DISCOURSE, IDEOLOGY, AND SUBJECTIVITY
IN THE MODERNIST NOVEL

by

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DEDICATION

To my parents –

For your unwavering love and support; you have made all this possible.

To Guy, Martha, Katie, and Cindy –

For accepting me without hesitation or pretense.

To Nicole –

This achievement, like every other, is not mine, but *ours*.

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ABSTRACT

This project challenges the conventional assumption that representations of subjectivity in modernist fiction, while innovative in their own right, were ultimately limited by overriding concerns with determinacy, order, and coherence. This view has been widely adopted by postmodern critics, many of whom rely upon a "straw-man modernism" (a term I borrow from Marjorie Perloff) in order to legitimize postmodernism as a descriptive artistic category and substantiate the existence of a post/modern divide. This project argues that in fact representations of subjectivity in modernist fiction anticipate postmodern theory in ways that have not been sufficiently explored and that highlight continuity rather than rupture. It analyzes six novels published between 1904 and 1941 that articulate subjectivity as "in process," a term used by Julia Kristeva to describe identity as constituted by linguistic, ideological, and social processes rather than ontological fixities.

I argue that the central modality in each of these novels is deconstructive, in the sense that each uncovers the processes through which the subject is interpellated into larger discourses oscillating between order and disjunction. Each novel, therefore, represents subjectivity as radically indeterminate, decentered, and fragmented. Ultimately, this project suggests that from its earliest moment modernist fiction was concerned with the "crisis of representation" that would not be theorized until well after modernism had been declared over. This reading not only calls into question the notion that postmodernism represents an overcoming of modernism's alleged limitations, but reappraises modernist fiction in its own right as the seminal expression of twentieth-

century subjectivity. Taken together, the novels that comprise this study reflect the complexity and multiformity of modernist fiction's concern with subjectivity as it intersects with issues of ideology, race, spatiality, violence, and other factors. The version of modernist fiction thus arrived at looks much different than the one described by Hassan, McHale, and many other postmodern critics. The authors covered make no attempts to envision new coherent versions of subjectivity or recover a challenged or lost transcendental ego. They not only depict and confront the fragmented self, but maintain an intentional open-enedness that explicitly rejects any sense of closure.

INTRODUCTION

In his seminal book *A Genealogy of Modernism* (1986), Michael Levenson describes the term "modernism" as "at once vague and unavoidable. Anything more precise would exclude too much too soon; anything more general would be folly. As with any blunt instrument, the best that can be done is to use it for the rough tasks and to reserve the finer work for finer tools. As a rough way of locating our attention, 'modernism' will do" (vii). In fact, however, "modernism" has not done. The subtitle of Levenson's book, *A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908-1922*, suggests one of the major reasons why, which is that the field of modernism was commonly perceived throughout the twentieth century as a coterie of Anglo-European critics studying an elite group of Anglo-European writers. In other words, it has long been viewed, as Peter Nicholls has called it, as "a sort of monolithic ideological formation" (vii). For many, the term "modernism" itself, particularly in literary studies, has been seen as a smokescreen for the "high modernism" of Joyce, Eliot, Pound, and other giants of early twentieth-century Anglo-European literature. Thus, while the study of modernism has flourished throughout the latter half of the twentieth-century and into the twenty first, it has also accrued a stigma that critics are still struggling to shed.

Aside from its own internal problematics, the field has for several decades had to contend with the massive wave of postmodernism and its attendant theoretical force. This is truer now than ever, as John T. Matthews has recently attested: "By this point in the early twenty-first century, students of culture rarely encounter terms like 'modern,' 'modernist,' and 'modernity' without a familiar prefix: '*post*modern,' 'postmodernist,'

'postmodernity'" (282). But this trend has been unfolding for at least the past two decades and the "problem," such as it is for the field of modernist studies, has been addressed before. The problem, in other words, is not a new one. Consequently, post-Levenson attempts at defining and delineating modernism have become more inclusive in order to accommodate more texts, more ideas, and more disciplinary possibilities. In *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (1995), a landmark in modernist studies, Nicholls addresses this underlying factor in his own approach:

> When I began work on this book, postmodernism was in its heyday. The plural form of my title – Modernisms – thus had something of a polemical intent, since so much of the debate about the 'post' hinged upon what Marjorie Perloff has called a 'straw-man modernism', one characterized primarily by its commitment to reactionary 'grand narratives' of social and psychic order. (vii)

This "straw-man modernism," in other words, has had the dual effect of legitimizing postmodernism as a descriptive aesthetic category, while simultaneously minimizing modernism's heterogeneity. This concept of straw-man modernism is one that I would like to expand upon and continually return to throughout in order to help frame my own particular reading of modernist fiction in relation to notions of a post/modern divide. Fortunately, as a result of Nicholls' and more recent efforts, the landscape of modernist studies has considerably diversified and is more expansive in our present moment than it was a quarter century, or even fifteen years ago.[1] In fact, the term "modernist studies"

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[1] In a follow-up to their seminal book *Bad Modernisms* (2006), Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz remark that "were one seeking a single word to sum up transformations in modernist literary scholarship over the past decade or two, one could do worse than light on *expansion*" (737). In tracing this expansion, they address the insular focus of twentieth-century modernist criticism: "Meanwhile, interrogations of the

itself only recently gained wide recognition with the establishment of the Modernist

Studies Association, now the flagship organization in the field, in 1998. While modernist

studies has had to battle for relevance in the past several decades, its rebranding has been

essential to its resurgence. Nicholls' pluralization, I would argue, encapsulates the

essence of this rebranding.[2] The shift to a broader conception of "modernisms,"

"modernist studies," and, most recently, "new modernist studies" and "global

modernisms" suggests a field that has become far more inclusive, diverse, and robust.[3]

The rebranding and reshaping of modernist studies has led to a number of new

and compelling critical avenues. Between 2009 and 2013, for example, Oxford

University Press published in three volumes *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of*

Modernist Magazines, which reflects a bourgeoning interest in archival work. The mining

of various magazines and other publications from the late nineteenth and early twentieth

century has led to a renewed focus on modernism's relationship to mass and popular

culture. While these studies have been compelling in their own right, they have also been

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politics, historical validity, and aesthetic value of exclusive focus on the literatures of Europe and North America have spurred the study (in the North American academy) of texts produced in other quarters of the world or by hitherto little-recognized enclaves in the privileged areas. In addition to these temporal and spatial expansions, there has been what we are calling here a vertical one, in which once quite sharp boundaries between high art and popular forms of culture have been reconsidered; in which canons have been critiqued and reconfigured; in which works by members of marginalized social groups have been encountered with fresh eyes and ears; and in which scholarly inquiry has increasingly extended to matters of production, dissemination, and reception" (737-738). Their article, "The New Modernist Studies," from *PMLA* 123.3 (2008), provides an excellent survey of the ever-changing landscape of modernist studies in the early twenty-first century.

[2] Although it should be mentioned that the general notion of "modernisms" in varying contexts dates back at least to Frank Kermode's use of the term in *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (1967).

[3] I would suggest the following as a broadly-conceived timeline of major moments in the "pluralization" of modernist studies:

1995: Peter Nicholls' *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*
1998: Founding of the Modernist Studies Association
2006: Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz's *Bad Modernisms* (which coined the phrase "new modernist studies")
2012: Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough's *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*

invaluable in broadening the context for the study of more "traditional" modernist texts as well. Another popular recent trend explores the connection between modernism and celebrity culture. Jonathan Goldman and Aaron Jaffe's recent collection *Modernist Star Maps* (2010) has been especially significant here. These and other newly-forged avenues of critical investigation have reinvigorated a field that for much of its existence has been rather rigid in its focus on canonical authors, texts, and ideas. But with these new trajectories being grounded to a large extent in a new historical paradigm, some have wondered whether the new modernist studies have undervalued what was once one of its hallmarks.

In the introduction to his recent edited collection *Modernism and Theory* (2009), Stephen Ross argues that "theory has been marginalized in the new modernist studies," perhaps because "it is seen as an outdated instrument whose usefulness has been superseded by a return to the archive and historicism" (1). A survey of recent notable contributions to the field lends credence to Ross's suggestion. This is not to say that work rooted in critical theory is not being done in modernist studies, but it is fair to say that the underlying current in the field has been broadly new historical in character. While the recent new historical bent has caused us to rethink the utility of archival material in understanding modernism and its context, Ross makes a convincing case that the character of modernist writing itself calls for a deeply theoretical approach that might supplement historicist studies:

> Phenomenology, existentialism, third-wave feminism, queer studies, postcolonial theory, Lacanian psychoanalysis, structuralist Marxism and neo- or post-Marxism, structuralism and post-structuralism do not merely

parallel the development of modernism, but partake of it. Theory

continues modernism's concerns, aesthetics, and critical energies. The

same cannot be said of any other literary movement: the affinities between

modernism and theory are wide, deep, and pervasive—and they demand

exploration. There is a massive amount of work to be done here, extending

the boundaries of modernism even further, and enhancing our

understanding of the unique affinity between modernism and theory. If we

are truly to understand either of them, modernism and theory simply must

be thought together. (2)

Ross's introduction is a call to arms of sorts that maps out a new direction for the role of

theory in the new modernist studies.[4] We should not, as he emphasizes, view the project

of incorporating critical theory in modernist studies as somehow superior to any other

methodological or critical approach. Rather, critical theory can help us understand

modernism's deep complexities and philosophical influences in unique and important

ways. Broadly speaking, this dissertation project intends to make a contribution to the

task that Ross outlines. It is not interested in "reintegrating theory into modernist studies

in a purely instrumental fashion" (15)—an approach that Ross rejects—but in exploring

how theoretically informed close readings of modernist texts may provide us with new

ways of framing one of modernism's most ambitious concerns: Its representation of

human subjectivity.

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[4] Ross closes by arguing that "our task now is to explore the occulted relationship between modernism and theory as aspects of the twentieth century's massive cultural upheavals. We must approach the problematic of modernism/theory from a range of perspectives, including the institutional, historical, and discursive constructions of them as distinct fields. Additionally, we must push beyond disciplinary squabbles to ask not just what modernism can tell us about theory and what theory can tell us about modernism, but also what the nexus modernism/theory can tell us about the twentieth century's preoccupations, tendencies, triumphs, and failures" (15).

Such a task necessarily involves a heavy theoretical investment, but it must also be firmly grounded in modernism's historical and cultural context. Following Ross, I would argue that this context cannot be separated from the theoretical work necessary in unpacking it. In their introductory chapter to *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*, Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane write of modernism:

> It is the art consequent on Heisenberg's 'Uncertainty Principle,' of the destruction of civilization and reason in the First World War, of the world changed and reinterpreted by Marx, Freud and Darwin, of capitalism and constant industrial acceleration, of existential exposure to meaninglessness and absurdity. It is the literature of technology. It is the art consequent on the dis-establishing of communal reality and conventional notions of causality, on the destruction of traditional notions of the wholeness of individual character, on the linguistic chaos that ensues when public notions of language have been discredited and when all realities have become subjective fictions. Modernism is then the art of modernization – however stark the separation of artist from society may have been, however oblique the artistic gesture he has made. (27)

This context of modernism is well known, but I quote Bradbury and McFarlane here in order to call attention to the extent to which modernism must grapple with profoundly inscrutable philosophical and theoretical problems in order to meaningfully respond to the complexities and challenges of its historical moment. To expand upon what Ross has said above, I would insist that modernism by necessity had to speak through the language of theory; it had to push the boundaries of the contemporary understanding of biology,

society, economics, and the notion of being itself in order to properly make something "new" of what had come before it.

In considering the historical and cultural characteristics of modernism as it is described above, it is not difficult to deduce that what we might broadly call "postmodern theory"[5] has lent itself particularly well to the study of modernist texts. But while critics have demonstrated time and again that postmodern theory can be made readily applicable to modernist literature, not enough attention has been paid to the prescience of modernist writers in articulating postmodern notions of subjectivity before postmodern theory itself envisioned them. One overarching goal of this project is to show that reading modernism through a postmodern theoretical lens transforms the way we view modernism as a distinct aesthetic category. To be clear, my goal here is not ultimately to enter into the fray of Hassan, Lyotard, Jameson, Harvey, and so many others who have sought for ways to draw distinctions between modernism and postmodernism as artistic categories, historical markers, and so on. For my part, I believe that this conversation is important and necessary—and also that the issue of periodization/categorization will never be resolved. My intention, rather, is to offer a critical reading of modernist fiction that allows us to view it in its own right as the birthplace of a unique aesthetic and narrative

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[5] I have chosen to use the designation "postmodern theory" for the sake of clarity. In doing so, I follow Stephen Best and Douglas Kellner, who in their book *Postmodern Theory* (1991) use the term to encompass not only theorists of postmodernism, as we might call them, like Lyotard, Jameson, Baudrillard, and others, but also those who have been instrumental in conceptualizing various aspects of postmodernity; this would include major figures like Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari, and Lacan. It also includes major theoretical movements of the late-twentieth century like psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, post-Marxism, queer theory, and so on. In other words, while someone like Jacques Derrida may not be primarily interested in postmodernism per se, his work may hold great value to the theoretical discourse surrounding it.

subjectivity that defined and set the stage for philosophical explorations of the subject to follow.[6]

In doing so, I intend to challenge what I argue is one the most egregious examples of "straw-man modernism," which is the notion that, as one critic has put it, "modernist experiments in narrative form [irony, impressionism, fragmentation, stream of consciousness, etc.] often take as their goal the reshaping of narrative to a newly-envisioned subjectivity" (Katz 232). My issue here is with the latter part of this statement, that modernist writers seek to reshape "narrative to a newly-envisioned subjectivity." Such a statement suggests that modernist writers are interested in recovering a lost sense of order which, while true in some cases, does not do justice to the full complexity of modernist fiction and the hesitation of many modernist texts to accept traditional notions of "order" or "coherence" at all. In fact, I will go on to argue, many modernist texts—both stylistically and thematically—challenge notions of "meaning" in ways that remarkably anticipate postmodern theory and, in doing so, suggest that many modernist writers are actually more interested in "deconstructing" prevailing notions of subjectivity than they are in "reconstructing" or "reshaping" them.

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[6] I should also point out by way of clarification that I find the works of critics like Fredric Jameson, David Harvey, Perry Anderson, and others to be invaluable in conceptualizing postmodernism. Their particular strength, I would argue, is that they begin by identifying historical, cultural, economic, and other factors in drawing distinctions between modernism (which the vast majority of critics agree ends by 1945, regardless of how it is conceptualized) and postmodernism; it is from that context that they begin to draw aesthetic distinctions that might help us further understand the two as distinct categories. Their landmark texts in this field—*Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990), and *The Origins of Postmodernity* (1998) —each take a similar approach. My objection is to those theorists who foreground aesthetic, stylistic, and other artistic concerns in drawing distinctions between modernism and postmodernism, as these tend to rely more heavily on a "straw-man modernism."

Discourse, Ideology, and Subjectivity

As the title of this project suggests, its theoretical underpinning is the intersectionality of language, ideology, and subjectivity. This foundation is effectively encapsulated by Rosalind Coward and John Ellis in their influential book *Language and Materialism* (1977). They write that "because all the practices that make up a social totality take place in language, it becomes possible to consider language as the place in which the social individual is constructed. In other words, man can be seen *as language*, as the intersection of the social, historical and individual" (1). If we view subjectivity—which is preferable to "man"—*as language*, then it stands to reason that narrative fiction may offer us a useful insight into how subjectivity has been theorized at particular moments in time, which is the essential goal of this project. Although they did not have the theoretical apparatus to support them, I will argue that certain modernist writers as early as Joseph Conrad at the turn of the century actually began to view subjectivity—and by extension the subject him/herself—*as language*. By engaging in textual practices that I call "deconstructive," these writers do not so much *react* to the contemporary notion of the "fragmented self," but *create* fragmented subjects by disclosing the void that presents itself when one peels back the layers of ideological mystification that form our common conceptions of the transcendental ego.

In the realm of postmodern theory that is now used to analyze such a conception of subjectivity, one must first turn to Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan conceived three psychoanalytic orders: The Symbolic, the Real, and the Imaginary.[7] The Symbolic, for

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[7] Capitalization of these terms varies widely. I have chosen to capitalize them throughout for the sake of clarity.

Lacan, is a linguistic dimension, although not purely so, as it is ultimately concerned with signification more broadly. He writes in *The Language of the Self*, "Symbols in fact envelop the life of man in a network so total that they join together, before he comes into the world, those who are going to engender him 'par l'os et par la chair' [by flesh and blood]" (42). While the subject uses symbols primarily in the form of language, then, the realm of the Symbolic runs much deeper than this. "Man speaks therefore," Lacan maintains, "but it is because the symbol has made him man" (39). The Symbolic, in this formulation, is the determining factor in the creation of subjectivity.

The Real, on the other hand, is located beyond the symbolic and resists signification. The Real can be thought of as the state of nature outside the symbolic order of humanity; as soon as we enter the realm of the Symbolic—as we all inevitably do—our access to the Real is forever severed. Jacques Alain-Miller describes the Real as "the ineliminable residue of all articulation, the foreclosed element, which may be approached, but never grasped: the umbilical cord of the symbolic" (280). Miller's metaphor is fitting, as our relationship to the Real is symbolically—in a dual sense—cut upon our birth. The concept of the Real, as Miller explains, "is not to be confused with reality, which is perfectly knowable" (280). What we commonly call "reality" is, according to Lacan, an illusion produced by our imaginary relationship to existence.

The Imaginary represents our relationship to "reality" as it is mediated through the realm of the Symbolic. It is closely associated with the "mirror stage," which Lacan connects to the movement of the subject from primal "needs" to symbolically mediated "demands." The phenomenon, which can occur in children from six months on, involves the child recognizing itself in a mirror and for the first time conceiving of itself as a

coherent whole apart from the people and objects around it. This image of wholeness,

however, is illusory in that it creates a mirrored concept of inner-completeness—what

Lacan calls the "ideal-I;" or gestalt (after Freud)—that contradicts the fragmentary nature

of a human subjectivity that is conceived as coherent only as a result of language and the

broader symbolic structure in which it exists. "The important point," Lacan explains,

> is that this form situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social
>
> determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible
>
> for any single individual or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach
>
> the subject's becoming, no matter how successful the dialectical synthesis
>
> by which he must resolve, as *I*, his discordance with his own reality.
>
> (*Écrits* 76)

In other words, the subject eventually comes to recognize that its desire—previously

satiated without question by the mother—is in fact mediated by the desires of others.

Thus, the resolution of the mirror stage is inherently tragic, in the sense that it initiates the

recognition of loss, and sets the subject's desire in motion.

Subsequently, the subject feels a sense of loss toward this ideal fantasy of

coherence and looks for objects of desire—what Lacan calls *objets a*[8]—to fill the void

that has been opened up. These objects form what Lacan calls a metonymic chain of

desire. That is, the objects of our desire always elude us because they are in fact

metonymically connected back to an originary desire that can never be filled, which is the

void opened by the loss of the mother. Lacan writes of the mirror stage resolution:

> It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge
>
> [*savoir*] into being mediated by the other's desire, constitutes its objects in

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[8] Which he pronounced *objets petit a*, or "little objects."

an abstract equivalence due to competition from other people, and turns

the *I* into an apparatus to which every instinctual pressure constitutes a

danger, even if it corresponds to a natural maturation process. The very

normalization of this maturation is henceforth dependent in man on

cultural intervention, as is exemplified by the fact that sexual object choice

is dependent upon the Oedipus complex. (79)

Ultimately, then, the Imaginary is structured by the symbolic order and is in that sense

deceptive. As the mediating force between us and the Real, the Symbolic holds us

endlessly in a state of suspension that we only experience as "reality." One might say, in

a conventional sense, that what we experience as reality in fact constitutes an illusion; as

such, Lacan's psychoanalytic topography can be seen as sharing common ground with

the Marxist concept of ideology. The potential of this connection has been especially

influential for the French philosopher Louis Althusser.

Althusser is another important theoretical influence in this project, particularly

through his appropriation of Lacan in his memorable essay "Ideology and Ideological

State Apparatuses: Notes Toward an Investigation" (1971). His theory of ideology is

especially useful to this project in that it synthesizes Marx and Gramsci on the one hand

and Freud and Lacan on the other. Like Coward and Ellis (quoted above), Althusser

recognizes the importance of historical materialism, social interaction, language, and

psychological factors in constituting subjectivity. Althusser begins with the premise,

which is deeply rooted in Marx, that in order for a society to survive it must reproduce its

own means of reproduction and, as such, it must reproduce its own labor power. This

reproduction is perpetuated by what Althusser calls "ideological state apparatuses," or

ISAs, which function by reinforcing and disseminating the ideology of the hegemonic power structure of the state. As opposed to the "repressive state apparatuses" (RSAs), which function either through violence or the threat of violence, ISAs "function massively and predominantly *by ideology*" (145). Althusser provides a working list of ISA's, noting its preliminary nature and pointing out its limits; it includes the religious ISA, the educational ISA, the family ISA, the legal ISA, the political ISA, the cultural ISA, and others. It is in his characterization of these institutions that Althusser most clearly shows the influence of Marx and Gramsci.

In delving more microscopically into *how* these ISA's function, however, Althusser draws heavily upon Freud and Lacan. He famously proposes that "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (162). In other words, the psychology of each individual subject contributes to the perpetuation of the dominant ideology that becomes concretized in social institutions. Althusser further claims that "*the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects*" (171). The influence of Lacan is significant here in the notion that ideology—which, if we read it through Lacan, emerges from the realm of the Symbolic—creates the "subject" as such. Although Lacan speaks of the subject primarily as a linguistic construction, the gesture in Althusser is essentially the same in accepting the notion that the subject is "constituted" and, by implication, inherently fragmented rather than existing a priori à la the Cartesian model.

According to Althusser, "*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*, by the functioning of the category of the subject" (173). In order to

explain this process, he uses the example of a police officer on a public street shouting "Hey, you there!" Although the officer could be referring to anyone within range of hearing, when the particular individual being addressed turns around, s/he acknowledges him/herself as a subject. In other words, the subject recognizes him/herself as implicated in ideology. This example, however, is not meant to suggest that one becomes a subject at some locatable moment in time. Rather, in Althusser's formulation, "ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects, which amounts to making it clear that individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects, which necessarily leads us to one last proposition: *individuals are always-already subjects*. Hence individuals are 'abstract' with respect to the subjects they always-already are" (175-176). Like Lacan, Althusser ultimately views subjectivity as a social construction rather than a naturally-given condition of existence.

This overview is meant to provide some theoretical background for my approach to the analysis of subjectivity in modernist fiction. It is also meant to illustrate that the theoretical underpinning of this project is not limited to a single "school" or theoretical approach, but rather draws upon a number of different concepts relating to language, ideology, and subjectivity that will prove useful for its analyses of particular novels. While the theoretical sources it draws upon are various, I would point out that they all constitute various trajectories that grow out of an originary Marxist—and often psychoanalytic—influence. My hope, in other words, is that the chapters that follow will give some sense of the diversity and complexity of modernist representations of subjectivity, while still maintaining an underlying analytical thread that runs through each.

Subjectivity in Modernist Fiction

Broadly speaking, this project argues that the novels it explores articulate

subjectivity in ways that align with the theoretical formulations described above. But I

also want to insist that these novels are representative of what I view as a broader trend

that can be found elsewhere in modernist fiction as well, certainly in the likes of Joyce,

Woolf, and Faulkner to name just a few others. This fact makes it all the more egregious,

I contend, that modernist innovation has been considerably undervalued by so many

major postmodern critics. One of the best illustrations of this is Ihab Hassan's

formulation of the "post/modern divide," from his 1987 book *The Postmodern Turn:*

Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture (91-92). His famous diagram epitomizes the

efforts of theorists to magnify postmodern stylistic and narratological experimentation by

manufacturing binaries that vastly oversimplify the variety and nuance of modernist

expression:

Modernism	**Postmodernism**
Romanticism/Symbolism	'Pataphysics'/Dadaism
Form (conjunctive, closed)	Antiform (disjunctive, open)
Purpose	Play
Design	Chance
Hierarchy	Anarchy
Mastery/Logos	Exhaustion/Silence
Art Object/Finished Work	Process/Performance/Happening
Distance	Participation
Creation/Totalization/Synthesis	Decreation/Deconstruction/Antithesis
Presence	Absence
Centering	Dispersal
Genre/Boundary	Text/Intertext
Semantics	Rhetoric
Paradigm	Syntagm
Hypotaxis	Parataxis
Metaphor	Metonymy

Selection	Combination
Root/Depth	Rhizome/Surface
Interpretation/Reading	Against Interpretation/Misreading
Signified	Signifier
Lisible	*Scriptible*
Narrative/*Grand Histoire*	Anti-narrative/*Petite Histoire*
Master Code	Idiolect
Type	Mutant
Genital/Phallic	Polymorphous/Androgynous
Paranoia	Schizophrenia
God the Father	The Holy Ghost
Metaphysics	Irony
Determinacy	Indeterminacy
Transcendence	Immanence

After a simple first glance, one notices that the right-hand column is replete with choice

terminology from late twentieth-century theory and criticism. The left-hand column, by

contrast, reads like an archetype of Perloff's straw-man modernism. While one may

certainly find such characteristics in various works of modernism, this column looks

undeniably reductive next to the other, whose terms (arguably *all* of them) could be

located in one modernist text or another. To be fair, Hassan acknowledges the

problematics of his own formulization, confessing openly that "the dichotomies this table

represents remain insecure, equivocal. For differences shift, defer, even collapse;

concepts in any one vertical column are not all equivalent; and inversions and exceptions,

in both modernism and postmodernism, abound" (92). But while he does make this

necessary concession, he goes to insist, "still, I would submit that rubrics in the right

column point to the postmodern tendency, the tendency of indetermanence,[9] and so may

bring us closer to its historical and theoretical definition" (92). But the ubiquity of

Hassan's table in discussions of post/modernism testifies to the fact that such

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[9] Hassan coins the term "indetermanence" as a combination of "indeterminacy and immanence."

dichotomies, however tentative, tend to ossify and become reinscribed as critical doxa.

The fact that we continue to turn to it in our attempts to understand the uncertain

relationship between modernism and postmodernism, I would argue, ultimately reflects

not so much its validity, but its convenience. I would caution that drawing such rigid

distinctions—even tentatively—can ultimately create obstacles that keep us from

meaningfully engaging important continuities and evolutions between the two.

In arguing against such distinctions as artistic categories in the chapters that

follow—especially in relation to the "postmodern" views of subjectivity that I sketch

above—I will pay particular attention to several of the binaries that Hassan formulates.

One particularly relevant example is his Centering/Dispersal dichotomy, which does not

hold weight against the many depictions of decentered subjectivity that will be explored

below and that can be found within modernism more generally. In a chapter on *The Great

Gatsby*, for instance, I focus on Fitzgerald's use of metonymy—which Hassan places in

the category of the postmodern—both in a narratological and psychological context using

a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework. My analysis suggests that *Gatsby* in fact

conceives subjectivity as radically decentered and ultimately fragmentary. Nick's

suggestion early in the novel that perhaps we ought to view "personality" as "an

unbroken series of successful gestures" (6) implies an identity that is not singular, but

dispersed among a series of individual actions. I will also challenge the distinction

between signifier and signified by highlighting modernism's preoccupation with the

indeterminacy and problematics of language. This extends obviously into Hassan's

Determinacy/Indeterminacy dichotomy as well, which vastly underappreciates the

willingness of many modernist writers to resist teleological thinking and instead embrace uncertainty.

A similar critique could be leveled against Brian McHale, who draws binary distinctions between modernism and postmodernism that are analogous to Hassan's. He is best known for his postulation that "the dominant of modernist fiction is *epistemological*" (*Postmodernist Fiction* 9), while "the dominant of postmodernist fiction is *ontological*" (10). As I will go on to demonstrate, however, each of the six novels that I analyze as part of this project foreground primarily ontological concerns; and, as I have said earlier, these novels are representative of larger trends in modernism. I would argue more broadly that one can find numerous examples of modernist novels that are preoccupied overwhelmingly with ontological concerns. Certainly this is the case in many of the novels of Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, and others. Like Hassan, McHale offers his own set of qualifications,[10] but once again I would stress that his continued standing as one of the most influential critics of postmodernism adds an inherent legitimacy to his epistemological/ontological binary that in turn reinforces its validity.

In pointing out these problematics, I want to be careful not engage in a straw-man argument myself against postmodern criticism. Theories of the postmodern are of course numerous and widely-varied. I choose the examples from Hassan and McHale above not

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[10] McHale, in fact, begins his book *Postmodernist Fiction* by questioning the accuracy of the term postmodernism itself: "'Postmodernist?' Nothing about this term is unproblematic, nothing about it is entirely satisfactory. It is not even clear who deserves the credit – or the blame – for coining it in the first place: Arnold Toynbee? Charles Olson? Randall Jarrell? There are plenty of candidates. But whoever is responsible, he or she has a lot to answer for" (3). He goes on to speak of the many "constructions of postmodernism," perhaps implying the possibility of "postmodernisms," not unlike the "modernisms" mentioned above: "There is John Barth's postmodernism, the literature of replenishment; Charles Newman's postmodernism, the literature of an inflationary economy; Jean-François Lyotard's postmodernism, a general condition of knowledge in the contemporary informational regime; Ihab Hassan's postmodernism, a stage on the road to spiritual unification of humankind; and so on. There is even Frank Kermode's construction of postmodernism, which in effect constructs it right out of existence" (4). The extended literature on both "modernisms" and "postmodernisms," I would argue, reinforces the problematic nature of each term and the difficulty of drawing distinctions between them.

to cherry-pick, but because they represent a prevailing trend among postmodern critics to construct a certain conception of modernism that can serve as a differential counterpart to postmodernism; because postmodernism can exist only as a category that follows modernism, it gains legitimacy only when viewed as a sort of overcoming. When one adopts this broader view, modernism inevitably appears as a nascent form that sets the stage for, but nonetheless is exceeded by postmodernism. What I am suggesting is that if we allow modernism to speak for itself, we begin to see that it in fact speaks the language of postmodern theory. This fact undermines the construction of a post/modern divide and suggests that the distinctions made by Hassan and others function at best as arguments by degree. Perhaps, in other words, taken as a whole we might find more instances of metonymy, more widespread preoccupation with the role of the signifier, or a willingness to accept or even produce incoherence to a larger degree in artistic creation after WWII, but the fact that one sees these same tendencies operating in significant ways in pre-WWII fiction implies hereditary lines of continuity between modernism and postmodernism rather than any radical break.

This assertion is not new, of course, as many notable critics have also stressed continuity rather than rupture. One seminal example is Frank Kermode, who suggests that we draw

> a useful rough distinction between two phases of modernism, and call them paleo- and neo-modernism; they are equally devoted to the theme of crises, equally apocalyptic; but although they have this and other things in common, they have differences which might, with some research, be

defined, and found not to be of a degree that prevents our calling both

'modernist.' (*Continuities* 8)

Kermode provides one of the early responses to the proliferation of postmodern theory in

the late 1960s. He contends that the project of modernism is ongoing and has evolved,

rather than taken a new trajectory as many postmodern critics would have it. In *The Sense*

of an Ending (1967), he writes of his formulations of paleo- and neo-modernism that

"there is a continuity between them, a continuity of crisis; what distinguishes them

broadly is that the older, in an ancient tradition, remade or rewrote its past, but the latter

has a nihilistic, schismatic quality" (122). This line of continuity lends support to his

broader claim, which asserts "the truth that there has been only one Modernist revolution,

and that it happened a long time ago. So far as I can see," he goes on to say, "there has

been little radical change in modernist thinking since then. More muddle, certainly, and

almost certainly more jokes, but no revolution, and much less talent" (24). Kermode's

eschatological readings of modernism lend credence to the line of continuity that he

describes, but they attract their own set of criticisms as well—especially in the decades

following when postmodern literature and criticism arguably reaches its apex.

Astradur Eysteinsson, for example, insists that "Kermode's approach to

modernism […] is undermined by the narrowness of his focus, which allows him to make

some preposterous generalizations" (106). Eysteinsson's *The Concept of Modernity*

(1990) offers a useful and more recent counterpoint to Kermode. Eysteinsson searches for

definitional concepts of modernism through contrasted readings of realism, the avant-

garde, and postmodernism, thus setting the stage for a conversation about how our

experience and theorization of postmodernism reshapes our understanding of modernism.

He also suggests, though he never does fully embrace the view as I do in what follows, that

> one could argue that it is only with the emergence of poststructuralist activities that theory "catches up with" the literary practices of modernism in this performative sense. Modernism could certainly be seen as the aesthetic embodiment of the "crisis of representation" that structuralists, and particularly poststructuralists, have greatly elaborated on recently and to some extent 'performed' themselves. (47)

This notion is reinforced, as he goes on to point out, by the fact that many poststructuralists use modernist texts in expounding their theories and that "some of them have acknowledged the often blatantly modernist tendencies in the methods and language-play of poststructuralist critics" (47). While Hassan views postmodernism as an overcoming of modernism, Eysteinsson suggests that the modalities of postmodernism and postmodern/poststructural criticism are already embedded in the practices of modernism itself.

I take up this argument by focusing on the particular strands of criticism that have grown out of (and ultimately synthesized) Marxism, psychoanalysis, and poststructuralism. This body of criticism grows out of the contributions of the Frankfurt School and is thus heavily grounded in the work of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, and others. Notable contemporary practitioners of literary criticism inspired by this theoretical synthesis are referenced throughout this project; they include Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, Richard Godden, Stephen Ross, Slavoj Žižek, and others. As I have alluded to above, my goal in utilizing both primary

theoretical sources from the realm of postmodern theory and those critics who approach

works of literature from such a background, is not to use postmodern theory to analyze

works of modernist fiction, but rather to call attention to the ways in which the critical

practices of various types of postmodern theory already operate in selected modernist

novels. I argue that the representation of subjectivity in what I call "deconstructive

fictions," or particular modernist novels that articulate subjectivity as "in-process,"[11]

prefigures not just poststructuralism, as Eysteinsson would have it, but postmodern

theory more generally. I follow Eysteinsson in his suggestion that

> it would be possible […] to see modernism in its totality as a
>
> deconstructive practice in the Derridean sense. Thus, we could read texts
>
> such as *Ulysses* (not to mention *Finnegans Wake*), *The Waves*, *The Sound*
>
> *and the Fury*, and *Das Schloß* with an emphasis on how they undermine
>
> the human desire for stable centers of representation by constantly
>
> displacing signifiers, frustrating immediate "presence" of meaning,
>
> decentering the subject or whatever constitutes a production of
>
> convention-bound reference, and dispersing it in the linguistic field. (48)

It is my intention to show, among other things, that deconstructive practices are in fact

pervasive in modernist fiction and that the novels I have chosen intently undermine the

attempt to stabilize conceptions of identity. In my selection of primary texts, I have

supplemented readings of authors that one might expect to see in such a project, namely

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[11] I borrow here from Julia Kristeva's concept of the "subject-in-process": "It is poetic language that awakens our attention to this undecidable character of any so-called natural language, a feature that univocal, rational, scientific discourses tend to hide—and this implies considerable consequences for its subject. The support of this signifying economy could not be the transcendental ego alone. If it is true that there would unavoidably be a speaking *subject* since the signifying set exists, it is nonetheless evident that this subject, in order to tally with its heterogeneity, must be, let us say, a questionable *subject-in-process*" (135).

Conrad and Beckett—and I have also looked beyond what are perhaps more obvious examples in Joyce, Wolf, Faulkner, and Kafka, referenced above—and have chosen authors in Fitzgerald, West, and Huxley that one might not as soon consider in this particular context.

Broadly speaking, the trajectory of this project as it moves from early to late modernism—1904 to 1941, based upon the publication dates of the novels it takes up— traces the development of modernist attitudes toward subjectivity. The subject is considered in relation to issues of ideology, race, spatiality, violence, and other factors, until finally Samuel Beckett begins to imagine a subjectivity that transcends corporeality altogether, only to undermine this possibility by reminding us that through language we have always-already been interpellated as subjects and are left with no other option but to confront our ontological limitations head on. Taken together, the novels that comprise this study reflect the complexity and multiformity of modernist fiction's concern with subjectivity, while at the same time employing common narrative modalities that ultimately deconstruct it. What we finally end up with is a version of modernist fiction that looks much different than the one described by Hassan, McHale, and others. These five authors make no attempt to envision new coherent versions of subjectivity or recover a challenged or lost transcendental ego. They not only depict and confront the fragmented self, but maintain an intentional open-endedness that explicitly rejects any sense of closure.

Chapter One takes up the issue of ideology in Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo* (1904) and sets the stage for the deconstructive approaches to narrative subjectivity used by the texts explored in the following chapters and by modernism more generally. While not as

renowned as *Heart of Darkness* (1899) or *Lord Jim* (1900), *Nostromo* is arguably

Conrad's greatest novel and the one that most profoundly anticipates the narrative and

philosophical complexities of modernism and even postmodernism. In a seminal and

prescient reading in his 1981 book *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially*

Symbolic Act, Fredric Jameson maintains that "a case could be made for reading Conrad

not as an early modernist, but rather an anticipation of that later and quite different thing

we have come to call variously textuality, *écriture*, post-modernism, or schizophrenic

writing" (219). Indeed, as he writes earlier, "even after eighty years [now over a century],

his place is still unstable, undecidable, and his work unclassifiable" (206). As a writer

whose novels span the years 1895-1923, Conrad has been seen as a crucial figure in the

transition from the Victorian to the Modernist era. *Nostromo* is particularly relevant in

this context, as it centers around the fictional nation of Costaguana—which is based on

Columbia—as it transitions from a predominantly rural country of farming and hard labor

into a major site of Anglo-imperialist capital ventures.

With this broad context in mind, this chapter examines Conrad's exploration of

individual subjectivities as they intersect with the imperialist ideologies that are thrust

upon them. It uses Slavoj Zizek's "The Spectre of Ideology" as a theoretical apparatus in

unpacking the complex ideological processes taking place in the novel, arguing that

Conrad demonstrates a prescient awareness of the ways in which ideological narratives

efface the "reality" of class struggle that according to Žižek comprises the social totality.

As a result, *Nostromo* represents subjectivity itself as an ideological construction that is

totalized by the very forces that it relies upon for its notion of individuality. However, in

recognizing the ways in which these "gaps in the real" are closed by ideology, the novel

makes a crucial gesture in arguing for the relevance and indispensability of ideology critique. In doing so, it acts as a precursor to the fundamental ideas of later modernist novels, particularly those discussed in the following chapters.

The second chapter explores F. Scott Fitzgerald's treatment of subjectivity in *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Fitzgerald's vision of subjectivity as radically fragmented and his representation of personality as performance anticipate postmodern theory in a number of ways. The sophistication and complexity of his efforts come into full focus in relation to the issue of race, which has been an underappreciated avenue of critical investigation in the novel. This chapter is particularly interested in the issue of race in *Gatsby* as it intersects with psychoanalysis. Using Lacan's "fundamental fantasy" as a theoretical framework, this chapter reads Gatsby's object of desire (*objet a*), Daisy, as the maternal figure in a (self-) destructive adult repetition of the oedipal drama, complicated by her metaphorical associations with the American landscape and her husband Tom's patriarchal and nativist views. Ultimately, the novel's symbolic structure is haunted by a latent desire to reconstitute Gatsby's ambiguous socially-projected racial makeup as only figuratively white. In doing so, the novel anticipates Lacan's notion of desire as a metonymic chain that ultimately folds into the oedipal drama. Like Lacan, Fitzgerald's portrayal of subjectivity involves the ceaseless pursuit of a desire that is perpetually elusive.

Chapter Three focuses on the work of three writers—Nathanael West, Aldous Huxley, and F. Scott Fitzgerald—who were born in various parts of the United States and England, but each ended up in Los Angeles and died in or near there. In particular, it takes up West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939), Huxley's *After Many a Summer Dies the*

Swan (1939), and Fitzgerald's *The Love of the Last Tycoon* (1941), which all take place in Los Angeles. While Los Angeles has been considered by postmodern theorists a paradigmatic—or perhaps *the* paradigmatic—postmodern city, in fact these modernist writers' depiction of it before the outbreak of the Second World War anticipates these postmodern characteristics in a number of ways. Comprised of a pastiche of architectural styles stacked one on top of another, Los Angeles in each of these novels is depicted as radically decentered/decentering and alienated/alienating.

The architectural and geographic qualities of the city are reflected in various ways in each novel by similarly decentered and alienated views of identity. Just as we see in Los Angeles the prototype of the postmodern city, in each novel we are presented with prototypes of the postmodern subject. While each novel fits the parameters of "deconstructive fictions" described above, in a broader sense this chapter suggests that we look to Los Angeles as a major fault line in (re)conceptualizing the notion of post/modernism. As the western endpoint on the map where the frontier meets its ultimate end, the city of Los Angeles—and California more generally—represents the figurative "end of the road" for its inhabitants and thus in each novel it is depicted as a site that creates great anxiety and disillusion. Its subjects, finally, are symbolically pushed to the edge where irreparable rupture looms.

While the focus of Chapter Four, Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* (1938), takes us slightly backward chronologically from the previous chapter, its envisioning of a subjectivity that would escape the corporeal body pushes the modernist subject to its greatest extreme and challenges the notion that postmodern conceptions of subjectivity offer up something *new*. In other words, Beckett—who is heavily influenced by

modernism but writes well into what is widely-acknowledged as the postmodern age—anticipates postmodern conceptions of subjectivity so entirely that he collapses the notion of a post/modern divide and delegitimizes the attempt to draw distinctions between modernist and postmodernist representations of subjectivity.

Murphy, then, represents a certain endpoint for modernist fiction's treatment of the desiring-subject. While early novelists found new and compelling ways of deconstructing prevailing notions of subjectivity, Beckett pushes the boundaries of this kind of dialectical deconstructive thinking until any sense of stable subjectivity unravels altogether. Its central character, Murphy, desires the negation of desire. In order to reach some notion of existential transcendence, Murphy must extricate himself from the torment of the subject-object relationship. Because subject and object are materially and metaphysically separate from one another—in other words, existing in different physical spaces—the only way that Murphy can envision absolute psychological or existential freedom is by removing himself from contact with the "other" entirely. But the novel bluntly reminds us that we are always-already subjected as human beings living within a physical space populated by other human beings that mediate their relationships with one another through the signifying practice of language. I contend that *Murphy* is the ultimate deconstructionist modernist novel. In it, Beckett deconstructs desire in its role as the fundamental element in structuring language and ends not by envisioning something new, but by reaffirming an essential truth: That language inevitably casts us in the process of desire. It is impossible to conceive of oneself outside desire, because desire is inherent in the act of conceiving. The only escape is death, or eternal negation.

The project concludes with a short chapter that more fully contextualizes Beckett as a post/modernist writer and previews the trajectory of the subject in later postmodern fiction. In doing so, it once again reinforces the importance of recognizing continuity along with drawing (perhaps necessary) distinctions between modernist and postmodernist fiction. It suggests, finally, that its reading of subjectivity in modernist fiction not only calls into question the notion that postmodernism represents an overcoming of modernism's alleged limitations, but reappraises modernist fiction in its own right as the seminal expression of twentieth-century subjectivity.

CHAPTER ONE: SPECTERS OF IDEOLOGY IN

JOSEPH CONRAD'S *NOSTROMO*

Although *Nostromo* (1904) has been highly praised by many distinguished Conradians[12] and has received attention from several preeminent critics of literature and culture,[13] it has never quite managed to escape the shadow cast by *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Lord Jim* (1900). In his essay "Untimely *Nostromo*," which introduces a 2008 special issue of *Conradiana* dedicated to the novel, Peter Mallios suggests that it has been "eternally and incorrigibly out of phase with respect to the politics and passions, the master narratives and ideological assumptions, the contingent senses of historically-arrived-at (and/or repressed) *time* that have defined any number of twentieth and twenty-first century *presents*" (216). That *Nostromo* should be deemed "out of phase" is ironic given that in an essay published that same year[14] J. Hillis Miller had remarked on its "uncanny resonance with the global situation today" (152). How is it that a novel can be seen simultaneously as both timely and "untimely?"

This is only one example of how polarizing *Nostromo* has been among readers and critics for the last century. Most have agreed, actually, that it is Conrad's most complex novel,[15] and perhaps this has something to do with its failure to gain traction in popular and critical circles. Because it is longer and more complex than both *Heart of*

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[12] Jacques Berthoud and Mara Kalnins boldly declare in their introduction to the Oxford World Classics edition of the novel, for example, that "*Nostromo* is Conrad's masterpiece" (x).

[13] These include F.R. Leavis, Fredric Jameson, Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, Edward Said, and others.

[14] See Miller, "Material Interests."

[15] In *Conrad: The Novelist* (1958), for example, Albert J. Guerard testifies that *Nostromo* "is in some ways a more difficult and more baffling novel than *Lord Jim*" (175). Edward Said, similarly, writes that "Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo* is the longest and most complex of his novels" (70); Stephen Ross calls it "the most sophisticated and most complete of all Conrad's novels" (114); and Hillis Miller (in the essay quoted above) points out that it "is extremely complicated in its narrative organization" (151).

Darkness and *Lord Jim*, it also tends to provoke a different kind of critical response. That is, while the earlier novels are commonly viewed as psychological exposés that branch out into broader thematic trajectories, critics tend to focus on *Nostromo*'s representation only of imperial capitalism. Benita Parry explains that whereas in the former novels "the central figures are represented as individual products and victims of historical circumstances, pressing against the frontiers of their given situation and destroyed by their presumption, 'history' as the collective project of human agents is itself the principal protagonist in *Nostromo* and the destiny of an entire social order its subject" (101-102). Albert J. Guerard, who is slightly more inclined to acknowledge the importance of the novel's psychodynamics, maintains that it "recognizes unconscious motives and self-deceptions (Charles Gould's especially) but its treatment of them – its psychology, in a word – is classical rather than Freudian. Reason and folly play a larger part than unconscious or half-conscious compulsion; reasoning on political affairs occupies more pages than solitary introspection" (177). And Ian Watt makes a comparable point in *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (1979), remarking that "Conrad did not continue to develop the subjective aspect of the disjunction between the individual consciousness and everything outside it; or at least it was in the phase of intense experimentation which began in 1896 and ended in 1900 that Conrad was most deeply involved in presenting the obdurate incompatibility of the self and the world in which it exists" (357).

Some recent critics, however, have distanced themselves from such claims and called for a renewed focus on the novel's psychodynamics as a lens for examining the broader political themes that it encompasses. My argument here is considerably

influenced by one such critic, Stephen Ross, who notes in *Conrad and Empire* (2004) "a tendency among politically concerned critics like Said, Watt, Albert J. Guerard, Claire Rosenfield, and Alan Friedman to minimize the importance of reading Nostromo as a subject in order to arrive at an adequate understanding of the novel's political critique" and argues, by contrast, "that the key to reading *Nostromo* lies in recognizing that, for all that the majesty of its scale seems to diminish the importance of individual experience, it remains a focused vision of the human experience of modernity" (115). Ross adopts elements of Lacanian psychoanalysis and ideology critique in the vein of Althusser, Jameson, and Žižek in grounding his contention that "*Nostromo*'s wild oscillations from sweeping panorama to focused interiority […] show the fundamental continuity between the subjective and the ideological in a highly compressed yet widely relevant critique of Empire's emergent order" (148). Ultimately aiming his attention at the title character, Ross argues that "Nostromo at last appears in his full dimensions as a vision of the Imperial subject who becomes aware of the arbitrariness of ideological/value systems, yet is unable to break free from them and is emphatically punished for attempting to transgress them" (149). While upholding Ross's basic premise and echoing "the fundamental continuity between the subjective and the ideological" that the novel maintains, I would like to focus more squarely on how the novel's representation of this continuity reflects Conrad's deeper pursuit of ideology *critique*.

Using Slavoj Žižek's essay "The Spectre of Ideology" as a theoretical apparatus, I suggest that we move beyond a reading of *Nostromo* that views its representation of ideology as all-pervasive and inescapable. This understanding of ideology tends to snowball, according to Žižek, into a prevailing postmodern challenge to the usefulness of

ideology critique as a critical practice altogether. If there is no "outside" ideology, one

might ask, if *everything* always-already is ideology, then how can it be of any conceptual

use? In contrast to such a view of ideology, which Žižek calls a "*quick, slick*

'postmodern' solution" that in fact "*is ideology par excellence*" (17) and the oppositional

"trap that makes us slide into ideology under the guise of stepping out of it" (17), Žižek

suggests that "it is possible to maintain a distance from it [ideology], *but this place from*

which one can denounce ideology must remain empty, it cannot be occupied by any

positively determined reality" (17). As such, Žižek's central claim is this: In the face of

such problems, "we must none the less maintain the tension that keeps the *critique* of

ideology alive" (17).

Our first step in doing so is accepting "that the concept of ideology must be

disengaged from the 'representationalist' problematic: *ideology has nothing to do with*

'illusion', with a mistaken, distorted representation of its social context" (7). Thus,

ideology critique does not simply involve disentangling the underlying reality from the

illusion that obscures it. For Žižek, rather, the task is far more complex. To begin with,

we must first distinguish between what we conventionally call "reality" and what Lacan

calls the Real. As we have seen above, the Real, along with the Symbolic and the

Imaginary, comprise what Lacan calls the Symbolic Order. While the registers of the

Symbolic and the Imaginary together constitute "reality" as we know it, the Real is that

which escapes signification and therefore exists beyond the other two registers, what

Jacques Alain-Miller calls "the ineliminable residue of all articulation, the foreclosed

element, which may be approached, but never grasped: the umbilical cord of the

symbolic" (280). We must keep this in mind, then, when approaching Žižek's

formulation of what he calls "the spectre of ideology": "To put it simply, reality is never directly 'itself', it presents itself only via its incomplete-failed symbolization, and spectral apparitions emerge in this very gap that forever separates reality from the real, and on account of which reality has the character of a (symbolic) fiction: the spectre gives body to that which escapes (the symbolically structured) reality" (21). For this reason, the role of psychoanalysis is essential for Žižek in carrying out ideology critique.

Thus, the essence of ideology critique for Žižek's is identifying "the pre-ideological kernel' of ideology [that] consists of the *spectral apparition that fills up the whole of the real*. This," he argues,

> is what all the attempts to draw a clear line of separation between 'true' reality and illusion (or to ground illusion in reality) fail to take into account: if (what we experience as) 'reality' is to emerge, something has to be foreclosed from it -- that is to say, 'reality', like truth, is, by definition, never 'whole'. *What the spectre conceals is not reality but its 'primordially repressed', the unrepresentable X on whose 'repression' reality itself is founded*. (21)

Žižek finally brings this argument back around to Marx, claiming that "the consequent thinking-out of this concept compels us to admit that there is no class struggle 'in reality': 'class struggle' designates the very antagonism that prevents the objective (social) reality from constituting itself as a self-enclosed whole" (21). My intention in what follows is to show that Conrad's representation of ideology in *Nostromo* anticipates Žižek in its recognition of class struggle as the antagonism that allows the experience of conventional "reality" to emerge. By identifying the "specters of ideology" that fill in the gaps of the

Real in the novel, we can in fact see that Conrad is working with a remarkably intricate and sophisticated conception of ideology not fully addressed by Eagleton, Jameson, and other Marxist critics concerned with the issue of ideology in the novel.

In response to Mallios's claim that *Nostromo* has been "eternally and incorrigibly out of phase," I would follow Hillis Miller's proclamation that "somewhat paradoxically, one of the best ways to understand what is happening now in our time of globalization is to read this old novel by Conrad" (163). If *Nostromo* has seemed "out of phase," I argue that this is because it is actually very much ahead of its time in its representation and critique of ideology under capitalism. In fact, we ought to read *Nostromo* as very much a novel of the *present* for the ways in which it strikingly anticipates the problematics of late twentieth and twenty-first century notions of ideology critique and, further, how those notions (particularly a la Žižek) are critical to our understanding and critique of global capitalism today. Although Nostromo does, indeed, become ensnared in an inescapable web of ideological networks, the novel cultivates an underlying focus on what Žižek calls "the spectre of ideology." Thus, while *Nostromo* offers fascinating insight into the continuity between ideology and subjectivity, it simultaneously gestures toward a more expansive vision of *how* ideology functions; as such, the novel itself can be read as a form of twenty-first century ideology critique.

Some Problematics of Ideology Critique

In order to contextualize my remarks about *Nostromo*'s representation and critique of ideology, I would first like to identify some of the major problems inherent in

ideology critique as a critical practice and outline how they are manifested in the novel. One of the central issues that problematizes the attempt to critique ideology is the paradoxical fact that "*the stepping out of (what we experience as) ideology is the very form of our enslavement to it*" (Žižek 6). Though we have a tendency to base our critiques of ideology around identifying and exposing representative ideological mystifications, Žižek warns that "when some procedure is denounced as 'ideological *par excellence*', one can be sure that its inversion is no less ideological" (4). There is an always present danger, in other words, that our responses to what we perceive to be ideological mystifications will be equally informed (and therefore problematized) by other forms or manifestations of ideology.

In order to illustrate this problem, Žižek quotes a case described by fellow Slovenian philosopher Renata Salecl in which she describes representative opposing examples of ideological mystification by juxtaposing media coverage of the Bosnian War with that of the 1991 Gulf War. During the Gulf War, she explains,

> instead of providing information on social, political or religious trends and antagonisms in Iraq, the media ultimately reduced the conflict to a quarrel with Saddam Hussein, Evil Personified, the outlaw who excluded himself from the civilized international community. Even more than the destruction of Iraq's military forces, the true aim was presented as psychological, as the humiliation of Saddam who was to 'lose face'. (13)

On the first end of the spectrum of ideological mystification, then, is the reductive approach, in which one metonymically reduces a conflict to a representative constitutive element in order to more easily criticize and vilify it, rather than exploring the complexity

of historical, social, and political circumstances that surround the conflict. The ideological seductiveness of this scenario is all the more evident considering that this depiction of Saddam (widely recognized by first name alone) as "Evil Personified" maintained profound symbolic force until his eventual capture and execution in 2006—and arguably to this day.

> In the case of the Bosnian war, however, notwithstanding isolated cases of the demonization of the Serbian president Milosevic, the predominant attitude reflects that of a quasi-anthropological observer. The media outdo one another in giving us lessons on the ethnic and religious background of the conflict; traumas hundreds of years old are being replayed and acted out, so that, in order to understand the roots of the conflict, one has to know not only the history of Yugoslavia, but the entire history of the Balkans from medieval times. . . . In the Bosnian conflict, it is therefore not possible simply to take sides, one can only patiently try to grasp the background of this savage spectacle, alien to our civilized system of values . . . . Yet this opposite procedure involves an ideological mystification even more cunning than the demonization of Saddam Hussein. (Salecl 13)

Thus, on the other end of the spectrum is the opposite procedure. Rather than personify the conflict through a representative and symbolically overdetermined figure, the complexity of the circumstances is used as an excuse to become disengaged altogether for fear that commitment to any particular position will fail to take into account some important factor. While Salecl's example is itself reductive in the sense that it offers only

representative opposing examples, it serves as a useful outline of how ideology affects the analysis of social and political antagonism. I suggest that we use her example in order to show how the tendency to gravitate toward one or another of these extremes problematizes the attempt to critique ideology in *Nostromo*, both for its characters and its readers.

With Salecl's example in mind, we might observe a paradox in *Nostromo* that arises out of its narrative construction. Conrad's complex narrative posture allows him to give readers some idea of the profound complexity of Costaguanan history. We might describe the narrator, following Salecl, as "a quasi-anthropological observer" whose continual digressions add increasingly intricate layers of context to the more particular story with which he is primarily concerned, namely the Monterist Revolution and the efforts of the Gould Concession to save the silver of the San Tomé mine. To complicate matters further, Conrad includes both real and fictional historical details in the novel, whose events he fittingly describes as "the imaginary (but true)" (*Personal Record* 95). Conrad resists master narratives, instead exploring the actions of conflicted individual characters in the face of overwhelming social, political, economic, and other obstacles. The narrative organization of the novel reflects the complexity of Costaguana's history and politics, ultimately suggesting that any attempt to definitively narrate history or establish historical causality is a fool's errand. For those within the world of the novel and without, then, there is a problem akin to the one Salecl describes above in attempting to make any coherent sense out of circumstances with such long and puzzling histories.

Yet, as far as the "media" within the world of the novel are concerned, we find the opposite tendency. Rather than explore the political issues at hand or the context that has

led up to them, the media representing both sides of the political spectrum engage in direct personal attacks against their opposition. Decoud, for example, who is our primary liaison to the Costaguanan media, is enlisted by the Blancos to combat what the narrator describes as "the lies disseminated by the Monterist press," specifically "the atrocious calumnies, the appeals to the people calling upon them to rise with their knives in their hands and put an end once for all to the Blancos, to these Gothic remnants, to these sinister mummies, these impotent paralíticos, who plotted with foreigners for the surrender of the lands and the slavery of the people" (116). In response, although he personally views politics as a farce, Decoud publishes personal attacks on Montero for the Blanco-backed *Porvenir*. As such, while readers may easily get lost in the abundance of contextual detail given by the narrator, we see the opposite form of ideological mystification as described by Salecl *directly* acting through the media in the novel. More importantly, we see the ossification of this ideology in the collective cultural consciousness.

The demonization of individual political figures perpetuated by the media is eventually mythologized and usually transposed into a religious context that uses spectral imagery in order to create fear or reinforce prescribed moral guidelines across the populace. This scheme is evident in the propaganda of the Monterist regime as described by the narrator above; the Blancos are depicted not simply as a political opposition, but as spectral remnants of an antiquated and sinister imperial ideology. This same type of demonization occurs on the other end of the political spectrum as well. The central mythologized political figure in liberal Costaguanan history is Guzmán Bento: "It was the same Guzmán Bento who, becoming later on Perpetual President, famed for his ruthless

and cruel tyranny, reached his apotheosis in the popular legend of a sanguinary land-haunting spectre whose body had been carried off by the devil in person from the brick mausoleum in the nave of the Church of Assumption in Sta. Marta" (37).

Ironically, the perpetuation of these myths—particularly by the lower classes—actually reinforces a sort of political paralysis. The Costaguanan populace does not meaningfully grapple with their country's social and political complexities; rather, the prevailing tendency to transmogrify Bento and other political figures simply integrates them into a preexisting religious/ideological structure. This phenomenon is not entirely lost, however, on certain characters in the novel; Emilia Gould, for example, observes that

> in all these households she could hear stories of political outrage; friends, relatives, ruined, imprisoned, killed in the battles of senseless civil wars, barbarously executed in ferocious proscriptions, as though the government of the country had been a struggle of lust between bands of absurd devils let loose upon the land with sabres and uniforms and grandiloquent phrases. And on all the lips she found a weary desire for peace, the dread of officialdom with its nightmareish [sic] parody of administration without law, without security, and without justice. (66)

She is similarly troubled later by the way in which Sulaco's inhabitants accept brutal violence as an inevitability: "That it should be accepted with no indignant comment by people of intelligence, refinement, and character as something inherent in the nature of things was one of the symptoms of degradation that had the power to exasperate her almost to the verge of despair" (82). While there is some sense of outrage among the

people, it is nonetheless troubling that such violence is accepted as simply the modus

operandi of "a struggle of lust between bands of absurd devils." Ultimately this outlook,

which engenders "a weary desire for peace," sets the stage for the Gould Concession and

its singular concern with "material interests" to install a dictator in Ribiera whose loyalty

to Western economic and political influence trumps his concern for the well-being of his

populace. The Gould Concession, concerned purely with profit, provides the country—

Sulaco in particular—with a sense of peace and stability that masks the reality of struggle

and conflict that actually constitute its social reality. It is not until the Gould Concession

has indelibly entrenched itself that people begin to realize "that the Ribierist reforms

meant simply the taking away of the land from the people" (141). By this time, there is

little recourse from the hegemonic rule of the Ribierist regime and the Gould Concession

other than submit to a "new" band of "absurd devils."

    For all its focus on broad political conflict, then, *Nostromo* is very much

concerned with the individual characters involved and the ideological networks within

which they are implicated. Again evoking Salecl's example, this presents us with yet

another related problem when exploring the implications of ideology in relation to the

individual subject. "In the domain of theory," Žižek explains,

> we encounter a homologous reversal apropos of the 'deconstructionist'
>
> problematization of the subject's guilt and personal responsibility. The
>
> notion of a subject morally and criminally 'responsible' for his acts serves
>
> the ideological need to conceal the intricate, always-already operative
>
> texture of historico-discursive presuppositions that not only provide the
>
> context for the subject's act but also define in advance the co-ordinates of

its meaning: the system can function only if the cause of its malfunction

can be located in the responsible subject's 'guilt'. (5)

Žižek goes on to caution, however, that "this logic of 'putting the blame on the

circumstances'" (5) may be equally as self-defeating in that it leads to a deep-seated

cynicism that views subjects as mere victims of circumstance who lack meaningful

agency. "Are we, the speaking subjects," he asks, "not always-already *engaged* in

recounting the circumstances that predetermine the space of our activity?" (5). Žižek's

point perfectly illustrates the difficulty we face in interpreting Nostromo as a subject: On

the one hand, we find it difficult to morally judge his actions based upon the fact that he

is clearly manipulated by external forces; on the other hand, if we exonerate him from all

sense of moral or ethical responsibility we risk rendering any notion of personal ethics

obsolete and falling into the type of moral skepticism that so powerfully (and tragically)

affects Decoud and many other characters throughout Conrad's novels.

It is precisely this problem that Stephen Ross encounters in his reading of

Nostromo, particularly in his focus on the scene in which Nostromo awakens exhausted

on the mainland after successfully concealing the silver that everyone (except Decoud)

thinks lost: "[W]ith the lost air of a man just born into the world […] he threw back his

head, flung his arms open, and stretched himself with a slow twist of the waist and a

leisurely growling yawn of white teeth, as natural and free from evil in the moment of

waking as a magnificent and unconscious beast" (294). In his analysis of this scene, Ross

argues that

Nostromo's assumption of the splayed posture of Christ on the cross,

followed by his 'moment of waking' in an animalistic state of innocence

that is 'free from evil' because it is beyond both good and evil, reverses

the routine trajectory of slave morality. Rather than throwing off his

amoral 'unconscious' wildness by discovering the rewards of self-

sacrifice, Nostromo welcomes the free naturalness of his desire. (138)

Ross's reading gestures toward a Lacanian analysis of Nostromo's desire in line with that

of Jacques-Alain Miller, who suggests that ultimately the subject's only true option is to

follow his or her desire, even if it leads into the painful realm of *jouissance*—which is

precisely the course travelled by Nostromo. Ross goes on to argue that

seeing both the world around him and his own existence as permeated

with gaps, perplexing spaces of nothing, Nostromo becomes a fully

modern, proto-Imperial subject. With this reconfiguration, Nostromo steps

out of the spurious social role he has occupied (as merely a structural

feature of the emergent Imperial order) and determines to take charge of

his destiny, supplementing his earlier ethic of action with the calculation

of ideological consciousness in a concerted effort to "gain a sense of

mastery over the fates." (138)

But such a notion of ideology falls into what Žižek calls the "representationalist

problematic," an outdated Marxist conception of ideology as an "illusion" that is

juxtaposed against a "true" reality. Žižek asks, "Is not this notion of a rebel who by way

of his 'irrational' resistance to social authority, acts out his unresolved psychic tension

ideology at its purest?" (6). This brings us back to the aforementioned paradox that "*the

stepping out of (what we experience as) ideology is the very form of our enslavement to*

it" (6). In other words, Nostromo's "revelation" here is a false one, leading him not "outside" ideology, but back into it.

Ross does acknowledge this problem later, arguing that when "he determines to replace the fantasy structure of 'Nostromo' with the materialist fantasy structure of Empire" he "lays bare the interdependence of subjective *méconnaissance* and ideological misrecognition, exposing the workings of ideology as an imaginary construction whose only defining feature is its own reproduction in further imaginary constructions" (142). But while he circumvents the representationalist problematic here, I would argue that Ross faces another:

> Here, however, one should be careful to avoid the last trap that makes us slide into ideology under the guise of stepping out of it. That is to say, when we denounce as ideological the very attempt to draw a clear line of demarcation between ideology and actual reality, this inevitably seems to impose the conclusion that the only non-ideological position is to renounce the very notion of extra-ideological reality and accept that all we are dealing with are symbolic fictions, the plurality of discursive universes, never 'reality' - *such a quick, slick 'postmodern' solution, however, is ideology par excellence*. It all hinges on our persisting in this impossible position: although no clear line of demarcation separates ideology from reality, although ideology is already at work in everything we experience as 'reality', we must none the less maintain the tension that keeps the critique of ideology alive. (Žižek 17)

At this point, it feels as though, whatever direction we take in our analysis of ideology in the novel, we run into some sort of "trap" that renders it inherently problematic. How, then, do we approach a meaningful analysis of ideology in *Nostromo* without falling into one or the other of these traps? In what follows, I suggest that an analysis of spectral imagery in the novel offers us an approach that avoids these pitfalls and highlights the novel's function as ideology critique.

Specters of Ideology

Žižek's "spectre of ideology" hinges upon his reading of Lacan's conception of the Real not as something that lies *behind* the imaginary like a palimpsest, but that is woven into its very fabric. "To put it simply," he explains, "reality is never directly 'itself', it presents itself only via its incomplete-failed symbolization, and spectral apparitions emerge in this very gap that forever separates reality from the real, and on account of which reality has the character of a (symbolic) fiction: the spectre gives body to that which escapes (the symbolically structured) reality" (21). If what we know or experience as "reality" is to become apparent to us, "something has to be foreclosed from it" (21). Thus, "*what the spectre conceals is not reality but its 'primordially repressed', the irrepresentable X on whose 'repression' reality itself is founded*" (21).

Here Žižek turns back to Marx's account of class struggle, "the supreme example of such 'reality'" (21), ultimately arguing that "the consequent thinking-out of this concept compels us to admit that there is no class struggle 'in reality': 'class struggle' designates the very antagonism that prevents the objective (social) reality from

constituting itself as a self-enclosed whole" (21). In other words, symbolic fictions—the spectral elements that fill the gaps of the Real—efface the class struggle that keeps objective social reality from emerging. "The ultimate paradox of the notion of 'class struggle' is that society is 'held together' by the very antagonism, splitting, that forever prevents its closure in a harmonious, transparent, rational Whole – by the very impediment that undermines every rational totalization" (21-22). This paradox gives rise to a number of ironies, like the fact that "peace" in fact emerges out of struggle, in the sense that a state of peace signals the winning-out of one particular side of an oppositional faction; the apparent condition of peace, then, hides the actual antagonism that constitutes the social reality. If the citizens of Costaguana, for example, were to have their "weary desire for peace" fulfilled, that "peace" would not exist in the absence of struggle, but as a result of it. The implication of this reading of class struggle, finally, "is that the very constitution of social reality involves the 'primordial repression' of an antagonism, so that the ultimate support of the critique of ideology – the extra-ideological point of reference that authorizes us to denounce the content of our immediate experience as 'ideological' – is not 'reality' but the 'repressed' real of antagonism" (25). So where do we find the "'repressed' real of antagonism" in *Nostromo* that helps us unpack the deeper ideological processes at work in the novel?

Before attempting to answer this question, I would like to highlight a few of the many critical treatments of ideology in *Nostromo*. The gold standard, to my mind, is Fredric Jameson's "Romance and Reification: Plot Construction and Ideological Closure in Joseph Conrad," from his classic 1981 book *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. While Jameson's commentary has elicited its share of criticism,

most notably an acerbic response from Jacques Berthoud in his 1985 essay "Narrative

and Ideology: A Critique of Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*," its impact on

subsequent criticism of the novel is undeniable. His reading is a fitting counterpoint to

that of Terry Eagleton, a fellow Marxist critic who writes insightfully, albeit tersely,

about *Nostromo* in *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (1976).

My analysis has much in common with Eagleton and Jameson, but I intend a new way of

reading *Nostromo* that engages with more recent theoretical shifts in how we view

ideology, particularly those articulated Žižek. By way of context, I would like to take a

brief inventory of Eagleton and Jameson's respective arguments, with a particular

emphasis on those aspects that intersect with my own.

Both Eagleton and Jameson are concerned primarily with the issue of form.

Eagleton claims that the plot, or action, of each of Conrad's novels revolves around a

central absence. "It is precisely in these absent centres," he argues, "which 'hollow'

rather than scatter and fragment the organic forms of Conrad's fiction, that the relations

of that fiction to its ideological context is laid bare" (137-138). The result, for Eagleton,

is that Conrad's narrative forms do not "express" an ideology, but rather produce

ideological contradictions. This production, as he explains it, is ironically deconstructive

in character:

> The tale or yarn 'foregrounds' action as solid and unproblematic; it
>
> assumes the unimpeachable realities of history, character, the objective
>
> world. Yet these assumptions are simultaneously thrown into radical doubt
>
> by the penumbra of spectral meanings which surround the narrative,
>
> crossing and blurring its contours. If the narrative is reduced to a yarn,

those crucial meanings dissolve; if the meanings are directly probed, it is

the narrative which evaporates. (139)

What adds to the complexity of Conrad's narrativity, as many critics have pointed out, is

his appropriation of the adventure story, which is generally quite formulaic. But one

hallmark of Conrad's fiction is his tendency to subvert the classic adventure story with a

thematic complexity that belies its formulaic simplicity. In the face of the contradictions

thus produced, for Eagleton Conrad's fiction insists that "faith, work and duty must not

be allowed to yield to scepticism if the supreme fiction of social order is to be sustained.

It is for this reason that Conrad the pessimist insists that the artist's task is not to convey

moral nihilism, but to cherish undying hope" (139).

Jameson is similarly interested in the novel's decenteredness, but instead focuses

upon the displacement of "actual" history by "strategies of containment," which for

Jameson are social ideological constructions that act as forms of erasure and suppress

history's underlying contradictions. Jameson reads *Nostromo* as "a dialectical

intensification and transformation of the narrative apparatus of *Lord Jim*" (269), Conrad's

earlier novel of 1900, and views it as "a demonstration of structural transformations, and

the way in which analogous materials are utterly metamorphosed when they are

wrenched from the realm and categories of the individual subject to the new perspective

of those of collective destiny" (269). Jameson is particularly interested in what he calls

"ideological interference" in the novel, which he describes as "threefold and layered,"

involving Conrad's adoption of the "classic 'Anglo' picture of a Latin 'race,' lazy,

shiftless, and the like, to which political order and economic progress must be 'brought'

from the outside" (270), Conrad's own political attitudes that are presupposed by readers

and "rhetorically reinforced by ethical and melodramatic markers (the Blancos are good, the Monteristas evil)" (270), and the text's relegation of *ressentiment* toward the central event in the novel—the Monterist revolution—to "the frame or border of the text proper" (271), thus foregrounding the story of the main characters. This picture of ideology in the novel lays the groundwork for Jameson's observation that "this central event is therefore present/absent in the most classic Derridean fashion, present only in its initial absence, absent when it is supposed to be most intensely present" (270). For Jameson, in other words, the "real" historical events of the novel are effaced and the corresponding blank space is filled by narrative. As such, he builds upon the point made in Said's *Beginnings* (1975): "Instead of mimetically authoring a new world, *Nostromo* turns back to its beginning as a novel, to the fictional, illusory assumption of reality: in thus overturning the confident edifice that novels normally construct *Nostromo* reveals itself to be no more than a *record* of novelistic self-reflection" (137).

To return to the earlier question of where we might locate the repressed real of antagonism in *Nostromo*, for me it is revealed when the opening chapter introduces the novel's central "symbolic fiction," a religiously-infused parable set on the peninsula of Azuera, which overlooks Sulaco, that effaces the true social antagonism underlying Costaguana's perpetual social and political conflict. "Utterly waterless," as the description of Azuera goes, "for the rainfall runs off at once on all sides into the sea, it has not soil enough—it is said—to grow a single blade of grass, as if it were blighted by a curse. The poor, associating by an obscure instinct of consolation the ideas of evil and wealth, will tell you that it is deadly because of its forbidden treasures" (5). While its physical barrenness suggests that it does not contain any actual treasure, the legend holds

a deep mythopoeic significance for the region's inhabitants: "Tradition has it that many

adventurers of olden time had perished in the search. The story goes also that within

men's memory two wandering sailors—Americanos perhaps, but gringos of some sort for

certain" (6) enlisted the help of a local mozo, stole a donkey, and went in search of the

treasure never to be heard from again. The last sign of their existence comes on the

second evening after their departure when a spiral of smoke is seen by various people

around the region:

> The impious adventurers gave no other sign. The sailors, the Indian, and
>
> the stolen burro were never seen again. As to the mozo, a Sulaco man—
>
> his wife paid for some masses, and the poor four-footed beast, being
>
> without sin, had been properly permitted to die; but the two gringos,
>
> spectral and alive, are believed to be dwelling to this day amongst the
>
> rocks, under the fatal spell of their success. Their souls cannot tear
>
> themselves away from their bodies mounting guard over the discovered
>
> treasure. They are now rich and hungry and thirsty—a strange theory of
>
> tenacious gringo ghosts suffering in their starved and parched flesh of
>
> defiant heretics, where a Christian would have renounced and been
>
> released. (6)

While the parable's symbolic overtones have been observed by numerous critics, typified

by Eloise Hay Knapp's assertion that "the superstition provides an allegorical framework

for the obsession with the silver that gradually takes possession of the novel's two central

gringos, Gould and Nostromo" (84), I see an auxiliary and ultimately deeper significance.

This begins with the fact that the poor have come to associate evil and wealth "by an obscure instinct of consolation." This association ultimately reinforces the hegemonic rule of the wealthy class; the poor's perception of the wealthy as "evil" actually checks their desire to become wealthy themselves. The tale of the two gringos reinforces the same ideology; by linking the aspiration to accrue wealth with sin, this "parable" in fact haunts its believers, reminding them of the dangers inherent in attempting (or even desiring) to transcend their social class. The naming of the gringos as "heretics" brings the parable full circle, as the suggestion that "a Christian would have renounced and been released" again reinforces the analogy between wealth and evil. The parable ultimately effaces the underlying struggle that creates the social reality of the country. In other words, it functions as a "symbolic fiction" that exemplifies "the primordial repression" of the antagonism of class struggle. "It can therefore be said," as Benita Parry puts it, "that the coherence of historical narrative is demonstrated and repudiated, and a criticism of imperialism's ideology which looks to its social matrix is undercut by a moral fable where the imperialist inspiration figures as the most recent incarnation of original sin and permanent folly" (101).

While the first chapter forecasts the ideological conditions under which the lower class citizens of Costaguana operate, this tendency to ignore the complexities of political conflict through religious narrative is pervasive and is encouraged by the country's religious leaders. When, for example, a churchgoer asks Father Román in what direction Europe is situated, he cautions that "'ignorant sinners like you of the San Tomé mine should think earnestly of everlasting punishment instead of inquiring into the magnitude of the earth, with its countries and populations altogether beyond your understanding'"

(78). Harking back to the legend of the gringos on Punta Mala, the religious dogma perpetuated by the likes of Father Román teaches the ordinary citizens to know their place and make no attempt to involve themselves in thinking beyond their own religious faith. In this sense, religious dogma itself is a spectral force in the lives of the faithful. Those who do not have faith, on the other hand, are haunted by the effects of "material interests."

The driving force of "material interests" in the novel is, of course, the San Tomé mine, whose legacy and endurance haunt all who come into contact with it, beginning with Charles Gould's father: "Mr. Gould, senior, did not desire the perpetual possession of that desolate locality; in fact, the mere vision of it arising before his mind in the still watches of the night had the power to exasperate him into hours of hot and agitated insomnia […] He also began to dream of vampires" (42-43). Recalling the popular conception of Guzmán Bento as a "sanguinary land-haunting spectre," Gould senior's unwanted possession of the San Tomé mine acts as an enervating force that haunts him until his death. Wise enough to understand that the mine will become the battleground for Costaguana's perpetual and inevitable political quarrels, Gould senior writes to his son "with words of horror at the apparently eternal character of that curse. For the Concession had been granted to him and his descendants forever" (44). In a sense, one might argue that in fact Gould senior—haunting his son in the vein of Hamlet, though less directly— understands the function of ideology in Costaguana better than anyone.

But Charles's youth and distance from the reality of Costaguana's affairs leave him blind to the "reality" of the situation. As he grows older "with advancing wisdom, he manage[s] to clear the plain truth of the business from the fantastic intrusions of the Old

Man of the Sea, vampires, and ghouls, which had lent to his father's correspondence the flavor of a gruesome Arabian Night's tale" (45). And finally, "by the time he was twenty Charles Gould had, in his turn, fallen under the spell of the San Tomé mine. But it was another form of enchantment, more suitable to his youth, into whose magic formula there entered hope, vigour, and self-confidence, instead of weary indignation and despair" (45). While he may "clear the plain truth of the business from the fantastic intrusions" that his father attaches to it in his typical pragmatic fashion, Gould merely supplants his father's fantasies with his own. While his father's imagery may be fantastic, he in fact recognizes the mine for what it is and foresees the future conflict that it will create from the moment it is thrust upon him.

Charles, on the other hand, comes to fetishize the mine and convinces himself that running it properly will act as penance for his father's tragic life: "The mine had been the cause of an absurd moral disaster; its working must be made a serious and moral success" (50). Unlike his father, Charles is unable to recognize that the "absurd moral disaster" the mine becomes is not a chance occurrence, but that absurdity is the modus operandi of Costaguanan politics. Naively thinking that proper management of the mine will establish peace in the province, he hopes to erase—or at least gloss over—his father's failure. "'What is wanted here,'" he explains to his wife,

> "is law, good faith, order, security. Any one can declaim about these
> things, but I pin my faith to material interests. Only let the material
> interests once get a firm footing, and they are bound to impose the
> conditions on which alone they can continue to exist. That's how your
> money-making is justified here in the face of lawlessness and disorder. It

is justified because the security which it demands must be shared with an oppressed people. A better justice will come afterwards. That's your ray of hope." (63)

Encapsulated here is Charles's own unique brand of ideology, which he uses to justify his own "money-making." He fails to recognize, of course, that the "peace" he speaks of will be brought about by the very violent antagonisms that establishing and running the mine will entail. In short, he describes the very function of capitalism itself (as described by Marx) which, once put in place, relies upon its own constant reproduction, or "action," which fittingly becomes the novel's symbolic foil to "faith":

It hurt Charles Gould to feel that never more, by no effort of will, would he be able to think of his father in the same way he used to think of him when the poor man was alive. His breathing image was no longer in his power. This consideration, closely affecting his own identity, filled his breast with a mournful and angry desire for action. In this his instinct was unerring. Action is consolatory. It is the enemy of thought and the friend of flattering illusions. Only in the conduct of our action can we find the sense of mastery over the fates. (50)

For those characters who have little or no religious faith, its passivity is replaced by consolatory and equally mystifying "action." It is, in fact, "action" that perpetuates the flattering illusions that haunt the psyches of many of the novel's central characters.

Like Gould senior, Decoud is one of the only characters who appear to recognize the political climate of Costaguana—and politics generally, for that matter—for what it really is. He says, as we are first introduced to him, that "any government anywhere, is a

thing of exquisite comicality to a discerning mind; but really we Spanish-Americans do

overstep the bounds. No man of ordinary intelligence can take part in the intrigues of *une*

farce macabre" (112). Unlike many of the other characters in the novel, who allow their

illusions to unconsciously dictate their actions, Decoud is very much aware of his own

personal illusions. "'No one is a patriot for nothing,'" he tells Antonia. "'The word serves

us well. But I am clear-sighted, and I shall not use that word to you, Antonia! I have no

patriotic illusions. I have only the supreme illusion of a lover'" (137). In this sense

Decoud, who is far more introspective than Nostromo, comes much closer to an actual

realization of how ideology acts upon him and others.

       One of the novel's great tragedies, I would argue, is that this recognition

eventually leads to Decoud's suicide when he realizes how utterly dependent we are upon

the "sustaining illusion" of "action" that constitutes our subjectivity:

> After three days of waiting for the sight of some human face, Decoud
>
> caught himself entertaining a doubt of his own individuality. It had
>
> merged into the world of cloud and water, of natural forces and forms of
>
> nature. In our activity alone do we find the sustaining illusion of an
>
> independent existence as against the whole scheme of things of which we
>
> form a helpless part. Decoud lost all belief in the reality of his action past
>
> and to come. (357)

While far more thoughtful and philosophically engaged than Charles Gould, Decoud

ironically suffers from the same fixation upon "action." I would argue, drawing in a

Lacanian context, that we might read "action" as a proxy for "desire." In a broader sense,

if we approach this scene from the perspective of "the 'repressed' real of antagonism"

that Žižek describes, we may also read "action" as a code word for "material interests" and, in turn, for the antagonism of class struggle itself. Only in our relationship to material interests, or within the world of class struggle, do we find "the sustaining illusion of an independent existence." Nostromo's false "revelation" that his own interests do not reflect those of the people to whom he has been enslaved, when viewed in this context, shows merely the reinforcement of the sustaining illusion. Conrad brilliantly demonstrates the ways in which various forms of either "faith" or "action" serve to fill the gap of the real for each individual subject. It is in these moments of false revelation that Conrad most skillfully deconstructs Marxist notions of ideology as illusion that were prevalent at the time and highlights the interpenetration of ideology and individual subjectivity, ultimately demonstrating the ways in which politics and class conflict profoundly affect the individual psyche.

Conclusion

Conrad's deconstructive approach toward ideology and subjectivity may be read as deeply pessimistic. After all, there is not a single major character in the novel who does not suffer from the damaging effects of ideological illusions. While this is a fair assessment to a point, I would argue that reading the novel through Žižek enables us to see the redemptive potential of Conrad's critique. In his typical fashion, Conrad carefully avoids didacticism. I would follow Daniel Schwarz in saying of Conrad that "while he dissects flaws in various systems, states, and communities, he does not propose alternative programs" (554). Like Žižek, he does not claim or attempt to offer definitive

solutions to the problem of ideology critique, but he does insist that it must be essential in understanding the hegemony of modern Imperial capitalism. Ideology critique must not, by necessity, be a teleological practice, but understanding, as best we can, how ideology functions and creating a space whereby we might meaningfully critique it allows us to retain a sense of individual agency that is critical in combating the political forces that would take it away.

In the end, our reading must necessarily come back to Nostromo. One might argue that in a novel so broad in scope and with so many characters his importance as an individual is actually diminished. Conrad himself, as critics have pointed out, insisted that Nostromo was not the hero of the novel, but a symbolic figure of its broader themes. "The title," according to Benita Parry, "functions as a metonym for an ethos that, by consecrating the private ownership of property, legitimises the concept of the person as possession" (102-103); for all that, I would insist that Nostromo remains the central figure in Conrad's critique of ideology, particularly when viewed through the Žižekian lens that we have used here. Žižek insists that one of the tasks of the "postmodern" critique of ideology must be "to designate the elements within an existing social order which – in the guise of 'fiction', that is, of 'Utopian' narratives of possible but failed alternative histories – point towards the system's antagonistic character, and thus 'estrange' us to the self-evidence of its established identity" (7). Following his assertion, I would argue finally that Nostromo is essential to our critique of ideology in the novel because his life itself is held up as the penultimate "Utopian narrative."

Widely considered to be "incorruptible," politically indifferent, and absolutely loyal, Nostromo represents a sort of alternative history—or the possibility of such a

history. This is especially apparent when the fate of the San Tomé silver is quite literally put into his hands; and it is his ubiquitous reputation that makes his "downfall" all the more startling and meaningful by contrast. Of course, we can go all the way back to the legend of the gringos on Punta Mala in the opening chapter for the first foreshadowing of Nostromo's later actions, demonstrating another way that Conrad places his readers "above" the action and allows us a privileged view of how ideology is functioning in the narrative. While Nostromo appears incorruptible in the eyes of those who rely upon his help and loyalty, right from the beginning of the novel he in fact "estranges" those who come into contact with him from the reality of "the system's antagonistic character." Nostromo, we might say, straddles the fault line of social antagonism in the novel; in him we find embodied the tensions that underlie every social and political interaction.

This fact makes it all the more important that Nostromo's "epiphany" is a false one; rather than escape the spell of ideology that has been cast upon him by those who have used him to perpetuate their own material interests, he simply adopts a clichéd ideology of "rebellion" that further expedites his downfall and eventually leads to his death. In keeping with the broad scope of the novel, his death does not mark its end, but is rather folded back into the utopian narrative into which his life has been spun:

> Dr. Monygham, pulling round in the police-galley, heard the name pass over his head. It was another of Nostromo's successes, the greatest, the most enviable, the most sinister of all. In that true cry of love and grief that seemed to ring aloud from Punta Mala to Azuera and away to the bright line of the horizon, overhung by a big white cloud shining like a mass of solid silver, the genius of the magnificent Capataz de Cargadores

dominated the dark Gulf containing his conquests of treasure and love.

(405)

The novel's final paragraph suggests that Nostromo's legacy, the utopian narrative that has built up around him, will live beyond him and, by implication, will continue to estrange its adherents from the social antagonism that it has obscured and that he once embodied *and* obscured himself. If, as Benita Parry maintains, "in the end Nostromo survives his abject capitulation to live on in the minds and hearts of Costaguana's poor as exemplar of their aspirations" (127), the parable of the gringo specters is brought back around full circle to Nostromo in the novel's final pages and the (false) parable of his life that fails to account for his theft of the silver will continue to ensure the capitulation of the poor to the forces that enslave them.

Jameson has written usefully of the way in which Nostromo and Decoud's heroic act is reinscribed back into the narrative that reinforces the dominant ideology:

> [T]he central act, the heroic expedition of Decoud and Nostromo, which ought to have grounded their status as heroes, as ultimate legendary forms of the individual subject, is appropriated by collective history, in which it also exists, but in a very different way, as the founding of institutions. In classical Sartrean language, we can say that the historical act of Decoud and Nostromo has been alienated and stolen from them even before they achieve it; or in a more Hegelian terminology, their action can be characterized as that of structural ephemeral mediation. They stand indeed in Weberian place of the "vanishing mediator," of the prophetic or charismatic individual term whose historical but transindividual function,

according to the "ruse of history," is merely to enable the coming into being after him of a new type of collectivity. Decoud's and Nostromo's is the moment of the action of the individual subject, but one which is at once reabsorbed by the very stability and transindividuality of the institutions it is necessary to found. (278-279)

In this sense, the narrative that emerges from Nostromo and Decoud's act simply reinforces and perpetuates the legend of the gringos on Punta Mala. Ironically, in his very attempt to combat the ideology that has enslaved him, Nostromo's actions are instead misinterpreted and used in a fashion that actually strengthens the dominant order. As such, we can finally say that the brand of ideology critique in which the novel is engaged does not exactly critique the various ideologies operative within the world of the novel, but rather deconstructs and critiques the processes that produce and sustain them. I would argue that this is a reflection not of Conrad's political conservatism, but of his unparalleled ability to penetrate to the heart of the political, social, and psychological affairs with which conflicted individual subjects must contend.

CHAPTER TWO: REPETITION, RACE, AND DESIRE IN *THE GREAT GATSBY*

F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote that he would "rather have written Conrad's *Nostromo* than any other novel" (87) and elsewhere called it "the great novel of the past fifty years" (*On Authorship* 86). Indeed, he spoke of his admiration for Conrad on a number of occasions[16] and openly acknowledged adapting some of Conrad's techniques in his own writing. In one anecdote related in Arthur Mizener's *The Far Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald and his friend Ring Lardner actually devised "a typical Fitzgerald scheme" in order to meet Conrad during his much publicized visited to America in 1923. "They would go to the Doubledays [where Conrad was staying] and perform a dance on the lawn," Mizener explains. "Their notion was that this dance would make Conrad see he was dealing with men who knew how to turn an amusing, yet delicate and sincere, compliment and that from there everything would be clear sailing. But before Conrad could be properly charmed they found themselves thrown off the Doubleday estate for creating a drunken disturbance" (158). Alas, despite Fitzgerald's best efforts the two writers would never meet.

Conrad died in 1924 and there is no record of his having read Fitzgerald's work, but his influence on the latter is clear and has led to some fruitful, albeit relatively limited, critical study. Robert Emmet Long was the first to meaningfully explore the Conrad/Fitzgerald connection in his seminal essay "*The Great Gatsby* and the Tradition of Joseph Conrad," which was first published in two parts by *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* in 1966. Long's study is broad in scope and traces *Gatsby*'s influence

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[16] According to John Galsworthy, Fitzgerald once told him that "'you are one of the three living writers that I admire most in the world: you and Joseph Conrad and Anatole France!'" (Mizener 132).

through a number of Conrad's novels. His most notable contribution is his attentive

reading of *Gatsby* as a restyling of *Heart of Darkness*. He draws upon a number of

elements in *Gatsby* that Fitzgerald appears to have adapted from Conrad, like the

embedded narrator who is captivated with a mysterious companion; the exploration of

obsessive desire and psychological disintegration; and the parallels between Marlow's

final meeting with Kurtz's wife and Nick's encounter with Gatsby's father. While Long's

work remains essential in laying the groundwork for comparative study of Conrad and

Fitzgerald, more recent critics have added greater critical depth and complexity to our

understanding of the intriguing connections to be found in their work.

Peter Lancelot Mallios has been instrumental in this regard, first in his 2001 essay

"Undiscovering the Country: Conrad, Fitzgerald, and Meta-National Form" and later in

his book *Our Conrad: Constituting American Modernity* (2010). Mallios argues in the

former that "what was once, for Fitzgerald, the allure of discovering and declaring the

essential terms of American national identity becomes, after Conrad, an expressive

opportunity to address nationhood as an imaginative social construct, and to uncover the

various imaginative techniques that framed American nationalist imaginings in the

1920s" (358). In addressing "nationhood" as an imaginative construct, I would add that

Fitzgerald necessarily addresses "nationality" in the same way. In doing so, I argue,

Fitzgerald ultimately addresses subjectivity itself as an "imaginative social construct,"

just as Conrad does in *Nostromo*. But whereas Conrad explores individual subjectivities

within a fictional nation as it succumbs to the influence of Anglo-American capitalism, in

Gatsby the capitalist dream has been fully realized and the social antagonism has been

almost entirely effaced by the rampant ideology of both personal and national "success."

Certainly we would view *Gatsby* much differently had it been published after the Stock Market Crash of 1929; but much of what makes *Gatsby* great is its prescient understanding of the antagonisms that lurk beneath the prevailing ideology and its deeply Conradian rendering of the individual subjects who are torn asunder by them. The following focuses on what is, to my mind, the central underlying social antagonism in *Gatsby*: The issue of race.

Race was the elephant in the room in Fitzgerald studies for decades, but since around the mid-nineties it has been a hot-button issue. A smattering of critics as early as the late-sixties and early-seventies began exploring Fitzgerald's personal racial politics. But it was the likes of Richard Lehan's The Great Gatsby: *The Limits of Wonder* (1990), Jeffrey Louis Decker's "Gatsby's Pristine Dream: The Diminishment of the Self-Made Man in the Tribal Twenties" (1994), and Walter Benn Michaels' *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (1995) that set the stage for a thriving discourse on race in Fitzgerald's fiction—and especially *The Great Gatsby*.

A major catalyst for these seminal readings was the rise of new historicism, which led to a reexamination of the nativist ideology that proliferated following the First World War. "The social climate of the early 1920's," says Decker, "specifically as it is expressed in increasingly racialized forms of nativism, creates the conditions under which Fitzgerald's narrator imagines Gatsby as a figure for America" (56). In sharpening our perception of the social, cultural, and historical conditions that *Gatsby* grows out of, new historical influence sowed the seed for the recent outcrop of critical attention to the novel's treatment of race. This new cycle of criticism, with noteworthy contributions including Meredith Goldsmith's "White Skin, White Mask: Passing, Posing, and

Performing in *The Great Gatsby*" (2003), Benjamin Schreier's "Desire's Second Act:
'Race' and *The Great Gatsby*'s Cynical Americanism" (2007), and Greg Forter's chapter
on *Gatsby* in *Gender, Race, and Mourning in American Modernism* (2011), has situated
the novel's racial politics in relation to prevailing contemporary critical approaches
including performance studies, queer studies, and narratology, helping establish what is
now a well-defined body of scholarship on the issue.

However, the issue of race in *Gatsby* has not been sufficiently explored from a
psychoanalytic perspective and I would argue that further intervention in this realm is
needed. My justification for this is essentially twofold. First, a slew of recent studies
drawing inspiration from Frantz Fanon's appropriation of Lacanian psychoanalysis have
added a compelling and valuable dimension to the study of race and have considerably
recalibrated the field. These include, to name a few, the influential collection *Female
Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (1997), edited by
Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helene Moglen; Claudia Tate's *Psychoanalysis
and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race* (1998); Barbara Johnson's *The
Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (1998); Christopher
Lane's collection *The Psychoanalysis of Race* (1998); Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks's
Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race (2000); Mikko Tuhkanen's *The
American Optic: Psychoanalysis, Critical Race Theory, and Richard Wright* (2009); and
various contributions from Slavoj Žižek, Homi Bhabha, Joan Copjec, Judith Butler, and
others. The second reason is that, while surprisingly few critics have taken up the task,
Gatsby lends itself remarkably well to psychoanalytic interpretation. A.B. Paulson, John
Hilgart, Barbara Will, Richard Godden, James M. Mellard, and others have certainly laid

some groundwork in this respect, but there remains much to be said about the novel's psychodynamics.[17]

    If we accept Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks's assertion that "Lacan's theory of subject constitution provides us with cognitive landmarks or positions by which to bring the subject of race into representation" (2), we might argue that a psychoanalytic reading of race in *Gatsby* involves identifying the major "cognitive landmarks" in the life of the title character. These are primarily manifested in adult repetitions of childhood—and teenage—fixations. In order to make sense of these landmarks, we should begin by contextualizing Gatsby's desire in relation to Lacan's "fundamental fantasy," which he codifies in the matheme $ \$ <> a $. A reading of the novel that places Gatsby as the barred subject (\$)—the void of subjectivity—and situates him in relation to Daisy as *l'objet petit a* (a), allows us to look beyond Daisy as mere commodity fetish, but rather as an object-manifestation of Gatsby's primal lack, the signifying phallus. While commodity fetish is one facet of Daisy's symbolic overdetermination, the novel—through Nick—tells us quite clearly what Gatsby is *really* after: "He talked a lot about the past and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, *some idea of himself perhaps*, that had gone into loving Daisy" (117, emphasis mine). Although Nick's suggestion is frequently cited, critics tend to revert to the standard interpretation of Daisy as just another item in Gatsby's list of "things." I suggest that we take Nick's proposition more seriously and pay closer attention to the construction and function of Gatsby's desire in the text.

    Benjamin Schreier has made the valuable observation that *Gatsby* "enacts a deeply problematical drama of identification whereby the representational capacity of

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[17] I would add, also, that what follows is a preliminary reading that leaves much to be said; I hope others will take up this issue further.

identity—ultimately *American* identity—is an object alternatively of desire and skepticism" and that it "ultimately lacks faith in the symbolic orders on which stable conceptions of identity rely" (155). Yet a more concentrated (re)contextualization of Lacan's symbolic order relative to race will help us bring the novel's psychodynamics into sharper focus. If we look beyond—or, perhaps more accurately, through—Daisy as commodity fetish, she may be viewed as an object-manifestation of Gatsby's desire to return to the realm of the pre-Symbolic, prior to the figurative castration of the oedipal drama. Her maternal role, which is crystallized through the association of the green light at the end of her dock with the "fresh, green breast of the new world" on the final page of the novel, suggests her broader symbolic role in the text as America itself. And if we accept Decker's claim that "Gatsby is 'borne back ceaselessly' into a Nordic past as recollected within the climate of the Tribal Twenties, when conceptions of whiteness both narrow and become a sign not of skin color but of national identity" (53), we might argue that she ultimately represents Gatsby's desire to re-constitute his ambiguous— suggestively Jewish—racial identity in line with a fantasized Nordic American past. Adopting Walter Benn Michaels' broader claim about Jewish identity helps us further contextualize this process:

> The point, then, of identifying as a Jew the "stranger" who wants to marry into your family is to identify as American the family he wants to marry into, which is to say, to transform American identity from the sort of thing that could be acquired (through naturalization) into the sort of thing that had to be inherited (from one's parents). Insofar as the family becomes the

site of national identity, nationality becomes an effect of racial identity.

(8)

Put in this broader context, we can read Gatsby's renouncing of his biological family as a denial of his racially adulterated lineage and his desire to marry Daisy as an attempt to enter/create a family that would regenerate his socially-projected ancestry as figuratively white. Ultimately, this reading offers us a unique way of reconciling the symbolic duality of Gatsby's autopoietic process and America's fantasized (and racially whitewashed) mythopoeic past.

Situating Gatsby's Desire

Just after the midway point in the novel, Nick recounts what must inevitably be considered an unverifiable account of Gatsby's adolescence:

His parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people—his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all. The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself […]. So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen year old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end. (104)

Outside of the general unreliability of both our title character and narrator, Nick's admission that "he told it to me at a time of confusion, when I had reached the point of believing everything and nothing about him" (107) leads us to further question the story's veracity. But what is particularly interesting about Gatsby's account is that it holds equal

interpretive value whether it is true or not. Either his parents actually were "shiftless and unsuccessful farm people" whom he never really accepted, or else he fabricated the account and, in doing so, refuses to accept whoever they *really* were. Nevertheless, the suggestion that his parents either were, or may have been, farm people has substantial— though multiple and perhaps competing—implications. On the one hand, this lineage may symbolically tie Gatsby to America's earliest settlers, implying a hereditary stake in the nation's history and emphasizing his essential "Americanness." On the other, an association with itinerant immigrant farmers may imply a family lineage that could potentially be perceived as non-white.

Gatsby's account reflects the ambiguity into which he is continually cast (and casts himself) throughout the novel and, ultimately, we do not come to understand his history with any more certainty. Instead, we are confronted with the essential polysemy of the novel, which—as critics have observed[18]—arises out of the many narrative and textual contradictions that cleave fissures in the meaning of the text. But regardless how we characterize or interpret Gatsby's family history, what matters is that he renounces it. In doing so, he symbolically extricates himself from the oedipal drama and sets the stage for what James M. Mellard has called in relation to Fitzgerald's short story "Winter Dreams," "an adult repetition of a childhood phenomenon" (55).

In his highly original reading of "Winter Dreams," part of what has come to be called the "Gatsby cluster" of short stories that prefigure the novel, Mellard argues that this tale of ill-fated romance "illustrates how we may read the dialectic of desire not only

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[18] For an excellent interpretation of the novel's internal contradictions, see Hilgart, whose essay "resist[s] the conclusion that contradiction in the novel defines Nick's limitations, arguing on the contrary that contradiction is very much Nick's overt technique, serving not only to undercut his critique of commodity culture but to mount it" (88).

in the context of oedipal authority—the Lacanian Law of the Symbolic Father—but also

in that of the abjected mother residing in the semiotic *chora* Julia Kristeva posits as prior

to the patriarchal order ultimately repressing it" (51). In the story, a young boy named

Dexter Green who aspires to transcend his humble upbringing and join the ranks of the

upper class, falls in love with a wealthy girl named Judy Jones. Much like Gatsby, he

covets her as a symbol of the wealth and status that he hopes to acquire. The narrator tells

us at one point that "he wanted not association with glittering things and glittering

people—he wanted the glittering things themselves" ("Winter Dreams" 220-221). Like

Gatsby, the story speaks through the language of commodities, as material possessions

become tantamount to social stature. Matthew J. Bruccoli describes the story as "the

strongest of the Gatsby-cluster stories," explaining that "like the novel, it examines a boy

whose ambitions become identified with a selfish rich girl. Indeed, Fitzgerald removed

Dexter Green's response to Judy Jones's home from the magazine text and wrote it into

the novel as Jay Gatsby's response to Daisy Fay's home" (217). By reading Dexter's

desire through Lacan's account of the oedipal plot, Mellard chronicles the eventuation of

Dexter's oedipal resolution. Like Daisy, "from the beginning Judy wears a halo of

desirability because of her metonymic association with a place—and eventually, a

subject—of wealth and power" (Mellard 58). Through the metonymy of Dexter's desire,

Judy ultimately represents the symbolic phallus that Dexter lacks on account of the

figurative castration of the oedipal drama. "As a symbol of the phallus," Mellard says of

Judy, "she represents something beyond desire" (66) and "as the symbol of that which the

subject wants but cannot have, she invokes castration in the prohibitions of the law of the

father" (67). The oedipal drama unfolds almost identically in *Gatsby*. The crucial

difference is that, while at the story's end "Dexter has truly become the postoedipal subject, has resigned himself to loss, loss not of grief or of Judy but of that which every oedipalized subject loses—the phallus" (Mellard 74), Gatsby instead charges on toward the painful *jouissance*[19] that resides in possession of Daisy and is eventually punished for his transgression of the Law of the Name of the Father. As with Dexter, Gatsby's desired object (Daisy) is merely one manifestation in a deeper signifying chain and, as Mellard explains, "since the object is never attainable, both Gatsby and Dexter approach it (as do most subjects) from the side, for, in the beginning, they focus not on the woman as such, but on the accouterments of wealth with which they associate the woman and in which they display their right to her, the one who symbolizes their fantasies" (54-55).

For Gatsby, this association is formed the first time he visits Daisy's house, which Nick tells us "had amazed him—he had never been in such a beautiful house before. But what gave it an air of breathless intensity was that Daisy lived there—it was as casual a thing to her as his tent out at camp was to him. There was a ripe mystery about it" (155). Gatsby realizes, however, that as "a penniless young man without a past" (156) he will not be able to marry Daisy. As Walter Benn Michaels argues, "the real problem is that he is 'without a past' and to get Daisy he must get a past. Thus Jimmy Gatz's efforts to improve himself, which begin in the Franklin-like scheduling of his present intended to produce the perfected Gatsby of his future ('study electricity, etc.'), must themselves be transformed into efforts to reconstruct his past" (26). Put another way, "Gatsby does not

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[19] "The French word, given its indissoluble relationship to all the rest of Lacan's teaching, including his mathemes or his logical and topological formulae, is difficult to translate into English. Lacan himself was aware of the problem and favored a combination of 'enjoyment' and 'lust'; however, all translators have noted the conceptual loss that is sustained in the use of these terms, and therefore the great majority prefer to keep the French word, without italics, as a word already recognized by the *OED* and as a psychoanalytic contribution to the English language" (Braunstein 103).

want to be praised for what he is, but for what he is not" (Berman, "*Gatsby* and the Twenties" 87). While Gatsby certainly wants to "reconstruct" his past, as Michaels has said, he also wants to *repeat* the past once he has revised its premises and live out the fantasy that his socially and racially muddled pedigree has prevented. Gatsby's symbolic transformation from James Gatz to Jay Gatsby represents his desire in motion before he meets Daisy; she simply becomes its object manifestation, or *objet a*.

Lacan describes *objet a*[20] as "something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ. This serves as a symbol of the lack, that is to say, of the phallus, not as such, but in so far as it is lacking. It must, therefore, be an object that is, firstly, separable and, secondly, that has some relation to the lack" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 103). Prior to the mirror stage, the object of the child's desire is the mother; the child—who has not yet imagined him/herself as subject(ed)—sees the mother as a physical extension of its own body. The "moment at which the mirror stage comes to an end," however,

> decisively tips the whole of human knowledge [*savoir*] into being
>
> mediated by the other's desire, constitutes its objects in an abstract
>
> equivalence due to competition from other people, and turns the *I* into an
>
> apparatus to which every instinctual pressure constitutes a danger, even if
>
> it corresponds to a natural maturation process. The very normalization of

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[20] "Objet 'a' designates the lost object as an abject remnant and uncanny revenant of the Real. Its lower-case 'a' stands for *autre* or little other in order to distinguish it from the Big Other of the general language system. In French *objet a* was pronounced by Lacan as *objet petit a*, 'object small a,' both in order to preserve its quasi-algebraic character as an abstract symbol for the absence of the lost object and also to sound like *objet petit tas*, 'a little pile of shit'" (Levine 67). Lacan maintained that the term should remain untranslated, wishing it to resemble an algebraic sign. As a result, it is represented by English translators as *objet petit a*, *objet a*, and at times simply *objet*. It is also—against Lacan's wishes—often translated as object a, little object a, and so on. For this reason, the reader may assume that the various terms are used interchangeably in this essay and refer to the same concept.

> this maturation is henceforth dependent in man on cultural intervention, as
> is exemplified by the fact that sexual object choice is dependent upon the
> Oedipus complex. (Lacan, *Écrits* 79)

Following the mirror stage, the initial desire for the mother (Other) becomes a repressed
unconscious desire for which the subject seeks substitutes, now symbolized in objects, or
the "little things"—*objets petit a*—that represent the mother/Other that has been lost
(Mellard, *Using Lacan* 147). While the process of subject formation is initiated in
childhood, it is on-going throughout adult life.

In adopting this Lacanian terminology, then, we must make a crucial
differentiation between *Autre* ("Big" Other) and *autre* ("little" other). According to
Lacan, the status of the Other is interminable. The subject's desire for the Other is an
unending and impossible attempt to fill the void left by the loss of the mother; it is this
interminability that causes the subject to seek substitutes in objects that can take virtually
any form[21]:

> Objet *a* can take on many different guises. It may be a certain kind of look
> someone gives you, the timber of someone's voice [i.e., "full of money"],
> the whiteness, feel, or smell of someone's skin, the color of someone's
> eyes, the attitude someone manifests when he or she speaks—the list goes
> on and on. Whatever an individual's characteristic cause may be, it is
> highly specific and nothing is easily put in its place. Desire is fixated on
> this cause and this cause alone. (Fink, *Clinical Introduction* 52)

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[21] See Fink's *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (1995), *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (1997), *Lacan to the Letter: Reading* Écrits *Closely* (2004), and *Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique: A Lacanian Approach for Practitioners (2007)* for some of the most lucid explications of Lacan's work.

Objet a produces an elusive/illusory duality, since its value is not inherent, but is rather a product of the metonymic process of desire, "indicating that it is the signifier-to-signifier connection that allows for the elision by which the signifier instates lack of being [*le manque de l'être*] in the object-relation, using signification's referral [*renvoi*] value to invest it with the desire aiming at the lack that it supports" (Lacan, *Écrits* 428). Thus, as Lacan famously says, desire is ultimately "caught in the rails of metonymy, eternally extending toward the *desire for something else*" (*Écrits* 428).

In order to understand Gatsby's fundamental desire to rewrite his ethnological history, we must further unpack the metonymic chain of Gatsby's desire and the process through which Daisy becomes the penultimate link. The key moment in this process is their first kiss:

> His heart beat faster and faster as Daisy's *white* face came up to his own. He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God. So he waited, listening for a moment longer to the tuning fork that had been struck upon a star. Then he kissed her. At his lips' touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete. (117, emphasis mine)

The ineffability of the dream—"his unutterable visions"—collide here with a very specific "object": "her perishable breath," culminating in an aptly described "incarnation" that transforms the various components of Gatsby's desire (which are joined through metonymy) into a Borromean knot that entwines each fiber of Daisy's symbolic overdetermination. Hilgart has made a similar observation: "His portrait shows Gatsby's

consciousness to be so completely reified that desire's subsitutional, symbolic process has become a loop, repeatedly attempting to exceed itself yet ever diverted back to the signifiers of the commodity" (99). In highlighting the process of reification, Hilgart perceptively demonstrates the way in which commodities in the novel act as signifiers of deeper desires rather than ends in themselves. Ronald Berman recognizes this distinction as well, noting that "the central irony developed by the novel is that our largest feelings, love and faith, can only be directed at objects unable to contain them" (The Great Gatsby *and Modern Times* 50). In turn, when Gatsby says to Nick that "'her voice is full of money'" (127), he employs not a simile but a direct metaphor; her voice is not *like* money, it *is* money.[22] According to Richard Godden, "Daisy's quality has a tendency to become a quantity: how many bedrooms, how many men, what make of car? Even as the object of Gatsby's desire is translated into 'commodity', so Gatsby's desire is commodified" (*Fictions of Capital* 83). Since commodification plays an integral role in the process of Gatsby's desire, it is crucial that we recognize the role of objects in the novel—and here I include Daisy—as mere place-holders (*objets a*) for Gatsby's deeper desire. The first kiss marks the moment when Daisy as commodity fetish and as object-manifestation of Gatsby's preexisting desire intersect. It also closely precedes the moment, as I will go on to argue, that Gatsby symbolically reinitiates the oedipal drama.

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[22] See Godden, "A Diamond Bigger than the Ritz," for more on Daisy's voice.

Desire and Repetition

Just before describing the first kiss, Nick recounts the following: "Out of the corner of his eye Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalk really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees—he could climb to it, if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder" (117). In his classic Freudian reading, A.B. Paulson glosses this passage by arguing that "Gatsby must 'climb' alone because Fitzgerald's metaphor—despite its conventionality—is true to the psychic realities of nursing infants and mothers' breasts; at some deep level Gatsby pursues a source of nourishment in which the self and the world merge, fuse, and expand to colossal proportions" (313). Bruce Fink can help us take this analysis one step further; he explains that "when Freud says in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* that '[t]he finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it,' he is referring to the fact that object-choice after the latency period repeats the child's first object-choice: the breast. Here too, an initially encountered object is found anew at some later point in time" (*The Lacanian Subject* 94).

Read in the context of Freud's insights on repetition, Gatsby's encounters with Daisy emerge as repetitions of his childhood relationship with his mother. The maternal language that appears throughout the novel—of which more will be said later—suggests Daisy as a substitute for the biological mother who Gatsby has forsaken—and who is conspicuously absent from the text. When, in the final lines of the novel, the green light at the end of Daisy's dock is symbolically linked to the "fresh, green breast of the new world" (189), the incarnation that becomes "complete" with the first kiss is now wholly

consummated in the novel's broader symbolic configuration. Ultimately, the final page of the novel underscores repetition as its textual, thematic, and symbolic axis. Gatsby's attempt to repeat his past with Daisy is finally equated with a collective cultural desire to relive a fantasized American past when "man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder" (189). While not understood or desired at the time—when the future had not been foreseen—it is the nostalgia to recover the (imagined) vanished moment that underlies the compulsion to repeat.

In order to make sense of this compulsion, it will be useful here to review Freud's identification of four types of repetitive behavior in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." The first involves "dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses [that] have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright" (11). The second is the *fort/da* (gone/there) game played by children, in which the child throws a toy from its crib, reels it back in, and then repeats the process.

> The interpretation of the game was related to the child's great cultural achievement—the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting. He compensated himself for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach. (14)

The third type of behavior occurs when an analysand is exploring his or her repressed past and "is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past" (19). The fourth is a more generalized "compulsion of destiny," in which the subject possesses "an essential character-trait which always remains the same and which is compelled to find expression in a repetition of the same experiences" (23-24). Freud concludes that "if we take into account observations such as these […] we shall find courage to assume that there really does exist in the mind a compulsion to repeat which overrides the pleasure principle" (24). Because the so-called "repetition compulsion" acts counter to the pleasure principle, Freud goes on to explain, it must therefore represent something "more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides" (25). This compulsion to act against the pleasure principle underlies Derrida's proclamation in *Writing and Difference* (1967) that "what is tragic is not the impossibility but the necessity of repetition" (248). In other words—as we see in the novel—repetition acts through language as it does through desire.

The novel's tragedy, in both a classical and psychological sense, is encapsulated in Gatsby's "incredulous" response to Nick's suggestion that one cannot repeat the past: "'Can't repeat the past […] Why of course you can!'" (116). Gatsby epitomizes the repetition compulsion; he attempts to relive his affair with Daisy "as a contemporary experience instead of […] *remembering* it as something belonging to the past." And, as we have seen, Daisy is only an object-manifestation of Gatsby's deeper desire; because it is not Daisy, but a reconstituted version of *himself* that he seeks, Gatsby's dream inevitably "fails" shortly after he and Daisy reunite:

> He had passed visibly through two states and was entering upon a third.
> After his embarrassment and his unreasoning joy he was consumed with
> wonder at her presence. He had been full of the idea so long, dreamed it
> right through to the end, waited with his teeth set, so to speak, at an
> inconceivable pitch of intensity. Now, in the reaction, he was running
> down like an overwound clock. (97)

The image of the overwound clock aptly describes the inevitable failure of the dream to live up to the reality and brings us back to the crucial role of repetition—both psychological and temporal—in the novel, back to the "orgastic future" that has always already eluded us. "In invoking the Oedipus complex," Mellard says of "Winter Dreams," "when Judy situates Dexter within the dialectic of desire, she places him between the polarities of desire and *jouissance*, alienation and separation, Oedipus and Narcissus" (62). The same could be said of Gatsby, whose reunion with Daisy sends him symbolically "beyond the pleasure principle" into the realm of *jouissance*, which functions as a surplus desire not unlike Marx's surplus value.

We can turn to Slavoj Žižek in order to bring the concept of *jouissance* into sharper focus. In one example, he describes the *Titanic* as

> a Thing in the Lacanian sense: the material leftover, the materialization of
> the terrifying, impossible *jouissance*. By looking at the wreck we gain an
> insight into the forbidden domain, into a space that should be left unseen:
> visible fragments are a kind of coagulated remnant of the liquid flux of
> *jouissance*, a kind of petrified forest of enjoyment. (*Sublime Object of
> Ideology* 71)

If we appropriate Žižek's metaphor in respect to Gatsby's desire, we might read Daisy in place of the *Titanic*. Because she cannot possibly live up to her symbolic overdetermination, she comes to represent not Gatsby's dream—which requires the whitewashing of his racial past—but the impossibility of its realization. We can never actually "obtain" the object of desire, but can only circle around it in a never-ending repetition. What is perhaps most tragic in the novel—if we lend some credence to Nick's insight—is that Gatsby appears to realize this fact. Just after the reunion with Daisy, for example, Nick makes the following observation:

> Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching her. It seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one. (98)

The light at the end of the dock serves as a perfect metaphor here, bringing Daisy closer to Gatsby in a process of optical magnification; because the light is physically close but also "as close as a star to the moon," the description fittingly analogizes Gatsby's relationship to his dream: In one sense it feels as close as an object across a bay, but from another perspective the distance is unfathomable. Even as he attempts to relive his past with Daisy, Gatsby realizes that his compulsion to repeat has already taken him beyond the pleasure principle and into the realm of pain and oedipal punishment.

Žižek's metaphor of the *Titanic* wreckage as "a kind of petrified forest of enjoyment" proves useful in relation to other aspects of the novel as well, particularly the valley of ashes, described here by Nick:

> About half way between West Egg and New York the motor-road hastily joins the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of a mile so as to shrink away from a certain desolate area of land. This is a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens, where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. (27)

Nick's Bosch-like imagery recalls Žižek's characterization of the *Titanic*'s wreckage. The valley rests in a liminal zone between the novel's two geographical poles, Manhattan and Long Island, and serves as a repository for the excreta of society's unconscious, "the material leftover" that Žižek describes above. The imagery of "a fantastic farm" suggests an inversion of America's idealized pastoral past. It also calls to mind Žižek's (re)formulation of the Thing (*das Ding*), a concept used by Freud and later Lacan, as

> the Space (the sacred/forbidden zone) in which the gap between the Symbolic and the Real is closed, i.e. in which, to put it somewhat bluntly, our desires are directly materialized (or, to put it in the precise terms of Kant's transcendental idealism, the Zone in which our intuition becomes directly productive - a state of things which, according to Kant, characterizes only infinite divine Reason). ("The Thing" 221)

For Žižek, the Thing is an Id-Machine, "a mechanism that directly materializes our unacknowledged fantasies" (221). This characterization lays the groundwork for a Lacanian analysis of the valley of ashes. The Thing, like Marx's surplus-value and Lacan's *jouissance*, represents a surplus-desire, a desire that has gone "beyond the pleasure principle and into the realm of pain," as does Gatsby's desire for Daisy.

While Žižek's *Titanic* serves "as a condensed, metaphorical representation of the approaching catastrophe of European civilization itself" (70), Fitzgerald's valley of ashes can be said to serve the same function in relation to American civilization as manifested in the views of Tom and other nativists of the time. "'Civilization's going to pieces,'" Tom says in the first chapter of the novel, before referencing "The Rise of the Coloured Empires." The valley of ashes thus becomes a symbolic reservoir for society's abject, a fact that is compounded by the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg that "look out of no face but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a nonexistent nose" and "brood on over the solemn dumping ground" (27-28). Spectral and uncanny, the eyes surveil and judge those living beneath. Moreover, it is overlooking the valley where the novel's most notable confrontation with race occurs as Nick and Gatsby cross over the Queensboro Bridge:

> As we crossed *Blackwells* Island a limousine passed us, in which sat three modish Negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry.
>
> "Anything can happen now that we've slid over this bridge," I thought; "anything at all…." Even Gatsby could happen, without any particular wonder. (73, emphasis mine)

Greg Forter observes that "the sight of racial inversion gives rise to the thought that 'Anything can happen now'; that thought then produces the reflection that 'Even Gatsby could happen.' Such a sequence gives an explicitly racial cast to the social fluidity and sense of possibility that Gatsby exploits in his self-making" (47). Furthermore, I would suggest that as the valley is figuratively racialized through Nick's account, crossing over it comes to suggest the prospect (and fear) of miscegenation. This fear, particularly on Tom's part, then erupts when the characters again make the crossing in chapter 7, where the novel's final tragic events are set in motion and where the violent scene in the hotel room takes us back once again to the oedipal conflict.

Resolution of the Oedipal Conflict

If we read Gatsby's desire through Lacan's fundamental fantasy, we must account for the moment in the novel when Gatsby's symbolic castration first takes place. This occurs, I would argue, when his initial affair with Daisy is interrupted by his deployment and he is subsequently usurped by Tom, who marries Daisy in his absence. A reading of Tom as symbolic father is supported by Nick's first description of him:

> Two shining, arrogant eyes had established dominance over his face and gave him the appearance of always leaning aggressively forward. Not even the effeminate swank of his riding clothes could hide the enormous power of that body—he seemed to fill those glistening boots until he strained the top lacing and you could see a great pack of muscle shifting

when his shoulder moved under his thin coat. It was a body capable of

enormous leverage—a cruel body. (11)

In the subsequent paragraph, Nick observes in his voice "a touch of paternal contempt"

(11). As a symbolic father figure, Tom stands in the way not only of Gatsby's desire for

Daisy, but of her desire for—or recognition of—him, which is crucial in his achieving his

dream. Tom's nativist views, as other critics have noted, put him squarely in opposition

to Gatsby, whom he addresses repeatedly in racially-charged terms. "For Tom, as for

Stoddard," Michaels explains, "Gatsby (né Gatz, with his Wolfsheim 'gonnegtion') isn't

quite white, and Tom's identification of him as in some sense black suggests the power of

the expanded notion of the alien. Gatsby's love for Daisy seems to Tom the expression of

something like the impulse to miscegenation" (25).

The conflict between the men reaches its climax in the hotel room altercation in

which Gatsby insists that Daisy never loved Tom: "'Your wife doesn't love you […]

She's never loved you. She loves me […] She only married you because I was poor and

she was tired of waiting for me. It was a terrible mistake, but in her heart she never loved

anyone but me!'" (137). In this battle for recognition, Gatsby seeks to symbolically kill

Tom—the father figure—so that he can decisively possess Daisy. It is not until Gatsby

has eliminated the symbolic influence of the father figure that Daisy's desire for him will

be pure and uncorrupted. Instead, the humiliating rejection that he suffers when Daisy

refuses to declare that she never loved Tom—"'Oh, you want too much!' she cried to

Gatsby. 'I love you now—isn't that enough?'" (140)—amounts to another symbolic

castration and a further splintering of Gatsby's dream, as she ironically exclaims that she

"'can't help what's past'" (140).

The deeper consequences of Gatsby's oedipal desire begin to unfold when Daisy kills Myrtle Wilson with Gatsby's car. Paulson's analysis of Freudian splitting in the novel is valuable here in drawing the symbolic connection between Daisy and Myrtle that fits her into the oedipal reading as well. "Here," Paulson explains,

> the novel's contrary movement—toward synthesis—appears as a function of androgeny [sic]; that is, the mythical dream of the hermaphroditic being […] The image of the 'fresh green breast' makes a good beginning because I see both androgeny [sic] and splitting as grounded in a special relationship to the mother. (312)

My sense is that the importance of the mother figure in the text is twofold: First, as Paulson argues, "mothers are conspicuous by their very absence" (312). But, at the same time, it is arguably all the more significant that Daisy is the only mother in the novel. As such, it seems a natural extension to symbolically tie her to Myrtle's physical violation, with her breast "swinging loose like a flap" (145).

If we accept the symbolic tie that links Daisy and Myrtle, the mutilation of the latter's breast can be read as an analogy for the corruption of the promise once carried by the American landscape as it has been embodied in our collective culture fantasies. Once again recalling Žižek's *Titanic*, Myrtle's mutilated body may also serve as "the material leftover, the materialization of the terrifying, impossible *jouissance*" that has been Gatsby's relationship with Daisy. Like the *Titanic*, Myrtle's body becomes a spectacle, first lying mutilated in the street and then splayed out on a table in Wilson's garage. The novel's climactic scene invests the valley of ashes with its full significance as described above—"a condensed, metaphorical representation of the approaching catastrophe of

[American] civilization"—and sets in motion the events that lead to Gatsby's ultimate punishment, inflicted by Wilson, but precipitated by Tom.

Conclusion

The final lines of the novel unify its themes with an overwrought precision rivaled by few short passages in fiction. Of particular interest to the present analysis are the following lines: "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter […]" (189). If we are to assume that the referent of the pronoun "It" that begins the second sentence is "the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us," then we are encountering a temporal dislocation in the text—what Thomas Pendleton has called a "chronological incoherence" (12). The text is telling us that "It" ("the orgastic future") "eluded us *then*"—and the context in which the pronoun "then" is used suggests that the elusion occurred in the past; but how can "the orgastic future *that year by year recedes before us*"—in a continual, ongoing action—have eluded us *then*, in the completed past? This paradox produces the polysemous doubling elusion/illusion mentioned earlier. The orgastic future eludes us precisely because it is illusory. And just as the orgastic future eludes us, so too does the certainty of meaning.

We can view this temporal disjunction as what Derrida calls an *aporia*, a paradox or contradiction that threatens to unravel the meaning of the text. And yet this contradiction also *produces* meaning in the final lines of the novel. It is through this temporal paradox that the meaning of the text is disseminated; or, perhaps more acutely

stated, the "literal" meaning is dislocated, allowing the symbolic to finally emerge. The final sentence of the book, "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (189), offers an inviting analogy to the concept of the "floating signifier" developed by Lévi-Strauss and later picked up by Lacan and others. Each individual word in a sentence acts as a "floating signifier" because its meaning cannot be fully known or comprehended until the sentence is completed and the broader meaning crystallizes.

This brings us back to the connection between subjectivity, language, and temporality that pervades the novel. I suggest that we approach the temporal disjunction and linguistic uncertainty of the final lines through Lacan's notion of the future anterior: "I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it as an object. What is realized in my history is neither the past definite as what was, since it is no more, nor even the perfect as what has been in what I am, but the future anterior as what I will have been, given what I am in the process of becoming" (*Écrits* 247). Lacan suggests that the subject must continually reinvent itself by anticipating what it will become in a future moment of psychological harmony. This unified conception of self, however, can only be recognized retrospectively, sending the subject into a repetitive rummaging of the past. It is this compulsion to repeat, or more deeply to reconstitute his past and rewrite his questionable lineage as racial outsider that plunges Gatsby back into the oedipal drama that ultimately punishes him for transgressing not only the Law of the Father, but the racial boundaries that have been erected against him.

CHAPTER THREE: "THE PEOPLE WHO COME TO CALIFORNIA TO DIE":

SWAN SONGS OF MODERNISM IN WEST, HUXLEY, AND FITZGERALD

> "Scattered among these masquerades were people of a different type. Their clothing was somber and badly cut, bought from mail order houses. While the others moved rapidly, darting into stores and cocktail bars, they loitered on the corners or stood with their backs to the shop windows and stared at everyone who passed. When their stare was returned, their eyes filled with hatred. At this time Tod knew very little about them except that they had come to California to die."
>
> – Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust*

> "All of them had come to California as to a promised land; and California had already reduced them to a condition of wandering peonage and was fast transforming them into Untouchables."
>
> – Aldous Huxley, *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*

> "'I seem to be a little mixed up. This doesn't seem to be quite the girl who came out to California for a new life.'"
>
> – Kathleen Moore, from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Love of the Last Tycoon*

After *The Great Gatsby* received a lukewarm response from readers and critics following its publication in April of 1925, Fitzgerald did not publish another novel until *Tender is the Night* in 1934. He was deeply depressed that *Gatsby* did not catapult his career as he had hoped and the ensuing years were some of the worst of his life. Although he began writing his new novel immediately after *Gatsby*'s publication, he struggled continually and, while he wrote several chapters in 1925 and 1926 that would eventually

be revised and incorporated into *Tender*, he was unable to complete the book at the time. In 1927, after he returned with his family from Europe, Fitzgerald moved to Hollywood and had his first stint as a writer for motion pictures. His time there provided him with further ideas for *Tender*, particularly the inspiration for Rosemary Hoyt in actress Lois Moran. "Fitzgerald was fascinated by Moran," writes Arthur Mizener, "and she by him" (204). The Fitzgeralds' short stint in Hollywood would be defined more, however, by "a whirl of parties, night clubs, and practical jokes" (Mizener 204) than Scott's rejected script for *Lipstick*. The Fitzgeralds left Hollywood as soon as the script was finished, but Scott would return several times and eventually spend most of the last four years of his life there.

His final trip came about as a result of serious financial hardship in the early and mid-1930s. Arthur Mizener writes that "ever since he had got into financial straits, Fitzgerald had thought of trying to get to Hollywood again. During 1936 he had worked to find a job there […] His income reached a new low in 1936 ($10,180) and would have fallen to half of that in 1937 had he not gone to Hollywood" (270). This is in addition to his massive debts, which "amounted, according to his own estimate, to something like $40,000 at the time" (272). Fortunately, those final years in Hollywood would prove more successful and his income increased considerably. Much of the money came from his prolific short story writing, but he enjoyed more success as a screenwriter as well. Along with this financial success, according to Mizener, "he was in love with someone in Hollywood, really in love for the first time since his feeling for Zelda had, with separation and time, become a memory rather than a fact. The best evidence there will ever be of how he felt is the story of Stahr and Kathleen in *The Last Tycoon*" (275).

Indeed, *The Love of the Last Tycoon*—which critics now agree was Fitzgerald's preferred title—had the potential to equal the best writing he had done in his career, but a lifetime of alcoholism and generally self-destructive behavior caught up to him and he died of a heart attack on December 21, 1940 before he could complete the novel.

Fitzgerald was one of many celebrated American novelists who tried their hand as screenwriters in Hollywood in the first half of the twentieth century. William Faulkner, Raymond Chandler, John Steinbeck, Dalton Trumbo, and Nathanael West all wrote for the movies, mostly because it paid better than writing fiction. A fair share of European and British writers made the move to Hollywood as well, including Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht, and Aldous Huxley, who arrived in 1937 around the time when Fitzgerald made his final return. As it happens, while the birthplaces of Fitzgerald, Huxley, and West were geographically and culturally distinct from one another—St. Paul, Minnesota; Surrey, England; and New York City respectively—each died in California: Fitzgerald in Hollywood in 1940, Huxley in Los Angeles in 1963, and West with his wife in an automobile accident outside of El Centro on their way back from a hunting trip in Mexico on December 22, 1940—the day after Fitzgerald's death.[23] I call attention to this fact not because it is particularly significant in itself, but in order to draw a deeper connection to California's long-held symbolic value as an endpoint, a final frontier. I suggest that the title and subject of this chapter might serve as a synecdoche for the many writers who came to California in the first half of the twentieth century as a last resort and for those who came in search of new opportunities, but instead became disenchanted.

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[23] The geographical and temporal proximity of West and Fitzgerald's deaths reflects a number of parallels between their career trajectories. Edmund Wilson points out that "both men had been living on the West Coast; both had spent several years in the studios; both, at the time of their deaths, had been occupied with novels about Hollywood" (*Classics and Commercials* 51-52).

But I do not simply wish to make a point here about California. Rather, in focusing on these three modernist writers,[24] I would like to redirect what has been a common focus in literary and cultural studies on California—and Los Angeles, in particular—as an archetypal *post*modern locale and ask instead what it might tell us about the symbolic "death" of modernism. Each of the three novels that comprise this chapter— *The Day of the Locust* (1939), *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* (1939), and *The Love of the Last Tycoon* (1941)—were published in the waning years of the modernist period as it is commonly conceived. Locating an "endpoint" to modernism is, as the above introduction makes clear, a highly contentious task. For the sake of convenience, perhaps, the most commonly-accepted year is 1945, when WWII comes to an end. There is some literary justification, however, for choosing the year 1939, as it saw the publication of James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*—after which, for many, modernism as such could no longer exist. Increasingly, however, critics have come to see not so much a "divide"[25] as

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[24] While Fitzgerald and West died in 1940, well before critics began debating postmodernism, Huxley lived until 1963 and went on to write novels like *Island* (1962) that could arguably be classified as postmodern. Because the bulk of Huxley's writing occurred before WWII—and in fact stretched back as far as 1916—I would argue that most of his writing (if not the author himself) ought to be classified as modernist.

[25] I have in mind here Andreas Huyssen's theory of the "Great Divide," which takes up mass culture as a central concern:

> Mass culture indeed seems to be the repressed other of modernism, the family ghost rumbling in the cellar. Modernism, on the other hand, often chided by the left as the elitist, arrogant and mystifying mater-code of bourgeois culture while demonized by the right as the Agent Orange of natural social cohesion, is the straw man desperately needed by the system to provide an aura of popular legitimation for the blessings of the culture industry. Or, to put it differently, as modernism hides its envy for the broad appeal of mass culture behind a screen of condescension and contempt, mass culture, saddled as it is with pangs of guilt, yearns for the dignity of serious culture which forever eludes it. (16-17)

That these three novels are set in and around Hollywood squarely places them at or near the hub of mass culture in America, or even worldwide, in the late 1930s. While mass culture may have acted as the repressed other of modernism generally, these novels collectively bring it to the forefront in a way that other modernist novels had not.

Furthermore, in examining the modernism of Los Angeles, I also hope to suggest a connection to the political climate of Hollywood in the 1930s and its relationship to the film industry at the time. In his book *Hollywood Modernism: Film and Politics in the Age of the New Deal* (2001), for example, Saverio Giovacchini insists upon "the necessity of recasting the history of the Hollywood community and its

a line of continuity between the modern and postmodern. With this in mind, I would like to make clear that I am not claiming that these novels or the city of Los Angeles in which they are set represent the end of modernism, the birth of postmodernism, or some other definite symbol. What I am suggesting, rather, is that a substantial reconsideration is in order of Los Angeles as a major fault line through the post/modern. Perhaps, finally, fault line is not quite the right phrase, as ultimately I would like to argue that these novels considerably muddle common distinctions between the modern and postmodern, using the architecture, geography, and culture of Los Angeles as their grounds for doing so.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the population of Los Angeles was just over 102,479, which was itself a stretch on the city's resources at the time and made it the 36th most populous city in the United States. By 1910 it was the nation's 17th most populous city with 319,198 residents. In 1920 it became the 10th largest city with a total population of 576,673 and by 1930 that number ballooned to 1,238,048 and Los Angeles was suddenly the 5th most populous city in the country (United States Census Bureau). While urban metropolises like New York were short on space and had to be built up vertically, Los Angeles sprawled out ever further from the Pacific Ocean and did not, like other major cities, maintain a discernible "center."

But while the setting of Los Angeles is a catalyst for my exploration of the so-called post/modern divide, my paramount focus in this chapter is conceptualizing its relationship to West, Fitzgerald, and Huxley's treatment of subjectivity. The

cinema from the 1930s to the end of World War II within the cultural context of an increasingly politicized modernism. A modernism," he goes on, "that was concerned with the necessity to open up its message to the masses insofar as it was increasingly aware that the work of the previous generation of modernists had been hampered by the narrowness, elitism, and overall fragmentation of its audience" (5). In other words, the appeal of each of these three novels—*Locust* and *Tycoon* to a greater extent—to mass culture represents a gesture that has typically been associated with the postmodern and does not do justice to the extent to which these late modernist writers sought to contextualize their fiction in contemporary popular culture.

decenteredness of the city itself, I argue, intersects with the individual subjectivities that inhabit it. Consequently, in each of the three novels at hand in this chapter, Los Angeles is represented as "the end of the road," an ideological wasteland whose inhabitants tragically and endlessly attempt to remake themselves in the image of their collective cultural fantasies. The subject in each of these novels is pushed to the proverbial edge, where the American frontier plummets into the Pacific Ocean and the psychological self is pushed to the edge of sanity and violently fractures. As such, these novels collectively invite a critical reevaluation of the post/modern subject and offer a potentially fruitful new avenue of investigation in the study of modernist fiction.

Los Angeles: Post/modern City

Many postmodern theorists have turned to Los Angeles as a paradigmatic example of the postmodern city. Jean Baudrillard, for example, writes that "there is nothing to match flying over Los Angeles by night. A sort of luminous, geometric, incandescent immensity, stretching as far as the eye can see, bursting out from the cracks in the clouds. Only Hieronymus Bosch's hell can match this inferno effect" (*America* 51). Edward Soja, in the words of Casey Shoop in a recent essay in *Cultural Critique*, "effects what is perhaps the ultimate consolidation of the many postmodern encounters with Los Angeles when he characterizes the city in Borgesian terms as the 'Aleph': Los Angeles becomes the space that contains all spaces" (206). In another recent essay, entitled "The Ends of America, the Ends of Postmodernism," Rachel Adams even suggests that we look *beyond* the postmodern, asking "If Los Angeles is the city that taught us how to be

postmodern, might it also be the place where we begin to imagine what comes after?"

(248). And the title alone of Norman M. Klein's quintessential 1997 book *The History of*

Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory reflects the continually adapted and

persistent notion that Los Angeles is a city "without a past." These and other examples

reinforce Fredric Jameson's alignment of postmodernism with the "weakening of

historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private

temporality" (6). This view of Los Angeles as postmodern seems fitting for a number of

reasons, one of the most apparent being its architectural "style," or lack thereof. Jameson

observes that "it is in the realm of architecture […] that modifications in aesthetic

production are most dramatically visible, and that their theoretical problems have been

most centrally raised and articulated" (2) and, as he goes on to explain, his own

conception of postmodernism grows largely out of architectural debates.

One prominent feature of greater Los Angeles that has been commonly remarked

upon is the endless variety of building styles throughout the city. These various styles did

not, as one might suspect, emerge after WWII when postmodern architecture first began

to take off, but much earlier. A 2008 draft of the La Fayette Square Preservation Plan

developed by the Los Angeles Department of City Planning characterizes the architecture

of the city between the World Wars as follows:

> The period between the World Wars was one of intense building activity
>
> in Los Angeles, and a wide range of revival styles were built in the area
>
> during this period. The Eclectic Revival styles popular in Los Angeles
>
> between the First and Second World Wars include the Colonial Revival,
>
> Dutch Colonial Revival, Spanish Colonial Revival, Mission Revival,

French Eclectic, Chateauesque, English and Tudor Revival, Italian

Renaissance Revival, Mediterranean Revival, Neoclassical Revival,

Egyptian Revival, Monterey and Hispano-Moresque styles. The Craftsman

and Craftsman Bungalow styles continued to develop as popular styles

through this period. Many of these styles were popular both as residential

and commercial styles, with a few, particularly the Egyptian Revival and

Chateauesque styles, being particularly popular for use in small and large

scale apartment buildings. (18)

This extensive list of architectural styles anticipates the ironic relationship to history

described by Jameson and suggests the rejection of the "new" in favor of a replicative

mining of past styles in an almost parodic fashion. And while one might insist that such

heterogeneous building is a reflection of high modernism, which according to Jameson is

"credited with the destruction of the fabric of the traditional city and its older

neighborhood culture," we should also observe that the architecture of Los Angeles was

in fact reviled by many architects of high modernism themselves. In a piece entitled

"Architect Wright Doesn't Like This City and Bluntly Says So," on the front page of the

Saturday Morning edition of the *Los Angeles Times* on January 20, 1940, Frank Lloyd

Wright famously remarked of Los Angeles that "it is as if you tipped the United States up

so all the commonplace people slid down here into Southern California" (Turner 1) and

the author of the piece, Timothy G. Turner, says of Wright that "he looks over its

architecture and laments. One notable example of business building, modern in

architecture, he calls 'a dish of tripe'" (1). These sentiments are picked up by cultural

critics as well. One notable example is Edmund Wilson, who has a number of strong

reactions to Los Angeles—and California in general—in his 1932 book *American Jitters: A Year of the Slump*:

> Now we motor agreeably and speedily along the beautiful residential boulevards. The residential people of Los Angeles are cultivated enervated people, lovers of mixturesque beauty—and they like to express their emotivation in homes that symphonize their favorite historical films, their best-beloved movie actresses, their luckiest numerological combinations or their previous incarnations in old Greece, romantic Egypt, quant Sussex or among the priestesses of love of old India" (Wilson 226).

Wilson picks up on the mishmash of revival architecture around Los Angeles—referring to it as "mixturesque"—and, anticipating Jameson, draws the connection to a shallow appropriation and lack of appreciation for actual history.

Wilson's observations are strikingly echoed in the opening chapters of both *The Day of the Locust* and *After Many a Summer*; the passages are so similar, in fact, that one wonders whether West and Huxley may have actually read and been influenced by Wilson's account.[26] *After Many a Summer* begins with a remarkably similar automobile ride following Jeremy Pordage's arrival in Los Angeles: "Through trees, Jeremy saw the facades of houses, all new, almost all in good taste—elegant and witty pastiches of Lutyens manor houses, of Little Trianons, of Monticellos; light-hearted parodies of Le

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[26] Wilson, incidentally, did not care for Huxley's *After Many a Summer*. He wrote in a 1944 *New Yorker* review of Huxley's next novel, *Time Must Have a Stop*, that "Huxley's peculiar version of the life of contemplation and revelation was expounded in *After Many a Summer* by a boring non-satirical character who read homilies to the other characters with an insufferable air of quiet authority and who constantly made the reader feel that it would have been better if he, too, had been satirically treated as a typical California crank" (*Classics and Commercials* 209-210). He does give Huxley some credit, however, writing elsewhere that "the one thing that was imagined with intensity in Aldous Huxley's novel, *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*, was the eighteenth-century exploiter of the slave-trade degenerating into a fetal anthropoid" (*Classics and Commercials* 43).

Corbusier's solemn machines-for-living-in; fantastic adaptations of Mexican haciendas and New England farms" (Huxley 11-12). Huxley's references to pastiche and parody in relation to the architecture of Los Angeles anticipate Jameson, who points to the two as important characteristics of the postmodern. The parody of modernist architecture here, however, comes from a modernist source itself and recalls a claim made by Michael Snyder in an essay entitled "Premonitions of the Postmodern: Aldous Huxley's *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* and Los Angeles in the Thirties," in which he argues that "a parody of modernism has, by definition questioned the sensibilities of the International Style: geometric purity, clean lines, austerity, and lack of ornamentation." As such, he goes on, "parody constitutes a proto-postmodern design which is informed by modernism, but injects humor and irony, as called for later by postmodern architectural theorists like Robert Venturi, Jencks, and Moore" (175). Stoyte's castle, in particular, evokes the type of play and excessiveness with which postmodernism is often aligned:

> The thing was Gothic, mediaeval, baronial—doubly baronial, Gothic with a Gothicity raised, so to speak, to a higher power, more mediaeval than any building of the thirteenth century. For this . . . this object, Jeremy was reduced to calling it, was mediaeval, not out of vulgar necessity, like Coucy, say, or Alnwick, but out of pure fun and wantonness, platonically, one might say. It was mediaeval as only a witty and irresponsible modern architect would wish to be mediaeval, as only the most competent modern engineers are technically equipped to be. (18)

It is, in other words, even *more* Gothic than an authentic Gothic cathedral, like some sort of gaudy modern-day Las Vegas hotel—the New York, New York or the Paris—that is

actually *more* like the actual place (because it so blatantly accentuates its stereotypical

features) than the place itself, thus entering into the realm of the hyperreal. Kevin Starr

adeptly encapsulates Huxley's vision of Los Angeles in his classic study *The Dream

Endures: California Enters the Forties*, where he describes it as

> the most sweeping, comprehensive, and […] successful description of Los
>
> Angeles as idiosynchratic cityscape […] Huxley's evocation announced to
>
> the English-speaking world the palpable presence of a new metropolis on
>
> the planet, in which distinctions between fantasy and reality, eccentricity
>
> and the norm, dissolved in the tense complexity of a new and vital genre
>
> of urban theatre. (157)

In short, Huxley's vision of Los Angeles anticipates the postmodern in a number of ways

and sets the stage for some of the complex philosophical questions that the novel pursues.

Fitzgerald's *The Love of the Last Tycoon*, which seems at first like an unlikely

partner to a writer like Huxley, similarly blurs the lines between façade and fantasy:

"Under the moon the back lot was thirty acres of fairyland—not because the locations

really looked like African jungles and French chateaux and schooners at anchor and

Broadway by night, but because they looked like the torn picture books of childhood, like

fragments of stories dancing in an open fire" (25). Nathanael West, finally, uses

essentially the same strategy as Huxley of establishing narrative setting in *The Day of the

Locust*, though in this case the trip is ambulatory and follows Tod Hackett on his walk

from the movie studio where he works to his apartment building: "But not even the soft

wash of dusk could help the houses. Only dynamite would be of any use against the

Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas, Egyptian and Japanese

temples, Swiss chalets, Tudor cottages, and every possible combination of these styles

that lined the slopes of the canyon" (West 262). As we have seen, both real and fictional

accounts of Los Angeles throughout the 1930s and 40s suggest that observers were

acutely aware of the air of artificiality, unreality, and fantasy surrounding Los Angeles.

We might best describe the architecture of Los Angeles since the turn of the

twentieth century—as we have seen in the passages above—as pastiche. This fits another

of Jameson's hallmarks of the postmodern and ties into the broader connections with

history and space that he relates back to Baudrillard and Guy Debord: "The New spatial

logic of the simulacrum can now be expected to have a momentous effect on what used to

be historical time. The past is thereby itself modified […] Guy Debord's powerful slogan

is now even more apt for the 'prehistory' of a society bereft of all historicity, one whose

own putative past is little more than a set of dusty spectacles" (18). In other words, we

might say that twentieth century Los Angeles represents "the New spatial logic of the

simulacrum." One of the primary characteristics of this new spatial logic, as the above

postmodern critics attest, is that it is decentered. This certainly reflects the spatial

organization of Los Angeles, but it also more broadly reflects one of postmodernism's

most recognizable characteristics. Michael Snyder, for example, points out that "the

decentering of postmodernity affects subjects, interpretations, disciplines, and even cities.

During the 1930s in Los Angeles, the downtown city center lost supremacy over other

outlying areas, and by the end of the thirties Los Angeles was literally an

idiosyncratically decentered city" (169). In fact, however, the notion of "decentering" is

critical in studies of modernism as well. One need look no further than Yeats' famous

line "the centre cannot hold" from his 1919 poem "The Second Coming" for evidence of

this fact. Edmund Wilson picks up on this notion as well, writing that "everyone who has ever been to Los Angeles knows how the mere aspect of things is likely to paralyze the aesthetic faculty by providing no *point d'appui* from which to exercise its discrimination, if it does not actually stun the sensory apparatus itself, so that accurate reporting becomes impossible" (*Classics and Commercials* 53). We might view the decenteredness of Los Angeles, then, as a sort of bridge between the modern and postmodern.

What further deepens this connection is the presence within Los Angeles of the district of Hollywood, which was formally absorbed as part of the city in 1910. Much of the tenor of Los Angeles since at least WWI has been set by Hollywood, which held more than 80% of the world's film industry by 1921 (Buntin). Aside from its geographical layout, part of the "decentering" of Los Angeles has to do with its role in the birth and development of the film industry, particularly in the interwar years. More than any artistic medium before it, film produced new and complex relationships to time and space and set the stage for the phenomenon that would later come to be known as simulacrum. In 1946, for example, long before Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), the great historian of Southern California Carey McWilliams wrote that Hollywood "exists only as a state of mind, not as a geographical entity […] The concentration of the motion-picture industry in Los Angeles is what gives Hollywood its real identity. As Jerome Beatty once said, Hollywood exists as 'a kingless kingdom without a kingdom,' an island within an island" (330). McWilliams' portrayal is strikingly Baudrillardian, as it in fact recalls the Borges fable ("On Exactitude in Science") that Baudrillard draws upon in crafting his notion of simulacrum. "Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept,"

Baudrillard writes, "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (1). McWilliams' description of Hollywood suggests such an environment in which the idea, model, or "state of mind" precedes the thing itself, the "geographical entity," once again testifying to Hollywood's symbolic value as a liminal space between reality and unreality.[27]

While it may seem surprising to find traces of Baudrillard in Fitzgerald, in fact we find examples of the simulacrum in *Tycoon*, again with specific ties to geography. Geography in *Tycoon* functions in much the same way as it does in *Gatsby*, only the poles have been reversed and the focus is the West Coast rather than the East. While Nick makes continual reference to the "Middle-West" as a point of contrast to New York City, *Tycoon* begins with our narrator Cecilia outside Hollywood in order to contextualize its unreality. The opening sequence of the novel, which takes place on a transcontinental commercial airline flight and in Nashville, Tennessee, where it is diverted due to a storm, is essential in establishing the contrast between Hollywood and the rest of America. This is particularly apparent when Cecilia, Wylie White, and Mannie Schwartz take a long middle-of-the-night taxi ride to visit the Hermitage: "I could feel even in the darkness that the trees of the woodland were green—that it was all different from the dusty olive-tint of California. Somewhere we passed a Negro driving three cows ahead of him, and they mooed as he scatted them to the side of the road. They were real cows, with warm fresh, silky flanks and the Negro grew gradually real out of the darkness with his big brown eyes staring at us close to the car, as Wylie gave him a quarter" (9). Having been

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[27] Wilson wrote favorably of West in his success in picking up on this fact, saying that "Mr. West has caught the emptiness of Hollywood; and he is, as far as I know, the first writer to make this emptiness horrible" (*Classics and Commercials* 54).

conditioned by Hollywood's unreality, where everything consists of mere facade without depth, she is struck by how "real" things appear in middle America. Perhaps someone with her familial connection to Hollywood might see "real" cows there, but they would likely be on a film set, where even in their very materiality they become merely a set piece. Fitzgerald's observation of Hollywood's "unreality" was not entirely unique for the time, particularly for those writers who, like him, also came from the East. According to Edmund Wilson, "All visitors from the East know the strange spell of unreality which seems to make human experience on the Coast as hollow as the life of a troll-nest where everything is out in the open instead of being underground" (*Classics and Commercials* 45-46).

Although in a more subtle way, temporality becomes implicated in this geographical differentiation as well. Upon landing in Nashville, Cecilia observes that "airports lead you back in history like oases, like the stops on the great trade routes" (7-8). Symbolically speaking, it is as though Cecilia and the others have been taken back in time to a period when America was primarily associated with its large swaths of rural landscape. The pastoral scene that Cecilia observes would not have been at all unusual at this time, but she belongs to a new urbanized generation for whom this type of quaint scene has become a novel slice of America's past. Cecilia, for her part, seems acutely aware of this. "In the big transcontinental planes we were the coastal rich," she remarks, "who casually alighted from our cloud in mid-America" (8). As she goes on to explain, however, she herself—along with her coastal compatriots—is not necessarily what she seems: "High adventure might be among us, disguised as a movie star. But mostly it wasn't. And I wished fervently that we looked more interesting than we did—just as I

often have at premiers, when the fans look at you with scornful reproach because you're not a star" (8). One of the things that makes Cecilia such a fitting narrator for Fitzgerald's novel is that she is, as Nick Carraway says in *Gatsby*, "within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible varieties of life" (40)—particularly those found in the Hollywood film industry.

Ultimately, these and other accounts testify to the fact that Los Angeles, back to nearly its earliest beginnings, has carried far more symbolic than real value. This fact was becoming especially evident in the 1930s when Hollywood was on its upward rise to power. In their book *Los Angeles in the Thirties*, David Gebhard and Harriette Von Breton explain that Depression Era Los Angeles—and Hollywood in particular—was the only place that "seemed to retain and even to continue the optimism of former decades […] The Los Angeles scene, as portrayed in films, weekly radio broadcasts, and the press, seemed to mirror just what most Americans throughout the country felt their world should be like" (5). In other words, in a time when so many Americans were suffering in their day to day lives, Los Angeles was becoming a profound ideological force in the collective cultural unconscious. Edmund Wilson is especially caustic in this regard:

> Here this people, so long told to "go West" to escape from poverty, ill-health, maladjustment, industrialism and oppression, discover that, having come West, their problems and diseases still remain and that there is no further to go. Among the sand-colored power plants and hotels, the naval outfitters and waterside cafés, the old spread-roofed California houses with their fine close grain of gray or yellow clapboards—they come to the end of their resources in the empty California sun. Brokers and bankers,

architects and citrus ranchers, farmers, housewives, building contractors,

salesmen of groceries and real estate, proprietors of poolrooms, music

stores and hotels, marines and supply-corps lieutenants, molders,

machinists, oil-well drillers, auto mechanics, carpenters, tailors, soft-drink

merchants, cooks and barbers, teamsters, stage drivers, longshoremen,

laborers—mostly Anglo-Saxon whites, though with a certain number of

Danes, Swedes and Germans and a sprinkling of Chinese, Japanese,

Mexicans, Negroes, Indians and Filipinos—ill, retired or down on their

luck—they stuff up the cracks of their doors in the little boarding-houses

that take in invalids, and turn on the gas; they go into their back sheds or

back kitchens and swallow Lysol or eat ant-paste; they drive their cars into

dark alleys and shoot themselves in the back seat; they hang themselves in

hotel bedrooms, take overdoses of sulphonal or barbital, stab themselves

with carving-knives on the municipal golf-course; or they throw

themselves into the placid blue bay, where the gray battleships and

cruisers of the government guard the limits of their enormous nation—

already reaching out in the eighties for the sugar plantations of Honolulu.

(259-260)

Against the glamour of Hollywood and of American life as it was portrayed on the big

screen, Wilson's juxtaposition of the West's brutal reality is all the more powerful.

Wilson explains elsewhere that suicide was a major problem in the West, particularly in

San Diego, which had the highest suicide rate in the nation at one time.[28] Although one

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[28] Wilson wrote in 1932 that "Americans still tend to move westward and many drift southward towards the sun. San Diego is the extreme southwest town of the Unites States; and since our real westward expansion

would not know it from American life depicted in popular films of the time, many saw

California not as an untapped land of opportunity, but as the end of the road for the

tragically desperate and hopelessly deluded.

Once again we find Wilson's sentiment closely echoed by West throughout *The Day of the Locust*: "All their lives they had slaved at some kind of dull, heavy labor, behind desks and counters, in the fields and at tedious machines of all sorts, saving their pennies and dreaming of the leisure that would be theirs when they had enough" (411). But eventually, the novel goes on to suggest, they become bored and "they realize that they've been tricked and burn with resentment" (411). The newspapers and movies that they turn to for entertainment rather feed them on "lynchings, murder, sex crimes, explosions, wrecks, love nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, war […] They have been cheated and betrayed," the novel laments, "They have slaved and saved for nothing" (412). While early Hollywood suggests a glamorous land of opportunity in Los Angeles, the reality simply does not live up to the filmic depictions. West is especially cognizant of this from the outset in *The Day of the Locust*, when Tod Hackett first steps off the street car at Vine Street near his apartment:

> A great many of the people wore sports clothes which were not really
>
> sports clothes. Their sweaters, knickers, slacks, blue flannel jackets with

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has come to a standstill, it has become a veritable jumping-off place. On the West coast to-day the suicide rate is twice that of the Middle Atlantic coast, and since 1911 the suicide rate of San Diego has been the highest in the United States" (257). He does not cite a source for his claim, but later writes that "in 1926 there were fifty-seven suicides in San Diego. During nine months of 1930, there were seventy-one, and between the beginning of the January and the end of the July of 1931 there have already been thirty-six. Three of these latter are set down in the coroner's record as due to 'no work or money'; two to 'no work'; one to 'ill health, family troubles and no work'; two to 'despondency over financial worries'; one to 'financial worry and illness'; one to 'health and failure to collect'; and one to 'rent due him from tenants.' The doctors say that some of the old people who have been sent out here by their relations but whose source of income has recently been cut off, kill themselves from pride rather than go to the poorhouse" (259).

brass buttons were fancy dress. The fat lady in the yachting cap was going

shopping, not boating; the man in the Norfolk jacket and Tyrolean hat was

returning, not from a mountain, but an insurance office; and the girl in

slacks and sneaks with a bandana around her head had just left a

switchboard, not a tennis court.

   Scattered among these masquerades were people of a different type.

Their clothing was somber and badly cut, bought from mail-order houses.

While the others moved rapidly, darting into stores and cocktail bars, they

loitered on the corners or stood with their backs to the shop windows and

stared at everyone who passed. When their stare was returned, their eyes

filled with hatred. At this time Tod knew very little about them except that

they had come to California to die. (261)

Fitzgerald, while less dire, echoes this sentiment as well: "There was lassitude in

plenty—California was filling up with weary desperadoes. And there were tense young

men and women who lived back East in spirit while they carried on a losing battle against

the climate" (80). In all three novels, we find a stark juxtaposition between the

expectations of what California will offer and what the actual experience of living there is

like. While the outcomes of their respective novels are different,[29] West, Huxley, and

Fitzgerald each develop characters that undergo various manifestations of identity crises

that suggest that what we call "identity" is simply a projection of our own desires and, in

doing so, venture into various realms of tragedy, violence, and the grotesque.

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[29] In Fitzgerald's case we have only his working notes.

Post/modern Personalities

In one of his famous descriptions, Nick says of Gatsby that "if personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that registers earthquakes ten thousand miles away" (6). Indeed, as we have seen earlier, Gatsby's "identity," such as it is, is in fact a meticulously constructed façade that he employs in an attempt to hide the true chaos at work in his subconscious mind. Although there are distinctions to be made between their various depictions of personality, ultimately each of the three novels with which this chapter is concerned takes a similar view of identity as multifarious and elusive, rather than singular.

Tycoon, like *Gatsby*, is narrated from the periphery. While Cecilia is involved in the action at times, she acts mostly as an observer rather than a direct influence. Like Nick Carraway, she interacts with the central characters and colors the narrative with her own subjectivity, but ultimately she is a vessel for the story of Monroe Stahr and his relationship with Kathleen Moore. In a prospectus sent to *Collier's* editor Kenneth Littauer on September 29, 1939, Fitzgerald writes that

> this love affair is the meat of the book—though I am going to treat it,
> remember, as it comes through to Cecilia. That is to say by making Cecilia
> at the moment of her telling the story, an intelligent and observant woman,
> I shall grant myself the privilege, as Conrad did, of letting her imagine the
> actions of the characters. Thus, I hope to get the verisimilitude of a first

person narrative, combined with a Godlike knowledge of all events that

happen to my characters" (xi).

In keeping with this narrative philosophy, Cecilia tells us from the outset that she's

unable to get fully inside the world of Hollywood herself and instead will take us there

through her proximity to Monroe Stahr: "You can take Hollywood for granted like I did,

or you can dismiss it with the contempt we reserve for what we don't understand. It can

be understood too, but only dimly and in flashes. Not half a dozen men have ever been

able to keep the whole equation of pictures in their heads. And perhaps the closest a

woman can come to the set-up is to try and understand one of those men" (3). Cecilia is

essentially a marginalized figure, not only in her role as peripheral narrator, but in her

continual inability to get Stahr to see her in the way that she would like him to. As she

remarks in the scene on the plane mentioned above, she wishes that she looked more

interesting and captivated more of Stahr's attention.

As critics have observed, Stahr bears many resemblances to Gatsby; in particular,

both are wealthy, charismatic young men seeking to recover a lost object from their past.

The primary difference between the two characters, as Bruccoli points out in his

introduction, is that Stahr's "success" eclipses Gatsby's in a number of ways. "Monroe

Stahr is an archetypal American hero," Bruccoli explains, "the embodiment of the

American Dream: a Jay Gatsby with genius" (vii). Stahr, for one thing, amasses his

fortune legally. And while he is not universally liked, unlike Gatsby he is universally

feared and his power is virtually unquestioned. We find in Stahr's character an apt

example of the "cult of personality" typically associated with political dictators. For

example, Cecilia observes the following scene when a crowd spots him on the studio lot:

He spoke and waved back as the people streamed by in the darkness,

looking I suppose a little like the Emperor and the Old Guard. There is no

world so but it has its heroes and Stahr was the hero. Most of these men

had been here a long time—through the beginnings and the great upset

when sound came and the three years of Depression he had seen that no

harm came to them. The old loyalties were trembling now—there were

clay feet everywhere—but still he was their man, the last of the princes.

And their greeting was a sort of low cheer as they went by. (27)

While Gatsby becomes a figure who people gravitate toward, particularly through his

parties, Stahr is more deeply implicated in the actual lives of those around him. Without

Stahr, the novel implies, the system itself would implode: "Stahr must be right always,

not most of the time, but always—or the structure would melt down like gradual butter"

(56). When asked what makes the "unity" of his studio system Stahr, whose "face was

grim except that his eyes twinkled" (58), replies, "'I'm the unity'" (58).[30] But the deep

irony of the novel, as in *Gatsby*, is that Stahr is in fact also struggling with his own sense

of identity and attempting to reconstruct it by repeating his past with a proxy for his

deceased wife Minna Davis.

Stahr appears as a strikingly confident figure early in the novel who is entirely in

control of his thoughts and actions; but when he first sees Kathleen and notices her

uncanny resemblance to Minna his personality begins to fracture. This begins, in the first

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[30] Stahr's name is certainly not accidental, as he is very much a "star" in the many different senses of the word. He is not only the "star" of the novel and a "star" in the sense of celebrity, but he is also symbolically, like a celestial star, a collection of "matter" held together by his own gravity. We might even add, further, another symbolic element in the additional meaning of "star" as "a crack or fissure in the skin" ("star"). Ironically, then, the word star may imply both coherence and cleavage.

instance, with his fragmented vision of Kathleen, as seen here during their first extended meeting at a party:

> When she came close his several visions of her blurred; she was momentarily unreal. Usually a girl's skull made her real but not this time—Stahr continued to be dazzled as they danced out along the floor—to the last edge, where they stepped through a mirror into another dance with new dancers whose faces were familiar but nothing more. In this new region he talked, fast and urgently. (73)

Kathleen appears to Stahr as "unreal" (like Hollywood itself in the depictions above) and he is unable to process his experience with her as he does other things in his life. Furthermore, the moment itself proves fleeting, which becomes apparent to him the next day: "Last night was gone, the girl he had danced with was gone" (78). As we have seen elsewhere, personality in Fitzgerald's fiction is something that appears different from moment to moment. But Stahr's affair with Kathleen actually helps him recognize this and he expresses a desire to become someone other than himself, at least temporarily, as we see in a telling conversation between the two:

> "Don't be a mother," he said.
>
> "All right. What shall I be?"
>
> Be a trollop, he thought. He wanted the pattern of his life broken. If he was going to die soon, like the two doctors said, he wanted to stop being Stahr for a while and hunt for love like men who had no gifts to give, like young nameless men who looked along the streets in the dark. (90-91)

Stahr's "don't be a mother" comment implies that deep down, like Gatsby, he actually

does desire some type of mother figure. It is in resisting this, however, that he wants "the

pattern of his life broken," to become someone other than who he thinks himself to be.

While Kathleen arguably helps him experience this, the experience is fleeting and

temporary: "Now they were different people as they started back. Four times they had

driven along the shore road today, each time a different pair. Curiosity, sadness and

desire were behind them now; this was a true returning—to themselves and all their past

and future and the encroaching presence of tomorrow" (94-95). Once again Fitzgerald

reminds us that these moments of figuratively stepping outside oneself are only

temporary and situational, trapped forever in the specific moments in which they occur.

What makes it so difficult for Stahr to "escape himself" is that his sense of his

own identity is so firmly entrenched in his work in the film industry. Even when he

experiences one of his most emotional moments, for example, it is mediated through the

language of film:

> Winding down the hill he listened inside himself as if something, by an
>
> unknown composer, powerful and strange and strong, was about to be
>
> played for the first time. The theme would be stated presently but because
>
> the composer was always new, he would not recognize it as the theme
>
> right away. It would come in some such guise as the auto-horns from the
>
> technicolor boulevards below or be barely audible, a tattoo on the muffled
>
> drum of the moon. He strained to hear it, knowing only that music was the
>
> beginning, new music that he liked and did not understand. It was hard to
>
> react to what one could entirely compass—this was new and confusing,

nothing one could shut off in the middle and supply the rest from an old

score. (95-96)

This experience with Kathleen is so entirely new to Stahr that he finds himself unable to

neatly fit it into any paradigm that he already knows. Ultimately, though, this lack of

control becomes frightening for Stahr and when he finds the letter that Kathleen has

accidentally dropped in his car he cannot resist opening it: "He was proud of resisting his

first impulse to open the letter. It seemed to prove that he was not 'losing his head' […]

'falling for dames' had never been an obsession—his brother had gone to pieces over a

dame, or rather over dame after dame after dame" (96). But while Stahr dislikes the idea

of "losing his head," "falling for dames," or losing control of himself in any way

generally, this is precisely what happens when he meets Kathleen. The raw reality of the

emotions he experiences for the first time (that we know of) challenges his sense of

identity as Monroe Stahr and he realizes how difficult—or even impossible—it is to

escape the public identity that he has created for himself and that he has allowed to

entirely consume his own personal thoughts. And while he begins to inevitably recognize

the incoherence of his own identity, he finds himself deconstructing Kathleen's in order

to justify opening her letter: "Kathleen was really far away now with the waning night—

the different aspects of her telescoped into the memory of a single thrilling stranger

bound to him only by a few slender hours. It seemed perfectly all right to open the letter"

(98). While Stahr allows himself to be seduced by the notion that Kathleen can act as a

replacement for Minna, ultimately he realizes that she is merely a projection of his own

desire, just as he has been a projection of Cecilia's: "I'll always think of that moment,

when I felt Miss Doolan behind me with her pad, as the end of childhood, the end of the

time when you cut out pictures. What I was looking at wasn't Stahr but a picture of him I cut out over and over […] He was my picture, as sure as if he was pasted on the inside of my locker in school" (71). What we find in the relationships throughout the novel is a great deal of blurring between the various conceptions that the characters have of one another and of themselves. By continually calling attention to this confusion, Fitzgerald creates an ironic characterization of identity in which each character projects his or her desire on another in an endless cycle, thus radically decentering the novel's representation of subjectivity.

To put this irony in a broader context, we might draw an analogy to the topography of Los Angeles described above. While Hollywood may appear to function as the "center" of Los Angeles in some sense, upon further investigation we find that it is actually a sort of vacuum that is filled only with the illusions and fantasies of those who inhabit it. When we speak of Los Angeles as "decentered," then, it is decentered both literally as a result of its endless sprawl, but also figuratively. I would suggest that Monroe Stahr, the center of Hollywood in the novel, functions in the same way. While he is decentered himself, the other characters in the novel ironically depend upon him for their own senses of identity. A perfect example of this is Mannie Schwartze who, although he appears in the novel only briefly, is a crucial figure in establishing both Stahr's profound power over the other characters and some of the deeper themes that the novel develops in relation to American ideology.

When we first meet him, Schwartze is on the tail end of a downfall out of a powerful position in Hollywood as a studio head. His suicide, while not actually described, is intensely imagined by Cecilia after she and Wylie leave him at the

Hermitage in a scene that establishes a number of deep symbolic connections to

American history:

>Mannie Schwartze and Andrew Jackson—it was hard to say them in the
>
>same sentence. It was doubtful if he knew who Andrew Jackson was as he
>
>wandered around, but perhaps he figured that if people had preserved his
>
>house Andrew Jackson must have been someone who was large and
>
>merciful, able to understand. At both ends of life man needed
>
>nourishment—a breast—a shrine. Something to lay himself beside when
>
>no one wanted him further, and shoot a bullet into his head. (13)

The passage recalls the maternal imagery from *Gatsby*, which uses both the breast and

the idea of nourishment, particularly in the description of the scene just before Gatsby

and Daisy share their first kiss: "Out of the corner of his eye Gatsby saw that the blocks

of the sidewalk really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees—he

could climb to it, if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck on the pap of life,

gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder" (117). And just as Daisy and the maternal

imagery of Gatsby establish a connection between Gatsby and the American landscape

and its history, a similar connection is made here between the racialized Jewish

Schwartze and Andrew Jackson, one of America's most enduring historical figures—

ironically one who was not known as particularly merciful or understanding.

But the other connection here, which is made clear a few pages later, is to Stahr.

This comes in the form of Schwartze's suicide letter, which reads "Dear Monro, You are

the best of them all I have always admired your mentality so when you turn against me I

know it's no use! I must be no good and am not going to continue the journey let me

warn you once again look out! I know" (16). Stahr, also not particularly merciful or understanding—at least professionally—is godlike in the power that he exercises over the other characters in the novel. Cecilia tells us early on, "some of my more romantic ideas actually stemmed from pictures—'42nd Street,' for example, had a great influence on me. It's more than possible that some of the pictures which Stahr himself conceived had shaped me into what I was" (18). We see, in short, a troubling sense of dependency among those characters who satellite around Stahr and depend on him in various ways for their own senses of identity. We might say that Stahr, himself, functions as a shrine—certainly for Cecilia. In addition, then, to forming their identities in relation to the ideological notion of Hollywood success, the characters actually construct their own notions of personal identity in relation to Stahr.

Throughout *Tycoon*, Fitzgerald shows a keen awareness for the ways in which Hollywood problematizes notions of personal identity. This is true of Cecilia, as we have already seen, but we find similar anxieties in every other notable character as well. Wylie White, for example, tells Cecilia wearily that Hollywood is "'a good place for toughies but I went there from Savannah, Georgia […] It was all there,'" he explains, "'that swimming pool, green moss at two dollars an inch, beautiful felines having drinks and fun—'" (11). His first impression, in other words, is just what one expects from Hollywood; the appearance is just as one would imagine it. He goes on, however: "'—And nobody spoke to me. Not a soul. I spoke to half a dozen people but they didn't answer. That continued for an hour, two hours—then I got up from where I was sitting and ran out at a dog trot like a crazy man. I didn't feel I had any rightful identity until I got back to the hotel and the clerk handed me a letter addressed to me in my name'" (11).

While Cecilia goes on to tell us that she has never had this experience herself, she is not surprised by it. "We don't go for strangers in Hollywood unless they wear a sign saying that their axe has been thoroughly ground elsewhere," she explains, "and that in any case it's not going to fall on our necks—in other words unless they're a celebrity. And they'd better look it even then" (11). Fitzgerald paints a picture of a Hollywood that maintains a stark contrast between what is above and beneath the surface, where people are seldom recognized for who they are, and are often unsure of their own selves. Although his depiction may not be as "horrible" as West's, he does—as Edmund Wilson says of the latter—also catch "the emptiness of Hollywood."

Hollywood, of course, consists largely of actors and writers, and Cecilia makes a fascinating distinction between the two when she first finds out that Wylie White is a writer: "Writers aren't people exactly. Or, if they're any good, they're a whole *lot* of people trying hard to be one person. It's like actors, who try so pathetically not to look in mirrors. Who lean *back*ward trying—only to see their faces in the reflecting chandeliers" (12). While writers are many people trying to be one, in other words, actors are one trying to be many. Although the respective desires run counter to one another, Fitzgerald's broader point here appears to be that in Hollywood everyone is driven to be something different from who or what they are. And regardless how they manage or present themselves, others will form their own opinions regardless based on the endless gossip that is passed around. In the case of one minor character named Rose Meloney, for example, we are told that she is "a dried up little blonde of fifty about whom one could hear the fifty assorted opinions of Hollywood—'a sentimental dope,' ' the best writer on construction in Hollywood,' ' a veteran,' ' that old hack,' 'the smartest woman on the

lot,' ' the cleverest plagiarist in the biz,' and of course in addition a nymphomaniac, a virgin, a pushover, a lesbian and a faithful wife" (36). In Fitzgerald's Hollywood, everyone contains multiple personalities in some capacity.

This is true of West's Hollywood as well, though West offers an interesting counterpoint to Wylie White in Claude Estee, a "successful screenwriter" whom Hackett meets at a party. In the way that he is depicted, Estee may be the type of man who would host a party like the one Wylie White attends. He "lived in a big house", we are told,

> that was an exact reproduction of the old Dupuy mansion near Biloxi,
> Mississippi. When Tod came up the walk between the boxwood hedges,
> he greeted him from the enormous, two-story porch by doing the
> impersonation that went with the Southern colonial architecture. He
> teetered back and forth on his heels like a Civil War colonel and made
> believe he had a large belly. (271)

As contrasted with White, or perhaps a figure like George Boxley—the novelist turned screenwriter in *Tycoon*—Estee demonstrates what success in Hollywood can get you. Like Joe Stoyt in *After Many a Summer*, Estee is able to in some sense "repeat the past" by replicating it architecturally—and even, as West shows us, playing the part. The successful characters in all three novels have a way of transcending history in a fashion that is not accessible to the middle-class and poor characters. While Hackett's personalities are closed away and repressed "like a nest of Chinese boxes," the likes of Stahr and Estee act out a form of masquerade that is playful, rather than grotesque like the evening crowd of pretenders who, as West describes earlier, have "come to California to die" (261). Hackett, on the other hand, appears more like the latter characters. On his

walk from the movie studio to his apartment in the opening pages of *The Day of the Locust*, as he encounters a menagerie of characters and architectural oddities, the narrator describes his physical appearance by explaining that "his large, sprawling body, his slow blue eyes and sloppy grin made him seem completely without talent, almost doltish in fact" (260). On the surface, in other words, Tod appears to be quite simple, as though there is not much to him. "Yet," the narrator continues, "despite his appearance, he was really a very complicated young man with a whole set of personalities, one inside the other like a nest of Chinese boxes" (260). Throughout the novel, we see a number of these different personalities emerge at various moments. In other words, while Tod may appear as one (type of) person at one moment, he may appear completely different at another. West's description is much like Fitzgerald's, whose characters are described as different people at different points in time: "Now they [Stahr and Kathleen] were different people as they started back. Four times they had driven along the shore road today, each time a different pair. Curiosity, sadness and desire were behind them now; this was a true returning—to themselves and all their past and future and the encroaching presence of tomorrow" (94-95). But while Tod is described as someone who is more complex than he appears, Kathleen insists that Stahr's personalities are out in the open: "'You're three or four different men but each of them out in the open. Like all Americans'" (116). The difference in each case, I would argue, is simply one of appearance. On a deeper level, each novel recognizes that the subject exists as an apparently singular entity only in specific moments in time. The subject, according to this conception, has little coherence, but rather adapts to situational particularities.

This notion of multiple personalities is not limited to Hackett, but spills over into other characters as well. In fact, early hints about Homer Simpson demonstrate a lack of stable personality and self-control. Shortly after we first meet him, for example, he is described getting out of bed "in sections, like a poorly made automaton" who, as though not fully in control of his body, "carried his hands into the bathroom" (289). Once there, we are told, "he ran hot water into the tub and began to undress, fumbling with the buttons of his clothing as though he were undressing a stranger" (289). This lack of agency becomes more sinister later, when we are told of a former encounter with a drunk and crying Romola Martin: "He caught her in his arms and hugged her. His suddenness frightened her and she tried to pull away, but he held on and began awkwardly to caress her. He was completely unconscious of what he was doing" (293). Strangely enough, when she later lies on her bed and offers herself to him he suddenly runs out of the room, unable to act upon his obvious sexual impulses. When we are brought back into the present, we are given some indication of his underlying issues:

> He got out of the tub, dried himself hurriedly with a rough towel, then went into the bedroom to dress. He felt even more stupid and washed out than usual. It was always like that. His emotions surged up in an enormous wave, curving and rearing, higher and higher, until it seemed as though the wave must carry everything before it. But the crash never came. Something always happened at the very top of the crest and the wave collapsed to run back like water down a drain, leaving, at the most, only the refuse of feeling. (294)

These disturbing descriptions of Simpson suggest deeply crippling emotional impotence that, while it precedes his move to California, eventually reaches a head there and returns through powerful violent acts throughout the novel culminating, of course, in the final mob scene.

One the strangest and most tragic examples of troubled personality in *Locust* is Harry Greener, who epitomizes the tragic downfall of the Hollywood performer. When Greener, a former vaudeville clown who has been reduced to selling silver polish door to door, tries to close a sale with Simpson, we see him shift into "acting" mode: "He jumped to his feet and began doing Harry Greener, poor Harry, honest Harry, well-meaning, humble, deserving, a good husband, a model father, a faithful Christian, a loyal friend" (300). The irony, of course, is that Greener's "acting" is in fact just another version of himself. Like the other characters we have seen in *Tycoon* and *Locust*, Greener has been reduced to a caricature of himself. Once again the masquerade is not playful, but tragic, which is emphasized a moment later: "Suddenly, like a mechanical toy that had been overwound, something snapped inside of him and he began to spin through his entire repetoire. The effort was purely muscular, like the dance of the paralytic. He jigged, juggled his hat, made believe he had been kicked, tripped, and shook hands with himself. He went through it all in one dizzy spasm, then reeled to the couch and collapsed" (301). While his former profession would have been associated with organic performance, Greener—like Simpson—has now been reduced to automation. These types of depictions are not unique in modernism, as Martin Rodgers explains in "Monstrous Modernism and *The Day of the Locust*": "Modernism's ambivalence toward technology often took shape in the critique of the dehumanization of mechanized industry, prophetically so in Karl

Capec's play *R.U.R.* (first performed in 1921) as well as Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936)

and [Fritz Lang's] *Metropolis*" (373). West's point, however, stretches beyond a mere

critique of mechanized society. Homer's daughter Faye, for example, suffers from a

similar obsession with show business that reaches frightening limits. She tells Simpson,

"'I'm going to be a star some day […] It's my life. It's the only thing in the whole world

that I want […] If I'm not, I'll commit suicide'" (309). Faye represents exactly the kind

of all or nothing attitude that West finds so troubling. For West's characters there is no

contentment to be found in leading "ordinary" lives; their entire existence is premised

around "making it" and living out their fantasies of what show business ought to be. His

characters—like many of Fitzgerald's—have become so obsessed with their projected

images of themselves that they become entirely artificial.

What makes Faye's artificiality, in particular, all the more disturbing is that

Hackett actually becomes attracted to it: "Had any other girl been so affected, he would

have thought her as intolerable. Faye's affectations, however, were so completely

artificial that he found them charming" (316). Faye's artificiality, in other words, is so

consuming and transparent that it is almost as if any sense of "reality" has melted away.

"Being with her," the narrator says of Hackett's attraction,

> was like being backstage during an amateurish, ridiculous play. From in
>
> front, the stupid lines and grotesque situation would have made him
>
> squirm with annoyance, but because he saw the perspiring stage-hands and
>
> the wires that held up the tawdry summerhouse with its tangle of paper
>
> flowers, he accepted everything and was anxious for it to succeed […] She
>
> didn't know how to be simpler or more honest. (316)

Despite his "attraction" to her, Hackett's desire is deeply conflicted and, like Simpson's, is also tinged with a deep desire for violence. This violence, perhaps, comes as a result of Hackett's conflicted emotional state, which is simultaneously drawn to and repulsed by Faye's artificiality: "If he only had the courage to throw himself on her. Nothing less violent than rape would do. The sensation he felt was like that he got when holding an egg in his hand. Not that she was fragile or even seemed fragile. It wasn't that. It was her completeness, her egglike self-sufficiency, that made him want to crush her" (320). What seems to enrage him so much about Faye, in other words, is that she thinks of herself as entirely self-assured and coherent, while he sees through her façade and recognizes that she is the exact opposite. Amidst the crowded throngs of people Hackett observes around Los Angeles, it is actually the impression of coherent identity on Faye's part that he finds so infuriating. The very fact that Faye is so content with herself inspires Hackett's violent rage. This sentiment, then, comes out in his art as well:

> In "The Burning of Los Angeles" Faye is the naked girl in the left foreground being chased by a group of men and women who have separated from the main body of the mob. One of the women is about to hurl a rock at her to bring her down. She is running with her eyes closed and a strange half-smile on her lips. Despite the dreamy repose of her face, her body is straining to hurl her along at top speed. The only explanation for this contrast is that she is enjoying the release that wild flight gives in much the same way that a game bird must when, after hiding for several tense minutes, it bursts from cover in complete, unthinking panic. (321)

As with Simpson, it seems inevitable from early on in the novel that Hackett's repressed desire will eventually be transformed into violence.

Hackett is able to see through the various characters he meets and recognize that they, like Hollywood, are pure artifice. When one looks closely enough, it becomes apparent that people fit into various reproduced categories of personality based upon the models presented to them by the popular culture of the time and Hackett cannot help but take notice of these phenomena:

> He thought of Janvier's 'Sargasso Sea.' Just as that imaginary body of water was a history of civilization in the form of a marine junkyard, the studio lot was one in the form of a dream dump. A Sargasso of the imagination! And the dump grew continually, for there wasn't a dream afloat somewhere which wouldn't sooner or later turn up on it, having first been made photographic by plaster, canvas, lath and paint. Many boats sink and never reach the Sargasso, but no dream ever entirely disappears. Somewhere it troubles some unfortunate person and some day, when that person has been sufficiently troubled, it will be reproduced on the lot. (353)

In "Hollywood Panoramics: Nathanael West's Baroque Modernity," Andrew Lyndon Knighton points out that "the novel is replete with similar inventories. It is set in a Hollywood where such fetish objects abound, both on the studio lots and beyond. And it makes the argument that, torn from their homelands and their historical contexts, such objects share their alienation with those refugees who have flocked to Los Angeles to pursue dreams of celebrity, wealth, or freedom" (145-146). This description applies

directly to Faye, who has built herself up entirely around the notion of achieving celebrity

and fame. Just as Faye's personality is pure artifice, her beliefs about Hollywood are

culled together from various things she has read and heard: "She went on and on, telling

him how careers are made in the movies and how she intended to make hers. It was all

nonsense. She mixed bits of badly understood advice from the trade papers with other

bits out of the fan magazines and compared these with the legends that surround the

activities of screen stars and executives. Without any noticeable transition, possibilities

became probabilities and wound up as inevitabilities" (386). Just as we arrive at a stable

sense of identity by transforming our thoughts and experiences into coherent narratives,

Faye creates a coherent narrative of future success out of what is, in fact, a patchwork of

anecdotes and half-truths. What become for her "inevitabilities," the novel demonstrates,

are no more than fantasies.

As in *Tycoon*, one potential reaction against this phenomenon is the symbolic

return to the maternal. But just as this step represents the end for Mannie Schwartz in his

suicide, for Simpson this turns into a devolution toward violence. Unable to bear the

stress any longer, near the end of the novel Simpson enters into what Hackett calls a

"Uterine Flight," a term that he gleaned from a caption under a picture of a woman in a

similar position from a book of abnormal psychology:

> But he wasn't relaxed. Some inner force of nerve and muscle was
>
> straining to make the ball tighter and still tighter. He was like a steel
>
> spring which has been freed of its function in a machine and allowed to
>
> use all its strength centripetally. While part of a machine the pull of the

spring had been used against other and stronger forces, but now, free at

last, it was striving to attain the shape of its original coil. (403)

As throughout the novel, Simpson's body is described with mechanized imagery. Even in

his attempt to symbolically return to the safety of the womb, Simpson is unable to escape

the influence of the mechanized world around him. This does not stop Hackett from

imagining the womb as an idealized space:

What a perfect escape the return to the womb was. Better by far than

Religion or Art or the South Sea Islands. It was so snug and warm there,

and the feeding was automatic. Everything perfect in that hotel. No

wonder the memory of those accommodations lingered in the blood and

nerves of everyone. It was dark, yes, but what a warm, rich darkness. The

grave wasn't in it. No wonder one fought so desperately against being

evicted when the nine months lease was up. (403-404)

But clearly one can never find an *actual* replacement for this state. Like Mannie

Schwartz, the closest one can get to this return is death. In lieu of that, as we have seen,

the inevitable turn is to violence.

Harking back to West's broader focus on mass culture, what is particularly

frightening about the violence in the final pages of the novel is the way that it erupts as a

result of a spontaneous crowd gathering. West describes the scene in meticulous and

horrifying detail, suggesting that the erupting violence wells up from a site of repressed

rage:

New groups, whole families, kept arriving. He could see a change come

over them as soon as they had become part of the crowd. Until they

reached the line, they looked difficult, almost furtive, but the moment they became part of it, they turned arrogant and pugnacious. It was a mistake to think them harmless curiosity seekers. They were savage and bitter, especially the middle-aged and the old, and had been made so by boredom and disappointment.

All their lives they had slaved at some kind of dull, heavy labor, behind desks and counters, in the fields and at tedious machines of all sorts, saving their pennies and dreaming of the leisure that would be theirs when they had enough […] If only a plane would crash once in a while so that they could watch the passengers being consumed in a "holocaust of flame," as the newspapers put it. But the planes never crash.

Their boredom becomes more and more terrible. They realize that they've been tricked and burn with resentment. Every day of their lives they read the newspapers and went to the movies. Both fed them on lynchings, murder, sex crimes, explosions, wrecks, love nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, war […] Nothing can ever be violent enough to make taut their slack minds and bodies. They have been cheated and betrayed. They have slaved and saved for nothing. (411-412)

As we have seen through West and Fitzgerald's novels in particular, the people who comprise the mob feel "cheated and betrayed" when their actual experience in Los Angeles does not live up to the ideological fantasies that they have been fed. In typical West fashion, the final riot scene of the novel is not without wry irony and humor. What is so bizarre about the scene is that some participants do not even realize that they are

part of a riot to begin with and simply gather because they believe Gary Cooper had been

sighted. While there is a degree of levity and humor here, West's deeper insight into the

violence of crowd mentality is all the more disturbing; the vast major of participants in

the riot do not enter with any violent intent, but are rather swept up in the fervor of the

moment. Human beings, West suggests, are tragically susceptible to the influence of

others around them. Wilson is insightful in his analysis of this final scene as well, writing

that

> the America of the murders and rapes which fill the Los Angeles papers is
>
> only the obverse side of the America of the inanities of the movies. Such
>
> people—Mr. West seems to say—dissatisfied, yet with no ideas, no
>
> objectives and no interest in anything vital, may in the mass be capable of
>
> anything. The daydreams purveyed by Hollywood, the romances that in
>
> movie stories can be counted on to have whisked around all obstacles and
>
> adroitly knocked out all "menaces" by the time they have run off their
>
> reels, romances which their fascinated audiences have never been able to
>
> live themselves—only cheat them and embitter their frustration. Of such
>
> mobs are the followers of fascism made. (*Classics and Commercials* 54)

Increasingly in recent years, critics and historians have drawn major connections between

modernism and fascism. Historian Roger Griffin's *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of

a Beginning Under Mussolini and Hitler* (2010), for example, convincingly argues that

modernism—from aesthetics to politics—was integral in setting the stage for the spread

of fascism in Europe. Ultimately, West's violent vision anticipates the violence of WWII

and the destructive potential of the masses as seen most tragically in the Nazi

concentration camps. We might say, finally, that West's vision serves as a warning for the destructive potential of modernity's effects on the individual psyche. Pushed to the edge, the human animal, like any other animal, will inevitably react through violence.

After Many a Summer Dies the Swan and the Escape from Personality

Given the subject matter of *The Love of the Last Tycoon* and *The Day of the Locust*, Huxley's *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* may seem like somewhat of an outlier in this chapter. Unlike Fitzgerald and West, who came to Los Angeles at the end of their careers, Huxley would spend over twenty years in Southern California, mostly in Los Angeles and, in fact, in Hollywood itself. While Hollywood and the film industry do not play a direct role in the novel, their influence on Huxley's novel is clear. As in *The Day of the Locust*, for example, Huxley's characters are often described as artificial, or as actors who are meant to play a specific role. The chauffeur, for example, who takes Pordage to Stoyte's mansion at the beginning of the novel seems entirely aware of the part that he is being asked to play in Stoyte's charade: "Once more the old-fashioned retainer, the chauffeur, taking off his cap, did a final impersonation of himself welcoming the young master home to the plantation, then set to work to unload the luggage" (26). The chauffer is conscious of his own role, understanding that Stoyte is not only interested in his practical employment, but in his keeping up the appearance of classical grandeur that feeds Stoyte's narcissism. The reference to Stoyte's mansion as a "plantation," suggests Stoyte of course as a plantation owner, which reflects his desire to possess not only lavish commodities that serve as testament to his vast wealth, but people themselves.

Huxley builds upon this notion of "acting" when describing Stoyte's face when he and Pordage first meet: "The face wore that shut, unsmiling mask which American workmen tend to put on in their dealings with strangers—in order to prove, by not making the ingratiating grimaces of courtesy, that theirs is a free country and you're not going to come it over *them*" (28). We see echoes here of Fitzgerald's Monroe Stahr; it is not enough that each man possess wealth and power, but he must play the part of a wealthy and powerful man down to the minutiae of each facial expression. Stoyte maintains a similar countenance throughout the novel, fitting of the archetypal American business tycoon after whom he styles himself. Underneath, however, like Monroe Stahr, Stoyte suffers from an emotional vulnerability not unlike the less wealthy and powerful characters around him. While the other characters are utterly fooled by Stoyte's act, Pordage comes to recognize Stoyte's façade for what it is: An attempt to mask his deep insecurities. Pordage, in fact, sees beneath the surface of all the other characters in ways that no one else is able. Perhaps, we might surmise, this is because Portage is the novel's only outsider, an Englishman who has not been so thoroughly corrupted by the intellectually enervating forces of American popular culture. In other words, while the other characters in the novel appear to fully buy into the "acts" that they perform, Pordage sees them for what they are. In the opening pages of the novel, for example, he observes a number of women walking down the city streets: "Most of the girls, as they walked along, seemed to be absorbed in silent prayer; but he supposed, on second thought, it was only gum that they were thus incessantly ruminating. Gum, not God" (5). As in *Locust*, Huxley's characters appear to be doing something meaningful, but upon deeper examination there is in fact nothing behind the façade; the façade itself produces

the illusion of meaning. In this case, the juxtaposition is particularly ironic on account of its religious connection; where God appears to exist, there is in fact only meaningless, mechanical action.

Religion is a major theme in the novel and it straddles the underling paradoxes between mind/body and faith/science that comprise its essential symbolic structure. In the vein of Eliot and Joyce, the novel takes up the classic modernist notion that society's old (namely religious) value systems have crumbled. Society is at a critical moral and philosophical juncture, Huxley appears to suggest, and it is unclear whether salvation will come in the form of faith or science. While in the cemetery that Stoyte owns, Pordage reads religious messages that accompany the sculptures scattered throughout and reflects upon their meaning in their new modern context. One in particular sets off his interest:

> "Death is swallowed up in victory"—the victory no longer of the spirit but of the body—the well-fed body, for ever youthful, immortally athletic, indefatigably sexy. The Moslem paradise had had copulations six centuries long. In this new Christian heaven, progress, no doubt, would have stepped up the period to a millennium and added the joy of everlasting tennis, eternal golf and swimming. (16)

Rather than a spiritual heaven, Jeremy envisions a modern heaven that resembles the lives led by the rich inhabitants of Los Angeles. As with the girls chewing gum who appear to be ruminating upon God, the cemetery shows all the outward signs of faith, but in fact those buried there have worshiped and coveted their earthly goods rather than the God who is evoked at their grave sites. While Fitzgerald and West do not quite take up the issue of religion in the same way, each novel uses the setting of Los Angeles to

symbolize the broader and ever-growing trend of American consumer culture. While Stoyte offers an extreme (and satirical) example, *After Many a Summer* suggests that Americans have become obsessed by the notion that immortality is available for purchase.

For Pordage, the man of history and science, the academic, the idea of faith in a "higher power" runs counter to his distinctly practical character. While the notion of "faith" is continually undermined throughout the novel, in Portage Huxley privileges the importance not only of experience, but of recognizing "meaning" as a construction rather than an a priori phenomenon: "For Jeremy, direct, unmediated experience was always hard to take in, always more or less disquieting. Life became safe, things assumed meaning, only when they had been translated into words and confined between the covers of a book" (27). Unlike the novel's other characters, Pordage recognizes the importance of language in structuring what we know as "reality." His reference to Stoyte's castle upon first seeing it as "this Object" (19) suggests Lacanian undertones, as though the thing itself cannot be encompassed by the inadequate descriptions of language. This is further emphasized by the capitalization of Object, which accentuates its domineering nature. As he comes upon the castle for the first time, he makes the following observation: "The Object impended, insolently enormous. Nobody had dealt poetically with *that*. Not Childe Roland, not the King of Thule, not Marmion, not the Lady of Shalott, not Sir Leoline […] Sir Leoline, the baron rich, had—what? A toothless mastiff bitch. But Mr. Stoyte had baboons and a sacred grotto, Mr. Stoyte had a chromium portcullis and the Hauberk Papers, Mr. Stoyte had a cemetery like an amusement park and a donjon like . . ."(27). In some sense, for Pordage at least, what Stoyte has created

transcends words and history, which makes it especially difficult for him to fit it into the practical paradigm in which he couches his existence. It also, in that sense, itself stands as a contrast to religion and symbolically sets up Stoyte as a Kubla Khan like figure whose vast material possessions make him a sort of god on earth; though along with that, of course, we are led to anticipate the erosion of this heretical power.

Running directly counter to the religious theme in the novel, and once again evoking the false belief in a timeless earthly paradise, is Stoyte's obsession with developing a scientific cure for aging. The irony of his wish is that when one turns so entirely from faith to science one must starkly face the realities of the human animal for exactly what it is—and this, as we will see, potentially leads us into the realm of the abject. Our first glimpse of these implications comes in the form of a description of the gorillas that are housed at Stoyte's residence:

> Just opposite the point at which they were standing, on a shelf of artificial rock, sat a baboon mother, holding in her arms the withered and disintegrating corpse of the baby she would not abandon even though it had been dead for a fortnight. Every now and then, with an intense, automatic affection, she would lick the cadaver. Tufts of greenish fur and even pieces of skin detached themselves under the vigorous action of her tongue. Delicately, with black fingers, she would pick the hairs out of her mouth, then begin again. (91-92)

This grotesque scene is, first of all, a reminder of human mortality that contextualizes Stoyte's futile pursuit in a far more disturbing light than Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." While Stoyte makes an effort to avoid meaningful emotional attachment, it is also a

reminder of the inevitable ("automatic affection") connection that even non-human animals feel toward one another. It also, of course, suggests the difficulty in understanding and coping with death. We cannot help but see shades of Stoyte in the baboon mother, unable to accept the reality of death and decay. Furthermore, just earlier the novel equates the rich with gorillas   Just earlier, for example, Huxley equates the rich with gorillas and, while the mother in this scene is a baboon, there is an obvious reminder of the connection between human beings and our primate ancestors. Further, the baby in the scene symbolically recalls Virginia (whose name is certainly an ironic joke), who is earlier described as Stoyte's baby, "not only figuratively and colloquially, but also in the literal sense of the word" (50). As two gorillas begin copulating she remarks, "'Aren't they cute! […] Aren't they *human*!'" (93). What is so alarming about the scene, finally, is that the gorillas *are* so human and that their actions, although we would not like to think so, are not so far removed from our own.

While the gorillas anticipate the final grotesque scene of the novel, in which we find that the Fifth Earl has devolved into, as Obispo calls him, a "foetal ape" (353), making a horrifying ironic joke of Stoyte's dream, I would argue that the most truly revealing aspect of the novel comes in the form of Propter's ruminations on personality. By way of contrast, the narrator first explains Propter's notion that "Peter Claver's conception of the world had the defect of being erroneous, but the merit of being simple and dramatic" (108-109). This conception consists of a personal and forgiving God, "heaven and hell and the absolute reality of human personalities" (109) and other qualities that one would typically associate with a Christian worldview. Propter, however, poses the following: "For, if individuality is not absolute, if personalities are illusory

figments of a self-will disastrously blind to the reality of a more-than-personal consciousness, of which it is the limitation and denial, then all of every human being's efforts must be directed, in the last resort, to the actualization of that more-than-personal consciousness" (109). It is in this gesture toward something somehow "more-than-personal" that I argue Huxley most closely reaches a postmodern and Lacanian psychoanalytic conception of "identity."

This is supported by other echoes of Lacanian theory elsewhere in the novel as well, for example in Dr. Obispo's comments during his first conversation with Portage, in which he draws a connection between the novel's problematic view of religion and what resembles parts of Lacan's theory of object choice: "Why, you can't even love a woman as she is in herself; and after all, there is some sort of objective physical basis for the phenomenon we call a female. A pretty nice basis in some cases. Whereas poor old Dios is only a spirit—in other words, pure imagination" (61). Like Lacan, Obispo suggests that we do not actual desire objects themselves, but the meanings that we project upon them. Our desires, in other words, are primarily narcissistic and ultimately our only desire is to fill the void opened up by our inevitable entry into the realm of the symbolic.

Propter's philosophy is not, finally, all that unlike what we find in Fitzgerald and West, but it is more acutely stated. "To conceive of that all-important ego of his [Stoyte's worker from Kansas] as a fiction," he ruminates, "a kind of nightmare, a frantically agitated nothingness capable, when once its frenzy had been quieted, of being filled with God, with a God conceived and experienced as a more than personal consciousness, as a free power, a pure working, a being withdrawn. . . ." (111). This is the vision of ideal human identity that Propter lays out and it is essentially Lacanian in nature. I would like

to view Propter's vision, ultimately, as a culmination of the fragmented view of

personality collectively laid out by Fitzgerald, West, and Huxley. Together, these novels

create a post/modern Los Angeles that imagines not simply an alternative view of

subjectivity—as do many modernist novels—but a profound problematization of the

conception of personality altogether.

I have tried to suggest, finally, that the Los Angeles of the 1930s provided a

perfect site for these writers to take up the notion of identity as a construct, rather than an

ontological fixity. As for the city's broader symbolic value, however, I would argue that

there is a great deal of nuance to their view. For *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*

also suggests, as Russell Berman points out, that it is problematic to simply view Los

Angeles as a place disconnected from any but its own ephemeral history:

> Stoyte's own obsessive pursuit of youth, which Pordage incorporates into
>
> his condemnation of the American West, turns out to draw on a tradition –
>
> so we learn from the documents – that leads back to England, and this
>
> unsettles Pordage's too comfortable contrast between Old World and
>
> New: California youth culture draws on very Old World traditions. Far
>
> from endorsing the denunciation of Los Angeles as barbarian, Huxley –
>
> not unlike the German exile philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor
>
> Adorno – uncovers a dialectic in the Enlightenment which finds its
>
> starkest expression in his new home. (50-51)

Huxley's Los Angeles, in particular, gives us the paradox of the city's vapidity and

artificiality—a waning sense of historicity—in the words of Jameson, but at the same

time a reminder that even as it seems so completely detached from what has come before

it is in fact built upon the values of its nation and its nation's progenitors. Taken together Fitzgerald, West, and Huxley seem keenly aware that Los Angeles represents a new phenomenon in American life, a fragmentation of old value systems and of classic notions about identity. But they also maintain a sense of continuity with the past. This chapter is meant to show, in a broad sense, that what we call postmodernism is not so far removed from its predecessor. In fact, these novelists of the 1930s were already exploring the major themes that postmodern writers would take up following the Second World War. Consequently, I suggest that Los Angeles has great value not only to postmodern critics, but to the landscape of modernist studies as well.

CHAPTER FOUR: *MÉCONNAISSANCE*, ERASURE, AND POST/MODERN SUBJECTIVITY IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S *MURPHY*

The first three chapters of this project have proceeded chronologically from Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo* (1904), to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), to the trio of novels taken up in the previous chapter: Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939), Aldous Huxley's *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* (1939), and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Love of the Last Tycoon* (1941). I have attempted a sense of continuity in order to suggest a trajectory from early modernist attempts to situate the subject within capitalist ideological structures to later novels that increasingly adopt stylistic and thematic traits typically associated with postmodernism. Although I wish to highlight progression, I would insist that each of these novels fits the heading of "deconstructive fictions" as I have defined it. One might ask, given this adherence to chronology, whether Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* (1938) is out of sequence here. Chronologically speaking, we are of course moving backwards here rather than forging ahead toward the Second World War that has become the commonly accepted de facto end of modernism as such.

But like Huxley, who also lived well into the age of postmodernism,[31] the bulk of Beckett's writing was done after 1945. His work continues to challenge critics, who have called him the last modernist, the first postmodernist, and countless other monikers that attempt to classify his elusive writing. Duncan McColl Chesney encapsulates the problem of periodization in relation to Beckett in a recent essay in *Modernism/Modernity*, in

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[31] Huxley died in 1963, which most, I think it is fair to say, would consider within the time frame of postmodernism—or certainly, at least, somewhere beyond the boundaries of modernism.

which he describes Beckett as a "crucial test case" in evaluating the usefulness and validity of postmodernism as a category, style, or—in a term borrowed from Jameson— "cultural dominant" (637):

> He follows perhaps the most exemplary of prose modernists, James Joyce, and produces a body of work which is very much unlike that of his famous predecessor and compatriot/co-exile, as well as that of the subject of his youthful scholarly interest (another quintessential prose modernist), Marcel Proust. Beckett clearly, and not just temporally, comes after these modernists and their moment. His defining war is the Second, not the First. His childhood was not that of the *fin-de-siècle*; his abandoned homeland was the *Republic* of Ireland; *his* exile was so famously marked by the change of language in order to achieve what he called "the right weakening effect" in a clear attempt to escape the style of Joyce in the language of Proust, and thus attain a style all his own. If *post* simply means *after*, then Beckett is perhaps the first great postmodernist. But we all know it is not so simple. (637-638)

As Chesney points out, Beckett's great influences were modernists; and yet his writing, even as early as *Murphy*, does not feel quite right in company with Joyce, Proust, and his other compatriots (with the exception, perhaps, of Joyce's perplexing 1939 novel *Finnegans Wake*, which has itself been used as an emblem to mark the end of modernism). In addition to the great modernist novelists and poets, Beckett was also profoundly influenced by his radically diverse readings in philosophy, psychology, and other subjects. This disparate assortment of influences generates a style in Beckett's

novels that is both literary and deeply philosophical, not to mention its psychological

insights. Perhaps, we might say, it is Beckett's footing in so many different disciplines

that gives his prose such a distinctive and unclassifiable character. He is one of those few

writers who truly resist comparison.

Murphy was Beckett's second novel, although his first, *Dream of Fair to

Middling Women*, which was allegedly written in a matter of weeks in 1932, was rejected

by publishers and not actually released until 1992, three years after Beckett's death.

While the mid-1930s saw the publication of the short story collection *More Pricks than

Kicks* (1934) and the collection of poems *Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates* (1935),[32]

Murphy represents Beckett's first mature effort. The major event that defined the 1930s

for Beckett was the death of his father in 1933, which was extraordinarily traumatic for

him. Following his father's death, he began psychoanalytic treatment at the Tavistock

Clinic in London with Wilfred Bion. During his treatment Beckett developed an interest

in psychology and began his own course of study on the subject. Ackerley explains that

> Freud was a major force, Beckett's interest centering upon narcissism,
>
> neuroses and the psychopathology of daily life rather than the familiar
>
> dreams of totems and taboos. He found in these studies […] confirmation
>
> of his own intrauterine attraction and psychosomatic problems, and
>
> insights into the fraught relationship with his mother […] but he retained a
>
> skepticism about their potential. (17)

James Knowlson, one of Beckett's biographers, describes some particular influences,

writing that "in the course of his therapy, Beckett read widely on the subject of

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[32] Critics have noted here the coincidence with Joyce, who also published a book of poetry and a book of short stories prior to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

psychology and psychoanalysis. R.S. Woodworth's *Contemporary Schools of Psychology* provided him with the general framework he needed. His detailed notes on this book still exist. In it, he read about behaviorism, gestalt psychology, Freud, Jung, Adler, and William McDougall" (171). These readings, coupled with his own experience, became the inspiration for the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, where Murphy eventually takes employment. Given this context, it is not surprising that *Murphy* was a deeply personal novel for Beckett. "Above all," according to Knowlson, "*Murphy* expresses in a radical and sharply focused way that impulse toward self-immersion, solitude, and inner peace the consequences of which Beckett was attempting to resolve in his personal life through psychoanalysis" (203). Taken together with his philosophical readings of Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and others, Beckett's readings in psychology inform *Murphy*'s unique discourse on human subjectivity.

While previous critics have observed the novel's underlying irony, I will focus specifically on what I find to be a central ironic tension out of which the novel's deconstructive critique emerges, which is the juxtaposition of Murphy's belief in a Cartesian dualism and the novel's narrative posture, which suggests a Lacanian view of subjectivity as a symptom of desire. In order to reach his utopian vision of existential transcendence, Murphy attempts to extricate himself from the torment of the subject-object relationship; in other words, he desires the negation of desire. The omnipotent narrative voice, on the other hand, recognizes that desire itself generates subjectivity and thus Murphy finds himself (like Gatsby) trapped in an endless repetition that is symbolically represented in his rocking chair. While the rocking of the chair creates physical movement, in a deeper sense Murphy does not go anywhere at all. His vision is

further sabotaged by the other characters in the novel, whose ceaseless pursuit of him ironically mocks his attempt to escape the social (we might imagine Lacan's Symbolic realm here) dimension of subjectivity. As Lacan, Althusser, and others have demonstrated, we are always-already subjected through the signifying practice of language and our existence in a physical space populated by other human beings through whom our desire is mediated. Thus, the driving force of Beckett's novel is *méconnaissance*, the persistent misrecognition that sustains the subject's sense of unity and coherence. This leads Murphy continually into the painful realm of *jouissance*, culminating in his encounter with Mr. Endon and eventual death. While Murphy longs to escape into the realm of the Real, the novel reminds us that our entrance into the Symbolic forever severs us from this realm.

Just as the novels taken up in the previous chapter emphasize the importance of spatial surroundings in creating a geographical context for the subject's existence, *Murphy* establishes spatiality as a major theme through its meticulous attention to particular spatial details. John Pilling argues that *Murphy* "could be called 'a novel of London' in much the same way as T.S. Eliot's *The waste land* [sic] can be seen as a 'poem of London', and there is perhaps no other single work of Beckett's that fosters, though very much as an incidental by-product, the possibility of a 'literary pilgrimage' to the places mentioned in it" (33). Indeed, *Murphy* is filled with references to particular streets, neighborhoods, and landmarks. As Pilling goes on to observe, "without such representational, solid points of reference – quite as important in their way as the 'points' which both the characters and the narrator insist we take note of […] Murphy's desire to elude definition would itself lack definition" (33). Particularly interesting in Pilling's

characterization of the novel is his claim that geography represents an "incidental by-product" in its own right, along with his insistence that it is, in fact, thematically crucial in that it allows a point of juxtaposition against which Beckett can examine issues of psychology and philosophy. The paradoxical tension underlying Pilling's characterization of geographical specificity in the novel mirrors the ironic tensions that underlie the novel itself; those between virtual and actual; mental and physical; subject and object; presence and absence; and ultimately life and death.

Neary says to Murphy in the opening pages of the novel that "'all life is figure and ground'" (2), to which Murphy responds: "'But a wandering to find home'" (3). Taking a cue from Joyce, this desire to "find home" pervades the novel, but *Murphy* explores a notion of "home" that is entirely psychological. In these opening pages, as it will do so often throughout, the novel asks us to consider the function of a concept that is generally associated with physicality (wandering) when used in a psychological context. In other words, the novel constantly forces us into an uncanny position as readers whereby anytime we try to establish a footing in physical reality, we are pulled back through the subjective filter of Murphy's consciousness. The notion of wandering is also ironically juxtaposed with Murphy's obsession with bondage, which is introduced on the opening page of the novel that begins with a meticulous description of the room in which Murphy feels his deepest pleasure by distancing himself from the outside world:

> The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new. Murphy sat out
> of it, as though he were free, in a mew in West Brompton. Here for what
> might have been six months he had eaten, drunk, slept, and put his clothes

on and off, in a medium-sized cage of north-western aspect commanding

an unbroken view of medium-sized cages of south-eastern aspect. (1)

The novel gives us in this first paragraph not only the general location of West Brompton,

but the directionality of the apartment itself. In mock epic fashion it even begins with a

description of celestial positioning, foreshadowing the premonition that Murphy receives

from Suk, which he takes as gospel and obsessively follows in his future actions

throughout the novel. The irony here is that physical location is practically meaningless

to Murphy (aside from the fact that he prefers spaces that provide him solitude), who

desires only withdrawal into his own mind. As with the juxtaposition between Murphy's

belief in a mind/body dualism and the novel's constant undermining of such a view of

subjectivity, one gets the sense that the novel's meticulous spatial details subtly mock

Murphy's insistence that "place" is of no importance to his project of psychological

liberation. Of course, this is not entirely true for Murphy, as in fact particular places like

the Cockpit in Hyde Park and, naturally, his apartment, become crucial sites of "escape"

for Murphy. It is significant, going along with this fact, that the passage refers to

Murphy's state "as though he were free," once again highlighting the irony that while

Murphy may feel a sense of freedom, we as readers are continually being told that this

freedom is illusory. This is emphasized as well, in the reference to his apartment as a

"cage," suggesting that what Murphy sees as liberating is in fact a form of confinement—

in a physical sense, but also perhaps in a psychological or emotional one as well.

Murphy's fixation on the solitude of his apartment is introduced in stark terms in

the following paragraph, which tells us just how unusual his obsession is: "He sat naked

in his rocking-chair of undressed teak, guaranteed not to crack, warp, shrink, corrode, or

creak at night. It was his own, it never left him" (1). Murphy's nakedness suggests the safety of the womb and his desire to escape the realm of the Symbolic. We also learn that Murphy is not only not, but physically constrained by the scarves that he has used to fasten himself to his chair: "Seven scarves held him in position. Two fastened his shins to the rockers, one his thighs to the seat, two his breast and belly to the back, one his wrists to the strut behind. Only the most local movements were possible" (1). The fetal metaphor is extended here as the scarves that hold Murphy to his chair suggest an umbilical connection, the security of physical confinement. Later the narrator tells us that "he sat in his chair this way because it gave him pleasure! First it gave his body pleasure, it appeased his body. Then it set him free in his mind. For it was not until his body was appeased that he could come alive in his mind, as described in section six. And life in his mind gave him pleasure, such pleasure that pleasure was not the word" (2). In this initial description of Murphy's occupation, we can already begin to see the novel's underlying irony emerge in that, while Murphy insists upon the absolute separation of mind and body, he nonetheless must rely upon physical appeasement in order to achieve the psychological pleasure that prepossesses him.

The famous sixth chapter of the novel fully lays bare the philosophical and psychological assumptions according to which Murphy operates. In doing so, however, it also calls attention to the multiplicity of viewpoints regarding subjectivity that the novel contains. "It is most unfortunate," the narrator explains, "but the point of this story has been reached where a justification of the expression 'Murphy's mind' has to be attempted. Happily we need not concern ourselves with this apparatus as it really was— that would be an extravagance and an impertinence—but solely with what it felt and

pictured itself to be" (65). We might interpret "as it really was" here as a scientific or biological description, the implication being that such a description would serve no purpose in this venue. That we are given a description of Murphy's mind according to "what it felt and pictured itself to be" suggests the problem of subjectivity with which the novel is concerned. There is, first off, an ontological conundrum here: If we accept that "Murphy's mind" carries this conception of itself, are we to assume that we are speaking here of Murphy? In other words, do we assume that Murphy's mind is speaking for him? This once again raises the issue, which the subsequent paragraphs develop, of the Cartesian mind/body dualism:

> Murphy's mind pictured itself as a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without. This was not an impoverishment, for it excluded nothing that it did not itself contain. Nothing had ever been, was or would be in the universe outside it but was already present as virtual, or actual, or virtual rising into actual, or actual falling into virtual, in the universe inside it.
>
> This did not involve Murphy in the idealist tar. There was the mental fact and there was the physical fact, equally real if not equally pleasant.
>
> He distinguished between the actual and the virtual of his mind, not as between form and the formless yearning for form, but as between that of which he had both mental and physical experience and that of which he had mental experience only. Thus the form of kick was actual, that of caress virtual. (65)

The description is solipsistic in its insistence on absolute subjectivity. Although the "mental fact" and the "physical fact" are said to be "equally real," all physical experiences are filtered through processes of mental activity. At the same time, it is only through mental processes connected with the brain that physical stimuli can be felt. The two are, then, equally real in the sense that both mental and physical sensations are registered through the activity of sensory perception as it is received by the brain. But the virtual, unlike the real, entails that which cannot be seen or felt by the real. The foot that kicks has a physical presence in time and space and is therefore plainly visible; the caress, in the common sense, is physical as well. The hand that caresses us exists in time and space and makes physical contact with the sensing body. But the caress transcends the real in the intangible emotion that it evokes, the immaterial thought, feeling, or desire that has no materiality. The novel plainly recognizes here, as it does throughout, the fundamental subjectivity of human existence. Our experiences—whether mental or physical—are always inevitably filtered through our physical, biological being *and* our psyche.

The Cartesian dualism is subsequently more fully developed and muddled by the narrator's description of Murphy's conception of and relationship toward his body and mind, which is rendered problematic by an essential lack of understanding: "Thus Murphy felt himself split in two, a body and a mind. They had intercourse apparently, otherwise he could not have known that they had anything in common. But he felt his mind to be bodytight and did not understand through what channel the intercourse was effected nor how the two experiences came to overlap" (66). While Murphy sees the body and mind as "equal"—if we may extrapolate this from the previous passage—he

also experiences a fundamental disconnect between the two. Interestingly, despite this philosophical notion of separation Murphy does admit to some sort of fundamental continuity between his body and mind, but he simply chooses to believe that it is enshrouded in metaphysical mystery: "However that might be, Murphy was content to accept this partial congruence of the world of his mind with the world of his body as due to some such process of supernatural determination" (66). We see here Murphy succumbing to ideology in the Žižekian sense of choosing to believe even while the evidence in front of him challenges his belief:

> The problem [described above] was of little interest. Any solution would do that did not clash with the feeling growing stronger as Murphy grew older, that his mind was a closed system, subject to no principle of change but its own, self-sufficient and impermeable to the vicissitudes of the body. Of infinitely more interest than how this came to be so was the manner in which it might be exploited. (66)

In other words, Murphy continues to believe, even though he realizes that he is deceiving himself in doing so. "Any solution would do," as long as he does not have to confront reality as such. In a famous passage from *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek posits "a new way to read the Marxian formula 'they do not know it, but they are doing it'" (32), which encapsulates the classic Marxist view of ideology. "The illusion is not on the side of knowledge," Zizek explains, "it is already on the side of reality itself, of what the people are doing. What they do not know is that their social reality itself, their activity, is guided by an illusion, by a fetishistic inversion. What they overlook, what they misrecognize, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real

social activity" (32). This brings us back to Conrad's *Nostromo*, where the citizens of

Sulaco allow themselves to be victimized by bourgeois ideology and continue to act in

ways that obviously run counter to their own interest (supporting successive political

dictators, and so on). While the nature of Murphy's misrecognition is somewhat different,

the effect is nevertheless the same: He is unable to recognize his role in social activity

through his relationship to others. Despite the obvious and inevitable connections that

build between him and the people around him, he persists in the belief that he may simply

sever these connections at any time and retreat back into the virtual world of his mind,

essentially shutting off the outside world. Žižek concludes the above point by

reformulating Marx's famous statement: "They know very well how things really are, but

still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists

in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality.

And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called the *ideological fantasy*"

(32-33). While Murphy believes in the liberating potential of freeing his mind from the

tethers of his body, the novel makes it clear that his pursuit simply constitutes his

fundamental ideological fantasy.

The essence of Murphy's fantasy is the belief that by extricating himself from the

realm of the physical, the realm of bodily sensation, he can then extricate himself from

the realm of desire. This is where we, as readers, encounter the disconnect between

Murphy's Cartesian view of subjectivity and the novel's, which recognizes that Murphy

has always-already been cast into the drama of desire from which his subjectivity has

emerged. The notion of subjectivity that the novel suggests resembles that posited by

Lacan, who maintains that physical objects are only fleeting material manifestations of

our desire, which in fact resides entirely in the psychological realm, or the realm of the mind as Murphy would have it. Murphy's mistake, in other words, is in thinking that he can escape the constriction of corporeality by shielding his body, so to speak, from the physical world—thus his tying himself to his chair. The underlying irony in the novel, which functions simultaneously as comedy and tragedy, arises out of the juxtaposition of Murphy's view with the novel's rejection of Cartesianism and insistence that one cannot escape desire, as it is desire itself that distinguishes us as human. The situational irony in Murphy's case is that his very attempt to escape the realm of desire through physical bondage is actually a symptom of his desire (put in Lacanian terms) to return to the pre-specular and pre-linguistic subjective fantasy prior to the mirror stage or, as we have seen earlier, a symbolic return to the safety of the womb. While Murphy becomes increasingly convinced throughout the novel that he can escape the external world that he loathes and achieve what might be described as a form of psychological enlightenment, the narrative voice of the novel simultaneously deconstructs his attempts.

Daniel Katz, who explores this issue in *Saying I No More: Subjectivity and Consciousness in the Prose of Samuel Beckett*, explains that "a deconstructive analysis of the 'voice' in Beckett inevitably leads to the broader questions of consciousness, self-presence, and subjectivity. As Beckett's prose closes down the space of phenomenal identification based on the representation of a coherent subjectivity, it likewise eliminates the possibility of psychologizing interpretations" (17). Without question, one of the most difficult characteristics of Beckett's prose for critics, as Katz goes on to emphasize, is its inherent resistance to interpretation. "It is difficult indeed," Katz writes, "to state the sum of the achievements of an author who so consistently strove for erasure, to constantly say

in order to have finally said nothing" (181). This notion of "say[ing] in order to have

finally said nothing" encapsulates Beckett's deconstructive discourse throughout the

novel. While Murphy is continually denied the negation of desire that he strives for, the

novel ironically ends in erasure when his ashes are unceremoniously scattered across a

soiled barroom floor.[33] It is as though Murphy is gradually erased throughout the novel

until he is done away with entirely—and of course Beckett further develops this irony by

continuing the novel for several chapters after his death.

As we have established, one of the central tensions in the novel is between

Murphy's attempt to escape the ensnaring net of desire and the novel's continually

recasting him back into it. Murphy's essential problem is that he believes in the

uniqueness of his own subjective experience; as the narrator tells us, "Murphy believed

there was no dark quite like his own dark" (95). Murphy says to Celia during one

exchange early in the novel, "'I can't talk against space'" and then asks her "'What have

I now? […] I distinguish. You, my body and my mind […] In the mercantile gehenna

[…] to which your words invite me, one of these will go, or two, or all. If you, then you

only; if my body, then you also; if my mind, then all.'" (25). Murphy's Cartesian dualism

has been the focus of many critics. Chris Ackerley, for example, contends that "the

structure of the novel as a whole arises from a distrust of Cartesian rationalism, and its

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[33] As an alternative to "erasure," which I find preferable, others commonly focus instead on the notion of "silence" in Beckett's work. Anthony Cronin, for example, writes the following: "Beckett was a perfectionist. Most artists are; and indeed perfectionism, à la Eliot and Joyce, was a feature of modernism, which rejected both the journeyman's code of 'needs must' and the slapdash, hit-and-miss methods of the great Victorians. But he was a perfectionist to a degree which was unusual and obsessive even among the modernist masters. He yearned for silence, the blank white page, the most perfect thing of all. As an artist he had had more false starts and false beginnings than most. The principal failing of his earlier work, so knowing but also so self-revealing in all the wrong ways, is the failure to achieve a form and a tone of voice which would allow him to express his particular truths. Perhaps this repeated failure made him feel more acutely than most the torment of marred utterance, of false utterance, of would-be significant utterance; and to feel also more intensely than others that the object of the true, achieved and necessary utterance is silence – in some sense or other, a permission to be silent, whether granted by one's daemon or by one's creator" (376).

controlling irony from the incommensurability of Murphy's declared goal and its realization in a universe which is unclear and indistinct—in a word, absurd" (18).[34] Thomas J. Cousineau also recognizes this underlying tension in his account of the novel's central ironic structure:

> In effect, Beckett uses irony to place in question that very promotion of mental experience at the expense of the physical which is the essence of Murphy's system. The abuse to which he subjects Murphy serves as a vehicle through which he registers his suspicion that, as attractive an option as Murphy's retreat into his mental world may be, it represents in some way a misconception of reality. (225)

What I find particularly interesting about Cousineau's account is the way that he characterizes Beckett as subjecting Murphy to the abuse he suffers throughout the novel. One cannot help but feel as though, as readers, we are in on a joke that the novel is perpetrating against Murphy, that the novel is subtly mocking him in his attempts at escape; it is as though, in effect, he is entrapped by the novel—and thus language—itself. While the novels taken up in previous chapters recognize the importance of language in structuring subjectivity, I would argue that *Murphy* is more extreme in plainly suggesting that subjectivity *is* language. As such, in order to make sense of the novel's complex project I insist that the use of Lacanian framework is essential.

Not surprisingly, there is precedent for reading Murphy through a Lacanian lens. Cousineau 1984 essay "Descartes, Lacan, and *Murphy*," which I have quoted from above,

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[34] Andrew Gibson, in a similar vein, writes that "Murphy commits himself to an extreme version of apagogic reason whose ironical futility is clear from the start: that is, he conducts himself 'as though he were free' in a world to which he 'fondly hope[s]' he does not belong" (144).

offers a particularly useful example, especially in that it addresses the novel's treatment

of subjectivity from a philosophical angle as well. Cousineau explains that

> for both Beckett and Lacan a central concern is the process through which
>
> the primordial subject moves out of its original undifferentiated
>
> experience into the world of customs, cultural norms, and socially
>
> sanctioned rationality. The process itself is paradoxical. Positively, it
>
> confers upon the subject an identity, through which he perceives himself
>
> as an organized unity, and a language, through which he presents himself
>
> to the world and forms relations with other language-uttering subjects.
>
> Negatively, it substitutes an artificial, socially conditioned self for the
>
> original, authentic, pre-cultural subject. Both Beckett's fiction and the
>
> psychoanalytical process as envisaged by Lacan are motivated by the
>
> desire, ultimately futile though it may be, to reverse this process of
>
> alienation and to restore original subjectivity. (225)

Cousineau's account is rooted in Lacan's famous account of the "Mirror Phase," in which

the subject first recognizes itself as an autonomous and coherent whole apart from the

mother. As Lacan explains, however, this apparent "recognition" is in fact a

méconnaissance, or "misrecognition." Because this autonomy and coherence are illusory,

the subject finds itself forever longing for the lost unity that the mirror phase deceptively

suggests. In some sense, then, Murphy's struggle actually brings us back around to

Gatsby, who similarly yearns for a symbolic return to the safety of the mother's womb.

The primary difference in the two cases is that Gatsby appears to be entirely unaware of

his subconscious desire and is so thoroughly immersed in ideological and desiring

processes that he believes himself to be striving toward an obtainable goal or idea, while Murphy's attempt is entirely premeditated. Gatsby desires the fulfillment of desire, while Murphy desires its negation.

In outlining the novel's symbolic structure, Cousineau identifies Lacan's symbolic order in the "three zones" that Murphy delineates in his mind, the "light," "half light," and "dark" respectively. "In the first," the novel explains, "were the forms with parallel, a radiant abstract of the dog's life, the elements of physical experience available for a new arrangement […] Here the kick that the physical Murphy received, the mental Murphy gave" (67). This first zone corresponds with the realm of the Symbolic, where experience is given form and arrangement. "In the second were the forms without parallel. Here the pleasure was contemplation. This system had no other mode in which to be out of joint and therefore did not need to be put right in this. Here was the Belacqua bliss and others scarcely less precise […] The third, the dark," finally, suggesting the Lacanian Real, "was a flux of forms, a perpetual coming together and falling asunder of forms […] Here there was nothing but commotion and the pure forms of commotion. Here he was not free, but a mote in the dark of absolute freedom. He did not move, he was a point in the ceaseless unconditioned generation and passing away of line" (67-68). It is well known that in discussing the issue of philosophy in *Murphy* Beckett pointed to two particular quotations, the first by Arnold Geulincx: "Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis" [where you are worth nothing, there you should want nothing] and the second by Malraux: "Il est difficile à celui qui vit hors du monde de ne pas rechercher les siens" [It is hard for someone who lives outside society not to seek out his own].[35] The first is

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[35] Although Lawrence Harvey relates a statement from Beckett that 'if he were a critic setting out to write on the works of Beckett (and he thanked heaven he was not), he would start with two quotations, one by

particularly relevant to Murphy's desire for negation, which I would argue—going along with the above description of the three zones—represents for Murphy an entrance into the realm of the Real. But despite his best efforts at a psychological transcendence that would allow him to enter the realm of the Real, Murphy of course remains trapped in the Imaginary.

While the mirror stage as described by Cousineau is obviously important in a Lacanian reading of *Murphy*, I would suggest that we might view it as a foundation for what might actually be a deeper Lacanian reading of the novel. In "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious," Lacan maintains that "man's desire is the Other's desire [*le désir de l'homme est le désir de l'Autre*] in which the *de* provides what grammarians call a 'subjective determination'—namely, that it is qua Other that man desires (this is what provides the true scope of human passion)" (690). Although there are essentially two implications that stem from this oft-repeated insistence from Lacan that "man's desire is the Other's desire"—the first that the essence of desire is the desire of recognition from the Other and the second that desire is directed toward the thing that the Other desires—the fundamental lesson remains the same: That desire is always in some way mediated by the Other and in that sense is always *social* in nature. In elaborating this point, Lacan goes on to explain the following:

> It should be noted that a clue may be found in the clear alienation that
> leaves it up to the subject to butt up against the question of his essence, in
> that he may not misrecognize that what he desires presents itself to him as
> what he does not want—a form assumed by negation in which

Geulincx: "Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis", and one by Democritus: 'Nothing is more real than nothing'" (267-268).

misrecognition is inserted in a very odd way, the misrecognition, of which

he himself is unaware, by which he transfers the permanence of his desire

to an ego that is nevertheless obviously intermittent, and, inversely,

protects himself from his desire by attributing to it these very

intermittences. (690-691)

The misrecognition, or *méconnaissance*, described above, grows out of but extends

beyond the mirror phase. Applied to Beckett's novel, it is apparent that Murphy

"transfers the permanence of his desire" to what he believes is a stable and permanent

"self" or ego, an ego that resides within the realm of the "virtual" and exists in distinction

from his physical body—although, as he admits, the two are mysteriously connected in

some ungraspable way. Murphy's strapping himself to his rocking chair is a symptom of

this misrecognition, as he fails to realize that it is the process of desire itself that produces

the very ego into which he longs to retreat. We might extrapolate this further and say that

Murphy's broader dichotomizing of the "virtual" and "actual" itself represents a

misrecognition that leads to Murphy's confusion of psychological and physical space.

In order to bring our Lacanian reading into broader focus, we might turn to David

Watson's insightful *Paradox and Desire in Samuel Beckett's Fiction* (1991). While

Watson searches for a symbolic landscape that covers the whole of Beckett's fiction, at

this point we can clearly see how his delineations apply to *Murphy*:

We thus now have the elements of a model containing all three of Lacan's

orders: the Symbolic, which for Beckett is the space of words, of the

alienating *je*; the Real, which lies beyond the text in silence; and the

Imaginary, instituted at the point occupied by the mirror, where the self in

the Other sees an image of the self in silence, the point which is in some

way the locus of an interaction between the zones of speech and silence.

(48)

The Other for Murphy is Celia, whose relationship with Murphy comprises one of the

central problems in the novel in challenging his attempt at mind/body separation. "The

part of him that he hated craved for Celia," the narrator explains, "the part that he loved

shrivelled up at the thought of her" (5). Despite Murphy's psychological protestations, he

is unable to keep himself from desiring Celia on some "bodily" level. This reflects the

paradox described above, as Murphy's fatal flaw is his inability to comprehend that these

two parts of him are in fact one in the same. Daniel Katz maintains that "Celia represents

not an alternative to Murphy's narcissistic scrutiny of the skies—narcissistic in that his

interest in them lies in his viewing them as a text of his own life, of himself—but its

continuation" (38). Beckett wryly subverts in Celia the classic love interest in a way that

once again brings us back to the novel's underlying conception of desire, which holds

that desire is in fact desire for the desire of the other, or ultimately recognition by the

other of one's self. While Murphy seeks to perpetually escape the realm of the other, he

ironically must rely upon the other for his own conception of self. "In Murphy's

dialectic," Katz continues, "Celia is one stop on the path that begins with the firmament

and ends with Mr. Endon, in which all acts of scrutiny are investments in self-scrutiny,

and where all objects derive their interest from narcissistic projection" (38). As we have

seen, despite his own obsessive investment in self-scrutiny, Murphy is nonetheless

always-already implicated in desire as a socially-mediated phenomenon; even his

narcissism, in the end, is socially-mediated.

We might finally say that the part of himself that Murphy hates is the desiring-subject that we all inevitably are, while the part that he loves is the solipsistic self that exists outside of the subject/object relationship; thus the central conflict in the relationship between the two. Lacan says that desire is "caught in the rails of metonymy." If Murphy were able escape the rails of metonymy, he could then extricate himself from the prescribed path that desire inevitably leads us down. The narrator's observation that "soon his body would be quiet, soon he would be free" (6)—which is repeated near the end of the novel—reflects the notion that it is in fact the primal nature of desire that negates any notion of freedom that we believe ourselves to be in possession of, a freedom that is inevitably tied to the corporeal body. In an insightful psychoanalytic reading of *Murphy*, Wendy Foster suggests that

> For Murphy, social meaning, as with socialized desire, has been domesticated to a state of patterned regularity, to a kind of dogmatic fixity that is crystallized, textually, in Suk's oracle and spatially in Neary's futile cycle of bar stools around which "[. . .] he sat all day, moving slowly from one stool to another until he had completed the circuit of the counters, when he would start all over again in the reverse direction" (56). Neary's "circuit," as the physical exposition of Murphy's inability to provide a verbal context for meaning, articulates that fundamental paradox of mobile immobility that is life within the boundaries of the "big world." (n. pag.)

I would add that Murphy's fear of "domestication" extends to his troubled relationship with Celia as well and her attempts to convince Murphy to seek out employment.

Entering the workforce would mean for Murphy capitulation to a socially-constructed

notion of the willing subject of the state, a position that Murphy longs to avoid.

Employment would mean, ultimately, a capitulation to a socially-constructed notion of

subjectivity that fundamentally clashes with his ideal philosophy of being. It is this

resistance to social expectation, in part, that causes Murphy to gravitate toward—and

eventually obsessively embrace—the mental patients at the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat.

As Phil Baker observes in *Beckett and the Mythology of Psychoanalysis*, "The hermetic

sphere of Murphy's mind finds its contented correlative in the padded cell; a windowless

upholstered monad which takes on the qualities of both skull and womb" (71). In the

asylum, the circle of life and death is closed, the metonymic chain of desire is collapsed,

and language itself breaks down.

In a relatively innocuous-seeming moment in the middle of the novel, Murphy

experiences the following train of thought: "The Chaos and Waters Facility Act. The

chaos. Light and Coke Co. Hell. Heaven. Helen. Cecilia" (106). At work in this passage

is the metonymic structure of language; Murphy's mind creates a chain of signifiers

beginning with The Chaos and Waters Facility Act and ending with Celia. As Foster

argues, "Within the space of the 'big world' Murphy is deprived of any kind of agency.

He is acted on and spoken through his capture within objectification -- Celia's ultimatum,

Suk's prophecy, the 'goal' of Miss Counihan, et al. The language and needs of the "big

world" are not his own, but forces to which Murphy is passively subjected" (n. pag.). Of

course, as Lacan, Althusser, and others have pointed out, we are all always already

subjected and thus it seems that Beckett recognizes the ultimate futility of attempting to

transcend our physically-grounded subjectivity in any meaningful way. In a final

postmortem request, Murphy asks that his cremains be unceremoniously flushed down a toilet; however, his final desire is ultimately thwarted when a bar fight causes them to be scattered across the barroom floor, part of the "sand, the beer, the butts, the glass, the matches, the spits, the vomit" (165), the remains of his physical body disseminated in space in ironic contrast to his living attempts at immobilization.

In his conclusion to *Saying I No More*, Katz emphasizes "how scrupulous Beckett is in refusing to allow traditional philosophical, literary, historical, and psychoanalytic notions of subjectivity, consciousness, or intention to be turned into bulwarks of meaning to orient, control, and finally recuperate the oscillations of erasure. If the metaphysical subject remains a crucial issue for Beckett," he argues, "it is largely because its deconstruction is necessary for the textual movements to be freed from an ideal tether that would prohibit their flux" (181-182). I would extrapolate from this that deconstruction is "necessary" in *Murphy* and in the other novels analyzed in this project in order to challenge the conventional notions of subjectivity that modernist fiction reacted against. As such, I would argue that Beckett's *Murphy* is the ultimate deconstructionist modernist novel. Beckett deconstructs desire in its role as the fundamental element in structuring language and ends not by envisioning some new conception of subjectivity, but by reaffirming an essential truth: That language inevitably casts us into the process of desire. It is impossible to conceive of oneself outside desire, as desire itself is inherent in the act of conceiving. There is no "conscious" escape from this, as Murphy would hope; the only escape is death, or eternal negation.

While the other writers in this project distinguish themselves from their predecessors by deconstructing conventional notions of subjectivity rather than looking to

supplant them, Beckett pushes the boundaries of this kind of dialectical deconstructive thinking to its breaking point. I follow here the path laid out by Richard Begam, who explains in *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity* (1996) his interest "in reading Beckett through the discourse of poststructuralism but also in reading the discourse of poststructuralism through Beckett. Such an approach reveals," he goes on to claim, "that as early as the 1930s and 1940s Beckett had already anticipated, often in strikingly prescient ways, many of the defining ideas of Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida. Indeed," he argues, "we might begin to understand Beckett as a kind of buried subtext or marginalium in French poststructuralism, the writer who spoke most resonantly to those thinkers in France who came after Sartre and reacted against him" (4). In other words, we might think of Beckett as a sort of full-fledged proto-poststructuralist and further, I would argue, proto-Lacanian. While this becomes further evident in his later work, *Murphy* functions as a fascinating test case that nonetheless distinguishes itself from other novels of its time. *Murphy*, as Chris Ackerley describes it, "represents the fullest achievement of the first decade of Beckett's writing (1926-36)" and "is a culmination of one stage in Beckett's career, but equally the beginning of another, the matrix in which many later works were formed" (10). In other words, while it is firmly-grounded in the modernist tradition and the influence of Joyce[36] and others, it also represents Beckett's ultimate trajectory toward the unmistakably postmodernism. Ackerley also points out, however, that *Murphy* has never quite escaped the shadow of Beckett's later work[37] and in that

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[36] Ackerley explains that "Beckett had written for his own delectation as much as anybody's, but the example of *Ulysses* could hardly be ignored. He probably believed that his novel should do for London (the dear indelible world of the 16th, 18th, and 20th centuries) what *Ulysses* had done for Dublin. It was not to be" (19).

[37] "Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* is a vast, rollicking *jeu d'esprit* in the tradition that runs from Cervantes and Rabelais through Burton and Fielding to *Ulysses*, and it maintains itself proudly in the company. Yet it has never received the attention it deserves. For all its mere 282 pages (158 in the Calder edition), it has an

sense I would argue that it still has much to offer us, particularly as we try to better

understand the post/modern divide and its problematics, as this project has sought to do.

It seems only natural that this project would end with Beckett, a writer who has vexed

critics for decades and who continues to resist categorization.

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intricacy which justifies its place among these giants of philosophical comedy, and cries out for the kind of close scrutiny that has not yet been made of it" (Ackerley 10).

CONCLUSION

One of the major theoretical influences of this project, as I outline in the introduction, is Rosalind Coward and John Ellis' *Language and Materialism* (1977), particularly their contention that "because all the practices that make up a social totality take place in language […] man can be seen *as language*, as the intersection of the social, historical and individual" (1). I see *Murphy* as a fitting end point to this project because, while Conrad, Fitzgerald, West, and Huxley are certainly aware of language and ideology as integral structural components of subjectivity, Beckett is aware in a more radical sense that, as Daniel Katz puts it in an echo of Coward and Ellis, in Beckett's fiction "the subject *is* language" (182). Although I would contend that the aforementioned writers display an awareness of this fact, I would insist that Beckett pushes this notion to its extreme, beginning with *Murphy* and extending especially into his later fiction. While *Murphy* in one sense carries us closer toward postmodernism, especially given the trajectory of Beckett's career following its publication, I would argue that it also leads us back to Conrad. In particular, I would suggest a connection between Murphy and Martin Decoud, two characters who die in solitude while pondering the relationship between consciousness and action. We might say, more to the point, that these two characters occupy opposing ends of the same spectrum. That is, while Decoud's existential crisis grows out of his vanishing sense of self in the face of utter solitude, his physical (and hence psychological) isolation is in a sense exactly what Murphy longs for. What Decoud finds unbearable, Murphy finds liberating.

Despite this difference, underlying each character's death is the sustained irony of the narrative voice. Just as I have suggested in the previous chapter that an ironic tension between the characters within the novel and the "external" narrator comprises the narrative modality of *Murphy*, so too does Conrad deploy a similar method in *Nostromo*. As critics—particularly Jameson—have observed, Conrad's movement beyond the embedded narrator(s) of *Lord Jim* to a more complex and nearly (though not fully so) omniscient narrator in *Nostromo* allows him a narrative posture that lays bare the psychological dramas of his characters while, simultaneously maintaining a narrative distance that more panoramically frames those dramas for readers. In other words, Beckett's narrative posture and its interconnectedness with his treatment of subjectivity are an outgrowth of the project that Conrad had already begun at the turn of the century, not an overcoming or new trajectory. Once again, as I have throughout, I would stress continuity here rather than rupture and insist that, while Beckett brings us closer historically and stylistically to what we call postmodernism, recognizing his modernist lineage is essential in understanding the contributions that modernist fiction more generally has made to what would later become central concerns among postmodern writers.

While I have focused throughout primarily on the issue of subjectivity, I would like to conclude by framing this particular issue more broadly within the historical framework of modernism and the post/modernist debate. In a letter dated December 20, 1897, Joseph Conrad suggests a definition of history that brilliantly encapsulates the "structure of feeling,"[38] to borrow a term from Raymond Williams, of the turn of the

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[38] Williams' term "structure of feeling" refers to, in an elementary sense, the lived experience of communities at particular moments in time, especially as they are manifested in the works of artists from

twentieth century and, I would argue by extension, modernism as a historical and artistic

phenomenon:

> There is—let us say—a machine. It evolved itself (I am severely
>
> scientific) out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold!—it knits. I am
>
> horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to
>
> embroider—but it goes on knitting. You come and say: "this is all right:
>
> it's only a question of the right kind of oil. Let us use this—for instance—
>
> celestial oil and the machine shall embroider a most beautiful design in
>
> purple and gold". Will it? Alas no. You cannot by any special lubrication
>
> make embroidery with a knitting machine. And the most withering
>
> thought is that the infamous thing has made itself; made itself without
>
> thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without
>
> heart. It is a tragic accident—and it has happened. You can't interfere with
>
> it. The last drop of bitterness is in the suspicion that you can't even smash
>
> it. In virtue of that truth one and immortal which lurks in the force that
>
> made it spring into existence it is what it is—and it is indestructible!
>
> (*Collected Letters* 424)

As we have seen in our analysis of *Nostromo*, Conrad's world is a frighteningly

indifferent one absent of a priori determinants or values. Human existence, according to

such a viewpoint, is distinctly messy; despite our best efforts to construct historical

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those communities. Ultimately, however, the term is more complex. In *Marxism and Literature*, for example, he writes the following: "The term is difficult, but 'feeling' is chosen to emphasize a distinction from more formal concepts of 'world-view' or 'ideology.' It is not only that we must go beyond formally held and systematic beliefs, though of course we have always to include them. It is that we are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations between these and formal or systematic beliefs are in practice variable (including historically variable), over a range from formal assent with private dissent to the more nuanced interaction between selected and interpreted beliefs and acted and justified experiences" (132).

events into a narrative that fits them into whatever value systems we have adopted, the situation on the ground, so to speak, ultimately resists meaningful representative signification. While Conrad does not directly address the issue of subjectivity here, by implication we see that it is interpenetrated by the processes of history. We might say, in keeping with his metaphor, that human consciousness is woven into the fabric of history's knitting; it is not distinctly visible in its individuality from a panoramic view, but it is nonetheless integral. After all, what is history without human consciousness to experience and record it? This interrelationship between the unfolding of history and the individuals caught up in its unfolding encapsulates Conrad's narrative project and, as we have seen, *Nostromo*'s exploration of both personal and historical dramas. As I have tried to show in subsequent chapters, Conrad's approach forecasts that of other modernist writers, who similarly deconstruct conventional notions of subjectivity and show that while humans are actively engaged in the process of "making" history in the form of narrative, our own (self-) identities are simultaneously implicated in these same processes.

By way of comparison, I would like to call attention to an articulation of subjectivity by Thomas Pynchon, who is widely viewed as a seminal postmodern writer. In the opening chapter of *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), the narrator describes a trip taken by the heroine Oedipa Maas and her now deceased ex-boyfriend Pierce Inverarity to Mexico City, where

> they somehow wandered into an exhibition of paintings by the beautiful
> Spanish exile Remedios Varo: in the central painting of a triptych, titled
> 'Bordando el Manto Terrestre,' were a number of frail girls with heart-

shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a

circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit

windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the

other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth

were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world. (20-21)

The work described, known in English as "Embroidering Earth's Mantle," was painted

late in Varo's career in 1961, just two years before her death. The obvious primary

influence of the work is Surrealism, a movement that coincided with modernism in the

1920s but remained popular beyond WWII and into the 1960s. The painting becomes a

centerpiece in the novel, much like Tod's "The Burning of Los Angeles" in West's *The

Day of the Locust*.

What is initially striking in a most general sense about the painting is that Varo's

choice of metaphor bears close resemblance to Conrad's. But whereas Conrad is

embroiled in a historical moment marked by the growth of modernity and thus imagines a

"machine," Varo images a tapestry that is human-made. And while Conrad's machine can

only knit—suggesting that history unfolds chaotically rather than neatly—Varo's women

embroider a remarkable tapestry that billows from their tower and comprises the

landscape around them. In his essay "What Was Postmodernism?" (2007), Brian McHale

explains that the painting

produces a visual equivalent of the kind of ontological paradoxes that one

finds in postmodernist novels – paradoxes based on the running-together,

in a logically impossible way, of different levels of reality […] Pynchon

calls our attention to this paradox in Varo's painting, and builds it into his

heroine's experiences of entrapment in a world of strange loops. (np)

Although Varo's painting and its use by Pynchon depart metaphorically from Conrad's

image in various ways, Conrad's fiction similarly represents the "paradoxes based on the

running-together, in a logically impossible way, of different levels of reality." He does

this in *Nostromo*, for example, by taking us into the psyches of various characters and

showing how their unique circumstances affect their consciousness and perception of the

"real" events that occur in the novel. He does this earlier in *Lord Jim* as well, where

fragments of the narrative are slowly pieced together as they are recalled by various

characters.

Later in the scene from *The Crying of Lot 49* cited above, Oedipa weeps in front

of the painting as she begins to understand its symbolic connection to her own existence:

> She had looked down at her feet and known, then, because of a painting,
>
> that what she stood on had only been woven together a couple thousand
>
> miles away in her own tower, was only by accident known as Mexico, and
>
> so Pierce had taken her away from nothing, there'd be no escape. What
>
> did she so desire to escape from? Such a captive maiden, having plenty of
>
> time to think, soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are
>
> like her ego only incidental: that what really keeps her where she is is
>
> magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no
>
> reason at all. Having no apparatus except gut fear and female cunning to
>
> examine this formless magic, to understand how it works, how to measure
>
> its field strength, count its lines of force, she may fall back on superstition,

> or take up a useful hobby like embroidery, or go mad, or marry a disk
>
> jockey. If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof
>
> against its magic, what else? (21-22)

The passage, which ends the first chapter, acquaints us with one of the central tensions in the novel: Oedipa's conflict with her own sense of self. Her name, derived of course from Oedipus, suggests both psychological anxiety and the inescapability of fate, or the "anonymous and malignant" magic that is "visited on her from outside and for no reason at all." While Oedipa is unable to escape her own subjectivity, in other words, history marches on indifferent to her plight. McHale, who as we have seen makes a famously rigid distinction between modernist and postmodernist fiction—maintaining that while the former tends to focus on epistemological questions, the latter is more concerned with ontology—has been inclined to "favor 1966 as year zero of postmodernism" on account of Pynchon's novel and its use of what he views as classic postmodern devices.

But is Pynchon's treatment of ontology really so different than Beckett's, or even Conrad's? I would argue that the primary difference between Pynchon's exploration of ontological questions in *The Crying of Lot 49* and Conrad's in *Nostromo* and elsewhere is more than anything merely stylistic. As is typical in the postmodern novel, for example, Pynchon pulls readers into the drama that his characters are experiencing in a way that Conrad does not. Conrad, rather, maintains an ironic distance in his narrative posture that Pynchon has rejected almost entirely. But despite certain undeniable stylistic differences, I have tried to show that as far back as Conrad we see writers working through the notion that our "reality" is in fact a construction of our own subjective consciousness. The examples from Conrad and Pynchon above *do* reflect changes in both historical

perspective and in stylistic conventions, but they are in essence promoting the same ontological worldview.

As such, I would reiterate that rigid distinctions like McHale's—especially given his explicit use of Pynchon—rely too heavily upon an oversimplified view of the modernist project. Certainly historical evolutions and major historical events—namely, in the context of this project, the Second World War—have produced scientific, technological, social, economic and other changes that justify the practice of demarking epochal changes. With this in mind, I would insist finally that my goal is not the rejection of postmodernism as a historical or artistic category. Such distinctions as those between modernism and postmodernism can be both useful and necessary in helping us understand historical progression and social evolution. But, as the eminent modernist scholar Robert Scholes remarks in the conclusion to *Paradoxy of Modernism* (2006), "the Modernists were grappling with the same modernity which we inhabit, though ours is a more extreme case of it, to be sure" (276). Just as Scholes breaks down the critical tendency to draw distinctions within the modernist period between "high" and "low," "old" and "new," and ultimately "good" and "bad," I urge that we must resist the impulse to view postmodernism as an overcoming of modernism's limitations. Rather, we ought to view postmodernism—particularly on the pivotal subject of ontology—as carrying on the project of the modernist writers who were already speaking the language of postmodern theory.

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