After Postmodernism:

Ethical Paradigms in Contemporary

American Fiction

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Andrew Frederick Allen

aus

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Introduction

The idea for this project grew out of the results of my Master's thesis, which examined to what extent David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* (1996) could be considered postmodern, and whether it had truly gone beyond postmodernism into something new and different. As part of that work, I compared the novel to various definitions of postmodernism, including one developed by Brian McHale that posited that postmodern works manifested an ontological dominant as opposed to the epistemological dominant he believed was present in modern works. While I found sections in *Infinite Jest* that seemed to reflect both ontological and epistemological concerns, which would have made the novel a postmodern/modern hybrid and would have been consistent with a number of theories about contemporary fiction, what I discovered instead was that *Infinite Jest* was, to a large extent, much more concerned with *ethical* questions. This led me to tentatively propose that the period after postmodernism may be characterized by an ethical dominant. My dissertation started as an attempt to examine this possibility more fully, to see if an ethical dominant applies to works other than *Infinite Jest*, and to investigate what sort of ethics might be explored in such works.

The original title of this dissertation was *The Ethical Turn in Contemporary American Fiction*, which seemed to describe the phenomenon I was observing rather concisely. However, after more closely examining the "ethical turn" in philosophy and literary theory that was already being debated and had been detailed, for example, in *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory* (2001), I quickly realized that the content of the ethics described by this terminology was more consistent with the postmodern era, and probably represented the end phase of postmodernism rather than the beginning of some new period. The results of my research were turning up completely different ethical paradigms. To avoid confusion, I removed the phrase "ethical turn" from my title. Similarly, I

decided not to employ the phrase "ethical dominant," both because I did not want to be shackled to McHale's theory and because I don't believe that an entire cultural and historical period can be summed up in one simple concept. McHale's theory is a useful tool, and I will explore the possibility of an ethical dominant in a later chapter in order to demonstrate that my theory is consistent with his, but I didn't want to impose unnecessary limits on the application of my research. Instead, my dissertation is designed to be compatible with most of the contemporary theories about what comes after postmodernism.

Such a design required that I first examine those theories in depth, and compare and contrast them to seek out areas of agreement and dispute. This examination makes up the content of my first chapter. Here, I evaluate the following theories that describe what comes after postmodernism: Nicholas Bourriaud's altermodernism, metamodernism – a theory proposed by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, Jefferey Nealon's post-postmodernism, Christian Moraru's cosmodernism, Gilles Lipovetsky's hypermodernism, Raoul Eshelman's performatism, and Alan Kirby's digimodernism. I summarize and assess each of them, and then explore what they have in common. These theories all try to go beyond postmodernism in some way, and all of them begin with the proposition that the postmodern era has ended. I've divided them into two categories: those that seem to try to extend postmodern theory into a new form, and those that try to make a clean break with postmodernism and propose something radically different. In either case, the results of my analysis clearly indicate that a renewed interest in ethics is of concern to most if not all of these theories. As the different theories vary widely in theoretical content, from the technological determinism of digimodernism to the high-speed capitalism of hypermodernism to the modern/postmodern hybrid of metamodernism, it may well be that the only constant is the need for a contemporary ethics. It is my hope that my thesis identifies

a connection among these theories.

In my second chapter, I present my argument that the renewed interest in ethics and ethical systems is directly related to ethical weaknesses in postmodernism. Some of the harshest critics have claimed that postmodernism is not ethical at all, that it represents a nihilistic relativism that negates any attempt to think ethics. This view is reflected in some of the novels I examine here. However, a postmodern concept of ethics emerged and began to gain prominence during the aforementioned "ethical turn," which generally explores a Lévinasian ethics of "being for the other." Such an ethics is compatible with major figures of postmodern thought such as Derrida (who promoted it) and Foucault, as well as movements that represent the marginalized, such as feminism and queer theory. I will examine some criticisms of postmodernism and more specifically its ethics, to reveal the kind of discontent that has arisen. This short section will serve primarily as background for the chapters that follow and is not intended to be a complete and thorough examination of postmodernism and its innumerable critics. After this, I will present an argument that the concept of an ethical dominant would expand Brian McHale's proposal that postmodernism reflects an ontological dominant.

In my third chapter, I present a short periodization concept that draws on the ideas explored in my first two chapters, in order to offer an explanation for the renewed interest in ethical structures or systems. I propose that postmodernity ends with the end of the Cold War, and that worldwide political and economic changes, spurred by the rise of the Internet, bring about a new mood of hope and uncertainty, triggering a need for ethical guidance. In some ways this new period resembles modernity, with its reawakened belief in the power of technology to make the world a better place, but it is a modernity tempered by a postmodern awareness of what could go wrong. During this chapter, I will introduce the three ethical

paradigms that I intend to explore in my close readings of contemporary fiction, and explain why I think these specific paradigms have arisen as potential responses to the weaknesses of postmodernism.

The first paradigm I will examine is a neoliberal ethics of selfishness, which I will draw from objectivism, the philosophy of Ayn Rand. Many of the theories I examine in Chapter One describe the impact of neoliberalism, but the ethics of neoliberalism are not explored even in those works that are most closely concerned with it. Rand's ethics is one of ethical egoism – being for the other is replaced by being for the self. I will draw in part from her work *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (1964) to explore how objectivism represents nearly an exact opposite of postmodern ethics, and thus represents a convenient antidote to its problems. I suggest that the rise of neoliberalism must be accompanied by a rise in neoliberal ethics, and the close readings I present in later chapters seem to bear this out.

The next ethical paradigm I explore is a pragmatist concept of a "higher power." Here, I draw primarily from William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), which introduces the idea of a non-denominational, self-imagined God-like spiritual force that provides ethical guidance. The sudden appearance of multiple high-profile novels exploring this terrain during a short period of time drew my attention to this paradigm. The idea of the higher power has been disseminated throughout American culture primarily by the self-help group Alcoholics Anonymous, which draws its intellectual content from James; yet, I've found numerous novels that directly reference James as well. The higher power concept accommodates a postmodern critique of power structures and dogma by being self-created, and is usually triggered by a religious experience of some kind. Inspired by this experience, one imagines a higher power, essentially an idealized supernatural other, and then asks it for

ethical guidance. Instead of being for the other, the goal is to be for something higher than mere humans.

Finally, in my third paradigm, I explore what I call the ecological metanarrative. This paradigm imagines the world as an ecosystem, usually contained on the planet Earth, and conceives of each subject as being a part of the whole. What is good, then, is what is good for the planet, or the system as a whole, rather than an individual. In fact, in the most extreme cases, human beings are seen as the enemy. Here, I draw on ideas from the Transcendentalists up to Deep Ecology. The metanarrative component of my concept refers to the fact that the threat of climate change is being viewed as not only objectively real but also imminently dangerous. Like the metanarratives that postmodernism had grown skeptical of, according to Lyotard, the ecological metanarrative insists on its universality and absolute truth, and it demands immediate action. Thus, the ecological metanarrative is a return to the kind of totalizing thought that postmodernism typically eschews, while at the same time it resembles a postmodern critique of modernity.

Before describing the primary texts I intend to examine, I would like to explain my text selection process. Although my paradigms hold true in other fields of culture, I opted to stay with novels because I believe that novels, due to their length and their unique exploration of the psychological interior of a subject, provide the best platform for examining ethics. Although drama, film and television provide narratives as well, rarely can they provide the depth of examination of psychological experience that a novel provides. We see on the stage or the screen what the characters do and say, but we can only infer why. Novels delve right into interior motivations and feelings, giving the reader unparalleled insight into reasons for actions, and ultimately, this is where ethics occurs. After some deliberation, I also opted to stay with American fiction, although I found some evidence of these paradigms in Canadian

and British works as well. For this project, I read over 60 novels published after 1990 in the United States alone, and that represented only a fragment of the total number of works published. Getting a picture of the contemporary fiction of every country in the world would have required multiple lifetimes. Furthermore, the specific paradigms I observed draw directly from American philosophy, and may simply not be applicable to other cultures, or if so, only indirectly. Limiting my text corpus to one culture enabled me to focus in more deeply. As this dissertation is the first foray into this territory, there is still much work to be done.

Finally, I chose to eliminate a number of contemporary authors and specific works if they could be interpreted as being postmodern or concerned with an ethics of being for the other. Famous names such as Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Toni Morrison were thus summarily removed from consideration even though they were still alive and still writing. I was more interested in going after the generation *raised* on these writers, those who might try to differentiate themselves by seeking some new direction or those whose works had been ignored until after the postmodern era. So, while some of the authors whose novels I chose to examine are well-known literary figures (Jonathan Franzen, Jeffrey Eugenides, TC Boyle), others are less famous. I aggressively sought out and read works by authors who had only published one or two novels, in the hopes of finding patterns across new authors. In no way does my text selection imply that postmodern ethics has disappeared from the market – in fact, it might even be more accurate to say that an ethics of being for the other is the most common ethics being explored in contemporary fiction. For each one of my paradigms, I opted to read two different novels, one of which directly engages with postmodern ethics or theory while the other does not. With this design, I want to demonstrate how those works that do not openly refer to postmodernism are nevertheless engaged in the same project as those

that do. The similarities in design and approach between the novels reveal their common

focus, and demonstrate how this focus is related to the contemporary era.

After reading a wide array of contemporary novels focused on the ethical paradigms I

was researching, a general pattern began to emerge. There was usually at least one character,

often the protagonist, who was living an unhappy, dysfunctional life, who had no fixed belief

systems, no clear focus or goals, and had enormous problems making decisions. The level of

dysfunction varies from work to work, but often these characters have substance abuse

problems, broken relationships, have attempted suicide, and have unsatisfying dead-end jobs.

Then, after discovering or encountering the ethical paradigm and applying it to their lives,

these characters begin to have success and to feel happier and more fulfilled. Sometimes, two

or more characters are contrasted instead, pursuing different ethical paradigms, with one

producing better results than the other. At times, the characters' suffering is directly linked to

postmodern theory, even to the point of naming specific theorists, but this is not always the

case. The second half of my dissertation contains my close readings of these selected texts.

In my fourth chapter, I examine the neoliberal ethics of being for the self with close

readings of two novels. *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* (1991) by Mary Gaitskill provides us with a

stellar example of the pattern I identified above. As the title suggests, there are two main

protagonists, Justine Shade and Dorothy Never, who represent the contrast between

postmodernism and Ayn Rand's objectivism. Justine is a jaded, unhappy, masochistic

underachiever who decides to write an article about philosopher Anna Granite and her

philosophy "Definitism," which are thinly veiled caricatures of Ayn Rand and objectivism.

She finds Dorothy Never, who not only is a follower of Anna Granite, but also her former

secretary. Although Justine is cool, attractive and thin, while Dorothy is fat and unattractive,

the novel suggests that Dorothy's adherence to Definitism makes her stronger than Justine,

and Justine begins to reluctantly admire her. In the novel's climax, it is Dorothy who plays the hero, saving Justine from an abusive lover. The second novel I examine in this chapter is Mark Costello's *Big If* (2002). Again, we have two protagonists, only instead of postmodernism versus objectivism we have Vi, a government employee, and Jens, who works at a startup. Vi is a Secret Service agent, and thus her life is dedicated to protecting someone else. She and the other agents are described as being unhappy and having highly dysfunctional private lives as a result of living at the whim of the government. Jens, on the other hand, has a happy family and is engaged in work that makes him feel satisfied. His startup is about to go public, and as a result of his talent and hard work, he is about to become rich. There is little hint of postmodernism here, but the difference between the two characters is ethical. Jens has chosen to live his life for himself, while Vi has sacrificed her life to protect others. The result is that Vi and the other agents are miserable, while Jens and his wife are prosperous and fulfilled. When Jens is called on to make a life-changing decision, he chooses himself and his family over the general public, demonstrating an ethics of the self.

My fifth chapter examines the concept of religious experience and the belief in a higher power. The first novel I read is Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Marriage Plot* (2011). Here, there are three characters, each of them unhappy and each of them presenting a direct and specific critique of postmodern theory. All are university students during the heyday of postmodernism in the United States, and all of them reject postmodernism in their own fashion. However, one of the characters, Mitchell Grammaticus, chooses to study religion after reading *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James. He subsequently goes on a journey in search of ethical truth that leads him to attempt being for the other, only to find that he is unable to do so. Only after he has a religious experience in a Quaker church can he still his unhappiness and find the right path in his life. A second character also has a

religious experience while suffering from bipolar disorder and subsequently chooses a similar

path. The novel directly opposes religious experience and the belief in a higher power to

postmodern theory. The second novel I read in this chapter is *Jamesland* (2004) by Michelle

Huneven. The protagonist is Alice Black, a direct descendant of William James, who is

referred to in the novel's title. Alice is the typical character for these novels: unhappy, having

an affair with a married man who treats her badly, working a low-level job that doesn't fulfill

her, and neglecting her health by drinking too much and not eating enough. After having a

religious experience that she can't understand, she contacts the minister at her local Unitarian

Universalist church, Helen Harlan, who is an admirer of William James and offers spiritual

guidance to Alice. Through Helen, she becomes friends with Pete Ross, who has just gotten

out of a mental hospital after attempting suicide. By applying the pragmatist religious ideas

of William James, all three characters improve their lives, return to happiness, and enter more

fulfilling careers.

My final chapter investigates the ecological metanarrative. In Jonathan Franzen's

Freedom (2010), one of three main characters has adopted ecological ethics, while the other

two flounder in unhappiness and substance abuse. Walter Berglund, an ardent

environmentalist, is relentlessly described as "good" throughout the novel and is widely

admired for it, while his best friend Richard Katz represents the nihilistic and relativist

version of postmodernism. Katz is portrayed as cool and attractive, but without a viable belief

system, and dedicated to hedonism. Walter's wife Patty recognizes that her husband is

ethically in the right, but finds Richard Katz more attractive. However, her affair with Katz

does not result in happiness, but rather in pain and loneliness. In the end, she returns to

Walter, who has become a hero to the younger generation because of his ecological beliefs.

The second novel in this chapter is *A Friend of the Earth* (2000) by T. Coraghessan Boyle.

This novel, like many dedicated to the ecological metanarrative, presents the reader with a dystopian future in which the environment has been destroyed by climate change. The protagonist, Ty Tierwater, has dedicated his life to fighting for the environment to such an extreme that he has spent years in prison. He has failed, and the consequences are spelled out to the reader in a vivid depiction of a ruined planet and a dangerous climate. Boyle takes the reader through Ty's slow indoctrination into ecological ethics and thus presents a didactic narrative that also attempts to indoctrinate the reader. The tragic death of Ty's daughter while trying to save a tree from being cut down makes her a martyr and a hero to the characters in the novel, and by extension, to the reader.

I believe these readings will clearly illustrate not only my specific paradigms, but also the centrality of the need for ethical guidance in the era after postmodernism. Since there is no clear consensus about what happens after postmodernity, my thesis is designed to solidify at least one piece of the puzzle. As my first chapter will show, my thesis is consistent with all of the different models, and thus, I believe that this dissertation is an important contribution to a new field of research. The paradigms I explore can be used to explain much of what has happened since the end of the Cold War, and can also serve as models for the interpretation of contemporary fiction.

In addition, I believe that an exploration of ethics is a valuable pursuit on its own. As our society grows ever more skeptical about the value of the humanities, with much of the skepticism tied specifically to postmodern approaches, ethical criticism can be pointed to as increasingly necessary. If science, math, and technology can provide us with ever new products and conveniences, they have no mechanism to tell us the right thing to do with all of these new wonders, some of which pose a threat to the entire planet. In order to survive as a species, to prevent us from destroying ourselves, ethics will be needed, and ethics lies firmly

in the realm of the humanities. Literary theory could seize this opportunity in time to re-establish itself as paramount. In the preface to *Mapping the Ethical Turn* (2001), Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack write, "[T]o pretend that the ethical or moral dimensions of the human condition were abandoned or obliterated in the shift to postmodernity certainly seems naive. Part of being human involves the daily struggle with the meanings and consequences of our actions, a struggle most often understood in narrative structures" (ix). Analyzing these narratives for ethical content is valuable work, and I hope that this dissertation will be an example of this.

1 After Postmodernism

1.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will analyze seven different attempts to describe what comes after

postmodernism and then I will compare and contrast them to draw out common threads.

There are multiple reasons why I want to start by doing this. First, I want to demonstrate that

there is a widespread agreement among a range of theorists that postmodernism has ended.

Next, I want to show that there is no substantial agreement about what comes after

postmodernism. Third, my comparison will demonstrate the importance of ethics to all these

models, meaning that the need for ethical structures or systems is one of the few areas of

agreement among these periodization concepts. Finally, the examination of these concepts

will serve as background for my own periodization model, which I will present in my third

chapter, and for the close readings that follow.

1.2 Theories Extending Postmodernism

1.2.1 Altermodernism

Nicholas Bourriaud's concept of what follows postmodernism is outlined in an essay prepared

for the art exhibition Triennial 2009 at the Tate Gallery. Both the concept and the exhibition

are named "Altermodern," a term "which serves both as the title of the present exhibition and

to delimit the void beyond the postmodern" (2). Drawing the name from the Latin word for

"other" (*alter*), the term "has its roots in the idea of 'otherness'" and thus "suggests a

multitude of possibilities, of alternatives to a single route" (2). He has formed his concept, in

part, by conceiving of "the death of postmodernism as the starting point for reading the

present" (2). Bourriaud proposes that the postmodern era began in 1973 with the oil crisis,

which "could well represent the 'primitive scene' of postmodernism in the same way as, according to Sloterdijk, oil gushing from a well symbolizes twentieth-century modernism" (7). Postmodernism, he believes, "is the philosophy of mourning, a long melancholic episode in our cultural life" (9), and citing Lyotard, he attributes this to the death of metanarratives: "[A] traumatic loss: that of the ideologies of carefree superabundance and progress, technical, political or cultural" (7). He insists that the postmodern era had two periods, the first of which was characterized by a "purely depressive attitude" (9) triggered by "[h]istory having lost its direction and ability to be read," leaving nothing but "an immobilized space-time, in which, like reminiscences, arose mutilated fragments of the past" (9). The second period of postmodernism reflects "the relativisation of history itself through the medium of post-colonial thinking" (9), and is "less melancholy – but multiculturalist" (9). The second period "has its beginnings in the end of the Cold War" (9), and thus, the "grand modernist narrative was succeeded by that of globalisation, which does not designate a cultural period properly speaking, but a geopolitical standardisation and the synchronisation of the historical clock" (10). According to Bourriaud, "The meaning of a work of art, for this second-stage postmodernism, depends essentially on the social background to its production" (10), and thus, "multiculturalism, now a critical methodology, has virtually become a system of allotting meanings and assigning individuals their position in the hierarchy of social demands" (10). This has the effect of "reducing their whole being to their identity and stripping all their significance back to their origins" (10). This "neurotic preoccupation with origins" (10), he insists, "must be called into question" (10). We are "on the verge of a leap, out of the postmodern period and the (essentialist) multicultural model from which it is indivisible" (2) into the new epoch, which would manifest "a synthesis between modernism and post-colonialism" (2). This urge is propelled by a "threat from fundamentalism and

consumer-driven uniformisation, menaced by massification and the enforced re-abandonment of individual identity" (2). The "definite turning point in history" triggering this movement appears to be "the collapse of the globalised financial system in 2008" (6), according to Bourriaud.

There is a difference between the new modernism and the old, for "altermodernism has no desire to substitute for postmodern relativism a new universalism, rather a networked 'archipelago' form of modernity" (13). Drawing from the writings of Winfried Georg Sebald, Bourriaud thus proposes the archipelago as a metaphor for the new era: "The archipelago (and its kindred forms, the constellation and the cluster) functions here as a model representing the multiplicity of global cultures" (1-2). The archipelago is "an example of the relationship between the one and the many" (2), whose "unity proceeds from a decision without which nothing would be signified save a scattering of islands united by no common name" (2). Contemporary culture then, due to "a multicultural explosion and the proliferation of cultural strata, resembles a structureless constellation awaiting transformation into an archipelago" (2). Creating the "abstract entity" (2) that links the parts to the whole is the role of altermodernism, which "sees itself as a constellation of ideas linked by the emerging and ultimately irresistible will to create a form of modernism for the twenty-first century" (2). Defining a network as a "connected chain of distinct elements in time or space" (12), he claims that "[v]arious materials can serve as a 'glue' to hold the component elements together, yet one of them today assumes a particular importance: storytelling" (12). This new network form of modernism "is only possible starting from the issues of the present, and assuredly not by an obsessive return to the past" (3).

In fact, essential to the idea of altermodernism is the idea of heterochrony, which is "a vision of human history as constituted of multiple temporalities," (3) and "is neither a

petrified kind of time advancing in loops (postmodernism) nor a linear vision of history (modernism)" (3), but instead, "a positive experience of disorientation through an art-form exploring all dimensions of the present, tracing lines in all directions of time and space" (3). Thus, "historical memory, like the topography of the contemporary world, exists only in the form of a network" (12). This heterochrony is possible because postmodernism "has allowed the historical counters to be reset to zero" (2), which has occurred "thanks to the post-colonial criticism of Western pretensions to determine the world's direction and the speed of its development" (2). This means that "today, temporalities intersect and weave a complex network stripped of a centre" (2). Bourriaud insists that altermodern heterochrony "is not the summoning up of the past to explain the present" (4), but rather, "history, the last continent to be explored, can be traversed like a territory" (5), creating "journeys in time" that "result in a modification of the way in which signs are indexed with their period" (6).

The journey as metaphor is another crucial component of altermodernism. Bourriaud writes: "[T]he vital thing today, starting from the standpoint of the extreme globalisation of world culture, is to grasp afresh the emblematic gesture of modernity – the exodus" (12). The altermodern, then, "brings together three sorts of nomadism: in space, in time and among the 'signs'" (3). Bourriaud envisions the artist as a "cultural nomad" (3), who "can simultaneously explore geographical, historical and socio-cultural realities" (3). This approach "goes hand in hand with the generalisation of hypertext as a thought process: one sign directs us to a second, then a third, creating a chain of mutually interconnected forms, mimicking mouse-clicks on a computer screen" (5). In fact, this exploration is one way that the contemporary era resembles modernism: "[W]hat remains of the Baudelairean model of modernism is no doubt this *flânerie*, transformed into a technique for generating creativeness and deriving knowledge" (3). This nomadism is "a way of learning about the world" (3), and "enshrines

specific forms, processes of visualisation peculiar to our own epoch" (3). This means that "trajectories have become forms: contemporary art gives the impression of being uplifted by an immense wave of displacements, voyages, translations, migrations of objects and beings" (3). In fact, Bourriaud believes that "in this era of the altermodern, displacement has become a method of depiction" (4), and thus, "artistic styles and formats must henceforth be regarded from the viewpoint of diaspora, migration and exodus" (4). This displacement means that "[n]o longer can a work be reduced to the presence of an object in the here and now: rather, it consists of a significant network whose interrelationships the artist elaborates, and whose progression in time and space he or she controls" (4). Bourriaud coins the word "viatorise," which he takes "from Latin *viator*, 'traveller'" (12), to designate this approach, and believes that its emergence is due to the fact that "[t]here are no longer cultural roots to sustain forms, no exact cultural base to serve as a benchmark for variations, no nucleus, no boundaries for artistic language" (4). Thus, "[t]oday's artist, in order to arrive at precise points, takes as their starting point global culture and no longer the reverse" (4). Bourriaud insists that "we must rexamine the very notion of territory – cultural or otherwise – from the viewpoint of 'viatorisation'" (13), because, due to the effects of globalisation, "there no longer is any territory" (13).

Finally, Bourriauad proposes that altermodernism "is also taking shape under the urgent pressure to answer very basic questions" (13), for example, "[H]ow do we live in this world that we are told is becoming 'global,' but which seems to be buttressed on particular interests or tensed behind the barricades of fundamentalism – when not upholding icons of mass culture as role models?" (13). Here, the altermodern subject seems to be struggling with an ethical dilemma. This is followed by an aesthetic one: "How to represent a power that is becoming ever more furtive as it slips into bed with economics?" (13). Finally, he poses that

altermodern art struggles to unite ethics and aesthetics while still remaining art: "How, finally, to make art anything but a secondary type of merchandise in a system of values entirely oriented towards this 'general and abstract equivalent' that is money, and how can it bear witness against 'economic horror' without reducing itself to sheer militancy" (13). These questions echo Bourriaud's comments at the beginning of the essay, while writing about the responsibility of the critic or curator: "We have an ethical duty not to let signs and images vanish into the abyss of indifference or commerical obilivion" (1).

I believe Bourriaud's concept has its strengths and weaknesses. Like metamodernism, it is presented in a short essay that doesn't give him much space to develop his ideas, and consequently, it is rather vague and skeletal. If altermodernism is a combination of modernism and post-colonialism, then it would be illuminating to have a more thorough description of how these two factors play a role in the archipelago and journey metaphors. I also question his periodization, especially his placing the beginning of postmodernism in 1973. While this may be somewhat more plausible when dealing exclusively with French philosophy, we can't ignore the appearance of major works of postmodern literature and art as early as William Burrough's *Naked Lunch* in 1959. Andy Warhol's career was in full flower well before 1973, and key works of postmodern thought, such as "The Death of the Author" and "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," both published in 1967, had already appeared. In fact, many theorists propose that the negativity of postmodernism comes not from concern about the exhaustion of energy sources, as symbolized by the oil crisis, but rather, the critique of reason and progress triggered by symbols of modern destruction such as Auschwitz and Hiroshima. This said, I think there is some merit to his proposal that there is a second phase of postmodernism that manifests an obsession with identity and origins, and that the era of post-colonial critique plays a role in

this stage. Again, though, he misses out on the roots of this phase in the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and '60s. These oversights could very well be explained by the brevity of his argument, however.

The archipelago metaphor aligns well with other similar concepts arising recently, such as networks, fractals, the bubbles and spheres of Sloterdijk, or the use of set theory by Badiou. These approaches attempt to reconcile the one and the many, creating a model that allows simultaneous separation and unity. I think his description of heterochrony is quite interesting, although less developed than Lipovetsky's ruminations about the contemporary perception of time, which we'll encounter later. However, his description of contemporary culture as a journey across time, space, and signs resembles several descriptions of postmodern pastiche or historiographic metafiction, so that one struggles to see the difference. He clearly is differentiating altermodernism from the postcolonial or late-stage postmodernism that concerns itself with questions of identity rather than the earlier transgressive, boundary-smashing version that arose well before 1973. Finally, the unfortunate selection of *alter* as his prefix makes it even harder to differentiate his concept from postmodernism and postcolonialism, both of which are frequently preoccupied with the "other." Ultimately, the altermodern journey doesn't take us very far from postmodernism.

1.2.2 Metamodernism

Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker put forth their concept, "metamodernism," in a short essay published in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* in 2010. Announcing that "[t]he postmodern years of plenty, pastiche and parataxis are over" (2), they describe a culture wherein "new generations of artists increasingly abandon the aesthetic precepts of deconstruction, parataxis, and pastiche in favor of *aesth-ethical* notions of reconstruction,

myth, and metaxis" (2). These new artists "express a (often guarded) hopefulness and (at times feigned) sincerity that hint at another structure of feeling, intimating another discourse" (2). A new model is needed, because "[t]hese trends can no longer be explained in terms of postmodernism" (2). The two scholars have developed the concept of metamodernism to describe "a structure of feeling" (2) but they "do not seek to impose a predetermined system of thought on a rather particular range of cultural practices" (2), insisting instead that their concept is "an invitation for debate rather than an extending of a dogma" (2).

This new epoch is characterized by "the apparent rise of another modernism" (2). Vermeulen and van der Akker "argue that this modernism is characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment" (2). Drawing the "meta" of metamodernism from the Platonic concept of metaxis, they write, "If the modern thus expresses itself by way of a utopic syntaxis, and the postmodern expresses itself by means of a dystopic parataxis, the metamodern, it appears, exposes itself through a-topic metaxis" (12). Thus, "metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naivete and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity" (5-6). However, we "should be careful not to think of this oscillation as a balance…rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles" (6). The oscillation guards against excesses: "Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm" (6).

Rejecting the modern "notion of history dialectically progressing toward some predetermined Telos" (5), metamodernism also rejects a postmodern conception of the end of

history, whether it posits that history's end has been "achieved," or whether "people realized its purpose could never be fulfilled – indeed, because it does not exist" (5). Instead, it stakes out a more tenuous position: "[M]etamodern discourse also acknowledges that history's purpose will never be fulfilled because it does not exist. Critically, however, it nevertheless takes toward it as if it does exist" (5). This "as if" approach draws from different philosophical sources than modernism or postmodernism, as "the modern and the postmodern are linked to Hegel's 'positive' idealism, the metamodern aligns itself with Kant's 'negative' idealism" (5). This "as if" approach is designed to lead to moral and political improvement: "[H]umankind, a people, are not really going toward a natural but unknown goal, but they pretend they do so that they progress morally as well as politically" (5). The result is a kind of "pragmatic idealism" (5) that avoids modern fanaticism and naivete as well as postmodern skepticism and apathy. Thus, the metamodern approach has a touch of tragic romanticism to it, as it "moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find" (5).

It comes as no surprise, then, that Vermeulen and van der Akker believe that "metamodernism appears to find its clearest expression in an emergent neoromantic sensibility" (8). Citing "movements as diverse as Remodernism, Reconstructivism, Renewalism, the New Sincerity, The New Weird Generation, Stuckism, Freak Folk" (7), as well as "Romantic Conceptualism" (8), they insist that this new romantic sensibility "has been expressed in a wide variety of art forms and a broad diversity of styles, across media and surfaces" (8). Noting that "Romanticism is about the attempt to turn the finite into the infinite, while recognizing that it can never be realized" (8), they believe that "aesthetic categories lingering between projection and perception, form and the unformable, coherence and chaos, corruption and innocence" such as "the tragic, the sublime, and the uncanny,"

strongly resemble the metamodern oscillation between "modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony" (8).

We must be careful, we are warned, "not to confuse this oscillating tension (a both--neither) with some "kind of postmodern in-between (a neither--nor)" (9-10). Although "both metamodernism and the postmodern turn to pluralism, irony, and deconstruction in order to counter a modernist fanaticism…in metamodernism this pluralism and irony are utilized to counter the modern aspiration, while in postmodernism they are employed to cancel it out" (10). This subtle distinction is due to the fact that "metamodern irony is intrinsically bound to desire, whereas postmodern irony is inherently tied to apathy" (10). By focusing on "what is often called the sublime, the uncanny, the ethereal, the mysterious, and so forth" (10), the metamodern art work counters the modern "by drawing attention to what it cannot present in its language, what it cannot signify in its own terms" (10), while the "postmodern work deconstructs it by pointing exactly to what it presents, by exposing precisely what it signifies" (10). This move toward the romantic is not nostalgic or parodic, and thus "should not merely be understood as re-appropriation; it should be interpreted as re-signification" (12), turning "everyday life, the commonplace, and the mundane" (10) into "site[s] of ambiguity, of mystery, and unfamiliarity" (10).

Vermeulen and van der Akker propose a number of potential causes of the transition from postmodernism to metamodernism. One such trigger is the fact that "financial crises, geopolitical instabilities, and climatological uncertainties have necessitated a reform of the economic system" (4), including "the transition from a white collar to a green collar economy" (4). Another factor is "the disintegration of the political center" due to "the rise to prominence of the Eastern economies" and "the failure of the 'third way,' the polarization of localities, ethnicities, classes, and the influence of the Internet blogosphere" (4-5), which "has

required a restructuration of the political discourse" (5). Finally, "a transformation of our material landscape" has been driven by "the need for a decentralized production of alternative energy; a solution to the waste of time, space, and energy caused by (sub)urban sprawls; and a sustainable urban future" (5). Using Barack Obama's slogans "yes, we can," and "change we can believe in" as examples, Vermeulen and van der Akker propose that a new "narrative of longing structured by and conditioned on a belief ... that was long repressed, for a possibility (a 'better' future) that was long forgotten" (5) has appeared. Although they have stated that "the 2000s are the defining period for the shift from postmodernism to metamodernism to occur" (Misunderstandings), they insist that "this new shape, meaning, and direction do not *directly* stem from some kind of post-9/11 sentiment" (Notes, 5), as they believe that the "conservative reflex of the 'war on terror' might even be taken to symbolize a reaffirmation of postmodern values" (5).

In my opinion, Vermeulen and van der Akker have accomplished what they set out to do, which is to start a debate. Due mostly to the brevity of their sketch, however, their concept remains vague. It seems a bit convenient and overly simplistic to define the new epoch as being merely a combination of the previous two. Their suggestions about the possible causes of this new era are generic: indeed, financial and political crises are nothing new and certainly existed during both the modern and postmodern eras. Although they do remark on environmental concerns, they could have built a better bridge between their model and these social changes they describe. I believe they have accurately grasped the quality of hope and optimism of the contemporary era, but have not gone back far enough to link it to the end of the Cold War and the rise of the Internet. In fact, the Cold War is not mentioned in their model, and they seem to relegate the '90s to the postmodern era. Their description of the metamodern as "pragmatic idealism" (5) seems to demand a consideration of pragmatism,

and in fact, the expression "practical idealism," which originates with John Dewey, was used by both Al Gore and Condoleeza Rice during the era in question. It seems to me that this was a missed opportunity.

The two theorists give an interesting overview of trends in architecture and the visual arts, but their consideration of literary texts is non-existent. Here, examples of neo-romanticism would have been interesting to those working on contemporary literary theory, and would have strengthened their argument. However, as they were writing for a journal primarily focused on the visual, this can be understood. Although they attempted to group a wide range of movements under the metamodern umbrella, some more careful analysis would have better demonstrated the accuracy of this assessment. In fact, the concept of metamodernism is so cursory and vague that I probably wouldn't have considered it at all if it hadn't achieved such popularity. The idea obtained notoriety when artist Luke Turner turned it into an aesthetic manifesto, which was then adopted by Hollywood actor Shia LeBoeuf, who began to describe himself as metamodern. Furthermore, in 2014, country music singer Sturgill Simpson released an album entitled *Metamodern Sounds in Country Music*. None of the other models examined here have attained this level of media prominence, and I suspect that alternate versions of "metamodernism" will eventually appear, with completely different descriptions.

1.2.3 Post-postmodernism

Jeffery T. Nealon has adopted the default epochal name for his analysis, *Post-Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*, published in 2012. He believes a new paradigm is required because "it's pretty clear that whatever happened culturally and economically in the 1980s and '90s, we're living in a different period" (26). Nealon argues

that "post-postmodernism marks an intensification and mutation within postmodernism" (9), and thus, "the initial 'post' in the word is less a marker of postmodernism's having finally used up its shelf life at the theory store than it is a marker of postmodernism's having mutated, passed beyond a certain tipping point to become something recognizably different" (9). This difference is "not a difference in kind as much as it is a difference in *intensity*" (10, italics in the original). As the subtitle to Nealon's book suggests, he draws his approach from Frederic Jameson, showing that economic and cultural forces are intertwined, and he remarks that "over the past thirty years in the US, the major shift in economic and cultural terrain is within 'capitalism' itself – which is no longer the same thing it was in the 1980s" (26). The intensity he frequently refers to is drawn from Hardt and Negri's assertion that "[c]apitalism today seeks primarily to saturate and deepen – intensify – its hold over existing markets, insofar as global capitalism of the twenty-first century has run out of new territories to conquer" (41), and so, rather than focusing solely on cultural forces, we need "to think economically as well as culturally about the difference between the two periods" (28). An economic focus is required because "capitalism itself is the thing that's intensified most radically since Jameson began doing his work on postmodernism" (11), and thus, "[t]he 'late' capitalism of that era (the tail end of the cold war) has since intensified into the 'just-in-time' (which is to say, all-the-time) capitalism of our neoliberal era" (11). Nealon believes that the economic realities of the postmodern period "overcoded" its cultural production, and so "the dominant logic of economics in the neoliberal revolution years has in many ways been isomorphic...with the cultural logic of the humanities and the rise of theory" (186). Nealon insists that the postmodern era be reassessed because "when one overcodes the liberated cultural effects of postmodernism with the substantially more dire economic realities that rely on the same concepts, one can no longer assess the cultural effects in quite the same way"

(38). Recognizing this means "you can't quite so easily or naively cherry-pick and affirm the stuff you like (say, the Yale School of literary criticism), while you simply denounce the stuff you don't like (say, the Chicago School of economics)" (38). In fact, Nealon proclaims somewhat provocatively, "we literary and cultural theorists are, and have been, neoliberal postmoderns" (187).

Nealon argues that critical theory needs to change: "[T]he narratives by which we characterize that period called the '60s – narratives of unprecedented rebellion, resistance, and liberation – don't necessarily do much useful work in explaining or intervening within a very different historical situation" (28). The fact that "a repressive notion of 'normalization' is not the primary danger lurking within contemporary capitalism" (36) means that "the cultural rebellion narratives of the '60s, which often revolved around the liberation of an individual's or group's desire in the face of various social repressions, can now officially be pronounced dead" (36). Indeed, "the ethos of liberation that surrounds cultural postmodernism (the transgressions of hybridity, the individual ethics of self-fashioning, Dionysiac celebrations of multiplicity, endlessly making it new)" (37) are, in fact, "the watchwords of neoliberal capitalism" (38). Nealon uses classic rock music as an example of the intermingled changes in economics and culture: "The rock 'n' roll style of rebellious, existential individuality, largely unassimilable under the mass-production dictates of midcentury Fordism, has become the engine of post-Fordist, niche-market consumption capitalism" (73). This shift underlines a movement away from the disruptive transgression of cultural novelty: "Consumption in the present cultural market for music has largely become unmoored from newness as the ultimate test of authenticity and value" (81). Instead, consumers are seeking self-affirmation in the form of liberation: "[C]lassic rock at this juncture functions in popular culture as little more than an endless incitement to become who you want to be, being your own person, not

following everyone else" (72). This cultural transition is due to changes in capitalism, according to Nealon: "[C]apitalism today promises the same subjective authenticity as the once outlaw commodity called classic rock" (73). Classic rock has become another commodity, rather than a disruptive cultural force, because "capitalism has morphed into the kind of thing that, at its center rather than at its margins, now has a use for classic rock" (73). Critical theory has not kept pace with these changes, as Nealon believes that "much of North American humanities 'theory' of the present moment is stuck in and around 'the '80s'" (28), and thus, "we need a new theoretical and methodological toolbox for responding to post-postmodern culture" (12).

Nealon questions whether "the end of the cold war, globalization, post-Fordianism, the rise of so-called immaterial labor, or the intensifications of postmodern 'finance capital'" (130) may have made "the tools and procedures of deconstruction problematic, in need of supplementation, or even maybe obsolete" (130). Nealon proposes some provocative questions, such as, "What happens to the critical discourse 'deconstruction' when capitalism in practice assumes the role of 'deconstructor' par excellence?" (137). Since neoliberal capitalism, through privatization and globalization, has performed a socioeconomically deconstructive role, Nealon asks us, "Has deconstruction's triumph as a kind of capitalist *epistemology* ironically cost it the store in terms of its status as a *critical* discourse?" (137, italics in the original). Mocking Derrida's suggestion that *Perestroika* was another name for deconstruction, Nealon rejoins, "Perhaps we should add 'global capitalism' to the list of alternate names for deconstruction" (137). For Nealon, "the hermeneutics of suspicion has waned as an effective post-postmodern research agenda" (147) because "[c]ontemporary capitalism...is not the sort of thing that hides – it's everywhere, all the time – so a hermeneutics of suspicion may not offer the most effective tools to diagnose it" (111). Citing

Christopher Nealon (no relation), he calls instead for a "hermeneutics of situation" (103) that is "aimed at offering tools for thinking differently about the present, rather than primarily either exposing or undermining the supposed 'truth' of this or that cultural position" (103). This approach moves "[f]rom a focus on *understanding* something to a concern with *manipulating* it – from (postmodern) *meaning* to (post-postmodern) *usage*" (161, italics in the original). This change has already started occurring: "[O]ver the past fifteen years or so, there's been a slow but decisive turn away from the linguistic turn in the North American academic world" (160). Literary studies, Nealon believes, "has swerved away from interpreting texts – from pivoting on questions about textual meaning and its discontents – to examining the historical, archival, scientific, biological, and political contexts of literary production" (160). He insists that "this post-postmodern (anti-language or anti-hermeneutic) set of stances" (163) is not a return to old methods, "but rather a recognition that not all deployment of force (social, biological, historical, unconscious, etc.) can easily or satisfactorily be modeled on a Sausurrean understanding of linguistics" (163).

Nealon offers readings of Nietzsche and Adorno as examples of how to focus on a hermeneutics of situation rather than the postmodern hermeneutics of suspicion. According to Nealon, "Nietzsche has much to teach us about the situation of transnational capitalism" (106). He believes that Nietzsche has given us an alternative way to understand economics, and thus a useful approach to post-postmodernism: "Nietzsche's intervention concerning truth and/as a coin teaches us that the value of truth or money is the product of a *dynamic action*, not the mere referencing of a *static state*" (110). The focus is on action and its effects rather than on meaning or truth: "Both God and money...have a common face or enact a common truism: it's all about the practices of *force* and *power*, not about the states of *truth* or *representation* (108, italics in the original)." In other words, a deconstruction of meaning or a

revelation of undecideability is less useful in the neoliberal era: "Like God, an Internet or tech startup doesn't really represent anything at all – there's nothing tangible or authentic 'behind' it; but both certainly do comprise and enable certain kinds of *command*" (108, italics in the original). Nealon draws a similar lesson from Adorno, proclaiming, "Adorno's 'minor ethics' is a kind of 'musical ethics' of speed and slowness – an ethics that *does something*, produces effects, over against the transcendental ethics of resentment, judgment, and condemnation" (120). Adorno's cultural readings, according to Nealon, are not mere excursions into the question of meaning, but rather, "the Adornian dialectic is a performative, rather than a constative discourse. In other words, the dialectic 'is' something only insofar as it produces effects" (123). Asserting that "[a]ctive, engaged praxis within existing conditions is the first and last principle of Adornian ethics" (125), Nealon believes that in Adorno "the philosophical question 'What does it mean?' will always be subordinated to the ethical question 'What does it do?'" (123). This approach offers us "an ethics that doesn't dictate, but rather works through and modulates extremes in a dialectical way" (123).

Nealon recommends that we not "moralistically denounce or judge capital, but rather experiment with its speeds and slowness – see what (else) it can do" (113). As a case study, he offers the situation of the so-called 'corporate university' much lamented among academics. The problem, Nealon insists, is that "corporatization and the economy at large has shrunk the middle-management ranks and made business command structures more flexible, while the 'corporate' academy has positively bloated itself on rigid layers of paper-shuffling administration" (87). Thus, "'80s-style economic theory offers some provocative tools and arguments to folks who would want to strengthen the position of those ousted by corporate managerialism in the university" (92). Nealon proposes using the techniques of neoliberalism rather than merely critiquing them: "[I]f higher education has to cut somehow to stay alive in

the near term, maybe it has something to learn from the people who brought you downsizing, '80s-style corporate practitioners" (85). He recommends taking the neoliberal argument directly to the funders of the university, the state and private donors, as if they were investors: "From a business perspective, it's hard not to conclude that the administration is the cash-wasting 'entrenched bureaucracy' that needs to be savagely downsized in the corporate university" (92). He argues that "an alliance with the enemy may still be in order, but that the provisional ally is not the *cultural* conservative" (100, italics in the original), but rather the fiscal conservative. In other words, Nealon says, "I'm suggesting that in many ways *the corporate university isn't corporate enough*" (94, italics in the original). University researchers and professors would not be endangered by such a move, as "faculty and students are not the 'fat' in higher education" (93).

Nealon wants to return to viewing literature as having a use function, rather than focusing solely on interpretive questions: "[F]or thousands of years before (in fact, for virtually all of its existence), literature was equipment for living in myriad ways, not just as a provider and/or frustrator of 'meaning'" (183). The problem today is, "[i]f literature has any 'use-value' or offers us equipment for living after postmodernism, that value remains primarily thematized as a kind of spoiling move, an antiquarian slowing down of all the superfast flows that characterize the post-postmodern world" (164). Rather than focusing on questions of truth or meaning, he insists, "one might directly focus on literature's powers of the false, its abilities to create other, virtual worlds" (173). He refers to this as "a 'strong' power of the false that lies in its direct ability to create the new, understood specifically as the abnormal or the error – rather than (or at least in addition to) the false's traditional philosophical, 'weak' job of subverting the true" (174). Here, literature and its analysis take on roles that can be constructive rather than deconstructing already existing belief systems.

Nealon believes this is a restoration of a more traditional role for literature, and so it is "less a call to innovate 'new' roles or jobs for literature, new modes of equipment, than to recall that literature was equipment for a lot of becomings before it somewhat myopically became equipment tailor-made to interrupt the totalizing claims of philosophy" (183).

Nealon offers us a biting and insightful critique of deconstruction and the postmodern approach to literary theory, pointing out the hidden similarities between the postmodern drive for emancipation and the neoliberal critique of government regulation of business. This inherent contradiction has been lurking at the heart of leftist politics, which call for ever more government control while at the same time advancing a paranoid and desperate critique of totalizing authority and power. It was inevitable that something had to give. I think he also correctly points out that the world has changed, that capitalism isn't hiding in the shadows embedding secret agendas into its products any more, but rather brashly trumpeting them in the public arena, meaning that a deconstruction of hidden meanings may not be as useful as a tool of resistance as it was once considered to be. He has correctly assessed the rather obvious change of direction that literary theory has made in recent years into areas that also include facts and details that exist outside the text. I agree, too, that, given the failure of Marxism to produce a viable alternative to capitalism despite numerous opportunities, it may be time for critics to seize the reins of capitalism and see where they can steer it, rather than standing on the sidelines emitting doleful lamentations. Nealon's suggestions about the corporate university offer an interesting path forward and an opportunity for academics to ride the waves of change rather than drown in them. What I find most appealing about Nealon's work is his call to regard literature as having other roles than merely providing fodder for exercises in deconstruction. Indeed, one could argue that one of the original purposes of storytelling was the communication of ethical beliefs and structures, which

resonates strongly with the thesis of my dissertation.

Where Nealon's attempt at periodization falls short is in its nebulous analysis of contemporary culture. Other than a vague suggestion about "intensification," we really do not get much of a description about what is happening now. He offers a minimal number of readings; for example, a cursory glance at Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) that serves only to illustrate his comments about an empire running out of new territory to conquer, and a brief discussion of Bruce Andrews, a Language poet (and what's more postmodern than Language poetry, anyway?) to illustrate the swerve away from using literature to communicate meaning. It almost seems as if Nealon is neither aware of nor interested in contemporary culture or even literature, and has set out primarily to engage opponents within the narrow field of literary theory, and within the university administration. Extensive readings of Nietzsche and Adorno reinforce the impression that he is not really focused on the contemporary. Adopting the default name for this period, post-postmodernism, indicates a certain lack of vision – yes, post-postmodernism is after postmodernism, but the name tells us nothing else. This lack of originality is exacerbated by using Frederic Jameson as his intellectual template, rather than developing something new.

1.2.4 Cosmodernism

Christian Moraru's *Cosmodernism: American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary*, published in 2011, proposes a new periodization structure, in which the contemporary era would begin with the end of the Cold War, and the post World War II era, essentially what could be referred to as the postmodern era, would be absorbed into the previous period, "with more recent events of incontestably global impact like September 11, 2001, as symptoms of the Cold War's aftermath rather than as harbingers of another,

genuinely new epoch" (2). He would call this era "cosmodern," drawing from the concept of cosmos, and emphasizing a one-world or universal ontology, which he labels an "ecology" that "sets out to critique late-global egology" (8). Cosmodern ecology, then, is set up in opposition to egology, "not because it features nature, although it often does, but because it challenges the egotistic penchant of late-globalization" (50). To counter this egology, we need "an 'ecological' balance understood as co-presence, co-implication, and co-responsibility of self and his or her 'cultural other,' in short, as ethical relatedness" (50).

In fact, according to Moraru, "the cosmodern lynchpin is relation itself – the concept and practices of 'relationality' in narrative, theory, and other areas of post-1989 American culture" (3). Thus, "relationality" is the important factor distinguishing the cosmodern era from its predecessors. This relationality "speaks to and upholds unabashedly an ethics of difference" (8), based on a "self-other relation" (21). Following Lévinas, he insists that this ethics precedes ontology, in other words, "it is premised on ethics" (31), and so, "cosmodernism is best understood as an ethical rather than 'technical' project" (316). This would differentiate cosmodernism from postmodernism, which "continues to do the bidding of an older worldview that conceptualizes and thus further 'others' and externalizes alterity qua 'theme' and 'form'" (313). Although Moraru acknowledges that "[c]osmodernism does follow in postmodernism's footsteps thematically and formally" (313), he believes that we should "give the postmoderns credit for laying the groundwork, setting the basic agenda, and developing...the terminologies and methodologies for a project whose completion by and large lies beyond the postmodern's [sic] purview" (310).

This uncompleted project has four aspects. First, it is "an *imaginary modality* of mapping out today's world as a cultural geography of relationality" (5, italics in the original). In this imaginary, on a cultural level, relations with others (here, meaning other *cultures*) are

perceived as shaping cultural development in a "mutually fashioning process" (50), in contrast to the modern and, Moraru argues, postmodern imposition of a dominant culture. Second, the cosmodern project is a "*protocol of subjectivity formation*" (5, italics in the original), by which Moraru, drawing loosely on Lacan and Derrida, means that the individual subject, the self, is formed by interaction with the other (here, meaning a person, but still from a different culture), and through encountering the other's difference. Third, cosmodernism is "an *ethical imperative* pointing to the present as much as to the future" (5, italics in the original). Thus, it is "not a strict assessment of where American culture stands now but a suggestion that this is where it may and *should* go" (305, italics in the original). Moraru argues that we are ethically compelled to implement the vision presented in the cosmodern imaginary. Finally, cosmodernism is "a *critical algorithm* for decrypting and assembling a range of post-1989 narrative and theoretical imaginings into a reasonably coherent and, again, ahead-looking model" (5, italics in the original). Here, Moraru is proposing that his model be adopted for critical purposes, as an organizing tool to make sense of the contemporary era. As one can see, Moraru's project is a bold and ambitious undertaking, and the pages of his book are inundated in a cascade of references encompassing much of critical and literary theory from the last half century, as well as a bibliography of more than 630 sources.

To illustrate his model, Moraru chooses five topics that exemplify the concepts he has laid out. The first is called "idiomatics." Moraru traces how interactions between cultures create changes to the dominant language, and thus "idiom springs from a condition of relatedness and sets up, against prescriptive statutes of correctness, accuracy, and legitimate enunciation, new ways of relating the speakers to others" (84). This demonstrates the ecological nature of encounters between cultures, and draws from postcolonial theory to

show how the subaltern affects the dominant culture. His next example is "onomastics,"
which refers to the history and use of proper names. Here, Moraru shows how proper names
can be appropriated by the cultural other to create new cross-cultural meanings,
disconnecting the name from its cultural and national source, and yet "can also inscribe us
into the wider world. In the cultural other's name, in the name of somebody from a different
topology, we overflow our initial toponomy" (125). This overflow of cultural or national
boundaries brings us into relation with the other, as "culturally 'transferable' proper names are
anthropological vehicles of compassion through which the self empathizes with others"
(155). His third focus is "translation," drawing from theory about globalization, and this
section presents Moraru's ideas about subject formation. The act of translation is presented as
a method of self-discovery: "[T]ranslation as interpretation and deciphering – as reading text
– prompts self-reading" (202). Moraru sees translation as an ecological act opposing the
egological projection of the self onto the other: "[S]elf-knowledge does not come about
egologically, as I self-center and shut others out, but translationally – ecologically" (169).
According to cosmodernism, "my being takes shape, and so I become what I am, in
translation of an other" (174), and thus, translation plays an important role in subject
formation. His fourth example is called "readings," and makes use of reader-response theory.
Here, analyzing novels that feature characters reading texts, Moraru builds a metaphor about
reading others (meaning actual people) as texts; a process that leads to self-development.
"Other-reading reaches beyond the informative; it is formative" (205), he insists. Moraru
believes this process is something new, connected to the cosmodern era, "this double
movement where the relation to an other serves as a prologue to self-relation is growing
quickly into a subjectivity procedure in the United States and elsewhere" (205). The last
section is called "metabolics," and deviates from the other four by moving away from

linguistic concerns and focusing on physical bodies. According to Moraru, "bodies are in the cosmodern imaginary worldly connectors. They embody culture, or cultures rather" (277). Bodies are "symbolic sites of cultural action, re-action, and interaction" (256), and "[c]ultural amalgams and venues of further amalgamations, tropisms, permutations, and combinations that allegorize emerging cross-cultural alliances and mèlanges" (285). In the cosmodern imaginary, the mutual fashioning of cultures and subjects is symbolically portrayed through fantastic physical transformations and hybridizations.

Moraru has compiled a fascinating and thorough assessment of the legacy of postmodernism, and has no doubt identified much of what that movement has bequeathed to the next generation. However, I find the name and even the whole concept of cosmodernism somewhat superfluous. If he had simply intended his book to be a mere summary of postmodernism, few, if any, changes would have been required. Building his concept on a foundation formed by thinkers traditionally considered postmodern, including citing sixteen different works by Derrida, ten by Baudrillard, and nine by Lévinas, while basing his ethics directly on Lévinas, makes it nearly impossible for Moraru to go beyond the postmodern. This is reflected in his selection of readings, as well. He puts great emphasis on Don DeLillo, citing eleven different works and giving several close readings, although DeLillo is widely regarded as a quintessential postmodernist. Other readings include John Updike, who published his first novel in 1960, Raymond Federman, who first published a book of poetry in 1967 and a novel in 1971, and Vladimir Nabokov, who died in 1977, twelve years before the cosmodern era supposedly begins, and who was actually born in the 19th century. Although he does include some more recent writers such as Chang-Rae Lee, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Suki Kim, it sometimes seems like he was trying hard to find some "others" to use as examples.

Although he insists on starting his period with 1989, the end of the Cold War, there is no analysis of how this political transformation has shaped subsequent cultural developments. The Internet is referred to in passing, but its radical impact on the way we live today is not addressed. Furthermore, he is hindered by his own ambition. The cultural features he describes may exist, but even he acknowledges that "cosmodernism is not necessarily the cultural model late globalization is fostering in the United States and elsewhere, or not the reigning one by a long shot" (305). He provides examples primarily from fiction, but insists that this model extends to contemporary culture as a whole, with no vision of how this might be reflected in fields such as architecture, art, film or music, although these cultural avenues might have been even more fruitful than readings of fiction. Had he merely claimed to have identified a movement in critical theory, he would have been on much firmer ground.

Finally, Moraru's advocacy of engagement and translation and reading of the other fall flat as he himself fails to engage with his own stated other, that of late-globalization's egology. If he were to follow the prescription laid out by cosmodernism, allowing his contact with an other to shape him through translation, reading, and even (metaphorically) physical transformation, then he must engage with the egologists whom he opposes. He makes no attempt to do so. This is one of the fundamental critiques of Badiou, a thinker Moraru dismisses in a hurry, but who has exposed the Achilles heel of the postmodern ethics of being for the other.

1.3 Theories Deviating from Postmodernism

1.3.1 Hypermodernism

In the book *Hypermodern Times* (2005), Gilles Lipovetsky, with the assistance of Sebastian Charles, puts forth his concept of the contemporary, which he calls "hypermodernity." This

new concept is necessary, according to Lipovetsky, because "[n]ow that genetic technologies, liberal globalization and human rights are triumphing, the label 'postmodern' is starting to look old; it has exhausted its capacities to express the world now coming into being" (30). These developments have triggered a "second modernity," which is "deregulated and globalized, has shot into orbit: it has no opposite, and is absolutely modern, resting on three axiomatic elements constitutive of modernity itself: the market, technocratic efficiency and the individual" (31-2). Rather than witnessing the end of modernity, we have entered the era of "consummate modernity" (32), "which takes the concrete form of a globalized liberalism, the quasi-general commercialization of lifestyles, the exploitation 'to death' of instrumental reason, and rampant individualism" (31). This consummated modernity means that "[i]t is no longer a matter of emerging from the world of tradition to reach the stage of modern rationality, but of modernizing modernity itself and rationalizing rationalization" (33).

  At the heart of Lipovetsky's concept is an examination of our relationship with time. He proposes that changes in capitalism have altered our experience of time: "[W]e are witnessing a formidable expansion in the size and number of financial and stock market activities, an acceleration in the speed of economic operations that now function in real time, and a phenomenal explosion in the volume of capital circulating across the planet" (32). This acceleration of the market is pervasive, and thus, "[t]he frenzied escalation of 'more, always more' has now infiltrated every sphere of collective life" (32). Lipovetsky proposes that "the reordering of the way social time is organized" is due to "the move from a capitalism of production to an economy of consumption" (36), leading to "the replacement of an unbending and disciplinary society by a 'society of fashion' restructured from top to bottom by the technologies of ephemerality, novelty and permanent seduction" (36). Thus, the postmodern conception of a society controlled by disciplinary structures is replaced by a culture of

marketing seduction and novelty, meaning that "fashion, now ubiquitous, has established the mode of temporality now socially prevalent" (37). According to Lipovetsky, "the logic and the very temporality of fashion" create enormous changes in societies; "they are dominated by the present, which replaces collective action by private happiness, tradition by movement, hopes for the future by permanent novelty" (37). This reorganization of time is not a recent phenomenon, rather, this "consecration of the present" began "decades before the fall of the Berlin Wall or the accelerated universe of cyberspace and globalized liberalism" (37). In other words, it was characteristic of the postmodern era, as well. However, "[f]rom the 1980s and, especially, 1990s, onwards, a second-generation presentism has come into being, based on neo-liberal globalization and the revolution in information technologies" (38). These political and technological developments have amplified our focus on the present: "While neoliberal, computerized society did not create the fever of the present, there can be no doubt that it brought it to its apogee by shuffling different time frames and intensifying our desire to be freed from the constraints of space-time" (39).

The second-generation presentism is different from the first; it brings with it a certain anxiety: "The spirit of the time dominated by frivolity has been replaced by a time of risk and uncertainty. A certain carefree attitude has gone for good: the present is increasingly lived out in a sense of insecurity" (39). This change is a clear signal that the postmodern era has ended, since "[t]he increasing insecurity of people's lives has supplanted the carefree 'postmodern' attitude" (40). Rather than an exuberant sense of postmodern play, "[a] sense of insecurity has invaded all minds; health has imposed itself as a mass obsession; terrorism, catastrophes and epidemics are regularly front-page news" (39). Even the political focus has changed: "Social struggles and critical discourses no longer carry any utopian perspectives that aim at overcoming domination. The only real question now is that of protection, security and the

defense of social benefits, of urgent humanitarian aid and safeguarding the planet. In short, 'damage limitation'" (39). The viewpoint has become so dark that "[t]here is no longer any faith in a future that will necessarily be better than the present" (41), and thus, "the time of disenchantment with postmodernity itself has arrived – the time of the demythification of life lived in the present, now that it is forced to face the rising tide of insecurity" (40).

The source of this anxiety is precisely the intense and forced nature of this focus on the present, and how it puts us continually in conflict with the future and the past. Lipovetsky argues, "It is no longer class against class, but time against time, future against present, present against future, present against past" (49). The disintegration of dominating cultural structures and the emergence of a present-oriented logic of fashion has brought forth a new condition: "Hypercapitalism is accompanied by its double: a detached hyperindividualism, legislating for itself but sometimes prudent and calculating, sometimes unrestrained, unbalanced and chaotic" (33). This hyperindiviualism brings with it both freedom and insecurity, and in fact, Lipovetsky contends, "The less collective norms can command our behavior in detail, the more the individual shows a growing tendency to be weak and unstable" (56). This instability is a by-product of freedom itself, as "the more freely and intensely people wish to live, the more we hear them saying how difficult life can be" (56). This new "hyperindividualism is less a cult of the present moment than a projection into the future, less festive than hygienic, less a matter of the intense enjoyment of life than of the prevention of problems" (47). And so, the constant focus on the present has paradoxically led to constant concern about the future: "In reality it is less a *carpe diem* which characterizes the spirit of the time than anxiety about a future fraught with risk and insecurity" (45). Thus, Lipovetsky suggests that the future, although momentarily displaced by the logic of fashion, is still a driving force in contemporary culture, and "[e]ven if short-termishness reigns in the

economy and media, our societies nevertheless continue to be turned to the future; they still wish to tear themselves away from the way things are" (43).

Therefore, he argues, "the hypermodern individual is still an individual-for-the-future, a future based around 'me'" (48). However, the changes brought about by the postmodern era have made this future a source of psychological instability: "Widespread institutional deregulation is accompanied by mood swings, an increasing lack of organization in people's personalities, a growth in the number of psychological disturbances and cries for help" (56). The constant anticipation of future risk means that "health is becoming a ubiquitous preoccupation for a growing number of individuals of every age" (47). This has led to profound change in ethics, as "hedonistic ideals have been supplanted by the ideology of health and longevity. In the name of these, individuals are to a massive degree renouncing immediate satisfactions, improving and reorienting their daily behavior" (47). This ethical change, manifesting itself within a culture formed by the logic of fashion, a logic of novelty and the present, is actually driven by preoccupation with the future: "While the axis of the present is still dominant, it is not absolute: the culture of prevention and the 'ethics of the future' have led to a renewed importance being given to the imperatives of a more or less distant future" (44). This 'ethics of the future' extends beyond individual choice to more universal concerns, as "anxieties about the future of the planet and environmental risks are assuming a fundamental importance in the collective debate" (43). However, the renewed concern with the future should not be confused with modernity's utopian fantasies; rather, "[t]he heroic will to create a 'radiant future' has been replaced by a managerial activism: a vast enthusiasm for change, reform and adaptation that is deprived of any confident horizon or grand historical vision" (34). Yet, we seem to have emerged from postmodernity's dark pessimism: "Hypermodernity has not replaced faith in progress by despair and nihilism, but

by an unstable, fluctuating confidence that varies with events and circumstances" (45).

Lipovetsky's ruminations on our changing relationship with time do not stop with considerations of the present and future; he also examines the contemporary relationship with the past. Although we are in an age of presentism, Lipovetsky insists that "hypermodernity is not structured by an absolute present, it is structured by a *paradoxical present*, a present that ceaselessly exhumes and 'rediscovers' the past" (57, italics in the original). In fact, he argues that "our age is the scene of a frenzy of commemorative activities based on our heritage and a growth in national and regional, ethnic and religious identities" (57). This recovery of the past marks a break with postmodernity because "[t]he value attributed to the past is a symptom of the advance of cultural capitalism and the commercialization of culture: as such, it is less a postmodern than a hypermodern phenomenon" (59). Neoliberal capitalism has seized on our fascination for the past in order to commodify it: "In hypermodern society, everything old, and our nostalgia for it, have become sales techniques and marketing tools" (60). As a result, a new dimension in material value has appeared: "There was use-value and exchange-value: in addition, we now have emotional-memorial value associated with feelings of nostalgia" (60). In some ways, this new value represents a reversal of modernity, since "[t]he moderns wanted to make a *tabula rasa* of the past, but we are rehabilitating it; their ideal was to break away from the grip of traditions, but those traditions have acquired a new social dignity" (57). This is because our relationship with the past is fundamentally different from the one the moderns struggled against, for "[t]he past no longer provides a social foundation or structure: it is revamped, recycled, updated, exploited for commercial ends" (60), and this forms a fundamental "characteristic of hypermodern society: we celebrate what we no longer wish to take as an example" (61). Lipovetsky believes that this celebration is individualist rather than institutional: "If doting on the past has a nostalgic dimension, it also

bears witness to the rising power of individualistic desires for quality of life, and to a hypermodern culture of well-being" (61). Since the individual in a culture driven by consumer choice and "deprived of any framework" (56) is left to self-definition, "[t]he second age of modernity is self-reflective, individualist-emotional and concerned with identity" (62). The past supplies ready-made identities that can be constructed, configured, and consumed.

Lipovetsky sees this revival of the past as potentially dangerous, noting that, "in several cases, the reactivation of historical memory functions in frontal opposition to the principles of liberal modernity" (63) and citing an "upsurge in religious trends which reject secular modernity, the neo-nationalist and ethnic and religious movements that lead to dictatorships, wars of identity, and genocidal massacres" (63). These dangerous trends are connected to the end of the Cold War: "The end of the division of the world into blocs, the ideological vacuum, the globalization of the economy, and the weakening of state power have led to the rise of a multitude of local conflicts based on ethnic, religious, or national factors, together with separatist movements and wars between communities" (63). Lipovetsky argues that the resurgence of religion is a by-product of hypermodernity rather than a sign of resistance to it: "In the uncertain, chaotic, atomized universe of modernity, new needs for unity and meaning, for security and a sense of belonging, arise: this is a new opportunity for religions" (64). Religions offer what our contemporary culture lacks: the traditions dismantled by modern reason, and the disciplinary structure dismantled by postmodern emancipation, and so, "it is from *within* the hypermodern cosmos that the religious domains reproduced, in so far as the hypermodern generates insecurity, the loss of fixed guide-lines, the disappearance of secular utopias, and an individualist disintegration of the social bond" (64, italics in the original). Although "[i]nstrumental rationality is extending its domain,"

paradoxically, "this eliminates neither religious belief nor the need to refer to the authority of a tradition" (64). "Secularization is not irreligion," insists Lipovetsky, "it is also a process which creates a new form of the religious domain in the sphere of worldly autonomy" (64). This hyperindividualist form of religion remains consistent with a consumer-focused modernity: "[T]here is no antinomy with individualist modernity, since the tradition is handed over to the initiative of individuals, 'cobbled together' in a DIY manner, mobilized for self-realization and integration into a community" (63). Religious tradition is now "used without any institutional backing, being perpetually reworked in accordance with the principle of individual sovereignty" (67).

As we can see, Lipovetsky presents a dynamic, paradoxical model that features clashing concepts of time and covers a wide range of topics. I believe he has definitely captured some of the psychological effects, not just of neoliberal capitalism and the instantaneous gratification delivered by the Internet, but also of the deconstruction of tradition and externally-imposed value systems that occurred during the postmodern era. I agree with his reading of the focus on the present as being more anxious and insecure than the postmodern era, leading to a renewed focus on ethics as a mechanism to deter future calamity. That this anxiety is connected to the sense of individual freedom obtained by postmodern emancipation seems plausible to me, as well. His explanation for the re-emergence of religious tradition is somewhat abrupt and ignores the role that postmodernism has played in undermining modernity's emphasis on empirical, scientific rationality. Nevertheless, I believe he has observed and partially described an important cultural force. Where Lipovetsky's analysis falls short, it seems to me, is in the lack of support for his assertions. He makes almost no cultural or historical readings beyond generalities like "the headlines are full of stories about disasters" (when were they not?), and "we are worried

about our health" (just as they were in the early twentieth century) and he seems content to sketch out his ideas in broad brush strokes, leaving the details to others. If this is the way our culture is truly developing, then it ought to be possible to illustrate it with more concrete examples. There could also be more attention paid to the philosophical underpinnings of these movements, rather than just giving us a surface description. In part, this comes from Lipovetsky assuming his audience shares his philosophical background, but the fact that the environmental movement is based on almost two centuries of philosophy should at least be mentioned before asserting that it arises from an "ethics of the future" (even if this is indeed the case). The philosophy of neoliberal globalism, which shapes Lipovetsky's entire concept, is given almost no consideration beyond "there is a demand for more and more." Despite these weaknesses, Lipovetsky's model is the one that most closely aligns with my own.

1.3.2 Performatism

In *Performatism: Or the End of Postmodernism* (2008), Raoul Eshelman presents his vision of what comes after postmodernism, which he chooses to call performatism. Performatism is primarily an aesthetic model that posits a return to semiotic monism. According to Eshelman, performatism "may be defined most simply as an epoch in which a unified concept of sign and strategies of closure have begun to compete directly with – and displace – the split concept of sign and the strategies of boundary transgression typical of postmodernism" (1). Theorists working from a postmodern theoretical perspective will misinterpret the works of this new epoch because "the new epoch works first and foremost on an aesthetic, identificatory level, to create an attitude of beautiful belief, and not on a cognitive, critical one" (12). He finds that there has been little willingness to make the theoretical adjustments necessary to understand the new era: "As it turned out, the mechanisms that made

postmodernism into one of the most theory-saturated literary epochs ever also prevented its norms from being exposed to any sort of historical self-critique" (161). To blame, according to Eshelman, is "the split, belated concept of sign running through all of postmodern thought" (161). Critics are reluctant to embrace the idea of an epochal shift "because of their obligation to postmodern norms" (31). To fully appreciate the new epoch, two major misconceptions must be clarified, the first is that "the notion of sign as something belated, uncontrollable, and split apart from its referent" provides the "only viable kind of theory" (193), and the second is, "that the new monist, unified concepts of sign are simply repeating old, well-known metaphysical errors" (193).

Although Eshelman believes that the cultural change is epochal in nature, he does not tie the changes to any particular historical events: "In my view, the main reason for the switch to monism is that creative artists have become tired of recycling increasingly predictable postmodernist devices and have turned to its monist Other to construct alternatives – a move that ultimately knows no ideological boundaries" (32). Still, he doesn't believe that there has been a complete break with postmodernism, but rather that "performatist works feed in some way on postmodernism; some break with it markedly, while others retain typical devices but use them with an entirely different aim. Still other works develop seemingly ironclad monist positions only to fall back into postmodern irony" (*xiv*). Eshelman presents four basic components of this new model. The first is "ostensivity (a specific type of monist semiotics)" (*xii*), the second is "double framing (a specific way of creating aesthetic closure)" (*xii*), the third is "opaque or dense subjectivity" (*xii*), and finally there is "a theist or authorial mode of organizing temporal and spatial relations" (*xii-xiii*).

According to Eshelman, "the new epoch may best be defined as the becoming-conscious of the ostensive, which up to now existed as a latent, but unrecognized force in all

culture" (199). Drawing from the concept of an "originary scene" developed by literary theorist and anthropologist Eric Gans, in which the birth of culture is envisioned as stemming from a monist, ostensive sign, Eshelman insists that "the ostensive is quite simply the most elegant and parsimonious monist answer that we have to the notion of dual origin marked by différance and its many terminological cousins" (6). This originary monist sign created at the birth of culture means that "a synthetic, unified, object-focused projection – and not an epistemological aporia – stands at the beginning of all culture and continues to condition each individual act of language" (6). The originary sign "can be experienced in three ways: as sacred, as political, and as aesthetic" (199), but the aesthetic is not itself a separate function, but rather the sign is "perceived as beautiful because it allows us to oscillate between contemplating the sign standing for the thing and the thing as it is represented by the sign" (5). Eshelman insists that when "you step back to regard the sign as it oscillates between being a sign and being a thing, you automatically lose interest in instrumentalizing it for material or sacral ends" (199). Although this aesthetic concept may seem to be nothing more than a return to Kantian metaphysics, in actuality, "[p]erformatist aesthetics are 'Kant with a club': they bring back beauty, good, wholeness, and a whole slew of other metaphysical propositions, but only under very special, singular conditions that a text forces us to accept on its own terms" (57). This new aesthetic differs from the traditional Kantian one, because "this one works by coercion" (57), creating a "a paradoxical, oxymoronic, or saturated *return to metaphysics using postmetaphysical means*" (194, italics in the original).

The mechanism of this coercive aesthetics is what Eshelman terms the "double frame," which "is based on a lock or fit between an outer frame (the work construct itself) and an inner one (an ostensive scene or scenes of some kind)" (36-7). The ostensive sign is found within the inner frame: "[T]he inner frame or scene is grounded in an *originary scene*:

it reduces human behavior to what seems to be a very basic or elementary circle of unity with nature and/or with other people" (4, italics in the original). Thus, the aesthetic property of the inner frame is a sense of unity or closure that "arises in a reflexive, intuitive distance to the ostensive sign" (199). However, "the constructed ur-scene must be confirmed somewhere else on the higher, authorial level of the outer frame" (81), which " has an arbitrary or dogmatic quality and seems to be imposed from above" (4). This outer frame "creates a discrete inner space within a context and – in direct opposition to postmodern practice – forcibly cuts that space off from the surrounding context and from what may variously be described as conceptuality or discourse" (200). If the inner, originary (or imaginary) scene is forcibly locked into the outer frame, "it enables the protagonists and ourselves to experience such scenes as part of a greater, transcendent frame, and thus as *ethical*, *beautiful*, *or sublime*" (81, italics in the original). This outer frame, Eshelman proposes, "is not impermeable or inviolable," and "cannot and should not be exempted from ideological and metaphysical critiques" (86). He points out the cause of confusion on the part of postmodernist critics: "When postmodernists misinterpret performatist works it is almost always because they think that there is only one kind of legitimate frame: the intermediate one," which "corresponds, in effect, to the Derridean notion of the parergon: it is that which mediates between inside and out while being reducible to neither" (84). In fact, Eshelman believes, the existence of the outer frame allows the possibility of transcendence from the inner scene, and thus performatism "seeks to restore a space where transcendence, goodness and beauty can be experienced vicariously, by identifying with fictional ostensive scenes" (90).

The coerced unity resulting from the ostensive sign and its role in the double frame "allows for a new, positively conceived – but not unproblematic – type of subjectivity" (8).

The performatist subject "is constructed in such a way that it is dense or opaque relative to its milieu," which is "a reaction to the plight of the postmodern subject, who is constantly being pulled apart and misled by signs in the surrounding context" (8). Opacity to this surrounding context enables the return of subjectivity, "[b]ecause the simplest formal requirement of once more becoming a whole subject is tautological – to be a subject the subject must somehow set itself off from its context" (37). Of course, this new form of subjectivity is "ambivalent, since it achieves a closed unity at the expense of participation in a viable social environment of some kind" (8). Eshelman emphasizes the constructed nature of this subject: "[T]he subject's newly won opacity or denseness is constructed and doesn't represent a natural, pre-existing essence," and "doesn't ascribe it any particular idealized or essential features before the fact" (9). In fact, the opaque or dense subject can appear quite limited due to its lack of social interaction. Comparing the performatist subject to Erving Goffman's concept, which also operates inside frames, Eshelman describes the limitations of the opaque subject: "Unlike Goffman's facile and highly adaptive social actor, however, performatist heroes and heroines are, at least at the beginning of their development, locked into a tight 'fit' with a single, set frame" (92). Yet it is through its constructed opacity that the performatist subject can attain transcendence from this frame; a transcendence that is "not some sort of mystical escapism, but a logical reaction to the legacies of both modernism and postmodernism" (119).

Eshelman believes that this transcendence involves a turn to a "theist" aesthetics: "Because of its emphasis on transcending coercive frames rather than continually transgressing porous, constantly shifting boundaries (as is the case in postmodernism), performatism acquires a distinctly *theist* cast" (13, italics in the original). This theism manifests itself "in such a way that the reader or viewer at first has no choice but to opt for a single, compulsory solution to the problems raised within the work at hand" (2). An "all-

powerful, omniscient" creator "forces his or her own authoritative point of view upon us in

what is usually a circular or tautological way" (19), "using dogmatic, ritual, or some other

coercive means" (2). This "radically theist" approach contrasts sharply with the "radically

deist" postmodern approach, in which "the notion of a personal God is replaced by a

dynamic, constantly shifting relation between parts and a whole" (89). In postmodern art,

"the authorial position recedes in an endless *mise-en-abyme* of undecidable, catch-me-if-you-

can irony" (200). In contrast, in performatism, the theist author manifests itself in the outer

frame: "Inasmuch as the outer frame is forcibly imposed from without, it may be experienced

as the sublime, intimidating product of a higher, powerful will" (200). In narrative works,

"closed, monistically organized narrative frames" (90) are imposed, which "means that time

and space are framed in such a way that subjects have a real chance to orient themselves

within them and transcend them in some way" (38), while visual artists "use strategies that

dampen or defuse suspicion and create positive visual projections within the artificially

imposed, but internally free space of intuition" (219). Accessing the intuition rather than

reason is part of an "attempt to make viewers *believe* rather than convince them with

cognitive arguments" (37, italics in the original). The theist intervention of an author or

creator in the work forces this belief.

Eshelman demonstrates his theory in five areas: fiction, film, architecture, critical

theory, and art, citing an extensive array of international works, all of which appear during

the timeframe of his proposed epoch. In each of the five sections, he presents and examines a

set of typical manifestations of his model, including five plot types and nine architectural

components, attempting to maintain his semiotic model while addressing such radically

different forms as photography and philosophy. Although his identifications and descriptions

of potentially new aesthetic elements are quite convincing, it takes an extraordinary labor to

connect the vast array of cultural elements to his simple monist semiotic model. Attempting to boil down an entire cultural epoch to a single change in semiotics, one that he believes occurs cyclically and has occurred now because artists have simply grown tired of the old shtick, is a Herculean task. The theory would have been much stronger if he had not insisted on this one structure: ostensivity, double frame, opaque subject and theism. Each of these may indeed be components of a new epoch along with the numerous other ideas (such as transcendence, a return to beauty, etc.) he presents, but relying on them all being present either excludes a huge amount of contemporary culture, or forces the critic to do some uncomfortable contortions to make the theory fit.

I believe he also missed out on several opportunities to tie his new epoch to historical and political changes that would easily apply and strengthen his argument. Especially frustrating, for example, is his discussion of new architecture in Berlin. He acknowledges that the new Federal Chancellory "is most certainly one case where the fall of communism has had a direct aesthetic expression" (152), but he does not go for the obvious comparison between German reunification and his proposed return to semiotic monism. Again, at the end of the book he cites "the rapid, revolutionary switch to a market economy in Eastern European countries and the globalization process in general" (207) as a contributing factor, but later hedges his bets by asserting that "the motor of this progress is located in a basic, insoluble conflict between semiotic monism and semiotic dualism and not in the zeitgeist" (216-7). There is also virtually no mention of the Internet, whose widespread impact on global culture has barely been registered by most theorists. Eshelman does acknowledge the post-Cold War triumph of capitalism as "a universal, inescapable economic and cultural reality" (207), but doesn't address how this might have helped create the new epoch. He does, however, open the door to such a discussion by asking, "If global capitalism really is as

spiritually empty, ugly, arbitrary, and claustrophobic as the postmodern critique maintains, then it is fair to ask how it managed to unfold such a world-encompassing, universal dynamic in the first place" (212), but unfortunately, he doesn't follow up on this line of thought. Eshelman has shown boldness by relinquishing the postmodern crutch of most of his rivals and venturing out into the raw, naked contemporary culture to analyze what is really out there, but remains reticent when it comes to answering the key question: why now?

1.3.3 Digimodernism

Alan Kirby has put forth a paradigm about what follows postmodernism in his book, *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure our Culture* (2009). According to Kirby, the rise of digital technology, including the Internet, have put the era of postmodernity to rest and created a new epoch: "Postmodernist culture was rooted in all kinds of historical, social, economic, and political developments; it was the aesthetic expression of epochal shifts engulfing millions of people. It would take something wrenchingly huge to sweep this away; I believe digital technology, essentially, is that something" (35). Kirby identifies specific traits that characterize the "digimodernist" texts he proposes are the successors to postmodernism: "onwardness, haphazardness, evanescence, and anonymous, social and multiple authorship," in addition to "infantilism, earnestness...and apparent reality" (4-5). This is a wide range of characteristics, but I want to go through them quickly, as I believe they are interesting and useful observations about contemporary culture that at times resonate with my concept.

Starting with onwardness, Kirby writes, "The traditional text appears to almost everyone in its entirety, ended, materially, made. The digimodernist text, by contrast, is up for grabs,: it is rolling, and the reader is plunged in among it as something that is ongoing" (63).

His primary example is the blog, which is continually updated and added to; never finished. Although he identifies the diary, journal, or log as the predecessors of the blog, Kirby insists that the "primacy given by blogs to the latest entry marks a first break with their textual inheritance" (131). Rather than following the beginning to end narrative flow of a printed diary, "as the eye descends the screen of the blog it goes *back* in textual time" (131, italics in the original). This reversed temporality, to Kirby, is due to the text's unfinished nature. The blog is "a text under development, one currently being constructed, being built up, a text emerging, growing" (131), and the ability of readers to add comments means that the text is never complete. Social networking sites such as Facebook follow the same pattern. In addition, the open-ended nature of some video games, which provide huge worlds to explore and are continually updated with new content, provides another example of this digimodernist onwardness.

This unfinished, contingent onwardness leads to another of Kirby's characteristics: haphazardness. Since the text is not finished, "the future development of the text is undecided. What it will consist of down the line is as yet unknown" (63). Unlike a traditional text, whose form is determined and permanently fixed, the digimodernist text retains "the permanent possibility that it might go off in multiple directions: the infinite parallel potential of its future textual contents" (63). As an example, Kirby cites YouTube, which, in contrast to cinema or television, allows the user an unprecedented range of seemingly random experiences: "YouTube places cheek by jowl highly sophisticated work by career specialists and stuff by people who barely know how to switch on a camcorder" (141). This has led to an aesthetic that recreates the appearance of the haphazard: "YouTube's haphazardness means that it encompasses amateur *and* professional material,...students and other unpaid wannabes seek to make their videos look 'professional' in order to gain employment, the trained and

salaried rough up their work to make it look real, authentic, and sincere" (142, italics in the original). Films such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) or *Cloverfield* (2008) exemplify this aesthetic.

According to Kirby, "The digimodernist text does not endure. It is technically very hard to capture and archive; it has no interest as a reproducible item" (63). In other words, it is evanescent. Kirby's key example is the text message, "several billion of which are digitally created and sent every day, [and] is by some criteria the most important 'textual' mode or recorded communication medium of our time" (82). Kirby believes that the text message, which he describes as "the lowest form of recorded communication ever known" (81) and "a virtually illiterate jumble of garbled characters" (81), is "ephemeral and evanescent, even harder to hold on to than the e-mail" (81). As it is not permanently stored and often has no features identifying its author, "biographers who depend professionally on stable, enduring private messages written and received by their subject look on the SMS and despair" (83). This evanescence extends itself into other fields, including the reality TV show contest, such as *Big Brother* or *American Idol*, as such shows are made to be seen once only: the drama disappears once the result of the audience voting is known, and thus, the shows have little if any replay value. Similarly, although a video game can be played again and again, once finished, each session is forever lost. It is impossible to go back and repeat the same experience.

Anonymous and/or group authorship is yet another characteristic of these digimodernist texts. According to Kirby, "the figure of the disreputably lonely or mocked or dethroned author of postmodernism and post-structuralism is obsolete" (72) because digimodernism "abolishes the assumed singularity of authorship" (71), and thus "silently restores the authorial, and revalorizes it" (71). From Wikipedia to message boards, the

Internet is filled with texts that are composed by the same people who use them, who remain mostly anonymous. The course of a reality TV show may be determined by the audience, who call in and choose the winners, but these viewers remain unknown; unseen. This authorship is hierarchical, with various functions performed by different levels of the hierarchy, "from an originative level that sets parameters, invents terms, places markers, and proffers structural content, to later, lower levels that produce the text they are also consuming" (71).

Kirby remarks on the prevalence of children's entertainment in contemporary culture: "American popular cinema and, by extension, world popular cinema have become a subdomain of children's stories. Of the ninety movies appearing on the lists of the top ten grossing films worldwide every year from 1999 to 2007, forty-five, or exactly half, are children's fictions" (148). In addition to dominating world cinema, there has been a "new redefinition of popular music as songs for children" (151). In part, he blames economics; "it can be argued that society has been infantilized, particularly through consumerism that fetishizes spending and sees work as an irrelevant burden" (157). This infantilization has widespread results on the culture: "Infantilized adults produce children and teenagers mired forever in preschool behavior patterns: unable to listen or concentrate, seeking constant entertainment, unwilling to do chores, verbally incontinent and incoherent, acting and dressing in public as at home" (285-6). This vicious circle drives the market, leading to more infantilized culture: "[C]onsumerism privileges too the response of the targeted market; and so an infantilized 'popular' culture at best elides, at worst scorns all cultural knowledge and training (which presuppose maturity)" (283). However, he suggests that there may be "another way of seeing all these traits not in terms of regression from sophistication (not as 'credulity,' or 'infantilism,' etc.), but in terms of breakup and re-formation. It can be argued

that a new, though in many ways old, form of narrative is percolating through our culture"

(182). This new form of narrative represents "an evolution in narrative after postmodernism,

away from the realist/antirealist impasse toward a mythopoeic form more reminiscent of

medieval storytelling" (180).

Kirby also claims that digimodernism is partly characterized by a new kind of realism

that he calls the "apparently real." He describes three components of the apparently real:

"There are three concomitant observations that can be made about the textual functions of the

apparently real: its deployment of a (pseudo)scientific discourse; its engulfing of the self

('addictiveness'); and its immersion in the present" (172). Unlike realism, the apparently real

must only present itself as real to be accepted, although the audience remains aware of its

actual unreality: "The apparently real is, then, a negotiation between viewer and screen: we

know its not *totally* genuine, but if it utterly seems to be, then we will take it as such" (165,

italics in the original). Kirby believes that "[p]ostmodernist culture was rooted in all kinds of

historical, social, economic, and political developments" (35), but the "apparently real and

digimodernism are by contrast lost in the here and now, swamped in the textual present; they

know nothing of the cultural past and have no historical sense" (175). Here, the primary

example would be the reality TV show, which is partly scripted, staged, and edited, yet

presented as real. Being rooted, as it is, in the non-historical present, the apparently real lacks

self-reflectivity: "The apparently real comes without self-consciousness, without irony or

self-interrogation, and without signalling itself to the reader or viewer. Consequently, for

anyone used to the refinement of postmodernism, the apparently real may seem intolerably

'stupid'" (164). The MTV show *Jackass* and its subsequent film version would be prime

examples

Finally, Kirby also remarks on the prevalence of autism in contemporary culture,

insisting that "[w]e live in the age of autism." (264). The ubiquity of autism is actually a component of digimodernism, as Kirby believes that "autism is integral to digimodernism, and plays much the same role within it as the neurosis did for modernism and schizophrenia for postmodernism" (268). The autistic subject as portrayed in films such as *Rain Man* (1988) and in books such as Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* (2003), could, in theory, be attributed to "the emergence of new technologies, especially computers, the Internet, and videogames, which enable individuals to engage with 'worlds' or reality-systems without socially interacting" and leads to "a diminished capacity to relate to or to 'read' other people" (268). This, in addition to "the growing and widespread tendency to portray the sociopathic as normative in popular TV drama, cinema, and music," a trend that "valorize[s] acting according to personal impulses with no reference to other people, the collectivity, social rules or conventions" (268), would be the easy explanation, according to Kirby. However, Kirby wants a more complex theory, and he invents one that has nine different cultural components. I'll list them briefly here. First, he cites a "demographic shift toward overpopulation" and "over-urbanization" that leads to "the disappearance of wilderness and the near-impossibility of solitude," and causes a "need for solitude, silence, freedom from interference" (269). Second, he lists "the economic tendency toward ever-greater flexibility, multitasking, ad hoc arrangements, job insecurity, rapid staff turnover" leading to an "insistence on sameness, on repetition of past actions, on rigidity" (269). Third, there is "a social shift toward an ever-greater valorization of social skills, of the ability to chat and come across, to accrue popularity and self-represent" which brings a backlash of desire for "the authentic, the concrete, depth-knowledge versus superficiality" (269). Fourth, "an increased suspicion of the characteristic traits of masculinity," so that the "culture sets more store by the 'feminine' quality of empathy than by the 'masculine' value of 'systemization'"

(270), meaning that "'maleness,' at root, is identical with mental impairment" (270). Fifth, there has appeared "a cultural modishness of a 'Latin' emotional tone (forever hugging, kissing, frequent touching, emoting, loud voices)" and this means that autism is associated with "an unfashionable 'English' (or Victorian) remoteness" (270). Sixth, there is a perception of an "emerging generational crisis by which young people are felt by adults to be unreachable" (270), with an illogical "media emphasis on autism as a child's disease" (270). Seventh, the collapse of Marxism has caused difficulty "conceptualizing alienation from a pervasively consumerist society," so that "autism can be broadly identified as behavioral alienation in a consumer-capitalist hegemony" (270). Eighth, "the emerging moral consensus, deriving from a degraded postmodernism or multiculturalism, by which everyone is right from their side and all views must be respected" is opposed by autism's focus on "truth, objectivity, and reason, postmodernism's devils" (271). Finally, the need for autism is driven by a "psuedophilosophical or antiscientific drift toward the denigration of knowledge and cleverness" that calls for "autism's contrasting embrace of exhaustive knowledge, its love and recall of facts, its rich and grammatically correct use of language, its insistence on rationality, truth, and rigor" (271).

As we see, Kirby gives us an extensive overview of new cultural characteristics that he believes are driven by digital technology. And yet, toward the end of his book, he suddenly and briefly shifts focus from technology to the "most popular and destructive Western grand narrative" (278): consumerism. For Kirby, consumerism is "a conception of life, a system of values, a worldview, a framework for the understanding, meaning, and purpose of existence stretching far beyond mere buying"(278), which has become "the sole or overriding model for all human life" and "a fanaticism," meaning that "[p]ostmodernism's commitment to many valid viewpoints is obsolete, overpowered by an all-swamping single creed" (278).

Consumerism is "megalomaniacal" (278), transforming everything from education to families, it "reinvents religion (as New Age bricolage) and sport (as club fanaticism)" (279), it "destroys political action" (280), and "eats up the planet and excretes back into it" (280). For Kirby, the goal is "to isolate consumerism primarily as a mode of thought, a moral code, an ethos, a buried framework of understanding; to challenge it in its grand-narrative imperialism, its demented ambitions to direct all; to roll it back, to push it back. We need a new mental master" (280).

The question for us is, are the forces shaping this new era connected simply to new technologies, as Kirby insists at the beginning of his book, or is there another force driving these changes that rises above the technologies? I believe Kirby has correctly identified a number of new forms of culture or communication, only to rely too heavily on technological determinism as the impetus. He himself can't decide whether it is technology leading the charge or consumerism. His nine-point analysis of the autistic subject is a great example of this lack of clarity as he swerves from the obvious factors, such as new technology, to everything from disapproval of masculinity to Marxist alienation to too much hugging and touching. To paraphrase football legend John Madden, when you have a whole lot of something, you usually have a whole lot of nothing. In other words, Kirby can see the cultural changes, but he is unclear about what is driving them. I think he glimpsed the horizon during his short detour into consumerism, but it was too late to go back and rename the book *Consumodernism*. He also finds no way to connect the end of the Cold War to the rise and spread of new technology, leaving a major worldwide historical shift unaccounted for. However, Kirby does at least separate himself from postmodern orthodoxy and venture forth into contemporary culture to bring back new ideas. He has clearly accomplished something valuable here.

Another flaw in his analysis has to do with the scarcity of culturally important texts. Kirby writes: "It is almost possible to argue that digimodernist literature does not exist. Where are the digimodernist novels, poems, and plays? One way of answering this would be to say that literature does not have the relationship to digimodernism which it had to postmodernism or modernism" (254), and then goes so far as to ask, "Is digimodernism finally another name for the death of the text?" (260). Of course, the fact that he asks this question *in a book* demonstrates that, indeed, the text may still be relevant. Simply writing "it would be true to argue that digimodern literature is yet to come" (254), and then ignoring contemporary fiction means his theory is primarily applicable only to the new cultural forms he has identified. One has to pose the question, is the text message a culturally important medium? Or is it comparable to the telegram, the post card, the fax, the e-mail – in other words, is it merely a quotidian mode of communication and not a new form of "culture"? I do believe that video games are the cutting edge art form of the contemporary era, and I would have loved to have seen an in-depth analysis of a game. Unfortunately, Kirby offers us few readings of any games, and only addresses the use of CGI animation in film.

1.4 The Importance of Ethics

When comparing and contrasting the different concepts outlined in these theories, we see a huge disparity in vision, from an extension of postmodern relationality with an other to technological determinism to a neo-romantic dedication to an unattainable future to a (re)turn to semiotic monism. There is no widespread agreement on exactly what follows postmodernism. However, certain commonalities do appear. For one, the acknowledgment of a global, consumer-oriented neoliberal capitalism is prevalent. Some are fearful of it, while others are more sanguine. Subject-formation and/or construction seems to be a component of

many of these models, whether the subject is formed by contact with an other or perhaps an autistic or dense subject. Another commonality seems to be the re-conception of the world as one: a cosmology or ecology, a monism, a network or archipelago, a global market – the fashioning of the many into one seems to be a common feature of these concepts. However, the most consistent point of agreement is ethics.

For example, Moraru's model is primarily focused on ethical concerns: "cosmodernism is best understood as an ethical rather than 'technical' project" (Moraru 316). His model is not just a description, it is also "an *ethical imperative* pointing to the present as much as to the future" (5, italics in the original) that calls for "an 'ecological' balance understood as co-presence, co-implication, and co-responsibility of self and his or her 'cultural other,' in short, as ethical relatedness" (50). Vermeulen and Van de Akker's model, metamodernism, proposes that "new generations of artists increasingly abandon the aesthetic precepts of deconstruction, parataxis, and pastiche in favor of *aesth-ethical* notions of reconstruction, myth, and metaxis" (Notes 2). Here, ethics is combined with an aesthetics premised on the belief that "humankind, a people, are not really going toward a natural but unknown goal, but they pretend they do so that they progress morally as well as politically" (5). Like Vermeulen and Van de Akker, Eshelman is concerned with the interaction of aesthetics and ethics: "Performatism, you could say, seeks to restore a space where transcendence, goodness and beauty can be experienced vicariously" (Eshelman 90). His double-frame model "enables the protagonists and ourselves to experience such scenes as part of a greater, transcendent frame, and thus as *ethical, beautiful, or sublime*" (81, italics in the original), and so, he believes, "[w]orlds constructed in this way become ethical by definition" (90). Nealon's model draws extensively from Adorno's ethics, which he describes as "a kind of 'musical ethics' of speed and slowness – an ethics that *does something*, produces effects,

over against the transcendental ethics of resentment, judgment, and condemnation" (Nealon 120). This ethics is different from postmodernism, offering instead "an ethics that doesn't dictate, but rather works through and modulates extremes in a dialectical way" (123). In this approach, the postmodern obsession with meaning and its failure is replaced with an ethical question: "[T]he philosophical question 'What does it mean?' will always be subordinated to the ethical question 'What does it do?'" (123). Lipovetsky believes that in hypermodernity the postmodern focus on the present is being altered by a new ethics: "While the axis of the present is still dominant, it is not absolute: the culture of prevention and the 'ethics of the future' have led to a renewed importance being given to the imperatives of a more or less distant future" (Lipovetsky 44). This ethics of the future has led to a change in behavior patterns: "[H]edonistic ideals have been supplanted by the ideology of health and longevity. In the name of these, individuals are to a massive degree renouncing immediate satisfactions, improving and reorienting their daily behavior" (47). Even Bourriaud, who doesn't discuss ethics specifically, believes that altermodernism "is also taking shape under the urgent pressure to answer very basic questions" (Bourriaud 13). One of the main questions is "how do we live in this world that we are told is becoming 'global', but which seems to be buttressed on particular interests or tensed behind the barricades of fundamentalism – when not upholding icons of mass culture as role models?" (13). The question "how do we live" is the central concern of ethics, and thus, altermodernism, too, seeks to examine ethical concerns.

In fact, the only one of the models we examined that doesn't address the importance and prevalence of ethics in contemporary culture is Alan Kirby's digimodernism. I would like to suggest that the incorporation of such a discussion would actually improve on his work. For example, the development of new technology hardly explains the popularity of children's

stories and what he describes as "an evolution in narrative after postmodernism, away from the realist/antirealist impasse toward a mythopoeic form more reminiscent of medieval storytelling" (Kirby 180). Why would digital technology cause this? Couldn't digital technology be used to create postmodern stories just as well as this "new" form of narrative? The fact is, what children's stories and medieval storytelling have in common is a clear, pedagogical approach to morals. Their very purpose is to impart ethical values. The popularity of such forms in contemporary culture would be better explained by the desire for ethical instruction than by new technology. A closer look at these fairy-tale like epic narratives would reveal clear, incredibly simplistic differentiations between good and evil, such as the light and dark sides of "the force" in the *Star Wars* universe, or the hobbits and orcs of the *Lord of the Rings* films. The contemporary era is longing for ethical clarity, and these youth-oriented, mythical narratives provide it.

The question is, why are ethics such an important part of these periodization models, and why is the need for ethical structures so prevalent in contemporary culture? In the following chapters I will address this question and I hope to provide a more satisfying answer.

2 Postmodern Ethics and the Ethical Dominant

2.1 Introduction

The main thesis of my dissertation is that the lack of ethical clarity and structure during postmodernity has led to a renewed interest in building and exploring ethical systems in the era after postmodernity. In my first chapter, I explored seven different models of what comes after postmodernism and demonstrated that despite an incredibly diverse array of possible features, nearly all of them contained a focus on ethics, and even the one model that didn't explicitly propose such a focus was made stronger by adding it. None of the models was inconsistent with my thesis. In this chapter, I will examine postmodern ethics, drawing from its critics to explore why it has ethical weaknesses. I will profile the "ethical turn" that occurs in response to such criticisms, leading to an ethics of being for the other. Then I will present some criticism of this reconfigured version of postmodern ethics to show that something different is needed. After this, I will consider the possibility of extending Brian McHale's theory that postmodernism manifests an ontological dominant by presenting a logical argument for an ethical dominant.

2.2 Postmodern Ethics and its Discontents

There are two visions of postmodern ethics that I will focus on here in order to provide a useful backdrop for presenting my three contemporary ethical paradigms, and performing my critical readings of contemporary fiction. The first vision is that postmodernism doesn't have an ethics, because ethics is not compatible with the postmodern approach. Zygmunt Bauman summarizes the views of critics offering this perspective: "The postmodern mind seems to condemn everything, propose nothing. Demolition is the only job the postmodern mind seems

to be good at. Destruction is the only construction it recognizes. Demolition of coercive

restraints and mental blocks is for it the ultimate purpose and the end of emancipatory effort"

(*Intimations* ix). As the author of *Postmodern Ethics* (1993), Bauman doesn't share this view,

as we will see shortly, but he describes it very succinctly:

> What has come to be associated with the notion of the postmodern approach to
>
> morality is all too often the celebration of the 'demise of the ethical,' of the
>
> substitution of aesthetics for ethics, and of the 'ultimate emancipation' that follows.
>
> Ethics is denigrated or derided as one of the typically modern restraints now broken
>
> and destined for the dustbin of history; fetters once deemed necessary, now clearly
>
> superfluous, another illusion that postmodern men and women can well do without.
>
> (*Ethics* 2)

According to this vision, postmodernity has left us without any ethical codes, floating in a sea

of relativity, while real world ethical concerns go unmet. We are thus forced to fashion our

own codes, without any hope of external affirmation: "In a cacophony of moral voices, none

of which is likely to silence the others, the individuals are thrown back on their own

subjectivity as the ultimate ethical authority. At the same time, however, they are repeatedly

told about the irreparable relativism of any moral code" (*Intimations* xxii). This has led us to

a position of hopeless stasis, paralyzing the postmodern subject in indecision and constant

anxiety. How do we live? What is the right thing to do? "The ethical paradox of the

postmodern condition is that it restores to agents the fullness of moral choice and

responsibility while simultaneously depriving them of the universal guidance that modern

self-confidence once promised" (xxii), Bauman writes. In the midst of this ethical crisis,

postmodern theory offers only rhetorical solutions that do not help us with any real-world

problems. As Christopher Norris puts it, "[W]e have reached a point where theory has

effectively turned against itself, generating a form of extreme epistemological skepticism which reduces everything – philosophy, politics, criticism, and 'theory' alike – to a dead level of suasive or rhetorical effect where consensus-values are the last (indeed the only) court of appeal" (Norris 4). This criticism of the focus on the rhetorical was echoed by postcolonialists such as Edward Said, who argued that postmodernism had abdicated any responsibility for events in the real world:

> In having given up the world entirely for the aporias and unthinkable paradoxes of a text, contemporary criticism has retreated from its constituency, the citizens of modern society, who have been left to the hands of 'free' market forces, multinational corporations, the manipulations of consumer appetites. A precious jargon has grown up, and its formidable complexities obscure the social realities....(Said 4)

Although supposedly on a mission of emancipation, by focusing on linguistics and textual questions almost exclusively, postmodern theory was ignoring real world oppression and the opportunity for real attempts to deliver emancipation to the marginalized, according to such critics. The idea that postmodernism was avoiding ethical engagement was further exacerbated by the revelation that the celebrated deconstructionist, Paul de Man, had collaborated with the Nazis during World War II, and then lied extensively about his past, including his academic qualifications: "De Man's *Wartime Journalism* indeed unleashed a flood of controversy within and outside the academy over whether deconstruction was morally evasive or iniquitous. It intensified criticism of the Derridean postulate of 'nothing outside the text' (or textuality) as ethically myopic" (Buell 9).

Around the same time, some voices began to question the entire postmodern project. Jürgen Habermas, for example, suggested that there was nothing 'post' about postmodernism, that it was actually just a form of conservatism whose criticisms of modernity were echoes of

the conservative complaints that arose back when modernity first arrived: "Is modernity as *passé* as the postmodernists argue? Or is the widely trumpeted arrival of postmodernity itself 'phony'? Is 'postmodern' a slogan which unobtrusively inherits the affective attitudes which cultural modernity has provoked in reaction to itself since the middle of the nineteenth century?" (Habermas 39). Notice the use of the word "phony." Together with the complaint about "jargon" we read earlier, the accusation began to arise that all of this postmodern theory was just a bunch of obscurantist nonsense. In fact, this was the suspicion of physicist Alan Sokal, who famously sent a fake article to academic journal *Social Text* that was filled with jargon and scientific inside jokes making fun of postmodern theory:

> So, to test the prevailing intellectual standards, I decided to try a modest (though admittedly uncontrolled) experiment: Would a leading North American journal of cultural studies – whose editorial collective includes such luminaries as Fredric Jameson and Andrew Ross – publish an article liberally salted with nonsense if (a) it sounded good and (b) it flattered the editors' ideological preconceptions? (Sokal)

The article was indeed published, and Sokal revealed his hoax afterwards. He followed this stunt up with a book he named *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (1998) that accused a number of prominent theorists of attempting to appropriate the authority of science by using phony mathematical and scientific language and symbols. Needless to say, the attacks provoked considerable controversy.

It may very well have been the sustained and increasing criticism that led many prominent postmodern figures such as Derrida and Foucault to swerve in the direction of ethics toward the end of their careers. Or perhaps they simply saw the same flaws that others were remarking on. Either way, a concept of ethics began to emerge that was compatible with postmodern theory. Drawn from the work of Emmanuel Lévinas, its takes the Heideggerian

mitsein one step further, replacing the ethical concept of being with the other with the idea of being *for* the other. According to Bauman, "In a most dramatic reversal of the principles of modern ethics, Lévinas accords the Other that priority which was once unquestionably assigned to the self" (85). That priority exists because, for Lévinas, ethics must be the first philosophy, the foundation on which even metaphysics or ontology must be founded: "Preexisting the disclosure of being in general taken as basis of knowledge and as meaning of being is the relation with the existent that expresses himself; preexisting the plane of ontology is the ethical plane" (Lévinas 201). The self is only fully realized when it comes face to face with an other: "Awakening to being for the Other is the awakening of the self, which is the *birth* of the self" (*Ethics* 77, italics in the original). The other's need demands a response, and our obligation is to help, without expecting any reward: "I am for the Other whether the Other is for me or not; his being for me is, so to speak, his problem" (50). Only then can we begin to establish a philosophy. Ethics does not come from outside, but from inside, from an internal response to the need of the other: "Given the ambiguous impact of the societal efforts at ethical legislation, one must assume that moral responsibility – being *for* the Other before one can be with the Other – is the first reality of the self, a starting point rather than a product of society" (13, italics in the original). Because it precedes all philosophy, it cannot be codified, transmitted or learned. Bauman acknowledges the problematic nature of this approach:

> To be frank, this is not the kind of foundation ethical philosophers dreamt of and go on dreaming about. It leaves quite a lot to be desired, and this is perhaps why the seekers for the building site of Law look the other way. No harmonious ethics can be erected on this site – only the straggly shoots of the never ending, never resolved moral anxiety will on this soil grow profusely. (80)

Being for the other does have the advantage that it dovetails with postmodernism's supposed

interest in the marginalized, in emancipation from oppressive power structures, and

transgression of restrictive boundaries. Postmodernists can do these things to help the other.

These concepts began to gain prominence just as postmodernism was staggering under the

weight of ethical criticism, and gave the movement new life in what has been called "the

ethical turn." If this all sounds familiar, it's because these ideas are the same ideas explored in

Christian Moraru's cosmodernism, which we examined in Chapter One.

Being for the other might resolve some theoretical problems for postmodern theorists

wanting to preserve their status and accomplishments, but it is quite difficult to actually *do*.

Lawrence Buell summarizes two major arguments against such an ethics, one from the left

and one from the right. From the left: "How can moral precepts (e.g., honor the claim of the

other) form the basis of social collectives and ensure a reformed society or polity? And even

if they can, is there not even something oppressively homogenizing, if not totalizing, about

Lévinas's 'other'?" (16). The other is always presumed to be inferior, in need of our help, his

or her individual characteristics erased by our desire to be ethical – we rush in to help, even if

no help is truly needed. The argument from the right centers around reciprocity: "How ethical

is the ethos of allowing oneself to be held hostage, without mutuality of personal obligation

or a social contract at the foundation of it?" (16). Indeed, in this ethics of being for the other,

what's in it for me?

Jacques Rancière goes even further with his skepticism in his essay, "The Ethical Turn

of Aesthetics and Politics" (2015), to suggest that this ethics of being for the other is nothing

more than a facade behind which hides good old-fashioned imperialism. In criticizing the

U.S. invasion of Iraq, he blames the ethical turn for providing justification for the military

action: "Ethics has established its reign here, too, initially in the form of the humanitarian,

and then in the form of infinite justice against the axis of evil" (7). The extension of human

rights to the oppressed in Afghanistan and Iraq was cited as justification to support the

military intervention:

> However, this absolute right of those without rights could be exercised only by an
>
> other. It is this transfer that was first called humanitarian right and humanitarian war.
>
> In a second step, the humanitarian war against the oppressor of human rights became
>
> the infinite justice exercised against that invisible and omnipresent enemy who came
>
> to threaten the defender of the absolute right of victims on its own territory. (8)

The need of the other compels us to take action, to intervene and impose those rights that we

consider absolute, but this has metastasized into something far worse: "The humanitarian war

becomes an endless war against terror: a war that is not one, but a mechanism of infinite

protection" (8).

Perhaps the harshest critic of the ethical turn is Alain Badiou, whose book *Ethics: An

Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2001) launches a full frontal assault against it. First of

all, he objects to the idea that the other needs our intervention: "We have seen that ethics

subordinates the identification of this subject to the universal recognition of the evil that is

done to him. Ethics thus defines man *as a victim*" (11, italics in the original). In fact, he

objects to the very idea that the other is, in some way, *other* in the first place: "[T]he other

always resembles me too much for the hypothesis of an originary exposure to his alterity to

be *necessarily* true" (22, italics in the original). He, too, sees colonialism lurking behind this

concept of the other:

> The objective (or historical) foundation of contemporary ethics is culturalism, in truth
>
> a tourist's fascination for the diversity of morals, customs and beliefs. And in
>
> particular, for the irreducible medley of imaginary formations (religions, sexual

> representations, incarnations of authority...). Yes, the essential 'objective' basis of
>
> ethics rests on a vulgar sociology directly inherited from the astonishment of the
>
> colonial encounter with savages. (26)

Being for the other requires an other who is subordinate, who is beneath us, whom we can

help through intervention, but awarding this status to the other implies a lack of respect:

"Every intervention in the name of civilization *requires* an initial contempt for the situation as

a whole, including its victims" (13, italics in the original), and this serves only to maintain

"the insistent argument according to which the misery of the Third World is the result of its

own incompetence, its own inanity – in short, of its *subhumanity*" (13, italics in the original).

In fact, instead of being a postmodern recognition of the marginalized, the ethics of being for

the other is merely racism disguised by a veneer of goodness:

> Who can fail to see that in our humanitarian expeditions, interventions, embarkations
>
> of charitable *legionnaires*, the Subject presumed to be universal is split? On the side
>
> of the victims, the haggard animal exposed on television screens. On the side of the
>
> benefactors, conscience and the imperative to intervene. Who cannot see that this
>
> ethics which rests on the misery of the world hides, behind its victim-Man, the good-
>
> Man, the white-Man? (13)

Badiou also points out one of the greatest weaknesses of the contemporary attempt to

politically realize being for the other, which is that the other might very well not be someone

we like or agree with, indeed, the other might very well be someone fighting for exactly that

which we oppose:

> Our suspicions are first aroused when we see that the self-declared apostles of ethics
>
> and of the 'right to difference' are clearly *horrified by any vigorously sustained*
>
> *difference*. For them, African customs are barbaric, Muslims are dreadful, the Chinese

are totalitarian, and so on. As a matter of fact, this celebrated 'other' is acceptable only

if he is a *good* other – which is to say what, exactly, if not *the same as us*? Respect for

differences, of course! But on condition that the different be parliamentary-

democratic, pro free-market economics, in favor of freedom of opinion, feminism, the

environment.... (24, italics in the original)

Tolerance for cultural differences can only go so far or otherwise we would have to tolerate

the intolerant as well: "[T]here can be no respect for those whose difference consists

precisely in not respecting differences" (24). Must women dedicate themselves to

misogynists, or homosexuals to the homophobic? Badiou insists that a postmodern ethics of

being for the other proceeds in the wrong direction, by starting not with the good and how to

attain it, but by focusing on the evil – the oppression or problematic conditions we wish to

free the other from. Without this evil, there can be no good: "[I]f the ethical 'consensus' is

founded on the recognition of Evil, it follows that every effort to unite people around a

positive idea of the Good, let alone to identify Man with projects of this kind, becomes in fact

the real source of evil itself" (14).

It is clear from this litany of criticisms that postmodern ethics, whether we want to

start with our first model, the relativist, non-ethical approach, or whether we want to follow

the ethical turn and embrace being for the other, are problematic, fraught with contradictions

and absurdities that make them difficult to live by. The ethical turn acknowledges the need for

ethics, but postmodern theory is unable to provide it. Being for the other is a concept that

crumbles apart as soon as it is examined closely. It is my contention that the attempt to find

other approaches to ethics has risen to prominence in the era after postmodernity as a direct

result of these weaknesses.

2.3 An Ethical Dominant?

One of the most popular and controversial definitions of postmodernism comes from Brian McHale, who argues that postmodern writing exhibits an ontological dominant. He contrasts this with modernism's epistemological dominant. According to McHale, modernist writing focuses on "such epistemological themes as the accessibility and circulation of knowledge, the different structuring imposed on the 'same' knowledge by different minds, and the problem of 'unknowability' or the limits of knowledge" (McHale 59). We see this reflected in the use of certain modernist techniques, such as "the multiplication and juxtaposition of perspectives, the focalization of all the evidence through a single 'center of consciousness'...virtuoso variants on interior monologue," and a structure of "impeded form" that employs "dislocated chronology, withheld or indirectly-presented information," and "difficult mindstyles" (59). These techniques are meant to bring into question the "accessibility, reliability, and limitation of knowledge" (59), McHale argues. In modernist writing, we often see a focus on subjectivity, consciousness, and individual constructions of truth.

In contrast, postmodernist writing exhibits a concern with ontological questions. For McHale, this is a logical progression, as "[i]ntractable epistemological uncertainty...becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability" (60). If truth is indeterminate or a product of subjectivity, then there can be no certain reality, but rather many different realities, many different worlds. McHale writes, "Postmodernist writing is designed to raise such questions as: what is a world? What kinds of worlds are there, and how are they constituted, and how do they differ? What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when the boundaries between worlds are violated?" (60). Thus, postmodern writing often exhibits stories with multiple possible endings, characters who cross ontological

boundaries, such as ghosts or characters taken from other fictional or mythological worlds; or even interactions between the characters and the "author." We also see mixtures of history and fiction, magic or hallucinatory worlds, and fictions that attempt to tell "the other side of the story," whether from a postcolonial perspective or as a representation of a marginalized identity group.

Although McHale acknowledges that the definition is "strategic" (55), designed to produce "new insights, new connections, coherence of a different degree or kind" (55), I find it to be a quite useful tool in distinguishing between the two eras as long as one keeps in mind that it is not a dogmatic truth. In fact, there probably can be no authoritative definition of a phenomenon as complex and diverse as postmodernism. In addition, McHale is narrowly focused on written fiction, and it remains to be seen how this could be applied to postmodern architecture, for example, where "difficult mindstyles" and "the limitation of knowledge" play perhaps less of a role. Nevertheless, as the idea follows a logical progression from modern to postmodern, it makes the explanation convenient and productive. At this point, I would like to pose the question of what would logically follow this progression from epistemological to ontological. If postmodernism has truly ended, we would need a new "dominant" to replace the ontological. If we followed the lead of those proposing a simple return to modernism, the logical choice would be a return to an epistemological dominant, but we would be lacking a logical description of why this has occurred. How does a questioning of ontology resulting from a questioning of epistemology lead back to questioning epistemology again?

I would instead like to propose instead an ethical dominant as the ideal candidate to succeed the ontological. During modernity, subjects questioned the veracity of received truths and began developing methods for creating more reliable and verifiable truths, such as the

scientific method. Eventually, they began to encounter the extreme limitations of the human mind, and the fact that much of our so-called reality is purely constructed from unconfirmed and unverifiable ideas. The realization that our tiny minds never know the full truth and cannot contain nor process even small doses of the infinite scope of the material world led to doubts about what had been previously perceived as reality. Other potential realities were identified or constructed that offered alternatives to the existing ones. This is confusing, leading to uncertainty, anxiety, and instability.

Decisions are difficult to make if we know that the constructed reality that the decision is embedded in may, in fact, be false. Yet, decisions must constantly be made, often with limited knowledge and experience of the circumstances surrounding the decision. The solution to this problem would be to develop a method to determine which of the potential realities to choose. In other words, which one is *better*? In order to even begin answering this question, we would need to have some kind of method of evaluating the different potential realities and sorting through their benefits and drawbacks. In other words, we would need a system of ethics. By implementing a system of ethics that exists independently of the situation being evaluated, a decision can be arrived at quickly, and if it later turns out to be a bad choice, the subject can at least have the solace of knowing that he or she acted in consistency with the principles of the ethical system. An ethical system provides an answer as to which reality construct to apply, and eases the anxiety and uncertainty of the postmodern approach. For these reasons, I believe the ontological dominant of postmodernity would logically be followed by an ethical one, if we follow McHale's model.

I offer this possibility, like McHale, not as some kind of absolute truth, but rather as a way of preserving and extending a useful tool. If we choose to see the development of cultures in terms of a cultural dominant, we will need to identify one for the contemporary

era as well. As far as I know, no one else has attempted to do this yet. My proposal is preliminary, but it offers a coherent and practical explanation for some cultural developments that have occurred over the last few decades. It can serve as a quick litmus test to help us sort out which works are still postmodern, and which ones are not. However, I am not willing to go so far as to say with certainty that the era after postmodernism is characterized by an ethical *dominant*. The concept could be useful, but ultimately I cannot accept an explanation that sums up an entire historical period with one simple idea.

2.4 Conclusion

If, ultimately, I am not willing to pronounce that the contemporary era is one characterized by an ethical dominant, I am at least willing to insist that the increased need for ethical certainty, structures, or systems is one component of this era. The analysis of the different periodization attempts in my first chapter has demonstrated this to us. Furthermore, the exploration of postmodern ethics and its critics above has made it clear that there is something lacking in the postmodern approach to ethics. Putting these two pieces together, it is reasonable to conclude that the lack of ethical certainty in postmodernism is the reason for the resurgence in ethical concerns. In the following chapter, I will present a periodization model that attempts to demonstrate this more conclusively by examining political, economic, and cultural changes in the era after postmodernity, and examining three specific ethical paradigms that I have discovered in contemporary American fiction.

3 The Period After Postmodernism

3.1 A New World Order

3.1.1 The End of Postmodernity

I propose that the end of the Cold War brought about the end of the postmodern era, and that we have been living in a different political, socioeconomic, and cultural era since then. The exact nature of this era is still open to debate, as we saw in Chapter One, but I believe that the enormous political and cultural changes brought about by the end of the Cold War make a logical and almost obvious turning point for anyone concerned with periodization. The world was no longer torn between two competing economic models, as neoliberal capitalism became global, flooding across central and eastern Europe, and even transforming China. New markets, new resources, new labor pools became available, and capitalists eagerly charged forth to exploit them, triggering an unprecedented economic expansion and subsequent prosperity. The Marxist model was dead, and the end of history was famously declared. Consumerism flourished.

Politically, the reunification of Germany became the celebrated symbol for the international integration processes set in motion. The Maastricht Treaty, signed in 1992, created the European Union and the common currency, opening an avenue for the integration of former Eastern bloc states into the European community. Peace processes blossomed, bringing a political solution to the ongoing troubles in Northern Ireland and a short-lived agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. Apartheid fell in South Africa, and even entrenched adversaries such as North and South Korea and India and Pakistan engaged in talks. After the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia removed its troops from eastern Europe, while NATO began expanding. The world-wide impetus toward reunion and reconciliation brought international attention to civil war in the former Yugoslavia, which was eventually resolved

through one of an increasing number of military interventions. An African Union was established in 2001. The polarized model of the Cold War was dissolved by images of Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin laughing together in front of the world press, and embodied by Russian troops serving alongside NATO forces as peacekeepers in the Balkans.

A similar process unfolded in the economic sphere. Free trade agreements flourished, despite the opposition of labor and environmental advocates. South Pacific nations created the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) in 1992, the same year the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) was created. The Central American Integration System (SICA) arrived in 1993, and was followed by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) was expanded, creating the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995. These supra-national agreements and regulatory structures emphasized integration and cooperation, even at the cost of national interests, as US presidential candidate Ross Perot's quip about a "giant sucking sound" famously accused. These agreements ushered in and fostered neoliberal thinking – restrictive regulatory barriers fell, dragging social protections with them, and the primary concern was economic growth and expansion. "It's the economy, stupid," Bill Clinton's campaign mantra, typified this focus, and his administration's "triangulation" strategy best symbolized the Third Way thinking that came into vogue. Government efficiency became a major concern, and the welfare state, as a product of the now discredited Marxism, fell into disrepute.

These colossal world-wide changes make the best starting point for a new epoch, in my opinion. The postmodern mentality was rooted in the man-made disasters of World War II, and the subsequent enduring stasis of a world teetering on the brink of an apocalyptic third world war, a never-ending threat of mutually assured destruction that inevitably triggered feelings of hopelessness, insecurity, and absurdity. The postmodern paranoia about power

structures was clearly ignited by these precursors. Concern for the "other" was rooted in

horror at the atrocities of the Holocaust, and the similarities between the oppressed Jews and

other oppressed and marginalized groups. Postmodern play was the flip side of existentialism

– if life was meaningless and death inevitable, we did not have to take it all so seriously.

What difference did it make? The structures of civilization built up over thousands of years

could be dismantled and reconfigured and mocked, the rules could be transgressed, the

powerful dethroned and replaced by the powerless. In the end, it didn't matter, as we were

headed toward apocalypse anyway.

The end of the Cold War changed these foundational conditions. The world was

transforming, and it appeared to many to be for the better. Hope, long dormant and ridiculed,

reignited and burgeoned, as new utopian schemes were conjured forth. There arose, as Alan

Greenspan famously warned, an "irrational exuberance." The world was suddenly in flux, and

that meant that decisions once again had meaning and consequences. The postmodern

philosophical approach, entrenched in a hopeless stasis and focused on dismantling the

existing order, was ill-equipped to deal with the rapid changes, and the real need for ethical

guidance brought about by the reconfigurations that were taking place. Postmodernists had

learned how to deconstruct what had been built by others, but hadn't developed a method for

constructing a viable, functioning alternative. And so, neoliberal thinkers, who had already

begun implementing their vision during the Reagan and Thatcher years, recognized and

seized the opportunity.

As we saw earlier, there are, of course, other logically possible starting points for a

new era. For some, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 seem to be the beginning of

something new. While I agree that September 11 brought about changes in the American

political system (suspicion of government power receded in the face of a nebulous, external

enemy, for example), I argue that September 11 is just a culmination of events that started earlier. In fact, many seem to have forgotten that September 11 was actually the second attack on the World Trade Center; the first having occurred on February 26, 1993. This was followed by the bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, and the attack on the USS Cole in 2000. The invasion of Iraq that followed September 11 was also an echo of an earlier conflict, and the end game of the ongoing state of conflict with Iraq that began during Operation Desert Storm. Thus, the events of September 11, 2001 are actually the result of changes occurring since the end of the Cold War, not the initiator of those changes.

Another proposed starting point is the development of the Internet. While I am a firm believer that the Internet is a massive driver of change and perhaps the most important development in world culture since the Gutenberg press, I believe that the rise of the Internet is also due to the changes triggered by the end of the Cold War, and not the source. In fact, the technology for the Internet had existed since the 1960s, and was available to home consumers in the 1980s. The explosion of the Internet into the world-shaping force that it is today is due to the creation of the World Wide Web in 1989. As the name boldly declares, the World Wide Web was envisioned as a way to foster international communication, research, and trade. It is thus representative of the same forces of globalization that were already sweeping the planet. That it rose to prominence during this exact moment in history is no accident, as the Internet was seized on as the perfect vehicle for global capitalists to expand internationally.

Another starting point that has been proposed is the financial crisis of 2008. The argument is that global neoliberal capitalism has since been discredited and that movements such as Occupy Wall Street were symbolic of the rejection of these values. While I concur that opposition to finance capital was galvanized by the impact of the crisis, I believe that this

opposition preceded the crisis and could be detected previously, especially during protests of

G8 and WTO conferences (the so-called "battle in Seattle" in 1999, as one example).

Neoliberal capitalism rose to power after the Cold War, but it was not universally beloved by

any means. In fact, the financial crisis also had its predecessor in the bursting of the dot com

bubble at the end of the 90s; an event that has been overshadowed by September 11. The only

thing unique about the crisis of 2008 was its size. Although there have been some cultural

representations of the impact of the financial crisis, they don't seem to be radically different

from the cultural representations that came before, and thus I do not believe that the crisis

itself generated a substantial cultural shift.

Finally, some have suggested that postmodernism came to an end because artists

simply got tired of doing the same old thing, and theorists began to run out of new theories to

create readings with. This may indeed be true, but it explains nothing. The question is

immediately begged: why did they get tired of it? Why exactly at that moment? Why not ten

years earlier or ten years later? Why not continue with postmodernism as we had grown to

know and love it? I believe that the overwhelming changes in politics and economics

following the end of the Cold War must have impacted cultural and intellectual production as

well. Whether it be a stirring of hope ignited by reunification processes or discouragement at

the fall of Marxism, an exuberance at the prospect of growing prosperity and stability, or

dismay at the deconstruction of social protections; the changes must have triggered a

corresponding cultural response. Furthermore, artistic production and its relative success or

failure occur in a marketplace, and audience choices are guided by their own sense of the

zeitgeist. Postmodern works and theories have still appeared over the last twenty years, but

the market has demanded something else, and those willing to supply it have been favored.

For these reasons, I believe that the end of the Cold War is the best starting point for a

new period, if we choose to accept that postmodernity has actually ended. Of course, it could be argued that postmodernity hasn't ended and that these global economic, political, and cultural shifts are easily contained in the postmodern paradigm. However, the appearance of so many theories proposing that postmodernism has ended seems to argue that there is a need for a new theoretical construct.

3.1.2 A New Modernity

The period after postmodernity resembles the modern era in many ways, and this is why most of the concepts put forth by others actually contain the suffix "modernism" in their names, whether it be digimodernism, cosmodernism, metamodernism, hypermodernism, or altermodernism. For instance, there has been a similar drive on the part of capitalists to discover and conquer newly opened territories, a utopian thrust to the creation and implementation of Western-style democracies and/or capitalist economies, and a new faith in the power of technology to change our lives for the better. In fact, I contend that the era of digital technology resembles nothing so much as the industrial revolution, bringing quintessential new machines that must be universally adopted, new digital jobs to replace the now automated old ones of the mechanical era (just as agricultural jobs had previously been replaced by factories), and new communication channels to further speed up economic activity. These modern qualities present a stark contrast with a postmodern era characterized by suspicion of technology, deconstruction of utopian schemes, and fear of political power. The Internet has even created a new generation of visionary robber barons, whose fortunes are used to create new industries, technologies, and media; or even for charitable aims. These new icons are celebrated in a way that was reserved for (counter-) cultural heroes during the postmodern era, whose capitalist swashbucklers were portrayed as villainous exploiters,

barbarians at the gate, or simply pigs. Despite concerns about the exploitation of workers in China, today's corporate Internet heroes are accorded a level of respect not seen since the days of Andrew Carnegie and JP Morgan. Something has clearly changed.

Still, there is a notable difference in this new generation of capitalists that is vividly illustrated by the (now changed) Google slogan, "Don't be evil." Can anyone imagine Rockefeller, J.P. Morgan, or Jay Gould warning his employees against the ethical risks inherent in power? This is an extraordinary development, and even if it is mere propaganda, it still publicly recognized the possibility that the corporate drive for profit might clash with other ethical concerns. The titanic confidence of the modernist corporate utopians is tempered now by an awareness of the impact of a company's actions on the world. The global communication enabled by the Internet and the video and image technology it distributes shine a nearly instant spotlight on the kind of corporate malfeasance that once could only be unearthed by daring muckrakers. What has changed is the metanarrative about technological, economic, and social development that arose in the wake of Darwin's theory of evolution. We have lost the belief that everything automatically evolves into something better, that the forces of progress lie behind every new development. We have entered a new era of evaluation.

What this means is that the new modernism is less robust, less self-confident than the old variety. As Ulrich Beck and many others have commented, we live in an era of risk calculation. The hubris that once led the Soviet Union to experiment with dismantling the family unit by raising children in group homes or the forced sterilization driven by eugenics that was practiced in both Nazi Germany and the United States are mere examples of activities that were once considered progress that are today regarded as obviously problematic. Today, with the Internet at our fingertips, outrage can be instantly evoked,

expressed, and directed. Virtual protest changes the public narrative without the use of traditional media channels. The drivers of change must be careful to push a narrative that positions their activities on the right side of the ethical divide or face the wrath of the indignant public. This requires a keen sense of the prevailing attitudes and belief systems. In other words, the neoliberal forces of capitalism are being driven by the market, which is in turn being driven, at least in part, by the ethical considerations of consumers.

In the current age, marketing is key – in an era of global competition where every product can be easily duplicated or simulated, a product or service is only as valuable as its brand's reputation makes it. The monopolies that emerged from the first industrial revolution have now been replaced by marketopolies, in which the market voluntarily embraces one of the many possible competitors. In this environment, cornering the market by controlling a key natural resource or area of land is an impossibility – any competitor with capital and vision can enter into any market. This has been remarkably disruptive to some long-established industries, such as the music industry, newspapers, and book stores. The state-sanctioned taxi industry is now competing with Uber and Lyft, and hotels are being undermined by Couchsurfing and AirBnB. The consequences of Apple and Google entering the automobile market have yet to be seen, but one can predict the outcome if the traditional car companies do not react quickly. This instability of the market means today's companies must assertively manage their online reputations, assuring the public that they are not, as Google put it, "evil."

3.1.3 The Death of Privilege

The new technology of the digital era has been massively influential, as Alan Kirby has persuasively argued. I won't go over his arguments again here, but I would like to supplement

them with a few of my own observations. In my opinion, the Internet and the devices that make it ubiquitous have triggered changes that will eventually be as profound as the invention of the alphabet or the printing press. In addition to the massive disruption of the marketplace that I have already gone into, the Internet has become a vehicle for personal empowerment on an unprecedented scale. Never before have so many people had the means to make their individual voices heard. This has already led to political revolutions in the Middle East, as well as enabling radical religious groups to expand their influence. In online form, news articles are no longer the opinion-shapers they once were – instead, they are mere conversation starters that are critiqued and debated by thousands of commenters whose reactions become the real story. I won't go as far as Thomas Friedman and assert that the world is flat, because the wealthy and powerful can still leverage their assets to gain more influence. Nevertheless, the means of worldwide mass communication are now available to anyone with internet access. The transformation of telephones into multi-media computers means that not only can mere printed language be distributed by nearly anyone, but also images, video, and sound. Widely available, inexpensive, or open-source software makes the creation of media content easy and intuitive. Websites such as YouTube give absolute amateurs the chance to compete with established content creators on a nearly equal basis. The gatekeepers are becoming increasingly irrelevant.

Furthermore, the Internet has democratized knowledge in a way that resembles the development of the printing press. While Kirby and others fear the dumbing down of society (and perhaps justifiably so), the fact is that the world's knowledge is now available to everyone with online access. Books, music, images, theories, videos of university courses, and personal testimony from voices around the world mean individuals can seek to educate themselves to a degree that even the wonderful institution of the public library was never able

to never attain. Knowledge is no longer confined to the university campus, and restricted to those of a certain class who can afford to attend the right institutions. While the information online may be suspect or even wholly inaccurate, the truth is, even esteemed university professors and other authority-approved experts can sometimes be wrong. Having access to the information gives each individual an opportunity to assess the facts directly. What has happened to knowledge resembles to a certain degree the changes in European Christianity when the Bible became available to the public. No longer was a priest class needed to control the narrative and instruct the unwashed masses in religion. The masses were now free to assess the Word of God themselves. This was tremendously disconcerting to those who found themselves losing power, triggering a series a of wars and persecutions. Already, oppressive regimes, sensing the threat to their power, have begun crackdowns on Internet content, and have sought ways to control what can be said online, fearing a loss of power.

The digital technology currently available makes it possible for nearly anyone to attain any skill and information he or she desires and to use these to compete in an open marketplace for prestige and profit, and to seek self-improvement and self-actualization to an unprecedented degree. That many are unable to take advantage of these opportunities does not negate their existence nor their importance. However, as Lipovetsky and others have pointed out, with limitless opportunity comes vast uncertainty and an anxiety caused by the possibility of choosing a less than optimal course. In contemporary slang, FOMO (fear of missing out) is the flip-side of YOLO (you only live once). This anxiety is caused by the abundance of opportunity in contrast with the limited resource of time itself, meaning that choosing the right use of one's time becomes increasingly urgent. Yet, to do this, one needs some kind of system of priorities with enough force of conviction to push through the infinite distraction that is also available. Without such a system of priorities, navigating the

constantly changing and endlessly complex possibilities offered by globalization and digital technology is nearly impossible. The death of privilege is accompanied by the weight of responsibility. Facing the anxiety of this responsibility is one of the primary challenges of contemporary subjects in developed countries. For this reason, I believe, a concern with ethics has risen to cultural prominence.

3.1.4 An Ethical Gap

This increased need for ethics couldn't have come at a worse time. The postmodern era spent much of its energy deconstructing the systems and structures of meaning upon which the ethical systems of modernity had been built. The subsequent development of a Lévinasian ethics of being for the other was more of a corrective to modernity's excesses than a functional guide to daily, real-life behavior. In fact, the deconstruction of metanarratives that characterized postmodernism created real problems for subjects desperately in need of ethical guidance. If all systems of ethical values are equally corrupt, how can we decide what is right and wrong? The immediate deconstruction of any attempt to build an alternative system of ethics would seem to make ethics impossible. The truth is, it was the pre-existence of a relatively stable, well-defined ethical structure that made deconstruction a viable approach in the first place. If there is no structure, there is nothing to deconstruct. Once the pre-existing systems had been sufficiently dismantled, something new would be needed to take its place, and yet, the postmodern approach made this impossible.

This was a major problem because ethics is essential. In order to make any decision, from the most trivial to life-altering, a system of values is needed to determine which decision would be "better." In a neoliberal globalized economy, coupled with a liberal, democratic political system, the number of choices is nearly infinite. The contemporary

subject, raised in an atmosphere in which all ethical structures are viewed as equally flawed, flounders in confusion, paralyzed by the "paradox of choice," as Barry Schwartz puts it. The ethics of being for the other, as cobbled together and proffered by postmodern theory, makes such choices even more complex. Can I buy this avocado, this coffee, this steak? Was anyone exploited during its production?

If this ethical laxity makes a trip to the supermarket into an existential drama, how much more difficult does it make important decisions, especially decisions that impact our relations with each other? Politics becomes nearly impossible when there is no way of distinguishing between right and wrong. Is it wrong to force people to sleep on the street like stray animals? Why? Why shouldn't we murder each other for sport? Why shouldn't women get paid less than men? Why shouldn't we torture people who might be Al Qaeda operatives? A shared system of values is absolutely necessary to accomplish anything as a family, a team, a neighborhood or a society. Even if we adopt concern for the other as our guideline, this doesn't help us to determine which of the infinite ways of showing concern for the other would be best. This problem underlies the very real confusion and disarray evident in programs designed to aid underdeveloped nations. Should we value ease of relief delivery over the teaching of self-reliance? Should we teach them our value system so they can duplicate our prosperity, or should we allow them to live in abject poverty, demonstrating our respect for their culture? Which is better?

The postmodern deconstruction of historically accumulated ethical systems may very well have been a valuable and necessary step in creating a better world (depending, of course, on what one considers to be "better"), but it has left the contemporary generation in confusion, anxiety, and doubt. Instead of being presented a tradition of values and handed a set of clear tools to accomplish the necessary tasks in life, as every previous generation has,

the contemporary generation has struggled with finding an effective value system. Each inherited solution has been questioned, problematized, revealed as compromised, and discarded – a process that has left an enormous gap. Thus, it should not be surprising that the creation, evaluation, and dissemination of ethical beliefs have become core concerns for the contemporary era, as the analysis of theories in Chapter One demonstrates. I believe that this overwhelming demand for ethical guidance should be at the heart of any analysis of the era following the end of postmodernity.

3.2 Signs of Postmodernism's Passing: Three Ethical Paradigms

3.2.1 The Virtue of Selfishness

The contemporary era presents us with a paradox. Globalization has emphasized the interconnection of the world, continually demonstrating how the part affects the whole. Change, conflict, or disaster in one part of the world leads to transformation in other seemingly unrelated regions. The opening of the Chinese labor market to foreign manufacturers has led to job losses, wage depression, and weakened labor organization in the U.S. Regional conflicts in the Middle East and Africa become international problems when refugees flee for safety and terrorists strike abroad. Nowhere is this interrelation so apparent as in environmental concerns. Rapid industrialization threatens devastating climate change that knows no national boundaries. The activities of any nation or region can have worldwide consequences. At the same time, globalization and the consumer-based market have created unprecedented freedom and personal choice for the individual in most industrialized nations. As Lipovetsky argues, it is a time of hyper-individualization, where even identity itself can be reconstructed and reconfigured through the purchase of consumer goods. Deconstructed social structures are in a "liquid" state, according to Zygmunt Bauman, and the contemporary

subject flows through life like a tourist or one of Bourriaud's nomads. Disconnected from tradition by modernity; emancipated from identity restrictions by postmodernity; the contemporary subject is dis-embedded like never before, a unit of one in an atomized society.

As these subjects live in a neoliberal economy that challenges them to seek self-fulfillment, it only makes sense that they would seek out a system of ethical guidance that would help them to accomplish this. A deregulated, free-market economy leaves each subject alone to decide his or her own fate. The belief that we each have a right to the pursuit of happiness underlies this economic model, and thus it should come as no surprise that egoism is the prevailing ethical model of the neoliberal order. Moraru prefers to call it egology, but its essence is to place the self at the center of ethical decision making. What is right is what is right for me, and marketing tells us we can have it, we can be it, we can do it, if only we have enough money. If some don't have the money, then they need to work harder to get it, to improve their competitiveness in the market. If that means some will have to suffer in poverty, then they are the victims of their own choices. In this model, there is no other that commands a response, no obligation to anyone but the self. Thus, the problems inherent in postmodern ethics are avoided completely.

Egoism assures us that it is okay to accumulate wealth, to live in luxury, to consume whatever we desire, because we have the right to do so. No additional justification is needed. We can see this ethics reflected in political platforms that promise to reduce taxes, reduce social spending, and reduce regulation in the name of economic freedom. As Nealon suggests, neoliberals have co-opted the emancipation focus of postmodernism, and applied it to economics. We can also see this ethics at work culturally, in hip-hop music videos, where rappers wave dollar bills in the camera while spitting rhymes about their luxury brand-name products. The solution to the oppression of the other, these videos seem to suggest, is to let

them gain economic freedom, to remove the economic barriers to success. The pursuit of self-actualization becomes the highest goal, and the other is left by the wayside. A more dramatic reversal of postmodern ethics could hardly be imagined.

3.2.2 A Higher Power

Another sign of the postmodern era coming to a close is the ongoing critique of the irony and skepticism that characterized that era. The contemporary generation, having been raised in an atmosphere of intense irony and distrust of authority, has made a vigorous effort to regain some kind of faith, belief, or hope for the future. One of the earliest and most influential salvos in this campaign against irony was an essay entitled "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction" written by David Foster Wallace and originally published in the *Review of Contemporary Literature* in 1993. In this essay, which "was received as a sort of manifesto for a new generation of writers" (Harrison 56), Wallace announces his dissatisfaction with the postmodern legacy. Taking aim at irony, he states: "I'm going to argue that irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and that at the same time, they are agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture" (*Supposedly* 49). Irony, according to Wallace, "serves an almost exclusively negative function. It's critical and destructive, a ground clearing...But irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks" (67). Wallace argues that commercial culture, especially television, has co-opted postmodernism's techniques: "[T]elevision has been ingeniously absorbing, homogenizing, re-representing the very same cynical postmodern aesthetic that was once the best alternative to the appeal of low, over-easy, mass-marketed narrative" (52). This means that "the forms of our best rebellious art have become mere gestures, schticks, not only sterile but perversely enslaving" (68), creating an aesthetic that is "malignantly addictive" (38). In the interview

that accompanied publication of the essay, Wallace expounded further, commenting on the postmodern impasse: "The problem is that once the rules of art are debunked, and once the unpleasant realities the irony diagnoses are revealed, then what do we do?" (McCaffery 147). Postmodernism has prevented artists from moving forward: "Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what's wrong, because they'll look sentimental and naïve to all the weary ironists. Irony's gone from liberating to enslaving" (147). He suggests an alternative that relies heavily on sincerity: "Really good work probably comes out of a willingness to disclose yourself, open yourself up in spiritual and emotional ways that risk making you look banal or melodramatic or naïve or unhip or sappy" (149). He proposes a movement of "new rebels" who are "willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'Oh, how *banal*.' To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness" (*Supposedly* 81, italics in the original).

Notice the distance we have come from the "incredulity toward metanarratives" of the postmodern era to a call to risk "overcredulity." Similar sentiments were expressed by Jedidiah Purdy, another prominent voice that has been put into the New Sincerity category. In his book, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today* (1999), Purdy calls for an abandonment of ironic distance and a return to engagement in the public sphere. He believes that the prevalence of irony is due to fear: "There is something fearful in this irony. It is a fear of betrayal, disappointment, and humiliation, and a suspicion that believing, hoping, or caring too much will open us to these. Irony is a way of refusing to rely on such treacherous things" (xii). He rejects this self-protection as negative: "An ironic attitude to politics and public life never invites disappointment by a movement's decline or a leader's philandering. There is a kind of security here, but it is the negative security of

perpetual suspicion" (14). We can already see some similarities to Wallace's argument, and Purdy also agrees that irony leads to despair: "Refusing to place its trust in the world, irony helps to make a world that is more likely to be worthy of despair" (20). Still, Purdy believes that there is hope: "[O]ur age of irony is also an age of belief – ambivalent, often frustrated belief, which bears the marks of its ironic competitor, but belief nonetheless" (21). He observes the call to what I refer to as the ecological metanarrative, a desire for unity and systemic coherence that is the opposite of postmodern ironic detachment: "Even in the midst of irony, there is a widespread hunger to feel oneself made whole, connected with true values that are also the values of one's community and, in some cases, of the world itself" (21). Here, the reference to values, extending even to a longing for universal values, makes the ethical nature of his argument apparent. In fact, it is the possibility of being "good" that draws Purdy: "I cannot help believing that we need a way of thinking, and doing, that has in it more promise of goodness than the one we are now following" (xxiii).

In his short story collection, *Life After God* (1994), Douglas Coupland explores similar themes. In the titular story, he depicts the postmodern aftermath: "Life was charmed but without politics or religion. It was the life of children of the children of pioneers – life after God – a life of earthly salvation on the edge of heaven" (273). Here, we see the same disengagement from public life Purdy described – life without politics or religion – and if we see the pioneers as the moderns (which would be historically correct), and their children as the postmoderns, then Coupland is writing about the generation after postmodernism. The narrator expresses skepticism about the life inherited from the previous generation: "Perhaps this is the finest thing to which we can aspire, the life of peace, the blurring between dream life and real life – and yet I find myself speaking these words with a sense of doubt" (273). Coupland's narrator traces this doubt to the prevalence of irony: "I think there was a trade-off

somewhere along the line. I think the price we paid for our golden life was an inability to fully believe in love; instead we gained an irony that scorched everything it touched" (273). The irony is clearly destructive here, scorching everything it touches, and the lack of belief – the lack of love – is the price exacted. Coupland goes on to blame this condition on the decline of religious belief: "I wonder if this irony is the price we paid for the loss of God" (273).

I won't go into a full analysis of every figure of this so-called "New Sincerity," but I mainly want to emphasize the difference between these ideas and the postmodern approach. There is a real critique here of irony, detachment, and cynicism and a longing for connection and engagement in some kind of unifying belief. The way forward would seem to be a re-engagement in public life and a willingness to expose the self to ridicule through a sincere expression of belief.

We looked briefly at Douglas Coupland's exploration of the impact of the loss of God, to which he attributes the rise of a destructive irony. This loss is a direct result of modernity, which dismantled any beliefs not supported by empirical evidence. The postmodern critique of this empiricism reopened the door to an exploration of religious belief, and, in fact, the 1950, 1960s, and 1970s were not just eras of political activism and carnivalesque transgression, but also of mysticism and a reawakened sense of spirituality. The Beat Generation, with its interest in Jewish, Native American, and Eastern religious traditions, exemplified this unlikely mix. In fact, even the Beatles didn't just protest war, grow their hair long, get high, and have sex in public – they also traveled to India to meditate with spiritual gurus and socialized with Hare Krishnas. The so-called New Age appeared bringing alternative medicine and a wide range of cults and pseudo-messiahs.

The postmodern era was also accompanied by a counter-movement of religious

fundamentalism that has reacted with increasing fervor to each of the postmodern emancipation attempts, and this movement is a major component of the contemporary era. To some extent, the rise of the Christian right in the U.S. and, perhaps to a lesser degree, Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East can be attributed to the deconstruction of values and social structures (such as the role of women or the acceptability of homosexuality) that are directly attributable to postmodern thinking rather than the modern era. Furthermore, in the contemporary era, religious fundamentalism has positioned itself as a viable alternative to neoliberal global capitalism, as described in Benjamin Barber's *Jihad vs. McWorld* (1995). Centuries-old religious tradition offers itself as the antidote to the continually new offered by neoliberal global capital through what Lipovetsky calls "the logic of fashion." The confusion triggered by shifting identities, limitless choice, dizzying freedom, and material plenty has fueled a counter-movement that emphasizes stability, tradition, clearly pre-assigned social roles, and, to a certain extent, material asceticism.

Yet, these economic considerations are not the only factor driving the return of religious belief. The fact is, religious belief offers much of what the postmodern approach lacked and the contemporary era demands. For one, religion provides relatively clear and stable systems of ethical guidance. It also provides an ecological, unified, or universal system in which all the parts are accounted for by the whole. It offers a renewed capacity for engagement with public life and an opportunity for sincere belief and expression. A sense of meaning and connection, denied by postmodern irony and detachment, is another lure. Finally, in an era characterized by risk and uncertainty, belief that a Higher Power has a plan for everything soothes the anxiety triggered by the infinite contingency of a high-speed socially deconstructive economy. When one examines the roles religion fills, its return seems inevitable as the aftermath of the postmodern questioning of reason and science.

Of course, traditional religion, with its oppressive social structures and its dogmatic truths, seems utterly incompatible with postmodernism's drive for individual emancipation and deconstruction of ideology. Thus, as Lipovetsky has cogently pointed out, another form of religious practice has evolved that is "without any institutional backing" (Lipovetsky 67). Here, religions are treated as products sold on the market that can be acquired for individual self-fulfillment and identity construction. In some cases, such as meditation and yoga, these practices are completely severed from their traditional religious contexts, and can be combined and reconfigured as the consumer sees fit. In other cases, religion is offered as a cure for individual psychological problems, such as drug or alcohol addiction. Twelve-step programs offer a self-defined version of a Higher Power that serves the needs of the specific user. The market is flooded with spiritual offerings such as Reiki and crystal healing. Thus, neoliberal capitalism has further exhibited its ingenious ability to absorb and exploit all attempts at resistance, by re-fashioning religion, its supposed opposite, into yet another product.

This consumerist version of religious belief is inherently pragmatist – it lays no claim to the kind of absolute truth that fundamentalism offers, but rather offers a series of tools or products that can be implemented if useful and subsequently abandoned when no longer necessary. Its truth has a certain Jamesian cash-value that can be replaced by other truths with a higher value when the need arises. As there was a pragmatist revival toward the end of postmodernism, perhaps leading the way out of some of postmodernism's particularly thorny traps, it should not be surprising that a pragmatist version of religious belief that accommodates postmodern pluralism while offering ethical guidance has become so popular.

3.2.3 The Ecological Metanarrative

Another indicator of postmodernity's demise is the return of the metanarrative. The belief that the world is threatened by man-made climate change is one of the most powerful and pervasive metanarratives of today. This metanarrative combines several defining components of the contemporary era. For example, it wholeheartedly embraces a one-world universalism while simultaneously focusing on individual action, as summed up in the well-known slogan "Think globally, act locally." Furthermore, as the use of the grammatical command form in that slogan implies, there is a firm ethical imperative driving the movement. Additionally, there is a strong technological utopianism at work, implying that we can undo the harm caused by human existence on this planet by merely reforming our technologies. Those who are, as postmodernists are supposed to be, skeptical of this metanarrative, are labeled "climate change deniers," with the word "denier" lifted from "Holocaust denier," and thus equating these skeptics with Nazis, the ultimate bad guys. Clearly, the metanarrative is back. Concern for the environment has become symbolic for the kind of thinking that Christian Moraru labels "ecologic," that is, a perception of reality as a unified system in which everything is connected and the actions of individual components affect the whole. The earth itself is the ideal symbol for this mentality, and this is strongly implied in the language used to describe the most powerful forces shaping the world today – globalization and the World Wide Web, for which the words "globe" and "world" are employed to emphasize this unified conception of reality. Concern for the environment has become a metanarrative as powerful as those that characterized the modern era, providing a structure and measuring system to evaluate human activities and to drive plans for future development.

As with any metanarrative, the ecological metanarrative can be used as a control and manipulation tool to attain power. In many cases, for example, capitalists have used concern

for environmental issues to sell products and services. From so-called "green" buildings to supermarkets selling food labeled as "organic," consumers who have internalized the ecological metanarrative as an ethical guide are responding to the marketing efforts of businesses. This tactic is known as "greenwashing," and has even been used by companies like ExxonMobil, whose products are one of the primary causes of climate change. Companies may trumpet their use of clean energy sources or the use of sustainable resources in their manufacturing processes to paint themselves as being on the right side of the ethical line. In a particularly egregious case, Volkswagen promoted its "clean diesel" engines in a national advertising campaign, when in fact, the true extent of their vehicles' pollution was merely being hidden by computer software manipulation. In the case of corporate greenwashing, the manipulation can be quite visible to critical thinkers.

The ecological metanarrative has also been adopted by various political movements to advance other, non-environmental policies. Eco-feminism, for example, makes the claim that women are somehow more attuned to nature, and that environmental problems are mostly due to patriarchy, and thus, more power for women would be a viable solution to ecological problems. This is a naked attempt to subvert the influence of the ecological metanarrative to attain the aims of another political discourse, feminism (let me add here that I consider myself to be a feminist). That the rise of environmental concern occurs during the decline of Marxism is also no coincidence. As the demise of communism became more and more obvious, disillusioned Marxists turned toward the environment as a new metanarrative to justify their political goals. If we have indeed reached the end of history (as inevitable force destined to bring us to a new utopian way of life), the global environmental threat could provide a new justification for planning economic activity, resisting capitalism, and creating international governing bodies.

3.3 Conclusion

We have explored the beginning of the new period and we have encountered three different ethical paradigms, the virtue of selfishness, the higher power, and the ecological metanarrative. The goal of this chapter was to provide a periodization model in which the three ethical models I have identified could be embedded, hopefully describing their importance to the contemporary era, and indicating why they are not a mere continuation of postmodernism. In the remaining chapters, I will explore these three paradigms in close readings of contemporary fiction, in order to illustrate the manner in which these ethical paradigms are shaping and informing contemporary culture.

4 The Virtue of Selfishness

> "A lot of folks forget because of all the bad press surrounding McCarthyism, but there really was a serious communist movement in this country at one point. In the Thirties, you could be blacklisted in Hollywood for being *anti-communist*, and Rand had trouble finding work for a while because she was too outspoken about the realities of the 'noble experiment.' And at the same time all these American Marxists were lining up in support of the Comintern, Roosevelt was centralizing control of farming, banking, and other businesses as part of the New Deal. Which may have been a far cry from Stalin's mass murder of the kulaks, but still, you can imagine how it must have looked from Rand's perspective."
>
> Joan nodded. "Hence *Atlas Shrugged*."
>
> "Probably had a lot to do with that, yeah," said Archie. "So if her defense of capitalism strikes you as being kind of loony, you have to understand, she had her reasons." (Ruff 210)

4.1 Introduction

The citation above is drawn from Matt Ruff's 1997 novel, *Sewer, Gas & Electric: The Public Works Trilogy*, which is dedicated to Ayn Rand. In the novel, Ayn Rand appears in virtual reality, as an artificial intelligence that interacts with the protagonist. Although Rand's personality and ideas are ironized at times, her virtual stand-in is allowed to make valid points in discussions with the main protagonist, and major characters in the novel are heavily influenced by her views. This is an example of an ongoing rehabilitation of Rand that has been occurring in contemporary fiction since the end of the Cold War. This would seem to make a lot of sense – if the contemporary era is one of rampant neoliberalism, as most of the models we examined in Chapter One insist, then surely neoliberal ideas must be appearing in contemporary culture as well. And of course, these ideas must also be having an influence on contemporary ethics. Although Ayn Rand is not the only neoliberal thinker, in the U.S., her novels, and their illustrations of the philosophy she developed, which she named objectivism, may very well be the mechanism through which the popularity of neoliberalism has spread. Rand is also the neoliberal thinker that is most closely associated with ethics, due to her

controversial book, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (1964). These

factors make her an excellent resource for reading contemporary novels that may reflect

neoliberal ideas.

Before I begin my short summary of Rand's philosophy, I want to state that I am not

an objectivist nor a follower of Rand's philosophy. I fundamentally disagree with the very

foundation of her philosophical system. Nevertheless, I believe her importance has been

overlooked by contemporary theorists for a number of reasons. First of all, by expressing her

ideas in novels that became hugely successful, she overshadowed the philosophical works she

later published. To put it kindly, literary critics were not overwhelmed by the quality of her

novels, or the beauty of her prose. Second, she had a confrontational and irascible personality

that alienated even her closest followers. Finally, she was a vociferous opponent of Marxism

and an ardent supporter of capitalism, making her unpopular in most academic circles.

However, these factors have not hindered her from having an enormous influence on

contemporary culture. Her disciple, Alan Greenspan, headed the U.S. Federal Reserve during

the '90s, and her followers include former Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, Senator "Rand"

Paul (notice his first name), Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas, and Internet billionaires

such as Mark Cuban and Peter Thiel. It is time, especially for opponents of neoliberalism, to

start taking Ayn Rand seriously.

Objectivism is a philosophical system. It begins with an ontology, and then moves to

an epistemology, an ethics, a politics, and an aesthetics. For this dissertation we'll be mostly

concerned with its ethics, but I want to briefly sketch the rest of the system to put the ethics in

its context. Objectivist ontology is quite simple – it consists of the statement that "*existence*

exists" (Peikoff 4). This is an axiom that Rand believes cannot be proven nor questioned, for

to do so would necessarily require one's existence, *a priori* demonstrating its truth. However,

the important factor of this ontology is its external focus – the belief in a universal external reality precedes all other questions – it is not "I" exist, but rather this external reality exists. All valid information must be drawn from this external source. Objectivist epistemology is complex, but to boil it down, we perceive this external reality through our senses, and form concepts from this input using reason. Again, reason cannot be questioned because "reason is the faculty of proof; one must accept and use reason in order to prove anything" (153). Any attempt to question reason using reason automatically contradicts itself, according to objectivism. Reason gives us the capacity to form concepts, which can be used to derive principles, which are "general truth[s] on which other truths depend" (218). These perceptions, concepts, and principles must be treated as real, because existence exists.

This epistemology can be expanded to ethics by the formation of moral principles, which are "a type of scientific principle, identifying the relationship to man's survival of the various basic human choices" (218). Survival is the most important principle: "The Objectivist ethics holds man's life as the *standard* of value – and *his own life* as the ethical *purpose* of every individual man" (Rand 21, italics in the original). Good is defined as that which reason tells us leads to continued survival: "Since reason is man's basic means of survival, that which is proper to the life of a rational being is the good; that which negates, opposes or destroys it is the evil" (19). Rational beings maintain their survival by exercising their reason and by working to produce the means of survival: "Since everything man needs has to be discovered by his own mind and produced by his own effort, the two essentials of the method of survival proper to a rational being are: thinking and productive work" (19). Those who think and do productive work ensure the survival of all: "If some men do not choose to think, but survive by imitating and repeating, like trained animals...never making an effort to understand their own work, it still remains true that their survival is made

possible only by those who did choose to think" (19-20). If productive work is the means to survival, it follows, then, that the use of force to steal the product of others is not acceptable to objectivist ethics: "If some men attempt to survive by means of brute force or fraud, by looting, robbing, cheating or enslaving the men who produce, it still remains true that their survival is made possible only by their victims" (20). For Rand, "survival" does not mean merely a continued physical existence, but rather a survival as a rational being with a free will. Happiness, then, is the measure of survival: "In psychological terms, the issue of man's survival does not confront his consciousness as an issue of 'life or death,' but as an issue of 'happiness or suffering.' Happiness is the successful state of life, suffering is the warning signal of failure, of death" (23). This chain of argument leads to Rand's provocative ethical assertion that the self rather than the other should be the focus of ethics:

> The basic *social* principle of the Objectivist ethics is that just as life is an end in itself, so every living human being is an end in himself, not the means to the ends or the welfare of others – and, therefore, that man must live for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself. To live for his own sake means that *the achievement of his own happiness is man's highest moral purpose.* (23, italics in the original)

For Rand, it is important that "happiness" not be based on mere subjective feeling, but rather, happiness must be rationally defined: "To take 'whatever makes one happy' as a guide to action means: to be guided by nothing but one's emotional whims. Emotions are not tools of cognition; to be guided by whims – by desires whose source, nature and meaning one does not know – is to turn oneself into a blind robot, operated by unknowable demons" (25). Thus, hedonism in any form is rejected. So too, does she reject any form of altruism: "The *moral cannibalism* of all hedonist and altruist doctrines lies in the premise that the happiness of one

man necessitates the injury of another" (26, italics in the original). Self-sacrifice is not considered noble and good, but rather the essence of evil in objectivist ethics, but this is accompanied by the belief that one must not allow others to sacrifice themselves. Thus, only a voluntary exchange of the results of the productive work of the individual can be used to obtain the products of another's work. This requires capitalism: "Capitalism is the system of productiveness; it is the system of and for producers. As to consumers under such a system, they are men who pay for what they consume, i.e., men who themselves earned the means of payment" (Peikoff 387). This ethics lies behind the neoliberal rejection of social welfare programs that redistribute wealth through taxation.

The final component of objectivism is its aesthetics. For objectivism, only external reality can be the basis of our concepts and principles. Denying this reality is self-destructive, and thus, evil. However, art, despite its basis in the unreal, the imaginary, serves a purpose: "The root of man's need of art lies in the fact that human consciousness is conceptual – and that a conceptual being needs the guidance of *philosophy*" (Peikoff 414). Art's purpose is to embody and represent the concepts and principles that arise from our exercise of reason, including ethical principles. Art should project ideals not reality. This deliberately chosen aesthetic may very well lie behind much of the criticism of Rand's fiction as being unrealistic.

It is easy to see how objectivism solves the problems inherent postmodernism, whether we consider the relativist/nihilist version or the ethics of being for the other. Objectivism rejects all of these ideas from the ground up. It not only insists on the existence of objective reality, but also that our perceptions of that reality are accurate, and the concepts that we form based on these perceptions are valid. The pluralism and subjectivity that are of such concern for postmodernism is nowhere to be found. It utterly rejects any form of being for the other and demands that each subject make his or her own survival and happiness the

focus of activity. Because it offers such clear cut solutions to the ethical dilemmas of postmodernism, it should not be surprising that such an ethics has thrived in a time of ethical uncertainty and confusion. Objectivism offers absolute certainty, clear and easily defined principles, a thoroughly systematic and integrated belief structure, and easy answers to all moral questions. It also completely absolves one from concern and guilt about the suffering of others. And to top it off, it allows us to get rich, fat, and happy. That its fundamental axioms are flawed seems a small price to pay.

I will now proceed to examine how a neoliberal ethics of the self manifests itself in contemporary fiction.

4.2 *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* by Mary Gaitskill

In Mary Gaitskill's novel, *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* (1991), the philosophy of Ayn Rand plays a central role in the plot, although Rand is disguised by the pseudonym Anna Granite, and her philosophy is named Definitism rather than Objectivism. As the title suggests, the story revolves around two women, Justine Shade, a journalist who is writing an article about Granite and her Definitist movement, and Dorothy Never, a devout Definitist and former employee of Granite's. Although both women share the experience of having been sexually abused as children, they have different, perhaps even opposing, philosophies about how to deal with the trauma. Justine, whose name evokes Sade, is fascinated by social power, by dominance and submission, and puts herself in the role of masochist, seeking sexual humiliation. Dorothy, on the other hand, has retreated into herself, creating a rich internal life, and drawing heavily from Anna Granite's (i.e. Rand's) novels and philosophy of selfishness. Although Justine is thin, attractive and cool, and possesses a postmodern outlook, Dorothy, who is fat and unattractive, is portrayed as stronger and psychologically healthier. Ultimately,

the two characters interest one another because of their similarities and differences, and despite her initial disdain for Granite and her philosophy, Justine comes to admire Dorothy. By the end of the novel, Justine is rescued from a violent and sadistic lover by Dorothy, and the two form the beginning of a relationship. Although many reviewers saw the novel as a parody of Ayn Rand and Objectivism; in fact, the novel shows how Rand's philosophy of selfishness could be implemented to counteract and defend against the weaknesses of postmodernism.

Justine Shade is a freelance journalist who works part time as an "assistant secretary for a doctor of internal medicine" (12), a job that is "lulling and comfortingly dull" (12). About her journalism we are told, "She was very serious about her career as a journalist, but she sold very few articles. This was because she got ideas at the rate of about one a year" (12). As we can see, career-wise, she has not accomplished much, being merely the assistant to a secretary, and a freelance journalist. Early descriptions of her are also not particularly flattering: "Justine Shade was a neurotic, antisocial twenty-eight-year-old. She had few friends, and as she saw them infrequently, her main source of entertainment was an erratic series of boyfriends who wandered through her small apartment, often making snide comments about her decor" (12). Here, she is portrayed as neurotic, antisocial, lonely, and erratic. The wandering boyfriends make snide comments about the decor of her small apartment, demonstrating not just the inferiority of her living arrangements, but also contempt for her. She is frequently described as childlike: "Her voice was flat, nearly metallic, except for the high pitch that made it the voice of a prematurely serious child" (9). When the novel's other main character, Dorothy Never, meets her, she tells us: "I was a little disappointed by her. I had imagined a mature and handsome woman wearing a tailored gray suit and carrying a small tape recorder. Justine looked like a college kid: tight jeans, pointy

red shoes, and a T-shirt with an indecipherable picture and the the words 'Girl World' on it"

(22). Once again, she is portrayed as a "kid," wearing clothing inappropriate for an adult, and

she disappoints Dorothy. Over the course of the novel, she is depicted drinking too much and

getting involved in an abusive, sexually masochistic relationship. She is a typical example of

the kind of postmodern subject that frequents contemporary fiction.

Justine becomes interested in writing about Anna Granite when a patient at the

doctor's office recommends her books, saying, "'Oh, you've got to read her. She's the most

unique writer. Of course, I don't believe in what she says politically, but still she's so

powerful. Especially now, when people are so into whining and abdicating responsibility, it's

good to read somebody advocating strength and power, and doing things'" (16). She asks her

co-worker about Granite's books and is told, "Very good writing, very dramatic. The clarity,

the way she states her case. I read *The Bulwark* at a time when I was undergoing a crisis and

it gave me such moral support to read about those strong characters doing great things'" (17).

Justine finds the continued popularity of the books fascinating and decides to write an article

about the Definitist movement that has sprung up in Granite's wake. Even in these early

citations of the impact of Granite's work, the view is quite positive, using adjectives such as

"powerful" and "unique" accompanied by testimony about its value in providing "moral

support." The first quote posits Granite's work as an antidote to the contemporary era, an era

of "whining and abdicating responsibility," a description that echoes contemporary criticisms

of postmodernism. For most of the novel, Granite's (and thus Rand's) work is described in

similarly glowing terms, although it remains clear throughout the novel that Gaitskill views

Rand's fiction with ironic distance. For instance, when describing the ending of one of

Granite's novels, she writes, "Katya had perished on an ice floe in an effort to escape to

America, Captain Dagmarov had killed himself on realizing he was philosophically in error,

and Rex, having been broken by the collectivist society around him, was writing pornography for a living" (19-20). These short passages read like parodies of Rand's novels, with their fierce ideological melodrama and livid condemnation of collectivism. Rand herself, on the other hand, is portrayed quite sympathetically, and the details of her life are represented rather accurately. Although it is tempting to view this novel as satirizing Ayn Rand, a closer examination reveals that the descriptions of the influence of her philosophy are actually enthusiastically positive, as we shall see shortly.

Justine posts ads in the newspaper and on local bulletin boards asking to interview adherents of Definitism, and the respondents are in universal support of Granite: "They all described what Granite had done for them, how she had made them value their lives, how she had inspired them to strive for the best they were capable of, whether as secretaries or engineers" (18). One of the respondents is Dorothy Never. When Justine gets the phone call, she thinks that Dorothy "sounded like a nut" (19), but nevertheless had "a voice that, although riddled with peculiarity and tension, stroked Justine along the inside of her skull in a way that both repelled and attracted her" (19). Gaitskill employs a subtle yet clever device to portray the difference between the two women. She narrates Justine's passages in the third person, as though Justine is an object, yet she narrates Dorothy's sections in the first person, emphasizing that she is indeed a subject. This device functions quite well at demonstrating the difference between the philosophies of the two women.

Dorothy began her relationship with Definitism, she says, "'As a teenager, when I read *The Bulwark*. I would say from about the tenth page on, it became the most important influence in my life – certainly the only positive influence'" (22). To explain this description of her childhood, Dorothy immediately confesses that she had been sexually molested by her father, a shocking admission that triggers Justine to admit that she, too, had been molested.

Dorothy begins to narrate how discovering Granite's books gave her the strength to handle her childhood trauma, saying:

> "[B]y the time I was seventeen, I had a very negative view of life, and a horrific view of sex. Then I read Anna Granite and suddenly a whole different way of looking at life was presented to me. She showed me that human beings can live in strength and honor. And that sex is actually part of that strength and honor, not oppositional to it."
> (24)

Very important to Dorothy was Granite's moral code: "'That morality is based on the right to choose for yourself, that your life is yours – she held up a vision for me, and her vision helped me through terrible times. I mean by the time I discovered Granite, I had just about given up'" (24). After discussing Anna Granite's private life, which closely mirrors Rand's, Dorothy states that the most important aspect of Granite's philosophy is that "'it takes life seriously, which is rare. She said reality was definable – no one was saying that in the sixties. She said you were important in reality, that you could control it. She was the first person to tell me I was important and that I could come out and say so'" (30). Here, Dorothy is contrasting an emerging concept of reality as a social construct with Rand's view that we have access to an objective reality and that our beliefs and actions must correspond to that reality. She asserts that evil is a result of not accepting an objective reality, saying, "'Evil comes from denying reality. Period. If my father hadn't deluded himself, he wouldn't have been able to do what he did. You have to distort reality to rationalize evil acts'" (31). Dorothy directly criticizes the ethics of being for the other: "People only accept the validity of movements that champion the underdog and scorn those that champion people of great accomplishment. You always have to take the dumbest as your lowest common denominator" (32). Furthermore, she offers a refutation of this approach, while directly criticizing feminism

and Marxism: "'I had a friend once named Kim who happened to be retarded. We used to belong to a women's support group, and those women there, those Marxist, feminist bitches, they ignored Kim, they hurt Kim, they would kill Kim if they thought it would further a cause. They would victimize the weak and helpless. Not me. And not Granite'" (33). Justine asks her the question, "'Why do you think Definitism frightens people so?'" (31). Dorothy responds with a defense of Granite's philosophy: "'Because it's powerful. It glorifies the freedom of the individual, and nowadays that sort of philosophy is labeled fascistic. People think if you make moral judgments, or work hard for a goal and don't let yourself be deterred, if you accomplish something, that you're right wing and somehow unfeeling to other people's plights'" (32). She goes on to defend Granite, saying, "'People made a lot of assumptions about Granite that simply weren't true. It's possible to have great humanity and be a Definitist'" (32). As we can see, our first encounters with Definitism present the philosophy in a positive light, emphasizing its moral content and its powerful influence on Dorothy, who fiercely champions both Granite and her philosophy.

The next section of the book details the similarities and differences of the two women's childhoods, and in part explains their diverging philosophical developments. One of Justine's earliest memories is being sexually abused by a friend of her parents named Dr. Norris. When she informs her mother that "'Dr. Norris touches me here'" (64), her mother merely replies, "'He just doesn't know that little girls don't like to be touched there'" (64), minimizing her abuse. Justine responds to the abuse by becoming obsessed with being a helpless victim. For example, we are told that "[w]hen Justine was seven, she ordered the Catholic boy who lived down the street to tie her to his swing set and pretend to brand her, as she had seen Brutus do to Olive Oyl on TV" (71). She develops a fascination with cartoons in which the woman is bound and helpless, and this morbid interest is directly related to her

molestation: "She wanted to be tied up and whipped after watching cartoon characters being beaten and tortured by other characters for the viewer's amusement. She watched the animated violence with queasy fascination, feeling frightened and exposed. It was the same feeling she had had when Dr. Norris touched her" (72). The fantasies extend to a keen focus on the torments of hell, as narrated by Mrs. Slutsky, mother of Richie, the aforementioned Catholic boy. The vision of eternal torment haunts her: "At night she would lie in bed and imagine being tormented forever because you had envious thoughts or were angry at someone. She didn't have the vocabulary to express, even to herself, the feeling these images evoked in her; it was too overpowering for her" (73-4). Again, this feeling is linked to her sexual abuse: "It seemed to occupy the place that all her daily activities and expressions came from, the same place Dr. Norris had touched" (74). Masochistic role play becomes her only outlet: "[S]he soothed the demanding feeling by tying herself to her bedpost, gagging herself, and forcing morose but compliant Richie to beat her" (74). The narrator suggests that this approach was not a healthy one, telling us, "[S]he didn't think of it like this until much later, when she could only look at the ancient entrenched feeling as an animal looks at a trap on its leg" (74). Justine's method of dealing with her abuse, voluntarily placing herself into the role of victim and deriving a morbid pleasure from it, has turned into a trap that she is unable to escape.

The fascination with power and transgression continues into Justine's adolescence. She joins a group of girls who are distinguished by their cynicism and cruelty: "[T]hey exuded an awful cynicism that impressed people and they knew dirty things" (112). They are portrayed as destructive and threatening: "The six of them terrified the other kids as they patrolled the playground, looking for trouble" (112). Her high school experience is described as one characterized by power and fear:

The assigned classroom was filled with murderously aggressive boys and rigid girls

with animal eyes who threw spitballs, punched each other, snarled, whispered, and

stared one another down. And shadowing all these gestures and movements were

declarations of dominance, of territory, the swift, blind play of power and weakness.

Justine saw right away that she'd be at home here. (110-1)

Rather than frightening her, the violent and terrifying atmosphere makes her feel comfortable,

feeds her inner fascination with victimization. Justine herself victimizes several classmates,

including sexually humiliating a teenage girl. The aggression of her group of friends is

noticed by the authorities, but they cannot be stopped: "Parents were always calling to

complain about them pulling down their son's pants or dropping someone's lunch in the toilet.

Teachers cajoled, pleaded, and occasionally ranted, but they couldn't do anything and they

knew it. Justine believed teachers to be secretly on their side as they trampled the weak and

the uncool" (112). These passages detailing power and transgression seem like they were

tailor made to illustrate postmodern theories dealing with power dynamics, transgression, and

abjection.

Justine's brutal childhood experiences forge her into a cool and charismatic presence:

"All those hours of running with mobs, tormenting other children, and having sex in

bathrooms had created an aura of sensuality and mystique that she radiated without effort"

(166-7). Yet, she hides this persona from her parents, shoplifting sexy outfits from a mall and

changing into them at school, until she is caught stealing. When her mother picks her up from

the store, "Justine shrugged her shoulders and scowled while her mother and the manager

agreed on how awful she was" (174). After her mother catches her at school in a forbidden

outfit, she is sent to a psychiatrist named Dr. Venus – a rather obvious reference to Sacher-

Masoch that not so subtly underlines Justine's obsession with dominance and submission.

Justine relates her sexual adventures to Dr. Venus, and "[a]s she talked she felt as if she were talking about someone else – someone who was complex and interesting, a femme fatale, yet a sad sensitive femme fatale who'd seen and done too much too soon, like one of those teenagers in decadent-society TV specials who drank or something" (182). This passage shows that Justine has learned to see herself as an object, to observe herself from the outside, evaluating herself for coolness, comparing herself to a type of fictional character, the femme fatale. When she is finished telling Dr. Venus about her sexual explorations, "she felt like a character in a rock song" (183). Again, she is distanced from her experiences, and views herself through the lens of popular culture – in the first quote, TV, and in the second, the ultimate in cool, a rock song. As her distance from herself grows, so too does her distance from her social circle: "[S]he now felt herself in her aloneness, and she savored herself bitterly" (190). This social isolation is a product of the persona she has cultivated, desperately seeking to protect herself from victimization and feelings of humiliation. After her parents divorced, "she calmly moved from parent to parent to school, counting the months, holding her aloneness around her like a magic cloak. When she moved to New York after graduating from college years later, the cloak was wound about her so completely she no longer knew it was there" (191).

Dorothy's childhood follows a similar path, but the outcome is quite different. Although her sexual abuse comes later than Justine's, she grows up in the shadow of an angry and abusive father. However, she shelters herself from this harsh reality by immersing herself in the fantasy of fictional worlds. For example, she relates: "When I was nine I read 'The Little Match Girl,' the fairy tale about a starving girl who freezes to death outside the home of a middle-class family as they eat Christmas dinner" (83). Her reaction, unlike Justine, is not to see herself as the victim, but rather to imagine herself in a heroic role: "For days I was

obsessed with fantasies in which I appeared in the story, a wealthy child philanthropist, to sweep the match girl away to my opulent home" (82). The most important of these early fantasies was *Peter Pan*: "When she [her mother] read *Peter Pan*, I stopped drawing pictures of heaven and began drawing Never-Never Land" (92). The imaginary world is described as protecting her: "Its very name made me feel a sadness like a big beautiful blanket I could wrap around myself" (93). Dorothy develops a rich inner world, which she keeps hidden from others:

> The boundaries of my inner world did not extend out, but in, so that there was a large area of blank whiteness starting at my most external self and expanding inward until it reached the tiny inner province of dazzling color and activity that it safeguarded, like the force field of clouds and limitless night sky that surrounded Never-Never Land. (135)

The neglect of her external world leads her to develop "what my mother came to call my 'unattractive habits.' First, I stopped brushing my teeth, except on rare occasions" (69). She also begins an unhealthy relationship with food: "In addition, I began giving in to gross and unhealthy cravings: candy bars, ice cream, cookies, sugar in wet spoonfuls from the bowl, Hershey's syrup drunk in gulps from the can, Reddi Whip shot down my throat, icing in huge fingerfuls from other people's pieces of cake" (70). These habits lead to her becoming fat, socially awkward, and unattractive. In response to her withdrawal from the family world, her father begins to berate her:

> Slowly, starting first with veiled attacks on "selfish turds" and "fat slobs," he began to tell me how awful I was. Soon he would be leaning towards me on his elbows, his mouth forming the words so vehemently that he showed his teeth. "You sit there on your fat butt night after night wearing the clothes I bought you, stuffing yourself with

my food, stupid and ugly, contributing nothing." (142)

Dorothy's inner fantasy world helps her withstand the abuse: "Those dinner tribunals occurred with such frequency that I developed the ability to divide myself while they occurred; the external person who sat and cried while her father reviled her and the internal person who helped herself to more salad as he ranted" (142). However, the abuse eventually turns sexual, as her father begins coming into her bedroom at night to molest her. Dorothy views the sexual abuse as just an extension of her damaged relationship with her father: "[U]nderneath the fear and shame, underneath the excitement, it seemed that what was happening now between my father and me was only the physical expression of what always happened between us, even when he verbally reviled me, especially when he verbally reviled me" (150). Dorothy's distance from the outside world extends to her relationships with the other children at school, with whom she is unable to connect. Although they cruelly tease her, she sees through their unkindness: "I sensed that if their mundane words covered cruelty and aggression, the cruelty and aggression covered other qualities. Vulnerability, tenderness, curiosity, kindness – I sensed these qualities in the child harridans around me, yet I could not experience them. Even more bewildering, it seemed that they did not experience them either" (135). The sections of the novel detailing Dorothy's childhood display a depth of perception and introspection that we do not encounter in the sections dealing with Justine. Her rich inner life enables her to be more successful at resisting traumas, even before she encounters Anna Granite's work.

Gradually, Dorothy's fantasy world begins to incorporate adult novels, including George Orwell's *1984*: "It wasn't the brutality I loved, it was the bravado in Orwell's monotonous treatment of horror, and the pathetic human efforts to stand against it, or even believe in the existence of something else" (153). Eventually, she encounters *The Bulwark*, a

novel by Anna Granite, which profoundly affects her: "I was deeply moved by the description of Asia Maconda and Frank Golanka, the proud outcasts moving through a crowd of resentful mediocrities, surrounded by the cold glow of their genius and grace" (158). Granite replaces Orwell in her private fantasy world because Granite's characters cannot be broken: "It was the same brave evocation of beauty that I had loved in Orwell – except that this was strong, contemptuous beauty, a beauty indifferent to anything but itself and its own growth. In Orwell's world, beauty was unreachable, and the attempt to reach it was fatal...In Granite's world, it thrived proud and undeniable" (159). Dorothy uses her identification with Granite's characters to resist the damage of her father's abuse: "I myself was another aspect of Asia, as I sat silently at the dinner table while my father crouched above his plate reviling me. I felt, in addition to the inevitable dislocated shame, a strange kind of pride" (160). By projecting an idealized fantasy realm of possibility, she endures her father's sexual assaults: "Like Katya in *The Last Woman Alive*, I nurtured myself with dreams of what could be. On those nights when my father came to me, these dreams were the mainstay on which my listing comprehension attached itself, the immobile constant that stood watch while I struggled to maintain silence and stillness" (161). Although it may seem that these fantasy escapes are somehow emotionally unhealthy, Dorothy insists that "'it wasn't the craziness in me that was responding to Anna Granite, it was the sanity'" (10).

Once Dorothy leaves home to go to college, the reality of her childhood hits her: "I left to go to class and sat looking at the people around me, marveling at my difference from them. I had had sex with my father" (194). This realization creates powerful feelings of self-loathing: "[M]ost of the time I felt as if my body had been turned inside out, that I was a walking deformity hung with visible blood-purple organs, lungs, heart, bladder, kidneys, spleen, the full ugliness of a human stripped of its skin" (194). Although she seeks help from

a counselor, she is unable to bring herself to tell her story. Finally, she turns once again to

Anna Granite's books for help: "The first thing I read was how utterly alone Solitaire

D'Anconti was in the world and how much pain it had caused her. I could understand that"

(197). In Granite's work, she finds a meaning for her own pain: "It described her pain as a

thing of beauty and grandeur, her isolation as a sign of her innate superiority, comparable to

mountain peaks and skyscrapers. 'Every loneliness is a pinnacle,' wrote Anna Granite" (197).

In this section, Gaitskill does a brilliant job balancing her ironic recreation of the simplicity

of Rand's fiction with a deep depiction of the intensity of its value for Dorothy, whose

extremely traumatic childhood not only generates tremendous empathy in the reader but

demands to be taken seriously. The following quote exemplifies this balance:

> I read of Solitaire's physical beauty and intellectual brilliance, how she "grimly seized
>
> the rapier of hatred thrust upon her by the squalling mob and fought her way out,
>
> forcing the hot anger of her pain into the icy steel of her intellect." So, not every
>
> social misfit was ugly and/or fat! They didn't all lie on the bathroom floor banging
>
> their heads! Some of them ran corporations, which is what Solitaire grew up to do.
>
> (197)

Gaitskill manages to replicate Rand's heavy-handed, cliché-ridden prose, while at the same

time, demonstrating why it appeals to Dorothy. And the impact is profound, as Granite's work

leads Dorothy to determine that "[t]he world, previously an incomprehensible prison, was

now an orderly place where I could live with dignity. Even what my father had done to me –

as a result of his denial of reality – was not too horrible to look at, could be explained and

then rejected. I could determine my own world and reject anything that made it an unhappy

place" (198-9). Dorothy, unable to continue living her old life, decides to abandon her

studies, pack her things and move to Philadelphia in order to attend Anna Granite's lectures

there. She paces her rented room, fantasizing about meeting Granite, yet afraid, because "the

intimacy and understanding that I fantasized was such that it would rip my skin off. She

would look at me and know everything I'd endured. I wouldn't have to hold back, I could tell

her about it all, I could tell her about the part of myself I'd held away from everyone, the tiny

but vibrant internal Never-Never Land I'd lived in when there was no other place for me"

(202-3).

In person, Granite's lectures effect her as deeply as her books. As she later tells Justine

during their interview, "'I felt I was connecting with the life force of humanity. At the first

lecture I sat there and wept. I just wept'" (25). Her emotions are so powerful that she has

difficulty concentrating: "I was so overwhelmed by my emotional response to Granite, that I

could only comprehend her speech in fragments. She talked about how tragic it was when the

individual was sacrificed for the majority, how the needs of the weak became an excuse for

undermining the strong" (226). These ideas provide solace for Dorothy in confronting her

trauma:

> I *had* been stronger than my parents. I had been damn strong to survive a childhood
>
> completely lacking in emotional or mental sustenance and in fact would have killed
>
> most people. And it was my strength that made my father hate me. It wasn't because I
>
> was worthless, not because I was ugly or fat. It was because I *was* worth something
>
> and he knew it and he wanted to destroy me for it. (226, italics in the original)

Dorothy, overwhelmed with emotion, approaches Granite after her lecture. In her depiction of

Granite, Gaitskill eschews most of the irony that characterizes her simulations of Rand's

fiction, making Rand seem not just sympathetic, but somehow heroic. Choked up by her

emotions, Dorothy is unable to speak. Granite's response is empathetic: "'I can see you've had

a lot of pain in your life'" (227), she says. Dorothy acknowledges her pain, saying, "'There

were times I didn't know how I would survive. Even recently. I just wanted to die'" (228).

Granite's response is reassuring: "Her eyes radiated the gentlest strength I had ever

experienced, her tough, hot, callusy hands supported me with the full intensity of her life.

'Yes,' she said. 'I can see that'" (228). Dorothy continues on: "'But I did survive, and the

reason I survived was you. I had to tell you that. I had to thank you'" (228). Unlike Dorothy's

fears of being destroyed by this meeting, Granite's empathetic, reassuring support enables

Dorothy to reclaim her agency:

> She looked at me and, as in my fantasy, she saw me, saw my pain – which no one had
>
> ever acknowledged or even allowed me to acknowledge. However, unlike my fantasy,
>
> to be seen and acknowledged by her wasn't to be penetrated and ripped apart by an
>
> obscene burst of energy. I did not feel her gaze boring through my pores to envelop
>
> my swooning spirit; I felt her at the perimeter of myself, waiting for me to reveal
>
> myself. So I didn't swoon. I stood and met her gaze and felt myself, habitually held in
>
> so deep and tight, come out to meet her with the quavering steps of someone whose
>
> feet have been asleep for a long, long time. (228)

Granite, despite being visibly exhausted, insists that Dorothy tell her everything. For the first

time in her life, Dorothy is able to reveal her secret: "What I had been unable to say to

anyone, barely even to myself, came out in normal sentences. I didn't even feel

embarrassment, let alone shame" (228). At the end of this extraordinary exchange, Granite

offers Dorothy a job as a secretary, at "almost double the standard hourly wage" (229),

despite Dorothy's lack of work experience. Dorothy accepts, although she feels unworthy of

Granite's esteem. Finally, Granite insists that Dorothy choose a new name for herself, and she

chooses "Dorothy Never" (230). In this emotionally powerful scene, Granite, and thus Rand,

is painted in the most positive light, and the impact of her beliefs and her presence are

described as life-saving, healing forces that enable Dorothy to reclaim herself and shed her traumatic past, literally creating a new identity.

Justine's interview with Dorothy has an impact on her: "It would be an exaggeration to say that Justine's meeting with Dorothy disturbed the years-old insulation of her cloak of loneliness. But something about the encounter sent an invisible ray under the cloak" (209). Justine initially reacts to her meeting with Dorothy by suspecting that she is crazy; however, she somehow still admires her: "[T]he fat woman was obviously very tough in some way. She had that craziness locked into formation, doing drills, getting her up and out and moving through life, with a roof over her head and money in her pocket, instead of roaming the Hades of beggars and bag people, many of whom had had, Justine suspected, normal homes and lives at some point. Where had this strength come from?" (239).

The question begs an answer and the answer is obviously the work of Anna Granite, whose philosophy has provided Dorothy the tools to overcome her childhood. Justine, despite being attractive and thin, has not managed to attain Dorothy's level of strength. This is emphasized several times throughout the novel. For example, Justine's job is assistant secretary, and the woman she assists is named Glenda. Justine doubts her abilities, believing that Glenda is superior to her: "Probably it was obvious to everyone, on a deep level, that Glenda was a conduit for the forces of order, rationality, and strength, and that she, Justine, was a mere appendage, useful insofar as she was a conduit for Glenda. Further, it seemed that this had been true all her life and would probably always be true" (306). As Justine continues meeting and interviewing Definitists, she becomes more critical of herself and begins seeing the value of the philosophy. For example, she contemplates the potential benefit of striving for an ideal self: "According to Definitist thought, for every imperfect entity, be it human or material, there exists a perfect counterpart; a lovely princess for every pimply shop girl. This perfection

was not an annulment of the shop girl, but an ideal for her to aspire to, and the clerk who whistled at her in the street could see and love the princess in her, just as she could see the glamorous playboy in him" (234). This causes her to look critically at herself: "Maybe, thought Justine bleakly, there is a perfect Justine Shade somewhere. A tall, full-lipped beauty who wears silk and leather. She lives in a beautiful, austere apartment and condescends to write a half-dozen or so brilliant pieces of journalism a year" (234). The thought of this ideal makes her long to improve her life: "This can't go on, she thought. Somehow, I have to go out and Live" (234). The more she encounters Definitists and their views, the more she begins to see things through Granite's philosophy:

> She was disconcerted to find herself thinking that perhaps, since she'd been in New York, the entire country had deteriorated as seriously as Manhattan had, that everywhere people were wading ankle-deep in rolling, rotting trash, that everywhere homeless people pissed in the streets and railed at the well-to-do who slunk shame-faced along the walls. This of course was exactly what Anna Granite had said would happen, due to weak-willed liberals and government meddling. For a moment she looked at the possibility of total collapse as if she were a Definitist and found the idea to be somehow dramatically and ethically satisfying. (289)

As we see, the philosophy briefly provides even Justine with a moral viewpoint, which is precisely what she has lacked her whole life. Gaitskill goes so far as to provide a literary critique to accompany the social one. While visiting a school built on Definitist principles, the English teacher decries the curriculum of contemporary schools: "'[Y]ou'd be shocked what they teach. Joyce, Kafka – horrible stuff about people's lives being destroyed by a crying baby. Or going to a carnival and getting lost and not being able to find what you wanna buy and getting depressed. Or a guy turning into a cockroach – it's unbelievable. It's

all about defeat and helplessness. No wonder the kids hate it'" (290). Gaitskill is once again

presenting an ironic view of the Definitist ideology, but when Justine starts to object to this

simplistic view, she finds herself disarmed: "Justine started to argue for the intrinsic value of

beauty in writing, but as he continued, she found herself seduced by his blunt sensibility, so

full of feeling yet so dumb, by his cheerful way of going after literature like a dog would a

bone" (290).

      Justine's self-doubts begin to torment her, and a call from her mother triggers a

panicked response. She goes out into the city on a self-destructive impulse to get drunk and

sleep with a stranger. She eventually ends up meeting Bryan, who is described as threatening:

"His voice was soft and gentle in a TV-lover boy style, but his pale eyes glittered with the

adrenal malice of a sex criminal who likes to crack jokes while reaming his sobbing victims"

(243). He informs her that he frequents the Hellfire Club, an S&M club, he says, "'You know,

master, slave, people being tied up and beaten, women getting fucked by dozens of guys. I'll

bet you'd like it'" (246). Justine feels threatened by Bryan, remembering that the Hellfire

Club was "the last place a beautiful model had been seen before being ritually murdered"

(246), yet she feels attracted to him, and "[s]he struggled to understand this attraction before

she was overwhelmed by it" (245). Justine gets blackout drunk and goes home with Bryan.

The aftermath of her encounter with Bryan is described this way: "Justine had just awakened

in the hellish but reassuringly familiar suburb of Hangover. Her eyeballs hurt, her vision was

static, the mucus in the passages of her head had turned to mud. Insects with many slow-

moving legs patrolled her skin" (281). Later, she remembers having sex with him; yet, the

memory "was not the least bit arousing; however she recognized something compelling in it,

a compulsion akin to that of a starving lab animal which will keep pressing the button that

once supplied it with food, even though the button now jolts its poor small body with

increasing doses of electric shock" (291). This startling simile makes clear that Justine's

behavior is self-destructive and compulsory, and doesn't fulfill her needs. The experience

leaves her upset and feeling like she is losing control: "Her mind had been moving in this

psychotic direction all morning, and it was beginning to alarm her. Even worse, it seemed as

though other people could see the distressed twistings and turnings in her head" (305-6). She

berates herself for her attraction to the dangerous Bryan, thinking, "If she was going to be

upset, it should be because she'd gone home with an abusive mental case, not because he

wasn't going to call her" (283). Her subsequent meetings with Bryan exhibit a strong contrast

with Granite's philosophy. Bryan describes an essay by Hegel: "'His basic idea is that people

crave freedom but that, because of the realities of their lives, they are inherently unfree. And

that the only way people can have a sense of freedom is by taking the freedom of others –

enslaving others'" (314). Although undoubtedly a misreading of Hegel's essay, as an ethics it

is the polar opposite of Objectivism, which holds that only by respecting the freedom of

others can an individual be moral. Justine's relationship with Bryan becomes more and more

abusive, both verbally and physically. Justine welcomes the abjection: "[S]he could barely

feel the welts rising on her back. Her knees hurt, she thought. He beat her as she squirmed on

the floor, caught in the steel trap that had closed on her when she was five years old" (346).

Again, she experiences a distancing from herself: "She was aware of her humiliation, but it

was so far away and had so little to do with her that she couldn't feel that either. Still, she

clung to it fiercely, as if it were her only chance to feel" (349). Their relationship becomes an

abusive mockery of love:

> 'Tell me you love me,' he said.
>
> 'I love you.'
>
> He pissed in her face. (349)

These experiences cause Justine to neglect her health: "The eating of meals had become burdensome to her; she was losing weight and becoming anxious about her health, yet she couldn't make herself eat nutritionally sound food" (356).

Clearly, Justine's connection to Sade and her fascination with power, dominance, and abjection place her interests in the realm of postmodern theory, but it isn't completely clear that Gaitskill is aware of this. She doesn't name theorists or mention "postmodern" or get very deeply into theory other than the ideas of Anna Granite. Nevertheless, Justine's ideas and viewpoint often mirror the postmodern. For example, when Justine meets with Dorothy, she brings up the subjectivity of the reader (or the death of the author): "'I mean what happens when people look at a thing and see in it something other than what its creator intended and aren't aware of the difference. That happens all the time, especially about writers. I just think it's interesting in the context of what Granite said about objective truth'" (325). Dorothy rejects this: "'[W]hy are you paying attention to dumb stuff like people thinking her work meant this or that when the important thing was what it in fact did mean?'" (329). Justine explains further: "'[W]hen people adopt a political position or philosophy, they rarely take it into their personality whole hog, whether they think they do or not. It is filtered through a life-long construct of individual perception, emotional needs, and assumptions about life'" (329). Dorothy views this as anathema to Definitism, but still finds it interesting: "This reeked of subjectivism, and I of course saw it as rot. Yet...it was interesting rot. I couldn't help but be curious even as I rejected it" (329). Here, the contrast between a postmodern embrace of subjectivity and the Objectivist insistence that we accurately perceive an objective reality is clearly delineated. Dorothy presses the point that this contrast is a moral one: "'The desserts we just ate – they embody qualities of lightness, gentleness, sweetness, and comfort – moral qualities because when you decide whether or not to have these things in your life,

you make a moral choice. Moral choice is not ambiguous; it is as concrete as the chairs we sit in'" (333). Justine rejects this viewpoint, but feels attracted to its certainty: "Hopeless, thought Justine, as are most attempts to quantify and contain. Still, she had to admit, there was something consoling, seductive even, about this vision of chairs and pieces of cake suspended, along with everything else, in a glistening web of order that connected them to all the morality in the universe" (333). In this exchange, Gaitskill is showing the weaknesses of the two viewpoints, but also how they complement each other, leading each character to be drawn to the ideas of the other. The two characters need each other, and the implication is that the two opposing viewpoints need each other as well. This is demonstrated more concretely by the novel's ending.

When Justine's article about Definitism is published in *Urban Vision* magazine, Dorothy feels betrayed because the article doesn't reflect a serious engagement with Granite's ideas. Instead, it mocks Granite and her followers, and blames Granite for neoliberalism:

> "This cultural utopia of greed, expressed in gentrification and the slashing of social programs, has had its spokesperson and prophet for the last fifty years, a novelist whose books are American fantasies that mirror, in all its neurotic excess, the frantic twist to the right we are now experiencing. Anna Granite, who coined the term 'the Truth of Selfishness,' has been advocating the yuppie raison d'être since the early forties; it is only now that her ideas are being lived out, in mass culture and in government."(357)

Justine's writing style is postmodern: "Justine went on for several paragraphs in that breezy pop *Vision*-speak, invoking television shows, movies, and media jokes about the inner conflicts of American psychology" (361). Dorothy storms out of her apartment to find Justine and confront her. Meanwhile, Justine is being severely abused by Bryan: "'You cunt,' he said.

'You fucking worthless cunt.' She didn't answer him because she had his belt tight around her throat. Her body convulsed and her sight went. He released his grip, and her vision cleared. Her arms and legs were cold; she tried to move her fingers and wasn't sure she succeeded" (368). Although Justine has willingly played along with his sadism, these passages make it clear that she is in real danger: "Her skin was so red it could have been scalded, her forehead was almost contorted with tension while her lower face was weirdly lax, her eyes were like terrified animals bolting in every direction and finding no release" (379). Dorothy storms into Justine's apartment to find that "Justine Shade lay naked on her bed, her hands and feet tied to its corners, her head raised, her wild mascara-smeared eyes staring at me with utter incomprehension" (379). Dorothy is shocked by her condition: "I saw marks on her thighs and breasts, and dried blood on her lips" (379). Bryan suggests that Dorothy join in the sadistic fun, but Justine pleads with Dorothy to untie her, saying that Bryan "has gone completely off the deep end" (380). Dorothy pushes Bryan out of the apartment, locks the door, and releases Justine. They lie on the bed together, and it is clear that something has blossomed between the two. Dorothy's first appearance in the novel tells us the result in hindsight: "I had thought of Anna Granite as the summit of my life, the definitive, devastating climax – and yet perhaps she had been only the foreshadowing catalyst for the connection that occurred between me and Justine, the bridge without which our lives would have continued to run their spiritually parallel courses" (11).

As this reading has illustrated, Justine and Dorothy represent postmodernism and objectivism respectively. Gaitskill gives us a comparison of the two viewpoints and despite her ironic recreation of Rand's fiction, objectivism comes out as the stronger philosophy. The novel's conclusion, bringing the two figures together and suggesting that they need each other, that they complement each other, demonstrates that objectivism has the answers for the

weaknesses inherent in postmodern ethics.

4.3 *Big If* by Mark Costello

Mark Costello's novel *Big If*, published in 2002, engages with the neoliberal era and explores

an ethics of selfishness, while not explicitly referring to Ayn Rand or other neoliberal

thinkers. The novel revolves around the main protagonists, siblings Vi and Jens Asplund, and

describes their differing life choices in the face of an uncertain, risk-oriented neoliberal

landscape. Vi works for the government as a Secret Service agent tasked with protecting the

Vice President. Her decision to take a government job has left her without family or friends,

living at the whim of the state. For long periods of time she loses all sense of who she is, that

is, she loses the sense of being a subject. The other Secret Service agents around her have

fared no better – each is struggling with marital, emotional, and family problems. Her brother

Jens, on the other hand, is a highly intelligent and creative programmer for an online video

game startup called BigIf. He is happily married to Peta, a successful real estate agent, and

has a young son named Kai. He feels a great pride in his accomplishments, both financial and

creative. The video game world that Jens and his colleagues have built functions along

neoliberal principles, with a functioning economy shaped by the invisible hand of the market.

BigIf is about to go public, and this means that Jens will soon strike it rich. However, Jens'

father, Walter, who has recently died, had expressed his disapproval of Jens' game shortly

before his death. This leads Jens into a moral dilemma that forms the heart of the book's

neoliberal message; a dilemma whose solution demonstrates an ethics of selfishness and

defies the reader's expectations. While Jens and Vi seem to represent the contemporary era,

their father Walter might represent modernity, while their mother, Jessica is more in line with

a postmodern ethics. *BigIf* wrestles with the limitations of these approaches while positioning

a neoliberal ethics of selfishness as an alternative.

Vi Asplund works for the Secret Service and is tasked with protecting the Vice President. The impact of Vi's work, the demands it makes on her, leave her feeling empty, as though she does not have a self. In a way, her government job has taken away her sense of being a subject. Costello's descriptions of her are peppered with phrases such as these: "Vi had lived in Tower South since coming to Protection, but standing at the window of her studio that morning, she wondered for a moment if anybody lived here. Her plants lived here, three geraniums along a dusty windowsill. Her clothes lived here...but Vi herself was generally gone" (69). The sense of her being gone is not only a physical one, but a larger one in which her entire self is erased by her job. Vi accepts this lack of a personal life: "Most of the agents had fairly shitty home lives, so Vi didn't feel too bad having none at all" (86). However, she does at times notice the loss, and at once such moment, she pays a visit to her brother Jens to try to recover her lost self: "She thought, I'm never in a home these days, a real home with real people living in it. Tower South, Vi's cubicle/studio near the Pentagon, didn't count as home" (252). Once she arrives at her brother's house, she notices the difference between their lives: "But this formica-bright condo in The Bluffs was a real home to a real family – a sample of the country the bodyguards defended. Vi thought, that's the problem – I've lost touch" (252). Vi makes an attempt to recover herself, to reconnect to her brother and restore her sense of herself as a subject, but the attempt fails as she cannot stop herself from scanning passersby for potential threats as if she were still executing her duties as a Secret Service agent: "Vi had come home to belong, to join the crowd for once, but she couldn't stop scanning hands as they walked along the streets of the downtown that weekend. Jens had caught her at it. 'Your eyes are always moving, Vi, like REM sleep only you're awake'" (129). Jens compares her state to that of someone asleep, as if she were not conscious

of her own actions. In a sense, she is programmed, much like the monsters in Jens' video game, who also continually scan for triggering events. Jens confronts her about this, saying, "'Why did you even come back here, Vi? I feel like I don't even know you'" (130). Afterwards, Vi returns to work and tries to return to her sleepwalking reality: "Vi popped her ears, in and out, riding on the jet, steeling herself to work the crowds, to forget them all, Walter, Jens and Peta, to get herself to emptiness and vacant mode" (130). The job has become her life, but she is not happy about it at all, in fact, she begins to think about retirement: "For the first time since leaving her hometown to join the Secret Service, Vi did the math and figured out that she was fifteen years and three months from retirement with pension" (251). At this stage, her pension is the only reward that her life-consuming job offers.

The other agents that Vi works with fare no better in their government jobs. For example, "There was Herc Mercado, twice divorced and not yet thirty, who often slept on O'Teen's couch because his latest manic girlfriend had locked him out and he was sick of breaking his own door in. There was O'Teen himself, a balding bachelor who had tried computer dating but found that he kept getting matched up with losers" (86). O'Teen has no family, but he does have a gambling problem: "O'Teen was a ratty Philadelphian, a lovelorn ex-computer dater and ruinous sports gambler. He lived alone in Arlington, where he had full cable and his mother and his bookie on speed dial" (126). There was Tashmo, the aging womanizer, described as "cranky, middle-aged, thirty years a bodyguard, whose wife was always after him to fix the car, fix the disposall [sic], who didn't give him a goddamn minute's peace the one day a week Tashmo managed to get home" (86). Tashmo had a reputation problem among the other agents: "Tashmo wasn't beloved by the other agents. They saw him for the selfish civil service schemer that he was" (272). Tashmo's great

dilemma is how to inform his wife that he is no longer cheating on her without admitting that he cheated on her in the first place. Tashmo has ja friend who is a former agent who has entered the private sector: "Loudon Rhodes, the ex-Reagan bodyguard, was living in L.A., running a private security firm, making millions in retirement" (111). He tries to convince Tashmo to leave the Secret Service to join the private sector: "He was always telling Tashmo that he ought to hang it up, retire, join the real world" (111). Notice how the private sector is referred to as the "real world," a world in which there are millions of dollars to be made. Vi's supervisor is Gretchen, a single mother who has little time for her son. Gretchen was a less than ideal supervisor: "Gretchen was a cold and scolding supervisor, richly hated by her agents" (74), who "believed in leadership by fear" (250). Yet, she is plagued by internal conflict: "She was starting to have fundamental doubts about herself. Not about her job, her methods as lead agent, the way she drove her people" (272), but rather, instead, "she was doubting something else. Was she a good mother?" (272). She tries to keep in touch with her son while she is traveling with the Vice President, but she "knew her morning phone calls weren't a substitute for mothering" (270). She fears for her son's well-being and development: "It didn't sound like much in the mothering department – a phone call, what was that? Pathetic – especially with Tev at such an awkward age and with all that trash out there, drugs and gangs and thievery and evil on CD, computer, television, movies, drops of poison in the well" (270). Finally, there is Vi's friend Bobbi Taylor-Niles, whose escape plan is to marry a rich man: "[S]he planned to marry a distinguished man of years and reputation, wealthy or at least well-to-do, a carnal, cynical arrangement maybe, but Bobbie had tried every other kind of marriage" (87). Bobbi's past can best be described as checkered: "The rest of her biography – three divorces, four abortions, seven maxed-out credit cards, one personal bankruptcy – was an accident, a draft. She would quit the service on her wedding day and say

goodbye to Vi and the crowds" (89). Bobbi has a nightmare that sums up the personal

sacrifices of the government job. She dreams of an assassin trying to kill the Vice President,

and of hurling herself in front of the bullet, but something is wrong, she tells Vi, "'Oh sure

and I'm a hero and I go down in history, all the way down to a footnote probably, but what the

fuck? I took the bullet like a good girl, and that's the fucking job – we plot against the

plotters, right? Plan and counterplan. Only we didn't stop this plot, Vi, because the real target

of the shooter was *me*'" (30, italics in the original). The nightmare drives home the message

that the Secret Service job is one of thankless self-sacrifice, in which the lives of its civil

servants are deliberately destroyed, in the name of a collective good. Far from being the ideal

way to live, the ideal ethics, this selfless approach leads to unhappiness, even madness. As

Bobbi tells Gretchen toward the end of the novel, "'It's crazy, Gretchen. We're all going

crazy'" (304).

In contrast to Vi, Jens has a life in the "real world," where he "wrote patches and

utilities for a start-up in West Portsmouth called BigIf, a massive multiplayer war game on

the Internet" (28). Jens is described as special, as a genius, even from early childhood: "Jens

got all the brains in the family; this was understood and not especially disputed. He was

locally considered something of a wonder, a math and physic prodigy" (13). After starting out

with a deep interest in weather patterns, and later, ham radio, Jens eventually finds his true

calling: "Ham radio and Morse – they were his two loves back then, the twin cyclones of his

heart. But, looking back, he saw that they were part, one part, of a youthful preparation for

Jens' shattering encounter with the true God: software" (150). Jens obtained access to a

computer at school and "was changed forever" (22). His first piece of software seems to

emphasize his focus on himself: "He spent a summer getting paler in the beaker storage

closet. He came out in September with his masterpiece, a program he called

JENSISNUMBER1.exe, which used a distant printer to spit out the sentence *JENS IS NUMBER 1!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*" (22). Although indicative of his adolescent mindset, the program also asserts his own sense of self-importance, emphasizing a feeling of selfish accomplishment. This feeling is ecstatic, the opposite of the way Vi feels about her non-existence: "Like the God of Israel, it went by many names, one for every face it showed: logic, code, loop, routine, algorithm, source. JENSISNUMBER1 – he remembered how it made him feel, the power and control, making the computer an extension of your will" (150). His love of software drives him to accomplishment: "Someday they would speak of the giants of computer science, Ada Lovelace, Alan Turing, Dennis Ritchie at Bell Labs, and Jens Asplund, father of the Jensatronic hyper-object language" (22). After bouncing around different jobs while in grad school, Jens joins BigIf with the specific goal of getting rich: "Many games were started in the fad, all of them pursuing the same vision strategy: take the VC money, build a game, do the marketing, get the player loads up to a stable-profit, self-sustaining waterline, then take the baby public and everyone gets rich, a can't-miss plan" (167). The game is actually successful and the company is planning to go public soon, but Vi doesn't like the video game because she feels that it is a waste of Jens' abilities: "There was a whiff of sellout and lost promise about Vi's brother" (29). Nevertheless, Jens vigorously defends his game: "'If you could see the source code, the logic of monsters, you'd see that it was beautiful'" (29). He compares his game to a great work of art: "'The technology is cool, state of the art. Our main software shell is eighteen million lines of beautiful cold code. It's the *Finnegan's Wake* of software, Vi, except it's longer and more complicated than *Finnegan's Wake*, and I wrote a good part of it'" (29). Jens' view of his accomplishment is echoed by Head, who leads the software development team: "Head said that Hollywood was dead, that the Web was the future of all entertainment narratives. Deep immersive gaming –

this was the new movies and they should all be damned glad to be among the founding fathers, the Chaplins and the Griffiths and the Lumières" (166). Here, Jens is compared to important cultural figures, and his game is viewed as a historically important development. This description of Jens echoes the grandiose modernist characters in Rand's novels, cultural and industrialist heroes who forge the way for the future, accomplishing greatness through their genius.

In fact, throughout the novel, Costello uses language that implies that Jens has a kind of God-like status, standing over his creation and observing it with a sense of pride. For example, the first description of Jens using the computer is: "He ran models of the Big Bang" (22). Here, the creation of the universe is linked to the creation of Jens' first program. Jens is also described as experiencing great ecstasy when he creates his virtual world's sun: "Jens and Naubek hacked out the refraction math, a way to get the white of the sub turning yellow-orange-bloody-red as it descends. Jens knew that he would never feel that way again" (294). Jens uses his childhood fascination with weather patterns to fashion realistic portrayals in his virtual world: "Toxic clouds drifted through the sky; the gamespace went dark beneath them, the shadow calculators taking over. The clouds were born at random intervals but moved pursuant to actual Weather Service models for the American southwest – Jens' touch, and he was proud of it" (155). Jens takes a personal pride in the thoroughness and complexity of his game, giving it dimensions that reflect reality: "Life, wisdom, speed, strength, agility, time, fate, magic, beauty, death – everything was numbers crunched through algorithms endlessly. My algorithms, Jens thought" (156). Jens and Naubeck immerse themselves deeper and deeper into the programming, which Costello describes as their "creation":

> They plunged deeper into code with each passing day. As they fell in love with their
> creation, the world around their maze seemed to fall away. For a long time, in the heat

of their creating, they knew and didn't know (they knew but they forgot) what the

code was *for*. If a subroutine is beautiful – flexible and balanced, efficient,

multithreaded, not one line longer than it needs to be – does it matter that its purpose

is to make a cartoon fart? (294, italics in the original)

Once the game goes online, the progress of players can be observed on a large screen: "The

big screen was a camera on the game, looking down, seeing all, like God or the Goodyear

Blimp" (153). This God-like status is attained by mastery of logic, which is reflected through

the "if" statements used by the programmers: "Jens' code was made of IF-switches and

WHILE-loops, of flow-control structures. Tell the system: test for Z, a data state. *IF* Z is true,

do something; *IF* Z is false, do nothing or do something else" (156, italics in the original).

His sense of the game's value is tied to his belief in the beauty of its logic: "He had built this

game, written it, the IFs and potential threads. He was certain of its beauty. When Walter

judged him, when Vi criticized with her scanning eyes, Jens knew they couldn't see the

beauty of the IFs" (156).

Jens' game itself demonstrates neoliberal economics and illustrates the invisible hand

principle. The game becomes a global success, driven by Jens' creation of the the monster

Hamsterman: "The first monster (Jens' design with Naubeck's help) was the cunning,

grinning, barrel-chested rodent biped Hamsterman, who became the game's first breakout

star. Kids in malls on five continents wore Hamsterman T-shirts, Hamsterman high-tops,

chewed Hamsterman bubble-gum" (154). Thus, through the Internet, the game is not only a

global product, but it is also used as a medium to market other products such as T-shirts and

shoes, but also includes in-game advertising of products. Furthermore, the world inside the

game functions as an almost ideal Objectivist economy. The goal of the game is to move west

from the starting point, and "you had to earn money to buy provisions. There were several

software-sanctioned ways to do this. Wise players hired out as guides. Strong players worked as bodyguards. Even a new player could find a spring and sell the water, or gather firewood in the overlush forests, or make and sell bread and boots and tunics, and survive that way" (157). The game world is an almost ideal neoliberal universe, with no government intervention in the market, and with each player trading on his or her strengths to earn a living. A problem arises, however, in the form of a class of takers who produce nothing: "Players engaged in rampant brigandage to get money to buy weapons to become more fearsome brigands to get money to buy better weapons" (159). This theft of the product of other player's hard work has a deterrent effect on the game world's economy: "Soon, normal human players, sick of dying or living in fear, desubscribed and monthly revenues downspiked" (160). This distortion of the market creates a crisis for the game's creators, who are worried about the impact on the value of their product: "The VCs panicked and the IPO was canceled. The bosses ordered patches in the shell to stop the war. Many patches were discussed. One would have stopped any player from hiring more than ten mercs at a time. There were numerous conceptual problems with this" (160). The game owners, panicking over the threat to their investment, feel the need to intervene in the economic activity of the game world: "They met and talked, managers and engineers, sipping seltzer water in conference rooms, charting counter-warlord strategies on smeary whiteboards. Why not declare a safe haven around the squatter camps? Or send the holybots through the desert spreading some kind of peace message?" (160). In the end, the invisible hand of the market intervenes before external regulation becomes necessary: "The crisis peaked and passed. Superwarlords got bigger on more killing, A few became megasuperwarlords, but one after another, each of them was swallowed up by his or her own retinue, which had grown too big to pay, feed, or lead. The mercenaries, going unpaid, mutinied, killed the megas, and fought

over spoils" (160). The result is a restoration of natural order, all without the need for heavy-handed intervention by the game creators: "Slowly normal players returned to the shops and roads and everything was back where it started" (160). Thus, BigIf not only represents the neoliberal capitalist era of globalized cultural products such as online video games, but it also functions according to neoliberal principles within its own gameplay.

Jens' father Walter, an insurance adjuster, clings firmly to his beliefs, which read like a short summary of modernism:

> Walter Asplund believed in many things, the dignity of humankind, the Genius of Democracy, the sanctity of the contract, *The Origin of Species*, the mission of the bloodmobile, the [insurance] charts devised in Hartford, poplin suits in summertime, brown bread with baked beans, little oyster crackers (with chowder, not with oysters), baseball, tennis, *The New Yorker*, travel hats he purchased from the back of *The New Yorker* (which he sometimes wore to baseball games), the pleasures of night skiing with his children on the bunny hill in Rye. He believed, that is, in almost everything but God. (11)

Here, we find everything from democracy to evolution to humanism to medicine, along with the cultural and economic structures of the modern world, and, like a good modernist, a rejection of religion. In fact, his rejection of religion is so fierce that "[h]e sat up in the den when his family was asleep, writing on his money, striking out the GOD from IN GOD WE TRUST, lest anybody think that by paying with the slogan he was buying into it" (11). However, Walter has a bout of existentialist angst when he does this, as he "was never really satisfied with his altered motto. He did not believe that we trust, or could trust, or should trust, in nothing" (12). So, Walter begins replacing the word "God" with "us." This constant altering of the money ensured that Walter's views began to literally circulate in his

community: "Finding a little piece of Walter in one's wallet forced the town to see itself as a set of lives, or one collective chorus-life" (12). Walter refuses to celebrate Christmas as a religious holiday and instead replaces it with a secular celebration of humanism: "Walter read a short reflection by Mr. H. G. Wells. Later they opened gifts, which Walter said was their way of honoring the dignity of humankind" (21). Evelyn, Walter's wife and Jens and Vi's mother, views Walter's ideas with skepticism, responding to his reading: "'Whoop-de-doo,' said Evelyn, raising her wineglass in a sarcastic toast" (21). In addition to her irony, Evelyn seems much more aligned with a postmodern ethics. After Walter's death, she relocates to Florida, and communicates by e-mail: "Her e-mails read like the letters of Louisa May Alcott, thoughtful, trenchant essays filled with observations about race relations in mid-Florida, and the country's moral soul, and the cruelties she saw doing volunteer work at the local shelter for battered and abandoned pets" (256). Her volunteer work at the animal shelter is an express criticism of capitalism: "Evelyn said the problem was that people saw their pets as consumer goods, like shoes or a new hat" (256). Her focus on race relations and animals is a rejection of Walter's humanism, and echoes the postmodern ethics of the other: "Evelyn said that pets and how we treated them were the secret index of our soul, and you could see the future of the nation at any shelter in the land" (256). Walter questions the rationality of Evelyn's concern for animals, but she turns the argument against him: "'I do what I can. I don't save every animal, or even most of them, but I do what I can, which is more than you can say, Walt. All your arguments add up to No. No, there is no God. No, there'll be no Christmas carols in the house. But what have you ever actually *done*? You scribble on your money. Cross out God'" (257, italics in the original). Walter and Evelyn seem to represent the two generations before Jens and Vi, and the result is a lack of ethical certainty among their children: "[U]nlike her bookish father, Vi had no morality" (12).

The novel's central conflict revolves around Walter's criticism of Jens' video game accomplishments. Shortly before he dies, Walter tells Jens he should stop working on the game: "'Your game is immoral, Jens. Worse, it's amoral. It's a waste of your gifts. You must quit right now'" (151). Jens questions his father's command: "'Why?' said Jens. 'To satisfy your idea of purity?'" (151). To this Walter replies with concern for Jens' well-being: "'No,' said Walter. 'You have to quit because you'll be unhappy if you don't'" (151). For Walter, happiness is found in adhering to a moral code, living in accordance to principles handed down by society, much like the insurance charts handed down to him by his employer. But Jens rejects this vision, asking "'What's wrong with being a success?'" (151). After his father's death, he complains about the exchange to his sister Vi: "'You should have heard him on the subject of the game. 'BigIf is immoral, Jens – worse, it's amoral.' Nice distinction, Dad. Am I happy? I'll be happy when we go IPO. I'll be happy when I'm comfortable for life'" (29). Here, Jens equates happiness not with doing his duty in a system of right and wrong, but with financial success and career achievement. His path to happiness differs from Walter's concept: "Am I happy? When I'm creating a cool application, a sweet design, I'm happy because I don't have to think about What It All Means. I left that to Walter, my self-appointed conscience'" (29). Nevertheless, his father's words haunt him, leaving him in doubt about the ethical values of his game. This doubt is exacerbated when his boss decides to implement new monsters that resemble humans, saying, "'We've got to up the ante folks. We've got to crank the dread. Our monsters are cartoons. Their life and death – cartoonish. We need human monsters. People want to shoot a face'" (168). Using the word "face" in this context summons echoes of Lévinas, directly contradicting postmodern ethics. Jens is asked to create a monster named Todd, a teenage school shooter whom the players hunt down in the halls of a high school. Jens feels reluctant to work on this new monster: "There was something in this

business of making monsters real or realistic which filled Jens with a deep sense of unease, as if the game were poised to cross some kind of line" (144). His doubt, spurred on by Walter's criticism, causes Jens to procrastinate: "He found it hard to concentrate on the code for Todd, simple though it was or should have been. His inability to finish the assignment was like a head cold which descended every time he clicked his buffers and opened a draft of Monster Todd" (141). Instead, he works on a different piece of software, "a program he liked working on, a program he enjoyed, a nice bright piece of value-neutral engineering" (144). Unfortunately, this leads to trouble at work. Jens tries questioning the concept of Todd, as if he doesn't understand what his bosses are requesting, but this doesn't work. His boss says:

> "Here's a concept, Jens. In every high school in this country, there is a quiet, troubled boy who is always thinking about murder. Maybe he is ugly, fat, or unpopular. Maybe he's a half-assed Satanist or a pimpled white supremacist angered by the failures of his skin. He's certainly a loser without normal friends or healthy extracurriculars...He brings the gun to school one day, planning to mow down. I say let's put that kid, a trademark of our time, up on screen." (169-70)

When Jens continues his reluctance, he is warned: "'We can fire anyone, Jens. I believe we could even fire you'" (171). Learning that his close colleague, Naubeck, has just been fired, Jens feels deep uncertainty: "Could they fire him? What would he tell Peta if they did? What about the plan for their family future – Hang on for the IPO, get the options, reassess?" (171).

As the novel shifts to Jens' wife Peta's point of view, we get an interesting contrast to Walter's perspective. A successful real estate agent, Peta has embraced neoliberal capitalism. Her primary customers are the wives of newly rich Internet entrepreneurs: "She was paid to coddle women like Mitzi Hindenburg (wife of Barry Hindenburg, the screensaver visionary) and Chappie Xing (wife of Ai-Me Xing, also known as Winston, the father of the 3-D e-mail

singing postcard and other online breakthroughs). Peta always steered them to closing in the end" (177). By giving her this specific group of customers, Costello portrays for us the financial benefits of getting rich during the Internet boom, illustrating the other side of Walter's ethical qualms. Peta has developed some theories about the newly rich generation: "Peta was no Marxist (who could be in this market?), but she did believe that there was a new ruling class and a new proletariat. The rulers controlled the means of scheduling, The proles were those who bore the brunt of dithering and cancellations" (177). Although ironically voiced, the theory introduces a portrait of the contemporary generation and its inability to make decisions or define values. This section of the novel focuses on Peta's attempt to find the perfect house for Lauren Czoll, the wife of the CEO of Jens' company, who will soon strike it rich when the company goes public. Lauren is unreliable and indecisive: "Lauren, being a new ruler, wasted everybody's time, coming late, forgetting some appointments" (178). As she shows Lauren property after property, unable to find the right one, Peta identifies Lauren's indecision as a generational problem: "All Peta really needed was an answer to the question What does Lauren want? What will make her happy – truly, deeply, finally happy? Why was this so difficult for people nowadays?" (178). Here, she illuminates the contemporary dilemma, that of not having a set of values to guide decisions: "It seemed to be the new plague of this age, this confusion over wants and needs. Poverty was pressure, Peta knew, but wealth created pressure too. The pressure on the software wives was quiet and corrosive – if you can have anything, buy *anything* you see, why are you still nervous and dissatisfied?" (178 italics in the original). Here, we see the problem of the limitless choices of a neoliberal economy, creating ethical uncertainty. Peta notices this problem in Jens, and connects it to his procrastination over programming Monster Todd: "Peta saw corrosion in her clients and in Jens. Poor Jens was building monsters, on the verge of finally getting rich,

but it wasn't good or pure enough somehow" (178).

Although it is clear which side of the argument Peta is on, one of her experiences while working as a volunteer on election day emphasizes the other side, ratcheting up the intensity of Jens' dilemma for the reader. Among the volunteers are members of the organization "Mothers for the Truth about Gun Violence" (278). Peta considers talking to the women and asking them about their political views, but she is frightened: "Peta wanted to ask the women from The Truth why children shot children, why there was, or seemed to be, a trend, and what could be done to stop them in the future...But the women from the Truth were kind of spooky" (280). Peta intuits that the women are themselves victims: "Peta guessed or suspected that what bound the women to The Truth, and to each other, was that they had all lost children in school shootings" (280). Peta is responding to visible cues that signal their experience of trauma: "They had a wounded, disemboweled look, and a Moonie farawayness in the eyes" (280). Her reaction to the women is visceral; the thought of their loss triggers fear, and, in fact, "the phrase itself, *school shooting*, made her kind of sick" (280, italics in the original). Briefly, she puts herself, and by extension, the reader, in the the shoes of these mothers: "For a moment Peta felt for them. It's Kai ten years from now who dies in the hallway with the others. It was fully real to her for as long as she could stand it, a moment and no more" (280-1). This brief discussion buried in the description of a political campaign appears to be a rather obvious device to bring home the real impact of Monster Todd and the reasons why it may not be ethical to create such a monster in a video game. The Mothers for the Truth are representatives of the potential victims should Jens' game inspire violence. In fact, Costello almost replicates the story line of the game itself in his description, writing: "There had been a rash of shootings that year and the year before, one in Oregon, one or maybe more in Southern California. Peta saw the stories in the paper, on TV, children

shooting children after study hall, parents asking why. There was always at least one hero story in the mix, the brave teacher who disarmed the kid or led the other kids to safety through a locker room" (280). The game would let the players play the role of the hero. Jens' game is no longer some abstract proposition or some avenue to riches; it becomes a potential threat to his own child, Kai.

The stage is set for a classic literary dilemma in which the character must choose the right path: "Jens had come to see his father's point. BigIf was immoral or amoral – the sheer scale of the killing, the product tie-ins with the frequent-flier miles, and the sinister new monsters (Postal Worker, Todd), the ones who look like us. This was the case for quitting. On the other hand, Jens knew it made no sense to leave BigIf now, after all his work, with his options vested" (292). As Jens struggles with the decision, he turns to his sister to help him sort it out, telling her about his conversation with Walter: "'He told me I had to quit. *Quit*? This game is my chance to make some real money. I'm not greedy, but I'd like to get out of the rat race, have more time with Kai, maybe see Peta not have to work so hard, so she's not a zombie every night. I'd like to do some pure research – and, yes, maybe really leave my mark with something great. Are these *wrong* things to want?'" (258, italics in the original). Vi assures him that it is not wrong to want these things, but he continues to try to justify himself to her: "'I know the game itself, the stuff you see, the monsters and the plugs for snow blowers and frequent-flier-mile tie-ins – well, it's pretty bad. But the code, the engineering – that's *totally* different. I don't expect him to understand the beauty, or frankly the *honor*, of the engineering. But I do expect him to trust me, trust my judgment'" (258, italics in the original). Jens tries to argue that his motivations are more serious than mere financial gain: "'Dad thought I wanted the money 'cause I wanted yachts and sports cars. And if that's your motivation, then sure, working at BigIf is probably pretty shameful. But I've never been that

way. And that's what hurt me when he said I had to quit'" (258). Vi offers no guidance about his ethical choice, but instead tries to heal his anger toward his father: "'Give Walter a break. The guy was human, big surprise. If you're happy in your life, what difference does it make?'" (259). After Jens speaks with Vi, the reader is left waiting at the crossroads, not knowing which direction Jens will take, with the stakes clearly illustrated: "He had joined the game to make cool objects out of software, and, yes, for the money and the options, the chance to cash out young and return to pure research. He had built BigIf with Naubeck and the others, and his options were waiting for the IPO, and everything was good, but was it what he wanted? He was undecided" (291).

As the reader contemplates Jens' quandary, it seems almost inevitable that he will have to make the "right" choice, the "good" choice, that he will have to honor his father's wishes and leave the game, give up the money, and be the self-sacrificing hero of literature we all know and love. Yet, what follows is almost shocking. Jens begins to lean in the other direction, focusing on his own self interest:

> Jens had tried to tell his father that it didn't matter that the code was for a war game.
> Walter didn't understand, of course. How could he? He wasn't there the night they
> wrote the sun. Jens thought of Vi at the house. He thought of what she had said – not
> everything in your life has to do with you. He hadn't understood it at the time, but
> now he thought that she'd meant that he ought to mind his own life and family, and
> not worry about BigIf, and whether it was good or bad, perfect or imperfect, the
> cartoons or the code. Give yourself a break, give Walter a break, don't worry about
> purity, just live. Peta could have said the same thing probably, but from Vi it carried
> weight. (294)

After all the deliberation and worry, Jens goes into work and speaks to Meredith, his boss,

who had fired his colleague Naubeck, and threatened to fire him. He apologizes to her for his recent behavior: "'I admit I lost my head and I apologize for that. And I just wanted to make sure that we're fine, you and me, with our relationship. I know I haven't been the most productive member of the team either. Hell, I'll say it Meredith: I've been in a slump. Monster Todd – he troubles me'" (295). The opportunity for Jens to make an impassioned plea against Monster Todd has arrived, but instead Jens acknowledges the economic realities of his situation: "'I didn't come to pick a fight or grovel. I know we're living in the marketplace – that's fine and I accept it'" (295). Here, he accepts the reality of his position as an employee in a capitalist economy and says it's "fine." Instead of refusing to create the unethical monster or trying to talk Meredith out of creating it, he relinquishes his moral qualms, saying, "'I couldn't work or I couldn't work on Todd. It was like flu bug, Meredith, like a three-day flu, a head cold, a nothing stupid kind of thing, and yet you're totally wiped out, you're good for nothing, and there's nothing you can do but wait until it clears. What I came to say is that it cleared. Now I'm better. I feel like I can work and that's why I thought I ought to clear the air'" (296).

After all the buildup, this passage is anti-climactic – there is no heroic moment of self-sacrifice, no speech of moral condemnation, no defiance of authority. Jens accepts his position in a capitalist marketplace and acts in his own self-interest despite the potential danger this might pose to society and even his own child. The decision is not portrayed as an act of cowardice and no character condemns it. Instead, Jens gains a sense of peace, going to Peta's office to tell her of his choice: "Jens had come to tell Peta that everything was going to be all right now. He felt it in his chest as he waited in the hall, new health and peace. He would get back to work and finish Monster Todd, the school shooter whom other kids could hunt through the halls" (298). Jens has chosen his own happiness and his own financial

success over abstract duty to a humanism embraced by his father. Earlier in the book, as Vi contemplated her father's defacing of the dollar to replace "God" with "us," she offers us an alternative perspective on his views that foreshadows Jens' decision: "She knew he hadn't meant that we trust in the U.S., the United States, a unit of community meaninglessly large. No, he'd meant that we should trust in a small town, in the people of a town, or maybe just the people that you know" (39). Walter's humanism is reduced to a manageable size, to the "people that you know," and the duty to the unknown public that has robbed Vi and her colleagues of their personal lives is replaced with taking care of yourself and your family. The ethics of selfishness has prevailed.

5. A Higher Power

> The world shifted, catching lots of smart people off guard, churning up issues you had thought settled forever beneath the earth's crust. The more sophisticated you are, the more annotated your mental life, the more taken aback you're likely to feel, seeing what the world's lurch has brought to light, thrusting up beliefs and desires you had assumed belonged to an earlier stage of human development.
>
> What is this stuff, you ask one another, and how can it still be kicking around, given how much we already know? It looks like the kind of relics that archaeologists dig up and dust off, speculating about the beliefs that had once animated them, to the best that they can be reconstructed, gone as they are now, those thrashings of proto-rationality and mythico-magical hypothesizing, and nearly forgotten.
>
> Now it's all gone unforgotten, and minds that have better things to think about have to divert precious neuronal resources to figuring out how to knock some sense back into the species. It's a tiresome proposition, having to take up the work of the Enlightenment all over again, but it's happened on your watch. (Goldstein 4-5)

5.1 Introduction

The above passage opens Rebecca Newberger Goldstein's novel *36 Arguments for the Existence of God* (2010). Goldstein proposes a "shift" that has brought back something we had thought buried – something she identifies as pre-Enlightenment that must be "reconstructed" to be understood. From the title of her novel, and her description of this shift as "proto-rationality and mythico-magical hypothesizing," we can infer that she is referring to the return of religious belief. The novel's protagonist, Cass Seltzer, is a psychologist who specializes in the psychology of religion, and is described as "the William James for the twenty-first century" (58). In the novel, Goldstein explores how religion can provide ethical certainty and structure even in a world where religion is supposedly obsolete. This novel is only one of a wide range of novels exploring this theme, many of which directly cite William James or draw from his ideas. In the following argument, I'll try to suggest why James' pragmatist concept of religion can thrive in a postmodern environment. This will be followed by readings of two novels that will attempt to illustrate how this Jamesian concept of religion

is being explored in contemporary fiction.

The postmodern condition, as Lyotard famously pronounced, is characterized by "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv): we no longer accept the totalizing truth systems prevalent during modernity, replacing them instead with with a number of smaller narratives. Another way of describing this would be to say we move from a monistic concept of "reality" or "truth" to a pluralistic view of "worlds" or "truths." This loss of the absolute might seem to pose a threat to most religious systems, which usually lay claim to direct access to some plane of higher, universal truth, so how can religious belief be returning in such a philosophical environment? Shouldn't the kind of skepticism described by Lyotard be inimical to religious belief?

Actually, some postmodern theologians have seen the pluralism and multiple truths of postmodernity as an opportunity. In *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (2003), Kevin J. Vanhoozer points out that postmodernity calls for "the return of the repressed" and the "embrace of the 'other'" (32) as part of its critique of modernity, since the creation of universalist thought systems requires disregarding or eliminating anything that doesn't fit the system. Vanhoozer goes on to claim that "one candidate for 'most repressed other' in modernity is religion" (32). The development of scientific, non-religious ontology by biologists, chemists, and physicists; the widespread implementation of secular government and education; and the philosophical implications of Nietzsche's proclamation that "God is dead" relegated religious faith to "the margins of private preference" (32), as Vanhoozer describes it. If we accept, then, that religious belief was marginalized during modernity, the emergence of postmodernity opens the door to a return of religion, or as theologian Graham Ward puts it: "The emergence of the postmodern has fostered post-secular thinking" (qtd. in Vanhoozer 32). The pluralism inherent in postmodernism represents an opportunity for

religion to regain equal standing with science and secular thought, since it eliminates the need for the reconciliation of conflicting narratives that plagued theologians during the modern era. The acceptance of multiple simultaneous truths means that religion, science, and secular thought can co-exist peacefully without the need for a universalizing metanarrative.

If postmodernity removes the certainty of the absolute, alerting us to the fact that our truths and our concepts of reality are constructed and contingent on innumerable factors such as class, race, gender, nationality and so forth, and helping us to emancipate ourselves from discursive power structures; it offers little in the way of guidance about how to navigate the resulting sea of uncertainty. If all systems of ethics are culturally contingent and manipulable by hegemony, then how is the postmodern subject supposed to make real-world decisions about how to live? If both our perceptions and our interpretations of those perceptions are suspect, then decision-making becomes nearly impossible. Ethical structures, such as those contained in most religions, provide guidelines on how to act, and thus ease the quandaries inherent in the postmodern perspective, although, of course, these structures remain every bit as problematic as ever. Taking advantage of the postmodern turn to plurality, postmodern subjects can adopt and incorporate religious ethical structures without needing to reconcile them with other constructions of reality, including those offered by postmodernism itself.

Of course, in order to accomplish this, we would need a concept of religion that relinquishes claims to universality; one that accepts the contingencies of individual experience, and tolerates other "truths." Such a vision of religious belief is offered in James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which is why I believe this book has become a key text for contemporary writers. For James, a belief is "true" if it is useful or good to believe: "*The True is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief*" (*Pragmatism* 42, italics in the original). For James, this adoption of a functional truth serves an ethical

purpose, helping us to lead a better life: "[I]f there be any life that it is really better we should lead, and if there be any idea which, if believed in, would help us to lead that life, then it would be really *better for us* to believe in that idea" (42, italics in the original). He extends this concept to religious belief as well, "*If theological ideas prove to have a value for concrete life, they will be true, for pragmatism, in the sense of being good for so much. For how much more they are true, will depend entirely on their relations to the other truths that also have to be acknowledged*" (40, italics in the original), as he expressed it in his seminal book, *Pragmatism* (1907). Thus, as we can see, a pragmatist conception of religion fulfills the demands we outlined earlier: it serves the purpose of providing ethical value while at the same time retaining a pluralist concept of truth, allowing the simultaneous embrace of scientific and secular beliefs. James' version of religious belief could be embraced by a postmodern subject in need of ethical structure.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, we find a whole range of ideas that will reappear a century later in contemporary fiction. James examines religion as a personal matter, excluding specific dogmas, organizations, or symbols, and instead focusing on individual experience. He proposes that religious experiences can effect personal transformation, leading the immoral to adhere to strict ethical codes, the dejected to become hopeful and motivated, the selfish to become saintlike in their selflessness, and the fearful to gain courage. It matters not to James whether a vision of God, for example, is "real" or merely a hallucination caused by neurological dysfunction or intoxicating substances – its "truth" lies in the impact of the experience. This approach to religion closely aligns with numerous contemporary novels in which dejected, hopeless, indecisive, and self-destructive characters have some kind of religious experience and subsequently achieve ethical transformation. Among these novels I count *Infinite Jest* (1996) by David Foster Wallace,

Thumbsucker (1999) by Walter Kirn, *Indecision* (2005) by Benjamin Kunkel, *This Book Will Save Your Life* (2006) by A.M. Holmes, and *Luminarium* (2012) by Alex Shakar, in addition to the two novels I will read shortly.

Before I begin with that, I would like to examine a few concepts that I will identify in the following close readings that are drawn from James. First of all, James offers a purely pragmatist definition of religion, created to avoid dispute over dogma: "[*T*]*he feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*" (*Varieties* 42). The "divine" he defines as: "any object that is god*like*, whether it be a concrete deity or not" (45, italics in the original), and he further parses "godlike" by defining it as that which is "most primal and enveloping and deeply true" (45). We can see that James' definition of religion is vague and individual, and does not refer to any specific dogma, but rather allows each individual to form his or own conclusion about the divine. He frequently refers to this godlike object as a "higher power" or "higher powers." James explores what he describes as mind-cure: "[T]he intuitive belief in the all-saving power of healthy-minded attitudes as such, in the conquering efficacy of courage, hope, and trust" (90). This curative effect of positive thinking can also be attained through religious belief if we believe "that a higher power will take care of us in certain ways better than we can take care of ourselves, if we only genuinely throw ourselves upon it and consent to use it" (108). Thus, the belief in a higher power serves a practical function in helping to maintain a healthy-minded attitude and reap the physical and psychological benefits of this attitude.

James catalogs and describes a wide range of religious experiences which I do not have space to recite here, but I would like to provide a glimpse some of their qualities. For example, James names four characteristics of mystical states of consciousness. First, they are

ineffable: "[I]ts quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others" (300). Next, they have a noetic quality, they "are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance" (300). Third, they are transient: "Except in rare instances, half an hour, or at most an hour or two, seem to be the limit beyond which they fade into the light of common day" (300). And, finally, they are experienced passively: "Although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations...the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance" (300). Furthermore, James goes to great lengths to give examples of people experiencing a "presence" of some kind that cannot be perceived through the senses: "Probably every religious person has the recollection of a particular crisis in which a directer vision of the truth, a direct perception, perhaps, of a living God's existence, swept in and overwhelmed the languor of more ordinary belief" (68). These descriptions of religious experiences echo the experiences of characters in the novels I will examine next.

5.2 *The Marriage Plot* by Jeffery Eugenides

In *The Marriage Plot* (2011), Jefferey Eugenides explores how a pragmatist approach to religion can help solve the ethical weaknesses of postmodernism. The novel begins with an extended critique of postmodern theory and its rise to popularity in the American academic world that runs for over 100 pages. The three main characters, Madeleine Hanna, Mitchell Grammaticus, and Leonard Bankhead, are all depicted as critical and disapproving of postmodern theory. Mitchell Grammaticus, whose Greek ancestry and name make him a logical stand-in for the author, decides to change his major from English to Religious Studies after reading William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), and this book forms a basis for his thinking throughout Eugenides' novel. Mitchell's pragmatist religious

approach leads him on a spiritual quest whose purpose seems to be ethical in nature. Mitchell

attempts to enact an ethics of being for the other, but fails. Only after a religious experience

of the kind described by William James leads him to make the right choice in his relationship

with Madeleine does Mitchell believe he can live ethically. Leonard Bankhead, who suffers

from bipolar disorder, has a psychotic episode, which he interprets as a religious experience,

and ends up making a choice similar to Mitchell's. Eugenides' novel, although ostensibly

about a love triangle among college students in the 1980s, is also a meditation on the state of

the novel, as the title suggests. The resolution of the characters' ethical problems is also

portrayed as a solution to the problems facing literature. Thus, the pragmatist approach to

religion appears to be a solution for both the problems of postmodernity and the postmodern

novel as well.

The first approximately 100 pages of *The Marriage Plot* are primarily concerned with

the narrative of Madeleine Hanna, an English major at Brown University. Madeleine is

associated with and defined by her relationship with literature from the opening sentence of

the novel: "To start with, look at all the books" (3), after which her reading tastes are

cataloged. Aside from setting up the plot of the love triangle with Leonard and Mitchell,

many of these pages present an extensive critique of the postmodern theory Madeleine

encounters during her studies. Early on, we are informed that "[t]he wholesome, patriotic

values of her parent's generation were now on the ash heap of history, replaced by a nihilistic,

post-punk sensibility that Madeleine herself didn't understand" (9). The "wholesome" values

of her parents have been displaced by a nihilism that Madeleine doesn't understand, leaving

her with a "feeling of being out of step for this day and the rest of her life" (13). Although at

this stage, postmodern theory has yet to be evoked, the scene is being set to launch an explicit

attack that goes on to name names. Even the romantic plot that serves as the structure of the

novel employs a critique of postmodern theory at certain points. For example, we are told, "Madeleine's love troubles began at a time when the French theory she was reading deconstructed the very notion of love" (24). It later becomes clear that "she had an unhealthy obsession with *A Lover's Discourse*" (99), Roland Barthes' postmodern deconstruction of love. This book in particular comes in for a heavy dose of criticism and is dismissed as ineffective. As Madeleine tries to cope with the difficulties in her love life, she uses a deconstructive approach that utterly fails:

> *A Lover's Discourse* was the perfect cure for lovesickness. It was a repair manual for the heart, its one tool the brain. If you used your head, if you became aware of how love was culturally constructed and began to see your symptoms as purely mental, if you recognized that being "in love" was only an idea, then you could liberate yourself from its tyranny. Madeleine knew all that. The problem was, it didn't work. She could read Barthes' deconstruction of love all day without feeling her love for Leonard diminish one bit. (100)

Here, deconstruction is shown to be ineffective, inapplicable to real world problems. This is further emphasized through the third-person indirect freestyle narrator's descriptions: "The magnolia trees hadn't read Roland Barthes. They didn't think love was a mental state; the magnolias insisted it was natural, perennial" (82).

We could dismiss this critique of Barthes as being merely connected to Madeleine's relationship struggles and not a critique of postmodern thought if this were the only instance of such criticism. However, other theorists and works receive a similar treatment. As Madeleine begins to encounter this trendy new literary theory, she displays skepticism: "Madeleine began hearing people saying 'Derrida.' She heard them saying 'Lyotard' and 'Foucault' and 'Deleuze' and 'Baudrillard.' That most of these people were those she

instinctually disapproved of – upper-middle-class kids who wore Doc Martens and anarchist

symbols – made Madeleine dubious about the value of their enthusiasm" (29). This

dubiousness is echoed once again by the third-person narrator, who keeps quite close to

Madeleine's viewpoint: "College wasn't like the real world. In the real world people dropped

names based on their renown. In college, people dropped names based on their obscurity"

(29). Here, the narrator suggests that the enthusiasm for postmodern theory was based on the

obscurity of the theorists and not on their "real world" accomplishments, and that it amounted

to nothing more than a kind of name-dropping. When Madeleine finally decides to take

Semiotics 211, the course focusing on postmodern theory, she does so for social, rather than

intellectual reasons: "Madeleine had always been popular at school. Years of being popular

had left her with the reflexive ability to separate the cool from the uncool, even within

subgroups, like the English department, where the concept of cool didn't appear to obtain"

(30).

Semiotics 211 is led by professor Michael Zipperstein, a former New Critic, who had

turned to postmodern theory after "he'd met Roland Barthes at a dinner party and been

converted, over cassoulet, to the new faith" (24). Although he is described as having a "guru's

dome and beard" (25), Zipperstein and his course are treated as skeptically as the other

postmodernists. Rather than being swayed by its academic or intellectual value, we are told

that the appeal of semiotics was social: "Going to college in the moneymaking eighties

lacked a certain radicalism. Semiotics was the first thing that smacked of revolution" (30).

However, there is no indication that the revolutionary quality of postmodern theory was

desirable for political reasons, but rather, "[s]emiotics was the form Zipperstein's midlife

crisis had taken. Becoming a semiotician allowed Zipperstein to wear a leather jacket, to fly

off to Douglas Sirk retrospectives in Vancouver, and to get all the sexy waifs in his classes"

(61). So, Zipperstein is mostly concerned with his image, and it is implied, his interest in semiotics has more to do with his ego than with scholarship: "Instead of leaving his wife, Zipperstein had left the English Department. Instead of buying a sports car, he'd bought deconstruction" (61). Although this withering commentary might seem to be enough criticism for poor Zipperstein, Eugenides makes sure we get the message. After assigning his own book, *The Making of Signs*, to the class, we are told, "Even Madeleine, who found all the reading hard-going, could tell that Zipperstein's contribution to the field was reformulative and second-tier" (32). If we are not yet sure that Zipperstein is to be held in contempt, the coup de grace comes when Thurston Meems, the novel's representative semiotics student, pronounces his judgment: "'Zipperstein's sort of brain-dead, don't you think?'" (109). After Madeleine complains that Zipperstein "never says anything" (109), Meems agrees, "'He's inscrutable. He's like Harpo Marx without the horn'" (109). Although I am personally a fan of Harpo Marx, this is hardly a ringing endorsement of a university professor.

Madeleine's reactions to the reading selections in Semiotics 211 continue this vein of criticism. The reading selections, we are told, "were eccentric if not downright arbitrary" (32). Madeleine finds the texts unrewarding: "In Week Four, Zipperstein assigned Umberto Eco's *The Role of the Reader*. It hadn't done much for Madeleine. She wasn't all that interested, as a reader, in the reader. She was still partial to that increasingly eclipsed entity: the writer" (53). This leads her to make a judgment on the entire field of semiotics: "Madeleine had a feeling that most semiotic theorists had been unpopular as children, often bullied or overlooked, and so had directed their lingering rage onto literature" (53). Finally, she finds a text that she likes, Jonathan Culler's *On Deconstruction*, only to find it dismissed by Thurston Meems. She argues, "'Maybe it's just me, but wasn't it a relief to read a logical argument for once?'" (54). Her reaction to Derrida's *Of Grammatology* is less than

enthusiastic:

> Since Derrida claimed that language, by its very nature, undermined any meaning it
> attempted to promote, Madeleine wondered how Derrida expected her to get his
> meaning. Maybe he didn't. That was why he deployed so much arcane terminology, so
> many loop-de-looping clauses. That was why he said what he said in sentences it took
> a minute to identify the subject of. (59-60)

This point is emphasized by direct citations of Derrida, mocking his writing, "Could 'the access to pluridimensionality and to a delinearized temporality' really be a subject?" (60). After Semiotics 211, Madeleine flees to the library to read nineteenth-century novels, "to restore herself to sanity" (60); the implication being that postmodern theory is driving her insane. Madeleine definitely prefers reading a well-constructed novel: "How wonderful it was when one sentence followed logically from the sentence before! What exquisite guilt she felt, wickedly enjoying narrative!" (60).

We could choose to see this extended critique of postmodern theory as merely representative of Madeleine's viewpoint, and dismiss her as perhaps too conservative or too conventional to appreciate postmodernism, if it weren't for the fact that the other two main characters of the novel also reject it. In fact, it is this distaste for postmodern theory that brings Leonard and Madeleine together, launching the main plot of the novel. During a discussion of Peter Handke's *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* (1972), Thurston Meems praises the author's remorseless fictionalization of his mother's suicide, and the narrator tells us of Meems: "He aspired to be a person who would react to his own mother's suicide with high-literary remorselessness, and his soft, young face lit up with pleasure" (33). Leonard makes his first speaking appearance in the novel by criticizing this response, commenting, "'[W]asn't anyone put off by Handke's so-called remorselessness? Didn't this book strike

anyone as a tad cold?'" (34). During the back and forth between Meems and Leonard, in

which Meems states that "'[b]ooks aren't about 'real life.' Books are about other books'" (35),

and Leonard remarks, "'[I]f your mother kills herself it's not a literary trope'" (35), Madeleine

finds herself rejecting Meems' views and being attracted to Leonard. Madeleine's first social

encounter with Leonard comes after she complains to him about not coming to her aid during

a classroom discussion. "'I thought you were on my side'" (55), she tells him. When Leonard

misses a week of class, it means that "Madeleine was left to contend with semiotics, and with

Zipperstein and his disciples, all by herself" (59). These early encounters serve to place

Madeleine and Leonard together in opposition to Zipperstein and his followers, and thus in

opposition to postmodern theory. This is what unites them. Leonard openly expresses his

distaste for semiotics, saying, "'I didn't get interested in philosophy because of linguistics. I

got interested for the eternal verities. To learn how to die, et cetera. Now it's more like, 'What

do we *mean* when we say we die?' 'What do we *mean* we mean when we say we die?' '" (57-

8, italics in the original).

     Complicating matters somewhat is the description of Leonard that Eugenides offers.

Leonard, a genius with a double major who suffers from mental illness, has long hair, wears a

bandanna, chews tobacco, is rather large, speaks in a soft, delicate voice, shaves irregularly,

and has "St. Bernard's eyes" (51) matches a detailed description of David Foster Wallace.

Leonard even wears Timberland boots, just as Wallace was known to do. An early scene

describes him as having his hair "in a masculine ponytail like a Scottish warrior" (63). This

seems like a reference to William Wallace, the hero of *Braveheart* (1995), whom David

Foster Wallace, perhaps jokingly, once claimed as an ancestor (Lipsky 168). Another

giveaway is the description of a picture of Leonard "standing in a snowy field, wearing a

comically tall stocking cap" (Eugenides 115), which matches the dust jacket photo of

Wallace's book, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (1997), which happens to boast an endorsement from Jefferey Eugenides on its cover. However, Eugenides has repeatedly denied that Leonard is based on Wallace, and so we are left to either disbelieve the author, whose character in a novel about the state of the novel is a nearly exact replica of one of his generation's most important novelists, or to assume that Eugenides, whose alter ego in the book, Mitchell Grammaticus, competes with Leonard for Madeleine's affections, has some major Freudian issues to work out. I actually believe the latter scenario to be more interesting, but I think it is clear that the uncanny resemblance between Leonard and Wallace is too obvious to be accidental, especially in a novel as meticulously constructed as *The Marriage Plot*. In any case, it complicates the character of Leonard, adding a layer of subtext to his scenes. When Madeleine sees Leonard's apartment, the narrator tells us, "The apartment had a message. The message said: I am an orphan" (76). This word choice is unusual because Leonard, although he comes from a dysfunctional family, is not actually an orphan. However, Wallace once stated in a famous interview, "The postmodern founders' patricidal work was great, but patricide produces orphans, and no amount of revelry can make up for the fact that writers my age have been literary orphans throughout our formative years" (McCaffery 150). Add to this the description of Billy, a young man Madeleine briefly dates: "On the wall of his living room Billy had painted the words *Kill the Father*. Killing the father was what, in Billy's opinion, college was all about" (Eugenides 39, italics in the original). Billy, a filmmaker, claims his father is Godard, the French director, indicating to us that the patricide he is advocating is artistic. Viewing scenes like this through the filter of Wallace's words and seeing Leonard as a stand-in for Wallace adds an extra layer of meaning to some parts of the novel, connecting Leonard to Wallace's very public criticism of postmodernism. These speculations reinforce my argument, so I choose to include them here,

but they are not essential – Madeleine and Leonard both reject postmodern theory even if we choose to accept Eugenides' denials.

The third major character, Mitchell Grammaticus, spends less time contending directly with postmodernism, but this is because he decides not to study English: "Like Madeleine, Mitchell had started out intending to be an English major. But after reading *The Varieties of Religious Experience* for a psychology course, he'd changed his mind" (117). Inspired by William James and his pragmatist examination of religious experience, he chooses Religious Studies instead. Yet, Mitchell also responds to postmodern theory with skepticism. During his trip to Paris, he and his college roommate, Larry, stay with Larry's girlfriend, Claire, who is studying in Paris. Claire is introduced holding a copy of *New French Feminisms,* whose "austere cover bore a regiment of names. Julia Kristeva. Hélène Cixous. Kate Millett" (172). Claire is thus directly associated with postmodern feminist theory. And yet, the narrator undermines Claire's commitment to feminism with descriptions like this: "Though auditing a class at the Sorbonne taught by Luce Irigary and titled The Mother-Daughter Relationship: The Darkest of Dark Continents, Claire had followed maternal example by setting out guest towels" (170). Here, a simple description of guest towels is used as an opportunity to ironize Claire's relationship to postmodern theory. As with Professor Zipperstein, the narrator attributes Claire's interest in theory to fashion, as we are told that "[u]nder the pretense of becoming a critic of patriarchy, Claire uncritically accepted every fashionable theory that came her way" (181). Mitchell immediately comes into conflict with Claire over her enthusiasm for postmodern theory. Upon finding out that Mitchell had studied religion, she begins criticizing religion for its sexism. Mitchell attempts to engage in conversation with her, offering her explanations he had learned, and even agreeing with her. Claire continues arguing. Finally, after Claire condemns her mother's performance of a mikva

(a ritual bath to cleanse the body after menstruation), she says, "'The whole institutionalized form of Western religion is all about telling women they're inferior, unclean, and subordinate to men. And if you actually believe in any of that stuff, I don't know what to say'" (175). At this point, Mitchell loses his patience, and replies, "'You're not having your period right now, are you?'" (175). This scene is important, not just because it sets up a conflict with Claire, but also because it reveals Mitchell's internal weaknesses in the way he regards women, triggering a self-examination of his attitude toward them. The conflicts with Claire continue, as she mocks him for reading Hemingway. Mitchell rejects her view: "He was perfectly aware that certain once-canonical writers (always male, always white) had fallen into disrepute. Hemingway was a misogynist, a homophobe, a repressed homosexual, a murderer of wild animals. Mitchell thought this was an instance of tarring with too wide a brush" (178). Eventually, Mitchell decides to leave Larry and Claire alone and stay in a hotel instead, even though it strained his budget to do so: "Mitchell was glad to be out of her apartment. He was happy to be out in the rain! It was worth it to pay for a hotel if it meant not listening to Claire spout her platitudes for one more second!" (181). Here, Claire's feminist views are dismissed as platitudes, and Mitchell is happy that he no longer has to listen to them.

The conflict with Claire does lead Mitchell to a reconsideration of his own behavior and attitudes. Yet, although he questions whether "he wasn't being just as knee-jerk in resisting the charge of misogyny as college feminists were in leveling it, and if his resistance didn't mean that he was, somewhere deep down, prone to misogyny himself" (178), Mitchell continues rejecting postmodern theory, arguing to himself that "[c]ollege feminists made fun of skyscrapers, saying they were phallic symbols. They said the same thing about space rockets, even though, if you stopped to think about it, rockets were shaped the way they were

not because of phallocentrism, but because of aerodynamics. Would a vagina-shaped *Apollo 11* have made it to the moon?" (201). Finally, he begins to question his desire for Madeleine, asking, "[H]ow much of his desire to marry Madeleine came from really and truly liking her as a person, and how much from the wish to possess her, and, in so doing, gratify his ego?" (203). He imagines a solution to the fact that "it was probably true that he objectified women" (201). This solution, however, does not come from postmodern theory, despite the fact that his response to Claire's arguments has led him to be more critical of his own views. Rather, his solution is drawn from his religious studies: "The more Mitchell read about religions, the world religions in general and Christianity in particular, the more he realized that the mystics were all saying the same thing. Enlightenment came from the extinction of desire" (202). This is a key scene, as it foreshadows his decision to relinquish his pursuit of Madeleine; however, at this point in the novel, he is not yet able to accomplish this, despite that fact that "[h]e was sick of craving, of wanting, of hoping, of losing" (203).

Mitchell's pragmatist approach to religion is what leads him to eventually be able to make this decision, and at this point, I'd like to examine the novel's exploration of this approach. We have already seen that Mitchell changed his major to Religious Studies because of William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and this pragmatist classic informs not just Mitchell's way of thinking, but much of the novel, as well. After a one-page summary of the book and a description of its importance to Mitchell, we are told that "Mitchell kept coming back to a paragraph about the neurotic temperament he'd underlined that seemed to describe his own personality, and, at the same time, to make him feel better about it" (118). This is followed by a nearly page-long quote, in which James contrasts the neurotic temperament with the healthy-minded one, suggesting that the neurotic "'have the emotionality which is the *sine qua non* of moral perception'" (qtd in Eugenides 118). Here,

we can see the direct link Eugenides makes between ethics/morality and James' pragmatist examination of religious experience, giving Mitchell a path to moral perception, and thus, ethical decision-making.

This passage is followed by a detailed description of Mitchell's religious studies that sharply contrasts with Madeleine and Leonard's experiences with postmodern theory. Here, Mitchell meets Professor Hermann Richter, who "had the reassuring attributes of Mitchell's own father – the diligence, the sobriety, the masculinity – while leading a life of unfatherly intellectual cultivation" (119). Richter stands in sharp contrast to the postmodernist Professor Zipperstein, who, remember, was compared to Harpo Marx without a horn. Richter "seemed worldlier than most professors and less ideologically programmed" (119) and "[i]t was impossible to imagine him as a boy" (119). In contrast to Zipperstein's indifference in the classroom, "Mitchell observed Richter's thoroughness, his compassionate revelation of error, his undimmed enthusiasm for presiding over the uncluttering of the twenty or so minds gathered around the seminar table. Getting these kids' heads in working order even now, so late in the game" (120). Richter took a scientific approach to examining religion, looking "unflinchingly at the reasons why the Christian faith had, around the year 1848, expired" (119). So Richter is anything but a dogmatic believer, and still, he "insisted that unquestioning nihilism was no more intellectually sound than unquestioning faith. It was possible to pick over the corpse of Christianity, to pound its chest and blow into its mouth, to see if the heart started beating again" (120). The extraordinary image of resurrecting a religion whose primary motif centers around resurrection is an apt metaphor for the pragmatic approach that has appeared increasingly since the postmodern era began drawing to a close. Richter, whose name is the German word for "judge," assesses religion to see what is still viable and what is not.

Unlike Madeleine, who graduates feeling out of step and without a plan for her life, Mitchell believes that his education has value. While taking his final exam, "he felt, for the first time, as though he weren't in school anymore. He wasn't answering questions to get a grade on a test. He was trying to diagnose the predicament he felt himself to be in" (121). He believes that it was "not just *his* predicament, either, but that of everyone he knew" (121, italics in the original). This generational predicament was a struggle to fill the void left by the absence of religion: "Everyone he knew was convinced that religion was a sham and God a fiction. But his friends' replacements for religion didn't look too impressive. No one had an answer for the riddle of existence" (121). As this section of the novel takes place during postmodernism's heyday, the comment about "replacements for religion" seems directed at postmodern theory. During his exam, Mitchell applies the pragmatist approach: "As he responded to the essay questions, Mitchell kept bending his answers toward their practical application. He wanted to know why he was here, and how to live" (121). The narrator sums up his education with the pronouncement: "It was the perfect way to end your college career. Education had finally led Mitchell out into life" (121). When Mitchell graduates, he sees "Herr Doktor Professor [sic] Richter prancing by, his face lit with a childlike joy it had never displayed in the seminar room for Religion and Alienation. As if Richter had found the cure for Alienation. As if he had beaten the odds of the age" (149). Richter is portrayed here as having solved the generational struggle Mitchell and his friends are grappling with. Unlike Zipperstein, he has the answers. The contrast with the portrayal of Madeleine's experiences in Semiotics 211 couldn't be more stark.

The pragmatist influence continues throughout the novel. For example, we are occasionally told about Mitchell's religious reading, and among the works described is Saint Teresa's *Interior Castle* (1577), which is one of a number of works mentioned that are also

examined in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. What interested Mitchell about *Interior Castle* "wasn't so much imagery...but its practicality. The book was a guide for the spiritual life, told with great specificity" (257). Here, we see Mitchell attracted to the practical aspect of Saint Teresa's work, rather than its aesthetic qualities. Mitchell's religious search occurs not out of a deeply held belief in God's existence, but as a pragmatic attempt to explore the possibility of God's existence: "In stiff-backed pews, smelling candle wax, he closed his eyes and sat as still as possible, opening himself up to whatever was there that might be interested in him. Maybe there was nothing. But how would you ever know if you didn't send out a signal?" (255). When he is arguing with Claire, he offers her a pragmatist explanation for the tradition of portraying God as masculine: "I'm saying that for some people, tradition is good. For others it's not so important. Some people think God reveals Himself through history, others that revelation is progressive, that maybe the rules or interpretation changes over time" (174). He even goes so far as to suggest to her to alter her own conception of God: "'If you dislike a conception of God as masculine,' Mitchell said to Claire, 'why replace it with one that's feminine? Why not get rid of the whole idea of a gendered divinity?'" (174). Here, God is treated not as an absolute whose nature is fixed or dogmatic, but as a mere conception that we create ourselves – an approach very much inspired by James.

The influence of William James in the novel is not limited to Mitchell. Eugenides emphasizes the concept of a higher power during a portrayal of Leonard's time in a mental hospital. Although Leonard is not actually hospitalized for substance abuse issues but rather bipolar disorder, Eugenides steers the discussion to the kind of 12-step program that David Foster Wallace depicts in *Infinite Jest*: "Most of the patients with substance abuse problems had picked up the religious inclination of 12-step programs" (329). One of these patients, Darlene, is more developed than the other characters, and she is described as having used

religion to free herself from addiction: "By the time she was twenty, she was addicted to heroin and alcohol. To get off the heroin and alcohol, she'd gotten religion" (327). Although Darlene is a mentally ill addict, she and her religious inclinations are perceived by Leonard in a positive light: "Darlene didn't seem weak, credulous, or stupid. Though she often referred to her 'Higher Power,' and sometimes to 'my Higher Power that I choose to call God,' she seemed remarkably rational, intelligent, and nonjudgmental" (328). Here, William James' concept of a higher power is explicitly named, and the character using it is described as "rational" and "intelligent." It helps to keep in mind Leonard's uncanny resemblance to David Foster Wallace, both physically and psychologically, and thus it comes as no surprise that the group therapy that Leonard experiences is portrayed as positively as the Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in *Infinite Jest*: "No one wanted to do or say anything that might hinder someone's recovery. In this way the unit was very unlike the world outside, and morally superior to it" (329).

When Mitchell arrives in Calcutta to begin working with Mother Theresa, he admires a man known to us as only the "beekeeper": "The beekeeper was a deeply sincere, deeply good person. If Mitchell was a sick soul, according to William James's categories, then the beekeeper was definitely healthy-minded" (391). This description is followed by a quote from William James about his concept of healthy-mindedness, once again demonstrating the extent of William James' influence on Mitchell's thinking. Descriptions of Madeleine also match the healthy-minded category that James introduces to us; for example, we are told that "[a]ll her life she'd avoided unbalanced people. She'd stayed away from the weird kids in elementary school. She'd avoided the gloomy, suicidal girls in high school who vomited up pills" (458). Rather, she "was pro-sunlight and anti-dust; she was for spring cleaning, for beating rugs over porch railings, for keeping your house or apartment as free of cobwebs and

grime as you kept your mind free of indecision or gloomy rumination" (348). This healthy-mindedness is attributed to her upbringing: "Madeleine had never been close to anyone with a verifiable mental illness. She instinctively avoided unstable people. As uncharitable as this attitude was, it was part and parcel of being a Hanna, of being a positive, privileged, sheltered exemplary person" (154). These descriptions of Madeleine do not directly reference William James, but they are so similar to his concepts that they seem almost as if they had been taken out of his book. This is further proof that James' pragmatist account of religious experience serves not only to inform Mitchell's views, but also provides an intellectual framework for the novel as a whole.

Mitchell's criticism of his contemporaries mirrors criticism of postmodernism as being uncommitted and hedonistic: "He thought about the people he knew, with their excellent young bodies, their summerhouses, their cool clothes, their potent drugs, their liberalism, their orgasms, their haircuts. Everything they did was either pleasurable in itself or engineered to bring pleasure down the line" (258). In his quest to escape from this hedonistic self-absorption, Mitchell decides to travel to India to work with the nuns of Mother Teresa. His motivation for going to Calcutta is to achieve goodness, and the "healthy-minded" beekeeper becomes a model for him: "It was to be around people like the beekeeper that Mitchell had come to Calcutta, to see what they were like and to have their goodness rub off on him" (391). His attempts to help the sick are a deliberate attempt to live an ethics of being for the other: "Mitchell had never so much as changed a baby's diaper before. He'd never nursed a sick person, or seen anyone die, and now here he was, surrounded by a mass of dying people, and it was his job to help them die at peace, knowing they were loved" (375). He quickly realizes that this ethics is difficult to enact: "[B]y the end of the second week he had become uncomfortably aware that he was performing only the simplest, least demanding

tasks at the Home" (387). The unpleasant realities of actually sacrificing oneself to face the other's need begin to repel him: "He was afraid to bathe the men. He was scared of what their naked bodies might look like, of the diseases or wounds that might lie under their robes, and he was afraid of their bodily effluvia, of his hands touching their urine and excrement" (387). The descriptions of his struggle are punctuated by his encounters with other travelers, whose comments highlight his difficulties. A character named Rüdiger, for example, tells him, "'You think you are not a vain person. You are maybe not so much into your body. But you are probably more vain about how *intelligent* you are. Or how *good* you are'" (395, italics in the original). Rüdiger puts his finger on one of the biggest pitfalls of the postmodern ethics of being for the other: that the secret motivation of this ethical approach might actually be more about vanity than the actual need of the other. He tells Mitchell that this concern has been dealt with by Luther: "'The problem is, no matter how much we try to be good, we cannot be good enough. So Luther says you must be justified by faith'" (399). Some of the women volunteering share their gripes about the hard, thankless work, and one of them bemoans the loss of her freedom, saying, "'Can't I become a saint and go to the beach, too?'" (401). Interestingly, Mitchell's difficulties don't prevent him from deepening his religious explorations:

> Mitchell's concern that he wasn't coming up to the mark of Kalighat coexisted, oddly enough, with a surge of real religious feeling on his part. Much of the time in Calcutta he was filled with an ecstatic tranquility, like a low-grade fever. His meditation practice had deepened. He experienced plunging sensations, as if moving at great speed. For whole minutes he forgot who he was. (396)

This description seems to put religious feeling, along with forgetting the self, into a different category than helping the other, so that Mitchell's failure to enact an ethics of being for the

other doesn't hinder him from religious experience. In fact, we are told that "he had got into the habit of walking around Calcutta in the presence of God" (397). Feeling the presence of a higher power is one of the primary experiences described in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and notice that here, it is not connected to helping others, but is rather a personal, internal experience. Finally, Mitchell musters the courage to do the dirty, difficult jobs, but during his first attempt, he encounters a man who desperately needs kidney dialysis, but cannot get it. When Mitchell offers to help him, he replies, "'I want to shit'" (405). Mitchell, unable to help him, and confronted with the prosaic, corporeal reality of illness, can take no more: "Already knowing that he would regret this moment for a long time, maybe for the rest of his life, and yet unable to resist the sweet impulse that ran through his every nerve, Mitchell headed to the front of the home, right past Matthew 25:40, and up the steps to the bright, fallen world above" (405). Mitchell abandons his attempt to live an ethics of the other, and leaves Calcutta to pursue his other obsession – his desire to marry Madeleine.

Upon returning to the U.S. from India, Mitchell quite conveniently runs into Madeleine and Leonard at a party. Leonard has been suffering from bipolar disorder and has recently been hospitalized for a manic episode; incidents that have put his marriage to Madeleine under tremendous strain. At the party, Leonard, remembering Mitchell from a religious studies course they had taken together, "began asking Mitchell about his own religious inclinations" (504). Mitchell, we are told, "provided testimony about his own specific variety of religious experience" (504). Notice the indirect reference to the title of William James' book. Leonard "listened intently, receptively. He appeared eager for any help Mitchell might provide" (504). Leonard then reveals that he has had an experience that he hasn't told anyone else about "because he hadn't been in his right mind at the time, and this tended to discredit the experience" (504-5). Leonard further reveals that "the vision, or

whatever it was, was the most awe-inspiring moment of his life. He said that it 'felt religious'" (505). The experience of flying off into space and floating past Saturn and then coming back to Earth, Leonard insists, "felt like the most lucid moment of my life'" (505). He asks Mitchell whether it was "O.K. to think of the experience as religious, since it felt that way, or was that invalidated by the fact that he was technically insane at the time?" (505). Mitchell replies that "mystical experiences were significant only to the extent that they changed a person's conception of reality, and if that changed conception led to a change in behavior and action, a loss of ego" (505). This is a direct reference to James' rejection of what he calls medical materialism, the attempt to invalidate religious experience with medical explanations. After receiving this advice, Leonard leaves Madeleine, and it is implied that he has done so because "whatever success he achieved in life wasn't going to come easy. It would always be shadowed by his disease. Bankhead had wanted to save Madeleine from that" (506). Leonard's unselfish decision is a product of a religious experience interpreted through pragmatism, and makes Madeleine available to Mitchell.

Mitchell seizes his opportunity, actually going to stay with Madeleine at her parents' home, and beginning a tentative sexual relationship with her. At this point, it looks like Mitchell will achieve his dream of marrying Madeleine. However, Mitchell continues his religious pursuits, sneaking off to sit in a Quaker Meeting House, and finds that "[t]he deeper Mitchell went inside himself, the more troubled he was" (510). Sitting in the Meeting House meditating, he has a kind of religious experience of his own: "A still small voice was speaking to him, but it was saying things he didn't want to hear. Suddenly, as if he was truly in touch with his Deep Self and could view his situation objectively, Mitchell understood why making love with Madeleine had felt as strangely empty as it had" (511). Here, sitting in the Meeting House, "[t]he truth poured into him like light" (511), and he realizes that "his

believing that Madeleine would marry him stemmed from the same credulity that had led him to think he could lead a saintly life, tending the sick and dying in Calcutta" (493). Here, his idealistic love of Madeleine is compared to his botched attempts to practice an ethics of being for the other. Furthermore, "the voice also told Mitchell that, in addition to never living with Madeleine, he would never go to divinity school either. It was unclear what he was going to do with his life, but he wasn't going to be a monk, or a minister, or even a scholar" (511). This religious experience, triggered by Mitchell's pragmatist attempts to explore spiritual truths, leads him to finally make the decision to relinquish his desire to marry Madeleine. Thus, Mitchell's pragmatic religious explorations have finally allowed him to reach the enlightened state of relinquishing desire, and the result is that "[h]e was feeling a lot better about himself, as if he might do some good in the world" (512). The end result of his pragmatist experiments is not just the relinquishing of his desire to marry Madeleine, but also the possibility of "doing good," in other words, the possibility of ethics; a result not reached through a pursuit of a postmodern ethics of being for the other, but as a result of a pragmatist pursuit of religious belief and a religious experience.

In the final two pages, Mitchell approaches Madeleine and asks her a key question about literature: "'[W]as there ever any novel where the heroine gets married to the wrong guy and then realizes it,and then the other suitor shows up, some guy who's always been in love with her, and then *they* get together, but finally the second suitor realizes that the last thing the woman needs is to get married again, and that she's got more important things to do with her life?'" (512, italics in the original). She replies that there wasn't. Mitchell asks her if she thinks it would be a good ending, and with the final word of the novel she replies "'Yes'" (513). This word brings not only the novel to a close, but also the novel's interest in updating the historically important marriage plot, which is the focus of Madeleine's literary studies.

Early in the novel, Madeleine takes a class called "The Marriage Plot: Selected Novels of Austen, Eliot, and James" (26), which is taught by the 79-year-old Professor Saunders. Saunders teaches Madeleine that "the novel had reached its apogee with the marriage plot and had never recovered from its disappearance. In the days when success in life had depended on marriage, and marriage had depended on money, novelists had a subject to write about. The great epics sang of war, the novel of marriage. Sexual equality, good for women, had been bad for the novel" (27). Thus, the postmodern emancipation of women is identified as a problem for the novel itself, which had been in decline ever since: "As far as Saunders was concerned, marriage didn't mean much anymore, and neither did the novel" (27). Thus, when Mitchell ends his pursuit of Madeleine, and proposes his alternate marriage plot, he doesn't just achieve the possibility of goodness for himself, he also redeems the novel from its postmodern decline. It is important to remember that Eugenides accomplishes this feat by having both male suitors undergo religious experiences of the the type that William James explores in depth, and having both of them relinquish Madeleine. Therefore, Eugenides uses a pragmatist concept of religion to solve not only the ethical dilemmas of postmodernity, but also what is portrayed as the postmodern decline of the novel itself.

5.3 *Jamesland* by Michelle Huneven

Michelle Huneven's 2004 novel *Jamesland* provides a typical example of how a pragmatist view of religion is being offered as a solution to the ethical dilemmas of the contemporary era in recent American novels. In this novel, two of the main characters, Alice Black and Pete Ross, are depicted as lost, unhappy, and self-destructive until they begin a relationship with a Universalist Unitarian minister named Helen Harlan. Although both are adults, they are frequently compared to adolescents. Pete is recovering from a divorce, an arrest, and multiple

suicide attempts. We find out that Alice Black is a direct descendant of William James, and has attempted to distance herself from her family legacy, only to find herself in what she refers to as "Jamesland." A mystical vision impels her to seek guidance, and Helen provides her with interpretations for her vision. It turns out that Helen Harlan is a devoted follower of William James, and her favorite book is *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The religious sermons she delivers are non-denominational, and she actually cites William James more frequently than the Bible throughout the course of the novel. Neither Pete nor Alice are religious believers, but Helen's non-dogmatic, pragmatic approach to religion inspires both of them to improve their lives and work to overcome their flaws. By the end of the novel, they have both returned to their professions, fallen in love with each other, and regained emotional health. After a religious experience of her own, Helen, too, decides to move on with her life. Through a combination of religious experiences and pragmatist philosophy, all three have determined how to live.

At the beginning of *Jamesland*, we are introduced to Alice Black, who is in emotional turmoil over her affair with a married man. A physical description informs us of her condition: "[H]er brown eyes were dull, with inflamed rims and swollen lids from last night's weeping. She hadn't cut her shoulder-length straight brown hair in six or seven months, and even when perfectly clean, it separated into strings" (24). She is hung over from drinking too much the night before, and "she looked more underfed than glamorously slender" (24). The description tells us that, although she is 33 years old, she is in a state of arrested development: "All told, she looked exactly as she had at twelve, after a temper tantrum. When would she ever look grown up?" (24). In addition to having an affair with a married man, Alice has had a checkered past: "God knows she'd slept around more or less indiscriminately, had had sexually transmitted diseases and could've been sued for criminal

conversation on many occasions" (229). She is afflicted with "a blank, obliterating fear that her life had veered off course, as she'd always suspected it would, and that she could no longer distinguish what was real from what was not" (9). Her last name, Black, is a rather obvious symbol of her dark condition, and we are told that "sitting next to Alice was like being perched on the rim of a black hole" (238). Alice's opinion of herself is that "she'd stalled out" (242), and that "she didn't know who she was or what she should do" (242). Alice had studied biology and had worked in a laboratory before quitting to pursue creative writing, which she has also quit, and now she has no idea what to do with her life: "She'd had no trouble working in the lab or writing for her extension class or showing up for jobs, but was still impossibly distant from her true vocation, whatever that might be" (34). As the novel opens, despite her academic qualifications, she works as a bartender at "the Fountain, a dark, fusty, intermittently hip and increasingly gay cocktail lounge" (15).

Another main character, Pete Ross, may be in even worse condition. Although he is over forty years old, he is currently living with his mother: "Dr. Freeman, his prescribing psychiatrist, along with his mother and probation officer, had concocted this regime of midlife reparenting" (31). Pete has recently been released from a psychiatric ward, where he was held after several suicide attempts: "Self-damage at first had been only a daydream, romantic, vengeful and deeply satisfying to contemplate. He'd show them. But it got away from him; like inviting the devil to checkers, he'd conjured a more ferocious entertainment than he had sought" (104). His suicidal behavior was accompanied by drug and alcohol problems: "A year or so ago, Pete devoured the contents of a medicine cabinet, drank most of a pint of whiskey and went driving" (125). Professionally, Pete is a chef, and the trigger for his depression had been the failure of his restaurant, and the subsequent collapse of his marriage. After destroying his estranged wife's apartment in front of his son, he is on

probation and under a restraining order. Not only is he in bad shape emotionally; "[p]hysically, he'd let himself go. His potbelly was reaching gross proportions. His posture was terrible, his clothes clean yet rumpled" (51). Huneven goes to great lengths to emphasize that Pete is in a state of suspended adolescence, describing his "adolescent sneer" (245), and writing that he "embodied the mannerisms of a hyperactive child" (92-3), or that "[d]espite his middle age, he was always as disgusted as a teenager" (51). Due to his probation conditions, he feels "way too much like he was sixteen and having to divulge his plans in order to get the car" (206). In another scene, he is described as "swinging his grocery bag against his leg like an eight-year-old" (94). These descriptions emphasize not just the return to childhood enforced by his probation, but also his overall lack of maturity.

At the time of the novel's beginning, Pete has just begun his recovery: "For Pete, the bottom was rising. At least not every oncoming car, or height above twenty feet, or electrical cord and length of nylon rope, presented itself as the solution to all of his problems" (32). He has begun exercising and practicing meditation, but these practices have yet to bear results: "He'd only recently begun his exercise routines, and his blood pressure was still sky high, his heart flabby as cheese. Sitting in silence, he was indeed face-to-face with what is – or, rather with what he is: a system near its breaking point" (30). He is struggling with a total lack of meaning in his life: "Nothing, he understood, mattered. This wasn't mere nihilism. His usual angle of perceiving the world had slipped, and from his new, wide-open vantage point, it was utterly clear that being sick or well, rich or poor, saint or murderer, even alive or dead, was not in the least bit important" (178). His sections of the novel are punctuated by "Pete's continuing investigation: *How do people live in this world?*" (26, italics in the original). This central question, how do people live, is repeated again and again, and emphasizes the ethical nature of his dilemma. Pete "did want to live. Most of the time, at least. To do so, he'd had to

start all over, first by relearning the trick of acting within reasonable bounds, a skill abandoned once he went to work on his estranged wife's apartment" (87). His mother, now a nun, has left the convent in order to help him relearn adulthood: "It had been agreed: Mom was to scold him, nudge him, signal the limits, train him as a mother bird or coyote or human would so he didn't end up in tarp-walled rooms above the river, sleeping on ferny beds and brushing his teeth with river scum" (87). We can see, then, that Pete's primary problem is that he needs to develop and adhere to the limits – the "reasonable bounds" – of a system of ethics. To help with this, he begins meditating: "At his mother's suggestion, Pete started coming to Helen for meditation instruction" (51), and Helen guides his meditation practice. When Helen asks Pete what he hopes to gain from meditation, he replies, "'A whole new personality'" (82). Pete complains to her about his experience of meditation, saying, "'How come I have no idea who I am? Why, whenever I try to look at myself, do I see *absolutely nothing*?'" (160, italics in the original). Helen reassures him, "'People meditate for years to experience that'" (160). The devastated state of these two characters is typical for the novels that explore the pragmatist approach to religion. They are usually lost, underemployed, often with substance abuse or psychological problems. Their lives lack direction and meaning. Improvement comes through either an actual religious experience of the kind described by William James or through an encounter with pragmatist philosophy. This is emphasized in *Jamesland* when Helen's boyfriend, a minor character at best, suddenly begins talking about William James, informing us that "'he showed that people can have all different kinds of spiritual awakenings, not just the blinding-light, God-of-the-preachers kind. Like the gradual, educational variety of religious experience. So there's hope for everyone'" (68).

In *Jamesland* the novel, both options apply. In Pete's case, his slow improvement comes through Helen Harlan's application of pragmatist philosophy. During one of her

conversations with Pete, for example, he asks her, "'What *is* your beef with God?'" Helen

replies "'It's been a very long time since I had any notion or concept of God I could have a

beef with'" (139, italics in the original). Here, we see Helen's adoption of a Jamesian concept

of a self-defined God. Her identification with James is also quite explicitly detailed. For

example, in the bookcase in her study, "two Bibles were shelved above the many editions of

The Varieties of Religious Experience" (73). As a joke, she describes her Wednesday evening

sermon as "'A religious variety show. The variety show of religious experience!'" (62). In one

of these sermons, she openly cites James, saying, "'James tells us that the truth of an idea is

determined by the goodness that idea manifests in our lives. The cash value, as it were, of a

concept'" (166). And, in case we are not yet persuaded of the influence of James on Helen,

Huneven makes it absolutely clear. When asked about her beliefs, Helen replies,

> "I suppose, theologically, I'm in sync with William James. I believe we're part of a
>
> greater something – God, the interconnected web of existence, whatever you want to
>
> call it. Cultivating a relationship with this greater something constitutes my religion. I
>
> believe that this relationship with the other – God, if you will – is transformative,
>
> regenerative and essential for a life lived fully." (223-4)

Not only is her theology pragmatist, but this quote lays out the novel's entire premise: that a

pragmatist relationship with a "higher power" is ethically transformative and regenerative.

We also see this higher power being described as "the other," as if to replace the postmodern

"other" with a pragmatist one. When Helen's interlocutor objects, "'But that sounds more

psychological than religious...Like a religion bled of specifics'" (224), she replies, "'So be

it...Especially since specifics cause all the trouble. It's insisting on this or that point of

orthodoxy or doctrine that has led to wars, inquisitions, burnings at the stake.'" (224).

However, Helen insists that she is religious, too: "'I actually am religious in that I believe the

great religions are storehouses of wisdom and practical guidance" (224). Here, she focuses

not on absolute truths, or metaphysics, but rather on the practical component of religion, or,

in other words, the ethical component, the part that deals with practice. Helen insists on the

necessity of the higher power, saying, "'[R]elating to a power greater than yourself generates

the energy required to create change and to change – and otherwise you'll burn out'" (225).

Helen has an interesting problem, in that her Universalist Unitarian congregation is

not so interested in the religious part of her religion: "'[C]ome Sunday they like to see their

friends and hear the music. They like their bazaars and rummage sales, potlucks and cocktail

hours. They just don't like religion'" (96). In fact, their primary purpose, according to Helen,

is ethical: "'the difference between me and most of my congregational is theological. They

come to church not to worship God but to be better humans and effect social change'" (224-

5). For much of her congregation, ethics comes not from a relationship with God, but is rather

a human creation: "'The older people in my congregation came of age between the world

wars. They're dyed-in-the-wool secular humanists who believe goodness and mercy and

justice come *exclusively* from humans'" (95, italics in the original). Helen disagrees, insisting

that a higher power is necessary, saying, "'[I]f you deny the divine, you risk deifying the

human ego. Any concept of an other – let alone a higher – power becomes untenable'" (96).

Once again, notice the play with the word "other" during Helen's discussion – the higher

power represents an idealized other with which we have a relationship and which is somehow

above us, and this allows us the possibility of ethics. Unlike the postmodern approach of

being for the other, where a real person, a "face" is present, here, an idealized, self-defined

other is created as a stand in. Helen expounds on these Jamesian concepts during a sermon

about surrender: "*You can't just surrender. You have to surrender to something, and have a

sense of what that something is. Preferably, it's something greater and larger and more*

encompassing than yourself, something dynamic rather than transfixed, something that enlarges rather than constricts, something that energizes the spirit and doesn't deplete it" (275, italics in the original). This sermon makes a profound impact on Pete, "To Pete's mind, Helen's sermon on surrender was brilliant, her best yet" (275). His encounters with pragmatist philosophy slowly and steadily begin to take effect.

If Pete's ethical transformation follows the path of exposure to pragmatist philosophy through the guidance of Helen Harlan and the words of her sermons, Alice's transformation comes as a result of a mystical experience. After yet another traumatic breakup with her married boyfriend, she has a vision of a deer inside her home, accompanied by the mysterious appearance of her aunt Kate, who resides in a nursing home. After confirming that her aunt hadn't left the nursing home at all, Alice begins to fear that the vision is a result of mental illness, which runs in her family: "[A]t age thirty-three, wasn't she out of the woods for adult-onset schizophrenia?" (17). She attempts to reach out to her family, but receives no assistance, and when she asks a psychiatrist who frequents her bar, he tells her, "'[T]his could be a wake-up call'" (35). Eventually, Alice finds a flyer from Helen Harlan's church with a picture of "Buddha, on a lotus throne, talking to half a dozen tiny deer" (46). This leads her to Helen's Universalist Unitarian church, where the Buddhist guest-speaker informs her that "'symbolically, deer in Buddhism represent listening to the dharma'" (54). Eventually, Alice meets Helen and they discuss the vision and the guest-speaker's statement, and when Alice admits her confusion about his words, Helen says, "'[M]aybe the deer symbolize a new *way* of listening. A more spiritual way, perhaps'" (60, italics in the original). In the beginning, Alice is shy and suspicious about Helen, fearing that she will be judged and found wanting: "However irreligious Alice considered herself, she automatically ascribed special spiritual powers to ministers. She assumed they could look at a person and see things that person

didn't know about herself – if she was a good person, say, or owned by darkness" (58). Alice's prime concern here is moral, she fears that she will be found out as evil, particularly in light of her affair with a married man. Nevertheless, Helen's deep and sincere interest in her problems, and her practical approach to dealing with them, encourage Alice to form a relationship with her.

Huneven ranges into New Sincerity territory with her descriptions of Alice. When Helen quite frankly asks Alice to be her friend, Alice is taken aback, since "Helen really wasn't the kind of person she was drawn to: too sincere, too hokey, too much about 'support systems'" (78). However, we learn that this distancing from sincerity was something that Alice had developed during adolescence to protect herself from her feelings: "When she began making friends in school, Alice had been surprised by how deeply she felt about them; the strength of her devotion unnerved her, as did the jealousies friendships inspired...She'd had to learn to calm down, to ape indifference, to be cool even as she clamored and yearned within" (79). Meeting Helen has reawakened this suppressed side of her character as she recognizes herself in Helen: "Helen Harlan's unabashed desire for human connection seemed just as uncool, unwieldy and embarrassing as her own" (79). In another part of the novel, when Helen invites her congregation to get up and dance, Alice feels uncomfortable: "She had managed, when properly intoxicated, to move rhythmically to rock and roll, disguising her ineptitude as willful humor and irony, as if she knew perfectly well how to dance but chose to be silly" (297). These comments about irony and humor being used to mask insecurity are nearly direct quotes from David Foster Wallace, who is seen as a founding figure in the New Sincerity movement. As we'll see in a moment, this movement is addressed and rejected later in the novel.

Besides needing companionship in the face of a difficult, hard-headed congregation,

Helen decides to befriend Alice as a way to pay William James back for the value his ideas had brought to her life: "William James had helped Helen through her own spiritual difficulties, and here was an opportunity to return that favor" (65). As a way to get a grip on Alice's mystic vision, she suggests watching films that feature deer, such as *Bambi* and *The Yearling*. Helen invites Pete to these gatherings, and he rediscovers his love of cooking while preparing meals for them. Helen also explores additional interpretations of Alice's vision, for example, directing her to a famous Bible verse, Psalm 42, which is quoted as, "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?" (qtd in Huneven 73). Helen explains this by saying, "'[T]he deer's a symbol for spiritual longing'" (77). Here, the suggestion that God is what she is lacking leads Alice to an examination of her own religious upbringing: "The notion of spiritual longing produced another quickening of fear. Was it possible that this is what she was feeling?" (77-8). Alice begins to reconsider her religious background: "Alice's religious training had come largely from her father, Meyer, who in his frequent rants on the subject insisted that religion was superstition and that a belief in God was infantile wish fulfillment, a form of regressive dependency" (73). However, her mother, herself a direct descendant of William James, had proposed another possibility, "Mary, Alice's mother, occasionally suggested in measured tones that religion might, at times, enhance a person's life. She'd cite her great-grandfather James, who asserted that people who *choose* to believe in God and an afterlife often lead calmer, happier and more productive lives" (74, italics in the original). Alice had wanted to form a religious belief: "For years Alice hoped that the right religion would send out an invisible tendril to make itself known and draw her home" (75); however, she had been discouraged by ideas that could be viewed as postmodern: "[S]he'd already heard the bad news: religion, no matter its trappings, was

nothing more than a man-made construct devised to obscure the insignificance of human existence and then used to gain power over others" (75). At first, Alice remains skeptical of Helen's interpretations, thinking, "[I]f Helen considered the deer incident a vision of some sort, and Alice, therefore, a fledgling mystic – well, Alice could only disappoint there, too. She had no interest in visions and saw no cachet in having them; nothing like a little mental illness in the family to deromanticize such goings on" (97). Eventually, however, she opens up to the prospect, asking Helen, "'What if a person doesn't want mystical gifts?'" (149), to which Helen replies, "'I'm not sure there's much choice...Unless it's to work with or against such gifts – and against seems the surer road to madness'" (149). Alice, accepting this judgment, says, "'And if one did decide to work *with*, how would one go about it?' (149, italics in the original). Helen's reply offers one of the key moments in the novel, and is, in some way, a turning point for Alice, "'One would *start*, Alice, by changing one's pronouns. One would start by saying *I*'" (149, italics in the original). Here, Helen proposes that Alice return to being a subject again, take control of her life and decisions, and work with her spiritual longings rather than against them. Becoming ethical requires becoming a subject once more.

This spiritual guidance begins to bear fruit. As a first start, Alice decides to change her appearance: "Tuesday morning, she walked into Hair Today and asked for a cut and color" (150). To emphasize that it is Helen's efforts that are driving this change, we are told that Alice "pulled Helen's sermon from her purse" (150) and began to read it while waiting for her haircut. Afterwards, "Alice drove to the Salvation Army thrift store to look for clothes that weren't black" (151). Her all black wardrobe had been the product of an attempt to avoid ridicule from an ex-boyfriend: "Spiro had made fun of what he called her ecowarrior look – the jeans and logo'd T-shirts, the hiking boots and Birkenstocks – and advised her to go with

black jeans and T-shirts and Doc Martens, a slinky black slip dress for clubs, a black leather jacket over all" (151). Abandoning the nihilism and self-abnegation of her defensive reactions, Alice reasserts herself and her right to choose her own appearance. On a recommendation from Helen, she takes a new job working as a transcriber with a researcher who specializes in psychics who believe they can communicate with William James. Here, she meets Dewey, a fellow researcher, younger than Alice, who seems to represent the New Sincerity movement. Dewey's name is quite interesting as it seems not only to be a nod to William James' fellow pragmatist, John Dewey, but to also indicate a kind of innocence, as if he were still wet behind the ears. Certainly, Dewey is portrayed as young and innocent:

> Alice had never met anyone so unironic. As perplexed as he was by some of the things she said, Dewey wasn't the least offended, as if it never occurred to him that anybody else would ever be other than perfectly kind. And she used to be kind, a real pushover, but she had set out to change that much as she had set out to lose her virginity, with the full intent to shed herself of a liability. (174)

Alice finds herself liking Dewey: "Dewey seemed so hopeful and good – so uncynical and unironic – that Alice quite liked him even as she wondered how he could possibly be, at twenty-six, so unbesmirched" (197). Alice feels that his innocence marks him as off-limits to her: "He'd have to go young, very young to find a taker for such sincerity and innocence" (199). Yet, when he reveals his attraction to her, she responds: "Looking into Dewey's sweet, excellent face and clear gray eyes made her feel jaded, sex-hungry, a thief of affections and potential violator of honorable intentions" (229). She questions whether she is good enough for him: "Didn't he know that she was too jaded, hard-hearted, *ruined?*" (199, italics in the original). Alice begins to wonder if a relationship with Dewey could be the way out of her dilemma, asking herself, "Could Dewey Hupfeld be her chance, finally, at what everyone else

already had?" (200). Unfortunately, things don't work out between Alice and Dewey. One reason is his tendency to neglect her in favor of helping others. For example, he doesn't show up for one date because he drove a university student to the hospital after a bicycle accident. Alice responds, "'Couldn't anyone else take the guy to the hospital?'" (236). Another time, "they went hiking in the desert, and he'd given their only water bottle to a hot fat woman when Alice herself was thirsty" (248). Another time, Alice has to drive downtown in rush hour traffic to pick Dewey up because he has loaned his car to someone else. Here, Huneven seems to be rejecting an ethics of being for the other, showing the downside of selflessness. Pete emphasizes this when he meets Dewey by openly criticizing him:

> "You're so nice, Doo-doo, you give away water to a fat stranger while your girlfriend gets dehydrated – but you got to be nice. You're so nice you stand Alice up to take some moron to the emergency room – never mind that ten or fifty other people were willing to do it, never mind that even your little Jesus college must have an ambulance service on hand. Never mind disappointing Alice. You get to be the hero. I've got your number, Meister Nice." (279)

Ultimately, despite his unironic sincerity, and his willingness to help the other, Dewey is found wanting. Alice finally breaks up with Dewey after experiencing a burst of religious feeling. They are taking a walk along the Los Angeles river when Alice encounters a religious offering:

> Just offshore, under inches of moving water, sat someone's offering: on a trembling bed of rice and beans sat four potatoes, two green apples and two oranges. Scattered throughout were foil-wrapped candies – turquoise, fuchsia, that copper – and golden butterscotch orbs, all lit by the sun and glowing like jewels in the leather-brown stream. For the first time in Alice's life, some kind of prayer, some admission to the

universe, seemed in order. (284)

This experience, an "admission" of religious feeling, a belief in a higher power, inspires Alice to break up with Dewey.

At this stage, having changed her life and begun delving into her background as a descendant of William James, Alice begins to feel a change in herself:

Alice felt far from everything and everyone she knew, in exile from her own life, out here among kind, if humorless, religious folk. Her family had no idea where she was, Nick could never ever find her. In another sense, she knew exactly where she'd landed – the one place she'd avoided all her life, while dreading its inevitability. Along with mad and maddening Aunt Kate, she' come smack to the heart of Jamesland. To finally encounter the benign specifics of this long-dreaded place...was almost a relief. (174)

Jamesland, the novel's title, seems to indicate a place of sincere, non-dogmatic exploration of spirituality and mysticism, and to be a relief from the suffering and self-rejection of the outside world.

After breaking up with Dewey, Alice realizes that Pete, who has been following the same path that she has, is a better match for her, and they begin a relationship. Pete takes an offer to be the chef at a new restaurant, and Alice takes an opportunity to begin working with animals at a zoo. There are some rough patches and plot twists, but ultimately, both are portrayed as happier and healthier. Helen, for example, says of Pete, "'He seems so much clearer and stronger every time I see him'" (261). Pete eventually gets clearance from the court to see his son again, who asks, "'Are you better, Dad?'" then clarifies, "'Mom said you were sick'" (337). Pete replies, "'I'm much better, sweetheart'" (337). Alice, too, is shown to be in better shape. Helen tells her, "'You do look good, Alice. Healthy'" (322). Alice responds, "'Fat you mean. I've gained all the weight Pete's lost.' And then Alice laughed, a pure, happy

noise" (322). Alice and Pete are doing well when Helen decides to leave the ministry to pursue Jungian therapy instead, but "[b]oth she and Pete had Helen on their speed dial" (335). When Pete encounters Helen again after an absence, he reveals how important Helen's guidance was for his recovery: "'I miss those midweeks,' he blurted, and almost added, *They saved my ass*. But he'd be hard pressed to explain how those dank chilly evenings with cranky old people, sputtering candles and an endless stream of hokum trickling from the podium could have accomplished such a feat" (322, italics in the original). When Helen asks Alice if she had gotten anything out of her sermons, she replies, "'Of course...Like my whole life'" (339). The message is clear, a pragmatist religious approach can restore even the most damaged and lost to health and happiness.

Helen's decision to leave her church is also driven by a religious experience. While on a cruise in Mexico, she goes swimming with whales, and encounters a whale in the ocean. The experience disturbs her to her core: "Unlike the other swimmers, she was in no sense exhilarated; she could not say, like Nancy, that she'd felt 'privileged and honored' in the whale's presence. *Scorched*, *struck down*, and *obliterated* were the words that entered her mind" (288, italics in the original). She experiences the whale as a brief glimpse of a higher power, leaving her awestruck:

> Even the idea of prayer struck her as distasteful, so much so that she couldn't imagine ever wanting to pray again – not from lack of faith, but rather from too close a brush with its source. Curled against the wall on her bunk, Helen understood why God did not want to make full-frontal appearances to humans. A single whale was too much to bear. (288)

The experience triggers a reexamination of her life, after which she ends her relationship with her boyfriend, and decides to change careers. She, too, finds the path out of her dilemma after

a religious experience that awakens her to the right decision.

6 The Ecological Metanarrative

> They passed through the ruins of a resort town and took the road south. Burnt forests for miles along the slopes and snow sooner than he would have thought. No tracks in the road, nothing living anywhere. The fireblackened boulders like the shapes of bears on the starkly wooded slopes. He stood on a stone bridge where the waters slurried into a pool and turned slowly in a gray foam. Where once he'd watched trout swaying with the current, tracking their perfect shadows on the stones beneath. They went on, the boy trudging in his track. Leaning into the cart, winding slowly upward through the switchback. There were fires still burning high in the mountains and at night they could see the light from them deep orange in the sootfall. (McCarthy 29-30)

6.1 Introduction

In his harrowing depiction of an apocalyptic future, *The Road* (2006), Cormac McCarthy describes a landscape wasted by an unnamed environmental catastrophe. The trees are charred and black, the air filled with ash, the pavement melted, the water polluted – and there is no life. With nothing to eat, the few surviving humans scavenge through the ruins for remnants of civilization, and eventually turn to eating each other. The nightmarish setting provides the backdrop for what could easily be described as a horror story. Yet, it is more than that; it is also a warning of what faces us if we continue to endanger the environment. In other words, McCarthy uses his narrative to illustrate the need for a certain kind of ethics. I am calling this ethical paradigm the ecological metanarrative because I want to indicate that unlike the postmodern skepticism toward metanarratives, this paradigm offers an affirmative system of belief that rests on an all-encompassing universalism foreign to postmodernism.

Ecological models of reality in American philosophy go back at least as far as the Transcendentalists. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, presents one in his famous essay "Nature":

> Nature, in its ministry to man, is not only the material, but is also the process and the
>
> result. All the parts incessantly work into each other's hands for the profit of man. The

wind sows the seed; the sun evaporates the sea; the wind blows the vapor to the field;

the ice, on the other side of the planet, condenses rain on this; the rain feeds the plant;

the plant feeds the animal; and thus the endless circulations of the divine charity

nourish man. (12)

Here, Emerson recognizes the components of an ecosystem, showing the necessary

interconnection of each component for the survival of humanity. The concern for ecology is

directly tied to the uses that humans can make of nature, whether material or spiritual. This

anthropocentrism is characteristic of the Transcendentalists. Thoreau, whose observations of

nature laid some of the groundwork for the development of ecology, also shared this concern

for the depletion of natural resources:

The very willow-rows lopped every three years for fuel or powder, - and every sizable

pine and oak, or other forest tree, cut down within the memory of man! As if

individual speculators were to be allowed to export the clouds out of the sky, or the

stars out of the firmament, one by one. We shall be reduced to gnaw the very crust of

the earth for nutriment. (Thoreau 401)

Thoreau's vision foreshadows McCarthy's stark warning of a world with depleted resources,

where food no longer can be produced. Early ecological concepts like these planted seeds

from which later visions would sprout.

An ecological ethics appears later, most famously in the work of Aldo Leopold. In his

book, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (1949), Leopold introduces the

concept of the land ethic. Leopold believed that if ethics are designed to regulate the

relationship between the individual and the community, then "[t]he land ethic simply enlarges

the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively:

the land" (Leopold 204). With this concept, Leopold moves away from the anthropocentrism

of previous ecological models to place humans on an equal basis with other parts of the ecosystem: "In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such" (204). Such a role reversal leads to Leopold's famous definition of ecological right and wrong: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise"(224). Here, we have the appearance of an ethics that centers around an ecosystem rather than humans or an individual, placing the land, soil, and water on an equal footing with living creatures. The land ethic thus moves us away from biocentrism.

Deep Ecology, developed by Arne Naess, represents an advance in ecological ethics that will provide us with most of the concepts we will need to examine contemporary American fiction. Naess identifies conservation efforts as a "shallow" ecology: "*The Shallow Ecology movement*: Fight against pollution and resource depletion. Central objective: the health and affluence of people in the developed countries" ("Shallow" 95, italics in the original). Naess not only focuses on the anthropocentric component of conservation, but also on class considerations – it is the affluent who can afford to practice conservation. In contrast to this shallow ecology, Naess proposes a deep ecology that rests on a number of basic principles. Rather than enumerate them all, I'll focus on those that will contribute to the close readings that follow. The first principle is: "Rejection of the man-in-environment image in favour of *the relational*, *total-field* image. Organisms as knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations" (95, italics in the original). Much like Heidegger's *dasein*, this vision moves away from seeing humans as separate from their context: "The total-field model dissolves not only the man-in-environment concept, but every compact thing-in-milieu concept" (95).

Next, the concept of biological egalitarianism means that humans are no longer above other species, as in the land ethic: "[T]*he equal right to live and blossom* is an intuitively clear and obvious value axiom. Its restriction to humans is an anthropocentrism with detrimental effects upon the quality of life of humans themselves" (96, italics in the original). Notice the important axiomatic extension of the idea of "rights" to the non-human. This right contains a caveat: "The 'in principle' clause is inserted because any realistic praxis necessitates some killing, exploitation, and suppression" (95). However, biological diversity should be preserved, because diversity "enhances the potentialities of survival, the chances of new modes of life, the richness of forms" (96). Survival of a species should no longer be seen as a zero-sum game, but rather viewed as symbiotic: "[T]he so-called struggle of life, and survival of the fittest, should be interpreted in the sense of ability to coexist and cooperate in complex relationships, rather than ability to kill, exploit, and suppress. 'Live and let live' is a more powerful ecological principle than 'Either you or me'" (96). Another important principle is that of local autonomy: "The vulnerability of a form of life is roughly proportional to the weight of influences from afar, from outside the local region in which that form has obtained an ecological equilibrium" (98). Here, Deep Ecology stands against globalization and international trade, equating distance with danger. Putting responsibility into local hands will have an effect on resource depletion, since "increased local autonomy, if we are able to keep other factors constant, reduces energy consumption" (98).

In a later work with George Sessions, Naess issued further principles that have served as guidelines for a wide range of groups. First of those is the proposition that "[t]he well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman Life on Earth have value in themselves. These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes" (Sessions 14). This proposition removes the concept of values from the human sphere,

extending them once again to animals. Deep Ecology's principles now not only extend rights and values to the non-human, but also serve to limit the rights of humans: "Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs" (14). Further principles insist on radical changes in human life: "The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease" (14). Now, Naess' principles are not only putting the non-human on equal footing with humans, but are requiring that humans reduce their population to accommodate other life forms. Rather than nature being a threat and a danger to humanity, so that it must be "tamed," it is humans who threaten the rest of the world: "Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening" (14). Rapid population growth and industrialization are the problems, and this must be reversed: "Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present" (14). The economy must be reconfigured around sustainability to prevent resource depletion and preserve the inherent value of other life forms. Finally, the last principle is a call to arms: "Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes" (14).

Although ecological ethics stem from an impulse similar to postmodernism's – a critique of modernity and a questioning of the "progress" of science – ecological ethics are in many ways incompatible with postmodern ethics. Ecological ethics embrace universal truths that remain valid for all subjects regardless of social identity constructions. Although it would certainly be possible to attempt it, there seems to be little appetite for a linguistic deconstruction of global warming and climate change. These ethics are a metanarrative

driving other discourses, from food production to architecture to transportation, and one toward which skepticism comes primarily from those financially impacted by restrictive ecological measures. Unlike postmodernism, which eschews structure and systems in favor of play, ecological ethics insist that structure is primary; is, in fact, inseparable from a subject, for an ecosystem is itself a structure, and all life exists within this structure. Although Deep Ecology addresses class and economic differences among humans, it does not put the human other at the center of its ethics. In fact, ecological thinking is probably best classified as post-humanist. As we can see, ecological ethics resolve some of the dilemmas of postmodernism, like the loss of metanarratives or the loss of the "real," by giving us a new metanarrative, attached to an urgent threat that cannot be ignored, that is, in fact, real enough to have an impact on our lives. It also dissolves the self-other concept completely, replacing it with an interconnected network of living and nonliving factors. There is no "other" anymore – we are all in the same boat.

These principles have led to countless splinter groups, each with its own individual focus, and in the way of dogmatic metanarratives such as religion or economics, each splinter group has its disagreements with the others. I won't go into them here, but we'll encounter many of them in the readings that follow. Their disputes are not the issue here, but rather what unites them, which is a conception of reality in which everything is interconnected, where the part impacts the whole.

6.2 *Freedom* by Jonathan Franzen

Jonathan Franzen's 2010 novel, *Freedom*, vividly explores the ecological metanarrative and contrasts it to the postmodern era, finding the postmodern approach wanting and positing ecological thinking as "good." He accomplishes this by setting up a love triangle in which

two men, Richard Katz and Walter Berglund, vie for the love of Patty Berglund. Patty, a housewife, is depicted as unhappy, constantly unsure of her choices and insecure about her weaknesses. She is the typical underachiever of contemporary novels, paralyzed by a lack of ethical structure. Richard Katz is the narcissistic representative of postmodernity, a musician who has no fixed beliefs and is primarily motivated by hedonism. Walter Berglund is an ardent environmentalist who is repeatedly described as good. Walter's ecological thinking begins with Thoreau and encompasses ideas linked to Deep Ecology. His ethics also manifest a strong post-humanism that places humans in opposition to the environment. While Patty and Richard express disdain for the contemporary generation, Walter embraces them and their willingness to believe. Through a series of rather comic blunders motivated by his ethics, he becomes a hero to the younger generation, who are inspired by his dedication. The novel ends with Patty, who has had an affair with Richard Katz, choosing to return to Walter because of his goodness, and Richard Katz redeeming himself by following in Walter's footsteps.

Freedom opens with a portrait of Patty and Walter Berglund, a married couple with two children, as told from the viewpoint of their neighbors in St. Paul, Minnesota. This opening narration sets up the novel and describes the disintegration of their marriage from the outside. Although Patty seems like a typical housewife, there is something unusual about her: "One strange thing about Patty, given her strong family orientation, was that she had no discernible connection to her roots. Whole seasons passed without her setting foot outside St. Paul, and it wasn't clear that anybody from the East, not even her parents, had ever come out to visit" (6). This is due to Patty's decision to abandon her family in New York and relocate to the Midwest in an attempt to create a new identity for herself. Both of Patty's parents seem to be adherents of the postmodern ethics of being for the other. About her mother, we are told: "She is even now, at the time of this writing, a state assemblywoman, the Honorable Joyce

Emerson, known for her advocacy of open space, poor children, and the Arts. Paradise for Joyce is an open space where poor children can go and do Arts at state expense" (39). Her father, a lawyer, is even more dedicated to the other: "Most nights her dad left the house again after dinner to meet with poor people he was defending in court for little or no money. He had an office across the street from the courthouse in White Plains. His free clients included Puerto Ricans, Haitians, Transvestites, and the mentally or physically Disabled" (40-1). His client list reads like a checklist of the marginalized. Patty's antipathy toward her parents stems from their failure to take her seriously, with her mother showing no interest in Patty's sports achievements, and her father's continuous irony and sarcasm. When Patty is raped by the son of a wealthy political donor, her parents are more concerned about the political repercussions than about her well-being. Patty's decision to marry Walter and have a family at a young age seems motivated by a desire to reinvent her life. To Patty, Walter represents the goodness she wishes she could embody, but can't due to her ethical weakness: "'There's something wrong with me. I love all my other friends, but I feel like there's always a wall between us. Like they're all one kind of person and I'm another kind of person. More competitive and selfish. Less good, basically'" (92-3). Patty develops a drinking problem as a result of trying to avoid the responsibility of being a parent: "[O]nce the one or two glasses turned into six or eight glasses, everything changed. Walter needed her sober at night so she could listen to all the things he thought were morally defective in their son, and she needed not to be sober so as not to have to listen" (186).

The novel's interrogation of the benefits of freedom is frequently illustrated by Patty's unhappiness: "Where did the self-pity come from? The inordinate volume of it? By almost any standard, she led a luxurious life. She had all day every day to figure out some decent and satisfying way to live, and yet all she ever seemed to get for all her choices and all her

freedom was more miserable" (226-7). This interrogation of freedom is hammered home when Patty visits her daughter at college: "Her daughter was gazing with desolate self-control at the main college building, on an outside wall of which Patty had noticed a stone graven with words of wisdom from the Class of 1920: USE WELL THY FREEDOM" (230). This motto seems to be an admonition to Patty. Towards the end of the novel, Patty spends some time with her dying father only to find that she hasn't been able to reinvent herself: "Spending so much time listening to her father make fun of everything, albeit a little more feebly each day, she was disturbed to see how much like him she was, and why her own children weren't more amused by her capacity for amusement" (645). This leads her to the conclusion that "[h]er dream of creating a fresh life, entirely from scratch, entirely independent, had been just that: a dream. She was her father's daughter. Neither he nor she had ever really wanted to grow up" (645-6). So we see that Patty has used her decision to be a housewife as a way to hide from the responsibilities inherent in being an adult, to remain in a state of eternal childhood, rather than to form a truly independent self. As if to emphasize that Patty doesn't view herself as a subject, large sections of the novel are written by Patty depicting herself in the third person, calling herself "the autobiographer": "The autobiographer is almost forced to the conclusion that she pitied herself for being so free" (227), she laments.

If Patty represents the typical contemporary subject paralyzed by freedom and the lack of an ethical system, Richard Katz, to some extent, embodies the narcissism and hedonism frequently identified by critics as a weakness inherent in postmodernism. For example, he is described early on as "a self-absorbed, addiction-prone, unreliable, street-smart guitar player from Yonkers, New York" (82-3). These early comments serve to emphasize his unstable and narcissistic personality before he even begins appearing in the narrative. Richard is clearly presented as an artist figure: "Richard, irritable and unreliable though he was in most

respects, was helplessly serious about his music" (83). The art he produces, with his punk

band, the Traumatics, is portrayed early on as destructive and hostile: "The noise was just

unbearable. Richard and two other Traumatics were screaming into their microphones, *I hate*

sunshine! I hate sunshine!" (90-1, italics in the original). Like many such characters in

contemporary novels, he is the product of a broken home: "'[H]is mom ran away when he

was little, and became a religious nut. His dad was a postal worker and a drinker who got

lung cancer when Richard was in high school'" (92). Richard's lack of scruples place him in

direct contrast to Walter, who, as we shall see, is continually depicted as a good person. For

example, Walter tells Patty, "'I feel like the stupidest person on earth sometimes. I *wish* I

could cheat. I *wish* I could be totally self-focused like Richard'" (123, italics in the original).

In fact, Richard's connection to Patty and Walter is described as the only factor that prevents

him from being completely self-absorbed: "He was very good at knowing what was good *for*

him, and this was normally enough for every purpose in his life. It was only around the

Berglunds that he felt that it was not enough" (474, italics in the original). However, Patty

assures the reader that "Richard had a strong (if highly intermittent) wish to be a good

person" (167). He is just not able to envision how to go about doing it, and his music career,

despite eventually achieving financial success, does not lead to happiness: "Though

Nameless Lake and the newly kindled consumer interest in old Traumatics recordings had

brought him more money than his previous twenty years of work combined, he'd managed to

blow every dime of it in his quest to relocate the self he'd misplaced" (240). Here, like Patty,

he seems to have lost the sense of himself as a "self," that is, as a subject. Richard's newfound

financial freedom instead merely leads to hedonistic excess: "He flopped around on the

ground, heavily carplike, his psychic gills straining futilely to extract dark sustenance from an

atmosphere of approval and plenitude. He was at once freer than he'd been since puberty and

closer than he'd ever been to suicide" (241). As with Patty, freedom does not lead Richard to

happiness. Instead, it leads to him becoming intensely depressed: "He strongly disliked the

person he'd just demonstrated afresh that he unfortunately was. And this, of course, was the

simplest definition of depression that he knew of: strongly disliking yourself" (255). Like

Patty, Richard is unable to use his freedom well, because he has no ethical beliefs to guide

him. At one point, Walter even goes so far as to protest that Richard "didn't believe in a

fucking thing!" (591). These qualities, the narcissism, the addiction, the instability, the loss of

self, the depression, and the lack of beliefs, all strongly echo other contemporary portraits

that are more explicitly critical of the postmodern era. Yet, an explicit connection to

postmodernism is rather hard to locate in the actual text of *Freedom*, with the exception of a

key scene that stands out. In fact, it occurs in the very first sentence in which Richard appears

as a character in the narrative. After spending the night with Patty's roommate, whom Richard

is dating, Patty meets Richard for the first time. She describes him thus: "Richard was

wearing a black T-shirt and reading a paperback novel with a big *V* on the cover" (84). The

immediate reference to Thomas Pynchon's debut novel, *V* (1963), not only timestamps the

scene as occurring sometime in the postmodern era, but also brands Richard Katz with the

postmodern label from the first moment we encounter him. Attaching this label to Katz links

his flaws to postmodernism, echoing Franzen's very public criticism of it.

While Patty and Richard represent the negative effects of the postmodern condition,

Walter is depicted as a relentless force for good. Just as an example, shortly after Walter

appears in the novel for the first time as Richard Katz's friend and roommate, we are told that

"Patty began to learn how miraculously worthy Walter was" (96). In fact, in one scene, Patty

tells him this directly: "'God,' Patty marveled. 'You really are quite amazingly worthy'" (123).

This worthiness is important to the story line, because Patty chooses to marry Walter despite

that fact that she is far more attracted to Richard, precisely because she values his goodness. We learn about Walter's dedication to caring for his parents, his self-sacrifices for others, and his firm embrace of an ethical system centered around the environment:

> Walter burned with all sorts of earnest and peculiar views – he hated the pope and the Catholic Church but approved of the Islamic revolution in Iran, which he hoped would lead to better energy conservation in the United States; he liked China's new population-control policies and thought the U.S. should adopt something similar; he cared less about the Three Mile Island nuclear mishap than about the low price of gasoline and the need for high-speed rail systems that would render the passenger car obsolete. (116-7)

Even those who are antagonistic to Walter recognize his goodness. Patty's sister chastises her for distancing herself from their family by saying: "'I'm not the one who turned her nose up, and could never take a joke, and married Mr. Superhuman Good Guy Minnesotan Righteous Weirdo Naturelover, and didn't even pretend not to hate us'" (655). Here, Walter is given a number of epithets, among them "Superhuman," "Good Guy," and "Righteous," that emphasize how impressively good he is. At one point, when Walter and Richard are arguing, Richard sarcastically mentions his goodness: "'Face it, man, you're just too excellent,' Katz said, not kindly" (264). At another point, Walter points out to Richard that the difference between them is Richard's lack of an ethical belief system: "'Well, we're different you and me. Do you get that? Do you understand that it's possible to have values higher than getting laid?'" (462). Patty and Richard have an affair, and Walter finds out, leading to a separation. At this time, Walter begins a relationship with his much younger assistant, Lalitha. Lalitha, too, falls for Walter's goodness: "'Oh, my sweetheart,' she said, embracing him, resting her head against his heart. 'Nobody else understands what good things you're doing. I'm the only

one'" (596). Even after they split up, Patty continues believing that Walter is good. In her

third-person biography, she writes of this time: "She wished she could go to him now, while

he was still alive, and say it to him plainly: I adore you for your goodness" (647).

If Walter is relentlessly portrayed as good, the content of his goodness is clearly

drawn from ecological thinking. At the very beginning, we are told that his neighbors see him

as "greener than Greenpeace" (3). Walter's interest in the environment begins when his

family inherits a house on a lake. In attempt to extract himself from working for the family

business, "he announced that he was going to spend the summer fixing up the lake house and

making an experimental nature film" (571). He arrives at the the house with "a duffel bag of

clothes, ten gallons of house paint, his old one-speed bike, a secondhand paperback copy of

Walden, the Super-8 movie camera that he'd borrowed from the high-school AV Department,

and eight yellow boxes of Super-8 film. It was by far the most rebellious thing he'd ever

done" (572). Thus, Walter's teenage act of rebellion is firmly connected to Thoreau, and his

sojourn at the lake house, renovating and simultaneously enjoying the exposure to nature, is

inspired by Thoreau's residence on Walden Pond. Here, Walter, like Thoreau, begins

observing nature, choosing to make a film about bitterns: "Bitterns were perfect – so retiring

that he could stalk them all summer without using up twenty-one minutes of film. He

imagined making an experimental short called 'Bitternness'" (572). Later, in college, Walter's

ecological interests expand into local activism. Patty tells us about "the symposia he'd

organized – on overpopulation, on electoral-college reform – that hardly any students had

attended" (136-7), and "his petition drive for better-insulated windows in Macalester's

dorms" (137). He even wrote editorials for the university newspaper, in which he, for

example, "grappled philosophically with his fellow students' habit of putting three times too

much milk on their cold cereal and then leaving brimming bowls of soiled milk on their trays:

did they somehow think milk was a free and infinite commodity like water, with no environmental strings attached?" (137). These ecological beliefs shape how he views everything in his world. For example, when Walter visits Richard in New York, he praises the city: "'God, I love the New York subway!' Walter said as he followed Katz down to the uric uptown platform. 'This is the way human beings are supposed to live. High density! High efficiency!'" (282). For Walter, New York's attractions are ecological, rather than cultural or architectural, for instance. Ordering a meal in restaurant is a torture to his conscience:

> He signaled to their waitress for another and then suffered through perusal of the menu. Between the horrors of bovine methane, the lakes of watershed-devastating excrement generated by pig and chicken farms, the catastrophic overfishing of the oceans, the ecological nightmare of farmed shrimp and salmon, the antibiotic orgy of dairy-cow factories, and the fuel squandered by the globalization of produce, there was little he could ever order in good conscience besides potatoes, beans, and freshwater-farmed tilapia. (384)

Listening to the radio disturbs him, because, "to Walter the message of every single radio station was that nobody else in America was thinking about the planet's ruination" (395). This discomfort is magnified when he thinks about television, as well: "And TV: TV was like radio, only ten times worse. The country that minutely followed every phony turn of *American Idol* while the world went up in flames seemed to Walter fully deserving of whatever nightmare future awaited it" (395). Even the problems that arise in Walter's marriage remind him of his ecological beliefs: "Walter was frightened by the long-term toxicity they were creating with their fights. He could feel it pooling in their marriage like the coal-sludge ponds in Appalachian valleys" (418). Hurtful words from his wife remind him of ecological damage: "You could try dumping the poison back down into abandoned

underground mines, but it had a way of seeping into the water table and ending up in drinking water. It really was a lot like the deep shit that got stirred up when a married couple fought: once certain things had been said, how could they ever be forgotten again?" (418-9). Nearly every thought Walter has is shaped by his ethical belief system.

The roots of Walter's environmental beliefs stem from his romantic/transcendentalist experience at the family's lake house: "Seventeen years in cramped quarters with his family had given him a thirst for solitude...To hear nothing but wind, birdsong, insects, fish jumping, branches squeaking, birch leaves scraping as they tumbled against each other: he kept stopping to savor this unsilent silence as he scraped paint from the house's outer walls" (572). His experience, however, is disrupted by the appearance of his older brother, who takes possession of the house and throws a loud, raging party at the lake. Hiding away in the lake house, Walter is infuriated at his brother's violation of nature: "Why couldn't they be *quiet*? Why this need to sonically assault a world in which *some people* appreciated silence? The din went on and on and on" (575, italics in the original). This experience "produced a fever to which everyone else was apparently immune. A fever of self-pitying alienation. Which, as it raged in Walter that night, scarred him permanently with hatred of the bellowing vox populi" (575). Later, when Walter begins working to conserve nature, we are told: "[H]is primary interest in working for the Conservancy, and later for the Trust, was to safeguard pockets of nature from loutish country people like his brother. The love he felt for the creatures whose habitat he was protecting was founded on projection: on identification with their own wish to be left alone by noisy human beings" (575). Walter's ecological ethics stem from an anti-human mindset; they posit that goodness lies not in affirming but rather in opposing humanity. Thus, Walter's primary ecological focus becomes the dangers of overpopulation, and although he works to secure habitat for the cerulean warbler, his antipathy for people

underlies even this effort: "'Well, nest-predation by crows and feral cats is an efficient cause of the warbler's decline. And fragmentation of the habitat is a formal cause of that. But what's the final cause? The final cause is the root of pretty much every problem we have. The final cause is too many damn people on the planet'" (274). Walter goes so far as to argue that "'there's hardly a problem in the world that wouldn't be solved or at least tremendously alleviated by having fewer people'" (275). This is almost a direct quote from the principles of Deep Ecology. Walter lays much of the blame for overpopulation on religion, in particular, the Catholic church, with its mandate to multiply: "In Walter's view, there was no greater force for evil in the world, no more compelling cause for despair about humanity and the amazing planet it had been given, than the Catholic Church" (394). Walter believes that a fundamental change has to be made, that the purpose of life has to be re-imagined: "'Kids have always been the meaning of life. You fall in love, you reproduce, and then your kids grow up and fall in love and reproduce. That's what life was always for. For pregnancy. For more life. But the problem now is that more life is still beautiful and meaningful on the individual level, but for the world as a whole it only means more death'" (278). Walter sees the individualism at the heart of America's concept of freedom as being a threat to the planet:

> "It's all circling around the same problem of personal liberties...People came to this country for either money or freedom. If you don't have money, you cling to your freedoms all the more angrily. Even if smoking kills you, even if you can't afford to feed your kids, even if your kids are getting shot down by maniacs with assault rifles. You may be poor, but the one thing nobody can take away from you is the freedom to fuck your life up whatever way you want to." (453)

The focus needs to shift from the individual to a macro-level: "'What's still 'normal' at the individual level is heinous and unprecedented at the global level'" (278), Walter argues. He

echoes many of the principles of Deep Ecology, for example: "'Every species has an inalienable right to keep existing,'" (274). Notice the use of the word "inalienable," which links this statement to the Declaration of Independence and the Enlightenment philosophy that influenced it, only now the right is extended to animals as well.

The novel goes out of its way to demonstrate to the reader that both Patty and Richard feel out of sync with the younger generation, whereas Walter forms an attachment with them. These passages depict a transition from the cynicism, irony, and opposition of the postmodern generation to a more sincere attachment to a fixed ethical belief system. Katz ponders these generational differences when he meets a young fan named Sarah, who has baked him some banana bread. Katz muses, "She was like a walking advertisement of the late-model parenting she'd received: You have permission to ask for things! Just because you aren't pretty doesn't mean you don't! Your offerings, if you're bold enough to make them, will be welcomed by the world!" (437). He compares Sarah's generation to his own and finds it lacking: "Katz wondered if he'd been this tiring himself at eighteen, or whether, as it now seemed to him, his anger at the world – his perception of the world as a hostile adversary, worthy of his anger – had made him more interesting than these young paragons of self-esteem" (437). This feeling is exacerbated when Walter takes him to the concert of an indie band named Bright Eyes led by singer Conor Oberst. Katz sneers at the band's optimism, thinking "[W]hat a fucking irritating youth-congratulating name for a band" (463). In fact, what disturbs Katz is the sense that the younger generation has "none of the rage and disaffection of the crowds he'd been a part of as a youngster" (464). Franzen is making obvious reference to the New Sincerity in these comments, describing Oberst (who really exists) as "performing sincerity, and when the performance threatened to give sincerity the lie, he performed his sincere anguish over the difficulty of sincerity" (464). Richard, whom Franzen has tied to postmodernism from the

beginning, finds it "insufferable" (464). For him the event is a celebration of the new

generation "being left to themselves to ritually repudiate, for an hour or two on a Saturday

night, the cynicism and anger of their elders" (463-4) This new generation signals in some

way Richard's, and thus postmodernism's, obsolescence: "They gathered not in anger but in

celebration of their having found, as a generation, a gentler and more respectful way of being.

A way, not incidentally, more in harmony with consuming. And so said to him: die" (464). In

direct contrast to Richard, Walter is enthusiastic about the band, proclaiming, "'They're all

about belief...The new record's this incredible kind of pantheistic effort to keep believing in

something in a world full of death...It's like religion without the bullshit of religious dogma'"

(464-5). Richard can only offer a sardonic comment, "'I admire your capacity for admiring'"

(465). After the concert, he seeks out Patty, because "he was now craving the company of

someone with a sense of irony" (465). In fact, Patty shares Richard's disdain of the new

generation: "'Patty's decided she doesn't like anybody under thirty,' Walter said. 'She's

formed a prejudice against an entire generation. And, being Patty, she's very funny on the

subject. But it's gotten pretty vicious and out of control'" (288). Richard remarks on the

contrast with Walter by replying, "'Whereas you seem quite taken with the younger

generation'" (288). By positioning Richard and Patty as out of sync with the new generation,

Franzen signals to the reader that the postmodern era has come to a close, and by describing

Walter as appreciative and admiring, he demonstrates that Walter's ecological ethics are more

attuned to the contemporary era.

     This is emphasized during the course of the novel when Walter has a rather comic

meltdown in public and becomes a hero to the younger generation after a video of his rant

goes viral online. Walter is hired by a billionaire who has concocted a scheme to open pristine

wilderness to coal mining with the provision that after the coal is extracted the land will be

made into a permanent habitat for the cerulean warbler. Walter defends the compromise,
telling a journalist that "[t]he Pan-American Warbler Park...represented a new paradigm of
science-based, privately funded wildlife conservation; the undeniable ugliness of
mountaintop-removal mining was more than offset by the prospect of sustainable 'green
employment' (ecotourism, reforestation, certified forestry)" (589). Once the plan has
succeeded, and he is set to make the public announcement, Walter begins to question "the
course he'd charted for two and a half years with the Trust, convinced of the soundness of his
arguments and the rightness of his mission, only to feel, this morning, in Charleston, that he'd
made nothing but horrible mistakes" (400). Embittered by the breakdown of his marriage, the
news that his wife has betrayed him with Richard Katz, and the corruption of his business
partners, Walter's public announcement disintegrates into an angry rant. He mocks the
displaced residents:

> "You, too, can help denude every last scrap of native habitat in Asia, Africa, and South
> America! You, too, can buy six-foot-wide plasma TV screens that consume
> unbelievable amounts of energy, even when they're not turned on! But that's OK,
> because that's why we threw you out of your homes in the first place, so we could
> strip-mine your ancestral hills and feed the coal-fired generators that are the number-
> one cause of global warming and other excellent things like acid rain!" (608)

He continues in this vein getting more and more worked up, until he explodes into this
diatribe:

> "And MEANWHILE," he shouted, "WE ARE ADDING THIRTEEN MILLION
> HUMAN BEINGS TO THE POPULATION EVERY MONTH! THIRTEEN
> MILLION MORE PEOPLE TO KILL EACH OTHER IN COMPETITION OVER
> FINITE RESOURCES! AND WIPE OUT EVERY OTHER LIVING THING

ALONG THE WAY! IT IS A PERFECT FUCKING WORLD AS LONG AS YOU

DON'T COUNT EVERY OTHER SPECIES IN IT! WE ARE A CANCER ON THE

PLANET! A CANCER ON THE PLANET!" (609, caps in the original).

At this point he is attacked by the angry audience and beaten to the ground. Naturally, he is

fired by the Trust, but the event is not a total loss, as "the local TV footage of Walter's rant

and the ensuing riot had gone viral. It had lately become possible to stream video over the

internet, and the Whitmanville clip (CancerOnThePlanet.wmv) had flashed across the radical

fringes of the blogosphere, the sites of 9/11-conspiracy-mongers and the tree-sitters and the

Fight Club devotees and the PETA-ites" (613). The unexpected media attention triggers a

surging awareness of Walter's neglected side project, a summer internship whose goal is to

interest the younger generation in population control.

Walter had developed the project with Richard Katz and his daughter Jessica, along

with Lalitha, his assistant. He had brought in Jessica to gain access into the mindset of the

younger generation, and Jessica points out that the new generation is not interested in

opposition, but rather in making a positive choice: "'Kids my age are way more libertarian

than you guys were,' she explained. 'Anything that smells like elitism, or not respecting

somebody else's point of view, they're allergic to. Your campaign can't be about telling other

people what not to do. It's got to be about this cool positive choice that *we're* all making'"

(457, italics in the original). Here, we see Franzen portraying a younger generation who

prefers to embrace a positive structure of belief rather than oppose the system. Walter

chooses the name for his movement specifically to undermine neoliberalism: "' I say we go

with Free Space,' he said finally. 'I like how it steals the word 'free' from the other side, and

appropriates the rhetoric of the wide-open West. If this thing takes off, it can also be the name

of a whole movement, not just our group. The Free Space movement'" (458). Thus, the

opponent, the "other side" of Walter's ecological ethics is neoliberalism, whose ethics is primarily focused on individual freedom, a concept that is relentlessly critiqued in the novel. When Walter's rant goes viral, the Free Space movement begins to take off: "[O]vernight, despite having lost its funding...Free Space acquired a bona-fide fan base and, in the person of Walter, a hero" (613). Walter's Free Space project attracts a wave of young volunteers:

> Lalitha checked her BlackBerry and found eighty new messages from young people all over the country, inquiring whether it was too late to volunteer for Free Space. Their e-mail addresses had more piquant flavors than the liberalkid@expensivecollege.edus of the earlier applicants. They were freakinfreegan and iedtarget, they were pornfoetal and jainboy3 and jwlindhjr, @gmail and @cruzio. (612)

Walter has clearly tapped into the zeitgeist, drawing out the younger generation. He starts a blog to communicate with his growing fan base, who latch onto his beliefs with intense fervor:

> For a while, in his blog, he'd tried to downplay and qualify his cancer-on-the-planet 'heroism' and emphasize that the villain was the System, not the people of Forster Hollow. But his fans had so roundly and voluminously chided him for this ("grow some balls man, your speech totally rocked," etc.) that he came to feel he owed them an honest airing of every venomous thought he'd entertained while driving around West Virginia, every hard-core antigrowth opinion he'd ever swallowed in the name of professionalism. (618)

These sections of the novel become highly didactic, as Franzen gives us pages of Walter's ecological beliefs in such volume that they seem disconnected from the plot. For example, while Walter is simply waiting for something to happen, Franzen portrays his thoughts:

> To pass the time, Walter did mental tallies of what had gone wrong in the world in the
>
> hours since he'd awakened in the Days Inn. Net population gain: 60,000. New acres
>
> of American sprawl: 1,000. Birds killed by domestic and feral cats in the United
>
> States: 500,000. Barrels of oil burned worldwide: 12,000,000. Metric tons of carbon
>
> dioxide dumped into the atmosphere: 11,000,000. Sharks murdered for their fins and
>
> left floating finless in the water: 150,000. (430)

These long passages detailing ecological disaster are interspersed with dialogue whose

primary purpose seems to be the exposition of ecological ethics. Walter's conversations are

sprinkled with such moments:

> "The problem is that nobody dares make overpopulation part of the national
>
> conversation. And why not? Because the subject is a downer. Because it seems like
>
> old news. Because, like with global warming, we haven't quite reached the point
>
> where the consequences become undeniable. And because we sound like elitists if we
>
> try to tell poor people and uneducated people not to have so many babies." (451-2)

The heavy-handedness of Franzen's recitation of ecological ideology during the sections

focusing on Walter can at times be distracting.

Walter attempts to get Richard Katz to use his fame to promote ecological ethics, and

Katz reluctantly agrees, but the revelation of his affair with Patty sours the relationship

between them. Patty leaves Walter and attempts to build a relationship with Richard, but he is

unable to adhere to any commitment: "Richard, in his stalwart if unconvincing way, was

doing his best to be a Good Man now that she'd lost Walter. She didn't love Richard a lot, but

she did somewhat love him for this effort (although even here, let the record show, she was

actually loving Walter, because it was Walter who'd put the idea of being a Good Man into

Richard's head)" (640). The relationship ends, and Patty finds herself alone. Meanwhile,

Lalitha dies in a car accident, causing Walter to give up his public persona and retreat to his lake house. Although it seems like he has given up his campaign against population growth, he is unable to stop living according to ecological beliefs. He launches a campaign against the pet cats in the new housing development that has been built on his lake: "The cats of the new neighborhood understandably preferred to stalk the woods and thickets of the adjoining Berglund property, where the birds were. And Walter, even before the last Canterbridge house was occupied, had gone door to door to introduce himself and ask his new neighbors to please keep their cats inside" (680). His neighbors naturally have objections to this. "'So Bobby kills birds,'" one of them says "'So what?'" (680). Walter patiently explains: "'[S]mall cats aren't native to North America, and so our songbirds never evolved any defenses against them. It's not really a fair fight'" (681). The neighbor doesn't care about Walter's concerns: "'[A]ll I care about is letting my children learn to take care of a pet and have responsibility for it. Are you trying to tell me they can't do that?'" (681). Walter persists: "'We're living in an important breeding area for a number of bird species that are declining in North America. And those birds have children, too. When Bobby kills a bird in June or July, he's also leaving behind a nest full of babies that aren't going to live'" (681). The neighbor counters, "'Well, I'm sorry,'" she says, "'but my children matter more to me than the children of some bird. I don't think that's an extreme position, compared to yours. God gave this world to human beings, and that's the end of the story as far as I'm concerned" (680-1).The obstinance of his neighbors reawakens Walter's fury and he once again launches into an ecological campaign, bringing his neighbors "brightly colored neoprene cat bibs. He claimed that a cat wearing one of these bibs could do any frolicsome outdoor thing it pleased, from climbing trees to batting at moths, except pounce effectively on birds" (684). Walter's neighbors are less than pleased: "Walter seemed not to understand what a bother it would be to tie a bib around a cat every

time it went outdoors, and how silly a cat would look in bright blue or red neoprene" (684). However, as the neighbors are tired of Walter's efforts, "the older cat owners on the street did politely accept the bibs and promise to try them, so that Walter would leave them alone and they could throw the bibs away" (684).

Walter's campaign against local cats is so drawn out and comical, and without any real narrative importance, that the question arises: Why is it there? The rather obvious clue is the name Richard Katz. Walter's campaign against cats stands as a symbol condemning the viewpoint of Katz: "Walter had never liked cats. They'd seemed to him the sociopaths of the pet world, a species domesticated as an evil" (688). Katz has broken up Walter's marriage because of his narcissism, and his lack of ethics. Richard believes that he has a right to hurt others: "His job in life was to speak the dirty truth. To be the dick" (475). Walter believes that Richard refuses to stand up for what he knows to be good because he wants to retain his independence: "'The world doesn't reward ideas or emotions, it rewards integrity and coolness. And that's why I don't trust him. He's got the game set up so he's always going to win. In private, he may think he admires what we're doing, but he's never going to admit it in public, because he has to maintain his attitude'" (386). He is also unable to commit to a serious relationship, even with Patty. Walter's end game in his battle with Bobby is to obtain a trap, catch him, and deliver him to a shelter far away, thus ridding himself of his enemy. However, this action does not make him happy: "He didn't regret having removed a menace from the ecosystem, and thereby saved many bird lives, but the small-animal vulnerability in Bobby's face made him aware of a fatal defect in his own makeup, the defect of pitying even the beings he most hated" (692).

This pity foreshadows the novel's ending. Patty decides to attempt a reconciliation with Walter, and goes to the house on the lake, where Walter finds her sitting on the front

step. When he refuses to speak to her, she remains outside in the cold. Eventually, he feels

pity for her, and brings her inside to warm her up. They reconcile. And Richard Katz also

makes a conciliatory gesture. He sends Walter a CD: "It appeared to be a Richard Katz solo

effort, with a boreal landscape on the front, superimposed with the title *Songs for Walter*"

(699). It contains songs that manifest Walter's ecological ethics: "The first song was called

'Two Kids Good, No Kids Better,'" (699). Although Walter responds by exclaiming "'God

what an asshole you are'" (699), his tears indicate that Richard's final embrace of Walter's

ecological ethics has redeemed him in Walter's eyes. At the novel's end, Walter and Patty

move away from the lake, leaving their house "to be managed by a local trust as a bird

sanctuary" (705), and "access to the preserve is granted only to birds and to residents" (706).

6.3 *A Friend of the Earth* by T. Coraghessan Boyle

T. Coraghessan Boyle's novel, *A Friend of the Earth*, published in 2000, provides a vivid

example of the deployment of the ecological metanarrative in contemporary American

fiction. The novel not only gives us an overview of the development and history of the

environmental movement in The United States, but also presents to us a dystopian future in

which the environment has been destroyed – a typical strategy of these novels. The

implication of these dystopian visions is that environmental ethics are "good" in a profound,

concrete way, and the results of not implementing them will be extremely harmful to us all.

Boyle's novel focuses on the life of Ty Tierwater, an environmental activist, and his daughter,

Sierra. The structure of the novel flashes back in forth through time, giving us a picture of the

future, in the years 2025-2026, as well as going all the way back to what I consider to be the

beginning of the contemporary era, 1989. Boyle uses a combination of first and third-person

narrators, including adding first-person commentary to the the third-person sections. These

structural and stylistic manipulations create clear links between the actions of the past and the conditions in the future dystopian world. The novel describes Ty's conversion from middle-class suburban father into an environmental activist that engages in "ecotage" (ecological sabotage) and who is eventually arrested and imprisoned for his crimes. In the distant future, after his release from prison, he works for Maclovio Pulchris, an eccentric pop star loosely based on Michael Jackson, as the caretaker of his private menagerie of endangered animals, in the hope that some of the species can be preserved despite the destruction of the environment.

If we restructured the novel into a temporally linear narrative, we would start with a portrayal of Ty Tierwater as a single father, living on the income generated by a shopping mall inherited from his father. This life is described as "his life of quiet desperation, aimless, asleep at the wheel, watching his father's empire fall away into dust like all the geriatric empires before it" (61). If the shopping mall and his father's success as a real estate developer embody the materialistic, Earth-destroying modern world, Ty's discontent would seem to belong to the postmodern era. Ty's future voice narrates this section, saying, "[F]or the better part of my life I was a criminal. Just like you. I lived in the suburbs in a three-thousand-square-foot house with redwood siding and oak floors and an oil burner the size of Texas, drove a classic 1966 Mustang for sport and a Jeep Laredo...to take me up to the Adirondacks" (42). Ty is indeed imprisoned for his ecotage, but that is not the kind of crime he is referring to. Instead, he considers the damage to the environment caused by his lifestyle to be the real crime: "I guess I was dimly aware – way out there on the periphery of my consciousness – of what I was doing to the poor abused corpus of old mother earth, and I did recycle (when I got around to it, which was maybe once or twice a year)" (42). He extends this description of crime to include everyone in the Western world: "And just like you – if you live in the

Western world...I caused approximately two hundred fifty times the damage to the environment of this tattered, bleeding planet as a Bangladeshi or a Balinese, and they do their share, believe me" (43). Although Ty had previously had a dim awareness of the environment, and had actually named his daughter Sierra, in addition to joining the Sierra Club, he hadn't yet adopted any kind of environmental ethics. Instead, after his wife dies from an allergic reaction to a bee sting, he concentrates on raising his daughter by himself: "He'd been father and mother to Sierra since she was three years old and he had to rescue her from her grandmother and tell her mommy wasn't coming back anymore" (83). The suburban life of single fatherhood is described as stressful and unfulfilling: "Try climbing out of the cavern of sleep to the screams and night alarums of an inconsolable thirty-seven-pound ball of confusion and rage, try dropping her off at nursery school, a single father on his way to mind-numbing, soul-crushing work, and she won't let go of the door handle" (83). His life at this point is empty, mind-numbing, and without meaning. He desperately needs a sense of purpose.

It arrives in the mail, when he receives a postcard inviting him to an Earth Forever! event: "*Dear Mr. or Ms. Tierwater,* it read, *Are you concerned about the environment? Do you care about the rape of our forests, the pollution of our streams and rivers, the acid rain killing off the pristine lakes of the Adirondacks? Fed up? Ready for Direct Action? Then come to our,* etc." (62, italics in the original). This event would change his life, giving him his purpose, a belief system, and a set of ethics; and also determine his fate. Ty decides to attend the event, he tells us, because "he believed. He did. He genuinely did. He needed an awakening, a cause, a call to arms – and here it was" (63). There, he meets Andrea Knowles, a member of Earth Forever!, who eventually becomes his second wife in addition to introducing him to the life of an activist. The activist organization depicted in the novel is

rather obviously based on the real life Earth First! group, which is heavily influenced by Deep Ecology, and some of its splinter groups such as the Animal Liberation Front and the Earth Liberation Front that have been known to engage in more radical illegal action. Andrea comes from a long line of environmentalists: "She was the great-granddaughter of Joseph Knowles, one of the archetypal eco-nuts" (171), and is described as "the woman who routinely chained herself to cranes and bulldozers and seven-hundred-thousand-dollar Feller Buncher machines back in the time when we thought it mattered" (1). Earth Forever! also brings Ty into contact with another major character in the novel, Teo van Sparks, who carries a business card that identifies him as an "Eco-Agitator" (22). It is Andrea and Teo who indoctrinate Ty and his daughter, Sierra, into environmental ideology and an ecological ethics. Ty divests himself of his property, including the shopping mall he inherited from his father, and donates the funds to saving the environment: "[E]verything I ever had to invest...went to Andrea and Teo and my wild-eyed cohorts at Earth Forever! (Never heard of it? Think radical enviro group, eighties and nineties. Tree-spiking? Ecotage? Earth Forever! Ring a bell?)" (8). To Ty, this divestment represents a movement away from a life of "crime" to a more ethical life, one centered around the planet: "I sold the house, the cars, the decrepit shopping center my father left me, my wind surfer and Adirondack chair and my complete set of bootleg Dylan tapes, all the detritus left behind by the slow-rolling glacier of my old life, my criminal life, the life I led before I became a friend of the earth" (43).

The depiction of Ty's belief system is scattered throughout the novel in side comments and in his descriptions of the world and his life, and this provides Boyle an opportunity to give us a tour through the history of the environmental movement. At the core of Ty's beliefs is the idea, as the novel's title indicates, of being a "friend of the earth." This concept's full expression requires a necessary opposition between humans and the eco-system of the planet:

"Friendship for the earth. For the trees and shrubs and native grasses and the antelope on the plain and the kangaroo rats in the desert and everything else that lives and breathes under the sun. Except people, that is. Because to be a friend of the earth, you have to be an enemy of the people" (44). Although Ty believes in human connection and loves his family, he still views people as the enemy: "Sure, there were individuals out there, human beings worthy of compassion, sacrifice, love, but that didn't absolve them of collective guilt. There were too many people in the world, six billion already and more coming, endless people, people like locusts, and nothing would survive their onslaught" (241). Thus, an ecological ethics renounces anthropocentrism and instead places the earth and its eco-system at its center. Boyle directly expresses the underlying motive for many of the dystopian eco-fantasies that populate contemporary culture as a romantic resentment of humanity and a longing to be freed from its inherited materialist value-system:

> Sometimes, hiking the trails, dreaming, the breeze in his face and the chaparral burnished with the sun, he wished some avenger would come down and wipe them all out, all those seething masses out there with their Hondas and their kitchen sets and throw rugs and doilies and VCRs. A comet would hit. The plague, mutated beyond all recognition, would come back to scour the land. Fire and ice. The final solution. And in all these scenarios, Ty Tierwater would miraculously survive – and his wife and daughter and a few others who respected the earth – and they would build the new uncivilized civilization on the ashes of the old. No more products. Just life. (243)

This romanticism should not be surprising considering the transcendentalist roots of the American environmental movement, but the outright hostility toward humans indicates that we are no longer dealing with an anthropocentric ethics.

In addition to these expressions of post-humanism, the novel is filled with other

references to specific figures and ideas. For example, at the beginning, Ty introduces himself

as an environmentalist and spells out some of his beliefs: "I'm an environmentalist, after all –

or used to be; not much sense in using the term now – and I believe in Live and Let Live,

Adat, Deep Ecology, No Compromise in Defense of Mother Earth" (6). Each of these phrases

represents a complex ideology with its own history in the environmental world. Henry David

Thoreau plays an important role in Ty's ideology as well. During the novel's first scene

depicting direct action, we read that perhaps Ty "was thinking of Thoreau, his hero of the

moment (along with Messrs. Muir, Leopold and Abbey): *The authority of government can

have no pure right over my person and property but what I concede to it*" (49, italics in the

original). Ty expresses his opposition to hunting by referring to Thoreau: "I've never hunted a

thing in my life, not to kill it – I'm with Thoreau: *No humane being, past the thoughtless age

of boyhood, will wantonly murder any creature which holds its life by the same tenure that he

does*" (146, italics in the original). Ty's downsizing of his lifestyle is modeled, in part, on

Thoreau: "I didn't want more. I wanted less, much less. I wanted to live like Thoreau" (263).

Thoreau remains his hero even during the scenes set in the future, as he still keeps a "portrait

of Thoreau" (76) on his wall. Another such figure is John Muir, who Ty identifies as "the holy

fool who was the proximate cause of all this" (156). When Sierra occupies a giant redwood to

prevent it from being cut down, Ty thinks of Muir:

> I remembered Muir riding out a storm one night in the Sierras, thrashing to and fro in
>
> the highest branches of a tossing pine, just to see what it was like. He wasn't trying to
>
> save anything or anybody – he just wanted to seize the moment to experience what no
>
> one had experienced, to shout his hosannas to the god of the wind and the rain and the
>
> mad whirling rush of the spinning earth. He had joy, he had connection, he had vision
>
> and mystical reach. (156)

Thus, Boyle brings his awareness of the romantic underpinnings of the environmental movement to the surface of the novel again and again. Ty's reading selections also reflect this intellectual history, and bring us comments that seem to exist only to name names: "I retreat to the lavatory with a mold-splotched copy of Muir's *The Mountains of California*" (157-8), for example, or "He's been trying to read – Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature*" (33), and even a reference to "*The Dharma Bums*" (105), Jack Kerouac's fictionalized depiction of beat poet Gary Snyder, a major figure in the development of the contemporary environmental movement.

References to Arne Naess and Deep Ecology also appear, including a rather pedagogical exchange between Ty and Sierra that seems designed to educate the reader: "She was fresh from Teo's Action Camp, in love with the idea of heroic sacrifice and so imbued with the principles of Deep Ecology she insisted on the ethical treatment not only of plants and animals, but even rocks and dirt. '*Rocks*?' I said. '*Dirt*?' She just nodded" (152, italics in the original). Ty here plays the role of uninitiated innocent, performing the presumed skepticism of a projected reader. Sierra takes the role of educator: "'Everything in the ecosystem has its integrity,' she assured me" (152). In answer to Ty's (and the projected reader's) skepticism, she continues to explain: "'[I]t's not just about wolves and caribou and whooping cranes – it's about the whole earth. I mean, you have to think about what right do we have to dig up the ancient soil and disturb the fungus and microbes, the springtails and pill bugs and all the rest, because without them there'd be no soil'" (153). This exchange is followed by a rather pedantic definition of Deep Ecology offered by Ty: "Deep Ecology – Adat – says that all elements of a given environment are equal and that morally speaking no one of them has the right to dominate. We don't preserve the environment for the benefit of man, for progress, but for its own sake, because the whole world is a living organism and we

are but a humble part of it" (153). Ty's sudden shift from skeptic to devotee in this passage emphasizes the force of Sierra's, and thus Deep Ecology's, moral argument. The reader's identification with Ty and his initial skepticism is exploited to suggest following his shift from skepticism to belief. Notice the emphasis laid on the ethics of Deep Ecology, invoking concepts such as rights and equality that are normally associated with humanism and extending them to the entire planet and the components of its eco-system.

Ty's beliefs intrude into every corner of his life so that he evaluates everyday events through the filter of an ecological ethics. When Maclovio Pulchris puts up Christmas decorations, Ty describes the holiday as "[t]he empty ceremony of a forgotten tribe. Christmas means nothing to me, except maybe as a negative, the festival of things, of gluttony, light the candles and rape the planet all over again" (144). His conversion to a new belief system is emphasized by the contrast with the past he describes: "We had Christmas when I was a boy, because of my mother, and there was magic in the world then – there was redemption. Hope. And more than that: there was a reason, for us and the beasts and the plants and everything else. That's all gone now. Long gone" (144). The recognition of environmental destruction has not only spoiled Christmas for him, but also eliminated the possibility of hope, redemption, and magic. These comments, coming as they do from a future viewpoint, toll the warning bell to us about the dangers of continuing on our current path. When Ty drinks a glass of wine, he can't really savor it because of his ethical doubts: "[H]e took no pleasure in it because the smell was artificial and the grapes that gave up their juice for it had been dusted with sulfur and Christ knew what other sorts of chemicals. Oak trees had fallen to make that wine. Habitat had been gobbled up. Nothing lived in a vineyard, not even nematodes" (238). Notice the references to nematodes and the ecological havoc wreaked by the creation of a vineyard, once again drawing from Deep Ecology. On the way

to commit an act of nighttime ecotage, Ty is stuck in a traffic jam, and he looks out on the

city and sees only environmental damage:

> The smog was like mustard gas, burning in his lungs. There was trash everywhere,
>
> scattered up and down the off-ramp like the leavings of a bombed-out civilization,
>
> cans, bottles, fast-food wrappers, yellowing diapers and rusting shopping carts, oil
>
> filters, Styrofoam cups, cigarette butts. A lone eucalyptus, twelve thousand miles
>
> removed from the continent where it had evolved, presided over the scene like an
>
> advertisement for blight. (240)

In fact, his thoughts are so imbued with ecological thinking that he can't even pass gas

without worrying about the environmental consequences: "That's methane gas, a natural

pollutant, same as you get from landfills, feedlots and termite mounds, and it persists in the

atmosphere for ten years, one more fart's worth of global warming. I'm a mess and I know it.

Jewish guilt, Catholic guilt, enviro-eco-capitalistico guilt: I can't even expel gas in peace"

(106-7). Here, Ty puts his environmental beliefs on the same plane as religious beliefs,

indicating that he has embraced their ethics as equivalent to a religion. The cumulative effect

of these repeated passages is to lead the reader into viewing the world of the novel and the

actions of its characters through an ecological lens.

Ty's beliefs lead him to fervently embrace direct action as the only possible way to

save the planet. In this pursuit, he is schooled by Teo and his newly wedded wife, Andrea,

who take him on an early excursion to block a logging road by digging a trench across the

road, filling it with cement, and then letting the cement harden around their feet. In the early

stages, Andrea is portrayed as the instigator of these actions: "She was enjoying this, a little

field trip, she the professor and Tierwater the student. Call it Ecodefense 101, or

Monkeywrenching for the beginner" (134). However, the irresponsible decision to allow his

fourteen-year-old daughter to join them in the cement leads to an attempt by local authorities to remove her from Ty's custody. Ty rescues/kidnaps her from temporary foster care and becomes a fugitive: "He was a criminal, a desperado, a fugitive from justice facing actual prison time, years maybe, years behind bars, and what had he done? He'd stuck his feet in some wet cement. Pissed off a few people. Tried to save the planet. Christ, they should be giving him awards" (125). Hiding with his family in a cabin in the woods under an assumed name, Ty sees himself not as a criminal, but rather a hero who should be rewarded for his sacrifices. Ty's reaction to the perceived injustice is to become more determined to fight for the environment:

> Nobody knew them now, and nobody cared. But they were going to become a *cause célèbre*, that's how Tierwater saw it, heroes of the environmental movement. Like the Arizona Phantom. Or the Fox. People who'd struck back, done something, mattered. People who didn't just take up space and draw breath and consume so many pounds of food and pints of liquid a day and produce nothing in their whole oblivious, cramped and contaminated lives but waste and more waste. (125)

Here, we see how Ty's newly adopted sense of ecological ethics has transformed him from a suburban mall owner leading a life of quiet desperation into a hero, at least in his own eyes, and has given him a sense that his life matters and the courage to take extreme risks

While in hiding, Ty continues his covert acts of ecotage, sneaking out at night to sabotage logging machinery and other construction equipment, in sections of the novel that are clear echoes of Edward Abbey's novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), one of the earliest attempts to fictionalize ecological thinking and an actual influence on the founders of Earth First! Here, we see how Ty uses defense of the eco-system to justify to himself the destruction of property:

The least of those machines was worth fifty-thousand dollars, and I was prepared to

destroy every working part I could locate – but subtly, subtly, so they'd see nothing

amiss and run their stinking diesel engines till they choked and seized. I only wished I

could be there to see it happen, see the looks on their faces, see the trees I'd saved

standing tall while the big yellow machines spat and belched and ground to an

ignominious and oh-so-expensive halt. (138-9, italics in the original)

Boyle maintains a distance from Ty's actions by showing him ignoring the cautions of Andrea

and Teo, who, though supporting his goals, are worried about the potential consequences of

his criminal activity. Although Andrea has warned Ty about drawing too much attention to

the forest where they are hiding, Ty cannot stop himself from burning down a huge plantation

of trees planted by a lumber company. When Andrea learns of his action, she chastises him:

"[T]*hirty-five thousand acres of habitat, gone just like that. What about the deer, the*

squirrels, the trees and ferns and all the rest?" (165, italics in the original). Ty replies by

lecturing her about the environment: "*Fire's natural up here, you know that – the sequoia*

cones can't even germinate without it. If you did a little research or even picked up a nature

book once in a while instead of plotting demonstrations all the time, you'd know it's the most

natural thing in the world" (165, italics in the original). Here, we see how Ty's embrace of

ideology has led him to ignore the danger to his own family, and Boyle allows a glimpse of

the hubris behind Ty's extremism: "*And how had he felt about the fire? Good, he'd felt good.*

And more: he'd felt like an avenger, like a god, sweeping away the refuse of the corrupted

world to watch a new and purer one arise from the ashes" (165, italics in the original).

Boyle's depiction of Ty's willingness to break the law for his cause creates a contrast between

him and an environmental movement that appears to be rather impotent: "E.F.!ers might have

marched in the street and shouted slogans like 'Back to the Pleistocene!' but they strictly

eschewed any illegal activity; it was only the disaffected fringe that sometimes, out of frustration and an overriding love of the earth, spiked a grove of ancient redwoods or blocked a culvert" (160). It's clear that Ty does not belong to this more passive contingent: "[W]*here did that leave Tierwater? Right where he wanted to be, on the unraveling edge of the disaffected fringe*" (160, italics in the original). Boyle draws a clear distinction between those who truly live the ecological ethics and those whose environmental concerns are merely fashionable. In doing so, he also distinguishes between the postmodern era and the contemporary era, as Ty thinks about the '60s, a time "when he and Jane wore flowered shirts and pants so wide they were like flapping sails, a time when they subscribed to everything and never thought twice about it. Drugs were part of life then. And protests. Political protests. Flag-burning. Jeering. Painting your face for the sheer hell of it. *There was none of that in what he was doing now*" (209, italics in the original). A clear distinction is drawn between the anti-establishment attitude of the '60s and the more serious commitment of the contemporary era.

After Earth Forever! negotiates Ty's surrender to the authorities and a guilty plea in exchange for a reduction of charges and custody of Sierra, he and Andrea decide to spend the time before he goes to prison duplicating her great-grandfather's most famous publicity stunt. In 1913, Joseph Knowles had stood before a gathering of reporters and had stripped off all his clothing: "He then reiterated the credo that had drawn the journalists in the first place – that nature was to be preserved for its own sake as the nurturer of mankind" (172). After this statement, he entered the woods to live in the wilderness naked and alone: "Two months later, hard and brown and considerably thinner, not to mention chewed, sucked and drained by every biting insect in the county, he emerged at the same spot to an even larger crowd and proclaimed that his God was the wilderness and his church the church of the forest" (172).

This reference back to the great era of conservation once again underlines the philosophical history of the environmental movement, and again, there is a comparison to religion. Andrea and Ty agree to repeat Knowles' action, only this time they bring a journalist along to take pictures and ensure that they do not cheat the conditions. Ty sees their suffering as confirmation of his commitment to the environment:

> *To go out into the wilderness with nothing, to hunt and gather and survive like the first hominids scouring the African plains, that was something, a fantasy that burned in the atavistic heart of every environmentalist worthy of the name. And he was one of them, as far now from the shopping center and the life of the living dead he'd been enduring all these years as it was possible to be.* (175, italics in the original)

Although they struggle to survive, finding little to eat and enduring exposure to the elements, Ty realizes the publicity value of the sacrifice: "*Think of it as an adventure, Andrea said, and it was an adventure, Tierwater saw that immediately, the sort of thing that would make the two of them more notorious than all the Foxes and Phantoms combined*" (175, italics in the original). They emerge from the forest after one month, but there is no sense of spiritual connection, just a collapse into pure physical existence. When Ty is arrested and taken to prison to serve his sentence, he feels a sense of relief, enjoying the pleasure of three full meals a day and a roof over his head. His and Andrea's publicity stunt had nevertheless been effective:

> It had made the cover of *Outside* magazine, and it put them on the map, that was for sure. After that, practically every publication in the country, from *People* to the *New York Times* to the *Enquirer*, wanted to know what he and Andrea thought about the rain forest, the holes in the ozone layer, the decline of frogs worldwide, what it felt like to live naked and make love in a hut. The article had run to twelve pages, with

photos, and each line added another layer to the myth till the canonization was

complete: they were the saints of the Movement, forget Abbey and Leopold and

Brower and all the rest. (210)

Ty has accomplished his mission of becoming a hero, even to the point of comparing himself

to a saint.

Upon his release from prison, Ty settles into a suburban routine, living on funds from

Earth Forever! as Andrea continues her life as organizer and fund-raiser. Although he gains

some measure of fulfillment from re-configuring his backyard in accordance with ecological

principles, he finds himself feeling a strange restlessness: "[I]t wasn't just boredom – prison

was boring – it was more a restlessness, a feeling of emptiness and impotence, a growing

certainty that this was all a charade. The animals were dying, the forests falling. There were

scores to be settled" (208). Ty yearns to return to the field: *"Tierwater found himself craving*

more, craving action. It was an addiction, exactly that: once you'd identified the enemy, once

you'd struck in the night and felt the magnetic effect of it, you were hooked. The passive

business was fine, restoring an ecosystem, digging up a lawn, handing out flyers and

attending rallies, but there was nothing like action, covert, direct, devastating" (237, italics in

the original). Andrea strongly argues that he is a public figure and cannot afford to risk

breaking the law, in light of his criminal record and the terms of his probation. In fact, she

seems to have fully embraced a more legal path, telling Ty:

> "*No more guerrilla tactics. We can't afford it. Every time some eco-nut blows*
>
> *something up or spikes a grove of trees, we lose points with the public, not to mention*
>
> *the legislature. Seventy-three percent of California voters say they're for the*
>
> *environment. All we need to do is get them to vote – and we are. We're succeeding. We*
>
> *don't need violence anymore – I don't know if we ever did.*" (238)

By now, we know what will happen: Ty ignores Andrea's advice and goes out at night, face painted black, with sabotage tools, despite the risk: *"He was risking everything, he knew that. But then, what was one marriage, one daughter, one suburban life compared with the fate of the earth?"* (243, italics in the original). Ty is caught by police, and sent to prison once more, and Andrea decides to divorce him. He has lost everything, driven by a sense of ethics that puts the planet above himself and everything else. When Ty finally does get out of prison, he becomes even more fanatical. Lured by his former cellmate, who is operating undercover at the behest of the FBI, Ty attempts to poison the water supply of Los Angeles: *"I was fighting a war, you understand, and maybe I lost my judgment, if I ever had any. In the company of an FBI agent posing as a disaffected scientist from BioGen and a shit by the name of Sandman...I found myself out on those windswept waters with eight big plastic buckets of tetrodotoxin at my feet"* (218). What he doesn't know is that there is no real poison in the buckets; nevertheless, Ty is unable to go through with the plan:

> [W]*hen it was time to tip the buckets and begin evening the score in favor of the animals, I couldn't do it. Though I'd steeled myself, though I seethed and hated and reminded myself that to be a friend of the earth you have to be an enemy of the people...though this was the final solution and I the man chosen to administer it, when it came right down to it, I faltered"* (218).

Ty is arrested and publicly branded "the human hyena" (218) by the press. Boyle portrays Ty Tierwater as man driven to such extremes by ethical concerns that he nearly commits what he believes will be mass murder, and although he doesn't go through with it, he describes this decision with the word "faltered," meaning that he sees his lack of action as weakness, as a failure. Boyle consistently portrays Ty as a flawed man, driven by hubris and ego; yet, nevertheless, committed to what he believes is right; driven by a set of ethical principles.

Sierra Tierwater is portrayed as similarly committed, but is viewed by the environmentalists in the novel as an almost religious figure. An early scene that takes place before Ty adopts his environmental beliefs demonstrates Sierra's character and foreshadows her fate. Having prepared steaks for dinner, Ty is surprised by Sierra's conversion to vegetarianism, telling us that her aunt "had taken her to the Earth Day rally in Washington Square, where she'd been converted by a dreadlocked ascetic and a slide show depicting doe-eyed veal calves succumbing to the hammer and headless chickens having their guts mechanically extracted on a disassembly line" (114-5). Surprised by her decision, he is equally surprised by her strength of will: "Sierra stood there in the kitchen, five feet nothing and eighty-eight pounds, lecturing me about the evils of meat" (115). Ty finds her arguments compelling:

> The steaks were in the pan, inch-thick slabs of flesh, and I looked at them there and for the first time in my life thought about where they'd come from and what the process was that had made them available to me and my daughter and anybody else who had the $6.99 a pound to lay down at the A&P Meat Department. Cattle suffered, cattle died. And I ate burgers and steaks and roasts and never had to contemplate the creature who gave it all up for me. That was the way of the world, that was progress. (116)

Although he can see her point of view, he fears that letting her refuse to eat the meat will compromise his authority as a single parent, and he worries that she will only choose to eat unhealthy food: "Let her get away with this and she'll rule me, that's the way I felt, and then it'll be junk food and candy, then it'll be stunted growth and rotten teeth and ruined skin, delinquency, early pregnancy, bad debts, drugs, booze, the whole downward spiral" (117). He insists that she eat the meat, but she refuses, remaining at the table until she falls asleep (a

scene that unfortunately reverberates with film and television clichés). For days, she

continues to reject Ty's attempts to serve her meat, until, "[o]n the fourth day of her hunger

strike, I got a call from the school nurse: she'd fainted during gym class, halfway through the

rope climb, and had fallen twelve feet to the gym floor" (117). Ty races to the hospital, where

he receives a cold welcome: "Sierra's eyes leapt up when she saw me come through the door,

but then they went cold with the recollection that meat was murder and that I, her father, was

chief among the murderers" (118). The end result of the standoff: "[S]he never touched

another scrap of meat in her life" (118). This scene establishes Sierra as committed to her

ethical beliefs and willing to stand up to authority at the risk of her own health.

When she visits her father in prison, he apologizes to her for the actions that have

separated them, for not being a bigger part of her life. Her response demonstrates her

commitment to the environment: "'You don't have to apologize to me, Dad. I think what

you're doing – and Andrea and Teo too – is the greatest thing anybody could do. The only

thing'" (207). She pronounces her verdict of his actions: "'I think you're a hero'" (207).

Drawing on the real-life example of Julia Butterfly Hill, who was still living in a tree at the

time the novel was published, Boyle has Sierra occupy a redwood slated for destruction by a

lumber company. The company tries to wait her out, hoping that the inclement weather will

discourage her:

> A tree hugger by the name of Sierra Tierwater, twenty-one years old and a complete
>
> unknown – nobody's daughter, certainly – was trespassing in one of their grand old
>
> cathedral redwoods and the press was waiting for them to send a couple of their goons
>
> up to haul her down, as brutally as possible. But they weren't about to do that. Why
>
> bother? Why give her anything? (188)

But, as we have already seen, Sierra is not the kind who gives up easily: "She wasn't your

ordinary body-piercing neo-hippie college kid chanting slogans and chaining herself to the

bumpers of corporate town-cars on her summer vacation, she was a shining symbol high up

in the tower of her tree, she was immovable, unshakable, Joan of Arc leading her troops into

battle" (223). She becomes a symbol, "the cynosure of the movement, the sacrificial virgin"

(152), and remains in the tree for years, despite numerous attempts to shake her will: "Sierra

set the record. Set it anew each day, like Kafka's hunger artist, but, unlike the deluded artist,

she had an audience. A real and ever-growing artist, an audience that made pilgrimages to the

shrine of her tree, sent her as many as a thousand letters a week, erected statues to her,

composed poems and song lyrics, locked arms and marched in her name" (261). Sierra's

resistance is described in glowing terms, and she is compared to a religious figure: "Sierra

had begun to take on the trappings of the mad saint, the anchorite in her cell, the martyr who

suffers not so much for a cause but for the sake of the suffering itself. She'd been studying the

teachings of Lao Tzu and the Buddha, she told me" (262). Unlike Ty, who is driven by hubris

and seething anger, Sierra takes to living in the tree as a way of life, communicating by cell

phone with journalists and admirers, but giving no sign of faltering: "There was no need to

come down to the earth, not then, not ever. She didn't care – or didn't notice – that she was the

idol of thousands" (262). The novel's tragic climax comes when Sierra, who has been

threatened by climbers and helicopters hired by the lumber company, simply falls out of the

tree by accident, falling 180 feet to the earth below. Ty views her death as an act of heroism:

"Sierra gave up everything for an ideal, and if that isn't the very definition of heroism I don't

know what is. Once she was up in her tree, that was it, her life was over" (222). The religious

connotations are again invoked during the future sections of the book, when a journalist

wants to write her life story. It is called: "Martyr of the Trees: The Sierra Tierwater Story"

(261). Ty has not only sacrificed his life to the cause, but also the life of his only child. The

loss helps drive him to the extremes that lead him back to prison.

If the scenes of the novel set in the past portray Ty and Sierra as ethical warriors fighting the good fight against the destroyers of the environment, the future scenes provide us with a terrifying glimpse of the consequences of losing the fight. In the years 2025-2026, global warming has devastated the environment. Ty's narration is littered with commentary which reveals the changes that have occurred, emphasizing the damage to the environment: "The sky is black – not gray, black – and it can't be past three in the afternoon. Everything is still, and I smell it like a gathering cloud, death, the death of everything, hopeless and stinking and wasted" (2). The world is racked by massive storms alternating with devastating heat waves: "[P]eople thought the collapse of the biosphere would be the end of everything, but that's not it at all. It's just the opposite – more of everything, more sun, water, wind, dust, mud" (8). The wind is so fierce that buildings are destroyed and lives are endangered by flying objects: "People have been decapitated by roofing material, crushed, pole-axed, impaled – you hear about it every day on the news" (13). Dust fills the air, making it hard to breathe: "And then there are the eye and lung problems associated with all the particulate matter in the air, not to mention allergies nobody had heard of twenty years ago. A lot of people – myself included – wear goggles and a gauze mask during the dry season, when the air is just another kind of dirt" (13). Ty chastises the reader for these conditions: "But what can I say? I told you so? This is the world we've made. Live in it" (13). The changes in the temperature have eliminated the possibility of creating certain foodstuffs: "Have I mentioned that grapes are a thing of the past? Napa-Sonoma is all rice paddies now, the Loire and Rhine Valleys so wet they'd be better off trying to grow pineapples" (15). Ty talks of eating "my last can of Alaskan snow crab (now extinct like everything else that walks or crawls in the sea, except maybe zebra mussels)" (4). There is no wine or beer, only sake, and meat has been

replaced by an invasive species of catfish transplanted from Asia. Animal life has been devastated, with mass extinction the norm: "[T]he whole world is Africa now, and India, Bloomington, Calcutta and the Bronx, all wrapped in one. The mega-fauna are gone, the habitat is shrunk to zero, practically no animals left anywhere but the R-species and the exotics" (232). This includes the local landscape: "This used to be open country twenty-five years ago – a place where you'd see bobcat, mule deer, rabbit, quail, fox, before everything was poached and encroached out of existence" (7). It also encompasses the entire earth: "Now the elephants are gone, and the forest too – Ceylon, last I heard was 100 percent deforested, a desert of unemployable mahouts and third-generation twig gatherers" (79). Heat waves lift the temperature to over 130 degrees: "The whole world's a pizza oven, a pizza oven that's just exploded, the blast zone radiating outward forever, particles of grit forced right up my nose and down my throat" (258). The narrative emphasizes the connection to today, chastising our inaction:

> Global warming. I remember the time when people debated not only the fact of it, but the consequence. It didn't sound so bad, on the face of it, to someone from Winnipeg, Grand Forks or Sakhalin Island. The greenhouse effect, they called it. And what are greenhouses but pleasant, warm, nurturing places where you can grow sago palms and hydroponic tomatoes during the deep-freeze of the winter? But that's not how it is at all. No, it's like leaving your car in the parking lot all day with the windows rolled up and then climbing in and discovering they've been sealed shut – and the doors, too. (185-6)

As if to emphasize to us the futility of global warming denial, Ty blatantly asserts, "Global warming. It's a fact" (186). This message, like most of these commentaries, is aimed backwards in time, to us, as the residents of Ty's era undoubtedly know the truth of climate

change. Ty's final verdict is damning: "Nature doesn't matter anymore – it's not even nature, just something we created out of a witches' brew of fossil-fuel emissions and deforestation" (81).

In this blasted dystopian world, Ty lives a spartan existence as the caretaker of pop star Maclovio Pulchris' private menagerie of wild animals. As he explains to a journalist: "'That's what we were trying to do here, Mac and me...save the animals. It's too late for the earth. Or for us. But the animals, if only we can keep them from extinction until we're gone – they'll adapt, they will, and something new will come up in their place. That's our hope. Our only hope'" (221). Unfortunately, the journalist is only interested in celebrity gossip: "I'm trying to marshal my thoughts to tell him about extinction, about how we're at the very end of the sixth great extinction to hit this planet, caused by us, by man, by progress, and how speciation will occur after we're gone, an explosion of new forms springing up to fill all the vacated niches...but he's not listening" (221). The message is clear – that our celebrity-obsessed media are not doing their job, not informing the public of the dangers that await them, and that the public is simply not interested. After Pulchris is killed by one of his lions, Ty and Andrea, who has returned to him, head out to the cabin where they had once hidden from the law. There they are greeted by a devastating scene:

> [W]hat has changed, and no amount of footage on the nightly news could have prepared us for it, is the forest. It's gone. Or not gone, exactly, but fallen – all of it, trees atop trees, trees bent at the elbows, snapped at the base, uprooted and flung a hundred yards by the violence of the winds. All the pines – the sugar, the yellow, the Jeffery, the ponderosa – and all the cedars and the redwoods and aspens and everything else lie jumbled like Pick-up-Sticks. Mount Saint Helens, that's what it looks like. Mount Saint Helens after the blast. (266)

Here, Ty and Andrea will try to establish a new existence in harmony with nature, in the hope that, eventually, the eco-system will recover. The novel ends on a note of hope: "The woods – these woods, our woods – are coming back, the shoots of the new trees rising up out of the graveyard of the old, aspens shaking out their leaves with a sound like applause, willows thick along the streambeds. At night you can hear the owls and the tailing high shriek of coyotes" (274).

It might seem that Ty, having lost his daughter and spent much of his life in prison, and having failed to stop the coming environmental collapse, would have some regrets about his life. Yet, in one of the novel's final scenes, Ty confronts an insurance investigator who had investigated the fire he had set in 1989. The investigator asks him if he was the one who had set the fire, and Ty replies: "'I set the fire and demolished it all, and you know what? I'd do it again. Gladly'" (270). Here, we see that Ty still believes that he was right and the changes in the climate described in the novel support this belief. The investigator remains skeptical, asking, "'And what did you accomplish? Look around you – just look around you and answer me that'" (270). Ty replies, "'"Absolutely nothing'" (270). Ty's ecological battle was justified on its ethical merits alone, even if the outcome was failure.

7 Conclusion

At this point, I'd like to look back over the dissertation and summarize the main points in order to consolidate my argument. In my first chapter, I analyzed seven different theories proposing an end to postmodernity and the beginning of a new period. This chapter established several important factors for my argument. First of all, it demonstrated a widespread sense that postmodernity has come to an end. Next, it established that although there are some overlapping areas of agreement, for the most part, there is no clear consensus about what happens after postmodernism. I identified two approaches that theorists have taken, one taking postmodern theory and extending it into something new, and the other proposing a break with postmodernism altogether. The most important conclusion I draw from my analysis for the purpose of this dissertation is the fact that most if not all of the theories posit a renewed interest in ethics. This conclusion leads me to my central thesis: that the period after postmodernity is characterized by an interest in finding ethical systems or structures that counteract the weaknesses in postmodern ethics.

In my next chapter, I examined postmodern ethics and its critics. I presented two critical views of postmodern ethics, the first being that postmodernism has no ethics, is essentially non-ethical; and the second an ethics of being for the other, derived from Lévinas. The criticism of postmodernism being non-ethical tended to fall into two categories. One insisted that a textual and linguistic focus was a distraction from real world suffering, and went so far as to suggest that the failure to engage ethically was an attempt to cover up something iniquitous at the heart of postmodern theory. One critic, for example, suggested that postmodernism was just a new form of conservatism that was attempting to resist the changes ushered in by modernity. The other criticism was that postmodern theory was pure nonsense, was, in fact, in some way "phony." These criticisms led to the so-called "ethical

turn," which put forth a concept of ethics based on being for the other. This ethics was criticized for different reasons than the first version I discussed. One criticism is that it is extremely difficult to live by these ethics, as there is no clear guidance for *how* to be for the other. Another criticism is the the lack of reciprocity that forms the basis of a functioning society. Others criticize the ethics of being for the other as merely another name for imperialism, colonialism, or even racism. All of these difficulties mean that postmodern ethics are inadequate for contemporary subjects.

After this analysis, I explored but ultimately rejected the possibility of an ethical dominant. Drawing from Brian McHale's theory that the modern era had been characterized by an epistemological focus, and that the postmodern era had been characterized by an ontological focus, I proposed that perhaps the era after postmodernity could be considered to have an ethical dominant. My argument was that if the modern questioning of epistemology had indeed led us to start questioning the very nature of reality itself, and had thus brought us to postmodernism, as McHale describes, then the postmodern questioning of ontology had led us to an ethical dilemma. If we can't trust our perceptions of reality, and thus, don't know what reality is, how can we make decisions about how to act? The postmodern solution was play, but play can only bring us so far. What if we want to do the right thing, the "good" thing? What if there are real world consequences? In the state of ontological uncertainty McHale leaves us in, we would desperately need some kind of system or structure independent of our perceptions of reality, in order to guide us in making decisions. In other words, we would need ethics. Ultimately I decided to reject an ethical dominant because I think it is impossible to sum up an entire epoch, even if, like McHale, we limit it to works of fiction, with one idea. However, as McHale's theory does have a lot of utility as a quick litmus test, I wanted to show that my theory could be used to extend his – and is, at the very

least, logically consistent with it.

Having established that the era after postmodernism is characterized by a renewed interest in ethics, and having explored the weaknesses of postmodern ethics, in my third chapter I laid out a periodization concept from which I draw out three ethical paradigms that in some way engage with or eliminate the weaknesses of postmodern ethics. In my model, I explained why so many of the theories examined in my first chapter proposed a new modernity. I integrated the end of the Cold War, the spread of neoliberalism, and the rise of the Internet into an explanation for a change in mood and focus, calling out the need for ethical guidance in a rapidly changing globalized society. I identified three ethical paradigms that arose from these changes. The first, an egoism embedded in neoliberalism that insists that each individual has the right to pursue individual happiness by participating in a free market that provides a nearly infinite array of products and services. The second paradigm I identified was a pragmatist approach to religion that involves relating to what one considers a higher power. The final paradigm was a metanarrative centered around ecological thinking that views humans as only one part of a larger system. Although these ethical paradigms may have arisen independently from the existence of postmodernism, I suggest that their growing presence in contemporary American fiction is indicative of their usefulness in resolving the ethical issues left over from the postmodern era.

In order to demonstrate and explore this growing presence, I performed six close readings of contemporary American novels, all of which were written in the period that I propose follows postmodernity. I opted to exclude from consideration novels and writers who are or could be considered postmodern. After briefly describing some key concepts from each paradigm, I read two novels per ethical paradigm. The first novel in each case contrasted the ethical paradigm with postmodernism in some way, either through a direct discussion of

theory, or through a character who represented the postmodern viewpoint. The second novel

illustrated the ethical paradigm without reference to postmodernism, showing that the ethical

paradigm is representative of the contemporary era and not just a critique of postmodernism.

The readings clearly demonstrate that not only are these three ethical paradigms present in

contemporary American fiction, they are placed in response to the ethical weaknesses of

postmodernism.

If postmodernity has indeed come to an end and been replaced by something else,

tentatively referred to by the clumsy appellation "post-postmodernity," there is no clear

model to describe this new period. By seeking out a common theme among the various

theories and offering a proposal for why it is so central, I hope I have made an important

contribution to the ongoing efforts to define the contemporary era. This definition is not only

important for us as literary theorists, helping us to better differentiate and analyze works of

literature; it is also necessary for anyone who hopes to understand the world in which we live

today. The paradigms I've identified and explored are helping to shape our culture, our

economic and political reality, and our daily lives. They form the environment in which our

ideas are formed, and it is essential to see how and why this happens. If our society is longing

for ethical guidelines to help navigate the rough seas of a rapidly changing future, at the same

time, it is also valuing humanities research less and less. Ethical research such as this

dissertation can demonstrate the centrality of the humanities to living full, happy, and

productive lives. Science can produce knowledge, technology, and change, but it doesn't help

us cope with these disruptions. Only the humanities do this.

At this point I would like to acknowledge and address some potential weaknesses of

my approach. Although I draw my examples solely from fiction, my models are larger than

that and could encompass other cultural fields. I could have used film quite easily, and there

were films such as James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) that exhibit all three of my paradigms. One of my biggest problems while writing this dissertation was sorting through the extraordinary amount of works that fit my paradigms. I had to draw the line somewhere, and I chose fiction because it is the form of narrative that gives the deepest insight into the internal decision-making process and belief systems of its characters. No doubt the same paradigms could be used to analyze art, architecture, poetry, or photography. There is certainly more work to be done, which makes this field of inquiry so exciting to explore. The contemporary era is like a new continent, and the maps we are forming are preliminary forays into new territory. Again, I could have opted to do a comparative study and chosen works from different cultures and languages, but this would have expanded my already enormous text corpus to unworkable size. I opted to stay within the culture where I first noticed the phenomenon.

Another weakness was the lack of marginalized voices. This occurred somewhat inadvertently as I excluded works that manifested an ethics of being for the other from consideration. This eliminated a hefty portion of contemporary fiction from consideration and caused me to exclude a number of important authors. In no way does my project intend to suggest that these writers are not part of the contemporary paradigm. In fact, the ethics of being for the other is probably the most common ethical paradigm in contemporary American fiction. Finally, if I had written three separate dissertations, I could have gone much more deeply into each of the ethical paradigms – there are plentiful examples for each of them, and I was only able to briefly explore them here. There are already multiple books detailing these ethical paradigms, but none of them, as far as I know, position them as characteristic of an era following postmodernity. Again, there is much more work to do.

With that in mind, I would like to propose some areas for future research. One of my

regrets was my inability to formulate a coherent thesis for another ethical paradigm I noticed, which appears quite frequently in non-fiction as well as fiction. In this paradigm, family illness or tragedy serves as a catalyst for depressed and unsuccessful postmodern subjects to form an ethical structure around caring for a family member. Works such as *The Corrections* (2001) by Jonathan Franzen, *Purple America* (1996) by Rick Moody, and Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) serve as excellent examples. I hope to develop a deeper theoretical concept on this theme sometime in the future. Another obvious direction for future work would be to try to apply these paradigms to works in other cultures or other cultural fields to see if they hold true. Due to the fact that all of my paradigms draw from established American philosophical tendencies, it could be interesting to see if these ideas exist in other cultures or not. In addition, searching for these paradigms in non-narrative forms such as visual art or music could reveal interesting aesthetic trends. Finally, I believe that if these paradigms are combined and balanced with each other, it could create some very interesting readings of major works such as the novel I began with, *Infinite Jest*. This dissertation could very well be a preliminary work in a new area of research.

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