.
The differences between these two novels are as productive and elucidating as their formal and thematic similarities. *Augie* illustrates Bellow’s decided break from the modernist tradition through language that exhibits free, colloquial looseness, while *Herzog* is a more tightly woven piece. Furthermore, if in *Augie* the protagonist is often constructed and characterized with and by the outside world, that is, by reality, *Herzog*’s eponymous protagonist struggles, for the most part, with his own mind; the novel is nearly solipsistic (and hence, more “modernist” by Lukács’ standards). These two novels create, then, a dialectical energy between what we might call “realism” on the one hand (*Augie*) and “bliss” on the other (*Herzog*), without moving toward either extreme. Interestingly, Bellow increases this tension by employing first-person narration in *Augie*, thereby emphasizing the protagonist’s effort to declare and define himself in the face of the empirical, and third-person narration in *Herzog*, providing authorial/outside control over a rather chaotic, unmoored consciousness. All this is to say that taken together, the two novels are a formal and thematic manifestation of blissful realism.

“A man’s character is his fate”: *The Adventures of Augie March*

In an early review of *The Adventures of Augie March*, Robert Penn Warren writes:

[T]he character of Augie himself is somewhat shadowy. This, I think, is true, and I think I know the reason: it is hard to give substance to a character who has no commitments, and by definition Augie is the man with no commitments. … That is, the character tends not to be static, and the lesson that Augie has learned in the end is not much different from the intuition with which he started out. (13)

While I don’t entirely agree that Augie is without substance, or that his character remains unchanged at the end of the novel, I do agree with the assertion that he is often, though not
always, defined by instead of defining. Indeed, as we move through the novel we become more familiar with Augie for what he isn’t than what he is. Augie admits, for instance, in reference to his inconsistent and varied employment, “Saying ‘various jobs,’ I give out the Rosetta stone, so to speak, to my entire life” (29). He continues elsewhere, “All the influences were lined up waiting for me. I was born, and there they were to form me, which is why I tell you more of them than of myself” (45). While this may be true in the sense that Augie’s adventures do define his character (as they do for us all at one time or another), it is not in a purely deterministic manner. This is not a naturalist novel. On the contrary; it is Augie’s resistance to these “various jobs,” the “opposition in [him]” (126, italics original), that becomes his defining characteristic. His conflict with the cultural, economic, and historical forces that might delineate and define his identity is what provides his character with ontological weight. As critic Daniel Fuchs puts it, “Viewing the world as ideological struggle conceals the essentialist reality for Augie. A sensuous will to life, a self-assertion, even in materialist circumstances, strikes his eye” (74). Yet he is not mere presence; nor is he an example of bare existence. His desire to hold on to notions of the transcendent and moral precepts of the “ought” as opposed to the “is,” as well as his resistance to the “reality situation,” become guides for his otherwise rudderless.

Despite this, Bellow was a great admirer of Theodore Dreiser, a fellow Chicagoan. He writes of Dreiser, “But there are few modern writers whose passion for the subject [of writing] is so steady. And then his journalistic habits are often useful; by means of them he captures things that perhaps could not be taken in other ways—common expressions, flatnesses, forms of thought, the very effect of popular literature itself” (“Dreiser” 146-47). Bellow feels that Dreiser had an “allegiance to life” (148) that he tries to emulate in his own writing.

This notion of the transcendent, though never articulated as such in the novel, aligns itself both with Hegel’s concept of “Absolute Knowledge,” a synthesis of the objective and the subjective “where knowledge no longer needs to go beyond itself … where Notion corresponds to object and object to Notion,” where, according to J. N. Findlay, “the whole distinction between objective truth and subjective certitude vanishes” (xxix), and Kant’s understanding of categorical imperatives. That is, Augie (and Bellow) understand the transcendent as a shared set of ideals (imperatives) or Kant’s “transcendental aesthetic,” pure, a priori intuition, in which and through which we are all connected. However, Hegel’s notion, a horizon toward which we are always marching but never reaching, reflects more accurately the frustration (akin to Lukács’ notion of the “transcendental homelessness” of the novel) often exhibited by Bellow’s characters.

I am borrowing this idea from Susan Neiman’s Moral Clarity, which I will discuss in more detail in the concluding chapter. Her premise, however, aligns with Augie’s own choices and actions: “For moral principles are
existence. Augie’s personality is held together by a loose grip on the unknown, the good, and the virtuous, what he calls the “axial lines” that he feels all human beings share.  

The narration of this tension between his autonomy and that which would take it away, of the “ought” against the “is,” the “ideal” against the “real,” and, most importantly, “bliss” against (and within) “reality,” constitutes the foundational material of the novel. The thematic framework built upon this foundation is illustrated in the novel’s opening and bookended at the close when Augie quotes Hericlitus’ famous dictum: “A man’s character is his fate” (1, 561). The ambiguity of this quote reflects the tension with which Augie, and Bellow, are concerned.

If we emphasize the first half of the statement, “A man’s character is his fate,” we might gloss it: A man’s character, his will and his agency, is the architect, foreman and crew of his fate and his life. Here, the term “character,” defined as “the mental and moral qualities distinctive to an individual; the distinctive nature of something; the quality of being individual in an interesting or unusual way; strength and originality in a person’s nature” (OED), implies a primacy of autonomy and agency; an individual, his character and his qualities, determines the nature of his fate. If, however, we place emphasis on the latter half of the statement: “A man’s character is his fate,” it implies the reverse. Here, “fate,” defined as “the development of events outside a person’s control, regarded as predetermined by a supernatural power; the course of someone’s life, or the outcome of a situation for someone or something, seen as outside their control” 

never true. Truth is a matter of the way the world is; morality is a matter of the way the world ought to be. … Strictly speaking, right cannot be a matter of knowledge, though it’s often the thing we want most of all. Yet it’s wrong to conclude with Thrasymachus that ideas of right are therefore unreal. For ideals—ideas of what is right—can be practical: When we use them as orientation, we can use them to change reality itself” (81). In a sense, this notion provides the arc for Augie’s personal development and growth.

23 Critics have often commented upon Augie’s connection to the Romantics and Transcendentalists. See Opdahl, who writes, “Bellow’s transcendent interpretation of strangeness allies him with Emerson, Wordsworth, Whitman and Thoreau” (24), and especially Quayum. For an interesting argument that extends Augie’s desire for transcendence to the religious, see Pifer, Saul Bellow 58-78.

24 Newman sees this ambiguity in the novel’s construction as well, noting, “the phrase is double-edged for Augie is writing his own autobiography, and therefore creating the character of himself. The double form of first-person narration emphasizes the ambiguity” (14).
(OED), forges a man’s character. His autonomy is formed by, and dependent upon, forces “outside [his] control.” The entire novel (and the majority of Bellow’s oeuvre) wrestles with this dynamic between autonomy and structural control—character and fate—and tries to move within a working dialectic between the two.

This thematic aspect of the novel can also be used as a metaphor for the writing of Augie against and beyond the exhausted and, by this point, prescriptive formal modes of modernism as outlined in the introduction above and described in Bellow’s “Wastelander” article. If Augie provides us with a character who is both struggling against and defined by his fate (indeed, the second time Augie mentions the Heraclitus quote at the end of the novel, he adds, “Well, then it is obvious that this fate, or what he settles for, is also his character” [561]), then Bellow looks at the novel form, and this novel in particular, as a method to work with and within modernist formal aestheticism while attempting to move beyond it, just as Augie’s character pushes against the social, cultural, and historical structures that might define and restrict him. Returning to Lukács’ critique of modernism and defense of realism, his statement, “For it is just the opposition between a man and his environment that determines the development of his personality” (Realism 28), becomes a direct reflection of the opposition between character and fate, the central tension in the novel, and the main formal consideration in the novel’s construction. Bellow “pushes back” against modernism, while fully conscious of its existence.

The tension of this “duality” is nothing new, of course. Heraclitus himself was a famous defender of dualism and binary, dialectical thinking. In modernity, from Descartes forward, thinkers and writers have been wrestling with this dilemma, and it has been most often and perhaps most clearly realized in the novel form, to which the abovementioned passage from Watt
attests. This vital tension, however, as Bellow, Watt, Lukács, and others have pointed out, dissipates with the solidification and sedimentation of modernist formal and thematic considerations. Emphasis is given, instead, to subjectivity (Proust, Woolf, etc.), to the foregrounding of language (Flaubert, proponents of the “New Novel”), or to overdetermining social factors (the naturalists, who Lukács groups, rightly, with the modernists). Bellow, like other blissful realists, attempts to reappropriate and reinvigorate the tension between notions of the external and the internal while maintaining an aesthetic awareness about his writing. For Bellow and other blissful realists, the basic assumption becomes: Yes, there is an epistemic break between reality and the symbolic; there is a break between the internal and the external. Yet we must move and live within this world and make sense of it the best we can, or the harsh reality of it will make us fools at best, at worst, cowards (Lear looms large in this conception). We must behave as if this separation does not exist, and, at times, we must exalt in our participation in, and representation of, reality. The novel becomes not a vehicle through which one can emphasize and complicate the disjunction and distance between the symbolic and reality, but rather where one can work with the dialectical relationship of those two categories, where the ideal and the real coalesce, where the “is” and the “ought” can battle with one another, and where the hope of a synthesis persists.

Despite Bellow’s frustration with modernist angst and aesthetics, as many critics have pointed out, Bellow’s first two novels were in the vein of their modernist forefathers. They were thematically concerned with the angst and isolation of modern man and were well wrought pieces of fiction, tightly woven, and pared down. When Augie was published, it was clear that

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25 See pg. 9.
26 See Realism in Our Time, pgs. 27-30.
27 Tellingly, according to Vermeulen and van den Akker, the notion of behaving “as if” is a central premise of many contemporary authors. See the conclusion here, pgs. 235-36.
Bellow was making a statement against the modernist aesthetic paradigm and was dedicated to writing a novel that “came easily. All I had to do was be there with buckets to catch it. That’s why the form is loose” (Cronin 4). His growing antipathy toward the modernist novel was due in part to his belief that the novel has imitated poetry far too much recently. … In its severity and style and devotion to exact form. … Today, the novelist thinks too much of immortality and he tries to create form. He tries to make his work durable through form. But you have to take your chances on mortality, on perishability. That’s what I felt. I kicked over the traces, wrote catch-as-catch-can, picaresque. I took my chance.

(5)

Clearly the “immortality” and “durability” of which Bellow writes is in reference to modernists’ attempts to isolate their work from the world and create pieces that remain unto themselves instead of in dialogue with empirical reality—the “glass case” mentioned above. Augie, however, eschews and rejects this notion in favor of a mediated agency for its main character, one which plays with words in such a way that foregrounds them and their relationship to the real world, rather than to each other, and one which revels in the “bliss” of description and the empirical in a novel and revelatory way.28 In a 1953 letter to Bernard Malamud, Bellow writes about Augie: “I declared against what you call the constructivist approach. A novel, like a letter, should be loose, cover much ground, run swiftly, take risk of mortality and decay. I backed away from Flaubert, in the direction of Walter Scott, Balzac and Dickens” (Letters 128). The irony here—that somehow the avant-garde and experimental status of modernism felt formalized, staid, and stale, and is rejected for a return to nineteenth-century romancers and

28 I would agree with Penn Warren, who writes that Augie’s “style is a powerful device of characterization … Which leads me to the last observation that the chief release Saul Bellow has found in this book may be the release of a style, for he has found, when he is at his best, humor and eloquence to add to his former virtues” (13).
realists—is clear: As Jameson predicted, Bellow’s return to “Walter Scott, Balzac and Dickens” becomes a revolutionary move in the context of his contemporary literary zeitgeist.

The novel’s opening is an indication of this new (or old) formal (or anti-formal) approach. Augie declares, “I am an American, Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, freestyle, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent” (1). This declarative sentence sets the tone for Augie’s struggle for individual autonomy against social structures, as he pits his agency (“I go at things as I have taught myself”) against the constructions of “American” and “Chicago” alike. This tension is redoubled by his “knocking” recollections, indicating agency in the character’s construction and development—he can choose to either admit or not admit—but also a defenselessness to whatever memories choose to present themselves. A character battles his fate. If we extrapolate this notion to that of authorship, Bellow complicates the modernist conception of author as authority (the privileging of the author’s controlling artistic consciousness as we see in James or Faulkner, for example). Instead we have a dialectic between the outside world and the author’s own phenomenological consciousness: To what extent is he creating a world? To what extent is that world dictating his creation? This is echoed by the interruption of the energy of the first clause. The em dashes of “—Chicago, that somber city—” slow the aggressive outburst of the first two clauses, and the tone changes from declarative and ebullient to drowsy and pathetic. This is also characteristic of Augie’s life: a man of limitless energy and optimism set against the restraints reality places on him—the actuality of the city and its limiting structures. The somber clause serves to interrupt and weigh down Augie’s “march” toward his own free identity, and the em dashes become limiting grammatical structures on an otherwise vibrant declaration of character. Furthermore,
the openness of form that Bellow espouses above is, necessarily, limited as well. The opening
two clauses, then, are a synecdoche for the novel as a whole: Augie’s individual battle against
outside forces echo Bellow’s battle against the strictures of modernist form.29 In the sentence
following the above, Augie admits that, “[I]n the end there isn’t any way to disguise the nature of
the knocks by acoustical work on the door or gloving the knuckles.” We are introduced to a
“truth teller,” as it were, one who admits that “[e]verybody knows there is no fineness or
accuracy of suppression; if you hold down one thing you hold down the adjoining.”
“Disguising” through “acoustical work” and “gloving the knuckles” is a direct jab at modernist
formal concerns that attempt to rework one’s interaction with an inadequate reality through
“acoustical work,” or formal ingenuity.

Augie also informs us on the first page that he is, for all intents and purposes, an orphan:
“My own parents were not much to me, though I cared for my mother. She was simple-minded,
and what I learned from her was not what she taught, but on the order of object lessons. She
didn’t have much to teach, poor woman.” He has few and jumbled memories of his father who
walked out when Augie was a child. Bellow’s use of the (in this case, American) novelistic
trope of the orphan—a character without any particular past or inherited qualities who must forge
his own identity just as America did—is, again, in service of the dialectic between autonomy and
influence.30 Augie does, however, have a limited number of early influences and, as such, is able
to “teach himself” and “make the record in [his] own way.” If we agree with Tony Tanner, who

29 About this, Fuchs writes, “To the extent that [modernists] make style the subject of their books, subordinating
personality to form, character to artifact, event to irony, action to words, making experience the reflection of some
higher truth, these writers reduce the historical to the point where it is merely a reflection of a perfection that can
never be known” (4), and, therefore, “[t]he central thrust of Bellow’s fiction is to deny [this] nihilism, immoralism,
and the aesthetic view” (9).
30 Clearly Augie’s form, title, and orphaned protagonist owe much to Twain. What Richard Chase has written about
*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: “But it is also literary because, unlike ordinary spoken language, it is always
conscious of the traditional English—notably of the Bible and Shakespeare—from which it is departing” (140), can
be applied here to Bellow and other divide authors in their consciousness of the formal language of modernism from
which they depart.
writes, “It has long been recognized that there is a tenacious feeling in America that while other, older countries are ridden by conventions, rules, all sorts of arbitrary formalities which trap and mould the individual, in America one may still enjoy a genuine freedom from all cultural patterning so that life is a series of unmediated spontaneities” (15), then Bellow argues, instead, that although an American is not as encumbered by cultural inheritance as a European might be, he is in no way “unmediated.” This is, perhaps, why Augie is almost an orphan, but not entirely. I would agree with Tanner’s later assertion that “there has to be some sort of system because you cannot have pure unstructured consciousness nor, as long as you are involved in language, can you have pure unmediated reality” (17). The “systems” that Augie both utilizes and rubs against as a character are, again, doubled by Bellow’s relationship to the more traditional forms of the American (realist) novel and his trouble with modernism. He recognizes and, at times, acquiesces to influence while attempting to break free of it: he feels the freedom of a near orphan.

Since Augie’s character is often defined by his conflicts with cultural, historical, and familial structures, the easiest way to define and understand Augie and, by extension, Bellow’s artistic vision, is by first looking at the many characters (each of whom symbolize an ideology or belief system) with whom Bellow’s hero interacts. Bellow is famous for his belief, however, that we shouldn’t read novels symbolically or allegorically. In a 1959 New York Times article, he writes:

Are we to attach meaning to whatever is grazed by the writer? Is modern literature Scripture? Is criticism Talmud, theology? Deep readers of the world, beware! You had better be sure that your seriousness is indeed high seriousness and not, God forbid, low seriousness.

31 As most of the critical literature attests, Augie is a notoriously difficult text to write about because of its dependence on multiple characters and myriad experiences. According to Opdahl, it is not until Herzog that Bellow “unifies—for the first time in his fiction—by means of a plot” (146).
A TRUE symbol is substantial, not accidental. You cannot avoid it, you cannot remove it. (“The Search”)

It is clear, however, that Bellow’s use of characters to define his hero makes it nearly impossible not to read them symbolically, or, at the very least, archetypally. We shall consider them “TRUE” symbols, then, and try not to be a victim or proponent of low seriousness. As Augie declares, “Personality is unsafe in the first place. It’s the types that are safe” (438). So let us do the safe thing first, and look at the types.

The novel is split into two thematic sections, each illustrating the ambiguity of the phrase “a man’s character is his fate”: the first shows Augie’s formation by what Bellow would refer to in Herzog as “reality instructors,” while the second illustrates his break from these instructors as he attempts to determine his own subjectivity. Much has been written about the first half of the novel, but I would like to briefly touch on the major figures that form Augie in that section. Although her character does not survive the novel, Grandma Lausch’s importance lies in her ambiguity and contradictions, and the symbolic weight that these differences provide. An aged boarder, of no relation, in the March house, she is a Nietzschean representative of the use and abuse of lying, history, and power; she is an example of a Yeatsian modernist “centre”; she is illustrative of the end of an era of nineteenth-century literary realism; and she is representative of the superiority (in her opinion) of Enlightenment rationality (what Bellow refers to as “hard-boiledness”) over romance and emotional display. During his childhood, Grandma “coaches” Augie in the “realities” and “truths” of life in order that he might get by in a “reality” that is necessarily unfair. Augie tells us, “Now I know it wasn’t so necessary to lie, but then everyone thought so, and Grandma Lausch especially, who was one of those Machiavellis of small street
and neighborhood that my young years were full of” (2). In addition to this world-wise instruction, Grandma Lausch declares herself to be the binding “centre” without which everything would fall apart. “Do you know what things would be like without me? You ought to be grateful for the way I hold [the family] together,” she tells Augie. And earlier, “There’s no man in the house and children to bring up” (4). The implication is that Grandma’s system, her Machiavellian approach to life and the necessity of lying to get by in a modern world, is one of the ways in which modern man might attempt to control the chaos of the world. She “put a regulating hand on the family life” (9), and was able to “hold them together” very much in the way that Yeats calls for a “centre.”

Yet it is her downfall that best illustrates her archetypal position within the novel and is a reflection of the breakdown of this old and faulty “system,” as it were. On a wintry election day, Grandma heads out, changing from “worsted stockings … to silk, to black dress, put up her triple-circle coif and, looking mean, powder her face.” Augie heads out later to find her “on one knee in the snowy passageway. Fallen” (57). From this point on, there is a “change in the main established order,” and, “there was something missing. … [Her dog] sensed that new days were pushing out the last of an old regime, the time when counselors and ministers see the finish of their glory, and Sitzers and Praetorian Guards get restless” (59). Strangely, her desire to “dress up” is not only indicative of a kind of outdated notion of aristocratic class but also indicative of the failure of form over function. This is to say, Grandma’s attempt to cover up the reality of her own situation—her age, her (poor) economic position, her ability to even walk down the street, her very reality—fails. Just as avant-garde modernists wished to use formal consideration as a method to safeguard art from the reality of what had become a bourgeois capitalist world, reality (here represented by an unseen patch of ice upon which she slips) consistently complicates

32 Tellingly, the original title for Augie was Life Among the Machiavellis.
things, if it doesn’t win out entirely. Her being “Fallen” is important in two regards: in recognition of our own post-lapsarian condition (her going down to one knee drives this point home), but also the passing of a particular notion of form as the next passage, indicating a “change in the main established order,” illustrates. There is clearly a “changing of the (Praetorian) guard” as it were.

After she unceremoniously dies in a nursing home (proving that social forces, and the body, were ultimately stronger than her system), as Augie finds himself “circling yet” (90), Augie meets William Einhorn. Perhaps the most interesting character in the book, Einhorn is a cripple who runs small businesses—some legal, some not—out of his Chicago household. The similarities between Einhorn and Grandma are clear, for, “Like Grandma Lausch again, [Einhorn] knew how to use large institutions” (75), and “[he] had a teaching turn similar to Grandma Lausch’s, both believing they could show what could be done with the world, where it gave or resisted, where you could be confident and run or where you could only feel your way and were forced to blunder” (71). Yet the differences between the two are clear: “He was not like Grandma, with her educational seventy-fives trained on us. He wanted to flow along, be admirable and eloquent. Not fatherly” (76 italics mine). If Grandma was someone who understood the “reality situation” but was tied to bygone notions of honor, form, and aristocratic mores, Einhorn is a kind of modernist/postmodernist figure who both understands how the world works and, instead of subscribing to notions of regality or aristocracy, believes in the power of information (a particularly postmodern notion, best evidenced in Lyotard’s understanding of technocrats) and power for its own sake. Unlike grandma, he does not represent a paternal system of control or a superego—he is “not fatherly.” Augie tells us, “[Einhorn] intended that, as there were no more effective prescriptions in old ways, as we were in dreamed-out or finished
visions, that therefore, in the naked form of the human jelly, one should choose or seize with force; one should make strength from disadvantages and make progress by having enemies, being wrathful or terrible” (199). His belief in “dreamed-out or finished visions” reflects Lyotard’s postmodern loss of metanarrative and Fukuyama’s end of history, and his desire to “flow along” and be “admirable and eloquent” is indicative of the kind of surface content that we will come to see in any analysis of postmodernism. Jameson states, for instance, that “we are sick and tired of the subjective as such in its older classical forms (which include deep time and memory) and that we want to live on the surface for a while” (Postmodernism 151). We sense an “urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel seeming goods” (4). Accordingly, Einhorn sent away for everything that was free: samples of food, soaps, medicine, the literature of all causes, reports of the Bureau of American Ethnology and publications of the Smithsonian Institution, the Bishop Museum in Hawaii, the Congressional Record, laws, pamphlets, prospectuses, college catalogues, quack hygiene books, advice on bust-development, on getting rid of pimples, on longevity and Couéism, pamphlets on Fletcherism, Yoga, spirit-rapping, antivivisection; he was on the mailing list of the Henry George Institute and the Rudolf Steiner Foundation in London, the local bar association, the American Legion. He had to be in touch with everything. (74)

This passage not only illustrates the “knowledge pastiche” that Einhorn comes to represent (that of culture as information and he as a technocratic czar), but is also another example of Bellow’s method of verbal saturation. Bellow wants to overwhelm the reader with a torrent of words and yet, except for the “samples of food, soap, and medicine” mentioned early in the passage, the rest
of the collected items here are paper- and language-related. Importance is placed on these items while the necessary, bare-life items of sustenance, hygiene, and health are relegated to mere “samples.” This is a prescient critique of the postmodern deluge of information that marks its arrival. As Bellow writes in “The Distracted Public,” written in 1990 but, as evidenced by the passage above, a subject upon which he was clearly ruminating long before, “We are now face-to-face with the Information Revolution … What good is such a plethora of information?” (It All Adds Up 156, 157). The article, which critiques postmodern thinking and its lionizing of the age of information and multiplicity, is a clear extension of the critique of Einhorn in Augie.

Einhorn’s superiority is wrapped up in his control and vast knowledge of information, but his status as a cripple (his physical deformity standing in for the harsh reality of the world), and his defeat by the power of reality toward the end of the book, undermines the sustainability and legitimacy of this particular type of power.

Indeed, Einhorn’s fall is reflective of Grandma Lausch’s and indicative of the failure of cultural and discursive knowledge alone protecting one from the realities of the everyday. Augie describes Einhorn late in life: “Einhorn’s [hair] was snowy, which made his eyes blacker. … The house stunk. The books were falling off the shelves. The busts of great men were lost up near the ceiling” (468). To be sure, the mention of books and “great men” here is telling: the side of Einhorn that Augie once revered, the great side, has fallen. “Law” and “custom” are overtaken by nature. Einhorn, like Grandma Lausch a defender of the “reality situation,” is eventually beaten by the very reality over which he thought he had control. If he represents a surface or discursive understanding of the world, a postmodern one in which information and the structural become the easiest ways to power (as opposed to bodily, as his own condition
indicates), then we can read this as Bellow’s critique of a nascent postmodern understanding of
the world.

The second pairing of reality instructors in Augie’s early education involves the Renling and
the Magnus families, both well-to-do, but, like Grandma and Einhorn, inherently different. After
his last evening working for Einhorn, chapter eight begins, “From here a new course was set—by
us, for us; I’m not going to try and unravel all of the causes.” Augie doesn’t know how it came
to him to “suddenly have views” (135), indicating an awakening of his subjectivity. Yet the
course being “set—by us, for us” again undermines his declaration of autonomy. Indeed, the
Renlings and the Magnuses both, the first literally and the second through marriage, attempt to
adopt Augie and situate and train him in their own versions of reality. At this stage he insists
that he is “merely trying various things on” (225), but later admits, “But I was, as at the
Renlings’, under an influence and not the carrier of it” (266). All this is to say that if, as Einhorn
tells him, he has “opposition” in him, he is not entirely comfortable asserting his own
subjectivity at this point in the narrative. Like Ellison’s invisible man, Augie allows his identity
to be given to him instead of asserting it himself. Yet this movement back and forth, this darting
in and out of being controlled by an other and reclaiming his selfhood (“suddenly having
views”), is indicative of the dialectic at play here in blissful realism. That is, the contingent,
objective world is as much a part of his subjective makeup as his will, and just as much a part of
Bellow’s artistic process as his own consciousness.

Augie’s rejection of the ideological extremes of all of these characters is illustrative of
Lukács’ understanding of the novel. In his Theory of the Novel, Lukács writes, “Thus, the novel,
in contrast to others [sic] genres whose existence resides within the finished form, appears as
something in process of becoming” (72-73). He continues:
As a formal constituent of the novel form this [irony of subjectivity] signifies an interior diversion of the normatively creative subject into a subjectivity as interiority, which opposes power complexes that are alien to it and which strives to imprint the contents of its longing upon the alien world, and a subjectivity which sees through the abstract and, therefore, limited nature of the mutually alien worlds of subject and object, understand these worlds by seeing their limitations as necessary conditions of their existence and, by thus seeing through them, allows the duality of the world to subsist. At the same time the creative subjectivity glimpses a unified world in the mutual relativity of elements essentially alien to one another, and gives form to this world. Yet the glimpsed unified world is nevertheless purely formal. … The irony of the novel is the self-correction of the world’s fragility… (74-75, italics mine)

The formal considerations of Augie as an “incomplete” character are in fact reflective of the very constitutive elements of the novel about which Lukács writes. Rather than being an incomplete character, Augie’s admission of subjective influence is reflective of the nature of the novel as a genre. About this, Bellow has said in an interview:

“But the claim I can make for myself is that I’m conscious of the correspondence between the inner and the outer life.”

“Can you get them together?”

“I think I do when I write. An important state of self-education is to realize that you’re never going to achieve the great synthesis. Hence the comedy in the effort—one of my specialties as a writer.” (Cronin 232)
The “great synthesis” and the “comedy of the effort” is, of course, the kind of novelistic irony about which Lukács writes—the author writes the novel as a whole with the knowledge that it can never be a whole.  

Like Lukács’ novel form, then, Augie “touched all sides, and nobody knew where [he] belonged” (122). Over the course of the novel he is a thief, a personal assistant (twice), a dog groomer, a newsstand salesman, a paint salesman, a shoe salesman, a fact checker, an eagle trainer, and an import-export man, just to name a few of his professions. The sheer number of these jobs indicates that he is both a man of the world who is guided by the world and a man who refuses to be pinned down (at least by vocation) to any particular identity. In this sense he is similar to the postmodern man—one described by Deleuze and Guattari as a body where “everything functions at the same time, but amid hiatuses and ruptures, breakdowns and failures, stalling and short circuits, distances and fragmentations, within a sum that never succeeds in bringing its various parts together so as to form a whole” (42). And yet it is Augie’s ever present ego—his desire to project his essence, his subjectivity, above and against these fractures—that holds both the novel and his character together. In other words, it is an expression of Bellow’s desire to return to an idea of the individual and his participation in and responsibility toward the world. In a letter to Lionel Trilling, Bellow writes, “I take it we agree, as square old liberals, that without individuals human life ends in a cold glutinous porridge—despite our different opinions as to what makes an ‘identity.’” (Letters 319). It is this “porridge” against which Augie, and his identity, rebel.

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33 I must point out here that the difference between critical realism and socialist realism is where I (and Bellow, I think) would part with Lukács. His teleological understanding of “socialist realism” as the logical aesthetic follower to critical realism implies a Marxist understanding of reality to which neither I nor Bellow would adhere. Instead, Bellow’s critical realism argues for something less concrete, something more intuitive—a transcendental notion similar to that of the Hegelian absolute or, more to the point, an ideal, moral world.
The middle of the book is a turning point for both the novel and Augie, as he encounters a mother who has just given birth:

And just then, in the elevator shaft nearby, there were screams. I stopped and waited for the rising light I saw coming steadily through the glass panels. The door opened; a woman sat before me in a wheel chair, and in her lap, just born in a cab or paddy wagon or in the lobby of the hospital, covered with blood and screaming so you could see sinews, square of chest and shoulders from the strain, this bald kid, red and covering her with the red. She too, with lost nerve, was sobbing, each hand squeezing up on itself, eyes wildly frightened; and she and the baby appeared like enemies forced to have each other, like figures of a war. They were pushed out, passing me close by so that the mother’s arm grazed me. (307-8)

The passage begins with the notion of a “rising light … coming steadily through the glass panels” of the elevator shaft, suggesting something transcendent, holy or magnificent, the approaching “Madonna and child” as seen through a church’s stained-glass window. This is immediately juxtaposed, however, with the horrific (Kristevean) scene that unfolds in which the reality of life and the body are forced upon us via sinew, blood, and screams. The baby, “born in a cab or paddy wagon or in the lobby,” and the mother are conceived as enemies, undermining our notions of instant maternal love and the beauty of childbirth. We are born into this world in horror, the passage seems to say, with very little enchantment or attachment, and must exist in it with this knowledge instead of any idealistic understanding of perfection or beauty. The “pushing out” of the mother and child is indicative of our own expulsion into the world (and, perhaps, our loss of prelapsarian perfection), and the mother’s grazing of Augie’s arm a transference of knowledge, as if to say, “You are a part of this as well.”
And yet on the following page, as Augie returns to a relative’s house, still horrified yet contemplative, he looks out on the brilliant first morning of the year. There was a Greek church in the next street of which the onion dome stood in the snow-polished and purified blue, cross and crown together, and the united powers of earth and heaven, snow in all the clefts, a snow like the sand of sugar. I passed over the church too and rested only on the great profound blue. The days have not changed, though the times have. The sailors who first saw America, that sweet sight, where the belly of the ocean had brought them, didn’t see more beautiful color than this. (309)

The association between the church, transcendence, and reality is telling, particularly in response to the aforementioned experience in the hospital. Augie’s “rebirth,” as it were, on the first day of a new year and after literally witnessing birth and its after-effects, is one that is focused on a synthesis between the transcendent (represented by the church) and the beauty of reality itself. The church is ideological and created by man, but the sky is not. Bellow juxtaposes not high and low, but high and higher, both literally and figuratively. The “snow polished and purified blue” washes away the red, anguished screams of the evening, and though Augie recognizes the significance of the church’s merging of “cross and crown together, the united powers of heaven and earth,” he sees these, again, as a man-made synthesis and he “passed over the church” and “rested only the great profound blue.” In effect, Augie has moved beyond the ideological and structural (the church and its doctrine, all of the reality instructors of the first half of the novel) and instead considers the purity and the infinitude of the sky, musing, “the days have not changed but the times have,” relishing the simple, eternal, beauty of it. There is a consistency in the reality of the world and its beauty and, perhaps most importantly, our shared relationship to
that reality. Augie accepts the coexistence of the brutality of the previous evening and the
beauty of the morning, and moves beyond the soft reassurances of the church into a greater
understanding of life as both horrific and beautiful, and even beautiful in its horror. Ultimately,
this is a reflection of the binary tension of blissful realism: the necessary brutality and the
attendant beauty of reality.

With this realization, Augie (and the novel) moves toward a second stage in which his
participation in the world is more involved and more grounded. Chapter thirteen (immediately
following the scene above) begins, “I was no child now, neither in age nor in protectedness, and I
was thrown for fair on the free spinning of the world” (311). Like the child above, born not in
the safety of a hospital room but in “a cab or paddy wagon or in the lobby of the hospital,”
Augie has been “pushed out” into the world. He begins the chapter recruiting members for the
CIO union, and the chapter ends when he is punched in the mouth by a rival union organization.
As pain and wounds are always a reminder in Bellow of reality above and beyond the structural
or ideological—the fist being reality, the union being the structural—Augie moves instead to the
ideal, and falls into the arms of the rich heiress Thea Henchel. After getting punched, Augie
thinks:

Look out! Oh, you chump and weak fool, you are one of a humanity that can’t be
numbered and not more than the dust of metals scattered in a magnetic field and
clinging to the lines of force, determined by laws, eating, sleeping, employed,
conveyed, obedient, and subject. So why hunt for still more ways to lose liberty?
(344)

The implication is, of course, that reality, the phenomenal world and society’s structures, people,
and responsibilities, are there to take away your autonomy. Thea is another such structure.
Augie says that her chief idea is “that there must be something better than what people call reality.” Her commitment to a greater reality, to something beyond the limits of the given world is reflective of the bliss which we have been discussing (recall Barthes’ “unspeakable, interdicted”). Thea believes in an ability to rise above that which is given. Though Augie should know better than this by now, he decides to leave Chicago with her and head to Mexico.

The Mexican section is, indeed, strange. But it is not the anomaly that many would have it, nor is it detrimental to the overall arc of the narrative. On the contrary, when Thea and Augie light out for Mexico in order to train a bald eagle to hunt lizards, they participate in what many characters in great American novels have done, lighting out for the territory and heading “west” in a country that no longer has a “west” as it was originally conceived. Just as Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty head to Mexico at the close of On the Road, or Perry and Dick in In Cold Blood, or, as we shall see in Chapter 2, when Rabbit attempts to run, this is Bellow’s effort at (and ironic use of) contiguity with the tradition of the American novel. Indeed, as they leave, Augie says that they are “loading up the wagon” (355). Mexico becomes for Augie and Thea what the west once was—the ideal space to discover the transcendent without the trappings of culture and history. Like most of these adventures, however, it is a tragic one. Those who try and escape structure find the same confines waiting for them: the confines of self, the confines of history, the confines of family and of love—everything the new land was supposed to free them of.

What they discover is that structure is always present, and it is up to the individual to figure out how to survive, adapt, and change within it. We can read this escape, as we have above, as a parallel to Bellow’s aesthetic project in the book: there is no freedom of influence, neither for Augie nor for Bellow’s own writing. The space of “bliss” for which Barthes argues, an “asocial character” that is “the abrupt loss of sociality, [from which] there follows no recurrence to the
subject (subjectivity), the person, solitude: *everything* is lost, integrally” (39), is, according to Bellow, an impossibility in life and in fiction.

Before reaching Mexico, however, Augie has another moment of clarity. After making love with Thea, Augie thinks:

> Meanwhile the clouds, birds, cattle in the water, things, stayed at their distance, and there was no need to herd, account for, hold them in the head, but it was enough to be among them, released on the ground as they were in their brook or in their air. I meant something like this when I said occasionally I could look out like a creature. If I mentioned a Chicago junkyard as well as Charlemagne’s estate, I had my reasons. For should I look into any air, I could recall the bees and gnats of dust in the heavily divided heat of a street of El pillars—such as Lake Street, where the junk and old bottleyards are—like a terribly conceived church of madmen, and its stations, endless, where worshipers crawl their carts of rags and bones. And sometimes misery came over me to feel that I myself was the creation of such places. How is it that human beings will submit to the gyps of previous history while mere creatures look with their original eyes? (359-60)

The connotations here to a prelapsarian state are fairly obvious (particularly since they recall nude Adam and Eve in this pasture). Augie’s desire to see the world with “original eyes,” to be in a Lacanian Real, as it were, but one that is not frightening, without language and without history and the need to “account for, hold [things] in the head,” is an idealistic conception of nature and undoing of the Cartesian understanding of the world.34 It is, as discussed above, akin

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34 It should be mentioned here that this is connected to many theoretical models as well, most notably Deleuze and Guattari’s, who write (with reference to Georg Büchner’s *Lenz*), “He thought that is must be a feeling of endless bliss to be in contact with the profound life of every form, to have a soul for rocks, metals, water, and plants, to take into himself, as in a dream, every element of nature, like flowers that breathe with the waxing and waning of the
to Hegelian “Absolute Knowledge.” But it is also, at least in this context, the state of an animal, not a human, and this unity cannot last. In good Bellovian form, the next paragraph begins with a startling juxtaposition: “We had few such afternoons when we started to train the eagle” (360), thrusting reality back into the reader’s consciousness. Augie’s “escape” here doubles that of the Mexico trip itself—a moment of a return to nature that he knows he cannot maintain since he is “the creation of such places.” Blissful realism lies, then, at the nexus of seeing with “original eyes” and the acceptance of created reality; where Barthes’ notion of an “asocial character,” where “everything is lost, integrally,” is appreciated as in dialectical tension with the reality constructed outside of it.

The eagle, ironically named Caligula, becomes the marker for the difference between existence in the world which does away with the subject/nature dichotomy (the “creature” above), and the “project”—in an Adornian understanding of the project of enlightenment, as that of subduing nature or controlling it—of altering the nature of something outside of ourselves. In other words, Thea and Augie are becoming “reality instructors” in that they want to instruct or reform the fundamental reality of the eagle to do something that is potentially against its nature. The eagle, however, does not acquiesce to this training. He is meant to fly above the ground until he finds a large species of lizard, swoop down, pick it up, and bring it back to Thea and Augie. When Augie expresses concern for the lizards, Thea responds, “Keep your silly feelings to yourself. Those lizards don’t want them, and if they felt the way you do they wouldn’t be lizards—they’d be too slow, and pretty soon they’d be extinct” (378), and later, he thinks about the eagle, “But that was my humanizing again, and she shook her head. She believed fierce

moon.’ … Lenz has projected himself back to a time before the man-nature dichotomy, before all the co-ordinates based on this fundamental dichotomy have been laid down. He does not live nature as nature, but as a process of production. There is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other and couples machines together. … the self and the non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever” (2). This state is, however, untenable.
nature shouldn’t be like that” (379). Thea’s Darwinian approach to the training is a stand-in for the earlier “training” of Augie, particularly by Grandma Lausch and Einhorn: he is supposed to not “feel,” to repress his emotional self in favor of a hard reality. The eagle is Augie, and Augie the eagle.

The symbol of the circling bird, Thea’s attempt to control it, and the connection to Yeats’ “widening gyre” cannot be overlooked. Consider Augie’s first description of the bird circling:

Anyway, it was glorious how he would mount away high and seem to sit up there, really as if over fires of atmosphere, as if he was governing from up there. If his motive was rapaciousness and everything based on the act of murder, he also had a nature that felt the triumph of beating his way up to the highest air to which flesh and bone could rise. And doing it by will, not as other forms of life were at that altitude, the spores and parachute seeds who weren’t there as individuals but messengers of species. (368)

Here there is no question of the falcon hearing the falconer; the bird is given his own autonomy. His flight, his gyre, his control, is due to his own will, not from an effort at control by the falconer below. Indeed, if Augie and the eagle are cut from the same sheet, then the point here is one of individual agency: the eagle soars to heights on his own, by his own nature, and not by guidance. This “highest air to which flesh and bone could rise” is indicative of the transcendent, and the ability of the individual to find these particular heights, these ideals, by his own volition if he would merely allow himself to do so. If, perhaps, Thea is the kind of perfection of human form that is akin to modernist thinking and artistic form—the agrarian perfectionism of Pound, or the mythological antiquarianism of Eliot and Joyce—then the eventual failure of her endeavor is a comment upon the failure itself of modernism. The reason that Thea (and her name becomes
even more important here—the idea of a god, or goddess, attempting to control and harness nature, to reclaim a sense of control that had been lost) fails in this project is telling as well. Caligula fails because he (and, perhaps, Thea) does not consider that the iguana that he is trying to catch might fight back. Indeed, when Caligula catches an iguana, “the monster opened its angular mouth with strange snake rage and struck the eagle in the neck.” The iguana finally drops from Caligula’s neck, and Thea responds, “You stinking coward! You crow! … We wasted our time with him, Augie. Oh, Augie. He’s no good. He’s chicken!” Augie thinks, “Well, it was hard to take this from wild nature, that there should be humanity mixed with it; such as there was in the beasts that embraced Odysseus and his men and wept on them in Circe’s yard” (386). Thea’s anger is not directed at the eagle as much as at her inability to control nature, to harness what she sees as the animal’s instinct, when in fact the animal bleeds and experiences fear like anyone else. Her inability, or unwillingness, to take humanity and emotion into account reflects not only her treatment of Augie (and other’s treatment of Augie), but, by extension, modernism’s unwillingness to take human emotion into account in its preference to isolate art from the social. This is, of course, one of Lukács’ main critiques of modernism—its absence of the emotional within purely formal work; a work of art which neglects this particular aspect is incomplete and inferior. Art should, instead, reflect “the series of extraordinarily numerous emotions which together combine to structure the inner life of man” (qtd in Adorno, “Reconciliation” 154). Thea, promoting only the aggressive nature of the eagle and concerned only with the success of the endeavor, fails, or refuses, to see the other side of what’s at stake. Bellow’s point, combining the hard contingency of reality with the idealism of man, whether it be through Thea’s attempt to control nature by will, or Augie’s desire to return to a harmonious
prelapsarian state, indicates, again, the blissful realists’ understanding of the necessity of this
dialectic in both art and life.

If Thea’s failure to train Caligula attempts to show this lesson, it is during the eagle’s second
hunt that Augie learns it for good. Just as Augie releases the eagle, his horse lunges and he is
thrown. As he attempts to recover, “one of Bizcocho’s hoofs caught [him] square in the head,
and [he] was out” (393). The horse cracks his skull, and reality once again literally kicks Augie
in the head. The next chapter begins:

It takes some of us a long time to find out what the price is of being in nature, and
what the facts are about your tenure. How long it takes depends on how swiftly
the social sugars dissolve. But when at last they do dissolve there’s a different
taste in your mouth, bringing different news which registers with dark
astonishment and fills your eyes. … Thea said, “You’ve lost a tooth.” I nodded. I
knew where the gap was. But sooner or later you’re bound to lose some teeth.
(394-5, italics mine)

Augie’s comeuppance is a response, in part, to his enthusiastic second attempt to launch
Caligula. His misguided, experimental support of Thea’s doomed project to control nature
results in the opposite—contingent nature controls him. The parallel here to Quixote’s tilting at
windmills, in that one can avoid reality, is indicative of the kind of trouble one gets in when
one’s notions of the ideal bump into that cold, hard reality. This is “where the gap was,” the gap
between the ideal and the real. A final connection is made between Augie and the eagle: “The
white patch of maturity was beginning to show on his head; the eye wasn’t a bit less imperial and
his beak with its naked purposes of breathing and tearing just as awesome as before” (395-6).
Augie with the white bandage on his head, Caligula with his “white patch of maturity”—each
has grown and moved to another stage of life. Yet for all of this, they are both still “imperial”; they both still are alive, with hope and promise, still capable of greatness. Though the project has fallen short, the being is still there and capable.

After the kick to the head, Augie, in depression, is abandoned by Thea and falls in with a group of American ex-patriots. He spends months playing poker and drinking tequila. While at a personal nadir, it is history that brings Augie back to a notion of what “ought” to be instead of what “is.” He discovers that Leon Trotsky is in this Mexican city, in exile, and his presence elicits a return to the elevated state (Caligula’s “highest air”) for Augie:

> [W]hat it was about him that stirred me up was the instant impression he gave … of navigation by the great stars, of the highest considerations, of being fit to speak the most important human words and universal terms. When you are reduced to a different kind of navigation from this high starry kind as I was and are only sculling on the shallow bay, crawling from one clam-rake to the next, it’s stirring to have a glimpse of deep-water greatness. And, even more than an established, an exiled greatness, because the exile was a sign to me of persistence at the highest things. So I was wild with enthusiasm; it bumped up inside my skull like the handle of a broom and made me recall that my head still was bandaged and I should go easy. (407)

It is not so much the specific individual, Trotsky, that reignites a flame in Augie (this incident is supposedly based on an actual trip that Bellow took to Mexico to meet Trotsky [Augie xvii]), but rather the reintroduction of history, and its attendant import. Augie is once again shown the possibility of something greater (something which most of the characters in this Mexican town

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35 Interestingly, this group seems to be mirror the Lost Generation, or, at the least, a caricature of it. These ex-patriots, all writers and/or artists, avoid the very reified qualities that ex-pats deplored, yet they, like the Lost Generation, seem unable to escape the fetters of their home and culture.
have forgotten or reconciled to the trash heap of failed idealism) and is ready to apply himself to
this concept. As the last sentence in the passage reminds him, however, he has been introduced
to cruel reality as well, and he now attempts a kind of synthesis between the pain of reality
(Jameson’s “history is what hurts”) and the desire for something greater than reality.

All of this—the trip to Mexico, the training of Caligula, the kick in the head, the meeting of
Trotsky—is representative of the dialectical movement between the real and the ideal which the
blissful realists look to explore as they try to find balance between the cold realities of everyday
life and the desire for something transcendent. If, as Adorno argues, the modernist aesthetic is
one in opposition to reality, or, in a different ontological category than reality, then this project
goes directly against that aim. Adorno writes,

This phenomenon should be linked to the problem of the dialectical tension
between reality and the realm of art, which Lukács evades. Since the work of art
never focuses directly on reality, it never makes the sort of statement found
elsewhere in the realm of knowledge to the effect that this or that is the case.
Instead it asserts: Yes, that is the way things are. Its logic, then, is not that of
subject and predicate, but of internal harmony. … *It is antithetically opposed to
the empirical reality which it encapsulates*, as well as being encapsulated by it …
The very idea, so fashionable nowadays, of “stating something” is irrelevant to
art. As a synthesis which utters no propositions, art may forgo the right to make
definite pronouncements on points of detail; but it more than compensates for this
by its greater justice towards everything normally excised from that proposition.
(“Reconciliation” 168, italics mine)
The first sentence, which claims that Lukács evades the tension between reality and art, seems odd, since his argument rests solely on that tension and how one employs it. Augie, then, represents what Lukács might argue for: not an evasion, but a capitulation to the tension between reality and the ideal, or reality and hope, or, most importantly here, reality and art. The notion of “stating something,” even if that something is unclear and out of the realm of possibility, is a necessary component of the dialectic. Without it, we have what Augie, and Bellow, rail against: complacency, resignation, and forlornness—the wastelander position.

As if in direct response to Adorno, we have this from Augie:

> Everyone tries to create a world he can live in, and what he can’t use he often can’t see. But the real world is already created, and if your fabrication doesn’t correspond, then even if you feel noble and insist on there being something better than what people call reality, that better something needn’t try to exceed what, in its actuality, since we know it so little, may be very surprising. If a happy state of things, surprising; if miserable or tragic, no worse than what we invent. (412)

Augie appeals for a synthesis between the necessary recognition of reality (the wound to his head) and the necessary creation of transcendent thoughts, ideas, and worlds. If we apply this to art, however, and to the novel in particular, Bellow calls here for a rejection of the kind of strict formalism or hermetic nature of modernism to which Adorno alludes above. Being “antithetically opposed to the empirical reality which it encapsulates” is fundamentally counterproductive to both art and man. The fabrication of worlds is always a good idea; if, however, they do not correspond to and wrestle with some kind of recognizable reality, they will always be miserable or tragic (again, Bellow’s “wastelander” outlook) in the sense that they are utopic and recognizably beyond our reach. Bellow argues, instead, that a closer look at reality
might paradoxically reveal the kind of transcendence we have been searching for. As Augie saw in the blue sky above the church, bliss is found within reality, not outside of it.

Augie’s growth and its kinship to Bellow’s understanding of the necessity of reality in fiction increases in intensity as the novel moves forward. With “external life being so mighty,” Augie tells us,

[y]ou invent a man who can stand before the terrible appearances. This way he can’t get justice and he can’t give justice, but he can live. And this is what mere humanity always does. It’s made up of these inventors or artists … each in his own way trying to recruit other people to play a supporting role and sustain him in his make-believe. … There’s one image that gets out in front to lead the rest and can impose its claim to being genuine with more force than the others, or one voice enlarged to thunder is heard above the others. Then a huge invention, which is the invention maybe of the world itself, and of nature, becomes the actual world—with cities, factories, public buildings, railroads, armies, dams, prisons, and movies—becomes the actuality. Then even the flowers and the moss on the stones become the moss and the flowers of a version. (437)

Bellow’s implicit critique of (post)structuralism here, and modernism by extension, is a critique of the separation of reality and ideology, or of language/art and reality. In essence, this is a pre-Foucauldian understanding of power and discourse as well as a pre-Baudrillardian understanding of simulacra and the image.36 Augie’s response to this problem, however, is not one of

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36 Compare, for instance, this from Foucault’s “The Discourse on Language”: “A good many people, I imagine, harbour a similar desire to be freed from the obligation to begin, a similar desire to find themselves, right from the outside, on the other side of discourse, without having to stand outside it, pondering its particular, fearsome, and even devilish features” (215). Or this from Baudrillard’s Simulacra and Simulation: “The cinema in its current efforts is getting closer and closer, and with greater and greater perfection, to the absolute real, in its banality, its veracity, in its naked obviousness, in its boredom, and at the same time in its presumption, in its pretension to being the real, the immediate, the unsignified, which is the craziest of undertakings...” (46-7).
resignation (as in the case of Bellow’s “wastelander” modernism) or participation and play (as in the case of postmodernism), but rather a reinstatement and reinvigoration of the “I” and of the subject as a participant and mover within reality. He responds:

Personality is unsafe in the first place. It’s the types that are safe. So almost all make deformations on themselves so that the great terror will let them be. …

While as for me, whoever would give me cover from this mighty free-running terror and wild cold of chaos I went to, and therefore to temporary embraces. It wasn’t very courageous. That I was like many others in this was no consolation.

If there were so many they must all suffer the same way I did. (438)

This recognition of angst is, of course, nothing new. But Augie decides that he “must try to be brave again” (438), and begins to assert the self that one relinquishes in the face of terror and chaos. This is in direct opposition to the wastelander position, which Augie summarizes as there being “nothing more dreadful than to be forced by another to feel his persuasion as to how horrible it is to exist, how deathly to hope, and taste the same despair. How of all the impositions this was the worst imposition. Not just to be as they make you but to feel as they dictate” (454).

It is with this understanding that Augie rejects the possibility of Mexico as a new frontier and returns to the somber city of Chicago. He “couldn’t hold [his] own against [Mexico] any more” (455). With his newfound understanding of the necessity of a balance between hard-hitting reality and idealism, Augie’s previous larkiness is replaced by a wise pragmatism, and he is ready to battle the reality instructors with whom he barely wrestled in the first half of the book. His first encounter is with an old friend, Padilla, who tells him, “The big investigation today is into how bad a guy can be, not how good he can be. You don’t keep up with the times. You’re
going against history. Or at least you should admit how bad things are, which you don’t do either” (470). Again, this is a recapitulation of the wastelander position. Augie, and Bellow, are railing against this notion; they are holding out for something higher that incorporates reality.

Augie then encounters Clem Tambow, who tells him, “You are a man of feeling. … You have ambitions. But you’re ambitious in general. You’re not concrete enough. … The whole mystery of life is in the specific data. … What I guess about you is that you have a nobility syndrome. You can’t adjust to the reality situation. … You want there should be Man, with a capital M” (472-3). All of this is true, yet it is Augie’s relatively concrete answer to this statement that stands as another turning point in his development:

It can never be right to offer to die, and if that’s what the data of experience tell you, then you must get along without them. I also understand what you’re driving at about my not being concrete. It’s as follows: In the world of today your individual man has to be willing to illustrate a more and more narrow and restricted point of existence. And I am not a specialist. (474)

In the “wastelander” article, Bellow chastises artists who “have accepted what we ourselves condemn—narrow specialization, professionalism, and snobbery, and the formation of a caste.” Indeed, Augie’s response is a rejection of solipsism or disconnect from the community and the reality of which that community is a part. It is also, however, Bellow’s rejection of a modernist conception of art that separates itself from common man and reality. Bellow refuses to be this type of “specialist.”

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37 I am reminded here, too, of Edward Said, who writes, “To an alarming degree, the present continuation of the humanities depends, I think, on the sustained self-purification of humanists for whom the ethic of specialization has become equivalent to minimizing the content of their work and increasing the composite wall of guild consciousness, social authority and exclusionary discipline around themselves. Opponents are therefore not people in disagreement with the constituency but people to be kept out, nonexperts and nonspecialists, for the most part” (152).
Augie’s apotheosis, however, occurs after another discussion with Clem as Clem attempts to wrangle Augie into yet another scheme. Augie’s response rejects this:

I have a feeling … about the axial lines of life, with respect to which you must be straight or else your existence is merely clownery, hiding tragedy. I must have had a feeling since I was a kid about these axial lines which made me want to have my existence on them, and so I have said “no” like a stubborn fellow to all my persuaders, just on the obstinacy of my memory of these lines, never entirely clear. … When striving stops, there they are as a gift. … Truth, love, peace, bounty, usefulness, harmony! And all noise and grates, distortion, chatter, distraction, effort, superfluity, passed off like something unreal. And I believe that any man at any time can come back to these axial lines, even if an unfortunate bastard, if he will be quiet and wait it out.

…there’s too much of everything of this kind, that’s come home to me, too much history and culture to keep track of, too many details, too much news, too much example, too much influence, too many guys who tell you to be as they are, and all this hugeness, abundance, turbulence, Niagara Falls torrent. Which who is supposed to interpret, me? … a man could spend forty, fifty, sixty years like that inside the walls of his own being. … It’s better to dig ditches and hit other guys with your shovel than die in the walls. (494-5)

The nature of axial lines, which becomes the central theme for much of Bellow’s fiction, is one of transcendental simplicity. They are a supra-subjective understanding of reason and harmony that is interfered with by the distortion of culture, history, and other structural components of the world. It is intuitive and difficult to make explicit; it is, ironically, the bliss that lies beyond
language and art. The “interpretation … inside the walls of his own being” is a direct critique of the hermetic nature of modernism which, according to Bellow, seals itself away in its own aesthetic as opposed to engaging in the world and its attendant problems. Better to experience the suffering and failure of social life in which you risk being hurt than the kind of life experienced by the Underground Man in Dostoevsky’s novel, for instance. Bellow calls this state “square one”: “Square one is the square in which you resume your first self, with its innate qualities. You recover (or almost recover) your original sense of life and your original powers of judgment return” (Cronin 213).

Critics have made much of the ending of the novel. Augie has moved to Paris and works for selling goods on the black market. He has married Stella, an actress. He is not entirely content, and finds out that Stella might, in fact be cheating on him. Two things occur here in the last chapter of note: Augie’s run-in with a homeless woman to whom he says, “I understand how it is, but what do you want me to do? People are coming up to me all the time.” And she responds, “People! But I am not other people. You should realize that. I am—” and she was voice-stopped, she was so angry. ‘This is happening to me!’” (566), resulting in Augie’s reaffirmation of subjectivity and the importance of the individual. He thinks, “This ancient lady was right too, and there always is a me it happens to. Death is going to take the boundaries away from us, that we should no more be persons. That’s what death is about. When that is

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38 This concept will become particularly apparent in my analysis of Herzog and, as I will show in Chapter 3, is echoed by Ellison in his concept of the “lower frequencies.”

39 The parallels here to Dreiser’s Sister Carrie are not unintentional, I think. Stella is certainly a Carrie figure, one without “character,” as it were, and Augie’s morose affect during this period is reflective, somewhat, of Hurstwood. The gentleman from whom they rent a flat, a Ryehurst, who was “an old man … practically dead, sat here in a suit like for burial, purple flannel without lapels or buttons or buttonholes, and he calculated about money and wrote letters to the papers on the Fall of France” (568), is reflective of Hurstwood, and it is as if Augie, living in this man’s flat, is, at the least, a kind of stand in for that character.

40 This is a counterpoint to a previous dream that Augie had in which a beggar woman asks for help, and he gives her a large amount of money, touches her head and says, “Why, old woman … you’ve got the hair of an angel!”, and she responds, “Why shouldn’t I have … like other daughters of men?” (553). The dream is set up in contrast to the above (again, ideal and reality), and yet is also intended to reinforce the social in the face of Augie’s belief in the individual. One must cultivate the self, and care for others.
what life also wants to be about, how can you feel except rebellious?” (566-7). Augie’s insistence on the individual and his own agency is a hallmark of the novel. The other occurrence is at the very end of the novel, as he and his maid Jacqueline head to the French countryside where her family lives and where he is to do some business. Their car breaks down and they must walk to Jacqueline’s family’s house. On this walk Jacqueline tells him “Ah, the dream of my life is to go to Mexico!” (585). Augie is astonished at the simplicity of this dream (“What, not Saigon? Not Hollywood? Not Bogotá? Not Allepo?”), and the novel concludes with him remarking

…thinking of Jacqueline and Mexico, I got to grinning again. That’s the animal *ridens* in me, the laughing creature, forever rising up. What’s so laughable, that a Jacqueline, for instance, as hard used as that by rough forces, will still refuse to lead a disappointed life? Or is the laugh at nature—including eternity—that it thinks it can win over us and the power of hope? Na, nah! I think. It never will. (585)

Hope, the overarching theme throughout the book, seems to be the key difference between what is going on here, in a divide novel, and in any kind of modernist or even late modernist book. Yes, that hope might be laughable, but it is necessary in order to cope with the ubiquitous “reality situation” around which Augie has been navigating his entire life.41 If the main theme of the book is the battle between the “is” and the “ought,” the point here is that the “ought,” the

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41 I am reminded here of Bakhtin’s comments upon the relationship of laughter to the novel: “Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world *realistically*” (23 italics mine). The laughter here seems to achieve this purpose, though not ironically, but rather in a way that mediates the distance between hard reality and Jacqueline’s own ideality, or “hope.”
hope, has to be present. When we lose this, when we succumb to angst, we have given up the one thing that makes us human and that makes art worthwhile.

“It’s like a howling emtness”: Herzog

As Augie opens and closes with a bookended thought, so Bellow’s 1964 novel, Herzog, bookends itself, beginning and ending in the eponymous Herzog’s Berkshire house. This formal structure, opening and closing at the same location and time with a six-day backstory in between, is an interesting formal move in the sense that Bellow adopts a Bergsonian understanding of time; one could argue that this aligns Bellow with modernists like Woolf and Proust. This method, however, an investigation into the fullness of consciousness, is also a direct commentary on the formal “wholeness,” in a Lukácsian sense, that the novel attempts to achieve.

The novel opens, “If I am out of my mind, it’s all right with me, thought Moses Herzog” (1). Like “A man’s character is his fate,” Herzog’s proclamation here is intentionally ambiguous and ironic. Being literally “out of one’s mind” contradicts the Cartesian binary: one cannot look objectively at his own subjectivity. Furthermore, the phrase, “thought Moses Herzog,” implying his subjective stability (I think therefore I am), undermines the notion further. Herzog’s desire to be “out of his mind,” however, to be present in a kind of supra-conscious way, is the project of the novel: Herzog needs to escape his thinking self before it drives him mad. Moreover, the lack of quotation marks conflates author and protagonist in a way that will fuse

42 Critics have often critiqued the novel for its apparent solipsism. In Opdahl’s summation, “Irving Howe writes that Herzog contains a ‘superbly-realized situation but hardly a developing action’ and Marcus Klein argues that the ending ‘is a little suspect, only a baiting of a resolution.’” Tony Tanner recognizes a movement from ‘corrosive restlessness to a point of temporary rest,’ but holds that we are inside Herzog’s mind for the bulk of the novel ‘—going over things, witnesses of this endless, silent self-examination. It is not systematic: like his life it is mismanaged and patternless’” (143-44).

43 The phrase is repeated again at the end of the novel on pg. 315.
the epistemological project of Moses and the artistic project of Bellow as author.\textsuperscript{44} This aporia being “all right” with him, then, implies a desire to escape the confines of his own consciousness—to escape a solipsism that, as our analysis of \textit{Augie} illustrates, becomes a stand-in for the modern(ist) consciousness itself. Being “out of his mind,” and, since he is thinking, in his mind, is the kind of synthetic binary of the empirical and the subjective, the is and the ought, of realism and bliss that has been argued for thus far.

Herzog’s complicated solipsism extends further into the formal structure and texture of the novel. Much of the novel is formed by Herzog’s dead letter writing which, ironically, is an attempt to reinvigorate his participation with the world. These letters illustrate how his relationship between the physical world and the discursive one changes over the course of the novel. Bellow writes about Herzog in the beginning of the novel:

He had fallen under a spell and was writing letters to everyone under the sun. He was so stirred by these letters that from the end of June he moved from place to place with a valise full of papers. … Hidden in the country, he wrote endlessly, fanatically, to the newspapers, to people in public life, to friends and relatives and at last to the dead, his own obscure dead, and finally the famous dead.

It was the peak of summer in the Berkshires. Herzog was alone in the big old house. Normally particular about food, he now ate Silvercup bread from the paper package, beans from the can, and American cheese. Now and then he picked raspberries in the overgrown garden, lifting up the thorny canes with absentminded caution. As for sleep, he slept on a mattress without sheets—it was

\textsuperscript{44} Critics often point out the frequent switching in the text between first and third person narration, further complicating the relationship between the text, reality, the reader, and the author. See Porter (150) and Rovit (“Bellow” 179).
his abandoned marriage bed—or in the hammock, covered by his coat. Tall bearded grass and locust and maple seedlings surrounded him in the yard…

…All the while, one corner of his mind remained open to the external world.

He heard the crows in the morning. Their harsh call was delicious. He heard the thrushes at dusk. At night there was a barn owl. When he walked in the garden, excited by a mental letter, he saw roses winding about the rain spout; or mulberries—birds gorging in the mulberry tree. The days were hot, the evenings flushed and dusty. He looked keenly at everything but he felt half blind. (1-2)

Herzog’s retreat to the Berkshires is telling. The Berkshires are, of course, where the great American Romancers, Hawthorne and Melville, both resided and wrote for a time. Bellow’s use of the word “spell” and his connection to the “big old house”—Hawthorne’s “Old Manse”—is reminiscent of a romantic enchantment. But Herzog’s preoccupation with letter writing and writing in general is indicative of a larger understanding and critique of a dependence on language and story in order to escape the problems of his real, quotidian life. Language becomes his existence and that existence, to use a Bellowian phrase, is going to pot: he is eating with the rats and sleeping under a coat, his garden is thorny and overgrown. He has chosen, against Voltaire, not to “tend to his garden,” in all senses. His constant attachment to his “valise full of papers” illustrates how this discursive existence overwhelms him and constructs his being. The scattered letter writing is an attempt to wrestle control of reality via discursivity, but his mental state will not allow this to happen. Writing “to people” as opposed to merely writing (a journal, for instance) also indicates the absence of intersubjective connection; in lieu of actual human contact, his connection to others, living or dead, is through letter writing. Any connection to the

45 Clayton writes, “In style Herzog combines the two main impulses of Bellow’s fiction: realism and romance” (186).
“outer world” in the opening passage is mostly auditory, marking only the diurnal, and the sounds are made by birds, not human beings. The experience of heat in the day and the “flushed and dusty” evenings is as general as possible. His being “half blind” despite looking “keenly at everything” is a sign of his withdrawal from the world; the analytical and inferential self is keen, but the experiential one is wounded.

Comparing this scene to the one which closes the novel, one can trace the progression that Herzog makes in the course of the narrative. Despite the fact that they are pinned together (that is, separated in time by days, if not hours), the discursive ruminations that fill out the bulk of the book seem to engender these changes:

Coming back from the woods, he picked some flowers for the table. He wondered if there was a corkscrew in the drawer… Meanwhile, he filled his hat from the rambler vine, the one that clutched the rainpipe. The spines were still too green to hurt much. By the cistern were the yellow day lilies … and, back in the darker garden, he looked for peonies; perhaps some had survived. But then it struck him that he might be making a mistake, and he stopped, listening to Mrs. Tuttle’s sweeping, the rhythm of the bristles. … He went around and entered from the front, wondering what further evidence of his sanity, besides refusing to go to the hospital, he could show. Perhaps he’d stop writing letters. Yes, that was coming, in fact. The knowledge that he was done with these letters. Whatever had come over him during these last months, the spell, really seemed to be passing, really going. He set down his hat, with the roses and day lilies, on the half-painted piano, and went into his study, carrying the wine bottles in one hand like a pair of Indian clubs. Walking over notes and papers, he lay down on his
Recamier couch. As he stretched out, he took a long breath and then he lay, looking at the mesh of the screen, pulled loose by vines, and listening to the steady scratching of Mrs. Tuttle’s broom. He wanted to tell her to sprinkle the floor. She was raising too much dust. In a few minutes he would call down to here, “Damp it down, Mrs. Tuttle. There’s water in the sink.” But not just yet. At this time he had no messages for anyone. Nothing. Not a single word. (340-41).

This closing passage is clearly meant to be juxtaposed to the opening one. While Herzog is alone in the first passage, here we have Mrs. Tuttle and her sweeping, and his gathering of flowers is in preparation for a dinner date with his girlfriend, Ramona. Herzog is also “walking over notes and papers,” illustrating his triumph over language and the symbolic. Instead of an overgrown garden from which he would occasionally eat wild berries, he picks mature flowers in a gesture toward his approaching romantic encounter. Instead of eating beans from a can he is chilling wine. His hammock and bare mattress have been replaced by a Recamier couch. If the initial passage is cerebral and one of preoccupation, this passage is richly sensuous: the smell of the day lilies and the dust in the air; the sight and implied sound of the “half-painted piano”; the touch of the wine bottles that he has just removed, chilled, from a spring with “vivid cold” water, and the wine’s implied taste; the sensuous curvature of the couch; the sound of Mrs. Tuttles’ broom going back and forth across the floor. This is a saturation of the senses, to be sure. His “bodily” relationship with Ramona is reflective of this return to the empirical as well. And he has found some kind of basic, essential, fundamental peace by not saying anything at all—by purging himself of all of the discursive, structural baggage that had previously weighed him down. He reconnects with the real, material world, and the culture by and through which one
regains his humanity. His acceptance of the flying dust and his refusal to “damp it down” indicates an acceptance of chaos; if Herzog was previously trying to impose order via letter writing, his acceptance of the dust as part of the chaos of reality makes sense. Or, as critic John Jacob Clayton writes, “As Augie says, ‘When striving stops, the truth comes as a gift.’ Reality in itself has meaning; Herzog is content to live in it” (226).

All this is to say that Herzog’s progression from frantic letter writer to one who has “no messages” is Bellow’s response to a world that is so heavily invested in its discursive structuring that the only way one can get out of it, to return to Augie’s axial lines, is through a purgative writing process which leaves one more in touch with the essential as opposed to the essence. The letter writing becomes what critic Daniel Fuchs has called Herzog’s “epistolary cure” (133). This is not, however, a move that supports a poststructuralist understanding of language and signifiers as slippery and, therefore, unreliable. Unlike Derridean notions of words sous rature, acknowledging and accepting the fundamental Nietschean instability of language, Bellow’s argument here synthesizes culture (the wine, the half-painted piano, the romantic gesture of picking the flowers) and being, almost bypassing or trying to undermine language as something that, when over-utilized, becomes an encumbrance. Like his “valise full of papers,” which, until the end, he carries with him as discursive “baggage” that weighs down and muddles the clarity of his life, here Herzog’s purgative process, his frenetic letter writing, finally allows him to move beyond language to some transcendent place of being. Herzog’s “bliss” that he finds at the end of the novel is very much in reality, yet it is the “unspeakable, inter-dicted” quality of it, to return to Barthes, that defines it. Still, it is only through language that he was able to get to this particular state of being. The passage describes the bliss of reality that blissful realism celebrates in writing.
But how does Herzog arrive at this transcendent state? Early in the novel we learn that all of Herzog’s writing is a result of his “need to explain, to have it out, to justify, to put in perspective, to make amends” (2). At first, his “scrawling” had “no pattern” and was “fragments—nonsense syllables, exclamations, twisted proverbs and quotations” (3). Recalling Jameson’s notion of pastiche here, Herzog’s “fragments” of “proverbs and quotations” seem to be at once an effort to gain control of an otherwise pattern-less world via his own education and a nonsensical amalgam of what he, a professor, has swimming in his own head. As the novel progresses his writing becomes at once more focused (his letters are on specific topics and to specific people or organizations) and more historical (they contend with current cultural and historical conflicts). They also decrease in frequency. If the first half of the novel moves frantically between narrated action and Herzog’s letter writing, the second half of the novel is decidedly more focused on the narrative, indicating that Herzog is, in fact, learning something as the story moves forward. Yet despite his move from a modernist lack of “centre” through a recuperative process of pastiche and a return to historical groundedness, he never can put things in place. The ending, then, in which he has “[n]ot a single word” to say, implies that it is not necessarily particular structures, systems, or institutions (as we see in Augie) that are causing his “crack up” (like Augie, Bellow references the lost generation again here: “Not everyone threatened with a crackup can manage to go to Europe for relief” [7]), but rather their linguistic oppression; that is, the “idea” of the institution is more oppressive than the institution itself. Addressing the structures gets him nowhere; addressing language frees him.

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46 See Postmodernism, pages 16-19.
47 It is never entirely clear what Herzog is a professor of, though his published book, Romanticism and Christianity, leads one to believe that he is a professor of history, philosophy, or theology. Interestingly, this lack of “specialization” is at once indicative of his own inability to focus and a defense of Augie’s critique of specialization in that book.
Indeed, Herzog, whose first book “looks at the past with an intense need for contemporary relevance” (5), and whose second book “really took into account the revolutions and mass convulsions of the twentieth century” (6), begins to distrust his own work. That which provided a kind of binding center—a notion of historical development and causation which could account for, and ground, people’s lives—was no longer adequate. He tells us, in one of his scrawlings, that something in his head is “pounding for order,” that he is “afraid of falling apart,” and that “[t]he life of every citizen is becoming a business. This, it seems to me, is one of the worst interpretations of the meaning of human life history has ever seen. Man’s life is not a business” (11). Recalling Lyotard’s famous dictum that postmodernism is an “incredulity toward metanarratives,” what we see here is a nascent diagnosis of the condition of a lack of metanarratives (i.e. Romanticism, religion, modernism, or, in the mid to late twentieth-century, the dominance of late-capitalism), but one that repudiates rather than endorsing the postmodern freedom that this lack otherwise provides. This includes, of course, the categories that were pointed out above in the introduction: lack of subjectivity, authorship and authority (Bellow’s choice of the third person, and its frequent slippage into first person narrative, makes even more sense here), and history (recall Herzog’s first book was grounded in this).

Like Augie, Herzog’s subjectivity is often defined against the characters that he is not. Unlike Augie, however, through the letters, the reader gets a much fuller understanding of the main character’s consciousness and subjective constitution. It remains important, nonetheless, to look first at the symbolic weight of some of the other primary characters in order to understand that against which Herzog defines and delineates his own conception of self. To begin, the novel centers on Herzog’s breakdown after his second wife, Madeline (Mady), has left him for his

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48 Since all of Herzog’s letters are written in italics, italicized quotes are from letter passages unless otherwise specified.
friend and neighbor, Valentine Gersbach. Madeline is representative of both the modernist desire for control in the midst of chaos as well as a stand-in for the performative nature of subjectivity that is espoused by defenders of postmodern subjective freedom. When Herzog first meets Mady, she has just joined the Roman Catholic Church, clearly in an effort to find a moral, ethical, and behavioral center to her life. Herzog tells us, however, that he had “won her away from the Church” (5), and that “Culture—ideas—had taken the place of the Church in Mady’s heart” (71). Mady, a lost soul who initially saw the Church as a stabilizing institution, marries a professor, picks up her studies, and now, like many modernists, uses culture and ideas for that stabilization. As such, when she comes into her own intellectually, she discards Herzog as the intellectual crutch that he was. Mady is also, however, representative of a postmodern “surface” appreciation of that same culture and its ideas. This is illustrated both by her physical self and her preference for Valentine Gersbach over Herzog. Indeed, just as Herzog tells us that “for Mady [c]onversion was a theatrical event” (112), her whole life seems to be grounded in performance and not necessarily any true investment in the belief systems and metanarratives which she adopts. In one particular passage, Bellow devotes three pages (110-12) to a description of Madeline putting on her make-up and clothing. She “primed her lips with waxy stuff, then painted them a drab red, adding more years to her age,” and Herzog watches while the “pastes … dried on her skin” (112). Her preparation and its concealing and altering powers are echoed by a description of Mady’s apartment, one of “disgraced Victorian luxury” (110) with old-fashioned fixtures and a “pompous old tub” (111) where “[t]he doorknobs and locks were immobilized by many coats of paint.” The two moved “down a corridor where bags of garbage were put out on the once luxurious carpet, and down in the decayed elevator, out of the trapped air of the black shaft into the porphyry façade of the moldy lobby, into the crowded street” (113).
The juxtaposition of this decaying old apartment that was once something grand and Mady’s attempt at aging herself through her “coats of paint” is reflective of a loss of authenticity (the apartment) and the kind of reappropriation of it, or the assignation of something to it that no longer exists. Mady, in her application of make-up, attempts to change who she is in order to look older and more respectable for the church just as the apartment tries to hide, but cannot, the fact that is a simulacra of a period that itself was concerned merely with aesthetics (the “pompous tub”) without, necessarily, any real substance to it.49

This point is pushed further as Herzog and Mady leave the apartment and walk to work. Herzog is “arrested by [an] odor.” He sees

fish packed together, backs arched as if they were swimming in the crushed, smoking ice, bloody bronze, slimy black-green, gray-gold… The morning was warm, gray, damp, fresh, smelling of the river. Pausing on the metal doors of the sidewalk elevator, Moses received the raised pattern of the steel through his thin shoe soles; like Braille. But he did not interpret a message. The fish were arrested, lifelike, in the white, frothing, ground ice. The street was overcast, warm and gray, intimate, unclean flavored by the polluted river, the sexually stirring brackish tidal odor. (113)

The sensuousness of the passage reminds us of the passage that concludes the story, and suggests the connection to sense and the material world to which Herzog has returned by the end. The smell, the rich description of color, and the presence of death all seem to indicate contact with

49 It is no coincidence, I think, that these types of Victorian houses and brownstones are often referred to as “painted ladies.” Furthermore, earlier in the novel Herzog has a conversation with Zelda, Mady’s aunt, who had “dyed hair as dry as excelsior and the purplish lines on her lids,” and about whom Herzog declares, “Oh! … The things women apply to their own flesh!” after she tries to instruct him about “truth.” It seems clear here that Bellow is referring to Melville’s “deified Nature” which “paints like the harlot” and covers the “charnel house” within. That is, these women and the apartment, all of “constructed” reality, are covering up the mere matter of life to which Herzog is trying to return.
something greater than the discursive or the illusory disguise and performativity of the make-up applied earlier. In addition, Herzog cannot “interpret a message” from the “braille” of the sensation underfoot because it is part of the real, and impresses itself on him, not for interpretation, but solely for the sensation itself. The fish, like Herzog, are “arrested,” and, also like Herzog, “lifelike” at this particular point in the narrative. The connection is made clearer as Herzog tells Mady that the fish remind him of his mother’s Baltic provinces, and, by extension, her death. But she was “one of the dead, dead, without effect on the new generation” (114). The implication here is that Mady, who Herzog “couldn’t expect … to consider his mother,” is part of a generation for whom death, and the enormous weight of reality that it brings, is part of the same performative reality of Mady and her apartment. Following this scene, Mady and Herzog sit in a coffee shop, and “[o]n the yellow-plated table was a red flower. The sharp dots of the blossom in a metal holder, or choker, sunk to the neck. Curious to know whether it was plastic too, Herzog touched it. Finding it real, he quickly drew back his fingers” (114). Herzog’s surprise at finding the flower real reflects his experience of a period of performance and simulacra—Herzog’s surprise is in the face of the avoidance of reality that he sees all around him: of our appearance, of our living spaces, of death. And Mady’s exclamations, “I can’t wait for you, Moses,” “What are you dawdling for?” and, “You know I’m in a hurry” (113-14) are all indicative of her desire to flit past these cold, hard realities in favor of ones of image, performatism, and half-hearted belief.

Madeline’s search for a systematic understanding of life that will provide her with a structure of reality through which she can “save [herself] from … I suppose the world is nihilism” (103) despite the fact that, as her inconsistency demonstrates, “if existence is nausea then faith is an uncertain relief” (105), stems from her upbringing. Her father, Fitz Pontritter, is an impresario of
“powerful personality” and “first-rate intelligence” (107). He is “burly” and “masterful.” He “liked Spanish costumes, and when Herzog last saw him he was wearing white duck trousers of bullfighter’s cut and alpargatas. Powerful, isolated threads of coarse white grew from his tanned scalp” (28-29). Pontritter and his wife, Tennie, who “sacrificed herself to a great artist” (108), are at the very least partly to blame. Pontritter is the exemplary late modernist figure who forces his art onto people, making them capitulate to his artistic dictums and approaches, his wife his most abused victim. Herzog understands him as an artist of the worst kind. Indeed, Herzog thinks about Tennie, and was

all too well aware of the layers upon layers of reality—loathsomeness, arrogance, deceit, and then—God help us all!—truth, as well. … Thirty years the bohemian wife, the platitudes of that ideology threadbare, cynically exploited by old Pontritter, Tennie remained faithful, chained in the dull silver “abstract” jewelry that she wore. (109)

The passage serves as a send up of modernism and of those who hold on to its vestiges. The “ideology” is seen, like Pontritter, as pompous (think of Mady’s tub, here), outdated, and, rather than avant-garde, bourgeois and very much invested, hypocritically, in the capitalist project (Mady tells Herzog “that the old man needed fifty thousand a year, and that he got it, too, the old Svengali, out of women and stage-struck suckers” [108]). Tennie’s “faith” in the “threadbare” “platitudes of that ideology,” reflects the blind followers of a “revolutionary” modernism, and this is redoubled by her “abstract” jewelry, the quotation marks driving home the irony of a critique of what was once a revolutionary aesthetic movement, but now merely a caricature of itself.
In a similar vein, Mady’s new lover, Valentine Gersbach, is representative of a new kind of figure, one who has the weighty intellectual and emotional presence of a Pontritter, but without any of the sophisticated aesthetic history of modernism behind him. He is, like Rinehart in *Invisible Man*, the protean, postmodern figure of the novel. Recalling Jameson on the postmodern subject, the “liberation … from the older *anomie* of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling” (*Postmodernism* 15). If Pontritter’s depth of feeling was, though hypocritical, somewhat authentic, then Gersbach’s character, who displays a huge emotional range, is, in fact, merely going through the motions. Herzog tells us that “[Gersbach] appropriated all the emotions about him, as if by divine or spiritual right. He could do more with them, and therefore he simply took them over. He was a big man, too big for anything but the truth” (61). He continues:

He’s a ringmaster, popularizer, liaison for the elites. He grabs up celebrities and brings them before the public. And he makes all sorts of people feel that he has exactly what they’ve been looking for. Subtlety for the subtle. Warmth for the warm. For the crude, crudity. For the crooks, hypocrisy. Atrocity for the atrocious. Whatever your heart desires. Emotional plasma which can circulate in any system. (215)

Gersbach’s ability to play many roles is reminiscent of Pontritter (that Mady would choose as her lover someone who is so similar to her father whom she despises is another discussion), yet his performance seems empty.⁵⁰ Indeed, as Herzog continues his description of Gersbach he makes

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⁵⁰ Bellow’s reference to “desire” here as well could easily be applied to a Marxist understanding of late capitalism. See Jameson (*Postmodernism* 215) or Žižek’s understanding of Lacanian *jouissance*, in which one is driven “towards knowledge about his desire,” where “the analyst wants effectively to steal from him his most intimate
a concrete connection between him and some of the tenets of postmodernism. “Modern consciousness,” says Herzog, “has this great need to explode its own postures. It teaches the truth of the creature. It throws shit on all pretensions and fictions. A man like Gersbach can be gay. … Exclaiming ‘I love you!’ or ‘This I believe.’ And while moved by these ‘beliefs’ he steals you blind. He makes realities nobody can understand” (193). He continues further on, “Emancipation resulting in madness. Unlimited freedom to choose and play a tremendous variety of roles with a lot of coarse energy. … I only meant to say that Gersbach won’t let anything go, he tries everything on” (216). Clearly, the nod to throwing “shit on all pretensions and fictions” is easily aligned with Lyotard’s “incredulity toward metanarratives,” and Gersbach’s “trying everything on” seems a prescient nod to Judith Butler’s conception of subjective performativity. Gersbach, then, becomes the protean subjectivity of postmodernism; he is the all-pleasing, all-being object of desire who “makes realities nobody can understand” and “tries everything on.” This “unlimited freedom,” this lack of metanarrative, for which people are in such desire that they will latch on to anything—as Tennie does to Pontritter, as Mady does to religion, and as Gersbach’s listeners (he started as a radio d.j.) do to him—is the nascent postmodern condition with which Bellow is in touch and prognosticating. Early in the novel Herzog writes in one of his letters, “People are dying—it is no metaphor—for lack of something real to carry home when day is done. See how willing they are to accept the wildest nonsense” (28). The wildest nonsense they end up accepting, it turns out, is Gersbach’s form of aimless and empty emotional salesmanship.

What, then, does Herzog (and Bellow) have to offer instead of either an exhausted modernism or a burgeoning postmodern conception of the self and culture? The answer is in his letter
writing. Like Augie, Herzog believes in something similar to the axial lines of life—a transcendent notion of the social and the Absolute, truth and beauty. And like Augie, Herzog’s personal life, his reality, is continually thwarting his efforts to achieve some kind of apotheosis. Unlike Augie, however, whose optimism and a notional understanding of a desire for something greater carry him through, Herzog’s failure to achieve what he calls a “grand synthesis” (207) between the real and the ideal forces him to letter writing and trying “to make coherent sense” (325). Herzog first takes issue with notions of “truth.” Truth for Herzog becomes, instead of a transcendent notion of the absolute, a reference to a Hobbesian notion of brutal reality. Early in the novel he has a conversation with Mady’s Aunt Zelda, who tries to get him to accept the “truth” about his relationship with Mady. He responds, “Ah! … So you love the truth!”, and the narrator tells us that Zelda “was giving him the business about truth” (37). Later in a discussion with Sandor Himmelstein, his lawyer, Herzog realizes that Himmelstein, and other reality instructors, were always “blasting you with their ‘truth’” (86). “Truth” and “reality,” here, begin to imbricate in a way that is unacceptable to Herzog. Reality and realism become, according to Himmelstein, “facts,” which are “nasty.” Herzog responds, however, that Himmelstein “think[s] they’re true because they’re nasty” (86). At another point in the novel he cries out to an imagined Jimmy Hoffa, “What makes you think realism must be brutal?” (218). His point is in regard to the current cultural climate as well as the wastelander’s outlook of the brutality of the age. His response is often the same: a cry for a return to a transcendent notion of truth that contains within it notions of the beauty of reality and of life itself—blissful realism. The tension in the novel arises, however, from Herzog’s inability to synthesize the brutality of what is actually happening to him (cuckolding, divorce, money problems, possible nervous breakdown)
and his quest for the transcendent—to bind the real and the transcendent, realism/reality and bliss.

In order to elucidate how he achieves this synthesis at the end (if he does at all), one needs to understand Herzog’s (and, by extension, Bellow’s) critique of modern society (and, by extension, the contemporary literary scene and project). We have already touched obliquely on some of these issues via other characters in the book, but Herzog himself provides the most explicit critiques. Herzog’s book in progress (we can read his letter writing as a failed attempt to finish that book) was supposed to have “ended with a new angle on the modern condition, showing how life could be lived by renewing universal connections; overturning the last of the Romantic errors about the uniqueness of the Self; revising the old Western, Faustian ideology; investigating the social meaning of Nothingness. And more.” And he continues, “But that was one of the problems I was working on, you see, that people can be free now but the freedom doesn’t have any content. It’s like a howling emptiness” (39). Herzog’s work, like his thoughts, is based on grand, unfocused schemes, and the “howling emptiness” reflects, in a sense, his inability to make the kind of synthesis for which he yearns. It also reflects Lukács’ description of modernism as an “escape into nothingness” (Realism 29). Herzog’s desire is to fill this emptiness with a narrative structure that does not 1) overwhelm and instruct as the modernist paradigm does and 2) does not give in to nihilism as he predicts postmodernism will do. In a letter to Shapiro, a colleague for whom he is writing a book review, he writes:

> Are all the traditions used up, the beliefs done for, the consciousness of the masses not yet ready for the next development? Is this the full crisis of dissolution? Has the filthy moment come when moral feeling dies, conscience disintegrates, and respect for liberty, law, public decency, all the rest, collapses
in cowardice, decadence, blood? . . . We mustn't forget how quickly the visions of
genius become the canned goods of the intellectuals. The canned sauerkraut of
Spengler's “Prussian Socialism,” the commonplaces of the Wasteland outlook,
the cheap mental stimulants of Alienation, the cant and rant of pipsqueaks about
Inauthenticity and Forlornness. I can't accept this foolish dreariness. We are
talking about the whole of mankind. The subject is too great, Shapiro. It
torments me to insanity that you should be so misled. A merely aesthetic critique
of modern history? After the wars and the mass killings? You are too intelligent
for this. You inherited rich blood. Your father peddled apples. (74-75)

His faulting Shapiro for a “merely aesthetic critique of modern history” is both a backward and
forward looking glance. His critique involves a castigation of a formalist (and hence modernist)
conception of history and a prescient understanding of an approaching postmodern
understanding of history that neglects real suffering in favor of play and surface. Late twentieth-
century concepts of historiography, ones that see history as text as opposed to the real, is given
over in favor of an appreciation for what hurts. Indeed, Herzog's comment that Shapiro's father
“peddled apples” is a stern reminder of the importance of his own history, and the very real
essence of the real work of his father. In another rant Herzog thinks:

…so that his recent misfortunes might be seen as a collective project, himself
participating, to destroy his vanity and his pretensions to a personal life so that he
might disintegrate and suffer and hate, like so many others, not on anything so
distinguished as a cross, but down in the mire of post-Renaissance, post-
humanistic, post-Cartesian dissolution, next door to the Void. … [Y]ou must
sacrifice your poor, squawking, niggardly individuality—which may be nothing
anyway (from an analytic viewpoint) but a persistent infantile megalomania, or (from a Marxian point of view) a stinking little bourgeois property—to historical necessity. And to truth. And truth is true only as it brings down more disgrace and dreariness upon human beings, so that if it shows anything except evil it is illusion, and not truth. But of course he, Herzog, predictably bucking such trends, had characteristically, obstinately, defiantly, blindly but without sufficient courage or intelligence tried to be a marvelous Herzog, a Herzog who, perhaps clumsily, tried to live out marvelous qualities vaguely comprehended. Granted he had gone too far, beyond his talents and his powers, but this was the cruel difficulty of a man who had strong impulses, even faith, but lacked clear ideas. (93)

Here Herzog defends his own individuality against what reads as an existentialist resignation to the void, but also a dismissal of one’s subjectivity to the notion of postmodern constructedness. His battle is with a particular belief, a hard-boiled one, that truth must be “nasty,” and to believe otherwise is to become a “dreamy boy,” as Himmelstein calls him (86). His mention of a “distinguished cross” is an admission of the necessity of some kind of belief, some kind of metanarrative, Christian or otherwise, and not merely resignation to the force of history (the wastelander perspective). But, presciently, we see the prediction of a breakdown of the more traditional conceptions of the subject and truth into a more Nietzschean and poststructural conception of discursivity. Herzog’s battle to remain an individual in the face of these trends is “marvelous,” and the mixture here of both defensiveness and self-derision is reflective of the kind of position that someone like Graff finds himself in the late twentieth century.
Herzog’s personal relationship to the zeitgeist is doubled by his (and Bellow’s) relationship to the waning aesthetics of modernism and their allegiance to form. Herzog writes in one of his letters, “It was easy for the Wastelanders to be assimilated to totalitarianism. Here the responsibility of artists remains to be assessed. To have assumed, for instance, that the deterioration of language and its debasement was tantamount to dehumanization led straight to cultural fascism” (76). This is a popular position for those who criticized who came to be known as conservative modernist artists, particularly Eliot and Pound.51

Instead, though different than the “catch as catch can” freestyle writing of Augie, Bellow reiterates his position in regard to the bliss of realistic description and the appreciation, not the denigration, of the real and the quotidian. In an exemplary passage, while getting ready for a date with Ramona, Herzog unbottened his shirt and let it fall behind him to the bathroom floor. Then he ran the water in the sink. The crude oval of the basin was smooth and beautiful in the gray light. He touched the almost homogeneous whiteness with his fingertips and breathed in the water odors and the subtle stink rising from the throat of the waste pipe. Unexpected intrusions of beauty. This is what life is. He bent his head under the flowing tap and sighed with shock and then with pleasure. … Herzog’s hands were on the taps; the left now shut off the warm water, the right increased the pressure of the cold. It poured over his scalp and his neck. He was shivering with the extreme violence of thought and feeling. (218)

51Bellow was famous for refusing to sign a petition for the release of Ezra Pound. In a 1956 letter to William Faulkner, he wrote, “Pound advocated in his poems and in his broadcasts enmity to the Jews and preached hatred and murder. Do you mean to ask me to join you in honoring a man who called for the destruction of my kinsmen?” (Letters 144).
The ironic simplicity of description here is juxtaposed with Herzog’s complicated subjectivity in a way that manifests the texture of blissful realism. The unbuttoning of the shirt leaves his body exposed, and we get a sense from the active motion of unbuttoning to the passivity of “letting it fall” of an imbrication of subjectivity and objectivity. The language is such that his own actions and observations are wrapped up and in dialectical competition with the forcefulness of the objects around him. The beauty of the “crude oval” and the “almost homogeneous whiteness” of the basin are juxtaposed to, or working in concert with, his own sense perception of touch, sight, and the earthy, human smell from the pipe, which he anthropomorphizes as having a “throat.” The fact that these perceptions are “intrusions,” giving, in effect, agency to that which is affecting Herzog and his own sense perceptions, indicates that beauty comes not from the aesthetic form itself but rather from the interplay of subject and object or, by extension, between object and the descriptive and imaginative faculties of the author. The “shock” and “pleasure” he receives from the water, which develops into “extreme violence of thought and feeling” connects the subjective, objective, and aesthetic in a way that underscores the importance of realism in aesthetic enjoyment. If, as Barthes writes, bliss is “held to be unspeakable, beyond words” (Pleasure vi), here Bellow tries to undermine this assumption. It is telling that the passage, rich in objective description, is interrupted by Herzog’s mind, indicating, again, a dialectic between consciousness and the empirical, working to produce this “extreme violence of thought and feeling” which leaves his body shivering and his mind racing. The declarative “This is what life is” brings us back to a Lukácsian understanding of the necessity of realism in fiction, of the true aesthetic pleasure coming not from “the negative knowledge of the actual world” (Adorno, et al. 146), as Adorno would have it, but rather “the artistic dialectic of appearance and essence,” as Lukács would (“Realism” 39).
This understanding of a dialectical movement between reality and transcendence, between realism and bliss, is tempered however. As Herzog discovers, the lure of existential bliss can often become overly romanticized. His inability to finish his book on Romanticism indicates his unease with this period and its tenets. His house in the Berkshires, which is a “fixer-upper” and constantly requires his attention, reminds us of the pressure that the outside world and its attendant reality can put on the transcendent. At a point when Herzog is particularly burdened with scholarly work, “He had all this paper to get through, and no help. The house was waiting—huge, hollow, urgent” (121). Paper, here, like his burdensome valise full of papers and the papers that he steps on and over at the close of the novel, is always indicative of his mental, discursive work. Here again the house and its physical needs are butting heads with, instead of synthesizing with, the needs of his mind. In a more telling passage, Herzog, on his way to Martha’s Vineyard, looks down at the sea and

> his breathing had become freer. His heart was greatly stirred by the open horizon; the deep colors; the faint iodine pungency of the Atlantic rising from weeds and mollusks; the white, fine, heavy sand; but principally by the green transparency as he looked down to the stony bottom webbed with golden lines. Never still. If his soul could cast a reflection so brilliant, and so intensely sweet, he might beg God to make such use of him. But that would be too simple. But that would be too childish. The actual sphere is not clear like this, but turbulent, angry. A vast human action is going on. Death watches. So if you have some happiness, conceal it. And when you heart is full, keep your mouth shut also. (91-92)

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52 This is, perhaps, another allusion to Melville. Herzog’s trip to the sea, before which he exclaims, “To the sea! To the sea!—What sea? It was the bay—between East Chop and West Chop it wasn’t the sea; the water was quiet” (23),
While this is similar to the bathroom passage quoted above in its glorification of the empirical world, it is also a warning against the romanticizing of reality to the point that one has neglected the harder reality that lies behind it. The detail of description as well as the odor, which carries through both the bathroom passage and the fishmonger passage before it, is indicative of a commitment to the senses that threads through the novel and is illustrated in its purest form at the end of the novel. Here, however, we see a reference to Augie’s “axial lines” in the “golden lines” of the reflection in the sea. His admission that to over-romanticize this is “childish” (one is reminded of Wordsworth’s “Intimations of Immortality”) indicates a respect and a recognition that one has to face the turbulent world which, like the protean lines at the bottom of the sea, is fraught with ambiguity. His desire to lock up his happiness, in particular his direction to “keep your mouth shut also” indicates, like the end of the novel, that often it is via language, by expression, that we lose these particular notions of calm and beauty. The tone here, however, is a much graver one than the one that Herzog leaves us with. Herzog, in fact, defends the Romantics from derision later in the novel, writing, “I do not want to sneer at the term Romantic. Romanticism guarded the ‘inspired condition,’ preserved the poetic, philosophical, and religious teachings, the teachings and records of transcendence and the most generous ideas of mankind” (165). Herzog is attempting, then, to understand this “inspired condition,” this notion of transcendence in the face of reality. It is his refusal to give in to a particularly Hobbesian view, however, that allows him to make this synthesis.

and “He had to calm down these overstrained galloping nerves, put out this murky fire inside. He yearned for the Atlantic—the sand, the brine flavor, the therapy of cold water” (27), is reflective of Ishmael’s need to go to the sea. Ishmael tells us that the sea was his way “of driving off the spleen,” his “substitute for pistol and ball” (18). Herzog, however, rejects the sea and returns, quickly, to Chicago, where, ironically, he contemplates murdering Gersbach with a pistol. Bellow’s allusion here, and the parallel to the sea’s own mystery, is one that both accepts the ambiguity of it (remember Ishmael’s declaration that “[The sea] is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all” [20]), and recognizes the necessity of reality as well. Herzog starts off, perhaps, an Ahab, but finishes an Ishmael.
Herzog’s escape, then, like Augie’s, is one from the constricting, confining, and particularly negative views of reality that modern man holds into an appreciation for the beauty of reality free from discursive intrusion. He understands this conception to exist within the limitations of a turbulent and sometimes nasty world, however. He writes that man

*is provoked to take revenge upon himself, a revenge of derision, contempt, denial of transcendence. This last, his denial, is based upon former conceptions of human life or on images of man at present impossible to maintain. But the problem as I see it is not one of definition but of total reconsideration of human qualities…*

This reconsideration is one based on notions of transcendence and idealism, but within the realm of *reason*; that is, within the world in which we exist. He continues in regard to contemporary notions of transcendence, “*This is thought to be attainable only in the negative and is so pursued in philosophy and literature as well as in sexual experience, or with the aid of narcotics, or in “philosophical,” “gratuitous” crime and similar paths of horror. (It never seems to occur to such ‘criminals’ that to behave with decency to another human being might also be ‘gratuitous.’)*” (164). He concludes this particular letter, as he hears “the soft dense rumbling of falling masonry, the splintering of wood and glass”: “*Reason exists! Reason … And belief based on reason. Without which the disorder of the world will never be controlled by mere organization*” (165). His Habermasian call to reason in the midst of the physical world crumbling around him is telling; just as his own house in the Berkshires is a constant reminder of the empirical in the face of the metaphysical or discursive, here, like the fish before, the physical world intrudes and interrupts his thinking. This formal juxtaposition, which occurs over and over again in the novel, is again indicative of Bellow’s larger project of blissful realism. And just as he “watch[es] the
white dust of plaster in the serene air of metamorphic New York,” and he “speaks words of understanding and prophecy,” he asks himself, “But can thought wake you from the dream of existence? Not if it becomes a second realm of confusion, another more complicated dream, the dream of intellect, the delusion of total explanations” (166, italics original). Again, the juxtaposition of thought and the empirical is telling, and his own conviction at the end of the passage that just as the world is “turbulent” so is the process of trying to put the world to rights via discursive structuring and thinking itself. Bellow’s italicizing of the final word is, of course, an ironic undercutting of Herzog’s italicized letter writing.

Just as Augie’s experience at the hospital is a turning point in that novel, here Herzog’s abandoned plan to shoot Gersbach and Mady after he hears that they may have mistreated his daughter serves as an epiphany (tellingly, he hears about this possibility in a letter). Upon seeing Gersbach tenderly bathing his daughter he decides that his plan was theatrical and ridiculous. He thinks, “To shoot him!—an absurd thought. As soon as Herzog saw the actual person giving an actual bath, the reality of it, the tenderness of such a buffoon to a little child, his intended violence turned into theater, into something ludicrous” (258). The reference to absurdity is most likely a reference to Camus’ The Stranger, and an explicit rejection of the absurd and deterministic nature of that novel and the murder which is its catalyst; Bellow’s reaction is one of laughter—his critique of the void that has been persistent throughout the text comes to a head here. There are, of course, consequences to murder, and there, are, of course, real people involved. Herzog is no Raskolnikov, and certainly no Meursault. After he leaves the house he meets with his friend Asphalter, to whom he exclaims:

The new attitude which makes life a trifle not worth anyone’s anguish threatens the heart of civilization. But it isn’t a question of dread, or any such words at all.
... Still, what can thoughtful people and humanists do but struggle toward suitable words? Take me, for instance, I’ve been writing letters helter-skelter in all directions. More words. I go after reality with language. Perhaps I’d like to change it all into language, to force Madeleine and Gersbach to have a *Conscience*. There’s a word for you. I must be trying to keep tight the tensions without which human beings can no longer be called human. If they don’t suffer, they’ve gotten away from me. And I’ve filled the world with letters to prevent their escape. I want them in human form, and so I conjure up a whole environment and catch them in the middle. I put my whole heart into these constructions. But they are constructions. (272)

This is, of course, in reference to the wastelander outlook as well as existentialists and nihilists. His admission, however, that he is trying to refashion the world in words, that he is “go[ing] after reality with language,” foreshadows his escape from language at the end of the novel. This escape is not to a void that is *devoid* of essence and therefore purely existence. It is not one in which words and discursive structures disappear altogether. It is, rather, a place of ambiguity, one where the dialectic between hard reality and essence comingle and coexist in playful and chaotic harmony. If, as Lukács tells us, the novel is the site of “transcendental homelessness,” where the transcendent works within the “dialectic of appearance and essence,” then Herzog’s condition at the conclusion makes perfect formal sense.

As we approach the end of the novel, then, Herzog becomes more at ease with this particular binary. He begins to understand that “The dream of man’s heart, however much we may distrust and resent it, is that life may complete itself in significant pattern. Some incomprehensible way. Before death. Not irrationally but incomprehensibly fulfilled” (303). This appeal to reason but
resignation to the incomprehensible is the project (and effect) of the novel. As we move toward the end Herzog’s letter writing is less frequent, indicating a return to reality, and the letters that we do get are less polemical and pedantic. For instance:

The light of truth is never far away, and no human being is too negligible or corrupt to come into it. … But to accept ineffectuality, banishment to personal life, confusion. . . . . . Since the last question, also the first one, the question of death, offers us the interesting alternatives of disintegrating ourselves by our own wills in proof of our “freedom,” or the acknowledging that we owe a human life this waking spell of existence, regardless of the void. (After all, we have no positive knowledge of that void.) (314)

Once again, his recourse to existentialist conceptions of the void is indicative of his full belief in essence, or the soul, and his belief that life, regardless of the current state of humanity, is owed a debt of gratitude. The void as a negative conception (since to prove its existence is to die) becomes useful in its creation of the desire for something greater—for transcendence.

And more, here:

Why not say rather that people of powerful imagination, given to dreaming deeply and to raising up marvelous and self-sufficient fictions, turn to suffering sometimes to cut into their bliss, as people pinch themselves to feel awake. I know that my suffering, if I may speak of it, has often been like that, a more extended form of life, a striving for true wakefulness and an antidote to illusion, and therefore I can take no moral credit for it. (317)

This is in response to a car crash he has while his daughter is in the car (tellingly, like Augie in Mexico, he receives a blow to the head). He is carrying the gun with which he intended to kill
Mady and Gersbach, and has no permit for it. After being escorted to the police precinct, he is released when his brother, Will, posts his bail. He thinks to himself, “Is this, by chance, the reality you have been looking for, Herzog, in your earnest Herzog way? Down in the ranks with other people—ordinary life? By yourself you can’t determine which reality is real?” (287).

Indeed, his desire, via his arrest, to have truck with the harsh realities of the world, with “nasty” facts, is too much for an “imaginative” man. Yet, it is certainly an example of someone “cutting into their bliss,” and an “antidote from illusion.” There is a realization, however, that it is via these illusions, these “oughts,” and “ideals,” that one maintains a positive and hopeful outlook over reality.

One of his last and most important letters Herzog writes is addressed to Nietzsche, and it concerns the cooptation of Nietzschean philosophy as a defense for nihilism. Herzog writes:

*No, really, Herr Nietzsche, I have great admiration for you. Sympathy. You want to make us able to live with the void. Not lie ourselves into good-naturedness, trust, ordinary middling human considerations, but to question as has never been questioned before, relentlessly, with iron determination, into evil, through evil, past evil, accepting no abject comfort. The most absolute, the most piercing questions. Rejecting mankind as it is, that ordinary, practical, thief, stinking, unilluminated, sodden rabble, not only the laboring rabble, but even worse the “educated” rabble with its books and concerts and lectures, its liberalism and its romantic theatrical “loves” and “passions”—it all deserves to die, it will die. … Humankind lives mainly upon perverted ideas. Perverted, your ideas are no better than those of the Christianity you condemn. Any philosopher who wants to keep his contact with mankind should pervert his own system in advance to see*
how it will really look a few decades after adoption. … Yours, under the veil of
Maya, M.E.H. (319)

The passage is a defense for the kind of loss of structural influence that Herzog finds at the end
of the novel (“Not a single word”), but it avoids the kind of “übermensch” unconcern with
human structures that Nietzsche would otherwise endorse. His signing off “under the veil of
Maya” is indicative, as the previous quote suggests, of an acceptance of the veil of illusion and a
desire, as in Augie, to operate within this world, working within the dialectic between the real
and the phenomenological. Again, Bellow endorses the position of allowing for the fact that the
world may be an illusion, but that to therefore live solely in the world of ideas is inadequate, as is
the merely pragmatic and functional. He writes and muses at the end of the novel that despite his
love of the metaphysical, “the intellectual has been a Separatist. And what kind of synthesis is a
Separatist likely to come up with? Luckily for me, I didn’t have the means to get too far away
from our common life. I am glad of that. I mean to share with other human beings as far as
possible … Herzog felt a deep, dizzy eagerness to begin” (322). The synthesis of ambiguity
here, what Malcolm Bradbury has called, “suspension in ambiguity” (76), becomes the necessary
participation in the reality of the world and the necessary maintenance of a search for absolutes,
all with the twentieth-century knowledge that this search is most probably in vain.53

And this returns us to Lukács’ understanding of the novel as the manifestation of this
particular tension. According to Lukács, the novel sees the “limited nature of the mutually alien
worlds of subject and object,” but “allows the duality of the world to subsist” in a “unified
world” which is “purely formal.” He continues, “The irony of the novel is the self-correction of
the world’s fragility” (75). What else is Moses E. Herzog doing than trying to make this

53 This notion, akin to faith but referred to more often in Bellow as “hope,” will be explored more fully in regard to
Updike’s relationship to Kierkegaard and the novel.
synthesis despite his knowing that it is, ultimately, purely a formal gesture? The formalities to which he attends at the end of the novel (the romantic gestures of gathering candles and flowers and of chilling the wine) as well as his acceptance of ambiguity, of the impossibility of putting the world to rights, is, in effect, a novelistic gesture at the end of a novel. As noted at the opening of this discussion, the connection of the opening to the end of the novel, the same period with a tale in the middle, makes the story oblate—that is, it is flattened at the poles until nearly touching, and yet containing within it its whole. The end of the novel, in which we see Herzog returning to the world and to his Dionysian lover Ramona (who was “serious about pleasure” [151]), is his attempt to create this novelistic synthesis. In his seminal *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode writes, “Men in the middest make considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, by the provision of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle” (17). It would appear that this is exactly what Herzog (and Bellow), are trying to do. Bellow tells us:

> If Herzog knew the loathsomeness of a particular existence, knew that the whole was required to redeem every separate spirit, it was then, in his terrible passion, which he tried, *impossibly*, to share, telling his story. Then, in the midst of it, the realization would come over him that he had no right to tell, to inflict it, that his craving for confirmation, for help, for justification, was useless. Worse, it was unclean. (156-57 italics mine)

> Herzog writes to God toward the end of the novel, “*How my mind has struggled to make coherent sense. I have not been too good at it. But have desired to do your unknowable will, taking it, and you, without symbols. Everything of intensest significance. Especially if divested of me*” (325-26). Herzog’s desire to “make coherent sense” through “telling his story” is
certainly reflective of Kermode’s observation (akin to Lukács’) about the novel itself. The irony of making everything of “intensest significance” is, of course, the novelist’s vocation. Herzog’s knowledge that “Awareness was his work; extended consciousness was his line, his business. Vigilance” (278), again is indicative of the attention that is demanded of any novelist. Yet, by the end, it is this keen awareness, detached from the necessity of “making coherent” sense via his letters, that allows him some peace of mind. Nevertheless, Bellow has ironically folded this into a complete and self-contained narrative. The dismissal of “symbols” in favor of intensity of feeling and sensitivity, which is reflected in his rich description of scene in the closing passage, is his attempt to rid himself of the structural and discursive net in which he had been caught and floundering. Bellow’s description of this, however, ironically undermines this attempt. Or, by closing off this particular narrative (starting and stopping at the same place and time), he has successfully created a “whole” without deviating from the particular. Herzog has been “divested” of both intellectual and personal baggage, and it is through a purgative writing process that he does so.

And yet, Bellow the novelist is ultimately what allows this return to happen. Herzog recognizes this as he awaits Ramona’s arrival and writes:

*Everywhere on earth, the model of natural creation seems to be the ocean. The mountains certainly look that way, glossy, plunging, and that haughty blue color. And even these scrappy lawns. What keeps these red brick houses from collapse on these billows is their inner staleness. I smell it yawning through the screens. The odor of souls is a brace to the walls. Otherwise the wrinkling of the hills would make them crumble.* (339)
The Melvillian return here to the ocean is countered, like Ishmael at the end of *Moby-Dick*, by the telling of this tale. It is countered by the account of an individual who wants to escape solipsism, and does so, ironically, through writing, and through the telling of his tale by another individual. The “odor of souls” is the glory not to the unknowable, but rather to the quotidian itself and the people who perform these “stale” tasks. To return to Kermode, “The novel is a lie only as our quotidian inventions are lies” (135), but “the world a novel makes … is unlike the world of our common experience because it is created and because it has the potency of a humanly imaginative creation” (137-38). As Herzog is poised for his return to the world—and Ramona—at the end of the novel, having written himself back to reality (much like narrator in *Invisible Man*), Bellow closes the novel, making a whole whose character jumps into the world of ambiguity. Or, as Lukács tells us, “The voyage is completed: the way begins” (73).
CHAPTER 2: “THE STRAIGHT LINE OF PARADOX”: RABBIT ANGSTROM

Fin-de-siècle sickliness became / High-stepping Modernism, then went lame. / Art offers now, not cunning and exile, / But blank explosions and a hostile smile.

– John Updike, “Midpoint”

[F]lee away from anxiety, he cannot, for he loves it; really love it, he cannot, for he flees from it.

– Søren Kierkegaard, The Concept of Anxiety

[T]he critic must establish by examination of the work whether a writer’s view of the world is based on the acceptance or rejection of angst, whether it involves a flight from reality or a willingness to face up to it.

– Georg Lukács, Realism in Our Time

In his introduction to the Everyman’s Library edition of Rabbit Angstrom: A Tetralogy, John Updike writes that he conceived of the collection’s first novel, Rabbit, Run, in part as a response to Kerouac’s On the Road: “Rabbit, Run was meant to be a realistic demonstration of what happens when a young American family man goes on the road – the people get left behind and hurt” (x). This sentiment provides the thematic foundation for this and the remaining novels of the tetralogy (and much of Updike’s oeuvre, for that matter): the binary tension between the desire for freedom and the restraints that the reality of the world—and adult responsibility—put on that freedom. The connection to Bellow’s Augie is clear, as both Rabbit and Augie struggle to declare their autonomy and agency against a world that would take it away. And just as
Bellow had to “be there with buckets to catch it” while writing *Augie*, so Updike, according to William Pritchard, broke free of the confines of formal and psychological restraints while writing *Run*: “When, as [Updike] said about the writing of [*Rabbit, Run*], the novel ‘took off,’ couldn’t that mean a release into more extreme, less ironically and humorously controlled responses to life, especially as made through the consciousness that so dominates the book?” (48). *Rabbit, Run*, then, is Updike’s *Augie*—a release from formal strictures into a boundless and bounding realism.

This is not to say, however, that Bellow and Updike were aesthetic and thematic twins. While Bellow was committed to realism, it was of a type that allowed him to expound upon his own ideas; his protagonists are generally a mouthpiece for Bellow the author.54 Updike’s protagonists often speak for him, but his work is more keenly concerned with reflecting and elevating reality via crystalline yet transcendent prose; or, as he puts it, his writing tries to reflect the fact that “the world wants describing, the world wants to be observed and ‘hymned’” (Plath xiv). Often this hymning foregrounds the writing at the expense, some have argued, of the work as a whole (the common critique that he “writes beautifully but has nothing to say” [Samuels 11]).55 This criticism is short-sighted, for it is often the very beauty of his prose that proves to be the vehicle and the message. Indeed, as Charles Thomas Samuels has argued, “Though occasionally drawing attention to itself, his prose is always precise and supple, equally adapted to fine emotional nuance and the painterly objectivity with which he limns the external world” (5).

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54 For a critique of this formal “shortcoming” in Bellow, see Poirier.
55 To a large extent I am drawing on Tanner here, who writes, “It is my contention that many American writers are unusually aware of this quite fundamental and inescapable paradox: that to exist, a book, a vision, a system, like a person, has to have an outline—there can be no identity without contour. But contours signify arrest, they involve restraint and the acceptance of limits. . . Can [the author] find a *stylistic* freedom which is not simply a meaningless incoherence, and can he find a stylistic form which will not trap him inside the existing forms of previous literature?” (17, 19). For Tanner, then, the American author between 1950 and 1970 foregrounds language in an attempt to find this “middle ground.”
To many, this foregrounding of language might suggest a modernist prioritizing of form, and one is reminded of Lukács’ critique of Zola and other naturalists and modernists. But Updike’s relationship to modernist aesthetics is more nuanced than this. If Bellow was anti-wastelander, Updike looked to continental modernists for guidance: he revered Proust (“In the interminable rain of his prose, I felt goodness. … For all his biochemistry, Proust emphasizes the medieval duality of the body/spirit: ‘the body imprisons the spirit in a fortress’” [*Pieces* 167]) and Joyce (Updike’s novel *The Centaur* draws heavily on *Ulysses* in its use of mythic structure). And yet while Updike revered these authors as craftsmen—their attention to and foregrounding of language—his opinion of their aesthetic project as a whole is more complicated. He says about Eliot, for example,

> I’ve often wondered what Eliot meant in his famous essay on *Ulysses*. Does he mean that we are ourselves so depleted of psychic energy, of spiritual and primitive force, that we can do little but retell old stories? Does he mean that human events, love, death, wandering, certain challenges overcome or certain challenges which sweep us under, have already attained classic narrative form? I don’t quite know what Eliot meant. (Plath 36)

His opinion of Nabokov, who he has called “the best-equipped writer in the English-speaking world” (*Pieces* 199) but for whom he has also “expressed … doubt that his aesthetic models—chess puzzles and protective colorations in lepidopter—can be very helpful ideals for the rest of us” (221), is even more thorny. All this is to say that Updike is invested in craft, but not solely for its own sake: “Art is part game, part grim erotic tussle with Things As They are; the

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56 In his preface to Lukács’ *Realism in Our Time*, George Steiner writes, “Where the realist selects, the naturalist enumerates (Zola’s catalogue of cheeses in *Le Ventre de Paris*). The breath of life is gone and the novel declines to photographic reportage” (13). See *Realism*, 33-34, for a detailed critique of (continental) naturalism as the progenitor of modernism.
[‘perfectly self-contained artistic’] boxes must have holes where reality can look out and readers can look in” (208). Like Bellow, then, Updike strives for a dialectical back-and-forth between reality and (aesthetic) ideality, between reality and subjectivity, but this dialectic functions more through the language itself than through the monologic introspection of a protagonist’s consciousness. Updike’s fidelity, however, is always to the energy of the dialectic.

This dialectical play is indicative and illustrative of Updike’s famous concern for “middles,” what Jeff Campbell has described as “a designation between idealism and materialism, between solipsism and self-abnegation, between euphoria and despair” (32). This does not provide, however, a comfortable synthesis, or even the telos of a synthesis, but rather a kinetic movement between poles. For Updike, the aesthetic of blissful realism provides this tension between willful description of the physical world and the acceptance of its presence and participation in our subjective life, and the elevation of that description, via the artist’s consciousness and ability, to something transcendent. It is reflective of the tension between the subjectivity of the author and his participation with the outside world but, more importantly perhaps, also that of the reader and the outside world. It is an attempt, as he writes in Run, to have the “The mindful will to walk the straight line of paradox” (203). Updike sees the tension that walking this line creates as the driving force behind life and writing; anything else becomes either enervating or entropic (e.g. Bellow’s “wastelander” outlook) or merely abstract, what he has called “a formal confusion, a scholastic bottling of the wind” (Pieces 354).

57 Surprisingly, however, Updike is noted for not editing his manuscripts very much, not, in his words, “treat[ing] words as chisel strokes” so that he can maintain “the quality of utterance, the rhythm of utterance, the happiness” (Plath 44). Certainly his output is indicative of this (Updike published about a book per year over his writing career).
58 About middles, Updike has said, “I like middles. It is in middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules” (Plath 11).
59 Updike writes that “[t]he writer’s strength is not his own; he is a conduit who so positions himself that the world at his back flows through to the readers on the other side of the page. To keep this conduit scoured is his laborious task; to be, in the act of writing, anonymous, the end of his quest for fame” (Pieces 38).
In one of the first and most comprehensive accounts of this aesthetic model, critics Alice and Kenneth Hamilton write, “If an experience has been, then it has some value. But its serviceableness to the writer is determined by its having light to throw upon the patter of human existence, the interrelatedness of different aspects of experience that can be understood by all, whatever ‘accidents’ shaping their individual experiences may have been” (35 italics original). They continue, “[Updike’s] strong realism prevents him from turning his back upon the actual world we live in so as to embrace the abstract theories claiming to represent the ‘contemporary’ vision” (42). We see here shades of Lukács. In fact, Lukács’ articulation of how modernist authors handled the “angst” of modern existence is telling and reflective of the way that Updike sees it. Lukács writes:

It is easy to understand that the experience of the contemporary capitalist world does produce, especially among intellectuals, angst, nausea, a sense of isolation, and despair. Indeed, a view of the world which excluded these emotions would prevent the present-day artist from depicting his world truthfully. The question is not: is x present in reality? But rather: does x represent the whole of reality? Again, the question is not; should x be excluded from literature? But rather: should we be content to leave it at x? (Realism 76)

Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom, the protagonist of these novels, is the exemplar of this particular formulation. His repeated confrontations with the Kierkegaardian horror of his freedom is the main source of his angst. Yet it is to Updike’s credit that he does not stop merely with the representation of or lament for this angst. Rather, he attempts to “represent the whole of reality,” and is not “content to leave it” merely in a state of critical liminality or resignation. As the Hamiltons point out, “Kierkegaard’s existentialism insists that the subjective understanding is
valid only when it coincides with ‘objective truth’” (142). Reality, then, and its confrontation with existential freedom, is at the center of the tetralogy.

If Bellow was concerned mainly with his character’s individual spirit matched against cultural, discursive, and historical structures, Updike introduces and emphasizes this third complication: that of existential freedom and the confrontation with the void (something which Bellow rejects almost out of hand⁶⁰). Updike’s knowledge and appreciation of Kierkegaard and Barth is well documented, and his understanding of these theologians is explored throughout the tetralogy. About Kierkegaard, Updike has stated,

…the whole idea I got from [Kierkegaard] of existence preceding essence was very liberating for me. … To act simply because of animal reaction to stimuli… was not to act in a way that gave shape to life. … I read the existentialists seeking a handle for something it had been hard for me to grasp, and thinking about life in this way enabled me to become involved in life as an average, enterprising, and organized person. (Gado 89)

Yet the novels are not in the vein of Sartre or Camus, but rather explore the more complicated and paradoxical space between the acceptance of existence preceding essence and the understanding, too, of the importance of the material world in our subjective construction.⁶¹

About this, the Hamiltons continue,

All desperate attempts at self-knowledge through introspection … remain,

[Updike] thinks, ineffective so long as the individual remains ignorant of the

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⁶⁰ See Ch.1, pgs 91 and 100.
⁶¹ About Kierkegaard, Lukács tellingly writes, “It is more than a hundred years since Kierkegaard first attacked the Hegelian view that the inner and outer world form an objective dialectical unity, that they are indissolubly married in spite of their apparent opposition. Kierkegaard denied any such unity. According to Kierkegaard, the individual exists within an opaque, impenetrable ‘incognito’” (Realism 27). It is this paradoxical space between unity and dualism that Updike explores.
nature of the world in which, as an individual, he has to live. The more an individual tries to know himself in isolation from his environment, the greater becomes his capacity for self-deception and the wider becomes the gulf that separates him from his fellows and leaves him in frightening loneliness. (62)

For Updike, Kierkegaard and Karl Barth provide grounding in the distinct otherness of the world and of God through which blissful realism, the glorification and “hymning” of this otherness, can be created and explored. About Barth, Updike writes, “[Barth understood that a] potent ‘nothingness’ was unavoidably conjured up by God’s creating something. The existence of something demands the existence of something else.” He finishes this though quoting Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*: “The fact that the creature can fall away from God and perish does not imply any imperfection on the part of creation or the Creator. … A creature freed from the possibility of falling away would not really be living as a creature,” but as a God (*Pieces* 89). This Barthian notion of presence and absence is another dialectical energy that pushes Updike’s writing in regard to his ecstatic celebration of reality and defines Harry’s continual movement toward and away from what is always lurking around him: nothingness and death. “Kierkegaard and Barth,” according to Jeff Campbell, “provide a framework for accepting the centrality of the subjective while at the same time accepting the existential reality and importance of the physical world” (36). Like Kierkegaard’s knight of faith, then, for Updike, the project of literature and the project of life becomes one of faith: if the world is a cold, indifferent reality, it is only through a faith that it is right and beautiful that we can make any sense out of it. The writer’s vocation becomes the task of manifesting this faith, elevating the “nothingness” of the world to something transcendent through writing and language which stands at the *midpoint* between the finite and the infinite. This dialectic between world and man, played out on the page, what
Updike calls—like Jacob wrestling the angel—the “intensity of the grapple” (17), is the foundation for much of the writing of the divide and the blissful realists.

**“The abstract brilliance burning underneath”: *Rabbit, Run***

As stated, the eponymous protagonist of John Updike’s *Rabbit Angstrom* tetralogy is in a constant battle for his autonomy against structural entities which would limit his freedom. And, like Augie and Herzog, Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom must come to terms with reality in order to exist and utilize his freedom in the world; the development of his character in the novel is predicated on the dialectic between Harry’s desire to express and realize his own subjectivity and the constraint of external pressures: family, society, culture, economics, etc. Harry’s last name, Angstrom, points to a main thematic concern of early twentieth-century literature: angst. Harry, however, suffers from a Kierkegaardian angst developed not necessarily or always through his alienation from the outside world and other human beings (as it is articulated in Marxist or modernist alienation) but rather, as the epigraph above suggests, from a fear of the perverse amount of freedom this world grants if we allow it. If modernists were trying to escape reification by an expression through form or a return to myth (and there found a semblance of autonomy and control), in *Run* Updike faces the fear that’s created when we are afforded the freedom from bourgeois constraints and find ourselves without an alternative narrative, without a place in everyday reality. Rabbit, and Updike, hop back and forth between the desire for autonomous freedom and the desire for structure and participation within the world, no matter how fallen, faulty, or bourgeois.62

We get a sense of Harry’s dialectical position early in the novel. Updike describes him as “an order loving man” (9) who is “the only person around here who cares about neatness. The clutter

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62 Updike’s description of *Run* as a “zig-zaggy shape” (Campbell 279) attests to this dialectical back and forth.
behind him in the room … clings to his back like a tightening net” (14). One is reminded here, as in *Augie*, of the necessity of finding a Yeatsian “centre” (via “order” and “neatness”) in an otherwise chaotic gyre. This plays both ways, however. As he stares at the clutter, “The problem knits in front of him and he feels sickened by the intricacy” (15). Harry’s desire for “order” is in direct conflict with the net that hems in his freedom. In addition to the figuring of nets, Updike also works with a motif of “traps”: Rabbit “senses he is in a trap” (15), he notices a golf course which “at the distance could be a long pasture except for the yellow beans of sand, which are traps” (18), and “doesn’t drive five miles before this road begins to feel like a part of the same trap” (24). Like his namesake, Peter Rabbit, 63 Harry is constantly trying to avoid that which would pen him in and restrict his freedom and autonomy while simultaneously longing for order and “neatness.”

The novel opens with Harry suffering from the weight of the responsibility toward his family (he has a son, a baby on the way, and an alcoholic wife) and his own reified existence and so he, as the title indicates, runs. Harry’s early foray into freedom is complicated, however, by a lack of direction and meaning—the “order” he desires above. At the outset of his trip Harry encounters a gas station attendant and has this conversation:

“Do you have any maps?”

“Son, where do you want to go?”

“Huh? I don’t know exactly.”

“Where are you headed? (25)
In their final exchange the attendant tells Harry, “The only way to get somewhere, you know, is to figure out where you’re going before you get there.” Harry responds, “I don’t think so” (26). Again, Harry would like it both ways: his request for a map indicates a desire for order and direction and yet his responses to the gas station attendant imply a desire for boundless freedom that the map would belie. He is running toward a freedom that has no particular end or meaning besides that of itself; it is an aimless adventure. As Earl Rovit has written about Bellow’s characters, Harry is about to find “an enormous lopsided burden of incomparable freedom without the balancing accompaniment of meaningful choices” (Saul 6).

As he continues driving Harry becomes entangled, trapped and netted in the literal narrowing of the road. The “brambles rake his painted sides,” while “the scrabbling shadows spider backward through the web of wilderness into a black core where he fears his probe of light will stir some beast or ghost” (32 italics mine). Harry looks at a map where “[t]here are so many red lines and blue lines, long names, little towns, squares and circles and stars. … The names melt away and he sees the map whole, a net, all those red lines and blue lines and stars, a net he is somewhere caught up in.” He rips up the map, forms the scraps into a ball, and throws it out the window. He thinks back to the man at the gas station and “[h]e can’t think past him, his smugness, his solidity, somehow” (33 italics original). The entirety of his trip is predicated on escaping nets. And yet, when Harry finds himself without direction, when he is confronted by the “black core” of absolute, existential freedom that lies in front of him, he realizes that it is in fact more horrifying than the semi-structured life that he has abandoned. His attempt to escape reality and the symbolic that comprises it (in the form of nets and maps or maps as nets, or the

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64 In *Rabbit is Rich* Harry’s son tellingly returns to college to study geography, reversing Harry’s desire for freedom and looking, instead, to locate and “map” his own existence.

65 Harry often relies upon memories of his high-school years, during which he was a basketball star, for a stable conception of self and his relationship to the world. The throwing of the ball—which is comprised of scraps of an “American” net—seems another attempt to try and stabilize a situation by simulating a game he once mastered.
“family unit” and a his job) is unsuccessful and unsettling. Escape, be it through a kind of formlessness or lack of “direction” or meaning, is unsettling, but not in the epiphanic or blissful way that Barthes might discuss it.\textsuperscript{66} Rather, the attendant’s injunction that he should “know where he’s going,” and Harry’s reflection of the man’s “solidity,” implies the necessity of the empirical world and its accompanying language and discursive structures.\textsuperscript{67} If Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus tried to “fly by those nets” of nationality, language, and religion, here Updike declares that project defunct and untenable.\textsuperscript{68} Harry’s attempt to escape the nets and traps of culture, tradition, and language in general is an impossibility, and the attendant’s “solidity” is a reflection of his knowledge of this fact. As Harry approaches the “black core,” a clear metaphor for existential nothingness, another car approaches and he realizes that the road “goes both ways” (32). This dialectical figure implies a recognition of the void, of the other, of absolute freedom, and the simultaneous recognition of the necessity of structure or the nets from which Harry has been trying to escape. It is a recognition of existence and essence, which, for Updike, “go both ways.” Harry again thinks of the attendant: “The man mocked, whether out of his mouth or in the paced motions of his work-worn hands or through his hairy ears, somewhere out of his body he mocked the furtive wordless hopes that at moments give Harry a sensation of arrival” (33-34 italics mine). These “wordless hopes,” an escape from the “prison-house” of language, are untenable and, literally, misguided. The bodily description of the attendant, his “solidity” in his

\textsuperscript{66} Recall that Barthes describes “bliss” as having an “asocial character” and that it is “the abrupt loss of sociality, [from which] there follows no recurrance to the subject (subjectivity), the person, solitude: everything is lost, integrally” (Pleasure 39). See Ch. 1, pg. 24.

\textsuperscript{67} We have here, then, the kind of space between bliss and pleasure about which Barthes writes. Harry is a subject who “enjoys the consistency of his self hood (that is his pleasure) and seeks its loss (that is his bliss)” (Pleasure 14). See the Introduction, pg. 6.

\textsuperscript{68} One is reminded here, both by argument and title, of Jameson’s The Prison-House of Language, in which he writes, “[Saussere’s] methodological perception is reflected in existentialism, whose leitmotiv—the priority of existence over essence—is indeed simply another way … of showing how lived reality alters in function of the ‘choice’ we make of it or the essences through which we interpret it: in other words, in function of the ‘model’ through which we see and live the world” (14-15).
hands and ears, forces Harry to recognize, too, the presence of the other. It is, as Updike writes, “The need for our ‘I’ to have its ‘Thou,’ something other than ourselves yet sharing our subjectivity, something amplifying it indeed to the outer rim of creation” (*Self-Consciousness* 229). The oncoming car that forces him to realize that the road “goes both ways” and the physical presence of the attendant shatter notions of solipsism as freedom that he was otherwise entertaining.⁶⁹

Rabbit quickly turns around and his “trip home is easier. … The music on the radio is soothing now, lyrical and unadvertised” (34). “He wonders why there are *so many signs* coming back and so few going down” (35 italics mine), suggesting a return to the symbolic, in which he now realizes he must participate. According to the Hamitons, “[Updike’s view] assumes that freedom is not an absolute, but something that is known solely when the limits upon freedom are first recognized and respected. The free man is supremely the man who has learned that self-will is slavery, since it is the desire to *create* the real rather than to respond to it” (61 italics original). Harry’s brush with the “black core” of existential freedom is countered by his return to structure, the symbolic, and language, and Updike’s aesthetic statement becomes that of the blissful realist: a recognition of the necessity of language as both a symbolic (in a structural sense) *and* mimetic function. Too much “black core,” too much blank symbolism that one cannot read, and the world becomes horrifying and, perhaps, pointless.⁷⁰ Transcendence, for Harry, is achieved in the

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⁶⁹ It is important to note that Harry was trying to head south, “down, down the map into orange groves and smoking rivers and barefoot women” (23). Updike understands, however, that following the American literary tradition of “striking out for the territories” is no longer possible. Even the “south” as a locale of escape does not exist (Harry’s move to Florida for retirement in *Rabbit at Rest* bears this out). As with Augie’s trip to Mexico, whatever pioneering or pastoral vision that Harry had is contained and trapped within the larger ubiquitous web of America and American culture.

⁷⁰ One is reminded here of the “freedom” of deconstruction that Derrida espouses in *Of Grammatology*. As Spivak writes in her translator’s preface, deconstruction “shows us the lure of the abyss as freedom. The fall into the abyss of deconstruction inspires us with as much pleasure as fear. We are intoxicated with the prospect of never hitting bottom” (lxxvii). Harry, and Updike, recognize this intoxication, if we can extend this metaphor to the existential
dialectical play between the world, the structural, and the subjective of which we are all a part; for Updike this is achieved on the page.

Harry does not immediately return home, however, into the same net in which he felt ensnared before his “run.” Instead, he runs to the arms of Ruth, a “not-quite” prostitute who comes to embody the “other” to Harry’s sense of self and his sense of the transcendent in everyday life. Through Ruth, Harry can both participate in the structured world and rebel against it.

Updike is known for espousing a “yes/but” approach to writing, and for enjoying the non-entropic nature of binary tension. Setting up this tension allows him to explore a potential synthesis between the subjective and the objective, but never acquiesce to or succeed in making one. This is in turn reflective of Lukács understanding of realism as well as J.P. Stern’s discussion of the “middle distance,” where realism and symbolism mix and a cooperation of “world, self, meaning, and language” makes for the most provocative type of literature. Just as Bellow creates tension between character and social structure to reflect his own aesthetic concerns, here Updike uses Harry and his juxtaposition to Ruth to represent what he believes to be the necessary dialectic between nihilism (equated with the “black core” above) and belief or transcendence.

Harry’s transcendent, spiritual understanding of sex juxtaposed with Ruth’s bodily one registers this tension. After their first date, Harry and Ruth prepare to make love and it becomes clear that while Harry hopes for the transcendent, for the joining of two human bodies to find something beyond their finitude, Ruth understands sex as a material act: a bodily exercise to be completed. Ruth tells Harry, “Don’t try to prove you’re a lover on me. Just come and go,” and,

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See Plath, p. 16, and his clarification in Pieces, “…I meant my work says “yes, but.” Yes, in Rabbit, Run, to our urgent inner whispers, but—the social fabric collapses disastrously” (“One Big Interview” 503).

See p. 17-18 in the introduction.
“Well then undress me and stop farting around” (70). During their lovemaking she tells him, “Come on. Work” (74), underscoring the bodily duty of the sex act, as if one were punching a clock. Harry, on the other hand, wants her to undress slowly. He wants to wash the makeup from her face, removing the “crust” (72), as if to get closer to her actual being, moving beyond the performative that the makeup implies.73 He also balks at the idea of her using a diaphragm, considering it a literal and figurative barrier to the spiritual proximity he wishes to achieve.

Updike writes of Harry’s frustration, “As they deepen together he feels impatience that through all their twists they remain separate flesh; he cannot dare enough, now that she is so much his friend in this search; everywhere they meet a wall” (73-74). Through sex Harry attempts transcendence, to move beyond otherness to a shared subjectivity; for Ruth it remains an act.

Updike admits, “I don’t mean to be dualistic, but there is a way in which I see things as mind or spirit on the one hand,”—Harry’s conception—“and body on the other”—Ruth’s conception (Plath 95). When Harry asks her what having an orgasm feels like, Ruth responds, “Oh. It’s like falling through.” He asks her where she falls to, and she responds, “Nowhere. I can’t talk about it” (75).74 Her inability to articulate the void of which she speaks reflects her unconcern with what Harry sees as the transcendent nature of the act and its culmination. This inability to articulate her jouissance suggests Barthes’ distinction between pleasure and bliss: recalling Barthes’ statement that bliss “brings to a crisis [one’s] relation with language,” the juxtaposition of Ruth’s reticence to Harry’s desire for articulation becomes a synecdoche for blissful realism.

Ruth’s position as “absent” in regard to Harry’s “presence” becomes a commentary on writing

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73 This parallels Herzog’s concern with Madeline and Zelda’s use of makeup in Herzog. See note 49 in Ch 1, pg. 84.
74 This is a direct reflection of Lacan’s understanding of the female orgasm representing the “face of the Other, the God face” (77). In his lecture “God and Woman’s jouissance” Lacan states, “There is a jouissance that is hers …, that belongs to that ‘she’ … that doesn’t exist and doesn’t signify anything. There is a jouissance that is hers about which she herself perhaps knows nothing if not that she experiences it. … [I]n all the time people have been begging women] … to try to tell us [about jouissance], not a word! We’ve never been able to get anything out of them” (74-75). This clearly reflects Ruth’s response, “Nowhere. I can’t talk about it.”
Harry’s former basketball coach, Marty Tothero, describes Ruth as someone who has “come to grips” (47), while Harry was “always the idealist” (56). This juxtaposition reflects their understanding of sex or, at the very least, the kind of transcendent connection that Harry strives for despite the fact that “Nature leads you up like a mother and as soon as she gets her little contribution leaves you with nothing” (75). Ultimately, Harry, and Updike, have to accept the transcendent as ineffable (Ruth’s orgasm) and other, but, like Harry’s constant attempt to overcome this, Updike’s prose and aesthetic is a struggle to glorify that which he knows to be, in the end, not articulable. About this, Updike writes, “Language approximates phenomena through a series of hesitations and qualifications” (Pieces 17), and writes this, perhaps more telling passage, from his memoir, Self-Consciousness: “My own style seemed to me a groping and elemental attempt to approximate the complexity of envisioned phenomena and it surprised me to have it called luxuriant and self-indulgent; self-indulgent, surely, is exactly what it wasn’t—other-indulgent, rather” (103). Updike’s belief that “The world, so balky and resistant and humiliating, can in the act of mimesis be rectified, adjusted, chastened, purified” (Pieces 35), implies a realism that reflects Harry’s own thwarted attempts at transcendence (through his initial “run” and his sexual encounters with Ruth) and is transcendent in the very prose with which he describes the attempt. He “over-indulges” the other in order to rectify the self/other duality.

This notion is doubled by Harry and Ruth’s respective opinions of God. Ruth’s bodily, finite view of sex reflects her atheism and nihilism. When Harry asks her, “Well now if God doesn’t exist, why does anything?”, she responds, “Why? There’s no why to it. Things just are. … Hey, why don’t you get some clothes on instead of just lying there giving me the Word?” (79). Her mocking Harry’s preaching suggests Updike’s position as writer and his belief that the word,
despite its shortcomings, is a necessary part of a confrontation with the void.\textsuperscript{75} Elsewhere Updike writes, “Though our first and final impression of Creation is not that it was achieved by taking pains, perhaps we should proceed in the humble faith that, by taking pains, word by word, to be accurate, we put ourselves on the way toward making something useful and beautiful and, in a word, good” (\textit{Picked} 17). Ruth’s figurative “void” against Harry’s “belief” or presence is reiterated in the novel when Harry thinks, “Now the noon of another day has burned away the clouds, and the sky in the windshield is blank and cold, and he feels nothing ahead of him, Ruth’s blue-eyed nothing, the nothing she told him she did, the nothing she believes in” (85). As a mediator between these two poles, however, stands the church outside of Ruth’s window and its glowing window. As Harry and Ruth walk into her apartment, Harry notices that “[a]cross the way a big limestone church hangs like a gray curtain behind the streetlamp. They go in her doorway, passing beneath stained glass” (65). And later, “There is only the church across the way, gray, grave, and mute. Lights behind its rose window are left burning, and this circle of red and purple and gold seems in the city night a hole punched in reality to show the abstract brilliance burning underneath. He lowers the shade on it guiltily” (70). Harry’s consistent lowering of this shade before the sex act is indicative of Harry’s disappointment, frustration, and shame that he cannot find the transcendent, the one that burns in the window of the church, in the sex act. Later, “He reaches and pulls up the shade a few feet. The rose window is dark now, and above the church, above Mt. Judge, the sun glares in a façade of blue” (78).\textsuperscript{76} The connection here between the glowing window of the church, the sun that replaces it, and the constant raising

\textsuperscript{75} One is reminded here, and in the paragraph previous to this, of Kristeva, who declared her fundamental project to be “the desire to produce a discourse which always confronts the \textit{impasse} of language (as at once subject to and subversive of the rule of the Law), a discourse which in a final aperetic move darest to think language against itself, and in so doing knowingly situates itself in a place which is, quite literally, untenable” (10). Yet Updike’s project is far less theoretical; the empirical world is accepted as totally other, and language as a \textit{positive} effort to bring us closer to that world, regardless of its participation in any hegemonic function. Giving “the Word” is a necessary act in order to understand the world.

\textsuperscript{76} This is akin to Bellow’s description of the “great profound blue” above the church in \textit{Augie}. See Ch. 1, pg. 58.
and lowering of the shade indicates a mixture of the divine and earthly transcendent. The church, the solidity and severity of it, its intense “otherness,” suggests an empirical reality that hides a transcendence within. In a nineteen sixty-eight interview with Charles Thomas Samuels, Updike states, “I describe things not because their muteness mocks our subjectivity but because they seem to be masks for God” (Plath 45). The church, “gray, grave, and mute,” and its rose window become metaphors for the empirical world (the façade) and the description of that world (the rose window). The movement from the church window to the glowing sun repositions otherworldly, religious, transcendence to that of the physical world and provides a metaphorical picture of blissful realism. The “hole punched in reality” is, again, representative of an illumination of an otherwise indifferent reality (its “muteness”), and, as indicated by Updike’s conception of fiction, the possibility of what proper blissful realism can accomplish.\footnote{Knowing Updike’s affinity for puns, the phrase “hole punched,” and its connection to paper and, therefore, writing, is apt.}

In contradiction to this conception, Barthes writes:

> In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, ‘run’ (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning. (Image 147 italics original).

Barthes’ notion of writing “running” suggests Rabbit’s own running—his (and the book’s) zig-zagging. Yet it is when Harry is running that he is most lost. Furthermore, Barthes’ notion of “piercing” is parallel yet counter to Updike’s “hole punched in reality”—the idea that underneath this empirical façade something does posit meaning, though that meaning may be inaccessible to
us. But to know it is there, burning behind the window or burning in the sky for us to ponder, is central for both Updike and the blissful realists. Updike states, “I’ve never, though, had the feeling that I am the only reality. I’ve always devoutly believed that the external is real, and what’s frightening and dismaying about being alive is that the outside would appear to be fairly indifferent to your presence” (Plath 253). This indifference is reflected in the “blue-eyed nothing” of Ruth and the cold grey exterior of the church, but, through a celebration and “hymning” of that otherness, one can, if not overcome it, at least comes to terms with it.

And yet this divine presence, the transcendence of and within reality, the illumination of it in the circle of the window, suggests a trope of absence which underlies the anxiety nearly all of Updike’s main characters experience. Harry’s anxiety is often represented in his effort to fill holes, or absences, whether shooting a basketball through a hoop, sinking a putt in a round of golf, or intercourse. In his introduction to Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Anxiety*, Reidar Thomte discusses Paul Tillich’s conception of anxiety, one which echoes Updike’s: “[For Tillich,] anxiety differs from fear in that the object of anxiety is ‘nothingness,’ and nothingness is not an ‘object,’” but “Tillich also speaks of ‘the anxiety of losing our ontological structure,’ which is ‘the anxiety of not being what we essentially are. It is anxiety about disintegrating and falling into non-being through existential disruption,’ with ‘the consequent destruction of the ontological structure’” (xvi). Updike writes against, or brushes alongside, this “nothingness”; that is, Harry’s attempts to confront this anxiety, the anxiety that he feels both being trapped within structures (threatening his subjectivity) and wandering without them (creating existential

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78 The use of the term “absence” calls for a discussion of Derrida. Briefly, Updike’s (and Bellow’s) belief in autonomy and subjective presence contradict Derridean subject (and knowledge) construction. Derrida’s “trace” is not the unattainable third term mentioned here between presence and absence. While Updike plays with dialectics, it is never the difference between the two terms that is important (*différance*), but rather the terms (or subjects) themselves. The subjective and the objective are very real for both authors. The space between is, in some ways, mediated on the page.
crises), provides the tension of the novel and is central to his aesthetic project. His defense of a finely-crafted realism is writing against the void; it is attempting to glorify and celebrate that which we often find cold, alien, and disheartening, and it is a battle against solipsism.

Updike employs binary opposition again in the representation of Mt. Judge, both the name of the town in which Harry was raised and the mountain that separates this town from the city of Brewer on the other side. Brewer comes to represent the traps and nets of civilization (from which he ran at the outset), while the darkness of the forest at the top of Mt. Judge is representative of the lack of those structures and the horror that accompanies that lack (the “black core” he encounters before he turns his car around at the close of his “run”). Updike’s first description of the mountain reads: “hundreds of acres of forest Mt. Judge boys can never wholly explore. … [I]n long patches of forgotten pine plantation the needle-hushed floor of land glides up and up, on and on, under endless tunnels of dead green and you seem to have passed through silence into something worse” (17). The silence of the forest above, and beyond that a terrifying void that is worse than silence, echoes the horror of the freedom that Harry experiences while fleeing from his responsibilities and the symbolic in the first part of the novel. Language here becomes paramount. A Lacanian Real, the forest of Mt. Judge occupies a place that is without or beyond language (and, by extension, a structure of the world and structure of self). Its motion upwards away from the earth to the sky, a place of the divine, is both attractive/transcendent and horrifying. Later, Updike describes the mountain as “the primitive ridge, the dark slum of forest, separated from the decent part of town by a band of unpaved lanes, derelict farmhouses, a cemetery, and few raw young developments. … The land grows steeper still, and the woods begin” (189). The separation here of the “primitive ridge” and “slum” of the mountain—the “uncivilized” area—and the structure of the city, indicates the control of culture
(American or otherwise) and the horror of the lack of this particular structuring entity lying above it. Indeed, in the culmination to the novel, Updike brings us into this nebulous area as Harry again runs, this time from the funeral of his infant daughter Becky, up the mountain to that very forest. Just before he runs, while they stand at the funeral, “Beyond them at a distance stands a crescent sweep of black woods; the cemetery is high on the mountains, between the town and the forest” (251-52). The black of the woods (reminiscent of the “black core” at the beginning of the novel), its nothingness, is beyond the cemetery which, though representative of death, is still a cultural institution and ritualistic space through which we process loss; hence its position “between the town and the forest”—an intermediary between these two worlds. Yet Harry runs “[u]phill exultantly,” while Eccles, his pastor, trails him screaming his name. As in his earlier run, Harry “loses his sense of direction”; the woods, like the “black core,” provide freedom, but one without the safety of the symbolic. And then:

Rabbit becomes conscious, by its cessation, of a whisper that fills the brown tunnels all around him. The surrounding trees are too tall for him to see any sign, even a remote cleared landscape, of civilization. Islanded in light, he becomes frightened. He is conspicuous; the bears and nameless menaces that whisper through the forest can see him clearly. Rather than hang vulnerable in these wells of visibility he rushes toward the menace.... Such an unnatural darkness … a darkness in defiance of the broad daylight whose sky leaps in jagged patches from treetop to treetop above him like a silent monkey. (255 italics mine)

The “whispering” that stops as he moves further into the woods suggests a loss of all structural understanding of oneself or one’s surroundings; it is an intermediary between the symbolic

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79 Eccles and his obvious association to Ecclesiastes suggest the intermediary position between man and the void as well. The “vanity” of life which Ecclesiastes (and Eccles) discusses is constantly countered by Harry’s, and Updike’s, attempt to hymn life.
(language) and the unrepresentable (as a sound, it is not language, but a foregrounding of the material of language). His rushing through light and shadow makes him “vulnerable” as a mark of civilization and of self-consciousness (hence the isolating, solipsistic “island of light”) against a mute other. The use of “bears” and the “silent monkey” of the light above him strengthens the troping of the wildness and, more importantly, non-humanness of the space in which he runs. And yet, as we read the passage, Updike uses language, confidently and lyrically, to describe precisely that which so horrifies Harry. As he runs further he encounters the evidence of a once occupied land, and

it dawns on him that on the floor of the hollow lie the cellarhole and the crumbled sandstone walls of a forgotten house. To his shrill annoyance at having lost his way and headed himself downhill again is added a clangorous fear, as if this ruined evidence of a human intrusion into a world of blind life tolls bells that ring to the edges of the universe. The thought that this place was once self-conscious, that its land was tramped and cleared and known, blackens the air with ghosts that climb the ferny bank toward him like children clambering up from a grave. ... He feels more conspicuous and vulnerable than in the little clearings of sunshine; he obscurely feels lit by a great spark, the spark whereby the blind tumble of matter recognized itself, a spark struck in an encounter a terrible God willed. (256)

This liminal space in the forest lies between the representable (culture/civilization) and the ineffable. His conspicuity and vulnerability are due to his own self-consciousness, and his own otherness; he is clearly part of the world and yet not (moving uphill brings him further away from the symbolic, here, downhill, closer to civilization and consciousness); he is moving here between the internal and the external, between the mind and matter. He is, again, “walk[ing] the
straight line of paradox,” and it is this line that Updike walks as well. Harry’s exploration of this space of “blind life,” one without conscious intrusion, is the space where the writer of blissful realism intrudes: where the author makes what is otherwise a horrifying absence a glorified presence.

Harry traces this line elsewhere in the novel. While waiting for his wife Janice to give birth, he thinks: “He is certain that as a consequence of his sin Janice or the baby will die. His sin a conglomerate of flight, cruelty, obscenity, and conceit; a black clot embodied in the entrails of the birth … he does not turn to the priest beside him but instead reads the same sentence about delicious fried trout again and again” (169). Harry’s repeated reading of the sentence and his reluctance to turn to Eccles, the only representative of the transcendent (through his religious affiliation) in the room, is telling as he tries to “make sense” of all that he has done and all that is happening. The birth, like Ruth’s orgasm, is something that he cannot comprehend or articulate in any understandable way, and his notion that the baby or his wife will die (birth and death both being, according to Kristeva, ineffable) because of his own “selfishness” reflects the presence of the void against the surety of his own consciousness and the acts that he perpetrated while privileging that consciousness. He tries to grab on to the symbolic by reading the same sentence over and over again, a sentence that, not coincidentally, reflects the “senses” through which he can ground his own existence (smell, taste, the animal act of eating and the trout) in an effort to “make sense” of that which one cannot. Similarly, later in the novel when he is told by Eccles that that same baby has died,

all he is conscious of is the stacks of merchandise in jangling packages he can see through the windows of the phone-booth door. On the drugstore wall there is a banner bearing in red the one word PARADICHLOROBENZENE. All the while
he is trying to understand Eccles he is rereading this word, trying to see where it breaks, wondering if it can be pronounced. (230-31 italics mine)

At birth and at death Harry focuses on words that make no particular sense to him, and yet he clings to them, “trying to understand,” and “wondering if it can be pronounced.” Words provide structure, but there are moments in which words provide no solace. Here, too, he attempts to gain some stability by focusing on the physical things around him, but the words still preoccupy him. In Harry’s inability to translate or understand language in both of these situations, Updike comments on the separation between language and reality at moments of void—at birth and at death. Language becomes the necessary link between these two worlds: the stitch that binds them together.  

In addition, before the baby’s birth, Harry thinks of Janice taking “in the antiseptic smell he smells, the smell running everywhere along the white walls of their having been washed, of blood being washed and shit washed and retching washed until every surface smells like the inside of a bucket but it will never come clean because we will always fill it up again with our filth” (169). This is related to his reading of the word “paradichlorobenzene,” the disinfectant and deodorant found in urinal cakes. What is hinted at is a “cleansing” of the human—a disinfecting of the “dirtiness” of the reality of being human in both birth and death. If language for Updike orders and beautifies the world, if in “the act of mimesis” the world can be “rectified, adjusted, chastened, purified,” there are moments when our recourse to language simply doesn’t serve. It is only through language, however, specifically Updike’s prose here, that we are able to comprehend this insight. For example, Harry thinks as he waits at his apartment for the return of his wife and newborn child:

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80 In Rabbit at Rest Harry thinks about the “zipper” being the greatest of man’s inventions. The zipper, then, becomes the figure for the binding together of these two worlds. See pg. 162 below.
…Ruth’s silence the last time he saw her, his mother’s oppressive not saying a word, what ails her? He rolls over on his stomach and seems to look down into a bottomless sea, down and down, to where crusty crags gesture amid blind depths.

… He must blot Tothero and Ruth out of his mind both remind him of death.

They make on one side this vacuum of death and on the other side the threat of Janice coming home grows. (198)

Indeed, Harry’s desire for structure via language (one which becomes even clearer in *Rabbit Redux*) is upset by the void of birth and death, by Ruth’s nihilism, and by Tothero’s corpse-like body in a hospital following a heart attack.

These dialectics—presence and absence, belief and nihilism, birth and death—all come to a head at the close of the novel. From the outset, Harry attempts to find some sort of synthesis between freedom and binding structure, between autonomy and responsibility to others. This notion seems to be realized when, while playing golf with Eccles, he perfectly strikes the ball. Harry first thinks about the ball and “he tries to pour his will down into that hard irreducible pellet that is not really himself yet in a way is; just the way it sits there white and Number 1 in the center of everything” (113). When he is playing poorly, “Somehow Rabbit can’t tear his attention from where the ball *should* have gone, the little ideal napkin of clipped green pinked with a pretty flag. His eyes can’t keep with where it *did* go” (112). He is frustrated by his inability to control the situation, and, by extension, his own life. It is the split between his consciousness and the world that motivates this frustration. Yet, when he strikes the ball perfectly, “The sound has a hollowness, a singleness he hasn’t heard before” (115)—it is a mind/body connection. He tells Eccles: “That’s it!” (116). He has achieved the synthesis for

81 One is reminded here of Hegel’s description of the absolute in the *Phenomenology*: “the point where knowledge no longer needs to go beyond itself where notion corresponds to object and object to notion” (51).
which he yearns, and yet it is only a moment—one that is impossible to maintain, and one which he rarely, if ever, achieves in the remainder of the tetralogy.\textsuperscript{82} As Lukács reminds us, Kierkegaard’s understanding of existence negated the possibility of the synthetic move.\textsuperscript{83}

Indeed, after the death of his daughter, Harry thinks:

\begin{quote}
The childish mystery—the mystery of “any place,” prelude to the ultimate, “Why am I me?”—re-ignites panic in his heart. Coldness spreads through his body. The details of the street—the ragged margin where the pavement and grass struggle, the tarry scarred trunks of the telephone poles—no longer speak to him. \textit{He is no one}; it is as if he stepped outside of his body and brain a moment to watch the engine run and stepped into nothingness, for this “he” had been merely a refraction, a vibration within the engine, and now can’t get back in. (243 italics mine)
\end{quote}

If he attempted above to “be the ball,” here he has lost himself entirely. Again, the feeling of “coldness” suggests, like Ruth’s eyes and the exterior of the church, an indifferent reality. The “detail” of the “ragged margin where the pavement and grass struggle,” where civilization (the building of the road) meets nature (the grass), like the woods at the top of Mt. Judge, has disappeared; or, more tellingly, it “no longer speaks to him,” indicating that language is indeed the vehicle through which one can appreciate this middle space. In a Sartrean moment, he experiences the nausea of existence, where “body and brain” no longer function as a whole (or,

\textsuperscript{82}The deterioration of Harry’s golf game over the course of the four novels parallels his own falling away from his initial experience of the “it.” In the third novel, \textit{Rabbit at Rest}, golf has become “more like work, pleasant work but work, a matter of approximations in the realm of the imperfect, with nothing breaking through but normal healthy happiness” (783). This is a telling reflection of Barthes differentiation of “pleasure” from “bliss” discussed in the introduction. One could argue that the only other time he achieves this unity is at the close of the tetralogy as he plays a game of basketball. This game results, tellingly, in his death.

\textsuperscript{83}See note 61 above.
in Hegel’s terms, “notion” does not correspond to “object”). Harry is left outside of whatever previous subjective position he maintained.

At the end of the novel Harry attempts to return to Ruth who may or may not be pregnant with his child, and he once again sees the church, where he looks for consolation, and lifts his eyes to the church window. It is, because of church poverty or the late summer nights or just carelessness, unlit, a dark circle in a limestone façade.

There is light, though, in the streetlights; … Goodness lies inside, there is nothing outside, those things he was trying to balance have no weight. He feels his inside as very real suddenly, a pure blank space in the middle of a dense net. I don’t know, he kept telling Ruth. (264 italics original)

The passage tellingly contradicts the previous one: here, Harry, instead of feeling as if he is “no one,” feels that he is all. This ending is difficult to understand except as a projection of Harry’s persistent incorrigibility, and Updike’s insistence that there are never easy answers to the questions posed by existence. Harry’s repeated glance toward the circle of light that usually emanates from the church, a glance he once used for reassurance, is rebuffed as the light has been extinguished. Transcendence—what he searched for in that window, the answer to his constant unfulfilled desire to determine what it is that he longs for when he runs from his wife, the thing that is “all there is” (108) and the thing that he feels when he strikes his golf ball purely—is dismissed, as “there is nothing outside.” And yet, all is not lost. Harry finds new hope “in the streetlights,” a secular stand-in for the transcendent “rose window,” and solace in the lack of an answer for which he was searching. The “I don’t know” becomes an acceptable answer. Just as Herzog finds comfort in the silence at the end of that novel, Harry finds solace in not knowing and, more importantly, the very otherness of the world around him. Like Herzog,
the empirical world steadies and defines his selfhood through negation: “Although this block of brick three-stories is just like the one he left, something in it makes him happy; the steps and windowsills seem to twitch and shift in the corner of his eye, alive. This illusion trips him. His hands lift of their own and he feels the wind on his ears.” It is the physical world, even when he knows that he is cognizing it through his own consciousness (hence the twitching and shifting of it, the “illusion”), that settles him and he “runs. Ah; runs. Runs” (264). The bliss he feels, the “happiness,” is due to his interaction with the physical world. Updike recapitulates his aesthetic: the necessity of realism, of the material, in any subjective understanding and appreciation of the world.

“A big round nothing”: Rabbit Redux

If at the beginning of Rabbit, Run Harry Angstrom is longing for freedom, the opening of the second novel of the series finds him longing for structure. Ten years after his initial attempt to escape the confines of employment and family, we find Harry working with his father as a linotyper at “Verity Press.” Here it is Harry’s wife, Janice, who takes up with another man and “runs” to find her own bit of freedom. Taking place in nineteen sixty-nine, the novel tracks some of the more important cultural milestones of the previous decade while using Harry’s reaction to these milestones to explore, once again, the battle for autonomy in the face of restriction or, here, the desire for structure in the face of what seems to be an increasing chaos—Harry struggles to maintain control in a widening gyre.

84 Obviously the name “Verity Press” foregrounds what will be a main thematic concern of the novel: language and truth.
The most prominent cultural event that Updike uses as a thematic anchor is the “moon shot” of nineteen sixty-nine. The United States’ moon-or-bust project suggests to Updike a restructuring of the country’s values. If, in the lack of structure of the late sixties, the country attempts to look beyond the planet for hope and direction, what happens to the immediate? The moon, another metaphorical absence or hole like the golf hole or Ruth in Run, serves as the nihilistic other, an emptiness set against our own earthly presence. Updike tells us that “The six o’clock news is all about space, all about emptiness. … Columbus flew blind and hit something, these guys see exactly where they’re aiming and it’s a big round nothing” (285). Lukács’ statement that modernism “is a gesture, moreover, that is destined to lead nowhere; it is an escape into nothingness” (Realism 29), seems apt here. The emptiness of the moon endeavor, one that is more gestural than anything else, is indicative of a culture devoid of purpose, one that believes in “a big round nothing” over any positive conception. It is a purpose that Harry attempts to locate throughout the course of the novel. Even his street, “Vista Crescent,” suggests the emptiness of this moon shot mirrored in his own neighborhood where he has a “view of the moon.”

Vista Crescent is in the middle class development, Penn Villas, where Harry’s is the “third house from the end. Once there may have been here a vista, a softly sloped valley of red barns and fieldstone farmhouses, but more Penn Villas has been added and now the view from any window is as into a fragmented mirror, of houses like this, telephone wires and television aerials showing where the glass cracked” (279). This passage illustrates not only a move to a postmodern sensibility of the “fracturing” of ontology and perception but also offers a clear juxtaposition between what was once productive farmland and the now reproduced and scattered commodification of land and products that Harry sees at the end of the sixties. Not only have the

85 Interestingly, Bellow uses this same central trope, and for the same reasons, to close Mr. Sammler’s Planet.
literal and cultural landscapes changed, but the aesthetic tenor of the publishing world has shifted as well. Updike sees the sixties as a period of fragmentation and broken perception, and one that, instead of forcing a change in his aesthetic approach, forces a change in perception.  

“Penn Villas” represents not only Pennsylvania, but the “pen”; Updike’s project becomes to use his pen in an attempt to reflect and repair the fractured way that we now see our world. As he puts it, “The world, so balky and resistant and humiliating, can in the act of mimesis be rectified, adjusted, chastened, purified” (*Pieces* 35), and at the beginning of the postmodern turn, this project seems, to Updike, more necessary than ever.

This cultural emptiness is reflected too in Harry’s postmodern concern with the “surface quality” of the items around him. The world for Harry no longer has any depth or transcendence, and even the reality which he once found so beautiful shows signs of entropy. Hoping to get his son, Nelson, involved in something, he thinks:

> Anything, just to put something there, some *bliss*, to live on later for a while. If he goes empty now he won’t last at all, because we get emptier. Rabbit turns from the window and everywhere in his own house sees a slippery disposable gloss. It glints back at him from the synthetic fabric of the living-room sofa and chair, the synthetic artiness of a lamp Janice bought that has a piece of driftwood weighted and wired as its base, the unnaturally-looking natural wood of the shelves… His inability to fasten onto any thought and make something of it must be fatigue. (288 italics mine)

Harry carries the vision he sees out of the “fragmented mirror” of his view of Penn Villas to the “slippery disposable gloss” and “glint” of this world, illustrating a turn toward the appreciation

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86 I have defined above the “end” of the divide period as 1969. It is important to note, then, postmodern characteristics are beginning to appear in Updike’s writing at this time.
and privileging of “surface” accorded to postmodernism. “Nature,” here, has been co-opted by the market to the point where “natural wood” becomes “unnatural-looking” and his inability to make a coherent narrative, to “fasten onto any thought and make something of it,” is indicative of the emptiness—the flat nature—of postmodernism. Later when he and his family go out to dinner, he thinks, “The tablecloth is a red checked cloth and the daisies in a blue glass vase are real flowers, soft, Harry notices, touching them. Janice was right. The place is nice” (299). Harry’s surprise at finding the flower’s “real” and that this is a quality which makes the restaurant “nice” also suggests this shift to surface and simulacrum and away from nature. This notion is redoubled when man first sets foot on the moon. In a passage worthy of Baudrillard, just before the event,

> Men in studios, brittle and tired from killing time, demonstrate with actual-size mockups what is supposed to happen; on some channels men in space suits are walking around, laying down tinfoil trays as if for a cookout. At last it happens. The real event. Or is it? A television camera on the leg of the module comes on: an abstraction appears on the screen. The announcer explains that the blackness in the top of the screen is the lunar night, the blackness in the lower left corner is the shadow of the spacecraft with its ladder, the whiteness is the surface of the moon. … A man in clumsy silhouette has interposed himself among these abstract shadows and glare. (352-51)

Updike’s flirtation with simulacrum here as well as the man who “interposes himself among these abstract shadows and glare” suggests an indictment of abstraction to the point of negation.

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87 Recall that, according to Jameson, in postmodernism “we want to live on the surface for a while” (Postmodernism 151). We sense an “urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel seeming goods” (4 italics mine).
88 This is also reflective of the scene in Herzog in which the real flowers at the diner table confuse Herzog for a moment. See Chapter 1, pg. 85.
That is, there must be reality interposed in representation and, perhaps more importantly, man must be a natural component of it, not an “interposer.” The concept of walking on the moon is beyond the scope of our thinking (or was at the time), and it would seem that man’s imposition on that which we cannot comprehend, here the negative dialectic of the moon and the presence and absence of light and shadow, indicates an overstepping of our bounds beyond that which is reality and to something abstract and beyond comprehension. Man’s interposition, or a mere shadow of a man, implies our intervention in an otherwise abstract world—a position suggestive, perhaps, of the writer who decides to merely experiment with form and abstraction at the expense of what we comprehend as reality. This echoes Lukács’ indictment of experimental modernism/abstraction or formalism: “by destroying the complex tissue of man’s relations with his environment, it further[s] the dissolution of personality,” (italics mine) and, as quoted above, “It is a gesture, moreover, that is destined to lead nowhere; it is an escape into nothingness,” one which “replaces concrete typicality with abstract particularity.” We can equate this with statements that Updike has made about Faulkner, whose “novels strike [him] as rather course and oddly experimental” (Pieces 178), or John Barth, who is “playing games with paper” (121).

This disconnect from reality is coupled with a loss of enchantment necessary for the production of fiction. Harry, his father-in-law, and his son Nelson attend a baseball game at which “something has gone wrong. The ball game is boring. The spaced dance of the men in white fails to enchant, the code beneath the staccato spurts of distant motion refuses to yield its meaning.” The players on the field “seem like specialists like any other … a gallant pretense has been abandoned.” What has been abandoned here is (meta)narrative. What once held “meaning” in both its cultural importance (America’s pastime) as well as its aesthetic value has become an empty gesture that is played only for the sake of “play”—for the sake of the
individuals and their actions and not necessarily the larger narrative to which the game contributes. This suggests the postmodern sensibility of “play,” of interactions of parts instead of a “whole,” here represented by the game itself (not to mention the pretense of the “whole” which Lukács posits as the defining characteristic of the novel). Furthermore, the “spaced dance of the men in white” echoes the empty gestures of the men walking on the moon. Fighting this emptiness, “Rabbit yearns to protect the game from the crowd,” for whom “the poetry of space and inaction is too fine, too slowly spun for them,” and from Nelson, for whom “the screen of reality is too big . . . , he misses television’s running commentary, the audacious commercials” (338). If, in Run, basketball, and later, golf, united both action and purpose in bliss, here the bliss and security of baseball has been drained of all of its cultural (and for Harry, personal) weight. We can return to Lukács, who writes, “Every human action is based on a presupposition of its inherent meaningfulness, at least to the subject. Absence of meaning makes a mockery of action and reduces art to naturalistic description” (Realism 36). Obviously the reference to enchantment points toward fiction and the novel in particular and the loss of enchantment associated with critiques of modernism and postmodernism alike. The game of baseball, one whose narrative develops slowly over the course of nine innings, becomes a metaphor for the narrative of a novel. The “staccato spurts of distant motion” suggest a focus on the formal aspects of the game much in the way that modernism and postmodernism focus on form over narrative and, as a consequence, often fail to enchant the reader.

The focus on “specialization” involves, too, a critique of both artist and critic, and Nelson’s position as watcher or “reader” is figured as a society which is unable to sustain attention for

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89 See Bellow’s discussion of the same in Chapter 1, pgs. 37-38.
extended periods of time to the unfolding of a narrative.\textsuperscript{90} Ironically, Harry’s desire to “protect the game from the crowd” illustrates Updike’s modernist streak: the desire to protect the “field” of artistic production (of baseball, in Harry’s instance, and the novel/writing, in Updike’s) reminds us of the modernist effort to safeguard art from the bourgeois. Yet Harry (if not here, certainly in the last two novels) is bourgeois in his own right. The “protection” that he desires to provide, then, does not have the same telos as the modernists. Harry wishes to protect something that doesn’t exist on this field—he wishes to protect the game as it used to be played and as it used to be enjoyed, much as Updike wishes to return to a more nuanced realism rather than follow the formal experimentation that holds purchase in the twentieth century. Indeed, as “[t]he game drags on, with a tedious flurry of strategy, of pinch-hitters and intentional walks, prolonging the end,” we can see that it is the game that has changed and that its particulars and “specializations” have become more important than the feel and beauty of the game itself; maneuvers within the game are foregrounded at the game’s expense. Extending this to the aesthetic project, Updike states, “I enjoy a lot of experimental writing, but some avant-garde writing seems to me to be almost unreadable. … I find them very hard to read. There’s a kind of feedback from the world in general that I need to feel” (Plath 121). This “feedback” between world, writer, and reader, or player, analyst, and observer, is what is missing in both the game and contemporary fiction for Updike. The enchantment and dialectical unfolding of a baseball game, a superlative connection between nature and the individual, is missing both in the game and in art.

\textsuperscript{90} This understanding of “distraction” contradicts Benjamin’s defense of distraction in his “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (\textit{Illuminations} 239-41) and reflects Bellow’s own growing concern with distraction, summarized most clearly in his “The Distracted Public” (1990) and “There Is Simply Too Much to Think About” (1992), both from \textit{It All Adds Up}. 
Further in the novel Harry stumbles upon a movie production in Brewer’s, his hometown, center. He recalls a headline in a recent paper that read, “BREWER MIDDLE AMERICA? Gotham Filmmakers Think So” (423). But the passage serves to undermine any authenticity that might be found in this representation of middle America. Observing the glamour and shallow beauty of the actors and the production itself, Harry thinks, “it makes [him] feel dim, dim and guilty, to see how the spotlights carve from the sunlight a yet brighter day, a lurid pastel island of heightened reality around which the rest of us—technicians, policemen, the straggling fascinated spectators including himself—are penumbral ghosts, suppliants ignored” (424). The “heightened reality” of the movie set, one of simulacra and non-reality, puts the reality of Harry’s own life, and those like him, in the shadows. The use of the word “penumbral” clearly links this passage to the moon walk, where man has become an “interloper” in an abstracted reality, here figured through the movie set. Tellingly, the passage above is followed by another from an article that Harry has set at Verity Press, which describes the excavation of many “artifacts of the ‘olden times’” from the city. The end of the article reads, “Also old sign-boards are common. Ingeniously shaped in the forms of cows, beehives, boots, mortars, plows, they advertise ‘dry goods and notions,’ leatherwork, drugs, and medicines, produce of infinite variety. Preserved underground, most are still easily legible and date from the nineteenth century” (424). The telling juxtaposition here of the “heightened reality” of the film set against the mix of semiotics and advertisement from “olden times” which are “still easily legible” and “preserved” in the material world “underground” suggests a shift in epistemology and representation. The nature of the signs, which advertise real goods with an accompanying sign that not only spells the words but also provides a pictorial representation, appears to be celebrated over the heightened reality of the film and the set. The “nineteenth century” items suggest a nostalgic return to the height of
Victorian realism. But Updike’s project as a realistic novelist is more nuanced than this. Though he wants to “get things down exactly the way they are: how people talk, how they act, how they smell” (Plath 203) in order to “give something of the texture and the ambiguity of life itself” (210), by juxtaposing these two forms of representation, Updike points to the basis of his own project: of finding another “middle” that lies somewhere between the over-the-top aestheticization of the movie set (which sees Brewer as a “representation” of middle American instead of an actual middle America) and the one-to-one relational representation of the signs. This illustrates the aim of blissful realism, and the aim, too, of authors of another middle: the modern/postmodern divide.

This aim is mirrored by Harry’s occupation as a linotyper. Harry’s physical, real work in setting type for a press which produces the print for the local newspaper illustrates his position within a larger symbolic system (as does Updike’s vocation as a writer). Rabbit’s lack of control and “control” of text here is telling: he admits to his helpless participation in the symbolic as he is not writing the news that he is typesetting, only participating in its structural existence (that is, each of the stories that Rabbit typesets have to do with the reality of his everyday experience in one way or another). At the same time, the physical nature of what he’s doing, the materiality of the job, can be viewed as something greater than the content of what is printed (this materiality is connected to the underground artifacts discovered in the passage above). He has physical control over and above the symbolic, just as Herzog was able to write himself free of many of these structures, but the control is merely structural and not imaginative or creative. Harry’s inability to grasp words at moments of contact with the abject or Real (birth and death in Run) has been somewhat lessened here by his ability to physically put down the words on the page of the culture in which he is a part. But, again, the actual narrative that he is setting is out of his
control—he is a participant in the action but the action is always already dictated. His only agency is in the “typos” that he makes in setting the stories. The typos are accidental, however, and they are fixed before the news goes to print. His agency is one of mere chance, not of control. In order to reclaim some of this control Harry often imagines creating headlines for his own life, such as, “VERITY EMPLOYEE NAMED CUCKOLD OF WEEK. *Angstrom Accepts Official Horns from Mayor*” (353) or, “LOCAL MAN STABBED DEFENDING OUT-OF-STATE GIRL. *Body Tossed From Historic Bridge*” (384). The discursivity of this allows him, in effect, to escape the reality of situations—to be involved, but not be involved. He can control/set words much easier than he can control the reality of his own life. This is an aesthetic statement. Harry’s control/lack of control of the print is indicative of Updike’s—and other blissful realists’—position in regard to their function as author: they certainly have more control over the story than Harry does (reflecting the author’s control of “character” in both senses of the word), yet they are bound by the constraints of the reality of the world as well. Like Bellow’s “first to knock, first admitted,” Updike recognizes and embraces Lukács’s dictum to “allow the duality of the world to subsist” in writing.

This notion, that the material world, the “other,” is as much a part of this dialectic as the subjective, is born out by the central plot of the book which develops around Harry’s “education,” as he allows a young runaway, Jill, and a young black revolutionary, Skeeter, to live in his house. While what goes on in this period is interesting (Jill becomes a new-age instructor who teaches Harry proper eating and Buddhist tenets of ego-less living; Skeeter teaches him about Marxist theory and the history of the black struggle in America), the larger issue of Harry once again believing that he can do what he wants without consequence (that he can live with an underage white runaway and house a drug-pushing African American while his racist neighbors

91 Typos as agency become an important trope in Updike’s *A Month of Sundays* as well.
in Penn Villas look on, horrified) is paramount. Harry himself says, “No kidding, I once took that inner light trip and all I did was bruise my surroundings. Revolution, or whatever, is just a way of saying a mess is fun. Well, it is fun, for a while, as long as somebody else has laid in the supplies. A mess is a luxury, is all I mean” (413). Indeed, this transgression, like driving away from the responsibility of family, is one that will not go unpunished. As Harry’s desertion in *Run* results in the death of his newborn daughter, Becky, here Jill is also lost in a house fire that is ostensibly set by neighbors who were murderously upset with his living situation. He later tells his sister Mim, “I don’t know what I’ve been doing … I was a fucking Good Samaritan. I took in these orphans. Black, white, I said Hop aboard. Irregardless of color or creed, Hop aboard. Free eats. I was the fucking Statue of Liberty.” And she responds, “And it got you a burned-down house” (575, 577). Ironically, Harry, Jill, Skeeter, and Nelson actually behave as a domestic unit, one which is often loving and tight-knit. Harry’s mistake, however, is believing that his own opinion of the situation is above that of anyone else’s; the world is in conflict with his own subjective desires. As Augie’s getting kicked in the head illustrates, contingent reality always has the last say.

After the house-fire in which Jill perishes, while snooping in a scrapbook of the fire that Nelson is making, Harry finds “two Polaroid snapshots of the ruin” which, brownish and curling, show a half-burned house, the burned half dark like a shadow but active in shape, eating the unburned half, the garage studs bent like matchsticks in the ashtray. Looking at the photographs, Rabbit smells ash. The smell is real and not remembered. In Nelson’s closet he finds the source, a charred guitar. (571)
The similarities here to the ending of *Herzog* are telling, as is the juxtaposition to the movie set and the archaeological find above. This combination of reality and simulacra, of photographs and sense-perception, delivers an interesting description of the aims of blissful realism. We have pictures of a “ruin,” which place us in historical memory, and the physical photo is “brownish and curling” like the images they hold of the house itself, where there is clear indication of entropy and decay fighting against the clean, unburned portion. There is dark against light, reflective of the thematic and actual (that is, a black man and a white man) residential situation in the house, one showing domestic bliss (the unburned house), and the other the sexual and drug-addled atmosphere in which they lived and for which they were punished. Rabbit’s visual observation of the photos triggers another sense, the smell, which emanates from something real, but might as well magically waft from the photos. Updike switches here between a representational relation between photo and image to a metaphorical one of the burned and bent matchsticks, as if allowing Rabbit to discursively escape from this memory. The passage moves through multiple and multiplying figurative iterations. But through the *actual* smell of the guitar, one “real and not remembered,” a phrase which in and of itself is ambiguous (is it real and not remembered as in forgotten, or real and not remembered as in physically present in the now?), we (and Harry) are pulled back to the reality of what occurred; via smell and the possibility of sound from the guitar (recall the green piano in *Herzog*), the *reality* of the incident and of the death are in conflict with the possibilities and ideality of its memory. Instead of mere symbolic representation of this event (as we saw with the moon walk and the movie set) here Updike includes physical sensation as a locator of the scene’s, and the event’s, reality. The aesthetic statement seems clear: the author is trying, as did Bellow at the end of *Herzog*, to move beyond
the symbolic in the face of the process of representation. Through realism, Updike attempts to transcend, to create bliss from, reality.

In the final section of the book, Mim, Harry’s sister who moved to Las Vegas to become, among other things, a call girl, returns home. Mim performs a scene for Harry’s son, Nelson, acting out her role that she held as Abraham Lincoln at Disneyland. As she delivers her mock performance, Rabbit grabs her and “is shocked by the tone of her flesh, which for the skit has become plastic, not hers, flesh that would stay in any position you twisted it to. Frightened, he gives her a little shake, and she becomes human” (581). As in his description of the baseball game, Updike critiques postmodern play and subjective slippage through which the metanarrative (here, American history) is mimicked and lost in performance. If autonomy for Rabbit in the first novel was easier because of a somewhat stable culture or even a negative concept such as angst, here it is even more frightening for its emptiness, which is doubled by the nothingness of the moonshot. Ironically, however, it is Mim who tells Harry that he must have rules in order to live: “Why don’t you tend to your own garden instead of hopping around nibbling at other people’s?” Mim asks. He responds, “I have no garden,” and she replies, “Because you didn’t tend it at all. Everybody else has a life they try to fence in with some rules. You just do what you feel like and then when it blows up or runs down you sit there and pout” (587). Beyond the obvious return here to Peter Rabbit (Harry is often found nibbling lettuce in the next novel), and a reflection of Harry’s desire to “protect” the game of baseball—to fence in the “field of play”—Mim’s combination of postmodern whimsy, modernist control, and a pragmatic realism seems an apt categorization for the kind of balance for which the blissful realists strive.
The end of the novel returns us to the opening passages discussed above describing the view of Penn Villas, where “the view from any window is as into a fragmented mirror, of houses like this, telephone wires and television aerals showing where the glass cracked” (279). If Harry (and Updike’s) vision was one of a once unified and “whole” picture of the farmland of the Pennsylvania countryside that has become “fractured” by the introduction of “telephone wires and television aerals,” by the end of the novel, just before his house is burned to the ground, Harry cleans the house’s windows “so that at last four flawless transparencies permit outdoors to come indoors, other houses to enter yours” (532-33 italics mine). The perspective has changed here. Earlier the emphasis was on Harry’s view of the outside world; here Harry has cleaned his windows so that others can see his world, a world which, in its inclusion of racial mixing, drugs, and underage sex, is unacceptable to the observers of Penn Villas. We are reminded of James’ “Preface to the New York Edition” of Portrait of a Lady:

[The observer of the ‘human scene’] and his neighbors are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing course where the other sees fine. … but they are … as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher—without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist. (7)

Like James, Updike’s troping of windows becomes more a reflection of the artist himself: the idea of seeing through his main character’s eyes in the beginning of the novel is combined with the necessity of understanding that others can look in the window: like Rabbit’s confrontation with the “black core” in Run, it is a two way street. That is, Harry’s hard lesson—that his living

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92 One is reminded of Herzog here, as he installs storm windows, from the outside, just before (and after) Madeleine asks him for a divorce (8, 10).
situation was untenable for the people who were watching it from the outside in—is one for the author as well: representation cannot be solely from his own point of view, or, in the authorial sense, via the character’s point of view, as in James’s understanding, but rather has to accurately portray the entirety of that world and the people looking back through the observer’s window, no matter how ugly those people may be (or, literally “seeing black where the other sees white”). About this, Updike states, “But no doubt, fiction is also a mode of spying; we read it as we look in windows or listen to gossip, to learn what other people do” (Hamilton note 35). Literature cannot be merely a subjective experience that looks out. It must recognize the observer. The I/thou dichotomy of realism must be respected. Mim’s point about “rules” above is well taken in a formal sense: the author, like Harry, must recognize the otherness of the world and other subjectivities.

Toward the end of the novel this trope recurs as Harry sits by his dying mother. He tells her, “Mim says I’ve never learned any rules. … Any decent kind of world, you wouldn’t need all these rules.” He thinks as “[he] looks out of her windows,”

There was a time … when this homely street … excited Rabbit with the magic of his own existence. These mundane surfaces had given witness to his life; this cup had held his blood; here the universe had centered, each downtwirling maple seed of more account than galaxies. No more. Jackson Road seems an ordinary street anywhere. Millions of such American streets hold millions of lives, and let them sift through, and neither notice nor mourn, and fall into decay, and do not even mourn their own passing but instead grimace at the wrecking ball with the same gaunt façades that have outweathered all their winters. However steadily Mom communes with these maples—the branches’ misty snake-shapes as inflexibly
fixed in these two windows as the leading of stained glass—they will not hold
back her fate by the space of a breath; nor, if they are cut down tomorrow to
widen Jackson Road at last, _will her staring_, that planted them within herself, halt
their vanishing. And the wash of new light will extinguish even her memory of
them. Time is our element, not a mistaken invader. (590-91 italics mine)\(^93\)

This passage reflects the ephemeral and indifferent nature of the empirical world, and, again, the
trope of windows is indicative of the aperture of perception of the author and the frame of fiction
itself. The window, marked by the maple as the “leading of stained glass,” reminds one of the
church window to which Harry looked for transcendence in _Run_. And yet the indifference, here,
like the church’s own stone structure, provides no particular relief. The relief, then, comes from
Updike’s rendering of it, through his infusion of bliss via accurate and transcendent
description—through his art. Updike is writing against the void, against the existential
emptiness that the world otherwise leaves us with. We must juxtapose, then, the Jamesian
concept of the place of the author and Updike’s own conception of the battle between reality and
fiction. In his famous essay on Hawthorne, discussing Hawthorne’s own love of Trollope and
his “realism” in spite of Hawthorne’s privileging of the imagination, Updike reflects, “Yet what
is reality? We do not feel material to ourselves, and matter itself is transient” (_Hugging_ 78). He
closes, “Our dreams move us: this is a psychological rather than a religious truth, but in a land
where, as Emerson said, ‘things are in the saddle,’ it gives the artist his vote” (80). This
juxtaposition, again, “the will to walk the straight line of paradox,” is ultimately where Updike,
and the blissful realists, position their aesthetic.

\(^93\) The indifference of the “wrecking ball” as well as its intended victims are reflective of the decay in the city of
_Herzog_: “The great metal ball swung at the walls, passed easily through brick, and entered the rooms, the lazy
weight browsing on kitchens and parlors” (175), and his reflection afterward: “Ruin comes to beauty, inevitably.
The space-time continuum reclaims its elements, taking you away bit by bit, and then again comes the void” (182).
“Running on Empty”: *Rabbit is Rich*

If *Redux* uses the moon shot as its central trope, *Rabbit is Rich* begins with the gas crisis of the late seventies and uses it as a figurative entropic starting point for the novel. Harry begins, “The fucking world is running out of gas” (623), and immediately inflates the metaphor: “…Harry feels they have let something momentous, something alive under the heading of energy, escape. But a lot of topics, he has noticed lately, in private conversation and even on television where they’re paid to talk it up, run dry, exhaust themselves, as if everything’s been said in this hemisphere” (631). While we can certainly extend this concept to discussions of the “death of the novel” touched upon in the introduction, Harry’s (and Updike’s) notion of a lack of energy has more to do here with a lack of dialectic—a lack of binary energy that is necessary to make the world function. In the course of the last ten years we learn that Skeeter has died and that with “Skeeter dead, a certain light was withdrawn from the world, a daring, a promise that all would be overturned” (649). Even before the fall of communism and its attendant “end of ideology” (which lingers in the background of the final book, *Rabbit at Rest*), we can already sense an exhaustion of energy in the world that is mirrored by Harry and his aging.

This is reflected by Harry’s (and Updike’s) understanding of the entropy of the world at large. Harry’s golf club, for instance, was built between the exclusive Brewer Country Club and Tulpehocken Club and the “public nine-hole courses tucked around in the farmland.” It’s “middle” position, built in a place which was, “if not quite a wilderness a strange and forbidding place, where resort hotels failed and burned down and only hikers and lovers and escaping criminals ventured,” indicates its own entropic existence. Where once there was energy in a “strange and forbidding place,” now there was a stasis of synthesis which seemed to lack any particular energy, mystery, or ambiguity:
But there was a class of the young middle-aged that had arisen in the retail businesses and service industries and software end of the new technology and that did not expect liveried barmen and secluded cardrooms, that did not mind the pre-fab clubhouse and sweep-it-yourself tennis courts of the Flying Eagle; to them the polyester wall-to-wall carpeting of the locker rooms seemed a luxury, and a Coke machine in a cement corridor a friendly sight. (675)

The club is representative of a new middle class and Harry’s own dwindling of energy; a settling down in his middle years.

Harry maintains, however, some dialectical energy with his continued insistence on the existence of the transcendent and the ideal. This is most tellingly figured in the character of Cindy Murkett, the young wife of a fellow club member, Webb Murkett. Cindy is young and beautiful and wears a cross on her neck, reminding one of the church’s “rose window” in Run. Like the transcendence that the window represents, Cindy is unattainable, even at the end of the novel.  

94 Ideality is also manifested in the possibility of him having a daughter through his relations with Ruth in Run (the possibility is all—knowing, like consummating his lust for Cindy, would destroy the potential energy). 95 When he tells Janice that he’s been thinking about the possibility of having a daughter by Ruth, she responds, “You always want what you don’t have instead of what you do. Getting all cute and smiley in the face thinking about this girl that doesn’t exist while your real son, that you had with your wife, is waiting at home right now…”

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94 When the couples swap spouses at the end of the novel Harry is sure he will sleep with Cindy, but ends up with Thelma, another club member, instead, allowing Cindy to keep her symbolic ideality. Her ideality is two-dimensional however; we are never given a full understanding of her or her husband’s characters. This is doubled when Harry finds some private polaroids of Cindy and Webb making love; their two-dimensionality (and her status as merely a sexual ideal) is both figuratively and literally illustrated. One is reminded here, too, of the polaroids of the “ruin” in Redux, which were themselves illustrative of a representational escape from reality.

95 It is no mistake, then, that this ideal “daughter” (who, we find out, is his actual daughter in Rabbit Remembered, a sequel published in 2000’s Licks of Love) is named Annabelle, mirroring Humbert Humbert’s first love in Lolita, a love which he never consummates, and therefore stands in as the ideal (and the love he tries to recreate through Lolita). See Chapter 3.
(685 italics original). And about Ruth he thinks, “He hadn’t wanted to face her, the complicated
and accusing reality of her. He wanted to hold her in his mind as just fucked and satisfied,
lifting white and naked above him on an elbow” (722 italics mine). Like a painting of a reclining
nude, Harry’s desire is to maintain this dialectical tension of the “is” and the “ought,” for it is
this that keeps his energy and desire—his life for that matter—possible. The ideality of Ruth and
Cindy, and the possibility of the daughter, not the reality of his poor relationship with his son, at
least hold the barbarity of reality at bay and do not extinguish the possibilities of transcendence
in which he still believes. It prevents the entropy of what has become an otherwise static
existence from laying hold.

As in the previous two novels, Harry’s relationship with language and its ability to control or
complicate his life is thematized here as well. If Updike, via Harry’s desire to hold the
transcendent above and against reality, wishes to illustrate the necessary tension within blissful
realism, Harry’s constant conflict with language illustrates the authors’ struggle with language
above and against reality as well. Toward the beginning of the novel Harry tries to tell a story
that he heard on the radio to his fellow members at the Flying Eagle. He begins, “Oh just some
doctor down in Baltimore, the radio announcer said he was hauled into the court for killing a
goose on the course with a golf club” (678), but it is only after two pages of interruptions by his
listeners that he is able to finish: “So the doctor’s defense evidently was that he had hit the
goose with a golf ball and injured it badly enough he had to put it out of its misery. Then this
announcer said, it seemed cute at the time, she was a female announcer—” (679), another half
page of interruptions, and then, “So the announcer says, ‘A mercy killing, or murder most
doubt?’” (680). The interruptions draw attention to Harry as storyteller, and by extension his
subjective position, as they fracture and undermine his authority (most of the interruptions are
ones of inattention or crude jokes). Further on in the novel the anecdote resurfaces, this time in an Ann Landers’ column that reads, “The other news story was about a Washington, D.C., physician who beat a Canadian goose to death with his putter on the 16th green of a country club. (The goose honked just as he was about to sink one.) The reason for printing those letters was to demonstrate that truth is stranger than fiction” (884-85). The tale turns up one more time toward the end of the novel, this time in *Golf Magazine*: “A COSTLY BIRDIE: Dr. Sherman Thomas cooked his own goose when he killed one of the Canadian variety at Congressional CC. The court levied a $500 fine for the act” (1034). Harry struggles to control the narrative (as he did the type in *Redux*) and it, again, gets away from him; it is usurped, reformed, and told by others. The cacophony of voices that interrupt his story are equivalent to his own struggle to find his place/voice in the world, and the initial “misreading” of the story, one which, by no accident, removes fault from the accused (Harry tells everyone at his daughter’s funeral, “Don’t look at me, I didn’t kill her,” in *Run*), indicates his own troubled relationship with narrative and truth (e.g. “Verity Press”). Updike also gives us puns, further undermining the “control” of language, as well as a refining of the tale, both in terms of its accuracy and rhetorical ends. This refining, then, becomes both edifying (in the sense that the facts come out) and undermining, as Harry’s version of the tale (which wasn’t his to begin with) is ultimately upended. If, as Landers says, “truth is stranger than fiction,” it is the pinning down of truth and determining of authority that is problematized. Harry is once again lost in a world of language.

If Harry is lost, then his creator, John Updike, and other blissful realists become the vehicle through which language can be controlled and used to situate and glorify, to “walk the straight line of paradox” between the contingent and the subjective. Like Bellow, Updike provides passages that serve as synecdoches for the concept of blissful realism and the elevation of the
quotidian to the transcendent via description. While Harry is on a short vacation in the Poconos (during which Rabbit takes up jogging, another indication that his “running” has turned from escapism to accommodation, Harry making a “stony truce [that] seems to prevail between himself and God” [747]), Updike gives us this:

Here in the Poconos food, exercise, and sleep, no longer squeezed into the margins of the day, swell to a sumptuous importance. The smell of fresh coffee drifting to greet him as he walks still wet back from his swim; the kiss of the morning fog through a rusted window screen; the sight of Janice with bare brown feet wearing the same tennis shorts and kid’s black T-shirt day after day; the blue jay switching stances on the porch rail; the smooth rose-veined rock holding shut the upstairs door that has lost its latch; the very texture of root-riddled mud and reeds where the fresh cedar dock pilings have been driven: he feels love for each phenomenon and not for the first time in his life seeks to bring himself into harmony with the intertwining simplicities that uphold him, that were woven into him at birth. There must be a good way to live. (745)

The connections between this passage, a panegyric of the phenomenological world, a “hymning” of reality, is akin to Herzog’s description of his bathroom discussed above. Indeed, Herzog’s declaration ,“Unexpected intrusions of beauty. This is what life is,” is mirrored by Harry’s, “There must be a good way to live,” though Harry, as usual, is unable to answer exactly what that way might be. The base, animal requirements of “food, exercise, and sleep” are elevated to metaphysical levels of appreciation, and, as did Bellow in Herzog, Updike touches upon all senses: the smell (and potential taste) of the coffee and fresh cedar; the touch of the water from the swim and the morning fog (which, again like Bellow, Updike anthropomorphizes into a

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96 See pgs. 93-94.
“kiss,” in addition to the “rose-veined” rock, connecting the subjective and the objective); the sight of Janice and her, and her clothing’s, familiarity; the sound of the blue jay on the porch rail. This elevation of the beauty of the everyday (underscored by Janice and her familiarity) is the foundation for blissful realism. It is an elevation of reality to that of the divine, or as close as once can get as a mere mortal. The juxtaposition of Harry’s bumbling and Updike’s masterful control illustrates Updike’s conception of the writer: he who celebrates the otherness of the world through the very abstraction that most find frustrating and elusive—language.

This passage also returns us to Barthes, as it illustrates that the gap between Barthes’ understanding of narrative and Updike’s is not as wide as one might think. In his “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” Barthes writes,

The “reality” of a sequence lies not in the “natural” succession of the actions composing it but in the logic there exposed, risked and satisfied. Putting it another way, one could say that the origin of a sequence is not the observation of reality, but the need to vary and transcend the first form given man, namely repetition: a sequence is essentially a whole within which nothing is repeated. … “What takes place” in a narrative is from the referential (reality) point of view literally nothing; “what happens” is language alone, the adventure of language, the unceasing celebration of its coming. (Image 124, italics original)

I am inclined to think that Updike (and, perhaps, Bellow) would agree with this notion with one vital caveat: that language’s independence from reality is still dependent upon reality. As the passage from the novel above illustrates, we can read the “adventure” and “coming” of the language without dispute. And yet the language is in service of elevating the very reality it describes. Furthermore, the inclusion of Janice, the “repetition” of her presence, her banality,
and even the clothes she wears, suggests that repetition, which provides consistency, need not be transcended, but rather depended upon in order to see and appreciate the new. Without that reality, without language, without the dependence upon narration, and a recognition of the static objective reality by the reader, the passage will lose a majority of its jouissance. All this is to say that Harry’s inability to control language throughout the tetralogy reflects a normal conflict between the objective and the subjective: one tries to make sense of a world through language, and often one fails. The duty of the blissful realist, then, is not to use language to escape the confines of the real (thereby giving up the battle), or to complicate notions of reality through language, but rather to do the best one can to glorify this tension.

The latter part of this notion, the postmodern effort to complicate reality via language, is illustrated through Updike’s characterization of Harry’s son, Nelson. If the first half of the tetralogy reflected Harry’s battles with notions of freedom and control, then the latter half often reflects his son’s desire for structure and control in what seems to be the beginning of a postmodern era with no “centre.” Nelson, who cries out, “People out to be consistent” (946), and who, when Harry warns him that he’s “caught. They’ve got you and you didn’t even squeak,” responds, “You say I’m caught but I don’t feel caught, I feel like I’m becoming a man!” (809), longs for the control that his father most often fights against. This isn’t necessarily a difference in character as much as a difference in history and culture. About Nelson’s generation Harry states, “Spineless generation, no grit, nothing solid to tell a fact from a spook with. Satanism, pot, drugs, vegetarianism. Pathetic. Everything handed to them on a platter, think life’s one big TV, full of ghosts” (766). And Janice says about Nelson’s generation, “They seem to have so many choices and yet they don’t. They’ve been taught by television all their lives to want this
and that…” (732). The world, running on empty, does not offer much solidity or stability any longer.

Indeed, Nelson sees the commodification of the world, and it is the emptiness of this cultural moment that makes him “run” at the end of the novel. Nelson, for example, thinks that “[He]’d much rather handle native American cars but between the three of us they’re junk. They’re cardboard. They’re pretend” (634), and “[T]he country’s the same now wherever you go. The same supermarkets, the same plastic shit for sale. There’s nothing to see” (689). In addition, in counterpoint to Harry’s desire for freedom in Run, Nelson is “majoring in geography” (731) at college, in an apparent move to try and locate himself and find direction in a world that physically no longer has any open places left to go and is ideologically groundless. If Harry is always searching for the ineffable, and is frightened when he finds it, Nelson is confronted daily with the ineffable, and searches for something solid and meaningful. As Nelson puts it, referring to Harry, “He doesn’t want to think about the invisible anyway; every time in his life he’s made a move toward it somebody has gotten killed” (767). Updike illustrates this point further, returning to the window motif when Nelson is at a party and sees that

[a] big bay of three four-paned windows overlooks the deadened heart of the city: where once the neon outlines of a boot, a peanut, a top hat, and a great sunflower formed a garland of advertisement above Weiser Square now only the Brewer Trust’s beacons trained on its own granite façade mark the center of the downtown: four great pillars like four white fingers stuck in a rich black pie, the dark patch made by the planted trees of the so-called shopping mall. … Slim’s front bay windows have in their upper panes the stained-glass transom lights … [T]he old floors of parqueted oak have been covered wall-to-wall with cheap shag
carpeting specked like pimento, and hasty plasterboard partitions have divided up the generous original rooms. The high ceilings have been lowered, to save heat, and reconstituted in soft white panels of something like pegboard. (912)
The “granite façade” of the church in Run has been replaced here with Brewer Trust’s edifice (which in turn reflects the wordplay of “Verity Press”), perhaps heavy-handedly transferring faith from the church to the bank and the mall beside it. In addition, the “stained-glass transom lights” have replaced the glowing stained glass of the church, which was illuminated, we are meant to believe, from some otherworldly source. These lights provide their own commodified illumination. The “cheapness” of the rest of the apartment reflects that of Harry’s new golf club, and the beauty of the old apartment has been replaced by a kitschy emptiness. In addition, Nelson sees at the party

[an album printed of photographs and posters from the Nazi days in Germany, beautiful blond boys in rows singing and a handsome fat man in a white uniform loaded with medals and Hitler looking young and lean and gallant, gazing toward some Alps. Having this here is some kind of swish thing like those tinseled cards showing women as so ugly and there seems no protection against all the ugliness that is in the world… (926)

The commentary here is aimed, of course, at postmodern irony and kitsch (of the type celebrated by Sontag), where taking something so horrible as the “Nazi days in Germany” and employing them as an ironic commentary on beauty is, Updike seems to say, an empty, ugly gesture. Nelson’s desire for a stable, non-ironic reality seems justified. He wants to be grounded in reality, not removed from it.
Updike juxtaposes this passage with one shortly after, in which Harry’s experience of the world and Updike’s conception of authorship and the craft of fiction are adjusted:

One or two of the panes in the window on the side nearer the street, the side where Rabbit sleeps, hold imperfections, patches of waviness or elongated bubbles, scarcely visible to the eye of day but which at night hurl onto the far wall, with its mothlike shadows of medallion patter, dramatic amplifications, the tint of each pane also heightened in the enlargement, so that an effect of stained glass haunts the area above Janice’s jumbled mahogany dresser descended from the Koerners, beside the four paneled door that locks out the world. [The years] have borne these luminous rectangles into Harry’s brain as precious entities…

(940)

The stained glass apparitions here recall, like the passage above, the windows of the church outside of Ruth’s Brewer apartment, windows which provided Harry with spiritual sustenance in the face of the empirical world’s enervation of that spirit. The reversal of the observational position here, however, is vital. That is, if in Run Harry had to search for that particular light, and in Redux Updike explored the position of the observer on the outside looking in, and for Nelson the light is reified and co-opted by capitalism, here it has come to Harry through his own window (imperfect though that image and coloration may be); the “abstract brilliance burning underneath” of the church window has now entered his bedroom, where the door “locks out the world” for his own space of transcendence. If, in Run, Harry had to look to the outside world for transcendence, here he is trying to keep it locked inside this room, protected, as he would try and protect the baseball game in Redux. The implication seems to be one of personal growth or illumination, one that indicates an acceptance of the “imperfect” nature of that light (since it
must be filtered through the imperfect window—the mechanism of apperception), and the fact that it is perceived only in shadow form. The “precious entities,” however, are “dramatic amplifications,” a metaphor for Updike’s own “hymning” of reality through his writing, amplifying the effects of nature to moments of transcendence.

This understanding leads to Harry’s finding and reaffirming the necessity and presence of the void in his life in order to appreciate the present and transcendent. After Harry and his Flying Eagle friends decide to take a trip to the Caribbean, they board the plane, and Harry thinks, “In such moments of adventure he is impatient with his body, that its five windows aren’t enough, he can’t get the world all in. Joy makes his heart pound. God, having shrunk in Harry’s middle years to the size of a raisin lost under the car seat, is suddenly great again, everywhere like a radiant wind. Free…” (975 italics mine). This controlled “run” has once again kindled his spirit of freedom that had dissipated with middle age and increased income. Yet it is the final scene of this vacation in which the couples swap spouses that Harry again touches the void. His partner for the evening, Thelma, allows him to have anal sex with her, and Harry thinks,

That void, inside her. He can’t take his mind from what he’s discovered, that nothingness seen by his single eye….his sense of miracle at being himself, himself instead of somebody else, and his old inkling, now fading in the energy crunch, that there was something that wanted him to find it, that he was here on earth on a kind of assignment. (1001)

This physical encounter with the “void” that Thelma provides once again sets in motion Harry’s own declaration of autonomous subjectivity, and the dialectical tension that has existed throughout the tetralogy of Harry’s own existential freedom, where Updike, as William Pritchard puts it, “is committed to the centrality of the individual, the reality of the material world, a
dualistic mindset, and a life of mystery and faith” (25), and poses the central question of most of Updike’s fiction, “Why am I me?” Harry repositions himself and his own subjectivity against the void of nothingness and begins anew. This experience is much different from the one with Ruth discussed above: there is no effort toward synthesis here, only appreciation of the void and the complete “not me” of Thelma which serves to elevate his own sense of self. Once again, however, this transcendence is ephemeral as the following day Harry and Janice are called home—Nelson has “run” away from his wife Pru. Reality refuses to leave Harry alone.

“We ought to be more grateful”: *Rabbit at Rest*

The final novel of the tetralogy finds Harry semi-retired and living half of the year in Florida. If to this point Harry has been trying to define himself against and in relation to certain voids or absences, here, as implied in the title, Harry pits himself against the void of inevitable death. Again, this dialectic is a tangible understanding of the project of blissful realists as they write against the wastelander outlook as well as formalism in an attempt to glorify and sanctify reality and its representation as an unstable mediation between the empirical and the subjective. As in *Rich*, Harry’s son Nelson seems to replace him as the postmodern representative of Harry’s earlier modernist search for freedom in a reified world: Nelson cries for structure in a structureless one (Nelson’s children, Roy and Judy, illustrate this genealogical inheritance as well). But it is Harry’s battle with and eventual acceptance of death that pushes the thematic tenor and narrative tension of the novel.

The first theme we encounter, however, is one of “crowding.” If in *Rich* the world was “running out of gas,” at the end of the eighties the world has too much of everything. The opening of the novel finds Harry struggling to locate a parking space at the airport, squeezing
into a spot and then forgetting, in the overwhelming crowd of the cars, where he parked when he returns. In his words, “There’s a crush on, and it’s not going to get any better” (1261). But the figuration of “squeezing” and “pressure” is often shifted to a discussion of his chest, as “He has spells of feeling short of breath and mysteriously full in the chest, full of some pressing essence” (1054). His full heart, his desire to do something in the boredom and entropic state of his retired life, is bound up in the pressure he feels in his chest: “He has developed, he realizes, an image of his heart as an unwilling captive inside his chest, a galley slave or one of those blinded horses that turn a mill wheel” (1235). The “pressing essence” is the essence of his subjectivity (soul) that no longer has room to express itself. As such, he is determined to “know when to quit” (1136). The physical demands of his heart ailment engender a dialectical conversation about body and spirit, material and essence.

After having a heart attack while sailing with his granddaughter, Rabbit is forced to choose between angioplasty, a temporary solution, and open-heart surgery, which, he is told, will be a better long-term solution. Harry chooses the former for very clear reasons: the idea of someone opening up his chest is an invasion of his notion of self. In a conversation with Charlie Stavros, who has had open heart surgery, he thinks, “Charlie’s word pull has upset him, made it too real, the physical exertion, pulling open these resistant bone gates so his spirit will fly out and men in pale-green masks will fish in this soupy red puddle with their hooks and clamps and bright knives” (1267). Instead, he thinks he is “A god-made one-of-a-kind with an immortal soul breathed in. A vehicle of grace. A battlefield of good and evil. An apprentice angel” (1265). Indeed, this resistance to his body being made matter and only matter reduces or elides his own

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97 Interestingly, Nabokov refers to the characters he creates as his “galley slaves” (Plimpton 96), reflecting Harry’s own desire for autonomous control against a world that is pressing in on him, and, perhaps, an author that is now willing to set him free.
conception of self that has kept him moving for the entirety of his life. To open him up, in effect, would kill him, regardless of whether he survived the operation or not.

Harry’s notion of his essence against that of his body, predicated on and created by his preoccupation with death and his own health problems, is further illustrated when Harry, Janice, Judy, and Roy take a day trip, stopping first at the Thomas Edison Alva Winter Home, and after, Jungle Gardens. The juxtaposition of the two places is telling: one a testament to the ingenuity and perseverance of the human mind and the other a testament to the animal being and its attendant beauty. At the Edison house the grandchildren are immediately bored and distracted. Harry tells the group, “It’s a one-way tour. … Come on, everybody. Let’s stick with it” (1135), and tells Judy, after giving her hand a “sadistic squeeze,” “Come on, stick it out. Go with the flow, for Chrissake” (1136). While this is in part a reaction to Harry’s disapproval of Judy’s t.v. channel surfing, in which he sees “[a]n impatient rage within the child, a gluttony for images…” (1120), it is also a larger commentary upon the patience that is required not only for narrative and Updike’s chosen genre (as reflected in the baseball passage above), but also one for life. That is, Harry’s injunction is a call for a human capacity for experiencing the fullness of life, and for maintaining a certain faith in the given experience of life. (This is also illustrated after Harry’s first heart attack, when “His collapse twenty-six hours ago did have its blissful aspect: his sense, beginning as he lay helpless and jellyfishlike under a sky of red, of being in the hands of others, of being the blind, pained, focal point of a world of concern and expertise, at some depth was a coming back home, after a life of ill-advised journeying” [1197].) He later tells Roy, who had to walk out of Dumbo before it was finished, “Roy, you should have stayed to the end. If you don’t stay to the end the sadness sticks with you” (1141). All of this seems to be operating in two ways: as a defense of the narrative form and the novel in particular, and of the
required balance between outside forces with internal and subjective ones. That is, if one shuts himself off from the waves of experience and fate (as Judy does with the television, never focusing long enough to be moved by anything in particular, but instead affirming her agency merely by changing channels), then he is not experiencing life to its fullest. Harry, as a representative of this theory of life, is literally bursting with this fullness.

There is a notion here, too, of trying to find a medium between the passivity of an animal (“sticking it out,” letting life happen to you), and the active human genius of Edison. As Harry and the others are informed about all of Edison’s inventions on the guided tour, Janice asks how different the world might have been without such a man. Harry responds, “Hardly at all. It was all there in the technology, waiting to be picked up. If we hadn’t done it the Swiss or somebody would have. The only modern invention that wasn’t inevitable, I once read somewhere, was the zipper” (1138). Harry’s point here in the face of Edison’s genius is giving the glory back to God; the material is provided, and it is up to man, in a position between the infinite and the finite, to do something with it. This is applicable to the author, who takes the materials given to him or her and attempts something greater than themselves: a “zippering” of the objective and subjective worlds, of the material and the spiritual, of realism and bliss. About this, the Hamiltons write that Updike “sees existence as that which simultaneously hides and reveals the truth about itself, since truth ultimately lies beyond the bounds of space and time and yet must be grasped by creatures who are temporally and spatially limited” (22).

In contrast, on the second leg of their trip, Harry ends up mistaking parrot food for a snack and ignominiously eats it. After being made fun of by his grandchildren, Harry states, “I didn’t know. … There’s no sign or anything.” Updike continues, “He is suffused with a curious sensation; he feels faintly numb and sick but beyond that, beyond the warm volume enclosed by
his skin, the air is swept by a universal devaluation; for one flash he sees his life as a silly thing it will be a relief to discard” (1143 italics mine). The lack of a “sign” here suggests the difference between Harry as human being and Harry as animal. Without “signs”—without language instructing him what to do—he is merely an animal. This is reminiscent of his problematic relationship with language in the first three novels (the sign in the pharmacy in *Run*, the newsprint in *Redux*, and the goose anecdote in *Rich*), all of which position him as subordinate to language. Here the missing “sign” again puts him in the position of animal (“rabbit”), and also indicates the necessity of language in our very human endeavor to rise above this nature. Harry later thinks, “It’s hell, to be a creature. You are trapped in yourself, the genetic instructions, more strictly than in a cage. … Harry hates shells. Whenever he sees them he can’t help thinking of the blobby hungry sluggy creatures who inhabit them, with hearts and mouths and anuses and feelers and feeble eyes…” (1144). The space between the effort of a transcendent human nature in Edison and the “sluggy creatures” that humans are reflects Updike’s own understanding of a man’s position in the world, a step below the infinite, caged within the material world, one who might as well eat parrot food as salted nuts—we are, in a sense, all animals. Furthermore, being “trapped in yourself” precludes contact with other individuals, emphasizing other’s “otherness.” Yet, in a disavowal of Sartrean existentialism and avowal of Forsterean “connectedness,” Updike writes that while the four of them stare at “sacred” flamingos, “they stand marveling, the four human beings, as if the space between farflung planets has been abolished, so different do these living things loom from themselves. The Earth is many planets, that intersect only at moments. Even among themselves, slices of difference interpose, *speaking the same language though they do*…” (1142 italics mine). This illustrates the wonder of the zipper above: that something so “very intricate,” with “all those little slopes and curves, the way they fit…” (1138), the way that
we are able to connect seemingly disparate and incongruous worlds, those of individuals, into the
connective thread of a narrative. This is, as has been discussed, the driving theme of the
tetralogy: the individual against outside forces, and those outside forces obviously encompassing
the will, desire, and being of others. Yet it also emphasizes the moments when these separate
worlds coalesce, when the I/thou dichotomy is broken, and when the subjective and the
objective, or subjective and subjective, merge into one: moments of bliss in the real world.

This duality between the infinite and the bodily, between Edison and animals, the duality
emphasized throughout the tetralogy, is also figured in the decision that Harry must make about
angioplasty and open heart surgery, where open heart surgery would reveal his animal, bodily
nature and do away with the infinite, his soul. The surgery would, metaphorically, condemn him
to forever eating parrot food. Thinking about a documentary about birth that he saw on t.v.,
Harry states in regard to a cesarean delivery, “This woman’s abdomen, with a baby inside, was
lined in a material, just like foam rubber” (1267 italics original). And considering his surgery he
“has trouble believing how his life is tied to all this mechanics—that the me that talks inside him
all the time scuttles like a water-striding bug above this pond of body fluids and their slippery
conduits. How could the flame of him ever have ignited out of such wet straw?” (1295). The
possibility of death has occasioned again the consideration of his own subjectivity, one for which
he has been fighting over the course of the novels, and it is his unwillingness to let go of this
notion that prevents him from having the open heart surgery. While he is getting the angioplasty,
however, as he is watching the procedure on a monitor, he thinks that “the anger [of his heart] is
his life, his soul, mind over matter, electricity over muscle. The mechanically precise dark ghost
of the catheter is the worm of death within him. Godless technology is fucking the pulsing wet
tubes we inherited from the squid, the boneless sea-cunts” (1298). Seeing his own bodily
interior on television, the image “seems as remote from his body as the records of his sins that angels are keeping. Were his heart to stop, it would be mere shadowplay” (1299). The simulacra of the interiority of his self (reminiscent of the shadows of the moon walk and the movie set in *Redux*), the image of his own heart on the t.v. screen, is in itself a far distance from reality. What he sees on the screen, the materiality of him, is not, in a Lacanian sense, his “imago” or gestalt, and is as far removed as any metaphysical or religious understanding of his essence or soul. The vessel of his body, the mystery of what lies inside it, represents a connection between his soul (the ineffable—bliss), and the material (reality). Like the combination of zoo animals and Edison above, Harry seeing his body as separate from his conception of self intensifies the tension of the novel and the way that blissful realists try to mollify and glorify that separation.

This disconnect from the body that technology forces upon Harry is doubled in the parallel story of Nelson who, by this point, is hooked on cocaine and has been defrauding Harry and Janice’s Toyota dealership in order to pay for his habit. Nelson’s addiction is the opposite of Harry’s: if Harry is addicted to his sense of self and constantly at battle with the forces that might take that self away from him, Nelson is looking to avoid his self and yearns for structure and direction provided by the outside world. Returning to his desire for “order” in *Run* (recall that he’s “an order loving man”), Harry declares, “We’ve got to get some order going in this crazy family” (1288), and Janice believes that Nelson has “just been begging for the rest of us to take over” (1324). Nelson, for his part, seems to use cocaine as a way to create the kind of transcendence that is lacking in his own chaotic life and culture. He says about his cocaine use, “After a hit, I feel no pain. I guess that means I feel pain the rest of the time. Everything goes

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98 Nelson’s desire for structure echoes Joseph’s ironic proclamation at the end of Bellow’s *The Dangling Man*: “Hurray for regular hours! / And for the supervision of the spirit! / Long live regimentation!” (143).
from black and white to color. Everything is more intense, and more hopeful. You see the world the way it was meant to be. You feel powerful” (1183). If Harry is enamored of the beauty of the world (he says about a group of pear trees, “Along the sidewalk in this radiant long grove shadowy people push baby carriages and stand conversing by their steps as if oblivious of the beauty suspended above them, enclosing them, already shedding a confetti of petals: they are in heaven” [1220]), Nelson sees the world as drained of that beauty. His own existential crisis, one which involves a lack of connection to the outside world, a lack of transcendence, must be supplemented with drugs. After abusing his wife, Nelson declares, “[When I’m using is] the only time I feel human, like other people I guess feel all the time. But when I went after Pru that way tonight it was like a monster or something had taken over my body and I was standing outside watching and felt no connection with myself. Like it was all on television” (1287). His connection here of his drug use to television of course illustrates a postmodern investment in simulacra and a distancing from the reality of the world and its transcendence. It is also reflective of Harry’s discomfort with and disbelief at watching his own heart on the television monitor. Responding to this postmodern notion of a loss of metanarrative and connection with reality, in an interview between a class at Union College and the author, Updike asks the class: “Is it really true that you feel there is no basis for anything?” (querying their admiration for Catch 22). A student responds, “Yes. In a sense things were more categorized before. You knew what to do from the very beginning; you could follow a plan. Now, basically, there are so many opportunities open that people get confused. That’s my personal view.” Updike responds, “I think your perception of the dilemma is accurate” (Gado 101). The confusion articulated by the class here is illustrated in the way that Harry and Nelson see the world and are suggestive of the differences in aesthetic approach: an appreciation and glorification of reality and its beauty
(blissful realism) instead of a desire to escape a reality that is no longer adequate or reflective of any notion of transcendence (postmodernism).

The end of the novel (and the tetralogy) sees Harry coming to grips, finally, with the accommodation that he has tried to avoid for a good majority of his life. Sitting in the hospital, looking out the window, he

tries to view his life as a brick of sorts, set in place with a slap in 1933 and hardening ever since, just one life in rows and walls of blocks of lives. There is a satisfaction in such an overview, a faint far-off communal thrill, but hard to sustain over against his original and continuing impression that Brewer and all the world beyond are just frills on himself, like the lace around a plump satin valentine, himself the heart of the universe… (1317)\(^99\)

At this point Harry still sees his own subjectivity as “the heart of the universe,” playing with his own failing heart. He does, however, recognize a communal connection to others, to the bricks in the wall of life. Later, as he is convalescing in Nelson’s house, he thinks,

The town never knew him, the way he had imagined as a child it did, every pebble and milkbox and tulip bed \textit{eyelessly} watching him pass; each house had been turned inward, into itself. A blurred lit window across the street displays an empty easy chair, a set of brassheaded fireplace tools, a brick mantel supporting a pair of oblivious candlesticks. (1359 italics mine)

In the space of a few days Harry’s position has changed (as it does throughout the novels) from one of subjective centered glory to one of an indifferent and uncaring world of which he is a part. Recalling the window motif used in the previous novels, here the “empty easy chair” implies the

\(^99\) Tellingly, elsewhere Nelson says about his life: “How else’re you supposed to take it? Like a big joke, like Dad does, as if the fucking world is nothing but a love letter to yours truly?” (1183).
lack of a return gaze, the gaze that taught Harry a hard lesson about perception in *Redux*. And, since “each house had been turned inward, into itself,” Harry feels, once again, the extreme otherness of everything outside of himself (reflective, perhaps, of the kind of subject centered writing of modernism). Harry seems to achieve reconciliation a little further on, however, with a nod toward Hegelian recognition: He liked working, “doing his bit, getting a little recognition. That’s all we want from each other, recognition. … There’s more to being a human being than having your own way. Fact is, it has come to Rabbit this late in life, you don’t have a way apart from what other people tell you. … *Your life derives*, and has to give” (1460 emphasis added). It is here that he is finally able to articulate an understanding of the dialectic that has been pushing him, making him “run,” throughout the entirety of the tetralogy.

Indeed, Harry’s discovery is seconded and articulated most clearly by the Japanese representative from Toyota who comes to Harry’s dealership to close it down. Mr. Shimada tells Harry (with a tongue in cheek Japanese accent, complicating the clarity of his “message”):

- In United States, is fascinating for me, struggle between order and freedom. Everybody mention freedom, all papers terevision anchor people everybody. Much rove and talk of freedom. Skateboarders want freedom to use beach boardwalks and knock down poor old people. Brack men with radios want freedom to self-express with super-jumbo noise. Men want freedom to have guns and shoot others on freeways in random sport. In Carifornia, dog shit much surprise me. Everywhere, dog shit, dogs must have important freedom to shit everywhere. Dog freedom more important than crean grass and cement pavement. In U.S., Toyota company hope to make ireands of order in ocean of
freedom. Hope to strike proper barance between needs of outer world and needs of inner being, between what in Japan we call *giri* and *ninjō*. (1406)

Once again, Harry needs someone or something else to articulate exactly what he has been feeling and experiencing for the entirety of his life: the conflict between freedom and discipline, or freedom and the strictures of the outside world. Mr. Shimada’s “outsider” position, however, is important in that it creates space (much in the sense that authorship creates reflection and space) between the observer, the subjects involved, and the structures in which those subjects move. This is the basis of blissful realism: a dialectical interplay between an effective and participatory representation of the world as it is lived and seen as a *necessary aesthetic function* of narrative, and a pushback that is seen in the elevation of that world to the transcendent, either through language itself (as in some of the passages quoted above) or the subjective presence of the protagonist of the novel. One of Harry’s final introspections reflects this notion: “His whole life seems … to have been unreal, or no realer than the lives on TV shows, and now it’s too late to make it real, to be serious, to reach down into the earth’s iron core and fetch up a real life for himself” (1477). While this idea is perhaps more suggestive of his body being separate from his sense of self, the feeling he experienced while undergoing the angioplasty, this thought is ultimately misguided and incorrect, for it is the collection of Harry’s own experiences, his constant battle for autonomy against outside structures, that has been the “realist” and “realest” thing in his life.

Updike sums this up nicely, and forecasts the end of the tetralogy, in an interview given twenty years prior to *Rest*’s publication:

> My books feed, I suppose, on some kind of perverse relish in the fact that there are insolvable problems. There is no reconciliation between the inner, intimate
appetites and the external consolations of life. You want to live forever, you want to have endless wealth, you have an endless avarice for conquests, crave endless freedom really. And yet, despite the aggressive desires, something within us expects no menace. But there is no way to reconcile these individual wants to the very real need of any society to set strict limits and to confine its members.

*Rabbit, Run*, which is a book much on my mind lately, I wrote just to say that *there is no solution*. It is a novel about the bouncing, the oscillating back and forth between these two kinds of urgencies until, eventually, one just gets tired and wears out and dies, and that’s the end of the problem. (Gado 92, emphasis added)

Indeed, that’s the end of the problem, and it provides a fitting ending to the tetralogy, as Harry expires and thinks, “…but enough. Maybe. Enough” (1516).
CHAPTER 3: “PANTING AFTER MEANING”: INVISIBLE MAN AND LOLITA

We have invented the creation of forms; and that is why everything that falls from our weary and despairing hands must always be incomplete. We have found the only true substance within ourselves: that is why we have to place an unbridgeable chasm between cognition and action, between soul and created structure, between self and world…

– Georg Lukács, Theory of the Novel

And while fiction is but a form of symbolic action, a mere game of “as if,” therein lies its true function and its potential for effecting change. For at its most serious, just as is true of politics at its best, it is a thrust toward a human ideal. And it approaches that ideal by a subtle process of negating the world of things given in favor of a complex of man-made positives.

– Ralph Ellison, Introduction to Invisible Man

A work of art has no importance whatever to society. It is only important to the individual … what makes a work of fiction safe from larvae and rust is not its social importance but its art, only its art.

– Vladimir Nabokov, Strong Opinions

This chapter looks closely at two works of “late modernism,” texts which both complicate and elucidate the literary aesthetic of the modern/postmodern divide and its relationship to the specific aesthetic category of blissful realism. My choice of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man and Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita is due in part to their productive relationship to this category, but also
to their authors’ connections to Bellow and Updike. Bellow and Ellison were friends, colleagues, and roommates, while Updike and Nabokov had mutual respect for each other’s work (which is notable, considering Nabokov’s stingy praise for any contemporary authors). Furthermore, both *Invisible Man* and *Lolita* are invested in the same thematics of the novel discussed in the first two chapters, but in different modes.

Through *Invisible Man*, Ellison utilizes his respect for and knowledge of modernist and avant-garde formalist approaches in order to reverse the thematic trend that Bellow and Updike both employ: while Bellow and Updike use their protagonists’ battle for autonomy to reflect their own complicated relationship with artistic form (Bellow struggling against modernist formal constraints and Updike writing against the void in order to celebrate and hymn reality), Ellison sets up his invisible narrator as the void. That is, if Augie and Harry define themselves through participation with the world, Ellison’s narrator defines himself via withdrawal from it. Furthermore, if at the end of *Herzog* the eponymous character writes himself out of and free from discursive structure, here Ellison’s narrator writes himself back in. As the narrator tells us at the end of Ellison’s novel, “Without the possibility of action, all knowledge comes to one labeled ‘file and forget,’ and I can neither file nor forget” (579).

On the other hand, Vladimir Nabokov might very well endorse “filing and forgetting.” His aesthetic project aligns with Updike’s in his emphasis on “ecstatic prose,” but he would not argue for a necessary return to and participation with the social. Indeed, Humbert Humbert’s position as a pedophilic pariah in *Lolita* provides space for the protagonist to explore his own subjectivity over and above social constraints. If Ellison’s narrator is devoid of subjective surety, Humbert sees the world as his for the taking and, more importantly, the *making*. His situation reflects that of the (post)modernist artist, positioned to refashion and polish reality to a
transcendent shimmer, one which causes, according to Nabokov, a “tingling of the spine” in the reader (Lectures 4). Both authors, however, differ from Updike and Bellow in one fundamental concern: if Bellow and Updike saw the necessity of reality in our everyday lives as well as in the fashioning and creation of art, Ellison and Nabokov, with their late modernist pieces, tend to keep their novels safe from an outside world that might sully them.

“To move without movin’”: Invisible Man

According to a Book Week poll from 1965, “200 authors, critics and editors … were asked to choose the most distinguished writers and the most distinguished novels between 1945 and 1965, and the most distinguished novel of all, they said, out of the 10,000 or so that were published, was Invisible Man. The No. 1 author, they said, was Saul Bellow” (Graham 99). Ellison and Bellow were clearly atop the literary heap at mid-century, and Ellison’s 1952 novel provides interesting parallels and contrasts to Bellow’s (and Updike’s) work. The differences between these authors, however, are evident in their approaches. Ellison’s reverence of modernist aesthetics and particularly the use of myth in the novel has been well documented. In The Craft of Ralph Ellison, which traces the use of folklore in Ellison’s work, Robert O’Meally argues that Ellison “drew symbols and rhetorical schemes from … Sophocles, Homer, Dostoevsky, Bergson, Freud, Jung, Raglan, Burke, Eliot, Joyce, Wright and Malraux; spirituals, blues, and minstrels’ jokes; personal experiences rendered symbolically—all [are] figured in Invisible Man” (78). He continues, “If he uses folklore, it is not because of his ethnic heritage but because he is a student of Ulysses and “The Waste Land” where folk and myth sources provide structure and resonance” (165-66). While Updike and Bellow respected the modernists but eschewed many of their aesthetic paradigms, Ellison took their aims more to heart.
But it is not, of course, as simple as all that. In *Shadow and Act*, Ellison discusses the necessity of the social in fiction and explicitly critiques the aesthetic hermeticism of many of the modernists: “The hard-boiled school represented by Hemingway,” writes Ellison, “[was] seeking a technical perfection rather than a moral insight” (35, 38). Art for the lost generation, according to Ellison, became “the instrument of a questionable personal freedom for the artist,” but “it is not within the province of the artist to determine whether his work is social or not. Art by its nature is social” (38). He concludes, “To be effective as personal fulfillment, if it is to be more than dream, the work of art must simultaneously evoke images of reality and give them formal organization … [as well as] shape them into socially meaningful patterns” (39). It is notable that Ellison, unlike many of his fellow black American writers, decided to remain in the country to write about the country. Critic Walter Shear’s description of the expatriate scene articulates a position with which Ellison would most likely agree:

Such a structure [the point of view of an expatriate] tends to treat the external world (the American society) as a detached setting rather than a place where one really lives, to regard existence as essentially a cultural construction, and to see others as figures in a game they take seriously, but whose behaviors are simply moves that one takes account of and reacts accordingly. If the external world is at times intrusive, this may be temporary interruption of the game or the signal of some new and interesting challenges. (134)

In many ways, then, despite what many considered to be Ellison’s high-brow artistic elitism—a perception which threw him into conflict with many of the writers, social activists, and race critics of his day, including Irving Howe, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Amiri Baraka

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100 We are once again reminded here of Lukács’ statement, “Every human action is based on a presupposition of its inherent meaningfulness, at least to the subject. Absence of meaning makes a mockery of action and reduces art to naturalistic description” (*Realism* 36).
(Lyne 320)—one could make the argument that Ellison’s novel is much more “committed” to social issues than anything written by Bellow or Updike, both of whom avoided, for the most part, the ideological and political.¹⁰¹ And yet, more in line with Bellow and Updike’s views, Ellison has stated, “A writer isn’t concerned with politics but with human beings and the way they live, and the way they move, and the way they dream” (qtd in Schor 6). These conflicting allegiances are, in part, what make *Invisible Man* a work of late modernism and what sets it apart from and against other works of blissful realism: Ellison’s reverence for and use of modernist technique, despite his conflicted relationship with the movement, moves beyond the respect for the same as articulated by Bellow and Updike. Instead of celebrating reality as it confronts and conflicts with the subjective, Ellison “negat[es] the world of things given” (*Invisible xx*) in favor of his art which could transform reality “into something deeper and more meaningful than its surface violence” (xvii).

Indeed, Ellison admits to this modernist influence. “In 1935 I discovered Eliot’s *The Waste Land,*” writes Ellison, “which moved and intrigued me but defied my powers of analysis” (*Shadow* 167). (One of the two epigraphs to *Invisible Man* is from Eliot’s *Family Reunion.*) He continues, “I learned a few things from Eliot, Joyce and Hemingway, but not how to adapt them. When I started writing, I knew that in both *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses* ancient myth and ritual were used to give form and significance to the material; but it took me a few years to realize that the myths and rites which we find functioning in our everyday lives could be used in the same

¹⁰¹ Updike writes in his introduction to the Everyman edition of *Rabbit Angstrom,* “I have little reformist tendency and instinct for social criticism” (xi), and Bellow states in a 1975 interview that “a liberal society so intensely political can’t remain liberal for very long. … I view ‘activist’ art theories in the same way. The power of a true work of art is such that it induces a temporary suspension of activities. It leads to contemplative states, to wonderful and, to my mind, sacred states of the soul” (Cronin 117).
way” (174). Ellison’s work, which moves between a socially committed critical realism and a carefully constructed and highly symbolic modernism returns us to Lukács, who himself understood the affinity of the two movements:

More significant … are the utterances of those critical realists who had an interest in, and concern for, the formal experimentation of modernism, and expressed the conviction that they had many basic attitudes in common. The reason is not far to seek. Many of these experiments are, in effect, reflections of contemporary reality. If realistic writers sympathize with these experiments, and are stimulated thereby to widen the scope of realism, it is because they wish to find new means to deal with contemporary subject-matter. (Realism 50)

The use of these shared “basic attitudes,” I would argue, accounts for the small difference between blissful realists and late modernists; that is, while Ellison is clearly concerned with reflecting social reality, his “sympathy” for the modernist experimentation is greater than that of Updike or Bellow. Using Updike’s model of binary tension, then, we can rub these two approaches against each other to further elucidate both. Recalling Robert Genter’s argument that late-modernism “argued not only that the nature of the aesthetic form needed to be rethought in an age of mass media but that the general assumptions about the nature of subjectivity needed to be updated” (4), we can extend these differences yet further. Late modernists understand and approach new configurations of ontology in different ways, in many instances adopting prescient postmodern conceptions.

Before discussing how that understanding develops, however, we should first consider Ellison’s relationship with Bellow. Bellow and Ellison were friends and colleagues, and in fact

102 For an in-depth study of the nuanced relationship between Ellison and Hemingway, see Scruggs and Fruscione. For a full discussion of Ellison’s use of myth and folklore, see O’Meally. For an analysis of Ellison’s use of The Waste Land, see Williams Walsh.
lived with one another in Bellow’s house in Tivoli, New York, in the fifties and sixties. Bellow writes in a eulogy read at Ellison’s funeral:

Toward the end of the Fifties, the Ellisons and the Bellows lived together in a spooky Dutchess County house with the Catskills on the western horizon and the Hudson River in between. As writers are natural solitaries, Ralph and I did not seek each other out during the day. A nod in passing was enough. But late in the afternoon Ralph mixed the martinis and we did not always drink in silence. 

*(Letters 505)*

Indeed, their personal and vocational acquaintance was so great that one could argue it affected the other’s work; numerous parallels can be drawn between *Invisible Man*, published in 1952, and *Augie March*, published in 1953. About Bellow’s novel, Ellison writes,

After two well-written, neatly constructed novels which paid their respects to the standards of the twenties, Bellow’s major work to date is *The Adventures of Augie March*, which at first glance looks like the work of a completely different man. It is characterized by a big conception of human possibility and a quality of wonder arising out of the mysteriousness of a reality which keeps its secret despite the documentation of the social scientists, and it is informed by a knowledge of chaos which would have left the novelists of the twenties discouraged. *(Going 257)*

Ellison’s praise of *Augie* here is predicated on Bellow’s shift from modernist experimentation in his first two novels (*Dangling Man* [1944] and *The Victim* [1947]) to the picaresque adventure of his third novel. The “chaos” of which Ellison writes, one which Bellow embraces rather than laments like his “wastelander” predecessors, is something that both authors confront, but in different ways. Their mutual respect, their proximity, and their critical honesty would likely have
affected both of their writing, and looking closely at where their work converges and diverges will shed light on the aesthetic project of each.

In the 1995 Vintage edition of *Invisible Man*, Bellow, in fact, has the only blurb on the back cover: “A book of the very first order, a superb book.” This is taken from his 1952 review of the book, “Man Underground,” in which he writes, “In our society Man—Himself—is idolized and publicly worshipped, but the single individual must hide himself underground and try to save his desires, his thoughts, his soul, in invisibility. He must return to himself, learning self-acceptance and rejecting all that threatens to deprive him of his manhood.” Since he was finishing *Augie* at this time, his concerns while writing that novel are clearly echoed in the review. And yet in the same review Bellow states that Ellison’s novel “is not by any means faultless; I don’t think the hero’s experiences in the communist party are as original in conception as other parts of the book” (29). Similarly, in a 1955 letter to Ruth Miller, Bellow articulates more fully his critical concerns with Ellison’s novel, and in the process discloses some of the more lucid differences between blissful realism and late modernism:

The first third of [*Invisible Man*] is beautiful, whereas the Brotherhood portion is ordinary. The sweet-potato seller, the eviction, the riot can’t be compared with the mechanical symbols, the hospital, the seduction. The former are in full cry after the meaning and your interest is in Opinion rather than Creation.

I think this is a fault of all American books, including my own. They pant so after meaning. They are earnestly moral, didactic; they build them ever more stately mansions, and they exhort and plead and refine, and they are, insofar, books of error. A work of art should rest on perception. “Here” in other words,
“is my vision, be meaning what it may.” The rest doesn’t count a bit. Ralph is wrong to think that it did. I tell him so often.

And I can’t understand the passion for adding meaning to meaning in a work of art, and making meaning proliferate from ordinary incidents. … Aren’t there jungles enough—personal, racial, national, historical? Must we make more snakes, grow more lianas, more leaves, cause more heat, sting and cause more scratching? May I say one last thing? Writing should derive from the Creation, and not attempt to add to it. We should require things to be simpler and simpler, greater and greater. (Letters 138, italics original)

This lengthy passage elaborates upon and contradicts the way we have been discussing Bellow thus far. Here, Bellow appears to be defending what many would consider to be the more symbolic sections of Ellison’s text (“the mechanical symbols, the hospital, the seduction”) and critiquing those sections of the novel which would align more with a social realism (those parts which are “didactic”). Bellow seems to defend an “art for art’s sake” position. The last paragraph, however, clarifies slightly and points toward a synthesis between creation and world, a willful description that “walks the straight line of paradox” between the creative and the given, and one to which Ellison, according to Bellow, does not adhere. The idea that adding to “Creation,” through which Bellow infers both created “reality” and artistic creation, mystifying that reality in and through language instead of glorifying it in prose, is indicative of a modernist conception of the aesthetic project of literature (as conceived by Lukács) and counter to that of the blissful realism which Bellow here describes.103

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103 I write this knowing that there are what appear to be exceptions to this rule, most notably Hemingway and Pound, who looked to the simplification of language as artistic bedrock. Their simplification, however, and its linguistic self-consciousness, draws attention to the writing which, in fact, adds layers of meaning which Bellow here critiques.
As hinted above, beyond these formal critiques lies a difference in the conception of the main thematic tension of the novels. If in Augie, Herzog, and Rabbit the stories describe individuals who are struggling for and declaring their autonomy in the face of societal structures, in Invisible Man, much like Nelson in the last two novels of Updike’s tetralogy, the narrator struggles to align himself with ideological structures in order to illuminate his identity. For him, if you “step outside the narrow borders of what men call reality … you step into chaos” (576). This difference is elucidated by comparing the beginning of Augie to that of Ellison’s novel. Recall that Augie opens, “I am an American, Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, freestyle, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent” (1). Ellison’s novel, on the other hand, begins:

I am an invisible man. … I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. … Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me. (3)

The difference is clear. While Augie asserts his autonomy, the narrator laments his lack of the same. Tellingly, his description of his bodily presence reflects that of Harry Angstrom’s when he is on the operating table: the “pulsing wet tubes we inherited from the squid,” the “material, just like foam rubber,” objectifies Harry in the same way that the narrator discusses his body here.\(^\text{104}\) Likewise, his declaration that he “might even be said to possess a mind” is in near contradiction to the opening of Herzog: “If I am out of my mind, it’s all right with me, thought

\(^{104}\) See Chapter 2, pg. 164.
Moses Herzog,” which, if we recall, both establishes Herzog’s subjectivity and objectifies it at the same time. The passive construction of the “I might even be said” of the narrator implies consciousness only if it is accorded to him. Furthermore, like Herzog, this story begins where it ends: the narrative is sealed by a bookended “Prologue” and “Epilogue” for which the entirety of the narrative is backstory. Because of this formal choice the novel is a closed artistic piece that unfolds not over time but in or on time, in such a way that the discussion of the narrator’s rise to consciousness is protected, just as the narrator’s underground abode protects him from the social structures above ground. Yet the narrator’s confession that “the end was in the beginning” (571) reflects Lukács’, “The voyage is completed: the way begins” (Theory 73). The implication here is that the novel, though closed and sealed off, is a call for action for both the narrator and the reader. The novel is not “art for art’s sake,” nor is it social protest. It is something in between.

In the “Prologue” we find the narrator famously underground, shut off from the outside world, but illuminated by 1,369 light bulbs. His position at the beginning and end of the novel indicates a temporary acceptance of the hermeticism of modernist aesthetics. That is, the narrator’s reluctance to go above ground is due to his desire to abstain from the defining structures that wait there, just as modernists desired to protect their work from the infection of bourgeois culture. He hopes to avoid what Adorno has critiqued in Sartre’s work: the problematic that “within a situation predetermined in reality, [the work] fails and becomes empty assertion … [The works] contain within themselves the whole administered world that existentialism ignores; it is unfreedom that can be learned from them” (“Commitment” 79-80).

105 See Chapter 1, pgs. 75-76.
106 This formal approach obviously mirrors that of Dostoevsky’s Notes from Underground. For a larger discussion of Ellison’s use of Dostoevsky, see Lyne, pgs. 324-25, and Frank.
107 For a discussion of how the novel’s formal structure complicates notions of history and time, see Singer.
In the case of *Invisible Man*, the narrator’s position is one that he has adopted in order to finally free himself from the “situation predetermined in reality” that would otherwise undermine his own search for freedom from the structures that continually define him throughout the novel. And yet, the lights that illuminate his space allow for his own recognition of subjectivity, his illumination, aside and apart from the world above. Contra Kierkegaard’s existentialist formulation, the narrator tells us, “All sickness is not unto death, neither is invisibility” (14), pointing to the fact that the narrator moves beyond what Adorno would understand to be the failure of existentialism. Instead, one must participate with the outside world, even if it limits one’s freedom, in order to gain freedom from, while within, that world.

The “light” that illuminates the narrator’s room and affords him an opportunity to discover his own subjectivity suggests the modernist/romantic association with the “light” or the “lamp” of the imagination of the author; the narrator is telling his tale, creating it, from this underground, illuminated lair. The narrator tells us, “Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form. … Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one’s form is to live a death. … The truth is light and the light is truth” (6, 7 italics mine). The allusion to Keats (“Beauty is truth, truth beauty”) is telling, for from it one gets a sense that Ellison’s authorial position (and/or the narrator’s) is one that is both illuminated and illuminating, and his concern with form, both in regard to the narrator’s identity and the form of the novel, aligns him with a modernist aesthetic. This is redoubled by the narrator’s self-imposed exile; his life is representative of an unadulterated aesthetic hermeticism. His insistence on light and form from a closed perspective, one which gives him space to reflect upon the world, suggests Tyrus Miller’s view of late modernism. Miller, using Beckett as an exemplar, writes,
Overall, Beckett stresses the modernists’ attempt, through formal innovation and involution, to tap into the source and essence of literature. Language, form, and content constitute a unity that supersedes any “partial” system of values. The artist must concentrate firmly on the world to be disclosed within the work of art, not on some part of the world he might reflect, in a conventionalized mimesis, by means of it. (171 italics mine)

Miller continues, “This struggle is often a defensive one, a struggle to maintain autonomy against overpowering external forces, and it in turn frequently constitutes a self-reflexive figure of the author’s struggle to master discursively the recalcitrant matter of the modern world” (171 italics original). And he concludes, quoting Patricia Waugh, “In modernist fiction the struggle for personal autonomy can be continued only through opposition to existing social institutions and conventions. This struggle necessarily involves individual alienation and often ends with mental dissolution” (177 italics original). Applying Miller’s understanding to the narrator’s condition (and extrapolating this notion to Ellison as a writer, keeping in mind that the narrator is writing this memoir from his underground cellar), it seems that the narrator has adopted a late modernist stance in which he sees the necessity of removing himself from the defining structures aboveground that threaten the dissolution of his sense of self. And yet the central narrative, safely encased within the “modernist” prologue and epilogue, allows for the kind of social realism and participation with the social world that modernism, as we have defined it, might otherwise eschew. Ellison is able to have his modernism and eat it, too, so to speak.

Indeed, in the prologue the narrator’s marijuana and blues induced trance makes him “afraid,” as the “familiar music had demanded action, the kind of which [he] was incapable” (12), and yet he defines his hibernation as “a covert preparation for a more overt action” (13). He continues,
“All dreamers and sleepwalkers must pay the price, and even the invisible victim is responsible for the fate of all” (14), implying a social responsibility beyond that of his hibernation, and by extension, Ellison’s responsibility as the writer of the tale that the narrator is recounting. Still, the narrator (and Ellison) asks, “Could this compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white be thus an urge to make music of invisibility” (13-14)? This line is crucial in understanding Ellison’s project in relation to the blissful realists. Bellow and Updike’s commitment to realism is one that is predicated on the tension between the “is” and the “ought” (in Bellow’s case) and the objective and the subjective (in Updike’s case). If Bellow and Updike wish to “hymn” reality and the subject, here Ellison wishes to hymn (“make music of”) the dialectical inversion of that premise—to sing the void in an attempt to move beyond it. As a man who lacks the ontological surety of any of Bellow’s or Updike’s characters, the narrator finds bliss in absence. He is, as the vet tells us later in the story, “a walking personification of the Negative” (94), but one which revels in its existential emptiness. Yet it is this void—“the void of faceless faces, of soundless voices” (439)—that ultimately allows for his return to the world, now secure in his subjectivity. About this Ellison has said in an interview, “In the Epilogue the hero discovers what he had not discovered throughout the book: you have to make your own decisions; you have to think for yourself. The hero comes up from underground because the act of writing and thinking necessitated it. He could not stay down there” (Graham 16). The end was in the beginning because he had to return to the unfettered space of structural emptiness from which he came. Like Herzog, he had to unburden himself of the structural baggage that had constituted his sense of self throughout the novel.

As in Augie and Herzog, the narrator of Invisible Man encounters his own “reality instructors” that fill this structural baggage with various subjective possibilities. The distinct sections of the
novel—the narrator’s education, his move to the city and employment with a paint company, his work for the Marxist “Brotherhood,” and the final move to his underground cave—each provide the narrator with different “others” who want to define and identify him. The narrator tells us, “They [Jack, Norton, and Emerson] were very much the same, each attempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to me” (508).

The difference here, of course, is that while Augie, Herzog, and Harry all push back against these would-be subject shapers, the invisible man longs for their instruction. His ontology is not predicated, at least until his move underground, on an inherent sense of self, a positive conception of “I,” as it is in Augie, Herzog, and Harry Angstrom, but rather on whatever ideological, social, and political structure of which he happens to be a part. His grandfather’s injunction, “Live with your head in the lion’s mouth. I want you to overcome ‘em with yeses, undermine ‘em with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction, let ‘em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open” (16), which puzzles him for the majority of his adult life, is akin to Harry’s “walking the straight line of paradox” (and his attendant inability to do so), yet it works negatively (agreeing with them) instead of positively (constantly railing against these structures to affirm one’s subjective surety). That is, his grandfather wants him to be of this world and play the game, but with the full knowledge that he is doing so; he must maintain a sense of self throughout. Until the end of the novel, however, the narrator does not comprehend the latter part of that understanding. He adopts the modernist “wastelander” position: to participate in society constantly reifies his subjectivity, so he “drops out.” This resigned stance would be unacceptable to Bellow, Updike, and other blissful realists.

108 Obviously the narrator’s subject position in Invisible Man is more complicated because he is African American. Though the novel is undeniably in part about race, I will take Ellison at his word when he writes, “In this sense fiction became the agency of my efforts to answer the questions: Who am I, what am I, how did I come to be?” (Shadow xxii), in a universal sense, and that he didn’t want to write “another novel of racial protest instead of the dramatic study in comparative humanity which I felt any worthwhile novel should be” (Invisible xviii).
The difference between Ellison’s understanding in this regard and Updike’s or Bellow’s is illustrated most clearly in the Trueblood episode. Most critics agree that the interaction between Trueblood and Norton suggests a transference of taboo desire in which Norton (and the white people of the town) literally pay off Trueblood as a scapegoat for their own sins or desire to commit those sins. They pay him, too, for perpetuating a stereotype of the “backward farm negro,” making it easier to justify their racism (accordingly, the black people of the town reject Trueblood and are angry at him for the same). There is, however, something else happening here relating to blissful realism and its attendant dialectical tension between the subjective and the objective. When Norton discovers that Trueblood slept with his own daughter, Norton responds, “You did and are unharmed! … You have looked upon chaos and are not destroyed!” (51), foreshadowing the narrator’s, “Step outside the narrow borders of what men call reality and you step into chaos” (576), at the close of the novel. Trueblood has stepped outside of societal structures and mores—he has transgressed, but in doing so he has, in disturbing fashion, affirmed his selfhood.\(^\text{109}\) Significantly, Trueblood begins having sex with his daughter while he is dreaming. The existential nexus created during this act, one of “the narrow borders of reality” (societal mores), fiction (the dream), and the “chaos” which lies “outside the narrow borders of what men call reality,” aligns with many of the themes discussed here thus far. That is, like Harry, Trueblood has tested and gone beyond the accepted social limits of his freedom; he has transgressed and is, accordingly, punished for it by reality. (Like Augie, who gets a horse’s hoof to the head, Trueblood is struck by an axe and, Prometheus-like, has a festering wound.) And

\(^{109}\) This is parallel to Harry Angstrom’s sexual encounter with his daughter-in-law in *Rest*. While Harry is recovering from his angioplasty and Nelson is in rehab, Nelson’s wife, Pru, and Harry sleep together. The fallout from this tryst induces Harry’s final “run” down to his retirement home in Florida. Indeed, Trueblood’s actions reflect awkwardly both Harry’s own “selfishness” in his act and the according punishment given to him by his family, but also the fact that Harry did not perish immediately—he is not “destroyed.” In fact, the defiant act helps to restore his waning sense of self.
yet it is crucial that Trueblood begins his misdeed in a fictional space: the dream affords him a freedom that reality otherwise does not. When he wakes from the dream and realizes what is happening, he decides that in order to keep from sinning, he has to “move without movin.’” He “flew in but … had to walk out” (59 emphasis original), and he considers castrating himself in order to get out of the paradox. Ultimately he decides that he has to “fight it on out to the end” (60). The aporia of trying to “move without movin’” draws an interesting parallel to Harry’s attempts to “walk the straight line of paradox” between the subjective and the objective world, and, by extension, the blissful realists’ efforts to do the same. Trueblood’s subjective, solipsistic consciousness is represented by his dream state, yet the real, objective world is the one in which he is having sex with his daughter, and his effort to “move without movin’” suggests the impossible space between these two worlds: one cannot remove oneself from reality without participating in that reality. As such, fiction (the dream) becomes the only space in which this paradox/taboo can be safely explored. Trueblood’s “fighting it out to the end”¹¹⁰ suggests the position of the narrator at the end of the novel—the knowledge that the solipsistic dream state that he is in (and in which the rest of the narrative is safely enclosed) cannot and should not last forever. Eventually he will have to rejoin the social world. He cannot maintain the position of “moving without movin’” any more than an artist can create a hermetic space that is not affected by, or free from, the social, empirical world. Ultimately, Ellison’s project ends up in the same space. As a work of late modernism, the novel attempts to “move without movin’”—to remain safely encased within a fictional, symbolic space, one which “negates the world of things as given” in favor of the ideal space of fiction; one which engages with the objective world not in a

¹¹⁰ One is reminded here of Harry’s desire to “stick [life] out” in Rest. That is, reality and our participation in it, no matter how disturbing or horrifying, is what matters. See Chapter 2, pg. 161.
dialectical, hymning fashion as we see in the blissful realists but in an ideal and transformational one.

This difference in the conception of the artistic “project” is further illustrated by the difference between Ellison’s articulation of subjectivity and Updike’s or Bellow’s. If the latter positively establish their narrator’s subjectivity, Ellison does the opposite. In the narrator’s early conversation with the vet at the Golden Day, the vet tells the narrator and Norton, “Poor stumblers, neither of you can see the other. To you he is a mark on the scorecard of your achievement, a thing and not a man; a child, or even less—a black amorphous thing” (95). The narrator thinks in turn, “Here within this quiet greenness I possessed the only identity I had ever known, and I was losing it” (99). The narrator’s position as a void, a “black, amorphous thing” (similar to Updike’s “black core”), when combined with his admission that he lacks subjectivity without it being provided for him, illustrates the strange reversal of subjective presence considered by the other two authors. Bledsoe tells the narrator, “But you don’t even know the difference between the way things are and the way they’re supposed to be” (142), reflecting not only a shift in the tension of the “is” versus the “ought” as illustrated in Augie but also, in terms of formal considerations, the possible corrective force of aesthetics. Indeed this, in addition to the vet telling him to “learn to look beneath the surface … Play the game, but don’t believe in it. … Play the game, but play it your own way” (153), suggests a control of narrative that the narrator lacks at this point in the novel, but one that he gains through writing his story and by Ellison’s writing of the novel. That is, considering that the narrator is the teller of this story (the man who “makes music of his invisibility” and who admits, “Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do?” [581]), he learns to “play the
game,” using and appropriating modernism and its use of myth and form to establish his own consciousness and history via those that would otherwise drown his story out.

But, how does the narrator get to this point? After he leaves the school it is telling that the narrator gets on a bus and heads north (the opposite direction which both Harry and Augie travel to escape the confines of the structures that would hem in their subjectivity) in order to find something that will, in fact, define him. Once in New York, he has a conversation similar to that which Harry has with the gas-station attendant in *Run*. He encounters a man pushing a cart carrying blueprints, what the man generally calls “plans” (that have been thrown out). When the man says to him, “Folks is always making plans and changing ‘em,” the narrator responds, as he was “thinking of his letters [the ones given to him by Bledsoe],” that “You have to stick to the plan.” The man responds in turn, “You kinda young, daddy-o” (175). This reliance of the narrator on “plans” or identities given to him contradicts Harry’s response to the gas station attendant (recall that the attendant tells Harry, “The only way to get somewhere, you know, is to figure out where you’re going before you get there,” and Harry responds, “I don’t think so.”).\footnote{See Chapter 2, pg. 115.} Here the cart-man’s “You kinda young, daddy-o” opposes the gas station attendant’s understanding of the necessity of structure, as he tries to tell the narrator that dependence upon plans is not conducive to finding agency and autonomy. Rather, one has to be willing to jettison plans if they contradict that search. In addition, the narrator’s “thinking of his letters”—“letters” referring to the ones he carries in his briefcase and the letters that are being constructed on the page—suggests Harry’s reliance upon and relief at seeing the abundance of “signs” when he returns home, as they provided structure.

Accordingly, the contents of the narrator’s briefcase, symbolic markers of his past and the things that structured his subjectivity—his high-school diploma, Clifton’s sambo doll, the
anonymous letter that tells him to “be careful,” and the slip of paper upon which Jack wrote the narrator’s Brotherhood name—are burned at the end of the novel. This reminds one of the end of *Herzog*, where the ideological and intellectual baggage that he carries in his “valise full of papers” is strewn about the floor, and Herzog walks over them signifying his release from their bondage.\footnote{See Chapter 1, pgs. 79.} The narrator’s similar symbolic action here makes him “free of illusion” and yet “painful and empty” (569). Where Herzog was liberated, the narrator heads, like Harry toward the “black core,” to the darkness of his underground habitation, where “he found only space, unbroken and impenetrable,” and a “deep basement, full of shapeless objects that extended farther than [he] could see,” as he moved “toward the darker blackness” and was “whirling on in the blackness” (567-68). The structureless nightmare that Harry often encounters becomes a home for the narrator; indeed, his existential crisis is a necessary one. He is no longer “young,” and has burned his “plans.” As Robert Genter puts it, “The self, for Ellison, was simply the product of the orientation with which it was aligned. Thus, a change in the nature of subjectivity could occur only when the individual recognized the social construction of those frames of reference with which his identity was connected” (307). Or, perhaps more accurately, a “burning” of those social constructions and the creation of time and space completely away from them where only the self is illuminated. One is reminded of the way that Thomte discusses Tillich, who “speaks of ‘the anxiety of losing our ontological structure,’ which is ‘the anxiety of not being what we essentially are. It is anxiety about disintegrating and falling into non-being through existential disruption,’ with ‘the consequent destruction of the ontological structure’” (xvi).\footnote{See Chapter 2, pgs. 123.}
Ultimately this notion is reflected in Ellison’s aesthetic choices, as he navigates the problem of trying to construct a narrative without over-constructing his protagonist—to “move without movin.’” This difference, the surety of the protagonists and their fight against control in Updike and Bellow and the insecurity of the narrator in *Invisible Man*, reflects the blissful realists’ questioning of modernist formal considerations and the late modernists’ adoption and promotion of them. That is, the protagonists’ position in Bellow and Updike reflects a rejection of the very aesthetic “structure” that Ellison adopts, just as the narrator adopts various ideological structures to define his own identity. It is only in his underground cave (the artistic consciousness) that he is able to come into his own. Here, Ellison is able to have his cake and eat it too—to work within modernist forms and traditions in order to work his way out of them: to move without movin’. Language here, as opposed to celebrating the outside world (as in Bellow and Updike), remains ensnared in a tradition that for Updike and Bellow would erase their character’s, and their aesthetic’s, agency. The narrator’s subjectivity is one of absence (or substitution); his lack of consciousness posits the world as overwhelming presence, reversing the dialectic that we see explicitly in Updike and implicitly in Bellow. Accordingly, Ellison tells us, according to Ross Posnock, “the ‘true function’ of both politics and fiction at their most serious [is] a ‘thrust toward a human ideal’ which demands ‘negating the world of things as given’” (italics mine). Reality must be overcome by the imagination, and this is the cause of his “writing” this memoir. But this conclusion is not one to which Bellow or Updike would come. For Ellison, instead of

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114 The narrator’s ontological position, however, is very much reflective of the way that Robert Penn Warren describes Augie. Recall that Warren writes, “[T]he character of Augie himself is somewhat shadowy. This, I think, is true, and I think I know the reason: it is hard to give substance to a character who has no commitments, and by definition Augie is the man with no commitments” (See Chapter 1, pg. 40). Yet Ellison’s narrator strives to make nothing but commitments to various social and ideological constructions that will help to define his identity. The difference between Augie’s “independence,” if we can reframe Warren’s assertion with that term, and Ellison’s narrator’s “servitude,” indicates the difference between Bellow’s and Ellison’s understanding of agency and autonomy and by extension their respective views on literature: one trying to utilize modernist technique and the other trying to break free of it, one returning to Eliot’s “tradition” and the other rejecting that particular vein of literary genealogy.
accepting reality as a given and necessary dialectical other to our own subjective construction, reality becomes something that can be reformed and idealized through the artistic vision instead of accepted and glorified.

And yet the narrator’s rise to consciousness is not only due to Ellison’s “negating the world of things as given.” It is also due to his confrontation with history. Emerson tells the narrator, “I want to try to reveal a part of reality that is most important to you—but I warn you, it’s going to hurt. … Who has any identity anymore anyway? … Aren’t you curious about what lies behind the face of things?” (186, 188). This particular “pain” returns us to Fredric Jameson’s understanding of history as what “hurts,” and looking at the narrator’s coming into “political consciousness” through this theoretical lens is helpful to understand his position at the close of the novel.115 The narrator’s historical inheritance with which he has to wrestle for the entirety of the text is exactly what hurts him. What triggers this understanding is the materiality of certain historical symbols in the text. This materiality, however, is not the kind that Updike or Bellow would glorify as an “other” that can be hymned. It is, rather, a symbolic attachment to a material history that helps to shape one’s subjective being. Perhaps the most telling of these is the link of the chain that the narrator has on his desk. Before giving the link to the narrator, Brother Tarp tells him, “Funny thing to give somebody, but I think it’s got a heap of signifying wrapped up in it and it might help you remember what we’re really fighting against. I don’t think of it in terms of but two words, yes and no; but it signifies a heap more…” (388). The narrator says in turn about this link, “It was such a link as I had seen on Bledsoe’s desk, only while that one had been smooth, Tarp’s bore the marks of hast and violence, looking as though it had been attacked and

115 Jameson writes, “History is therefore the experience of Necessity … Necessity is not in that sense a type of content, but rather the inexorable form of events; it is therefore a narrative category in the enlarged sense of some properly narrative political unconscious … History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis…” (Political 102, italics mine).
conquered before it stubbornly yielded” (389). History is both a chain that holds one down and something which one will have to reconcile before he or she can move forward. The “symbol” of the link holds the “political unconscious” of the narrator’s history and figuratively “links” him to his past. The narrator’s position as the “speaker” of the Brotherhood, as someone who controls reality with language, is undermined by Tarp here, who affords the object only two words, “yes and no,” pointing to something more profound that lies beneath the surface of language. Instead, the visceral description of the chain signals the material reality of what really “hurts,” and, by extension, what really counts. Like Augie’s kick to the head, reality forces itself into what was otherwise an ideological, structural existence. And yet, unlike Augie’s experience, which was happening “now” (or like the woman at the end of the novel who tells him “this is happening to me!”), this material, real thing is symbolic—it serves a representative purpose, not one that reminds one of the objective world in the present. It is, as Bellow has written, “panting after meaning” instead of simply “being.” The space between these conceptions is indicative of the distance between blissful realism and late modernism: where late modernism often remains at a level of language or allegory, blissful realism engages with the world as it is. This is illustrated by the narrator’s position at the close of the novel; he realizes the reality, the “pain” of social existence (hence his retention of the chain), and he burns the paper contents of his briefcase, effectively freeing himself from the “bonds” of ideological constructions, but his immediate connection to the world is one underground—one removed from the reality which blissful realists hymn.

This is redoubled during the scene in front of the evictees’ apartment, which Bellow describes above as “panting after meaning.” Again, the narrator’s contact with the materiality of history provides him with a connection to his subjective being beyond what had structured him thus far.
After looking through some of the items on the curb that were from many different historical eras and seeing a paper that marked the freeing of a slave, the narrator thinks:

_It has been longer than that, further removed in time, _I told myself, and yet I knew that it hadn’t been … And with this sense of dispossession came a pang of vague recognition: this junk, these shabby chairs, these heavy, old-fashioned pressing irons, zinc wash tubs with dented bottoms—all throbbed within me with more meaning there should have been. (273, italics original)

The concern with physical objects here, and with the chain link above, reminds one of examples of blissful realism provided in the first two chapters here. And yet here the narrator’s association with the objects has less to do with a union of the subjective and the objective through language as much as it has to do with the subjective and the _symbolic _materiality of history. Like the chain, these objects “signify a heap more.” Again, the trigger of this understanding is the physicality of the objects and the visceral reaction that the narrator has to them. His inability to articulate what the “meaning” of the items is suggests, like Herzog’s connection to the physical objects at the end of that novel and his injunction against language, an undercurrent of a shared history that is beyond language, a political unconscious that is more a part of his subjective construction than anything he had adopted thus far. If Updike and Bellow hymned reality through language, celebrated the object/subject duality, and reveled in their distinct nature (and the ability of language to—almost—bridge that gap), here Ellison uses materiality to tie the narrator to a past and to a history which is part of his subjectivity. Bellow and Updike celebrate a distinction; Ellison leads us to a connection and continuation with a discursive sense of self via history.
Furthermore, the character of Tod Clifton illustrates the possible danger when one attempts to evade this history, to ironize it completely, or to live outside of it. The narrator finds Clifton, a former prominent member of the Brotherhood, on the street selling Sambo dolls. When Clifton is accosted by a policeman, he resists, punches him, and is shot down. The narrator’s reading of this incident is important to understanding his liminal position at the end of the novel. The narrator tells us, “It was as if [Clifton] had chosen … to fall outside of *history.* … But he knew that only in the Brotherhood could we make ourselves known, could we avoid being empty Sambo dolls. Such an obscene flouncing of everything human!” (434). He continues a few pages later:

Why should a man plunge outside of history and peddle an obscenity, my mind went on abstractedly. Why should he choose to disarm himself, give up his voice and leave the only organization offering him a chance to “define” himself? … Bits of paper whirled up in the passage of air, settling quickly as a train moved past. … Why did he choose to plunge into nothingness, into the void of faceless faces, of soundless voices, lying outside of history? … I stood there with the trains plunging in and out, throwing up blue sparks. What did they ever think of us transitory ones? … We who write no novels, histories or other books. (438-39)

Clifton’s death is the first time that the narrator truly articulates the dilemma with which the entirety of the novel wrestles: how does one reconcile history, the present, and his own subjectivity? Clifton chooses to exit history, and this is obviously an insufficient answer. His attempt to escape the “pain” of history leads to a strangely “unrecognized” death, one that erases his life from the historical record as a passing “whirl of paper.” Yet Clifton finds himself in a very similar existential condition to which we find the narrator at the end of the novel, one
without any subjective structure, similar to Updike’s “black core”: a “nothingness,” a “void of faceless faces.” The opposite pole, that of the strict historical science of the Brotherhood, which does not take into account the individual, is also insufficient.\textsuperscript{116} This dilemma is directly reflected by the imagery in the passage, as the bulk of the speeding trains (history) move forward kicking up sparks and “whirling bits of paper” without regard.\textsuperscript{117} It is at this point that the narrator first begins to discover the true nature of his ontology—as someone entirely at the whim of history (the bits of paper). As in Bellow and Updike, the narrator finds himself here at a loss for words at a moment of crisis. Clifton’s “plunging outside of history” leaves his mind “grappling for meaning,” (435), and as he tries to process what has happened he thinks, “What does it mean,” and he “opened his mouth but nothing would come out” (437). This is what forces the narrator underground. Clifton’s “void,” his lack of identity, does not allow him to participate in the real world—he is shot for the effort. When the narrator finds himself in the same condition at the end of the novel, he hides in order to avoid Clifton’s fate. Here he is allowed, via his autobiography, to construct his own identity before he returns to the world. He becomes the force that controls the “whirling bits of paper,” not the train of history. And yet unlike Herzog, who by the end of the novel is trying to get outside of language to a more immediate connection to the world, or Harry, who at the end of the tetralogy is happy to say “Enough,” it is the narrative here, the novel, which allows the narrator, and Ellison, to “move without movin’.” As opposed to direct contact with the world, the resolution lies in language, language delivered from an enclosed, underground space.

\textsuperscript{116} Brother Wrestrum tells the narrator, “Individuals don’t count for much; it’s what the group wants, what the group does. Everyone here submerges his personal ambitions for the common achievement” (397).

\textsuperscript{117} One is reminded here of Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in which he writes, “The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (255), and also his “Angel of History,” whose “face is turned toward the past,” and who “sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (257).
Before this “resolution” at the end of the novel, Ellison offers two other potential solutions to this historical dilemma that either creates an inherited past (the chain link and the eviction) or leads to chaos (Clifton). Both are representative of a fast approaching postmodern sensibility. The first, the vet’s, is represented by the melee at The Golden Day. The vet’s freedom is one which eschews the norms of history and ideology, yet, he is ironically imprisoned within this very freedom (within the confines of the insane asylum), suggesting a Deleuzian “schizoid” freedom that is really no freedom at all. What the vet has to tell the narrator is important and prophetic, however:

All right, forget what I’ve said. But for God’s sake, learn to look beneath the surface … Come out of the fog, young man. And remember you don’t have to be a complete fool in order to succeed. Play the game, but don’t believe in it—that much you owe yourself. Even if it lands you in a strait jacket or a padded cell. Play the game, but play it your own way—part of the time at least. (153)

After the narrator asks the vet who is the “they” to which he is constantly referring, the vet responds, “They? Why the same they we always mean, the white folks, authority, the gods, fate, circumstances—the force that pulls your strings until you refuse to be pulled any more. The big man who’s never there, where you think he is” (154). It is the vet’s understanding of ideological and historical systems that the narrator ultimately adopts when he retires to the underground. His progression from white folks to authority to gods to fate to circumstance is a castigation of any acceptance of a “controlling” system. It is only through our recognition of such systems and an escape from them that we become free. Of course, it is this very position that has put the vet in the mental ward and drives the narrator underground—it is difficult to live outside of these systems, a truth to which Clifton’s death attests. The vet continues further on, “Now is the time
for fatherly advice … but I’ll have to spare you that—since I guess I’m nobody’s father except my own. Perhaps that’s the advice to give you: Be your own father, young man. And remember, the world is possibility if only you’ll discover it” (156). This last plea, to leave any notion of father behind—law, system, superego—and define his own subjectivity, is keenly postmodern, as is the idea of possibility, or the “emergent.” The novel provides us with another model, however, one which tests the limits of this subjective “possibility.”

To be sure, it is when the narrator moves from the “identity” of speaker for the Brotherhood to that of Rinehart that he gets a clear understanding of the possibilities of postmodern sensibility. Rinehart is a fractured subjectivity—pure surface and signifier. The narrator asks:

Still, could he be all of them: Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend? Could he himself be both rind and heart? What is real anyway? But how could I doubt it? He was a broad man, a man of parts who got around. Rinehart the rounder. It was true as I was true. His world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool. I must have been crazy and blind. The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home. (498, italics mine)

The narrator’s discovery of the possibilities of Rinehart’s fractured, polyvalent identity is liberating and distinctly postmodern. Yet the narrator ultimately rejects this fractured identity as useless and unproductive. About Rinehart, Tony Tanner argues, correctly, I think:

To emulate Rinehart would be to submit to chaos. Rinehart, whose heart is in fact all rind, really represents the ultimate diffusion and the loss of self; a freedom, indeed, which might easily turn into that nightmare of jelly. The narrator, attempting to discover or
create his own identity, does not want to dissolve in fluidity. Yet if he rejects both the life-denying mechanical fixities of the surface operators, and the fluid adaptations and adaptive improvisations of a Rinehart, the question emerges—where can he go, what can he do? (57)

To be sure, this is the question at the end of the novel, as the narrator asks us, “Yes, but what is the next phase.” The narrator continues:

How often have I tried to find it! Over and over again I’ve gone up above to seek it out. … I believed in hard work and progress and action, but now, after first being “for” society and then “against” it, I assign myself no rank or any limit, and such an attitude is very much against the trend of the times. But my world has become one of infinite possibilities. … Step outside of the narrow borders of what men call reality and you step into chaos—ask Rinehart, he’s a master of it—or imagination. (576)

The narrator is trying to find the synthesis of the chaotic freedom of Rinehart and the limiting confines of society and community. How can one be “free” inside these structures? It is only through his hibernation that the narrator is able to contemplate this position. Tanner concludes by saying about the narrator:

In many American novels we will find the hero in quest of identity confronting a Protean figure whose quick metamorphoses seem to make him enviably well adapted to reality; but the hero seldom takes him for a model, no matter how much he may learn from him, for that way lies chaos, the nightmare jelly, the ultimate dissolution of self. No fixed patterns, then, but not a reversion to Protean fluidity either; instead a struggle with, a resistance to, both, conducted in some
“border area” where author and hero alike attempt to create themselves and come into the meaning of their experience. (63)

Only through a shedding of all ideological influence can he truly become “free of illusion,” and return to the world with full knowledge of the symbolic structures by which people live their lives. Tanner’s “border area” seems to suggest what we have been articulating here about blissful realism: “walking the straight line of paradox” between the subjective and the objective. And yet, *Invisible Man*, by ending in this liminal position, feels somehow less secure in the dialectical space between the objective world and subjective surety than any of the novels discussed thus far.

The narrator doesn’t necessarily have an answer at the close of the novel, but his last utterance, “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you” (581), certainly indicates a positive understanding of the modern subject’s relationship to himself and to his community. And his declaration that he’s “coming out” of his basement at the end of the novel suggests a desired participation with reality that is central to an understanding of blissful realism. Yet the novel is ultimately hermetically sealed—while the narrator promises to move above ground, we are not entirely sure, and, as such, the work remains safe within its modernist aesthetic form.

“Aurochs and Angels; the Beastly and the Beautiful”: *Lolita*

In Ellison’s essay “Society, Morality, and the Novel,” from *Going to the Territory*, he writes about the novelist:

[T]heorizing about the form, function, and *raison d'être* of the novel leads him straightway into the fields of social and aesthetic criticism, the domain of
specialists. Here he is held in by rules which are alien to his obsessive need to play with the fires of chaos and to rearrange reality to the patterns of his imagination. For while it is the drive of the critic to create systems of thought, it is that of the novelist to re-create reality in the forms which his personal vision assumes as it plays and struggles with the vividly “eidetic-like” imagery left in the mind’s eye by the process of social change. Life for him is a game of hide-and-seek in which he is eternally the sometimes delighted but more often frustrated “it.” (239-240 italics mine)

This offers a comfortable transition to the literary vision of Vladimir Nabokov, an author who certainly was concerned with the drive to “re-create reality in the forms which his personal vision assumes.” Indeed, if Bellow and Updike felt somewhat aesthetically beholden to reality, Nabokov’s only loyalty was to his own artistic vision. This is not to say, however, that this vision excluded the existence of the physical world (his writing, while foregrounding language, is not “experimental” in the sense that it eschews traditional forms of representation or narration). As Ellen Pifer explains, “Artifice, rather than oppose life, is deployed by Nabokov to renew the reader’s perception of reality—by estranging that perception from habitual formulations. As the act of perception becomes, in Nabokov’s fiction, the focal point for examining reality, the general world, whose existence we automatically assume, tends to fade into the relatively unreal” (Nabokov 25). Or, one might say, it tends to fade into Nabokov’s reconceptualization of that reality. As Leland De la Durantaye puts the point: “What we see reflected in Nabokov’s reality is a robust absence of interest in shared visions of the world. … Nabokov happily exiles himself to the ivory tower of his singular reality and focuses with rare intensity on the passionate pursuit of an inner vision” (47 italics original). Nabokov’s project,
then, is one invested in his own, solipsistic, aestheticized version of reality, a project which finds him often accused of over-valuing art to the point of removing himself from the reality of the everyday in his novels, or, at the very least, over-privileging his own conception of reality.\(^{118}\)

Nabokov had much to say about his aesthetic positions over the course of his life, and while it is perhaps misguided to take him solely at his word (particularly since one often feels that he is speaking ironically, playfully creating an artistic persona that might be quite different from Nabokov the man), it is helpful and necessary to summarize these opinions in order to frame a larger discussion of the relationship of his writing to blissful realism. Nabokov strove for the bliss of accurate description and, like Updike, was concerned with the particular over the general. As he has famously opined, “mediocrity thrives on ideas” (Strong 66); instead, “[l]iterature consists, in fact, not of general ideas but of particular revelations, not of schools of thought but of individuals of genius” (qtd. in De la Durantaye, 111). For him “literary virtue” consists of “[m]ustering the best words, with every available lexical, associative, and rhythmic assistance, to express as closely as possible what one wants to express” (Strong 181). “A creative writer,” he continues, “must possess the inborn capacity not only of recombining but of re-creating the given world. In order to do this adequately, avoiding duplication of labor, the artist should know the given world” (32), but he also believes that “[r]eality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information; and as specialization. … [It] is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. … [W]e live surrounded by more or less ghostly objects… [A]ll art is deception and so is nature” (10-11). One of the most lucid summations of Nabokov’s aesthetic project is provided by Sylvia Paine, who writes,

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\(^{118}\) For a comprehensive list of detractors of this aesthetic approach, see note 2, pgs. 173-74, in Pifer’s *Nabokov*. 
From his perceptions he extends the known world into the unknown by inventing a new universe that he can master—his art—*a universe that mimes the real even in harboring the secret of its own creation*, offering endless clues but never answers. Still, the clues, threaded through the details and available to human consciousness through the senses, constitute a fabric of beauty and tenderness that makes man cherish life and therefore helps him to live it well. (48 italics mine)

Nabokov’s position resembles, on the one hand, a modernist conception of “art for art’s sake”—a position that seals off the literary from the bourgeois—and, on the other, an Updike-like fidelity to the empirical. Nabokov’s reverence for the modernists, however, is qualified; while he respects Joyce, Proust, and Kafka (Foster 95), he considers Eliot “not quite first-rate” and Pound “definitely second-rate” (*Strong* 43). The complicated relationship he has with modernism and modernists reflects his own complicated relationship to blissful realism. That is, as an author who was primarily concerned with the perfection of the art piece, his writing, though often games and “chess puzzles,” tend to, like Updike’s “hymning,” limn reality in such a way as to make its participation in his pieces compulsory. And, as Paine’s passage aptly concludes, this fidelity “helps man cherish life” in a way that does hold some social significance.

Nabokov’s relationship to Updike might shed some light on this contradiction. Updike, while revering Nabokov and considering him “the best-equipped writer in the English-speaking world” (*Pieces* 199), became somewhat disenchanted with Nabokov’s self-conscious use of form in his later work. Updike writes that, “In his post-*Lolita* novels, especially, he seems more illusionist than seer. Though he offers us sensations never before verbally induced, and performs stunts that lift him right off the page, we are more amused than convinced” (215). In a more recent interview, he states:
I don’t think I can aspire to the particular sheen of Nabokov’s brilliance. There is a sense of wordplay that if I tried it that much it would be I think distracting. … But also it is trying to deliver images and a story to a reader, so in that sense [writing] should be kind of invisible. And I think I’m a little more invisible than Nabokov is. But the beauty and the comedy, and the poignancy often, of his prose, are something I’m happy to imitate if I can. (Zanganeh)

Like Updike, Nabokov believes that “We are translators of God’s creation, his little plagiarists and imitators” (qtd. in Kuzmanovich, 27). Updike’s conflicted appreciation—the reverence for a master of the craft and a concern for that master’s “particular sheen” and “sense of wordplay”—suggests the difference between late modernist aesthetics (or even a nascent postmodernism) and blissful realism, in which reality is an integral part of the writer’s aesthetic.

Like Bellow for Ellison, Updike blurbs on the Vintage edition of Lolita: “Nabokov writes prose the only way it should be written, that is, ecstatically.” But their connection goes further than this. Updike wrote the introduction to Nabokov’s Lectures on Literature, in which Updike talks about his then wife, a student of Nabokov’s in 1958, who had “not surrendered a jot of the central dogma she culled [from the class],” that, “style and structure are the essence of a book; great ideas are hogwash” (xxiii). This reminds us of the charge frequently levied against Updike—that he was a beautiful writer without much to say. Nabokov, like Updike, often says what he needs to say through his ecstatic prose. In turn, Nabokov, in a rare praise of other authors’ work, writes about Updike, “Salinger and Updike are by far the finest [American] artists in recent years” (Strong 57), and names Updike’s “The Happiest I’ve Been” as one of his favorite short stories (313). Their connection is an important one, then, in that their projects, in

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119 In this regard, Nabokov differs from Ellison as a late modernist, as Ellison believed in these “great ideas” and in fiction’s “potential for effecting change” (Invisible xx).
many ways, are similar and, like Bellow and Ellison, their respect and admiration for one another shed’s light on both of their respective projects.

*Lolita* is an interesting case in point. Outwardly a story about a pedophile and his victim, the novel uses this plot and character exposition in order to frame a larger discussion about form, art, and the novel as a genre. That is to say, Humbert Humbert’s pedophilia provides an interesting “outsider” perspective to that of bourgeois America and, in doing so, reflects the artistic hermeticism that has been discussed here in regard to modernism. Humbert is an aesthete: he often describes his affliction as “bliss,” the same bliss that Nabokov equates with the novel in his famous afterword, “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*: “For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm” (314-15). Indeed, Humbert, the first-person narrator of the novel, tells us he has “only words to play with” (32), and becomes a figure for the love of something removed and segregated from the everyday; his pedophilia, again, marked by him as a source of bliss (people who have had “regular” sex, according to Humbert, “had not … caught glimpses of [the] incomparably more poignant bliss” of pedophilia [18]), doubles the artist’s (Nabokov’s) position as someone segregated from the rest of society in order to provide artistic bliss for that same society. Humbert is “free” from the confines of the quotidian, and yet the quotidian threatens to undermine and unman him at the slightest slip-up of vigilance: “taboos strangulated [him]” (18). Humbert admits toward the end of the novel:

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120 See introduction, pg. 7.
121 At the risk of disappointing Nabokov (he was severely critical of Freud—see De la Durantaye, pgs. 117-128), I must mention here Freud’s discussion of taboo in his *Totem and Taboo*. Freud sees the taboo as an injunction against certain personal pleasures for the maintenance of the community. He writes, “Sexual needs are not capable of uniting men in the same way as are the demands of self-preservation. Sexual satisfaction is essentially a private affair of each individual. The asocial nature of neuroses has its genetic origin in their most fundamental purpose, which is to take flight from an unsatisfying reality into a more pleasurable world of phantasy. The real world,
There was in the fiery phantasm a perfection which made my wild delight also perfect, just because the vision was out of reach, with no possibility of attainment to spoil it by the awareness of an appended taboo; indeed, it may well be that the very attraction immaturity has for me lies not so much in the limpidity of pure young forbidden fairy child beauty as in the security of a situation where infinite perfections fill the gap between the little given and the great promised—the great rosegray never-to-be-had. (264)

This “rosegray never-to-be-had” was controlled by Humbert’s knowledge and recognition of the taboo, his admission of the necessary component of that restriction in order for him to achieve the space needed for bliss. This “security of a situation” which provides a gap between the “is” and the “ought,” similar to that space found in Bellow and Updike, suggests that the novel is not only a closed piece separated from the social, but also a recognition of the necessity of the social and its prescriptions and boundaries in order to create this space of bliss. As in Updike, the dialectic is a necessity for transcendence, or, more accurately, the ever-present possibility of transcendence.

Formally, the novel is constructed similarly to Ellison’s. Humbert is writing this tale from his jail cell, which at the close he calls his “tombal seclusion” (308)—the initial separation from society due to his pedophilia is now redoubled in this prison. We can read this as both a defense which is avoided in this way by neurotics, is under the sway of human society and of the institutions collectively created by it. To turn away from reality is at the same time to withdraw from the community of man” (74 italics mine). Like Trueblood’s violation of the incest taboo in Invisible Man, Humbert’s violation here affords him distance from the community, one which provides him, as the “poet,” a space ironically unfettered by bourgeois constraints. In an aesthetic parallel, Nabokov has written, “To be sure, there is an average reality, perceived by all of us, but that is not true reality: it is only the reality of general ideas, conventional forms of humdrumery, current editorials. Now if you mean by “old reality” the so-called “realism” of old novels, the easy platitudes of Balzac or Somerset Maugham or D. H. Lawrence—to take some especially depressing examples—then you are right in suggesting the reality faked by a mediocre performer is boring, that imaginary worlds acquire by contrast a dreamy and unreal aspect. Paradoxically, the only real, authentic worlds are, of course, those that seem unusual” (Strong 118). In this sense, Humbert’s “unusual” world provides its authenticity.
of artistic hermeticism and a rejection of it in a way that suggests Ellison’s point of view: Humbert’s perversion provided him space to explore “bliss,” as it were, but there were, of course, consequences to creating that space. If, as Nabokov states, “the real modern world is the world the artist creates … by the very act of his shedding, as it were, the age he lives in” (qtd. in Pifer, 17), then certainly contriving a plot in which the main character, by necessity, must shed the age he lives in, and, at the same time, reflect that age in the very shedding of it, illustrates both blissful realism (some of Nabokov’s descriptions of the American countryside are blissful, indeed) and a late modernism that still attempts to shut the piece up in its own, as Updike puts it, “perfectly self-contained artistic [box]” (Pieces 208). If Updike and Bellow try to “walk the straight line of paradox” between the phenomenal and the subjective, Nabokov leans more heavily on the subjective at the expense of the phenomenal.

This is not to say, however, that Nabokov is unaware of the necessity of reality. It is to say instead that, like Updike, he sees his artistic purpose to be that of raising reality to the transcendent and to something beyond the bounds of formal realism. If the characters of Updike and Bellow were constantly thwarted by the insistence of the outside world (which figures as their aesthetic dialectic), those of Nabokov are both limited and not limited. As Pifer writes, “…Nabokov examines the process by which individual consciousness creates the character of the perceived world. This is, of course, a radical inversion of the methods of formal realism, whereby fiction seeks authenticity by approximating our general notions of reality” (23). This tension is mirrored in the juxtaposition of Part One and Part Two of the novel: the novel illustrates the dialectic of self/world or self/other by creating a dialectical counterpart between Part One of the novel, which is limited to Humbert’s subjective consciousness, and Part Two, which returns us to the world and its vengeance against Humbert.
Just as Bellow warns his reader against symbolic or allegorical readings in “Deep Readers of the World, Beware!”, however, Nabokov in his afterword tells us, “everybody should know that I detest symbols and allegories” (314). Once again, I am going to take the author at his word here, with a qualification that I will read the novel as an expression of Nabokov’s aesthetic opinions and pronouncements combined with an expression of his vision of reality, one which is not based on any shared, objective notion. Instead, he questions, “Whose ‘reality’? ‘Everyday’ where? Let me suggest that the very term ‘everyday reality’ is utterly static since it presupposes a situation that is permanently observable, essentially objective, and universally known. … [It doesn’t] exist” (Plimpton 95). Taken as a whole, Lolita is both an expression of this conception of reality and an admission of the dialectical necessity of an empirical world.

The novel begins with Humbert trying to discover from whence his love for “nymphets” derived. He believes it stems from a summer love of his childhood at his father’s hotel on the French Riviera, at the age of thirteen, with a girl named Annabel. Humbert describes his love for Annabel as pure, and obviously the highly romanticized locale sets up this particular love as a kind of transcendent perfection that could never otherwise be recreated (recall the “rosegray never-to-be-had” above). Because this love was un consummated, Humbert tells us, he attributes his love for young girls to a desire to both recreate and finalize this particular love “until at last, twenty-four years later, I broke [Annabel’s] spell by incarnating her in another” (15), and he sees his “Riviera love peering at [him] over dark glasses” (39). It is clear early on, then, that Lolita embodies the bliss for which Humbert has been searching for the majority of his life.

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122 See Chapter 1, pgs. 48-49.
123 It is no mistake, I believe, that the name of Harry Angstrom’s daughter in the Rabbit series is named Annabelle. That is, her ideality in Harry’s mind aligns with the ideality of the Annabel as it is presented in Lolita. See Ch. 2, pg. 149. Critics have pointed out the name’s association with Poe’s Annabel Lee, as well. See Appel’s notes in The Annotated Lolita, pgs. 328-332.
124 This is similar to Harry’s “idealizing” of Ruth and Cindy in Rest. See Ch. 2, pgs. 149-50.
adult life and, as such, is not a subject for him to love but rather a fetish for him to both worship and control. She is a symbol of perfection and of bliss. This goal is akin to Harry’s struggle for the “it” that he finds when playing basketball as a teenager or striking a golf ball perfectly. It is reflective of the “ought” versus the “is” (as we find out, she “is,” in fact, a foul-mouthed, rude, young American girl).

The way that Humbert distinguishes what he calls “nymphets,” girls “between the age limits of nine and fourteen” (16), from “ordinary” girls is reflective of Barthes’ distinction between pleasure and jouissance and the way that we have positioned those distinctions in regard to the texts in other chapters. Humbert tells us that when distinguishing nymphets,

[n]either are good looks any criterion; and vulgarity, or at least what a given community terms so, does not necessarily impair certain mysterious characteristics, the fey grace, the elusive, shifty, soul-shattering, insidious charm that separates the nymphet from such coevals of hers as are incomparably more dependent on the spatial world of synchronous phenomena than on that intangible island of entranced time where Lolita plays with her likes. Within the same age limits the number of true nymphets is strikingly inferior to that of the provisionally plain, or just nice, or “cute,” or even “sweet” and “attractive,” ordinary, plumpish, formless, cold-skinned, essentially human little girls, with tummies and pigtails, who may or may not turn into adults of great beauty … You have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in your loins and a super-voluptuous flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine …, in order to discern at once, by ineffable signs … the little deadly demon among the wholesome children… (17 italics mine)
Accordingly, Humbert is repulsed by Charlotte, Lolita’s mother, and “her heavy hips, round knees, ripe bust, the coarse pink skin of her neck (‘coarse’ by comparison with silk an honey) and all the rest of that sorry and dull thing: a handsome woman” (72). Humbert’s distinction between the nymphet and the “ordinary,” “formless,” and “handsome” suggests Barthes’ description of the text that “imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language,” against other “comfortable practices of reading.” Recall that Barthes’ continues, “With the writer of bliss (and his reader) begins the untenable text, the impossible text” (Pleasure 21-22), and that “Representation … is embarrassed figuration, encumbered with other meanings than that of desire: a space of alibis (reality, morality, likelihood, readability, truth, etc.)” (56). Humbert’s pedophilia and his understanding of nymphets is exactly this: it is against “reality” and “morality,” and, tellingly, the public often found the novel “unreadable” in its perversion. The novel and its central character makes the practice of reading “uncomfortable.” In the description of the nymphet, then, lies the aims and content of a text of bliss. The “plain” girls here reflect Barthes’ notion of readerly texts of pleasure, whereas the “ineffable signs” of the nymphet reflects his understanding of jouissance.

Furthermore, the “flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine” that Humbert describes suggests Nabokov’s description of the bliss of great literature: “The mind, the brain, the top of the tingling spine, is, or should be, the only instrument used upon a book” (Lectures 4, italics mine). This “tingling” is elucidated further by his lessons on how to read Dickens:

All we have to do when reading Bleak House is to relax and let our spines take over. Although we read with our minds, the seat of artistic delight is between the
shoulder blades. That little shiver behind is quite certainly the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained when evolving pure art and pure science. Let us worship the spine and its tingle. Let us be proud of our being vertebrates, for we are vertebrates tipped at the head with a divine flame. (64)

Humbert’s description and appreciation of nymphets is parallel to both Barthes’ conception of texts of bliss and Nabokov’s conception of how we appreciate great literature. The ineffable “tingle of the spine” moves both Humbert and the reader out and away from what Barthes describes as the “comfortable practice of reading” and bourgeois values like “reality,” “morality,” and “truth.” And it is here, too, that we first understand Humbert’s conception of himself as an “artist,” one whose search for the ineffable has ended with and is embodied by Lolita, his “uncomparably more poignant bliss” (18).

Lolita becomes, then, the vessel through which Humbert experiences bliss and, as such, she loses any agency of her own. She is merely a symbol of something greater than herself. If Augie and Harry were in a fight for their own agency against social structure, and the narrator of Invisible Man struggled (at least initially) to use those structures to find some sort of subjective stability, Lolita, in Part One of the novel, has her subjectivity stolen from her. Humbert co-opts Lolita as his artistic own, both his muse and his poem, and becomes the kind of solipsistic entity that Updike and Bellow reject as untenable and undesirable. Humbert’s admission that “what is most singular is that she, this Lolita, my Lolita, has individualized the writer’s ancient lust, so that above and over everything there is—Lolita” (45), indicates his consumption of her; that is, Lolita no longer exists as young Dolores Haze (a pseudonym itself), but rather as the idealized version of aesthetic perfection (his Annabel) which Humbert ascribes to her: “in the possession and thralldom of a nymphet the enchanted traveler stands, as it were, beyond happiness. For
there is no other bliss on earth comparable to that of fondling a nymphet. It is *hors concours*, that bliss, it belongs to another class, another plane of sensitivity” (166 italics original).

This co-opting of a subject, one that points toward the solipsistic world that Humbert is creating, is doubled by the control that Humbert (read: Nabokov) has over the text and the events therein. The reality that had been limiting Humbert—the necessity to either hide his desire or fulfill it by paying for child prostitutes—is somewhat overcome when he initially arrives at the Haze house and sees Lolita. Like Harry’s experience in *Redux*, living with Skeeter and Jill in a kind of faux domestic bliss that did not consider the gaze and opinion of the outside world, while at the Haze house Humbert lives in a domestic situation that is somewhat stable and in which he can fulfill his desires. Lolita becomes, early on, an escape from the shackles of reality. Thinking about her, Humbert declares, “*Reality at this juncture withdrew*, and the Quest for the Glasses turned into a quiet little orgy with a singularly knowing, cheerful, corrupt and compliant Lolita behaving as *reason knew she could not* possibly behave” (54 italics mine). We are informed early on that this situation (and we are always to remember that Humbert is writing his own story here) is one that would otherwise seem unreal. When he is finally alone with Lolita and she has draped her legs over him, he “cautiously increased the magic friction that was doing away, in an illusional, if not factual, sense, with the physically irremovable, but psychologically very friable texture of the material divide (pajamas and robe)…” (59). This “doing away” with the “psychologically very friable texture of the material divide” suggests a subject/object split that he believes, at least in this recollection, he has overcome through his contact with Lolita. Furthermore, when he’s about to ejaculate, he declares, “Lolita had been safely solipsized” (60), but then delays the moment, “Suspended on the brink of that voluptuous abyss (a nicety of physiological equipoise comparable to certain techniques in the arts)” (60). Again, his
understanding of *jouissance* here is one that combines literally coming with the aesthetic liminality and ineffability of it, being an enjoyment only unto himself, one for which he has completely rid himself of any conception of the other. Later Humbert thinks, “Thus had I delicately *constructed* my ignoble, ardent, sinful dream; and still Lolita was safe—and I was safe. What I had madly possessed was not she, *but my own creation*, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own” (62 italics mine). His possession of his ideality (he continually refers to her as “his” Lolita) is reflective of Nabokov’s understanding of his artistic project; that is, his understanding of his characters as his “galley slaves” (Plimpton 96), a pun which implies his total control of the consciousness of his characters, is reflected in Humbert’s control of Lolita not as a subject, but as an aesthetic object of his own creation. If Trueblood in Ellison’s novel tried to “move without movin’,” to act in a fictional world (or dream state) without that state interfering with reality, Humbert is here once more removed by his creation of that reality.

But Humbert’s “quest” for the *jouissance* and aesthetic perfection of Lolita is doomed from the beginning, and we are given hints of the impossibility of the endeavor early on. As Humbert moves from someone who is “no poet … only a conscientious recorder” (72), to someone who exclaims, “Emphatically, no killers are we. Poets never kill” (88), we get a sense of the unreliability of the narrator, an unreliability which foregrounds the tale’s artifice. To press the point further, Nabokov provides the reader with an unlikely progression of coincidences, impossibilities which highlight the novel’s fictionality and reduce the contingency that the

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125 Recall Spivak’s description of deconstruction as well, as being “intoxicated with the prospect of never hitting bottom” (Ch. 2, note 70, pg. 118).
phenomenal world generally provides. For example, Nabokov/Humbert gives us early in the novel a page from *Who’s Who in the Limelight* which contains the name of the man who Humbert will ultimately kill, Clare Quilty, as well as the name of “Dolores” (Lolita) in the entry that follows. Furthermore, an unlikely house fire initially sends Humbert to the Haze house, and Mrs. Phalen, who was to be a live-in nanny for Lolita, breaks her hip “on the very day [Humbert] arrived in Ramsdale (56), giving Humbert free-reign over the house. A *Gatsby*-like car accident kills Lolita’s mother, Charlotte Haze just after she has discovered Humbert’s plans for her daughter. About this, Humbert writes, “But even had they blinded her, still nothing might have happened, had not precise fate, that synchronizing phantom, mixed within its alembic the car and the dog and the sun and the shade and the wet and the weak and the strong and the stone” (103). And perhaps most tellingly, Humber tells a lie (that Lolita had gone on a hike) that turns out to be true, after which he gets change back from a telephone and says, “One wonders if this sudden discharge, this spasmodic refund, was not correlated somehow, in the mind of McFate, with my having invented that little expedition before ever learning of it as I did now” (107). These, among many others, are examples of a narratological control that suggests Nabokov’s artistic premise of total artistic ownership of reality. As Ellen Pifer puts it:

In Nabokov’s view, the world we perceive and call ‘reality’ is known to us only through subjective awareness or perception. The word itself, he liked to point out, means ‘nothing without quotes’ … As individual consciousness registers phenomena, each of us creates out of the raw data of experience the shape and meaning—the distinctive ‘reality’—of the world(s) we inhabit” (“Introduction” 9).

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126 I am reminded here of Murdoch, who writes, “The motive here [of the “symbolist ideal”] … is a fear of contingency, a yearning to pierce through the messy phenomenal world to some perfect and necessary form and order” (260). Nabokov, at least in Part I, removes this contingency from the text.
In his *Pale Fire*, Nabokov writes, “‘reality’ is neither the subject nor the object of true art which creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the average ‘reality’ perceived by the communal eye” (qtd. in Appel, “Backgrounds” 33). The “coincidences” in *Lolita*, “McFate’s” hand, is nothing other than a formal statement of control over reality, both by the narrator and the author. Indeed, Alfred Appel dedicates a small section of his introduction to *The Annotated Lolita* to “Coincidence,” in which he quotes from Nabokov’s *Ada*: “Some law of logic … should fix the number of coincidences, in a given domain, after which they cease to be coincidences, and form, instead, the living organism of a new truth” (xxvii-xxviii). Humbert’s (and Nabokov’s) understanding of fate here elucidates a key difference from the way that both Updike and Bellow understand it: fate, in the latter authors’ conceptions, becomes an active metaphor for reality and its contingency; that is, fate is that over which the characters in the novel have no control and that which illustrates the necessity and active participation of the world in a character’s formation (recall Bellow’s use of Heraclitus’ “A man’s character is his fate” in *Augie*). Humbert and Nabokov avoid this influence by having complete creative control of the action in the story, implying a modernist privileging of form over reality. Unlike the blissful realists, who understand the necessity of reality and its own agency within the action of their novels (indeed, it is an indispensable dialectical counterpart), Nabokov dismisses this for a modernist sense of control. To that end, we have Humbert trying to describe the accident in which Lolita’s mother, Charlotte, is killed, saying, “I have to put the impact of an instantaneous vision into a sequence of words; their physical accumulation in the page impairs the actual flash, the sharp unity of impression…” (97). Humbert tips his hand, showing his endeavor to control the reality of the situation, or, to be the master of a fate that should otherwise be out of his control.
In order to maintain this control Humbert sweeps Lolita away to what he believes to be the safety of “The Enchanted Hunters,” a cabin whose name itself is indicative of Humbert’s conception of the ideality and romanticism of his quest for the bliss of this nymphet, and the more stylized and the more “imaginative” things become. The text’s reflection of Barthian *jouissance* begins to increase accordingly. Before they reach that romantic safe haven, however, Humbert and Lolita begin to kiss for the first time, and Humbert sees it as the “beginning of the ineffable life which, ably assisted by fate, I had finally willed into being.” Yet, “not daring really kiss her, [he] touched her hot, opening lips with the utmost piety, tiny sips, nothing salacious.” This “ineffable life” suggests *jouissance*, and his hesitancy to kiss her indicates a fear of moving from the inarticulable (the ideality of a moment which he has held in suspension with the memory of Annabel) to the articulable (the actuality and physicality of the moment), illustrating the difference between the notion of pleasure (kissing) and that of bliss (almost kissing).  

127 It is, in fact, Lolita who “pressed her mouth to [his] … in imitation of some simulacrum of fake romance.” Lolita’s third-degree remove (an “imitation” of a “simulacrum” of a “fake”) from an essential understanding of romance is the beginning of the end for Humbert’s quest for transcendence through this nymphet. He was “agonizingly anxious to smuggle her into the hermetic seclusion of The Enchanted Hunters” (113), and there is good reason for this: her proactive sexual advance has broken whatever spell of solipsistic ideality that had thus far existed for Humbert. Like Harry with Ruth, Humbert sees his relationship as an act of transcendence—something to move beyond the quotidian to a realm of artistic pleasure. The difference, of course, is that Harry, despite his efforts to unify their bodies into one transcendent act, realizes that it is the otherness of the individual that makes the act special. Humbert is set on

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127 One is reminded here again of the Trueblood episode in *Invisible Man*, as he tries to “move without movin’”: to keep the fictional, ideal space separate from the real.
“solipsizing” Lolita and her agency expressed in her kiss has undermined that project. As Humbert continues to rush toward the Enchanted Hunters, he, very much like Harry, begins to lose his sense of direction:

If we did not get to the hotel soon … I felt I would lose all control over the Haze jalopy … [T]he passers-by I applied to for directions were either strangers themselves or asked with a frown ‘Enchanted what?’ as if I were a madman; or else they went into such complicated explanations, with geometrical gestures, geographical generalities and strictly local clues … that I could not help losing my way in the maze of their well-meaning gibberish. (116)

Humbert has lost control of his environment and his narrative. His dependence on others (and his inability to interpret their “gibberish”) suggests a loss of the solipsistic worldview over which he previously ruled. He, like Harry on his initial “run,” has lost structural control. This is doubled when, before they consummate their relationship and ruin Humbert’s project for good, Humbert is thrown into an aphasic state: “What’s the Katter with misses,” he asks, and tells Lolita to “Show, wight way.” He then goes into an Italian-gibberish stream of consciousness:

“Seva ascendes, pulsate, brulans kitzelans, dementissima ...” (120), indicating a complete breakdown of language. At this point, Humbert still existed in a blissful space beyond language. What he doesn’t realize is that his image of Lolita, his creation and comprehension of her as an ideal, solipsized work of art, has already been sullied by reality. Lolita discloses a past sexual experience that has brought the outside world into Humbert’s hermetic space. His loss of his control of language reflects his loss of control of Lolita which in turn reflects a loss of artistic mastery and bliss. He writes, “But somewhere behind the raging bliss, bewildered shadows conferred—and not to have heeded them, this is what I regret! … I should have understood that
Lolita had already proved to be something quite different from innocent Annabel…” (124). Indeed, Annabel, his image of perfection, his aesthetic apex, has been destroyed by Lolita’s agency; her sex has breached the impenetrable wall that Humbert had built around his conception of her—she is fallen. Humbert initially had no intention of having intercourse with her—a violation which would corrupt the ideality. As Humbert ironically puts it, “The gentle and dreamy regions through which I crept were the patrimonies of poets—*not* crime’s prowling ground” (131). But it is Lolita’s action, the fact that “it was she who seduced [him],” (132 italics mine), that moves the text from the transcendent to the philistine. Obviously Humbert’s claim is specious; one cannot argue that what he would have done, sex act or not, was reprehensible. But this is not Nabokov’s point. Humbert’s taboo position placed him outside of the bourgeois realm, in a strange space that was safe from the infiltration of the outside world. And yet Lolita, in her ragged youthful Americanness, will not let this solipsistic world safely exist. Nabokov’s elision here of the philistine and the transcendent, the words’ interchangeability and reversibility, are indicative of his larger project. That is, what would normally be considered philistine, the pedophilia, is placed in the position of the transcendent, and Lolita’s agency, her strange reclamation of her subjectivity, is represented as philistine instead. Nabokov’s point, then, suggests the untenability of Barthes’ understanding of a text of bliss: the outside world will not allow it to happen. In this sense, then, Part Two of the novel is a comeuppance for this kind of hermetic thinking, and the dialectical balance to the solipsism of Part One.

After Lolita has “seduced” Humbert, then, his project is a faulty one. Despite the fact that not sex, but “a greater endeavor lures [him] on: to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets,” (134), he encounters problems: “The beastly and beautiful merged at one point, and it is that borderline I would like to fix, and I feel I fail to do so utterly. Why?” (135). The answer to this
question lies in the “walking the straight line of paradox” in Updike and Bellow and the transcendent and philistine discussed above: Humbert’s failure (and subsequent failure to articulate this merger of the “beastly and the beautiful,” what we can safely say represents reality and ideality/bliss respectively) is indicative of a larger artistic failure to understand reality and solipsism—the project that Nabokov successfully achieves in the novel itself. If Updike and Bellow use the dialectical tension between the outside world and the will of their protagonists (character versus fate) as well as an example of the writer’s duty both to their own conception of aesthetically beautiful prose and a willful description of the outside world, Nabokov juxtaposes Part One and Part Two of the novel to heighten the tension between these two poles. In the second half of the novel, “Whether or not the realization of a lifelong dream had surpassed all expectation, it had, in a sense, overshot its mark—and plunged into a nightmare” (140). That nightmare is the “unsolipsizing” of Humbert’s story both through the no-longer-transcendent relationship of him and Lolita (one which is merely physical now) and the description of and involvement with the outside world in this second half. Humbert’s “love” for Lolita is no longer bliss, but rather a kind of sick and base pleasure, again reflecting Barthes’ distinction.\(^{128}\)

Lolita and Humbert’s subsequent tour of the “crazy quilt of forty-eight states” (152) makes Part One and Part Two of the novel a juxtaposition of the solipsistic, hermetic work of art in regard to the former, and a celebration (albeit rueful) of the objective, social world in the second. As De la Durantaye puts it, “Humbert encourages his reader to view his memoir in its initial

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\(^{128}\) Many critics have offered the opinion that in Part Two of the novel Humbert’s regard toward Lolita is one of love instead of bliss, while still pointing out that it is often unclear whether or not Humbert has, in fact, changed for the better. Stark writes, for instance, “[Nabokov] offer[s] love as a solution but not until after [he] make[s his] case against realism and commonsense notions of reality” (10). Paine adds, “Humbert Humbert in Lolita offers a classic example: not until he abandons his solipsistic indulgence in the pleasures of the beautiful nymphet for love of the dowdy young wife can he translate his experience and feelings into art” (52). My disagreement lies in the fact that Humbert doesn’t change and the final act of writing the book is not an act of love, but a final attempt to solipsize Lolita in art, an attempt with purely selfish motives, and one which allows Nabokov to make no moral or ethical excuses for the creation of art.
stages through the lens of art. In its second stage, he encourages his reader to view his memoir through another lens—the lens of life” (190). After ruining his blissful relationship with Lolita, she becomes to Humbert, “unromantic” (146), and “mentally, [he] found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl … to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster” (148). Indeed, Lolita becomes the very bourgeois specimen that modernists (and Humbert) despise. Interestingly, Humbert’s attention, then, begins to shift away from Lolita toward the American countryside:

Not only had Lo no eye for scenery but she furiously resented my calling her attention to this or that enchanting detail of landscape; which I myself learned to discern only after being exposed for quite a time to the delicate beauty ever present in the margin of our undeserving journey. By a paradox of pictorial thought, the average lowland North-American countryside had at first seemed to me something I accepted with a shock of amused recognition because of those painted oilcloths which were imported from America in the old days to be hung above washstands in Central-European nurseries, and which fascinated a drowsy child at bed time with the rustic green views they depicted—opaque curly trees, a barn, cattle, a brook, the dull white of vague orchards in bloom, and perhaps a stone fence or hills of greenish gouache. But gradually the models of those elementary rusticities became stranger and stranger to the eye, the nearer I came to know them. Beyond the tilled plain, beyond the toy roofs, there would be a slow suffusion of inutile loveliness, a low sun in a platinum haze with a warm, peeled-peach tinge pervading the upper edge of a two-dimensional, dove-gray cloud fusing with the distant amorous mist. There might be a line of spaced trees
silhouetted against the horizon, and hot still noons above a wilderness of clover, and Claude Lorrain clouds inscribed remotely into the misty azure with only their cumulus part conspicuous against the neutral swoon of the background. … while lost in an artist’s dream, I would stare at the honest brightness of the gasoline paraphernalia against the splendid green of oaks, or at a distant hill scrambling out—scarred but still untamed—from the wilderness of agriculture that was trying to swallow it. (152-53 italics mine)

I offer this lengthy passage as an example, as I have done in previous chapters, of explicit blissful realism. Here, what is interesting is the strange transfiguration of paintings and their use to describe the actual countryside. Like Humbert’s (forced) escape from solipsism, here we see the move from his own childhood aesthetic memory of the American countryside to the very real American countryside, and its glorification (or re-appropriation, as it were) in his prose. His recognition of the “beauty ever present in the margin” indicates, through the pun, an admission of something outside of the text—that is, his eyes have wondered from the art piece to the actual piece of paper on which it is printed (to read the metaphor literally). The “models” of his imagination of the American countryside that were predicated on middling oil representations are replaced by the actuality of the beauty he sees before him. And yet, the “inutile loveliness” of that countryside implies a recognition of beauty very much in the vein of Updike: it illustrates the aesthetic beauty of the particular and not any metaphorical or “meaningful” recognition beyond that of the bliss it provides Humbert. This understanding is redoubled by his insistence on the painterly, two dimensional aspects of the scene. Here Nabokov is able to recognize the outside world and yet keep it within an artistic frame, “hymning” the physical world as Updike does in his novels, recognizing its otherness and yet capturing and reconstituting it in his own
artistic lexicon. The oscillating vibration between the “real” and the “model,” between the representational and the actual, provides a nice example of the way that Nabokov understands the interaction and interplay between reality and his art. The personification of the countryside, its “amorous mist,” “swooning,” “scrambling” and “scarring,” all point to another solipsism; that is, Humbert moves from pictorial representation to objective perception and back to a subjective pictorial representation in words. This anthropomorphizing reminds us of Bellow’s and Updike’s use of the same method in order to merge the subjective and the objective in an effort, as I’ve written above, to fuse the objective and the imaginative faculties of the author. And just as the beauty of the countryside awakens his recognition of the outside world, so the blissful bubble in which Humbert wished to live with his Lolita has burst: “how long did I think we were going to live in stuffy cabins, doing filthy things together and never behaving like ordinary people?” (158). The taboo that once protected his aesthetic bliss has now become a hindrance, and a dirty one at that. Yet Humbert’s move here from a completely interiorized understanding of the landscape (one attached to his childhood memories) to a recognition of the beauty of the scene itself infers, if nothing else, a recognition of its existence outside of his own epistemological bubble.

Humbert’s and Lolita’s subsequent settling in Beardsley in the east and Lolita’s attendance at the Beardsley School is indicative of Humbert’s attempt at reconciliation of the outside and inner worlds. He “did crave for a label, a background, and a simulacrum” (175), he states. The use of the word “simulacrum” undermines the truthfulness of that effort, however. The school itself is a perfect example of this misguided attempt to blend the reality, normalcy, and contingency of the world with Humbert’s taboo desires. The headmistress of the school tells him that, “with due respect to Shakespeare and others, we want our girls to communicate freely with the live world

129 See Chapter 1, pgs 93-94 for Bellow’s use of this technique, and Chapter 2, pg. 152-53 for Updike’s.
around them rather than plunge into musty old books” (177 italics original), and, “We live not only in a world of thoughts, but also in a world of things. Words without experience are meaningless” (178). This program “appalled” Humbert, and Nabokov, despite his proclamations against social commentary, seems to be participating in satire here (satire intimating a concern with the social well-being). The headmistress’ point, however, though undermined by Humbert, stands. Humbert’s experience at the moment is conflicting with his own story, both in the sense that he is writing the story in jail (the “world of things” has caught up with him) and that it is interfering with his own solipsistic drive and urge to own Lolita above and apart from the outside world. His “words,” without “experience” of the outside world, are, indeed, meaningless. Soon after the discussion with the headmistress, the small view of the school playground that a window provides from Humbert’s house is taken from him when the “material” of a fence blocks his “magic vista,” “erect[ing] a sufficient amount of material to spoil everything” (179). It is the “material” of the outside world that is beginning to infringe upon his world (we assume that his view of the playground was not for wholesome purposes): the contingent is encroaching upon his control over “McFate.”

This articulation of the ideal or the blissful bumping into the real is returned to often in the latter half of the novel. Indeed, Lolita’s tennis game becomes a figure for the difference and problematic incommensurability of the ideal and the real. Lolita’s tennis is perfect, but not practical (she doesn’t win): “Miss Gold says Dolly’s tennis form is excellent to superb … but concentration and point-accumulation are just ‘poor to fair’” (195). And, later in the text, Humbert tells us:

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130 This suggests Harry’s position in Redux, when what was considered a tenable domestic bliss begins to dissipate with the intrusion of the outside world and people looking back through his windows. See Ch. 2, pg 145-146.
[Lolita’s] tennis was the highest point to which I can imagine a young creature bringing the art of make-believe, although I daresay, for her it was the very geometry of basic reality. … The ball when it entered her aura of control became somehow whiter, its resilience somehow richer, and the instrument of precision she used upon it seemed inordinately prehensile and deliberate at the moment of clinging contact. Her form was, indeed, an absolutely perfect imitation of absolutely top-notch tennis—without any utilitarian results. (231 italics mine)

Humbert tells us that she had “such grace! I remember at the very first game I watched being drenched with an almost painful convulsion of beauty assimilation” (231). Lolita’s tennis is that of perfect aesthetic form without the necessity here of utility—it is “inutile,” to use Nabokov’s word above—and suggests Nabokov’s conception of art as articulated in this chapter’s epigraph: “A work of art has no importance whatever to society. It is only important to the individual … what makes a work of fiction safe from larvae and rust is not its social importance but its art, only its art” (Strong 33). Trying to “win,” as it were, in tennis would make the beauty of Lolita’s game “rust” and lose its blissful nature. Her “cheerful indifference toward [the game’s] outcome” is reminiscent of Harry’s understanding of the purity of the games of basketball and golf when they are being played perfectly, although a difference lies in the ends: when Harry is playing beautifully, he wins whatever game he is playing; reality and bliss coexist. The aesthetic suggestion is that there are moments when bliss and the world (here, the game) coalesce into “it.” Nabokov believes, on the other hand, that a concern with winning implies a concern for the world outside of aesthetics, one which sullies the beauty of the act itself.

While attending Beardsley, Lolita wins a part in a play, a play whose title, “The Enchanted Hunters,” doubles the name of the lodge where Humbert and Lolita first had sex. The
“coincidence” here is no longer of Humbert’s making—he is confused as to the relationship between the two things. What has come to pass is an overtaking of his own “play,” both in the sense of his writing of this narrative and the coincidences that he has thus far managed to create (overcoming contingency), by another, written by someone else and in which Lolita has an important part. Lolita plays a farmer’s daughter who learns hypnotism and becomes an enchantress, “or Diana, or something” (200), who makes a banker, a plumber, a policeman, an undertaker, an underwriter, and an escaped convict “remember their real lives only as dreams or nightmares from which little Diana had aroused them.” But a seventh character, a “Young Poet,” insisted that [Diana] and the entertainment provided (dancing nymphs, and elves, and monsters) were his, the Poet’s, invention. I [Humbert] understand that finally, in utter disgust at this cocksureness, barefooted Dolores was to lead check-trouserined Mona [the poet] to the paternal farm behind the Perilous Forest to prove to the braggard she was not a poet’s fancy, but a rustic, down-to-brown-earth lass—and a last-minute kiss was to enforce the play’s profound message, namely, *that mirage and reality merge in love.* (201 italics mine)

Humbert thinks, “I considered it wiser not to criticize the thing in front of Lo” (201). The plot of the play is obviously reflective of how Humbert sees Lolita capable of enchantment, but moreso of the fact that she is a creation of someone else, namely, here, Humbert and, more precisely, Nabokov. Her ability to “entrance” these characters who are a gross exaggeration of bourgeois types is a sarcastic reflection of a type of literature which Barthes would label “texts of pleasure.” The poet, however, is the one who controls *real* magic in the play. This is further complicated by the fact that the play was actually written by Clare Quilty, the man who steals Lolita away from Humbert to have his own way with her. He, too, then, becomes the poet in this
play, over and above Humbert (but not Nabokov). Lolita’s/Diana’s effort to convince the poet that she is “not a poet’s fancy, but a rustic, down-to-earth lass” reflects the recognition of Lolita’s agency (not merely an aesthetic object) and, the final line, “that mirage and reality merge in love,” is what makes this passage one of blissful realism. Just as Lolita kissing Humbert broke Humbert’s spell of aesthetic control, the play does the same here. Because of Humbert’s desire to criticize the play we can assume that the conclusion is unsatisfactory for him in that it escapes the bounds of his own aesthetic project. The notion of love, then, derives from this merging of “mirage and reality,” of the objective world and its elevation by the consciousness of the artist.

Lolita, then, being a part of someone else’s (Quilty’s) aesthetic scheme (though Humbert takes her on the road again before she can act in the play), has exited the solipsistic world of Humbert and has further come into her own consciousness, or, at the very least, has moved out of the consciousness of Humbert into another’s. Because of this, Humbert begins to lose control of McFate: as they “run” a second time Humbert’s car starts to break down on the ride and they get a flat. Humbert’s paranoia with getting caught is greater as he is no longer in control of the contingent—he no longer writes the play. Eventually he sees that someone is following them (it is, in fact, Clare Quilty, the new “poet” in Lolita’s life). At one point, as Humbert tries to decipher who is following them, he and Lolita see some mannequins in a store window:

One figure was stark naked, wigless and armless. Its comparatively small stature and smirking pose suggested that when clothed it had represented, and would represent when clothed again, a girl-child of Lolita’s size. But in its present state it was sexless. Next to it, stood a much taller veiled bride, quite perfect and intacta except for the lack of one arm. On the floor, at the feet of these damsels,
where the man crawled about laboriously with his cleaner, there lay a cluster of three slender arms and a blond wig. Two of the arms happened to be twisted and seemed to suggest a clasping gesture of horror and supplication. (226)

This passage is remarkable in that it could be an easy metaphor, perhaps of Lolita and her mother, or perhaps of the fact that in Humbert’s estimation, Lolita is beginning to lose her imago—her wholeness as conceived and created by Humbert (figured by the man cleaning on the floor who is trying to “clean up” this mess). Humbert’s recognition of this scene, however, undermines any symbolic reading: “‘Look, Lo.’ I said quietly. ‘Look well. Is not that a rather good symbol of something or other?’” (226). His inability to read the symbol, to “put it together,” as it were, indicates his own loss of control of the narrative. The “horror and supplication” becomes reflective not of Lolita’s position and condition, but Humbert’s own desire to put his narrative back together again. Furthermore, as he continues his quest to uncover who it is that is following them, he thinks that he has written down the car’s license plate number, but:

What remained of it in [his] mind were the initial letter and the closing figure as if the whole amphitheatre of six signs receded concavely behind a tinted glass too opaque to allow the central series to be deciphered, but just translucent enough to make out its extreme edges—a capital P and a 6. I have to go into those details (which in themselves can interest only a professional psychologue) because otherwise the reader (ah, if I could visualize him as a blond-bearded scholar with rosy lips sucking la pomme de sa canne as he quaffs my manuscript!) might not understand the quality of the shock I experienced upon noticing that the P had acquired the bustle of a B and that the 6 had been deleted altogether. The rest,
with erasures revealing the hurried shuttle smear of a pencil’s rubber end, and
with parts of number obliterated or reconstructed in a child’s hand, presented a
tangle of barbed wire to any logical interpretation. (226)

Here again Humbert is unable to decipher what exactly is on the page—initially he is able to
make out the beginning and end, as an artist might conceive of the construction of a whole piece,
but the middle of its construction is unclear.\footnote{Tellingly, Nabokov says about his compositional method: “The pattern of the thing precedes the thing. I fill in gaps ... Since I always have at the very start a curiously clear picture of the entire novel before me or above me, I find cards especially convenient when not following the logical sequence of chapters but preparing instead this or that passage at any point of the novel and filling in the gaps in no special order” (qtd. in Rowe, ix).} Beyond this, the beginning is altered to perhaps a
different letter and the ending no longer exists. The erasure and “reconstruction” here by Lolita
implies, again, her own rise to consciousness in the text outside of Humbert’s construction.
Unlike Humbert, who cannot put the mannequins back together, who can’t “clean up,” Lolita has
begun to take narrative control. If, in Derridean terms, the key to meaning for Humbert was
literally \textit{sous rature}, here Lolita has begun to create her own narrative.

As the novel comes to a close, Humbert continues to lose control of his narrative and he
contantly struggles “for clarification” (236). After Lolita escapes with Quilty, Humbert chases
them and becomes ensnared in word games that Quilty has left for him, again reiterating
Humbert’s loss of control of the language and how to create meaning. Humbert, in fact, begins
“losing contact with reality” (255) and heads to a sanatorium to try and find some semblance of
the narrative control that he once maintained and lorded over Lolita. His “supersensitive system
was loath to face the actual scene” (262), but he does, eventually, succeed in finding Lolita after
she writes him a letter asking for money. Upon their meeting, Lolita reflects, “Yes, she said, this
world was just one gag after another, if somebody wrote up her life nobody would ever believe
it” (273). The play on the word “gag” here is important, as until this point our argument has
circled around Humbert’s co-optation of Lolita’s agency and subjectivity; the word indicates the “gag” she has had placed on her, and the discursive “joke” and play of the narrative itself. As Humbert drives away from Dolly, as she is now called, he has an incident very similar to Harry’s first “run” to the “black core.” Humbert tries a shortcut, he tells us,

however, the short-cut in question got worse and worse, bumpier and bumpier, muddier and muddier, and when [he] attempted to turn back after some ten miles of purblind, tortuous and tortoise-slow progress, [his] old and weak Melmoth got stuck in the deep clay. All was dark and muggy, and hopeless. … The surrounding country, if any, was a black wilderness. (281)

Like Harry, without the “control” of Lolita, without the opportunity to control his own particular narrative, he finds himself lost and encountering the same existential abyss.

After losing Lolita, the only way he can see to gain control of his narrative again is to kill the man who took it from him: Clare Quilty. The murder scene is interesting in that Quilty continually tries to dictate the action of what’s happening, just as he has done to Humbert in the past. He tells him, “My dear sir … stop trifling with life and death. I am a playwright. I have written tragedies, comedies, fantasies. … I know all the ropes. Let me handle this. There should be a poker somewhere, why don’t you fetch it, and then we’ll fish out your property” (298). What Humbert is most upset about, however, is Quilty’s use of Lolita; that is, Humbert sees his love of Lolita as pure and aesthetically beautiful, whereas Quilty’s was lascivious and perverted. Humbert’s was art, Quilty’s was second-rate trash. Tellingly, he has Quilty read a poem that he has written about his theft of Lolita with lines such as, “because you stole her from her wax-browed and dignified protector spitting into his heavy-lidded eye … you have to die” (300). After the killing he thinks, “This, I said to myself, was the end of the ingenious play staged for
me by Quilty” (305). And yet, there are moments where Humbert’s understanding of his relationship with Lolita are more real than aesthetic. At one point he thinks, that unless it can be proven that what he did to Lolita doesn’t matter, “(and if it can, then life is a joke), I see nothing for the treatment of my misery but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art. To quote an old poet: ‘The moral sense in mortals is the duty / We have to pay on mortal sense of beauty’” (283). The poem, of Nabokov’s invention (Nabokov, *Annotated* 444), indicates the greater stakes involved in attempting to create a hermetic piece of art by moving outside the realm of moral taboos. That is, if beauty is to be “mortal” (subject to death), we must pay for that death (our “duty”) with a confining moral sensibility. The opposite of this implies, however, that if we have a transcendent, infinite understanding of beauty, then no duty is required, and the bounds of morality are no longer in play. Humbert has evaded the duty by creating his memoir.

After he kills Quilty, Humbert is once again on the outside of bourgeois constraint—he is now a murderer and again in an “artistic” space of freedom that transgresses the normal boundaries of society. Driving away from the crime scene,

[t]he road now stretched across open country, and it occurred to me—not by way of protest, not as a symbol, or anything like that, but merely as a novel experience—that since I had disregarded all laws of humanity, I might as well disregard the rules of traffic. So I crossed to the left side of the highway and checked the feeling, and the feeling was good. It was a pleasant diaphragmal melting, with elements of diffused tactility, all this enhanced by the thought that nothing could be nearer to the elimination of basic physical laws than deliberately driving on the wrong side of the road. In a way, it was a very spiritual itch. (306)
Indeed, the freedom he experiences here, the “novel experience” (!), one could argue, allows him to write the document that we read today. That is, the freedom produced from killing Quilty, putting him once again in a “taboo” position of murderer, has replaced the space that being a pedophile had created and once again puts him in touch with the “itch” or the “tingling of the spine.” Immediately preceding this passage, however, covered in Quilty’s blood, Humbert thinks, “It is strange that the tactile sense, which is so infinitely less precious to men than sight, becomes at critical moments our main, if not only, handle to reality” (306). The suggestion of the two passages—both of which point to a bond between the physical world and moments of transcendence—indicates the basic dialectical tension that we have been discussing throughout this argument. Humbert’s growth in the second part of the book—one which is pained and overwhelmed by contingency, most often by the presence of the other: Lolita and Quilty—allows him to appreciate the necessity of the outside world and the coming to terms with it, even if he is not happy about it.

The very end of the novel provides us with a lasting impression of Humbert’s growth. He recalls sitting at a roadside when he hears “that vapory vibration of accumulated sounds that never ceased for a moment,” sounds which “were of one nature … the melody of children at play.” And it was “then [he] knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord” (308). Indeed, Humbert’s admission at the end here of the necessity of connection with the outside world and with others is akin to Bellow’s notion of “axial lines” in Augie, Updike’s “bricks of humanity” in Rest, and Ellison’s “lower frequencies” in Invisible Man. By writing the memoir, however—by imprisoning the memory of Lolita within the novel, still under his spell—Humbert has succeeded in the final relegation of her existence and its accompanying bliss to the “the refuge of art.” He
closes by saying, “I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita” (309). The final move here, one of solipsistic closure (“my Lolita”), is what keeps this novel in the realm of “late modernism.” Its dialectical tension is, in the last, given up. As Brian Boyd states, “Because he rejects determinism, because he refuses to see life in terms of action and counteraction meshing like teeth on interconnecting cogs, Nabokov’s stories minimize the conflict that ticks its way through so much of story. He constructs his stories to reflect the unique, unpredictable rhythm of an individual character’s life” (46).132 This ultimate rejection of the contingent separates Nabokov from the other authors discussed here.

132 One is reminded here of Updike’s discussion of the “zipper,” where the subjective and the objective mesh together. See Chapter 2, pg 162.
CONCLUSION

Perhaps humankind cannot bear too much reality, but neither can it bear too much unreality, too much abuse of the truth.

– Saul Bellow, “Nobel Lecture”

Not even the poststructuralists, with their philosophically unassailable celebration of the “pleasure of the text,” can help me out here, because I know that no matter how metaphorically rich and linguistically sophisticated [the novel] is, what I experienced when I first read it was not some erotically joyous lateral slide of endless associations, but something coherent and deadly pertinent.


I have argued that the blissful realists of the modern/postmodern divide attempt to recognize and celebrate the objective world, making it an integral part of the dialectic between fiction and reality both in regard to their narrative (characters must respond to the world as it is, not only as a fantasy of the author’s construction) and their responsibility toward phenomenological certainty. In this sense, they do not overly privilege the formal quality of their work but move dialectically between form and reality. They complicate the modernist project by questioning the privileging of the autonomous artistic piece and respond to a nascent postmodernism by eschewing the kind of ontological slippage for which postmodernism allows.\(^{133}\) Instead, these

\(^{133}\) One might argue, however, that postmodern authors were in fact responding to the blissful realists’ return to realism and saw an opportunity to extend some of the major tenets of modernism. See Barth’s “Replenishment.”
authors defend the autonomy of the subject, who is not merely a product of discourse and structural forces, but a real, constitutive and constituting consciousness.

This concluding chapter looks at a few examples of contemporary literature that return to these blissful realist positions. That is, they reject a postmodern predilection for the problematizing of ontological stability as demonstrated through the literary text (as we see in the Paul Auster’s novels, for instance) and defend a more stable and assured subjective immanence. Moreover, they challenge the post-structuralist privileging of discourse over objective reality. In this sense, they ask the questions, “After postmodernism, what?” and, “After post-structuralism, what?” Labeled with various unwieldy names like “metamodernism,” “new sincerity,” and, the most unproductive and undermining of them all, “post-postmodernism,” this school of writing attempts, like its blissful realist predecessor, to recognize the aesthetic movement that preceded it— postmodernism, in this case—while struggling to move beyond irony and metalanguage to a greater understanding of the real possibilities of literature at a given time and historical moment. Jonathan Franzen and Jeffrey Eugenides, two authors often associated with this movement, illustrate this particular shift in the poetics and function of the contemporary novel.

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134 These questions are indebted to a genealogy of efforts to move past staid literary and critical movements. Norman Podhoretz, for example, famously asked in 1974, “After Modernism, What?” Interestingly, Bellow and Updike have asked similar questions in print. In his “Some Notes on Recent American Fiction,” Bellow writes, “Writers like Sartre, Ionesco, and Beckett or like our own William Burroughs and Allan Ginsberg are only a few of the active campaigners on this shrinking front against the Self. One would like to ask these contemporaries, ‘After nakedness, what?’ … After absurdity, what?’ … Modern literature … would rather have the maddest chaos it can invoke than a conception of life it has found false. But after this destruction [of the Self], what?” (62, 66). Similarly, in a New York Times interview Updike has said, “After Christianity, what?” (qtd. in Samuels, 34), implying the necessity of metanarrative (contra postmodern critiques of the same). In any case, this genealogy, I would argue, is carried forward here.

135 I use the term “undermining” to point out that if a movement is predating itself, in part, on a return to positivism and authenticity, then defining the period negatively seems entirely counter-productive.

136 My choice of these authors is due in part to their current critical and popular acclaim as well as their published aesthetic positions, but also due to their participation in a 2006 Italian conference entitled “le conversazioni: scrittori a confronto,” which brings together like-minded contemporary authors and artists. Others invited included Zadie Smith, David Foster Wallace, and Nathan Englander, all of whom could be used as exemplars of this shift in the
In her 2002 epilogue, added to the 1989 edition of *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon writes in regard to postmodernism, “Let’s just say: it’s over” (166). While this type of statement is ubiquitous and de rigueur today, writers and critics have nevertheless had difficulty moving out of postmodernism’s substantial shadow. Hutcheon continues, “The postmodern moment has passed, even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on—as do those of modernism—in our contemporary twenty-first-century world” (181). Have we really moved on? If so, how, precisely (or even generally, for that matter), can we define this new movement in contemporary literature and contemporary criticism? Authors Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker have made an attempt. In their now much cited article “Notes on metamodernism,” they categorize this new aesthetic period as one that moves away from irony and pastiche toward a renewed investment in sincerity. This period, which they term “metamodernism,” contains the full range of postmodern tenets, yet behaves in an “as if” fashion: subjectivity is fractured, but we behave “as if” it weren’t; history is not teleological, but we behave “as if” it were, and so on. “The current, metamodern discourse,” they write, “acknowledges that history’s purpose will never be fulfilled because it does not exist. Critically, however, it nevertheless takes toward it as if it does exist.” They continue, “Inspired by a modern naïveté yet informed by postmodern skepticism, the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility” (5). Like blissful realists, the metamoderns’ main thematic concern is the dialectic between reality and the subjective, between the ideal and the real, and behaving “as if” there might be a dialectical synthesis, knowing full well that there would not and could not be. Contemporary artists must

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update this conception, however, to include postmodern beliefs and practices. According to Vermeulen and van den Akker:

> Ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. Indeed, by oscillating to and fro or back and forth, the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern.\(^\text{137}\)

The epistemology and the ontology of the metamodern “are each at once modern and postmodern and neither of them” (6). One is reminded of Lukács’ *Theory of the Novel*, in which he famously argues that the novel attempts to create an “epic wholeness” with the full knowledge of the task’s impossibility:

> The irony of the novel is the self-correction of the world’s fragility… Thus a new perspective of life is reached on an entirely new basis—that of the indissoluble connection between the relative independence of the parts and their attachment to the whole. But the parts, despite this attachment, can never lose their inexorable, abstract self-dependence: and their relationship to the totality, although it approximates as closely as possible to an organic one, is nevertheless not a true-born organic relationship but a conceptual one which is abolished, again and again. (75-76, italics mine)

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\(^{137}\) One is reminded here of the oscillation in *Lolita* between the model and the real, between the authentic and the inauthentic. See Chapter 3, pgs. 220-21.
For Lukács, the author of the critical realist novel writes “as if” the success of achieving this wholeness were a possibility, and, according to metamodernism, contemporary authors and artists do the same.

But what is it about postmodernism against which the “metamoderns” react? From the epigraph above, it would appear that these contemporary authors are reacting not only against postmodern aesthetics, but also against the philosophical and linguistic discoveries and positions of the post-structuralists who often influenced postmodern writers. Let us begin, then, with a comprehensive summation from critic Colin Davis of the most frequent criticisms of post-structuralist tenets:

They celebrate a “decentring of the subject” or “death of man” which denies human agency and freedom; their anti-foundationalism condemns them to a sterile relativism; they are nihilistic and irrationalist; they can provide no basis for an ethics because they do not accept the universality of any values; they are concerned with the abstractness of “theory” to the point that they allow no place for “practice” and no conceivable application to the world which common sense tells us we inhabit; they denigrate and undermine all knowledge, belief and serious intellectual endeavour; they are elitist, stylistically baroque and intellectually shallow politically, they are ineffectual and reactionary; and their...

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138 See my introduction, pgs. 29-34, for a summation of postmodern aesthetic approaches.
139 While there is certainly a distinction to be made between “postmodernism,” which is a set of shared aesthetic approaches, and “post-structuralism,” which is concerned mainly with philosophical, linguistic, and poetic issues, they are connected and symbiotic, if not reciprocal, terms. Under “postmodernism,” for instance, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes mainly “philosophical postmodernism,” which lists post-structuralism within its purview. All this is to say that much postmodern fiction adopts many of the most popular post-structuralist positions (e.g. there is nothing outside of the text [Derrida]; the subject is a construct [Butler, Lacan]; and/or meaning is destabilized [any post-structuralist]) and attempts to manifest these ideas on the page. It is this practice to which the authors I explore here respond.
rhetorical and terminological complexity only serves to mask their lack of real substance. (1)

The aim of Davis’ book is to show that these criticisms, however, are often founded upon misreadings of Derrida, Lacan, Kristeva, etc. While his thesis may be correct, in postmodern fashion, the “correct” readings of these theorists is not, in fact, what is important (nor could they defend a “correct” interpretation). What is important is how their discourse has been popularly accepted and deployed, and therefore the complaints above, whether actually true or not, are true in the sense that the discourse has been, by most, accepted and (mis)understood as true.

Susan Neiman, former Yale professor of philosophy and current director of the Einstein Forum, agrees with many of the critiques of post-structuralism that Davis articulates above. In her book Moral Clarity, Neiman argues, as Vermeulen and van den Akker do, for a Kantian return to “morality” in the face of postmodern skepticism. That is, she argues that Kant’s understanding of a communally shared “moral imperative,” one that can be reasoned and agreed upon, should overtake and is overtaking postmodern apathy and relativism. Neiman writes, “The resolve not to impose your moral worldview by force often ends with the resolve to make no judgments at all. For those who live without divine sanctions, judgments of good, and especially of evil, are off-limits” (14). This kind of criticism for the sake of criticism (echoing an avant-garde “art for art’s sake”) produces a moral and ethical “rudderlessness” or vacuum. She writes in regard to Foucault:

But while the feeling [Foucault] generated by reconsidering possibilities is genuinely liberating, the liberated reader is left without any sense of direction—partly because Foucault’s analysis of power leaves us all so enmeshed in it that we cannot even see it properly. As the philosopher Richard Rorty concluded,
“The Foucauldian academic left in contemporary America is exactly the sort of left that the oligarchy dreams of, a left whose members are so busy unmasking the present that they have not time to discuss what laws need to be passed in order to create a better future.” Nothing promotes inertia like cynicism. (63)

This passage articulates a common critique of post-structuralism being levied by turn-of-the-century philosophers and literary critics alike. That is, as Vermeulen and van den Akker suggest, these critics and philosophers are struggling to move beyond irony to a new kind of commitment, even if that commitment is qualified or reluctant. Indeed, another writer who might be included in the metamodern or “new sincerity” group, David Foster Wallace, would “argue that irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and that at the same time they are agents of great despair and stasis in U.S. culture, and that for aspiring fictionists they pose terrifically vexing problems. … [I]rony, entertaining as it is, serves an exclusively negative function. It’s critical and destructive, a ground-clearing” (171, 183). He concludes, thematically returning us to the Jameson passage with which I began this project,

The next real literary “rebels” in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of “anti-rebels,” born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic. … [There will be] accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Credulity. Willingness to be suckered… (193)

Wallace’s pronouncement, written in 1993, is more relevant now than it was at the time.
These kind of pronouncements, however, are nothing new. As Martin McQuillin et al. put it at the beginning of “The Joy of Theory”:

This is not the first time that Theory has been reported dead. …

This is not the first time that reporting the death of Theory has been reported dead. …

However, we believe we are the first to call for an end to reporting the death of reporting the death of Theory. (ix)

Gerald Graff and Terry Eagleton have been making this argument since the seventies, in part as a response to late modernism and the nascent postmodernism that they, and the blissful realists, saw on the horizon. Graff writes in his Literature Against Itself (1979), “The paradox of the sophisticated modern mind is that it is unable to believe in the objective validity of meanings yet is unable to do without meanings” (36-37), reflecting the same type of “as if” behavior that metamodernism postulates, not to mention Updike’s own “walking the straight line of paradox.” Graff continues, “The concept of demystification or demythologizing becomes meaningless unless there is a norm of reality against which to demystify and demythologize” (170). Eagleton agrees. In his After Theory (2003), he writes,

[The West] may be forced to reflect on the truth and reality of its existence, at a time when postmodern thought has grave doubts about both truth and reality. … Cultural theory must start thinking ambitiously once again—not so that it can hand the West its legitimation, but so that it can seek to make sense of the grand narratives in which it is now embroiled. (73)
All this is to say that these discussions have been percolating since the advent of postmodernism (and more like them since periodization began), and it is only now that authors are beginning to relinquish postmodern influence and authority in favor of a sincere, though qualified, realism.\footnote{There have been numerous books written against theory and postmodernism: Lentricchia’s \textit{After the New Criticism} (1980), Callinicos’ \textit{Against Postmodernism} (1989), Norris’s \textit{What’s Wrong with Postmodernism?} (1990), Eagleton’s \textit{The Illusion of Postmodernism} (1996), Harris’s collection \textit{Beyond Poststructuralism} (1996) and Patai and Corral’s collection \textit{Theory’s Empire} (2005), to name a few.}

It is to two exemplars of this “structure of feeling” that I shall now turn. Jonathan Franzen and Jeffrey Eugenides, both twenty-first century best-selling authors and winners of numerous literary awards,\footnote{Franzen most notably won the National Book Award for \textit{The Corrections} and Eugenides the Pulitzer Prize for \textit{Middlesex}.} present us, in the former’s \textit{The Corrections} and \textit{Freedom}, and the latter’s \textit{The Marriage Plot}, with turns away from and against postmodern aesthetics as described here in the introduction as well as the linguistic and philosophical tenets of post-structuralism (or, at the very least, the complaints against post-structuralism as articulated in the Davis passage above). That is, like the blissful realists before them, they return to notions of subjective autonomy, the necessity and inevitability of metanarratives, and the possibility of what Franzen calls “tragically realist,” a realism which critic Jeremy Green says “grows from the realization that life’s essential problems, the problems with which great literature and art have always been concerned themselves, cannot be overcome by new technologies or ideas” (94). Indeed, as Franzen tells us in his essay “Why Bother?”, “The shift from depressive realism to tragic realism—from being immobilized by darkness to being sustained by it—thus strangely seems to require believing in the possibility of a cure. But this ‘cure’ is anything but straightforward” (\textit{How} 93). This elusive “cure” is equivalent to the “as if” discussed above. “Hope,” the type discussed at the end of \textit{Augie} and \textit{Herzog} and throughout the \textit{Rabbit} tetralogy, the belief that the above conceptions are possible even if we know them not to be, is the essential character of this fiction. For his part,
Eugenides has stated in an interview, “You have a time like the 1920s when experimentalism was speaking to people, but then that becomes its own tired mode, so you go back to Bellow and a more traditional kind of novel. That’s what’s reigning now, until we get to a point where experimentalism will gain hold and become fresh again” (Schiff 108). What is “reigning now” is a return to blissful realism.

“Wishing to be infinite”: The Corrections

What is particularly different about Franzen’s writing? Why has he captured the modern imagination and received such critical and popular acclaim? First, his work as a storyteller has eclipsed the necessity of his writing as writer. He produces, self-consciously, rich readerly texts as opposed to writerly texts. Franzen, unlike his postmodernist and modernist precursors, is concerned not with writing about writing, or writing about language (at least not primarily). Instead, like his blissful realist predecessors, he writes about people and their universal problems; his characters are Lukácsian “social beings.” He does not, however, provide easy answers for what ails contemporary culture. As he puts it, “Expecting a novel to bear the weight of our whole disturbed society—to help solve our contemporary problems—seems to me a peculiarly American delusion.” And yet he, also like the blissful realists, attempts to hymn the world through language: “To write sentences of such authenticity that refuge can be taken in them: Isn’t this enough? Isn’t it a lot?” (84). He attempts to find Barthes’ “seam” between form and reality. His responsibility is not to social ills, but rather to words, words that “authentically” and accurately, dare we say “truthfully,” reflect reality. He desires “both the reconnection with a community of readers and writers, and the reclamation of a sense of history” (93). Furthermore, he is concerned with affect and emotion; he returns to a notion of bringing about emotion as a
means of connecting to (not alienating) the reader. We can see this in a sampling of some of the blurbs on the back cover of *The Corrections*. Various reviewers write: “Frighteningly, luminously authentic”; “An energetic, brooding, open-hearted, and funny novel”; “A book which is funny, moving, generous, brutal, and intelligent, and which poses the ultimate question, what life is for”; “Wondrously devastating,” a “heartbreaking beauty,” and “Brilliant … Almost unbearably lifelike.” Obviously these reviews have an emotional texture that point out the book’s ability to “move” the reader. Yet it is the first and last quotes which are particularly important: one which accords the book “frightening authenticity” and the other which describes it as “almost unbearably lifelike.” These reviews suggest the book has succeeded, for the most part, in telling the truth. An author of the realist vein is once again able to proclaim his grasp of the truth in the face of a critical culture that says there is no such thing.

Like Neiman, Franzen confronts the complaints against post-structuralism, as enumerated by Davis above, in *The Corrections*. Moreover, as a writer of fiction, Franzen is able to address these philosophical premises not only argumentatively but also through form, taking on postmodern aesthetics in the process. The main characters of the novel, the members of the Lambert family, are on the front lines of this battle. The patriarch of the family, Alfred, suffers from Parkinson’s disease and is a literal figure of the postmodern fracturing of subjectivity which postmodernism often advocates and defends. Alfred lived his life, much like, Harry, with a keen sense of “order.” The Deleuzian joy of the schizo consciousness is replaced here by the horror of losing contact with reality and losing control of what once was, for him, a coherent identity based on the mid-century tenets of work and family. “His affliction offended his sense of ownership,” Franzen tells us, and his “shaking hands belonged to nobody but him, and yet

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142 Recall Deleuze and Guattari’s famous statement that “a schizophrenic out for a walk is a better model than a neurotic lying on the analyst’s couch…” (qtd. in Seem, xvii).
they refused to obey him. They were like bad children” (67). In order to maintain a connection
with reality, Alfred “preferred more and more to spend his days down among the unchanging
historical roots of things” (66). His basement, where he makes scientific experiments, becomes a
refuge where his contact with the outside world is somewhat under his control and, as a Marxian
“base”ment, puts him in contact with the literal historical materiality of his life (containing, as it
does, objects from his past). His loss of physical control is mirrored by his loss of language.
Early in the story, “He began a sentence: ‘I am—’ but when he was taken by surprise, every
sentence became an adventure in the woods...” This sentence continues for an entire page, the
clauses broken only by semicolons, figuring on the page Alfred’s loss of syntactical control and
his control of symbolic order. The passage is reminiscent of the one toward the end of Run, in
which Harry finds himself lost in the woods, looking for some stable signifier to which he can
attach his consciousness in order to make sense of the world.143

[E]very sentence became an adventure in the woods; as soon as he could no
longer see the light of the clearing from which he’d entered, he would realize that
the crumbs he’d dropped for bearings had been eaten by birds, silent deft darting
things which he couldn’t quite see in the darkness but which were so numerous
and swarming in their hunger that it seemed as if they were the darkness, as if the
darkness weren’t uniform … and hence the panic of a man betrayed deep in the
woods whose darkness was the darkness of starlings blotting out the sunset or
black ants storming a dead opossum, a darkness that didn’t just exist but actively
consumed the bearings that he’d sensibly established for himself, lest he be lost;
but in the instant of realizing he was lost, time became marvelously slow and he
discovered hitherto unguessed eternities in the space between one word and the

next, or rather he became trapped in that space between words and could only stand and watch as time sped on without him… (11 italics original)

This Joycean reverie is one of horror. Alfred becomes “trapped” in the lexical gaps where signifier and signified do not link, and these fissures create an emptiness in which he can no longer express himself as a fully constituted “man,” but rather a “panic-stricken little boy” who cannot find his way.144 Indeed, as Alfred educates himself about the slow decay of his capacities that the disease will cause, he reads “[c]hapters devoted to the problems of swallowing; to the late torments of the tongue; to the final breakdown of the signal system … The betrayal had begun in Signals” (68). These “Signals” refer to his employment at a railroad company; a life which was dependent upon the “reading” of signals has now lost that very control. Where he once rode a train that depended on signals and accurate time, his ability to control, as he did each stop of the railway line, has disappeared, and he is stuck interminably between stations.

Alfred’s horror at his inability to connect signifier and signified is countered by his son, Chip, who appreciates these gaps: he is a professor of “Textual Artifacts,” that is, of post-structuralist theory. His belief and confidence in the tenets of deconstruction and late-feminism, indeed, all post-structuralist theory, begins to dwindle, however, with the discovery that his students, who once revered this theoretical practice as revolutionary and avant-garde, are now exhausted by it.145 Chip notices that “[e]ach year, it seemed, the incoming freshmen were a little more resistant to hardcore theory than they’d been the year before” (40). On the last day of classes, students in his “Consuming Narratives” class balk at the content and critical methodology that he

144 There is a clear connection here between Alfred’s lexical gaps and Derrida on the trace: “The trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general. The trace is the difference which opens appearance and signification. Articulating the living upon the nonliving in general, origin of all repetition, origin of ideality, the trace is not more ideal than real, not more intelligible than sensible, not more transparent signification than an opaque energy and no concept of metaphysics can describe it” (65 italics original). For Alfred as for Franzen, this space is a horrifying one.

145 In a nice contrast, Eugenides’ novel, discussed below, takes place in 1982, when post-structuralism was getting a foothold in English departments.
teaches. After telling the class to deconstruct an advertisement which, according to him, takes advantage of the emotional response to cancer in order to sell products, his best student, Melissa, tells him, “As if you care about any of our opinions unless they’re the same as yours” (42). Melissa ironically points out that the very material that he is teaching—material that ostensibly sheds light on how the media can “construct” consciousness and manipulate—is, in fact, just as manipulative as that which it deconstructs. Melissa continues,

[T]hat is such bullshit. … This whole class. … It’s just bullshit every week. It’s one critic after another wringing their hands about the state of criticism. Nobody can ever quite say what’s wrong exactly. … And it’s always the death of this and the death of that. And people who think they’re free aren’t “really” free. And people who think they’re happy aren’t “really” happy. And it’s impossible to radically critique society anymore, although what’s so radically wrong with society that we need such a radical critique, nobody can say exactly. (44)

Melissa, a young woman who does, in fact, seem to be “happy,” who is described as “loving herself” and loving her parents (59), has a point, and it is one that both Franzen and Eugenides make repeatedly explicit: after we are done deconstructing, what then? What is left when there is little left to critique or complain about, or alternatively, as Wallace points out above, the only thing remaining is critique? Apropos of Bellow’s critique of the wastelanders’ constant complaining, how do we go about reconstructing?

Throughout the remainder of Chip’s story in the novel Chip wrestles with his understanding of his discursive existence against that of the real, material world and tests the strength of his allegiance to his theoretical positions. He goes on a road trip with Melissa, sleeps with her as an ostensible revolt against modern mores (*Lolita*?), and is fired from his job as a result.
Subsequently, he is hired by a Lithuanian businessman to create a fraudulent website selling investment opportunities in his homeland that don’t exist: the buyers are promised the “appointment of selected local magistrates and judges!”, or an “honorary doctorate of Humane Letters from Vilnius University, founded in 1578!” , or “‘top-of-the-list’ priority for liver, heart, and cornea transplants at Vilnius’s famed Antakalnis Hospital!” (436-37), or they can invest in Lithuania’s vast supply of “sand and gravel” (113). Here “[Chip] felt as if, finally, here in the realm of pure fabrication, he’d found his métier” (436), defending a Baudrillardian conception of reality—one whose presence is “verified” online, but whose actual existence is nil. Gitanas, Chip’s employer, tells him, “The collective fungible assets of my country disappeared in yours without a ripple … A rich powerful country made the rules we Lithuanians are dying by. Why should we respect these rules?” Chip responds, “This is an essential Foucaultian question” (115), misinterpreting the very real effects that history has had on Gitanas’ and his countrymen and resituating them as theoretical premises. After moving to Lithuania, his attempt to be an eastern-European Robin Hood backfires, and he is forced out of the country when real people with real bullets force a coup. Chip’s conflict between theory and reality is hinted at earlier in the novel when, penniless after getting fired from his job, he must sell all of his theoretical books in order to maintain his relationship with a woman. He sells the books for close to nothing (late-capitalist critiques not fetching much on the open market): “But Jürgen Habermas didn’t have Julia’s long, cool, pear-tree limbs, Theodor Adorno didn’t have Julia’s grapy smell of lecherous pliability, Fred Jameson didn’t have Julia’s artful tongue” (92). When he tries to put into practice what he believes to be true (or untrue, as the case may be), he, like the protagonists of the blissful realists before him (Augie’s getting kicked in the head by his horse, for example), is forced to confront a cold reality that doesn’t align with his beliefs. In order to keep the pleasure
of the body, Chip must give up the pleasure of the mind. Indeed, as Jeremy Green writes, echoing the words of Bellow and Updike, “The difficulty for the [contemporary] novelist lies in the immense gulf between the experience, agency, and cognitive capacities of the subject, and the large structures and processes that make up the postmodern world” (188 italics mine). Chip and his father, Alfred, become opposing forces in an ontological game—Chip wants to believe in postmodern conceptions of reality (and is taught to do otherwise), and Alfred’s reality is quickly, and tragically, falling victim to a literal realization of those same conceptions.

This is not to say, however, that Franzen merely critiques post-structuralism and leaves it at that. To do this would make him guilty of the same offense to which he calls attention (critique without the suggestion of an alternative). Multiple passages in the novel confront many of the epistemological and ontological questions raised by postmodernism and post-structuralism in a less contradictory and more nuanced manner. In a section of the novel narrating Chip’s childhood and Alfred’s middle-age, Chip sits at the table, being punished for not eating his dinner (recall Alfred’s description of his Parkinson’s afflicted hands as “bad children,” marking Chip here as the postmodern/Parkinsonian precursor), and thinks as he plays with the underside of the dinner table:

At his farthest reach were baffles pierced by taut wire leading to pullable rings.
Complicated intersections of roughly finished blocks and angles were punctuated, here and there, by deeply countersunk screws, little cylindrical wells with scratchy turnings of wood fiber around their mouths, irresistible to the probing finger. Even more rewarding were the patches of booger he’d left behind during previous vigils. The dried patches had the texture of rice paper or fly wings. …
The longer Chipper felt this little kingdom of the underside, the more reluctant he became to lay eyes on it. Instinctively he knew that the visible reality would be puny. He’d see crannies he hadn’t yet discovered with his fingers, and the mystery of the realms beyond his reach would be dispelled, the screw holes would lose their abstract sensuality and the boogers would shame him, and one evening, then, with nothing left to relish or discover, he might just die of boredom. (264, 265)

This passage echoes the blissful realists’ understanding of their art and the purpose of the novel. The “underside,” this otherworldly realm of imagination, is separate from reality and yet a part of it. It is Chip’s touch (recall Herzog being “arrested by an odor” or him touching the “smooth and beautiful” basin, both of which trigger a subjective/objective meshing), in addition to his inability to see what’s on the underside, a breach which would tarnish the enchantment of his own subjective conception of it, which initiates and instigates the imagination. This is a combination of the tactile and the subjective in the same vein of that which has been discussed in previous chapters. Furthermore, Franzen, like Updike and Bellow, anthropomorphizes, giving us the “mouths” of the “cylindrical wells,” symbolizing a connection of the objective world and subjective consciousness. Neither the signifier nor the signified is privileged, and yet the telling of this scene, Franzen’s description of an imaginative moment where objectivity and subjectivity are complicated, celebrates both: the real, hard physicality of the objective world and Chip’s own subjective understanding of it.

Similarly, but in a different context, Alfred thinks after contemplating a jail cell (complete with electric chair) that his eldest son Gary has constructed out of popsicle sticks:

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See pgs. 84 and 93 above.
It came to him now, more forcefully than ever, that maybe every “real” thing in the world was as shabbily protean, underneath, as this electric chair. Maybe his mind was even now doing to the seemingly real hardwood floor on which he knelt exactly what it had done, hours earlier, to the unseen chair. Maybe a floor became truly a floor only in his mental reconstruction of it. The floor’s nature was to some extent inarguable, of course; the wood definitely existed and had measurable properties. But there was a second floor, the floor as mirrored in his head, and he worried that the beleaguered “reality” that he championed was not the reality of an actual floor in an actual bedroom but the reality of a floor in his head which was idealized and no more worthy, therefore, than one of Enid’s silly fantasies.

The suspicion that everything was relative. That the “real” and “authentic” might not be simply doomed but fictive to begin with. That his feeling of righteousness, of uniquely championing the real, was just a feeling. … And if the world refused to square with his version of reality then it was necessarily an uncaring world, a sour and sickening world, a penal colony, and he was doomed to be violently lonely in it. (272)

Indeed, Alfred’s existential angst here is amplified later with the onset of his Parkinson’s, where his own reality is violently torn from that which exists around him, and the postmodern possibilities of “relativity” and a “fictive” reality literally come to pass. Alfred’s life-long battle to wrestle and control the empirical world, to declare absolute truths and authentic realities, is

147 We are reminded here of Augie, who states, “But the real world is already created, and if your fabrication doesn’t correspond, then even if you feel noble and insist on there being something better than what people call reality, that better something needn’t try to exceed what, in its actuality, since we know it so little, may be very surprising” (412).
questioned, and the phenomenological understanding to which he comes is one where writing, and novel writing in particular, becomes a sanctuary of order and relief. That is, if the empirical and subjective worlds won’t square, if Alfred’s attempt to bridge the gap between his “ought” and the “is” is doomed to existential nightmare, it is in the novel where the “as if” can become “is.” As Franzen writes, “the glory of the [novel] consisted of its spanning of the expanse between private experience and public context” (How 65). If Chip and Alfred are meant to be dialectical opposites, here we find a correlation to the imbrication of bliss and realism, where we are meant to think of a middle ground between Chip’s celebration of the subject/object split (bliss) and Alfred’s fear of the same (realism).

Franzen’s concluding response to the loss of metanarrative that we see in postmodernity (as famously articulated by Lyotard), a loss that is coterminous with Alfred’s failure to pin down and interpret reality, comes from Chip’s employer. He tells Chip as his scheme begins to fall apart,

   How Lithuanian we all felt … when we could point to the Soviets and say: No, we are not like that. But to say, No, we are not free-market, no, we are not globalized—this doesn’t make me feel Lithuanian. This makes me feel stupid and Stone Age. So how do I be a patriot now? What positive thing do I stand for?

   What is the positive definition of my country? (444 italics original)

This is, of course, the question of the twenty-first century. Assuming, against Fukayama’s account, that we are not at the end of history, how does one define him or herself positively in a globalized society? With entropy and a loss of binary friction, how does one create identity in a world that either provides it for them or subsumes it immediately in mass culture? The answer for Franzen, for better or worse, is the connection one has with family. That is, in a fractured
world, the greatest unit of “heterotopia,” to use a Foucaultian term, is the family unit, or at the very least, the busy household as an exemplar of interconnection. Franzen tells us:

> The family was the house’s soul.
> The waking mind was like the light in a house.
> The soul was like the gopher in his hole.
> Consciousness was to brain as family was to house.

Aristotle: *Suppose the eye were an animal—sight would be its soul.*

To understand the mind you picture domestic activity, the hum of related lives on varied tracks, the hearth’s fundamental glow. You spoke of “presences” and “clutter” and “occupation.” Or, conversely, of “vacancy” and “shutting down.” Of “disturbance.” (267)

This “hum,” on “varied tracks,” like Augie’s “axial lines,” is the inter-subjective understanding and empathetic connection with other individuals, where the I/Thou dichotomy is breached. The house, then, becomes the figure for the novel, in which all of these characters are contained and explored.

**“An actual definite someone”: Freedom**

Terry Eagleton states in his *After Theory* (2003), “It is as though we must now sacrifice our identity to our freedom, which leaves open the question of who is left to exercise that freedom” (190). Not only is this a central question to the texts discussed throughout this dissertation, but it is—unsurprisingly—the question that lies at the center of Franzen’s latest novel, *Freedom* (2010). Franzen picks up on many of the central themes explored by both Bellow and Updike, particularly the question: what does a subject do in the face of either structural restraint or
boundless freedom? Through the main character, Patty Berglund, Franzen draws specific parallels to Updike’s Rabbit, as she was a college basketball star who often found transcendence while playing the game:

Patty herself was amazed at how slow-motion the bigger opposing players suddenly were, how easy it was to just reach out and steal the ball from them, and how many of her jump shots went in, game after game. Even when she was being double-teamed, which happened more and more often, she felt a special private connection with the basket, always knowing exactly where it was and always trusting that she was its favorite player on the floor, the best at feeding its circular mouth. (65)

Like Harry, Patty’s “feeding the circular” mouth here and her ability to slow time down during a game implies a subjective connection with the outside world, where she finds the subject/object dichotomy broken down in her interaction with the ball and the basket. And like Harry, the court is the only place where she finds this connection; all other experiences seem to be a battle between her subjective will and the restraints of reality or other subjects. As with Updike and other blissful realists, then, Franzen traces the battle between individual will and the world throughout the novel.

The novel tracks the lives of the Berglunds: Patty, her husband Walter, and their son Joey (their daughter Jessica is present in the text but not a focal point). We are given Patty’s history first, one which is immediately understood, like Rabbit, Augie, and Herzog, the invisible man,

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148 When recounting his basketball glory, Rabbit says, “I get this funny feeling I can do anything, just drifting around, passing the ball, and all of a sudden I know, you see, I know I can do anything. The second half I take maybe just ten shots, and everyone goes right in, not just bounces in, but doesn’t touch the rim, like I’m dropping stones down a well” (58). Franzen also tellingly admits, “I’d read Rabbit, Run at a certain point and spent a couple of weeks being highly alliterative before coming to my senses and realizing that not only was my alliteration bad, Updike’s was, too” (Burn 54).
and Humbert before her, as a battle between autonomy and structure. She is initially controlled by her parents (who, horrifyingly, convince her to “forget about” a rape since the guilty party is the son of a prominent politician), and then by her friend, Eliza, with whom she co-dependently experiences the vicissitudes of college life. Yet it is when she is finally able to break free of Eliza’s spell that she encounters her first taste of freedom, only to have the contingency of the world give her comeuppance for her presumption: “She was Free! She was Free! [of Eliza] … In her exhilaration, she ran so blindly that she didn’t see the black ice on the sidewalk until her left leg had slipped gruesomely out sideways behind her right leg and she’d ripped the shit out of her knee and was lying on the ground” (97). Patty’s freedom does not come without cost, and, again, like Augie, Herzog, and Harry before her, the world reminds her of its powerful and capricious role that it plays in the freedom of any of its subjects.

Patty’s freedom is next hemmed in by the love of two men: the dialectical pairing of Walter Berglund, who becomes her husband, and his best friend Richard Katz, Walter’s antithesis. Where Walter is disciplined and intellectually rigorous (“It was the way he knew how to live: with discipline and self-denial” [339]), Richard is a romantic—a musician and a wanderer. Indeed, “Richard was deeply read in certain areas … but he had no method, no system, and was genuinely in awe of Walter’s intellectual focus” (142). At one point in the novel Walter and Richard play chess, their styles of play indicative of their approaches to life:

“More of this clotting-of-the-middle shit,” Richard said. “You’re always tying up the middle. I hate that.”

“I’m a clotter of the middle,” Walter affirmed in a voice breathless with the suppression of competitive glee. ⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁹ This is clearly related to Updike’s conception of “middles” discussed above (see Chapter 2, pg. 109). Yet Walter’s middle-of-the-line lacks the dialectical charge which Updike explores. It is a static middle.
“It drives me crazy.”

“Well, because it’s effective,” Walter said.

“It’s only effective because I don’t have enough discipline to make you pay for it.”

“You play a very entertaining game. I never know what’s coming.” (166)

Franzen gives us these inverted mirrors as a way to explore the opposition that has been discussed above: that between restraint and control and unbridled freedom. Patty becomes the mediator between these two figures, trying both on for size (at one point in the novel she cheats on Walter with Richard) while she struggles with the battle between autonomy and freedom and subjection and control. On Walter and Patty’s first date, they see the film *The Fiend of Athens*, in which an otherwise self-controlled and conservative individual—one clearly meant to represent Walter—becomes, through a case of mistaken identity, the leader of a terrorist group and ends up dying for their cause. Walter and Patty’s respective responses/readings of the film illustrate their conceptions of life. While Walter reads the film as “a parable of Communism in postwar Greece,” intellectualizing the film and reading it through the social world instead of subjectively, Patty tells Walter:

I think it’s about how the main character never had a real life, because he was so responsible and timid, and he had no idea what he was actually capable of. He never really got to be alive until he was mistaken for the Fiend. Even though he only lived a few days after that, it was OK for him to die because he’d finally really done something with his life, and realized his potential. (104)

Patty’s reading is a personal one, and one which reflects her desire for Walter to come out of his intellectual shell and participate in the real world. Walter’s complaint that the film “wasn’t a
realistic story” (105) implies his own sense of pragmatism against Patty’s idealistic vision of possibility. Furthermore, Patty’s understanding of the film is reflective of a sincere belief that her vision aligns with the possibilities of implementing idealistic thinking; it points to a “new sincerity.” Suggesting Vermeulen and van den Akker’s thesis, she thinks “as if” things were possible; she envisions a kind of “idealistic pragmatism.” This is also illustrated by her musical preferences: “Patty was strictly a lyrics-and-stories gal—Walter had long ago given up on interesting her in Ligeti and Yo La Tengo—and never tired of cheating men and strong women and the indomitable human spirit” (160). This further echoes Franzen’s conception of the novel: “To try to connect with what might formerly have been called the soul, and what I might now describe as some interior locus of privacy and reflection where moments of personal significance are experienced: this, I think, is the job of the fiction writer” (“The Liberal Form” 36). That is, Patty’s interpretation over-and-above Walter’s more social/theoretical one, her’s that is less complicated but personally significant, implies a more honest, less theoretical approach to both fiction and critical work.

After experiencing the confines of a young marriage and raising two children, Patty’s life begins to afford her the freedom that she once desired, and this freedom becomes overwhelming. She can spend large amounts of time at the family’s summer cabin, alone: “There was her cherished freedom to go up to Nameless Lake for weeks at a time whenever she felt like it. There was a more general freedom that she could see was killing her but she was nonetheless unable to let it go” (190). She reflects, furthermore, that “[b]y almost any standard, she led a luxurious life. She had all day every day to figure out some decent and satisfying way to live, and yet all she ever seemed to get for all her choices and all her freedom was more miserable. The autobiographer is almost forced to the conclusion that she pitied herself for being so free”
This echoes the existential angst exhibited by Harry throughout the *Rabbit* series: he strives for freedom, but without structure, the world becomes a horrifying place. Formally, Franzen presents an interesting solution to this problem: a majority of the story is told through Patty’s autobiography, “Mistakes were Made: the Autobiography of Patty Berglund.” Allowing Patty to tell her own story, to give it “structure,” as it were, provides the kind of control that is otherwise absent from her life. Language becomes the arbiter and “prison house” (recall, above, Alfred’s reading of the popsicle stick prison cell) and, if in *The Corrections* the controlling figure of the novel was that of the house and the family, here it is a literal autobiography. The textual metacommentary is interesting: if Franzen argues, quoting Shirley Bryce Heath, that substantive works of fiction are “the only places where there was some civic, public hope of coming to grips with the ethical, philosophical and sociopolitical dimensions of life that were elsewhere treated so simplistically…the point is in the continuity, in the persistence of great conflicts” (*How* 82, 83), then this autobiography is in itself an attempt to “come to grips.” With the lack of substantive works of fiction, Patty (and Franzen) writes one herself.

Walter and Patty’s son provides an example of the same preoccupation, but from a youth’s perspective. The fact that his conflict is identical to his mother’s attests to Franzen’s understanding and appreciation of “the persistence of great conflicts” across generations. Joey illustrates the freedom afforded to youth today (at least as Franzen understands it). He moves out of the house at fifteen, and is rarely in contact with his parents after this: “He’d asked for his freedom, they’d granted it, and he couldn’t go back now” (257). But Joey’s freedom, like Patty’s, and, eventually, like Richard’s (after a successful tour with his band which garners him a Grammy nomination, Richard “was at once freer than he’d been since puberty and closer than he’d ever been to suicide. In the last days of 2003, he went back to building decks” [205]),
becomes a burden. Joey, like Chip in *The Corrections*, becomes involved in an underhanded scheme to buy parts for outdated military vehicles used in the war in Iraq. Upon inspection, he sees that the parts are unusable, but his partner tells him to send them regardless of condition. The vehicles break down, and, with no viable parts to fix them, men are wounded and killed. Joey is forced to face the fact that the structural moves that he has been making—ones that allow for a monetary freedom without any real consequences—have come back to haunt him. Like Chip, Joey is forced to face the consequences of reality and the conceptual butting heads.

Similarly, in a discussion with his friend Jonathan’s father (a powerful official in Washington D.C.), the father tells Joey, bastardizing Plato’s allegory of the cave, “Our modern media are very blurry shadows on the wall, and the philosopher has to be prepared to manipulate these shadows in the service of a greater truth” (284). Joey responds, “But it seems like once we start lying about Iraq, we’re not better than the Arabs with the lie about no Jews being killed on 9/11” (285). Jonathan’s father responds, “Freedom is a pain in the ass. And that’s precisely why it’s so imperative that we seize the opportunity that’s been presented to us this fall. To get a nation of free people to let go of their bad logic and sign on with better logic, by whatever means are necessary” (285). The father outlines the American battle between the freedom of the individual and how that freedom can be taken advantage of (or misguided) when given incorrect information. In other words, like the blissful realists before him, Franzen here calls for a dialectical energy between the empirical reality of situations (contingency) and the desire for freedom (autonomy). As Walter tells Richard, “The reason the system can’t be overthrown in this country … is all about freedom. The reason the free market in Europe is tempered by socialism is that they’re not so hung up on personal liberties there” (384). Personal liberty becomes a locus of political manipulation: when it is threatened, people will ironically submit to
anything that purports to defend their personal liberties. As Walter points out, Europeans understand that there is always a required metanarrative; it is merely a matter of having a choice or being forced to choose.

Joey’s necessary recognition of the limits the material world puts on freedom is redoubled during an encounter with his ideal woman, Jonathan’s sister, Jenna. Despite the fact that Joey had recently, though secretly, married his high school girlfriend Connie, he goes on a vacation with Jenna in hopes of sleeping with her (another expression of his “freedom”). Like Harry before him, however (and Humbert post-coitus), the ideal is not exactly what he had envisioned. Franzen writes that Joey, as he tries to realize the ideal, “couldn’t see her face in the dark, and when he couldn’t see it he had only the memory, the idea, of its beauty. He kept telling himself that he was finally getting Jenna, that this was Jenna, Jenna, Jenna. But in the absence of visual confirmation all he had in his arms was a random sweaty attacking female.” Jenna’s ideality as distinct from her physicality here is amplified by the Stein-like repetition of her name, where the individual Jenna becomes the word “Jenna,” and with each repetition the ideal is further removed for the original. Her physicality, however, will not be denied. Turning on the lights, he is unable to perform. Instead, “Jenna’s allure had always largely consisted of the impossibility of imagining that he could have her. Now that she was a tired, drunk, bleeding person crouching between his legs and doing businesslike oral work, she could have been almost anybody, except Connie” (456 italics mine). The reality of Jenna, like the reality of Cindy in Rest, destroys any kind of transcendent notion he has of her. This, and the recognition of the real consequences of what he had done with the truck parts, forces him to accept the empirical world outside of his solipsistic desire.
In a rather disturbing turn of events, Joey had accidentally swallowed his wedding ring prior to the vacation with Jenna and had been waiting for the ring to pass. When it finally does, he must sift through his own feces in order to retrieve it. After doing so, he thinks,

He could see this person so clearly, it was like standing outside himself. He was the person who’d handled his own shit to get his wedding ring back. This wasn’t the person he’d thought he was, or would have chosen to be if he’d been free to choose, but there was something comforting and liberating about being an actual definite someone, rather than a collection of contradictory potential someones.

(459)

In a Kristevean turn, it takes the touching of his own shit, of the Real and abject of his own person, of passing the ring through his physical body and finding it in his own excrement, that allows him to drop the constructive contrivances to which he had thus far submitted. Joey’s “freedom” had really been, like the narrator of Invisible Man, merely a performative show. He was ready now to invest sincerely in the woman he loved and the life that they both should lead.

Walter, too, as his marriage begins to break apart, is given more and more freedom both personally and professionally. He thinks, “There was no controlling narrative: he seemed to himself a purely reactive pinball in a game whose only object was to stay alive for staying alive’s sake. … How to live?” (338, 339). To be sure, Walter is troubled by the postmodern subjective fracturing which Franzen, the blissful realists, and other critics of postmodernity decry. He continues:

This is what was keeping me awake at night. … This fragmentation. Because it’s the same problem everywhere. It’s like the internet, or cable TV—there’s never any center, there’s no communal agreement, there’s just a trillion little bits of
distracting noise.\textsuperscript{150} All the real things, the authentic things, the honest things are dying off. Intellectually and culturally, we just bounce around like random billiard balls, reacting to the latest random stimuli” (232).\textsuperscript{151}

This reflects the loss of subjective surety that has been described in the previous chapters. Here Franzen is responding to a (post)modern notion of the inability of the subject to find a center, to find control, in the midst of all of the distraction that is provided daily. But Franzen is careful not to adopt what would be the postmodern equivalent to Bellow’s wastelander position, what we might call a “no-man’s-lander” position, one content with irony, cynicism, and apathy.

Franzen writes:

\begin{quote}
The world of the present is a world in which the rich lateral dramas of local manners have been replaced by a single vertical drama, the drama of regional specificity succumbing to a commercial generality. … To engage with it … is to risk writing fiction that makes the same point over and over: technological consumerism is an infernal machine, technological consumerism is an infernal machine… (\textit{How 69})
\end{quote}

And though here we see a specific complaint along these lines—Franzen often returns to Delillo-like critiques of late capitalism—it is to Franzen’s credit that he does not return to it often.

Rather, he returns to a positive investment, as the blissful realists before him, in both art and the concepts of hope and love. Tellingly, the novel closes much like \textit{Herzog}. Just as Herzog, by writing his letters, has written himself out of the structural and discursive by the end of that

\textsuperscript{150} Similarly, Bellow writes in his 1990 essay “The Distracted Public,” “TV allows your isolated American to think that he participates in the life of the entire country. It does not actually place him in a community, but his heart is warmed with the suggestion (on the whole false) that there is a community somewhere in the vicinity and that his atomized consciousness will be drawn back toward the whole. But through the promise of unity it leads us into wild diversity” (\textit{It All Adds Up} 159).

\textsuperscript{151} Tellingly, this “pinballing” and billiard ball bouncing is doubled by a game of “Cowboy” that Joey plays with Jonathan’s father, who defeats both Joey and his son handily. He is better at controlling the chaos than others, even if that control is used to nefarious ends.
novel, so, too, has Patty. When Walter initially finds and reads Patty’s first autobiography mentioned above, in which her betrayal with Richard is disclosed, he begins quoting her transgressions. Patty responds, “Ohhh … please don’t quote me. Call me a whore, call me the nightmare of your life, but please try not to quote me. Have that little bit of mercy, if you can” (490). Walter responds, “You let him read things about me you never would have let me read,” and then “He kicked the manuscript into a white flurry…” (492). Walter’s response implies he is more angry that Patty allowed Richard to read the manuscript than he is about the sexual transgression—Patty let Richard “read” Walter in a way that Walter never has been able to “read” himself. That is, Walter is most angry that Richard has a greater understanding of Patty’s conception of Walter than Walter does. His “kicking the manuscript into a white flurry,” reminiscent of Ellison’s “Bits of paper whirled up in the passage of air”\(^{152}\) and in the same figurative vein, suggests Walter’s “fractured” self discussed above. Patty’s discursive control of Walter on those pages is more control than Walter has of his own subjectivity. There is also a strange disconnect here between Patty’s desire for a structural center in the midst of her most “free” moments (when she cheats on Walter, when she and Walter are not getting along), and her desire for him not to use that structure (the autobiography) against her. Language, it seems, has become both the method in which she can control her life (and his) and yet not control it at all. Or rather, a real connection with Walter would be preferable to the discursive one she has via her autobiography; as Ellison’s invisible narrator teaches us, fiction and narrative can only accomplish so much. This real connection is realized at the end of the novel when, after six years apart, Patty shows up on Walter’s doorstep with another autobiography, and waits outside of his door in sub-freezing temperatures. Walter responds to the new piece of writing by yelling at her, “I don’t want this! … I don’t want to read you! I want you to take this and get in your car

\(^{152}\) See Chapter 3, pg. 196.
and warm up, because it’s fucking freezing out here” (592 italics original). Walter then has to
undress her, undresses himself, and uses his own body heat to keep her from freezing. The novel
ends with the two of them rediscovering themselves, naked, as he pulls her back from near death,
and, via the sensual, they discover something about each other above and beyond the symbolic.
As she recovers consciousness she states, “It’s me, just me.” The brevity of the statement it akin
to Herzog’s silence at the end of Bellow’s novel, as both characters have achieved some greater
sense of being within and yet beyond language. This brings us full circle back to Lukács, who
writes in The Theory of the Novel:

Since human nature is not finally separable from social reality, each narrative
detail will be significant to the extent that it expresses the dialectic between man-
as-individual and man-as-social-being. It is these tensions and contradictions
both within the individual, and underlying the individual’s relation with his fellow
human beings … that must form the subject-matter of contemporary realism. (75
italics mine)

And it is this tension that is underscored at the close of the novel, as both Walter and Patty, free
of any discursive relationship (one that would be equated with an “empty gesture” by Lukács),
discover their relation with their fellow human being.

“It was maybe true, what he said, but it shouldn’t have been”: The Marriage Plot

Eugenides’ 2011 novel is at once more and less complicated than either of Franzen’s. Moreso
in that Eugenides, in near postmodern-pastiche fashion, plays with the novel genre and its
nineteenth-century convention, the marriage plot. It is, as it were, a twenty-first century Austen
novel. (The main character, Madeleine, \cite{footnote153} falls in love with the wrong man, Leonard, at the expense of the better man, Mitchell. But this is complicated by the fact that Leonard, the wild romantic—the Willoughby, as it were—is only wild because he is manic depressive. When he is on his medication, he is often insufferable. This is further complicated by the ending, in which Leonard and Madeleine are granted an annulment, but Madeleine ends up happily alone instead of with Mitchell). Yet it is also a less nuanced, more explicit critique of postmodernism in favor of the new sincerity being discussed here. That is, the novel, I would argue, is to be read in earnest as a love story.

The novel begins with a classic Quixote-esque novelistic trope: Madeleine has been reading too many novels, a collection that has made her “Incurably Romantic.” Indeed, Madeleine’s collection includes “a lot of Dickens, a smidgen of Trollope, along with good helpings of Austen, George Eliot, and the redoubtable Brontë sisters,” along with a “first edition of [Updike’s] Couples … which she was using now to provide textual support in her English honors thesis on the marriage plot” (3). This love of the novel, and particularly the nineteenth-century heavyweights, is pitted very early here against the rise of literary theory and post-structuralism. We are told that Madeleine is taking “Semiotics 211,” a class which “deconstructed the very notion of love” (19). Eugenides is unsparing in his critique of the postures of early post-structuralists (the action takes place in 1982). We are introduced to Derrida thusly: “When Madeleine asked what the book was about, she was given to understand by Whitney that the idea of a book being ‘about’ something was exactly what this book was against, and that, if it was ‘about’ anything, then it was about the need to stop thinking of books as being about things” (23). Eugenides continues, “Almost overnight it became laughable to read writers like Cheever or Updike…” (24), a notion which reflects the aim of my project here to recuperate and reinvigorate

\footnote{153 Even the name here, which opens the novel, seems indebted to Proust, extending the literary genealogy.}
the discussion of those very authors. In the class, when the students are asked to introduce themselves, the most vigorous defender of post-structuralism states, “Um, let’s see. I’m finding it hard to introduce myself, actually, because the whole idea of social introductions is so problematized. Like, if I tell you that my name is Thurston Meems and that I grew up in Stamford, Connecticut, will you know who I am?” In response, Eugenides writes, “When it was the turn of the boy next to Madeleine, he said in a quiet voice that he was a double major (biology and philosophy) and had never taken a semiotics course before, that his parents had named him Leonard, that it had always seemed pretty handy to have a name, especially when you were being called to dinner, and that if anyone wanted to call him Leonard he would answer to it” (25). Thurston is characterized as the post-structuralist poser, while Leonard is the authentic individual. Indeed, Leonard’s response reflects that of the blissful realists in regard to the necessity of reality and the necessity of a discursive component which, real or not, must be predicated on an “as if” basis for the world to function. The addition of postmodern and post-structuralist conceptions of ontology, then, take the blissful realists’ concern with the hermeticism of modernism and apply it to the deconstruction of postmodernism.

Eugenides’ critique continues throughout the first half of the book. In a different class, Leonard defends the sentimental and affective, and Thurston responds, “Books aren’t about ‘real life.’ Books are about other books. … [H]ow do you write about something real and painful—like suicide—when all of the writing that’s been done on that subject has robbed you of any originality of expression?” In response, Eugenides tells us that “What Thurston was saying seemed to Madeleine both insightful and horribly wrong. It was maybe true, what he said, but it shouldn’t have been” (28). This is crucial to understanding both the connection of these

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154 We are reminded here of Stern’s description of the necessity of realism, one that “doesn’t ask whether the world is real, but it occasionally asks what happens to persons who think it isn’t” (31). See the Introduction here, pg. 16.
contemporary authors to the blissful realists and their understanding of their own position in regard to aesthetic purpose. Eugenides seems to say that it is not that Thurston is entirely wrong, here, and not as if Leonard is entirely right. The balance that Eugenides attempts to find, between showing his participation in the genealogy of the novel and separating himself from current trends, indicates a commitment to the realism of the novel and the understanding, one that has been part of the novel’s heritage from its inception, that we are behaving and creating worlds “as if” they were true. Madeleine’s “It was maybe true, what he said, but it shouldn’t have been” is indicative of the necessity of an acceptance of many of postmodernism’s and post-structuralism’s discoveries; the problematics of linear history, the construction and lack of authenticity of the subject, and the conception of “reality” itself are accepted, but moved beyond “as if” they were not true.

Eugenides continues to touch on many of the post-structuralist tenets that he hopes to supersede. Madeleine’s first college boyfriend, we learn, “On the wall of his living room … had painted the words Kill the Father. Killing the father was what, in Billy’s opinion, college was all about.” Billy asks Madeleine, “Who’s your father? … Is it Virginia Woolf? Is it Sontag?”, and she responds, “In my case … my father really is my father” (31), undermining Billy’s theoretical move. Furthermore, Madeleine believes that while most post-structuralists “wanted to demote the author,” she “was perfectly happy with the idea of genius… [she] championed a virtue that had fallen out of esteem: namely, clarity” (42). And Leonard, her male counterpart, tells her, “I didn’t get interested in philosophy because of linguistics. I got interested for the eternal verities. To learn how to die, et cetera. Now it’s more like, ‘What do we mean when we say we die?’ ‘What do we mean we mean when we say we die?’” (46). At one point, to escape the difficulty of Derrida’s prose, Madeleine runs to a novel and, “How wonderful it was when one sentence
followed logically from the sentence before! What exquisite guilt she felt, wickedly enjoying narrative! … Something was going to happen to [the characters] in a place resembling the world” (47). Even Mitchell, the third character within the marriage plot, shows resistance to this type of thinking. When he is visiting Paris, he feels guilty for reading Hemingway in front of a feminist (who considers Hemingway “a misogynist, a homophobe, a repressed homosexual, a murderer of wild animals” [140]), but, “Under the pretense of becoming a critic of patriarchy, Claire uncritically accepted every fashionable theory that came her way” (143). All this is to say that the characters’ critique of post-structuralism here aligns with many of the critiques catalogued by Davis above, and are critiques that are being taken seriously in contemporary literature.

If, on the one hand, Leonard presents us with a brilliant mind who is a scientist, Mitchell, on the other, is representative of a turn toward religious truth and the quest to find the answer to large questions in the postmodern absence of metanarrative. Mitchell, also a brilliant mind, goes on a tour of the Middle East and India in an effort to find answers to the eternal questions. He “wanted to know why he was here, and how to live. It was the perfect way to end your college career. Education had finally led Mitchell out into life” (96). We are reminded here, again, of Lukács’ “What is man?” (Realism 19), and his “The voyage is completed: the way begins” (Theory 73). Mitchell has completed his theoretical training and is now forced out into the world to answer the former question. In order to help answer these questions, he turns to religion, as he was “aware of the centrality of religion in human history and, more important, of the fact that religious feeling didn’t arise from going to church or reading the Bible but from the most private interior experiences, either of great joy or of staggering pain” (93).

It is at this point that the story turns away from deconstruction and toward a complication of the traditional marriage plot, becoming less germane to the argument here. The novel does close,
however, with something akin to the aesthetic and personal philosophy of both Bellow and Updike. Mitchell tells us, “It was something every child knew how to do, maintain a direct and full connection with the world. Somehow you forgot about it as you grew up, and had to learn it again” (314). Indeed, this seems parallel to Bellow’s understanding of “axial lines” in *Augie* and Herzog’s state at the end of that novel, not to mention the connection that Harry searches for throughout Updike’s tetralogy. Indeed, this is, perhaps, a good place to close, with the words of Bellow, who brings us back to the beginning:

> What is square one? Square one is the square in which you resume your first self, with its innate qualities. You recover (or almost recover) your original sense of life and your original powers of judgment return. Lucky to have a second opportunity. … When the noise dies down you’ll find yourself with the “I” you first knew when you came to know that you were a self—an event which occurs quite early in life. And that first self is embraced with a kind of fervor, excitement, love—and knowledge! Your formal schooling is really a denaturing of that first self. (Cronin 213-14)

As I hope this project has shown, blissful realism attempts to rediscover that “first self”—a condition in which the subjective and objective world are in direct conversation and celebration of one another.
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