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CLASS WORK:  
NEW YORK INTELLECTUAL LABOR AND THE  
CREATION OF POSTMODERN AMERICAN FICTION, 1932-1962

BY  
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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English  
in the Graduate College of the  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2012

Urbana, Illinois

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## Abstract

This dissertation argues that American literary postmodernism was profoundly shaped by midcentury intellectual workers' resistance to the bureaucratization of their labor. An Introduction establishes the significance of the dissertation to debates over both postmodernism and the New York Intellectuals, and summarizes each chapter's contribution to the overall argument. Part I, "Class Unconsciousness," then offers three chapters that detail the birth, growth, and eventual eclipse of a theory of "brain workers" as a class in the labor-radical circles of the New York Intellectuals. In the 1930s and 40s, authors Tess Slesinger, Mary McCarthy, and Lionel Trilling sounded an increasingly shrill alarm over what they imagined was a pro-Soviet intellectual class of bureaucratic mental workers in America. I argue that while their class-conscious fictions laid foundations for postmodernism's arrival decades later, their increasingly indiscriminate hostility toward a class-conscious left nevertheless also hindered later recognition of the intellectual and class origins of postmodernism.

Part II, "The Groves of Postmodernism," begins with an Interlude that offers a theory of the literary and sociological meanings of the postwar campus novel in America. Three final chapters then explain how the antibureaucratic academic fictions of Trilling, McCarthy, and Vladimir Nabokov helped create the characteristic themes and even forms of this emerging genre—and thence of postmodernism itself, whose early canon includes such campus novels as Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) and John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966). I contend that these authors' liberal satire of academia, influenced by the earlier theory of an intellectual class, was rooted in a passionate desire for intellectuals' autonomy, and a corresponding critique of their bureaucratic labor in the academy. Thus I argue that the early postmodern, even for such avowedly apolitical writers as Nabokov, may be read as the protest of mental and professional

workers against the bureaucratic confines of their work. Against recent accusations that postmodernism represented a “libertarian turn” colluding with the New Right, a brief Epilogue then insists on the importance of this early and antibureaucratic postmodernism to the successes of the New Left in the 1960s, as well as to present-day academic workers seeking their own autonomy in a rapidly proletarianizing workplace. This dissertation thus excavates a history of postmodernism’s labor-left origins, thereby challenging familiar accounts of postmodernism’s roots in a 1950s or 1980s political conservatism, as well as notions of the New York Intellectuals’ hostility toward or irrelevance to postmodernism. Along the way, it suggests postmodernism’s continuing relevance to white-collar anxiety and academic activism.

## Acknowledgments

As Mary McCarthy knew already in her first book, *The Company She Keeps*, we are defined by the company we keep, by our relationships with others. I've kept excellent company over the years I've been writing this dissertation, and all that is good in what follows reflects that. Here I am happy to express my profound gratitude for all who've accompanied me.

My dissertation committee gets first thanks. It's hard to know where to begin to thank Bill Maxwell. On the grand side, his course on "Writers as Intellectuals in American Literature" inspired the topic of this dissertation and many of its ideas. Simply put: no Bill, no dissertation. But there's also the more specialized help he's given. Bill has taught me modernism high and low. He's taught me proletarianism of literary and theoretical varieties. He's taught me to break up sentences like they were so many fights, and he's taught me to get rid of parentheses and colons (note well: mostly it's worked). When my graduate employee comrades at the University of Illinois and I were occupying an administrative building for recognition of our union, he brought us a big ol' bucket of KFC. He is, in short, a great intellectual and political role model. He kept patient when many another advisor might have lost patience altogether, and had faith in the project throughout.

Michael Bérubé gave me my first formal introduction to postmodernism, and this covers only the broadest and most direct aspect of his influence on this dissertation. I came to Illinois many years ago largely because I saw someone teaching there who seemed to share my intellectual interests. But I had no idea then how helpful it would be to share that community of interest with someone who had a bigger and more flexible mind, and who allied such formidable traits with a real kindness and generosity. Michael's life as an intellectual and his reflections on both postmodernism and intellectual life itself have challenged and inspired me.

I've taken more courses with Bob Parker than with any other professor at Illinois, and it's paid off: he's made my recalcitrant brain think about literary theory, identity, history, and American literature in nuanced ways, and he's offered another valuable role model for what a professor—a teacher—could do and be. In one course he introduced me to Tess Slesinger's *The Unpossessed*, which started me on the road to the first chapter. In all my courses with him he's struggled valiantly to make me write genuinely readable prose. His work never stops in this regard: soon after my defense, he sent me an email that kindly praised the dissertation's contents and its clarity, but then enumerated with uncanny and alarming skill all the rote phrases that lingered. For every error of thought and expression in what follows, try to imagine four others you were saved from. Then thank him.

I gained an interest in American intellectual history through an undergraduate course, but as I entered grad school I wasn't sure I'd ever pursue the topic again. Taking a fascinating second course on it from Kathy Oberdeck helped push me from this stage of insouciance to my current conviction that I am as much intellectual historian as literary critic. Her course also had a direct effect on this dissertation by introducing me to the scholarly work of Michael Denning, and to the provocative essays of New York Intellectual Dwight Macdonald. She has been unfailingly helpful whenever I've asked.

Then there are friends. Amihan Huesmann fed and entertained me, keeping me in mind of life outside the dissertation. But she also encouraged me in my work, and aided it. She not only gave me seasoned graph-making advice for my sudden foray into quantitative aspects of the campus novel (see the Interlude), but—and here's the glory of knowing an atmospheric scientist, for those of you who don't know—when I fashioned an article from Chapter Four, she researched the New York City weather report for what turns out to have been “a cold, early

winter's day" in December of 1933. Lionel Trilling coped heroically with highs in the low forties, it turns out.

Ellen Samuels, dear friend for nearly two decades, has now become a mentor as well. Between episodes of *Deep Space Nine* and *Mad Men*, then, she's listened to more than her fair share of whining. But she's also worked on this thing. In particular, when I'd begun to despair of Chapter Three altogether, she generously took it from me and commented in detail on issues both macro and micro, allowing me to patch the chapter together for the first time. She also performed crucial research on the arcana of MLA citation policies as I was preparing part of Chapter Five for publication.

Lisa King talked with me about several chapters, watched 1940's *Dance, Girls, Dance* (screenplay by Tess Slesinger) with me, and wrote a dissertation that made me want to read Hannah Arendt. She is still one of my cherished models of the passionate and political intellectual. Her influence shows most tellingly in Chapter Five, though she hasn't seen it and would likely disagree with some of it.

Samaa Abdurraqib, Carrie Conners ("my agent," as I like to call her in honor of her enthusiasm for the project), John Bradley, Xochitl Gilkeson, and Sara Phillips all read and responded to parts of the later chapters and encouraged me in finishing long past when it seemed fruitful to do so.

Other friends had less influence on the dissertation's content, but I wouldn't have gotten through it without them. Charlie Cooney demonstrated early on in my college years that intellectual ability and interest weren't synonymous with pretension. Rychetta Watkins offered much encouragement and by her example gave me hope that there was life after the dissertation. Gretchen Soderlund encouraged me early on, as we read Walter Lippmann together. Mark

Dahlquist frequently housed me in Champaign and made the MLA more enjoyable. Ryan Jerving, Edward Burch, Riley Broach and the others in the Viper and His Famous Orchestra's stable of musicians and significant others cracked me up and kept me musically informed, if not hep. (Rachel Leibowitz kvetched with the best of them, especially about academic matters.) Toby Higbie listened patiently to a number of oral summaries. Loretta Gaffney chatted with me late into the night as she finished her own dissertation, and really doesn't deserve to be called what I regularly call her. Elizabeth Majerus read a chapter, and brought balloons when it was all over. Lisa Morrison, well, put up with me (there's no other way to say it) in the waning days of work on this dissertation, and I'm deeply thankful she's stuck around afterward. Deb Hoffman pushed me to finish—hard—at the moment I needed it most.

Scholars from across the country went out of their way to help in ways large and small, too. Alan Wald deserves primary thanks here. His book on *The New York Intellectuals* first traced in detail the myriad political affiliations and milieux of all the figures in my dissertation save one. My work here would have been inconceivable—to me, anyway—without his. In addition to this scholarly debt, I offer thanks for his more direct interventions: his skepticism in conversation about New York Intellectuals' connections to New Class theory forced me to clarify my thoughts, and he graciously read an early draft of Chapter Two. Other scholars likely won't remember their help, but I do: Janet Sharistianian answered a query about Tess Slesinger, Caren Irr and Laura Browder asked thoughtful questions at conferences, and Pamela Caughie and Kathleen Diffley provided encouragement for me to write more about McCarthy and Nabokov. Anonymous readers at *Arizona Quarterly* and *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* helped polish my ideas and my prose.



Scholarly forums and libraries at two universities stepped in to make this a better read as well. The American Studies Working Group at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign gave me much-needed feedback on the earliest version of the Slesinger chapter; and from this group I would single out John Marsh and Rachael DeLue especially for their generosity. Rebecca Walkowitz, Thomas Schaub, Rob Emmett, and the rest of the Contemporary Literature Colloquium at the University of Wisconsin-Madison commented helpfully on what is now the second of two Trilling chapters. I'll steal one of Barbara Ehrenreich's many good lines by thanking also "that familiar beachhead of socialism, the public library system" (*Fear* viii)—and the public-university librarians at UIUC and UW-Madison in particular. All manner of data in this dissertation wouldn't have been available to me without their valiant and all-too-often unsung (and undercompensated) labor.

And speaking of undercompensated: though it might sound merely pious at first, I must also truly thank the graduate employee labor movement for its contribution to this dissertation. I was a member-activist in the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) at UIUC, and then more recently I have worked as a staff organizer for the Teaching Assistants' Association (TAA) at UW-Madison. These experiences have shown me, with consistent gratification, a group of intellectual workers capable of political action. Without these experiences of solidarity, I would not have been able to take the concept of an "intellectual class"—examined in Part I of this dissertation especially, but underlying the work as a whole—as seriously as I have, nor to imagine it as concretely. Likewise Part II's fascination with representations of academic labor in the postwar campus novel has obvious roots in my activist life. I would especially like to mention Brenda Carter, formerly of the Graduate Employees and Students Organization (GESO)/UNITE-HERE at Yale, and now at UNITE-HERE, in this regard. She shared her own

scholarly work and offered me encouragement and solidarity in my dissertation as we tried to build networks of solidarity in the grad employee movement as a whole.

And last but not least, two mentors from my undergraduate days at Oberlin College deserve mention as well. Bob Longworth didn't hear much about the dissertation from my distressingly infrequent emails. But he was nevertheless the first to teach me, by both word and deed, that it was noble to think about higher education's purposes and value. Even more importantly, he was a mentor who got me through college: when family difficulties threatened my ability to pay tuition, he introduced me to the right administrative people, made persuasive calls on my behalf, and offered no small amount of therapeutic conversation along the way, having faith in my abilities when I did not. My debt to him is enormous. Bob's friend and colleague, the late Jeff Blodgett, taught that first course many years ago on an unknown topic that sounded positively exotic to me then: "American Intellectual History." Perhaps more than anything else, his exquisitely crafted and witty lectures, and the fascinating variety of ideas he explored in them, persuaded me that intellectual history could be vital. I can't do it as well as he could yet, but here's hoping that this dissertation is a start in the right direction.

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## Introduction

This dissertation offers a prehistory of literary and intellectual postmodernism in America. I offer this prehistory knowingly at an autumnal, if not indeed posthumous, moment in the history of postmodernism. Arguably near fifty years old now, “postmodernism” is an at best faded movement. Its aesthetic practices have become predictable, and its central ideas conventional academic wisdom. That venerable and Congressionally-celebrated institution *The Simpsons* has taught us metafiction for years now, for example, and the idea that power functions through a multitude of cultural (or “disciplinary”) practices as much or more than it does through states no longer surprises. As one letter-writer to the *PMLA* already remarked in 2006, “Over a decade ago, when the word *postmodern* seemed to be part of every fifth book title exhibited at the MLA convention, any discerning critic should have realized that it was time to move on” (Galef). The postmodern has become, shall we say, familiar.

My hope here, however, is precisely to revise a number of now overly-familiar and sometimes wrong or simplistic narratives about American postmodernism that have accrued to it during the half-century of its existence. In the chapters that follow, I trace a history of political and cultural forces and ideas on the American socialist left in the 1930s that ultimately contributed to the emergence of postmodernism in literary-intellectual thought and practice in the 1960s. My argument is that the postmodern emerged in significant part from the resistance of intellectual workers to the bureaucratization of their labor—to the potential reduction of the range and scope of their thought as they entered academic institutions, especially and specifically; and that these intellectuals staked their proto-postmodern resistance in the name of a universalism often expressed in the terms of realist fiction’s hopes to comprehend the whole of a society. Approaching my subject through intellectual history as much as the sociology of

previous critics' approaches, I identify the New York Intellectuals in particular (though not exclusively) as a vanguard of materialist and politicized intellectual workers—often academics—from the 1930s through the 1950s whose ideas about and critiques of their own labor's move into bureaucratic institutions created a structure of thought and feeling from which the postmodern emerged in the 1960s. Examining the works and days of Tess Slesinger, Mary McCarthy, Lionel Trilling, and Vladimir Nabokov, I show that essential roots of postmodern literature and thought in the 1960s and beyond lay in intellectual workers' decades-long resistance to the proletarianization of their labor.

With this prehistory of the postmodern, I seek to challenge some standard accounts of the nature and importance of postmodernism in American fiction and thought. But I also hope to show hitherto unremarked facets of the cultural and political significance of the New York Intellectuals, who have been widely acknowledged as among the most important intellectual influences on mid-century American literary and intellectual culture—and in their earlier years as the most important group of socialist intelligentsia the U.S. has produced to date. Before moving on to a more detailed, chapter-by-chapter summary of the dissertation's argument, then, I would like to elucidate more fully these broadly revisionist aims regarding both the New York Intellectuals and postmodernism.

The standard account of the New York Intellectuals in relation to postmodernism is that when postmodernism first emerged in the 1960s, the New York Intellectuals served merely as “disgruntled guardians of high modernism, defending its monuments from the pigeons of the new,” in George Cotkin's amusing summary. Monographs on the New York Intellectuals have most fully drawn the picture. Hugh Wilford pityingly speaks of the New York Intellectuals as “cultural Modernists who for most of their lives inhabited post-modernity” (246), while Neil

Jumonville and Harvey Teres each spend an entire chapter of their books expounding on the supposedly fundamental antagonism between the New York Intellectuals and 1960s politics and culture, including postmodernism. Teres nicely covers the greatest hits here, from Norman Podhoretz's 1958 recriminations against Beats such as Kerouac, whose novel *On the Road* apparently required responsible critics everywhere to deny aloud "that incoherence is superior to precision, that ignorance is superior to knowledge" (qtd. on 233), to Irving Howe's 1968 sneering attack on the "new sensibility" of a postmodernism "impatient with literary structures of complexity and coherence," which wanted instead a literature "as absolute as the sun, as unarguable as an orgasm, and as delicious as a lollipop" (qtd. on 235). In contrast, I argue at the broadest level that the New York Intellectuals actually if unwittingly *contributed* significantly to postmodernist cultural and intellectual expression. Specifically I argue that the New York Intellectuals' experiences of and ideas about intellectuals as a coherent social group, conveyed so vividly in their essays and fiction from the radical 1930s through the more liberal 1950s, were important precursors and goads to the postmodern literature and thought that incubated during this period before hatching in the 1960s. When it arrived, postmodernism in the United States took a substantial number of its themes from, and even created a number of its formal techniques in response to, a zeitgeist strongly influenced by the New York Intellectuals' attempts to think the social and political significance—dystopian dangers and utopian potentials alike—of their own labor.

Another widely-accepted truth about the New York Intellectuals is that as they became comfortably middle class in their later years, their once biting political criticisms of America faded into toothless irrelevance. They "sold out." The facts behind this accusation are well known. Eschewing the revolutionary fervor of their socialist beliefs in the 1930s, by the middle

of the century many espoused various forms of liberal anti-Communism, and in some cases even a strident Cold War and thence “neo-” conservatism.<sup>1</sup> Estimable New York Intellectual Philip Rahv may have first articulated the economically-based accusation that followed. In 1952, *Partisan Review* initiated a forum titled “Our Country and Our Culture,” asking representative intellectuals and writers to comment on intellectuals’ growing comfort with U.S. politics and culture. Rahv argued that the general postwar boom, and particularly the boom in higher education, had given intellectuals steady and respectable work. This had inevitably affected their opinions. “We are witnessing a process that might well be described as that of the *embourgeoisement* of the American intelligentsia,” he declared, “a process that is plainly not unconnected with the changes of mind and mood we are analyzing in this symposium” (306).

Later critics have been wary of this idea of *embourgeoisement* and subsequent conservatism, without outright denying it. They have asserted the need for more than a vulgar Marxism in order to understand why the New York Intellectuals moved rightward.<sup>2</sup> But in all that follows I want to take the New York Intellectuals’ entry into the middle class seriously, not in order to understand their undeniable shift to the right, but on the contrary in order to demonstrate a fundamental *continuity* in belief from their earlier radical class politics. This was a continuity expressed in the 1940s but especially in the 1950s, I will argue, by their often prickly relationship to employment in middle-class institutions, specifically those of higher education. As Wilford notes, the “relation between Intellectual and institution was never harmonious.

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<sup>1</sup> This narrative is so standard as to not require documentation; but Wald’s *The New York Intellectuals* is the most detailed about their political shifts.

<sup>2</sup> Wilford explicitly rejects it, arguing that the rightward march was “less the result of cynicism or careerism” than of “various recuperative, hegemonic processes that were so powerful the Intellectuals could not withstand them” (viii). Wald similarly calls the *embourgeoisement* idea a “moralistic oversimplification” (*New York* 309), and speaking of Sidney Hook in the 1950s, for example, argues that his growing conservatism could be accounted for not only by “the postwar prosperity that resulted in a loss of ability to view the world from the class perspective of the oppressed,” but by “social pressures brought on him and his generation” (i.e. McCarthyism) (293). Interestingly, though, neither seems to take seriously the possibility that various New York Intellectuals might have simply changed their minds on the merits as they saw them.

Instead it was fraught with tension and conflict” (12). I argue specifically that the New York Intellectuals’ entry into the bourgeoisie was conditioned by an early and widely-held theory of intellectuals as an autonomous class located between capital and proletariat; and that this theory, with its focus on intellectuals as workers, caused the New York Intellectuals (here represented principally by Lionel Trilling and Mary McCarthy) to be markedly sensitive precisely to the *proletarianization* of the middle class they were entering. They expressed their anxieties and misgivings about the now-institutional labor of the middle class, with its newly constricted autonomy (compared to older and more independent structures of middle-class work), in the form of fictions about academic labor—most notably in Mary McCarthy’s “invention” of the postwar genre of the campus novel in 1952.<sup>3</sup> This, then, is my second thesis on the New York Intellectuals: even if (and this *is* an “if”) the New York Intellectuals’ movement into the class of the bourgeoisie resulted in *embourgeoisement*, a rightward political shift resulting from their new-found economic comfort, the shift did not mean that they simply gave up their class consciousness. The New York Intellectuals’ upward mobility was accompanied by a cogent critique of downward pressure on the middle-class institutions and labor that they now experienced.

This dissertation’s revisions of central narratives about postmodernism often follow from this understanding of the New York Intellectuals as figures retaining insights from their radical youth. To begin with, I seek to complicate the prevalent notion that postmodernism is rooted in political exhaustion and pessimism, whether that of the 1950s or of the 1980s. Thomas Schaub postulates that the postmodern refusal of certainty and truth emerged from a particularly conservative 1950s liberalism and “politics of paralysis” (190). And a number of Marxists have

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<sup>3</sup> I will elaborate on the ways in which the “campus novel” can be said to have been “invented” by Mary McCarthy in the 1950s, both in the Interlude that begins Part II and of course in Chapter Five, which examines *The Groves of Academe* in depth.



likewise understood postmodernism to be aligned with a triumphant and cynical New Right in the 1980s. David Harvey, to take one prominent example, offers up the “ex-movie actor, Ronald Reagan,” as his chief image of the “mediatized politics shaped by image alone” characteristic of the postmodern (330). Cultural movements rarely if ever have one political meaning, and thus there is more than enough truth to these formulations of a postmodernism born from political stasis in the 1950s, and disturbingly cozy with a brutal round of capitalist expansion in the 1980s. Especially as far as the earliest postmodernism goes, this dissertation indeed expands upon Schaub’s insight about postmodernism’s origins in the surprisingly conservative “new liberalism” of the 1950s, the liberalism of Arthur Schlesinger’s “vital center.” (See Chapters Three through Five in particular.) But while I don’t wish to dispute outright such conclusions about postmodernism’s political origins, I do seek to offer a compelling alternative to them. Most importantly, I draw out a more optimistic (from a left point of view) prehistory of the postmodern. For the early postmodern also had many origins in distinctly Old Left, class-radical concerns and aspirations involving the political possibilities of intellectual labor. Postmodernism’s class-radical potential, I will show, inhered at the start—even in such comparatively apolitical authors as Vladimir Nabokov.

The materialist politics of the New York Intellectuals also entailed certain literary and theoretical commitments that the dissertation seeks to illuminate, further challenging our standard conceptions of postmodernism as a result. The very name of “postmodernism,” to begin with, reveals a curious linearity in literary-historical thought. Whether the “post-” in postmodernism is taken merely as a chronological marker of that which comes *after* modernism, or as a more agonistic name for an aesthetic movement that presumably “challenges [the] earlier legitimating narratives” of modernism (Appiah 353), the term undeniably serves to put “the

postmodern” in dialogue with modernism, and modernism alone. Our best and oftentimes most historicist critics of postmodernism have reinforced this notion, if unintentionally. Writing against “The Myth of the Postmodernist Breakthrough” way back in 1979, for example, Gerald Graff insisted that the postmodern was only a return to a modernism itself rooted in romanticism (31-62). Ihab Hassan’s also early and now canonical writings on the postmodern offered iconic charts counterposing the postmodern to the modern (267-68). In the mid-eighties, Andreas Huyssen and Charles Newman both posited postmodernism as a reaction to the institutionalization and academicization of modernism.<sup>4</sup> Marxist critics have also seen the postmodern and the modern in such bipolar terms. Fredric Jameson magisterially reads postmodernism as the cultural logic of a late capitalism defined against an earlier monopoly capitalism that underwrote the practices of modernism (*Postmodernism* 36), while Harvey interprets postmodernism as the cultural logic of a post-Fordist mode of production opposed to the Fordism of the modernist era—complete with an Hassan-like chart, as he himself notes (340-41). Thus the postmodern has been figured continually as either a continuation *of* modernism (a hyper-modernism, or even a hyper-romanticism to boot, in Graff’s case) or as a more or less decisive break *from* modernism.

The most exclusively literary aim of this dissertation, however, is to demonstrate that the early postmodern was very much a response to contemporary difficulties within a still-living *realism*, as much as it was a response to the flagging energies of modernism. Though they have become celebrated as some of the chief institutionalizers of modernism in America, the New York Intellectuals whose thoughts on intellectual labor I will trace here were nevertheless all passionate devotees of literary realism, and their thoughts and realist depictions of their intellectual labor all lay foundations for postmodernism’s most treasured ideas and habits. For

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<sup>4</sup> See Huyssen’s chapter on “Mapping the Postmodern,” 178-221, and Newman’s chapters 18 and 20.

these authors, realism was not merely a style, but a social commitment to represent society in imaginative but still faithful terms. Realism was a categorical imperative that followed from their socialist and then liberal politics, in short; serious authors had an obligation to represent society accurately by whatever means worked best. And my dissertation suggests that even as they recorded some of their worries about the fate of realism, the New York Intellectuals made possible the ideas and practices of the earliest postmodernism. Crucially often *through* their theories about realism's troubles, they created a milieu in which postmodernism might thrive.

The last and perhaps grandest revisionary aim of this dissertation parallels this literary-historical argument about realism on the plane of theory. We have become accustomed to understanding the postmodern as a rejection of totalization and the universal. Here the name of Lyotard is prominent, though one could find literally scores of others registering similar opinions. 1979's *The Postmodern Condition*, which did more than most any other book to solidify the theoretical existence of something called the "postmodern," sympathetically defined the postmodern as an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxix), and in supposedly postmodern spirit proceeded to declare any impulse toward totality and universality as a form of intellectual "terror" seeking to shut down legitimate disagreement (46, 63-64). The totalizing aspirations of reason were politically dubious at best, in this formulation. Large sections of the academic cultural left have since then adopted a similar credo, heralding a postmodern hostility toward universality and totalization as solid theoretical armature for attacks on white, straight, Western, etc. men's pretenses to universal subjecthood.

Critics on the left who have been more enamored of claims to universality have nevertheless largely accepted the idea that the postmodern was hostile to them. Two years before Lyotard, in a 1977 conclusion to the volume *Aesthetics and Politics*, Jameson discussed the

“emergence in full-blown and definitive form of that ultimate transformation of late monopoly capitalism variously known as the *société de consommation* or as post-industrial society” (208)—what he would later call the postmodern era itself, in other words. He then called for “a new realism” in response (212), one which, while adopting the modernist emphasis of a “violent renewal of perception” (213), would nevertheless “resist [in the spirit of Lukács] the power of reification in consumer society and . . . reinvent that category of totality which, systematically undermined by existential fragmentation on all levels of life and social organization today, can alone project structural relations between classes as well as class struggles in other countries, in what has increasingly become a world system” (212-13). Jameson’s more famous 1984 article on postmodernism, with its call for “an aesthetic of cognitive mapping—a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system” (*Postmodernism* 54), essentially elaborated on this Lukácsian realist and totalizing imperative. In the same year as Lyotard, and also calling on the spirit of Lukács, Gerald Graff likewise declared himself willing to support a form of postmodernism only if it would recognize epistemological uncertainty precisely *as a problem*, something to account for—a sadly rare form of postmodernism that would “subserve a higher realism” by satirizing radical indeterminism or despairing over it, but would also in either case acknowledge the value of universal reason itself in the process (57).<sup>5</sup>

Left enthusiasts and left critics of the postmodern have thus disagreed about the value of universal norms and totalizing thought in the realm of theory. Both have agreed, however, that the history of postmodernism is one primarily *opposed* to Enlightenment calls for reason in the realm of politics, including such calls from the Old Left. My dissertation suggests to the contrary

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<sup>5</sup> Given Graff and Jameson’s invocations of him, perhaps this is the moment to say that the monumentally problematic Lukács makes several appearances in this dissertation, and is indeed one underlying theoretical inspiration for it, despite comparatively few citations of him.

that Old-Left-rooted hopes for a universal reason and comprehension of the world were constitutive features of postmodernism at its start. Drawing on a hostility toward bureaucratic intellectual labor that was derived from 1930s theories of intellectuals as a class, I argue, the early postmodern registered intellectual workers' fundamental desire to comprehend, and work upon, precisely the *whole* of a concept, rather than that partial fragment that work in a (bureaucratic, academic) department afforded. Despite later assaults on the concept of totality, I argue here, the early postmodern found its origins in precisely that Enlightenment desire for universality and understanding of the whole.

In sum, this dissertation seeks to reveal a surprising origin of postmodernism in the midcentury New York Intellectuals' essentially still-radical hopes for an aesthetic practice and set of philosophical-political commitments rooted in intellectual workers' desire for autonomous and dignified labor. With that aim in mind, the remainder of this Introduction offers a summary of the dissertation's argument in more depth, chapter by chapter, providing necessary social contexts along the way.

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## **The Argument**

*Class Work* is divided into two major parts. While critics have long been familiar with the existence of "proletarian fiction" in the 1930s, Part I examines a lesser-known, more middle-class counterpart to this genre, what I will call "intellectual labor fiction," or novels about (and by) class-conscious intellectuals during the 1930s and '40s. Eschewing the revolutionary optimism of most proletarian fiction, however, the intellectual labor fiction of the early New

York Intellectuals displays a growing and corrosive skepticism of what they understand to be their protagonists' *class*, that of intellectual workers. This skepticism of an "intellectual class," I contend, ironically promoted a mid-century discomfort with or even dismissal of class as a category of analysis, and thereby contributed to the later occlusion of postmodernism's class origins. Part II, however, shows that this discomfort with class analysis did not succeed in expunging the social concern of New York Intellectual and other novelists in the forties and fifties. Instead, I argue, these authors transposed the earlier intellectual class theory into an extensive critique of intellectual workers' increasingly bureaucratic working conditions, one that lay at the heart of the birth and then surprising growth of the campus novel as a popular genre in the fifties and sixties. I conclude that this new genre, richly bearing the marks of brain-worker fiction, created a space for, and even substantially influenced, the forms and themes of American literary postmodernism in its infancy.

### **Part I: Class Unconsciousness, 1932-1950**

Suddenly vulnerable to economic shocks from which it had previously been shielded, the American middle class was hit hard by the Great Depression. In New York City—where all but one of the novelists studied throughout this dissertation lived in the early 1930s (Nabokov lived in Berlin, itself devastated by the worldwide depression)—this was especially true. There, "one out of five charity patients in the hospitals were salaried employees" in 1933, and a 1934 government study of urban relief cases "revealed among them 649,000 professionals and clerical and other salaried employees" (Corey, *Crisis* 22). A full "40% of the needy seeking relief jobs were white collar workers, professionals and intellectuals" (25). Furthermore, as Robert Cantwell noted in 1934, "The crisis struck the New York literary world almost as hard as it struck the steel

industry. The number of novels printed dropped from about forty-five million in 1929 to about nineteen-million in 1931; and as the prominent novelists began writing book reviews for a living, book reviewers began living with their wives and families” (53). In no sense did the middle class, and especially the literary wing of the middle class in New York City, escape the Depression.

In response, many intellectuals and other professional workers became radicalized. Though this dissertation focuses less on the Communist Party than on those Trotskyist organizations that opposed the Party from the left in the 1930s, the Party’s history is nevertheless distinctly representative of intellectuals’ leftward lurch. “During the thirties,” Nathan Glazer has observed, “the party was transformed from a largely working-class organization to one that was one-half middle class” (114). While the rolls of “five major districts” were reported as being only five per cent “office” and “intellectual” workers in January of 1932, by 1941 a survey of the entire party indicated that a full *forty-four per cent* of the Party were professional and white-collar workers (114). Though the Communist Party traditionally had proclaimed itself “the vanguard of the proletariat,” then, “from the middle thirties to the early fifties, the period of its greatest size and its greatest influence, the party was rather more successful in becoming ‘the vanguard of the intellectual and professional workers’” (Glazer 130). In the largely New York-centered and Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party, discussed in Chapter Two, Trotsky himself recognized similar social dynamic at work during a famed 1939 split. He proclaimed the schism the result of “A Petty-Bourgeois Opposition in the Socialist Workers Party” (98), and angrily declared that “When a few thousand workers join the party, they will call the petty-bourgeois anarchists severely to order. The sooner, the better” (“Open Letter” 162). However one felt about it, then, it is clear that intellectual workers drove much of the debate on the radical left in this era.

Within this context of intellectuals' radicalization, Part I of this dissertation traces the history of an idea debated frequently on the left in the 1930s and '40s: that of intellectuals as a *class*. Though the theory is mostly known today, if at all, in one of its 1970s incarnations—as the neoconservative *bête noire* of the “New Class,” or the ambiguous socialist hope of Barbara and John Ehrenreich’s “Professional-Managerial Class” (PMC), for instance—the idea of a class of mental workers distinct from capital and proletariat has a much longer pedigree. It is a truly international theory that, depending how loosely one defines it, might be traced back as far as the French Enlightenment, when social philosophers like Saint-Simon argued for government by technocrats; or to British Romanticism, with Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s hope for a beneficent class of educated “clerisy” to guide the nation morally, expressed in his 1830 book *The Constitution of Church and State*.<sup>6</sup> But Part I follows the expression of the idea in novels and essays from its specifically American and largely Communist birth during the fall of 1932, through to its career, on the dissident Trotskyist left in the later 1930s and 1940s, as the increasingly skeptical theory of a “new class” that ruled via a system of “bureaucratic collectivism.” I argue that as this theory grew more important in socialist circles during the era, its influence increasingly served to create skepticism about the role of intellectuals in proletarian

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<sup>6</sup> For a brief summary of Saint-Simon’s theories, see Bruce-Briggs 10; for discussion of the idea of a “clerisy” in Coleridge, see Kirk 142-43. The literature on the intellectual class (“New Class”) idea is large and still growing. Here I will offer a preliminary bibliography for those new to the idea. Coming from opposed political perspectives (neoconservative and socialist, respectively), B. Bruce-Briggs and Barbara Ehrenreich nevertheless both offer among the most admirable short summaries of the intellectual class idea’s history, and I benefited greatly from them when starting out: see Bruce-Briggs’s introduction to *The New Class?* (1-18), and the fourth chapter of Ehrenreich’s *Fear of Falling* (144-95). Daniel Bell, a critic of the neoconservatives’ New Class idea (“a muddled concept” in Bruce-Briggs) whose thought nevertheless has had a selective influence on neoconservatism, presents a more international and characteristically encyclopedic history of it in *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, pp. 80-112. For him, it should be noted, the concept of a new class is thoroughly enmeshed with that of bureaucracy—a concept central to Part II of this dissertation. Lawrence Peter King and Iván Széleányi offer a comprehensive summary of the idea in their 2004 book *Theories of the New Class*. Haberkern and Lipow’s *Neither Capitalism Nor Socialism* gathers together some of the key essays on “bureaucratic collectivism” that I discuss in Chapters Two and Three, though a perusal of my citations will reveal other sources. One subsidiary aim of this dissertation, particularly the first three chapters, is to explicate the idea’s travels and consequences in American intellectual history, in more depth than has appeared to date in the cited publications.



politics. Part I allows us to see that such skepticism could lead in two opposed directions: first toward the sometimes antipolitical and always antileftist “end of ideology” ethos that characterized 1950s intellectual life; and second toward a profound liberal but potentially still radical left critique of intellectuals’ isolation from social and political life itself. Both these trends, I contend, were important to the emergence of literary and intellectual postmodernism in the 1960s.

Chapter One examines the earliest attempts of 1930s intellectuals to work out the political complications of their class position, and then analyzes how such debates were comprehended in Tess Slesinger’s first and only novel, *The Unpossessed* (1934). The fall of 1932 saw two of the first U.S. articulations of the theory of an intellectual class: *Culture and the Crisis*, the influential manifesto of the League of Professional Groups, which urged intellectuals to vote Communist; and “White Collars and Horny Hands,” Max Nomad’s controversial article describing intellectuals’ typical sabotage of proletarian revolutions. Both acknowledged at least the possibility of intellectual workers’ legitimate participation in proletarian revolution. But I argue that both also shared a revealing and historically momentous ambivalence about the exact purpose of intellectuals in a revolution. Were truly revolutionary intellectuals simply to *follow* the revolutionary working class, or to *lead* it? Were they merely to participate in a broader social movement, or direct it from outside? Slesinger’s *The Unpossessed* encapsulates these works’ commonalities and contradictions, I suggest, by depicting a class of foundering, self-involved Communist intellectuals through the Freudian lens of narcissism. Narcissistically intent on seeing themselves as leaders of a revolution, the novel’s intellectuals cannot comprehend the bodily and political existence of a proletariat outside their imaginations, and so fail to create even the first issue of a radical literary magazine. This intellectual class is thus not capable of *leading*

a revolution, certainly, let alone following one. Yet these intellectuals' defining (and isolating) high-mindedness and insistence on their own autonomy, the novel suggests in a sentimental moment, may still afford them an important leadership role to play *after* the revolution, when economic necessity will take a back seat to other social values. Slesinger's Janus-faced political critique *and* appreciation of intellectual workers' independence and autonomy from other classes, I conclude, lay foundations for both the postmodern skepticism of bureaucratic ("disciplinary") institutions whose social isolation thwarts democratic control, and the postmodern valorization of an essentially independent play, undecidability, and indeterminacy.

Chapter Two demonstrates how Mary McCarthy's first novel, 1942's *The Company She Keeps*, engages with a contemporary Trotskyist theory of the intellectual class that attempted to explain the failure of the Soviet Union under Stalin. The theory of "bureaucratic collectivism" posited that a new class of intellectual workers in Russia—sometimes later called the New Class—had subverted Lenin's proletarian revolution by creating a vast government bureaucracy that dominated proletarians and capitalists alike. I argue that by extending Slesinger's technique of class psychoanalysis, McCarthy's novel portrays a potentially revolutionary class of *American*, New Deal intellectuals whose narcissistic attraction to power may be used for either the good of democratic socialism, or—more likely, in the novel's rendering—the ill of an American version of bureaucratic collectivism. This critique of *bureaucracy* in relation to intellectual work, I argue, would prove fundamental to the emergence of a fundamentally antibureaucratic postmodern literary, social, and political thought two decades later.

Chapter Three shows how such comparatively obscure theories of intellectual labor were catapulted into the mainstream of American literary and political thought via what Cynthia Ozick has called the "now nearly incomprehensible influence" of Lionel Trilling's fiction and criticism

of the forties (115). Reading Trilling's 1947 novel *The Middle of the Journey*, as well as his seminal essay collection *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), the chapter argues that Trilling's account of the New Class in these works not only contributed to an increasingly conservative and anti-intellectual "new liberal" movement in the U.S., but transmuted the theory of an ambitious and authoritarian intellectual class into an influential account of the conceptual and political dangers of "ideology." The "end of ideology" ethos that subsequently dominated U.S. intellectual life, I argue, was a largely moralizing rhetoric that obscured the earlier, more materialist and class-based explanations of the growing social significance of intellectual labor—explanations that might have more fully accounted for postmodernism when it arrived in the following decades.

## **Part II: The Groves of Postmodernism, 1943-1962**

While Part I shows how the intellectual class idea could be *forgotten*, Part II nevertheless suggests the ways in which it was *not* forgotten. I argue specifically that the genre of the campus novel was an important inheritor of 1930s and '40s intellectual labor fiction, and thus of intellectual class theory in America, and that the campus novel was in turn a critical participant in the emergence of postmodern fiction in the 1960s.

If intellectual class theory is the intellectual underpinning of Part I, the campus novel's meaning as a genre likewise forms the lynchpin of my argument in Part II, and indeed of the dissertation as a whole. But as a popular genre often dismissed as more fun than significant, the campus novel is, as the saying goes, "undertheorized." Thus a brief Interlude at the start of Part II offers a theory of the genre. I distinguish between the campus novel—a postwar genre satirizing professors and administrators—and the academic novel more generally, which includes

all novels about academic life, and which has a history in America stretching back to Nathaniel Hawthorne's debut novel, 1828's *Fanshawe*, set at Hawthorne's alma mater Bowdoin College. While from the 1880s onward the academic novel in America was bound up in middle-class hopes for success in the newly-dominant professions, I argue, the campus novel's emergence in the 1950s was distinguished by its chiefly sardonic attitude toward the labor of a middle class now increasingly employed by large bureaucratic institutions.

This understanding of the genre in hand, we turn to the specific professor-*cum*-authors whose academic fictions and criticism contributed strongly to the ethos of postmodernism when it emerged in the 1960s. Lionel Trilling did not write any campus novels, but his best-regarded (and most earnest) depiction of faculty life, 1943's short story "Of This Time, Of That Place," may still be understood as an important contribution to the emergence of the satirical campus novel of the 1950s—a contribution that suggests, moreover, the campus novel's roots in the intellectual class theory described in Part I. Chapter Four examines Trilling's short story alongside his now better-known critical essays from this period, revealing that Trilling regarded academic labor as intellectual class labor *par excellence*: it is on his account fundamentally bureaucratic, narrow and given to simplistic pigeon-holing. But this chapter also argues that the famously moderate Trilling nevertheless nurtured a utopian hope for a type of academic labor, both wide-ranging and creative, that would transcend such bureaucratic constrictions. I go on to show that Trilling's antibureaucratic ambivalence toward academic labor, expressed both in fiction and essays, lies at the center of his 1948 conception of a novel of *ideas* as opposed to ideology. And this specifically realist genre's self-consciousness and insistence on intellectual complexity, I argue, possesses striking affinities with the postmodern novel's famed embrace of metafiction, and its valorization of indeterminacy.

Chapters Five and Six then expand upon the possibilities revealed by Trilling's simultaneous hopes and fears for academic labor, detailing the outsized role of the antibureaucratic campus novel in the creation of the postmodern novel. Chapter Five examines what is often dubbed the "first" campus novel, Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* (1952). Writing with her friend Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) fresh in her memory, McCarthy depicts a quintessentially bureaucratic campus awash in the reified pseudo-information characteristic of bureaucratic and segmented organizations such as those of a totalitarian state. I argue that her scathing depiction of campus politics in fact offers a key to understanding her political ideal in this era, which is that of a precisely universalist—trans-departmental, if you will—liberal politics. Borrowing some ideas from McCarthy's early sixties essays on the troubles of realistic fiction, I conclude by demonstrating that in her inaugural campus novel's uneasily realist satire of professors as political intriguers, lodged in a radically decentralized system devoted to its own perpetuation rather than to any notion of truth, we have an accurate if profoundly anxious preview of both postmodern fiction and postmodern (especially Foucauldian) theories of power.

Chapter Six turns to Soviet refugee Vladimir Nabokov's much-celebrated campus novel, 1962's *Pale Fire*, now often read as an iconic exemplar of the postmodern itself. The novel's depiction of academic life and its parody of literary-critical discourse, I contend, satirize bureaucratic existence and thought as simplistic and narrow-minded. Simultaneously, the novel glorifies the complexity of aesthetic experience as an antidote to bureaucracy. Offering a brief synopsis of potential Derridean and Foucauldian readings of *Pale Fire*, I go on to argue that the antibureaucratic animus of the novel makes it not only a prototypical novel of 1950s late modernism, but also of 1960s early poststructuralism and postmodernism. I conclude by

demonstrating that *Pale Fire*'s proto-poststructuralist themes and sheer writerly exuberance valorize the aesthetic not only as a complex experience of readerly *consumption*, but also as an authorial craft *labor* opposed to the increasingly “deskilled,” Taylorized intellectual labor of the postwar academy. As an intellectual-class satire of the bureaucratization of intellectual work, and a celebration of the potential for a more creative and autonomous labor, the mock-academic aesthetic of *Pale Fire* helped create the content and form alike of early postmodernism.

A brief Epilogue takes stock of the political meanings of postmodernism in both the 1960s and today. As against recent critics who have suggested that postmodernism represents a “libertarian turn” in literary and intellectual history, effectively aiding the New Right’s dismantling of the welfare state, I offer a reckoning of the historical and contemporary political value of the postmodernism I have limned here. The early postmodern hope for intellectual workers’ autonomy, I argue, served the New Left well, and might offer us guidance still.

\* \* \* \* \*

Fredric Jameson notes that the class origins of postmodernist culture may be understood as “the expression of the ‘consciousness’ of a whole new class fraction,” called variously the “new petit bourgeoisie, a professional-managerial class, or more succinctly as ‘the yuppies’” (*Postmodernism* 407). The ideologies of any such “class fraction,” Jameson goes on to emphasize, do not have to directly articulate those of the ruling class; they only have to “articulate the world in the most useful way functionally, or in ways that can be functionally reappropriated” (407). And, he concludes,

Why a certain class fraction should provide these ideological articulations is a historical question as intriguing as the question of the sudden dominance of a particular writer or a particular style. There can surely be no model or formula given in advance for these historical questions; just as surely, however, we have not yet worked this out for what we now call postmodernism. (407)

Agreeing with those who understand the postmodern as the expression of something like a “professional-managerial class,” this dissertation helps answer Jameson’s historical questions. It suggests why and how a class fraction of intellectual workers from the 1930s through the 1950s provided key ideological articulations of postmodernism in the 1960s. Most importantly, by revealing an unfamiliar ancestry of postmodernism in American fiction and thought—one ultimately rooted in the socialist, realism-inspired, antibureaucratic universalism characteristic of the New York Intellectuals—this dissertation proves that intellectual workers’ earliest expressions of recognizably postmodern sentiments were not by any means wholly friendly to any “ruling class” in America. And ultimately the genealogy I present here should help us to understand and advance the labor-left heritage of the literary and political moments I document. For the histories of realism and postmodernism, of Old Left and New Left, may have much to tell us still about the present-day struggles of intellectuals for dignified labor.

## **Part I**

### **Class Unconsciousness, 1932-1950**

The reform of consciousness consists *only* in enabling the world to clarify its consciousness, in waking it from its dream about itself . . .

—Karl Marx, “For A Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing” (1844)

[T]he organisation of the revolutionaries must consist first and foremost of people who make revolutionary activity their profession . . . . In view of this common characteristic of the members of such an organisation, *all distinctions as between workers and intellectuals . . . must be effaced.*

—V. I. Lenin, *What Is To Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement* (1902)



## Chapter One

### **Professional Revolutionaries: Tess Slesinger and the Origins of Intellectual Class Theory in America**

#### **1. Personal and Political**

Relatively unknown today, Tess Slesinger's *The Unpossessed* (1934) is an entertaining and yet sometimes poignant satire of intellectuals in the 1930s. Detailing the personal lives of three male Marxist (or at least pseudo-Marxist) intellectuals and their wives and lovers in New York City, it chiefly chronicles its intellectuals' hapless attempts to found a literary and political magazine. At the start, Miles Flinders and his wife Margaret are stuck in a foundering marriage, with Miles regularly receiving cuts in his salary at work; the egocentric Jeffrey Blake writes vapid novels while perpetually cheating on his maternal and (perhaps only seemingly) oblivious wife Norah; and Bruno Leonard teaches college English and dreams one day of starting a magazine with Miles and Jeffrey. The real action comes when one day they all agree to actually *start* the (soon-capitalized) Magazine, hoping that the militant working-class student group known as the "Black Sheep" will provide political stimulus for the enterprise. In the burst of activity following this decision, the intellectuals' personal lives become animated and happier. Miles and Margaret conceive a child, and Miles for once seems to be able to accept his wife's love; Jeffrey Blake is able to have affairs while convincing himself he is advancing the cause of revolution through them. Bruno sets aside his unconscious attraction to young Emmett Middleton, one of the Black Sheep's number, in favor of an attraction to his cousin Elizabeth, who is arriving back in America after a bohemian life in Paris. This period of animation ends sadly, though, when one of the Black Sheep (Cornelia) faints from hunger during a planning meeting for the Magazine. Her fainting reminds the intellectuals of the bodily seriousness of the

political issues that they are, finally, only playing at. At a fundraising party for the Magazine, it all comes apart in a rambling, tragicomically self-denigrating speech about intellectuals and politics given by Bruno. The novel ends poignantly and symbolically with Margaret's regretful and bitter trip to the hospital for an abortion.

Meditating on the less-than-universal subject of the political and personal lives of Marxist intellectuals in the 1930s, then, one would expect *The Unpossessed* to be a novel for specialists alone. But despite its seemingly narrow appeal, the novel has proved surprisingly popular. It's been reprinted regularly, if not frequently—by Avon in 1966, The Feminist Press in 1984, and most recently New York Review Books in 2002. Critics interested in left politics have taken up the novel repeatedly. Most have understood the novel as a *roman à clef* about specific contemporaries—or at least historically, as a document of a particular moment in Marxist and/or feminist experience and history. Murray Kempton, Lionel Trilling, and Alan Wald, for example, have all read the novel in the context of the evolution of the *Menorah Journal* that Tess Slesinger contributed to frequently in her youth—a magazine dedicated to issues of Jewish identity, whose editors and contributors moved leftward over the course of the 1930s, eventually constituting a significant portion of those writers who revamped the *Partisan Review* as a Trotsky-sympathetic journal in 1937. Wald has offered the fullest person-for-person correspondences for the novel in this vein, for example, identifying the characters of Bruno Leonard as Elliot Cohen, the journal's editor; Miles Flinders as Slesinger's ex-husband Herbert Solow, who went on to serve as one of Trotsky's chief American defenders against Stalin; and Jeffrey Blake as Max Eastman, the eventual translator of Trotsky and a Marxist theorist in his own right, with whom Slesinger had an affair—much as the character of Margaret Flinders does with Blake in the novel (68).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In 1955 Murray Kempton saw the novel as “almost our only surviving document on a group of intellectuals who were drawn to the Communists early in the thirties and left them very soon,” and was the first to recognize in print

Feminist critics have latched on to the novel as well, with Janet Sharistianian arguing that “its specific focus is the relationship between politics and sexual politics” (371), and Paula Rabinowitz reading it as “a political evocation of [the] dilemma [of the] female intellectual” caught in a patriarchal Marxist intellectual milieu that did not countenance women’s concerns as political ones (149).<sup>2</sup>

But whatever their focus, what has united political critics of the novel has been the feeling that the novel is conspicuously thin in its political content, despite its knowing depiction of characters supposedly immersed in politics. Phillip Rahv’s review of the novel in the *New Masses* started the trend, complaining that the novel “fails to give a disciplined orientation” for recently radicalized intellectuals (“Storm” 26). Soon thereafter Robert Cantwell noted in *The New Outlook* that the political and economic background of the book is “neglected,” and lamented that “The real confusion through which the intellectuals moved in the period covered by the book . . . had more meaning than is given to it here” (57). In later years, literary critics have agreed with Cantwell’s assessment. To the extent that the novel concerns itself with “documenting” the New York Intellectual scene, Trilling took the time to observe in 1966, the

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that its main characters were modeled on the people who would be central in the creation of a new *Partisan Review* in 1937 (122). A decade after that, Lionel Trilling admitted that the novel had some “evidential” value (5), and spent time describing the *Menorah Journal* as valuable context for this (7-15), as well as its more Marxist roots (15-20). Wald, too, sets the novel primarily in the context of the *Menorah Journal* group (64-74). Janet Sharistianian, while not primarily concerned with real-world correspondences, has also identified Margaret Flinders and Elizabeth Leonard each as representatives of Slesinger herself, respectively a “socially conscious, yet confused, educated, middle-class young woman of the 1930s” and a 1920s “flapper” (376-77).

The pursuit of real-life correspondences has not resulted in unanimity, however. When Kempton seemed to identify Lionel Trilling (“a critic of notable powers” [122]) as a model for Bruno Leonard, Trilling took care to disavow any resemblance (“Novel” 19). (Indeed, the manically funny Bruno Leonard would seem to be a poor fit for the more reserved and serious Trilling.) And Diana Trilling identifies Jeffrey Blake as Melvin Levy, a friend of Slesinger’s (*Beginning* 137), rather than as the more famous Max Eastman that Alan Wald spies in Blake. (On Slesinger’s affair with Eastman, however, see Biagi 226-27.)

<sup>2</sup> Oddly enough, Lionel Trilling, of all published critics, appears to have been the first to note legitimate “ground” for a feminist reading of the novel. *The Unpossessed* might be understood, he wrote, as “that so often graceless thing, a novel of feminine protest.” But he then asserted that such a reading would miss the novel’s “real intention” to portray a dialectic between “life” and “the desire to make life as good as it might be” (23, my emphasis)—between a seemingly implacable reality and the political urge itself, we might translate.

novel fails because it lacks respect for its prototypes' detailed knowledge of politics (18-19). Wald quotes Sidney Hook to the effect that "There is no coherent presentation of any political idea" in the novel (*New York* 40), and—though he clearly admires the novel more than Hook—he ultimately also finds the novel essentially "limited" (64) because of its "failure . . . to portray the political essence of the [*Menorah Journal*] group" (72). Sharistanian summarized the consensus view quite pithily in 1984, noting an "uneven density" to the novel: "though it dramatizes the intersection between private and political spheres of commitment and action," she writes, it contains "more depth in presentations of the former sphere than of the latter" (372). The novel's politics, critics have agreed, pale in comparison to its psychological portraits.

I agree too. *The Unpossessed* is wonderfully long on understanding its characters' personal motivations, and relatively short on political analysis of their intellectual and political milieu. But nevertheless I think the novel's attention to contemporary Marxist thought deserves more serious attention than it has received to date. For *The Unpossessed*, I will argue in this chapter, is engaged with a specific, important, and influential theoretical debate of Marxism in its day—that over the concept of an *intellectual class*. This concept would go on to have a remarkable career throughout the twentieth century, often under such more familiar latter-day names as the New Class or Professional-Managerial Class (PMC). I will therefore first examine the contemporary theoretical debate over intellectuals as a class that occurred in radical New York City circles during the early 1930s. A manifesto and a journal article on the topic of intellectuals' roles in revolutionary politics helped legitimize the idea that intellectuals were a class, I will show. But they also revealed key fissures in the concept, fissures that would have profound consequences for the idea's political uses throughout the twentieth century—a history that this dissertation examines in some depth. I will then examine *The Unpossessed*'s roots in

this contradictory theory of an intellectual class, arguing first for its ultimate *political* (and not just personal) skepticism about this intellectual class's ability to offer any aid to proletarian politics. But secondly I will argue for its perhaps surprising sympathy for the class's need for autonomy from such politics. In dramatizing this alternately skeptical and enthusiastic (yet always revolutionary in intent) concept of an intellectual class, I conclude, Tess Slesinger's novel helped launch key debates over intellectual labor that would become central to postmodernism's emergence several decades later.

## **2. The Political Contradictions of the Intellectual Class Idea**

Amidst spreading unemployment and poverty that affected not only the working class but salaried professionals as well, the American theory of an intellectual class was born in New York City in the fall of 1932.<sup>3</sup> That September, a group of “over fifty American writers, painters, teachers and other professional workers” gathered together to support William Z. Foster and James W. Ford's bid for the presidency under the Communist ticket (League 31). They soon formed the League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford, one of the “most important organizations of revolutionary intellectuals that existed during the early 1930s” (Wald, *New York* 54). Centered in New York City, they wrote a brief press release announcing their support for the CPUSA and its candidates. The next month, they wrote and published forty thousand copies of a manifesto urging other professional workers to do so as well (58). It took the form of an election pamphlet titled *Culture and the Crisis: An Open Letter to the Writers, Artists, Teachers, Physicians, Engineers, Scientists, and Other Professional Workers of America*. An unillustrated, thirty-two-page booklet printed on plain paper and published by the relatively obscure Workers

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<sup>3</sup> See the Introduction for more on the social context of middle class hardship during the Great Depression, especially in New York City.

Library Publishers, its appearance was modest, even drab. Yet it would be difficult to overestimate the significance of *Culture and the Crisis* as a founding document of the 1930s literary and intellectual left. Its fifty-three signatories constitute a who's who of that decade's radical intellectuals and writers. The literary figures alone include Sherwood Anderson, Fielding Burke, Erskine Caldwell, Malcolm Cowley, Countee Cullen, John Dos Passos, Theodore Dreiser, Waldo Frank, Granville Hicks, Langston Hughes, and Edmund Wilson; prominent intellectuals such as Sidney Hook, Matthew Josephson, James Rorty, and Lincoln Steffens also signed on. According to Michael Denning, the manifesto represented "the first . . . attempt by the [American] left to theorize the social and political significance of modern mental labor" (99). As such, *Culture and the Crisis* also marked the American left's first attempt to theorize modern intellectuals and intellectual work in Marxist terms.

Those terms were specifically those of *class*. For this founding document of the 1930s left regards intellectuals as part of a class of "brain workers" separate from both the proletariat and the capitalists. The authors begin by identifying themselves as a group "listed among the so-called 'intellectuals' of our generation," and then ask

Why should we as a class be humble? Practically everything that is orderly and sane and useful in America was made by two classes of Americans; our class, the class of brain workers, and the "lower classes", [sic] the muscle workers. . . . [W]e reject the disorder, the lunacy spawned by grabbers, advertisers, traders, speculators, salesman, the much-adulated, immensely stupid and irresponsible "business men." (3)

Located between the productive “lower classes” of muscle workers and the greedy and stupid “business” class of capitalists, the self-described “intellectuals” authoring the letter claim a common class with all professional workers.

This idea, of the class identity of a group of brain workers located between capital and labor, would become central to an influential generation of intellectual and literary figures in New York City, a group sometimes referred to as the New York Intellectuals. Their shared idea of a class of intellectual workers is the subject of Part I of this dissertation. In this section of the chapter, then, I will lay out the theoretical origins of the idea as represented in *Culture and the Crisis*, and in a now much more obscure article published in the Autumn 1932 issue of *The Modern Quarterly*: Max Nomad’s “White Collars and Horny Hands.” If one knows these two works well, the notion of yoking them together as representative of a common theory of an intellectual class will undoubtedly seem counterintuitive. One of the main authors of *Culture and the Crisis*—radical economist Lewis Corey—had felt the need to denounce Nomad’s thesis before readers read it, after all: in the editorial for the issue of *The Modern Quarterly* where Nomad’s article appeared, Corey declared that the journal “disagrees thoroughly with the article by Nomad,” and was publishing it only because “it may be useful to expose the theory in advance” of its possible dissemination to increasingly revolutionary masses, who might be misled by it (“Role” 10).<sup>4</sup> But as I will soon demonstrate, Corey’s manifesto and Nomad’s article have more in common than either of their authors would have wished to admit. I will argue specifically that while *Culture and the Crisis* championed a revolutionary ideal of intellectuals’

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<sup>4</sup> Denning calls Corey the “main writer of *Culture and the Crisis*” and provides a brief biography of this fascinating figure, calling him the “great theorist of the Popular Front social movement, the American Antonio Gramsci” (99); see 99-101. Wald, however, reckons Corey as only one of the manifesto’s authors (though first on his list), giving credit also to “[Malcolm] Cowley, [James] Rorty, [Sidney] Hook, and [Matthew] Josephson” (*New York* 58). In any case, Corey was clearly a main contributor. For more on Corey, see Paul Buhle’s biography, *A Dreamer’s Paradise Lost*.

autonomy from capital—an ideal that would unify and sustain the remarkable appeal of the theory of an intellectual class throughout the twentieth century—*Culture and the Crisis* and its nominally opposing article “White Collars and Horny Hands” nevertheless exhibited a common and central ambivalence about whether intellectuals should be leaders or followers of the working class in revolutionary socialist politics. This key dichotomy ultimately hints at the intellectual class idea’s contradictory political uses in the years that followed. Last but not least, I will suggest that Nomad’s article revealed from the outset the method by which many of the intellectual class idea’s proponents would attempt to unravel the uncertain intentions of intellectual workers’ involvement in radical politics: psychoanalysis. In short, these initial expositions of the theory of an intellectual class reveal in embryo the paradigmatic features of its consistently idealistic but ultimately contradictory political trajectory over at least two decades.

*Culture and the Crisis* begins its description of an intellectual class by allying its “brain workers,” the intellectual class, with its “muscle workers,” the working class. Professionals have more and more in common with the working class as capitalism declines, it argues. The “brain workers who give technical or educational services are not spared” from the economic crisis engulfing the nation (9): teachers, librarians, architects, and engineers are unemployed too. Like the industrial workers displaced by new forms of technology, for example, musicians are subject to “technological unemployment through the development of radio, talking-movies and the like” (10). The professional class is just as injured as industrial workers in the crisis.

But if *Culture and the Crisis* attempts to cultivate cross-class solidarity by citing the common fate of all workers under capitalism, it also cites—as the title might lead one to expect—the *cultural* effects of capitalist crisis. Here it tried to appeal to the specific and distinct class concerns of cultural workers: their autonomy from capitalists. “What we see ahead is the



threat of cultural dissolution,” the preface warns (3); capitalism has rotted “the fibre [sic] of our culture, and stultifies large sections of our people” (14-15), leading to widespread censorship and propaganda, as well as reduced arts funding. Capitalism is “hostile to the genuine culture of the past and present and bitterly opposed to the new cultural tendencies which have grown out of the epic of working class struggle for a new society” (29). The “immensely stupid” business men who run the country also hope to run intellectuals’ lives. But intellectual workers must resist this. “We claim the right to live and to function,” the manifesto asserted. “It is our business to think and we shall not permit business men to teach us our business” (3). Thus while the pamphlet argues that capitalism threatens mass unemployment of proletarian and professional alike, it strenuously warns that the specific concerns of the professional class—culture, ideas, and above all intellectual autonomy—are threatened by capitalism, too.

Communism, on the other hand, promises to protect these professional class concerns. It is conservative: it will “save civilization and its cultural heritage from the abyss to which the world crisis is driving it” (30). And it is revolutionary as well: it will usher in “a new cultural renaissance” of culture and ideas (30). Under the planned economy of communism, intellectuals will have a freer hand in their “business,” having been released from the irrationality and ugliness spawned by the profit motive. Under communism

the engineer need consider only the efficiency of his work, the economist and statistician can purposively plan the organization, management and social objectives of industry, the architect is released from profit and speculative motives and may express his finest aspirations in buildings of social utility and beauty, the physician becomes the unfettered organizer of social preventative

medicine, the teacher, writer, and artist fashion the creative ideology of a new world and a new culture. (18)

Preserving and nurturing the “genuine culture” of the past, present, and future, communism will also enable intellectual workers to work more freely. The communist revolution will provide bread, yes; but it is “also and necessarily a cultural revolution” that will provide those particular roses favored by the professional class (22). In short, communism promised intellectual and creative *autonomy* for the intellectual class.

This promise and ideal would resonate with intellectual workers for the duration of the twentieth century, as the rest of this dissertation will show: intellectual autonomy remained a lodestar for intellectuals’ politics. But another aspect of the manifesto would resonate for intellectuals throughout the century as well, both directly and indirectly, and with much less predictable effects. For *Culture and the Crisis* was confused about the role intellectuals were to play in any socialist revolution. Scholars of the intellectual class idea in America should understand this confusion—and indeed the whole theory’s origin—within the context of the American Marxist left’s understanding of revolutionary theory after the founding of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1917. Specifically, the American intellectual class theory we are tracing here arose from a debate over Vladimir Lenin’s beliefs regarding intellectuals’ roles in revolution, which departed from Marxist tradition in significant ways.

Some background is required. When Marx and Engels had written about proletarian revolution, they did not imagine any great role for intellectuals. As the capitalist era comes to an end, the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* predicted in 1848, the breakdown of the ruling class and indeed society itself assumes “such a violent, glaring character, that . . . a portion of the bourgeoisie goes over to the proletariat, and in particular, a portion of the bourgeois ideologists,

who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole” (481). This was all. As Ralph Miliband notes, “Marx and Engels attributed no special ‘role’ to the intellectuals-cum-ideologists who had ‘gone over’ to the proletariat” (60).

With Lenin, however, this changed. In 1902’s *What Is To Be Done?* he argued that “The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade-union consciousness, i.e. the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc.” (31-32). For Lenin, the working class could not create a revolution on its own. But the “theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical, and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals” such as Marx and Engels themselves, he noted (32). And thus while workers knew intimately the conditions in factories and the like, they needed and wanted intellectuals to supply them with revolutionary theory and political knowledge (72-74). Consequently any political party truly capable of forming a revolution would have to fuse intellectuals and workers together, joining revolutionary theory with revolutionary practice. Once part of the revolutionary party, intellectuals and workers alike would have to lose their character as intellectuals or workers, Lenin argued, and instead become “*professional* revolutionaries” above all (107, emphasis in original)—“people who make revolutionary activity their profession” (109), who dedicate their whole lives to fomenting revolution. As party members, then, intellectuals had a special role to play in Leninist working-class revolutionary politics. These party intellectuals were required to impart revolutionary theory to workers who would otherwise only come to trade-union consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In this summary I have attempted to avoid certain Cold War caricatures of Lenin’s position—partisan misinformation often promoted by figures discussed in this dissertation. The misinformation is familiar enough even

Writers and intellectuals on the American left reacted to this theoretical development—the revolutionary theory of a leader who had, after all, seemed to produce the world’s first successful socialist country—in contradictory ways. Specifically, while *Culture and the Crisis* confidently promised a cultural renaissance in the Communist future, it was considerably more ambivalent about what role intellectuals were to play in the present, especially in relation to what it still understood as the essentially “*working class* struggle for a new society” (29, my emphasis). The pamphlet begins by identifying its authors as intellectuals, to be sure, but in a curiously bashful manner: they are only “listed” (by whom?) “among the so-called ‘intellectuals’ of our generation” (3). It proceeds to elaborate on the intellectuals’ social function. “We . . . [are] people trained, at least, to think for ourselves and hence, to a degree for our time and our people,” it starts, but then quickly admits that “we have no faintest desire to exaggerate either our talents or our influence” (3). The author-intellectuals of the pamphlet are reluctant to identify themselves as intellectuals in the first place, and reluctant to identify the intellectual as one with the specific, let alone important, social function of thinking, “to a degree,” “for our time and our people.”

As the “Open Letter” continues, however, the intellectual increasingly becomes a creature of “responsibilities” who might be morally justified in taking power. The motif of responsibility sounds throughout the pamphlet. The “irresponsible ‘business-men’” (3) who

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today to warrant debunking in a footnote. Though Lenin assumes intellectuals’ initial superiority over workers in the knowledge of revolutionary theory, he never advocates for intellectual workers’ (as opposed to manual workers’) control of the Party. Indeed, as I have indicated in the main text, in *What Is To Be Done?* Lenin advocates just the opposite: upon entering the Party, he wanted both workers and intellectuals to shed their previous identities, becoming equal “professional revolutionaries” first and foremost. In a revolutionary party, he asserts with emphasis, “*all distinctions as between workers and intellectuals . . . must be effaced*” (109). Thus the Cold-War assertion that Lenin planned for intellectual workers to control the working class does not hold water. Once again, Miliband is a sure guide on the matter: in the main, he tells us, the “workerist” Lenin *mistrusted* intellectuals’ tendency toward individualism and their consequent political ineptitude; and it was only “*as members of the Party* and through its mediation that he saw . . . intellectuals involved in the service of the workers’ cause” (61, emphasis in the original). For a more recent and thorough-going reexamination of Lenin’s beliefs about workers, intellectuals, and “professional revolutionaries” in *What Is To Be Done?* and elsewhere—one that also counters Cold War interpretations of Lenin—see Lih.

presently rule the United States—via a Republican administration that fails to be “a responsible element in modern civilization” (12)—are both implicitly and explicitly set off from the “responsible intellectuals” who have authored the manifesto (3). Toward its close, *Culture and the Crisis* finally sheds hesitance and ascribes to intellectuals a national and indeed world-historical importance: “If we are capable of building a civilization,” it intones, “surely it is time for us to begin; time for us to assert our function, our responsibility; time for us to renew the pact of comradeship with the struggling masses, trapped by the failure of leadership in the blind miseries of a crumbling madhouse” (29). The open letter here imagines that the intellectual class will be the *leaders* of this movement to create a new civilization: society as a whole is figured as an irrational and uncomprehending “madhouse” of “blind” suffering, while the working class is—crucially—“struggling” and “trapped” by a “failure of leadership.” The class of intellectual workers, by contrast with such a helpless, leaderless proletariat, has the almost naturalized “function” and “responsibility” of “building a civilization.”

But such a point of view, it is crucial to note, is not consistent or even dominant in the letter. It goes on to warn these professionals in a much more orthodox Marxist manner that they “do not constitute an *independent* economic class in society. They can neither remain neutral in the struggle between capitalism and Communism nor can they by their own independent action effect any social change” (29, my emphasis). Intellectual workers’ power is dependent on the working class. And accordingly, intellectuals are now not the responsible leaders of that class: rather, they may choose to be “allies and fellow travelers” of the working class (29). Positing a class of intellectuals and professional workers distinct from the working class below, *Culture and the Crisis* thus offers a somewhat contradictory meditation on intellectuals’ role in revolutionary politics. If at one moment it exhorts brain workers to provide much-needed

leadership to a helpless and trapped working class, thus becoming the responsible creators of a new civilization, at another it urges the professional class merely to join an antecedent working class struggle that requires only its aid.

In this tension, *Culture and the Crisis* is much like Max Nomad's "White Collars and Horny Hands," published in *The Modern Quarterly* at roughly the same time, in the Autumn 1932 issue. Though ultra-left and revolutionary in its intent, this article was arguably the first American exposition of an idea that would mutate in the 1970s into the neoconservative theory of a "New Class" of self-interested and state-bureaucracy-loving professional workers; and it remains an important entry in the annals of theories about intellectuals' involvement in Marxist politics.<sup>6</sup> Nomad (born Nacht) was an Austrian refugee who had come to the United States in 1913 (Bruce-Briggs 12). "White Collars and Horny Hands" explicated his Polish mentor Waclaw Machajski's critiques of Marxist revolutionary strategy in such books as *The Evolution of Social Democracy* (1899) and *The Intellectual Worker* (1904).<sup>7</sup> Machajski charged that Marx and Engels "showed an incomplete understanding of the class antagonism in modern society" by failing to recognize that intellectuals constituted a "rising, privileged bourgeois stratum" with

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<sup>6</sup> I will have more to say about the neoconservative "New Class" theory—a theory of intellectuals as a class founded in recoil from the student activists of the New Left—in Chapter Three. For the sake of theoretical precision, we ought to note that unlike the neoconservatives who followed him (or for that matter the Trotskyist dissidents we will examine primarily in Chapter Two), Nomad understood intellectuals to be a *stratum* within the bourgeoisie, and not a separate class. Nevertheless, my chief justification for including his article amongst the founding documents of the theory of an intellectual class is its surprising influence on subsequent theories of intellectuals as a class, and on theories of the social importance of intellectual work more generally—a mostly conservative influence that undoubtedly would have horrified this revolutionary. Nomad's work was important to Daniel Bell's sociology from the 1950s onward, for example. 1960's *The End of Ideology*, largely basing its account on Nomad, hails Nomad's mentor Machajski as a prophet of the failure of socialism and hence of the "end of ideology" itself (355-357). And in 1973's *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* Bell again recognized Nomad and Machajski's centrality to the theory of the Soviet Union's domination by a bureaucratic "New Class" (96)—an ancestor, as Bell acknowledges, of his own theory of postindustrial society. (Bell's "postindustrial society," of course, itself went on to be a frequent citation in discussions of postmodernism.) Nomad's work also inspired the neoconservative theorists of a New Class in the 1970s. 1979's *The New Class?* is dedicated to his memory, strangely, and his work and its influence is discussed in the introduction (12-14).

<sup>7</sup> The publication dates of Machajski's two books are taken from Bell, *End* 355-56. Most of Machajski's works, including these, are still not translated into English. For a summary of his life and works, though, see Shatz. Nomad tells us to pronounce Machajski's full name as "Vatzlav Makhayski" (69).

class interests distinct from the proletariat they often claimed to speak for.<sup>8</sup> As a result of such distinct interests the “white collars” had regularly sabotaged the revolutionary movements of “horny hands.” Their vision of socialism was ultimately only “the ideology of the discontented intellectual workers in their struggle for taking over the inheritance of the parastic [sic] private capitalist” (Nomad 75). The Paris insurrection of 1848, for example, had been put down not only by the capitalists, but by “the whole mass of *privileged employees* of the capitalist State, lawyers, journalists, scholars—even by those who, not long before, had sung to them songs about ‘organization of labor’ and ‘workers’ associations’” (Machajski qtd. in Nomad 70, emphasis in original). The Russian Revolution of 1917 was in danger of following this pattern too, Machajski argued in 1918. The intelligentsia still ruled the government there, and maintained their higher incomes as well: despite the slogans, the Soviet Union hadn’t yet secured workers’ control of anything, for “The intelligentsia . . . defends its own interests, not those of the workers” (Machajski qtd. in Nomad 75). Mistrustful of pseudo-revolutionary socialist intellectuals who would finally only work for either bourgeois social democracy or a state-run capitalism controlled by a bureaucratic elite (71), Machajski instead advocated a long-term revolutionary strategy for economic equality, based on continual and exclusively working-class pressure for the bread-and-butter demands of jobs and higher wages (73).

But even as “White Collars” espouses this deeply skeptical theory of intellectuals’ involvement in revolutionary class politics, like *Culture and the Crisis* it simultaneously promises an eventually heroic role for intellectuals in revolution. For the article dreams that if the working masses do continue their fight for bread-and-butter demands, and eventually thus understand social democracy and state-run capitalism to be merely *intellectual* workers’ self-

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<sup>8</sup> The first quotation is from Machajski, as quoted in Nomad 70; the second quotation is in Nomad’s words on page 71.

interest, they will at last “force part of their old leaders to take a new course, and win over some of the adventurous, romantic intellectuals and self-taught workers who will then lead them forward in a victorious struggle for economic equality”—for the classless and thence stateless society promised by Marx (75). In other words, if socialist intellectual workers are at present only self-deceived parasites hoping to live off working-class resistance, in the genuinely revolutionary future the “adventurous” and “romantic” among them may hope to lead the working class.

Once again, though, it is crucial to note that—much as in *Culture and the Crisis*—the precise role these dashing intellectuals will play in revolutionary politics remains unclear. They will be “forced” by the working class to “lead” the working class, we are told. But this offers a paradoxical scenario for intellectuals at best. For Nomad’s formulation of intellectuals being “forced” to lead the working class unconvincingly attempts to solve the dilemma originally offered by the article, which was that intellectuals have *separate* interests from the working class. Why won’t intellectuals, once forced to lead, simply advance their own interests instead of those of the manual workers? Or to put the matter more positively—the way readers of the *Modern Quarterly* and other left intellectuals likely would have put it at the time—how can intellectual leaders with class interests implacably opposed to the working class still be allies of that working class?

In answer to this constructive question of intellectuals’ involvement in working-class politics, Nomad’s article makes a move which would become familiar to theorists of an intellectual class, and suggestive to many a chronicler of intellectual life in New York in this period: it discusses the *psychology* of the truly revolutionary intellectual. Nomad tells us that Machajski was aware of “the apparent contradiction that the class struggle of the manual workers



may be championed by men not of their own class,” and that he had an answer for it. Machajski argued that

there was a manifest and fundamental difference between the purely material causes of the class struggle of an emerging social group—whether it be manual workers in their struggle for economic equality or the intelligentsia in its struggle for power and privilege—and the purely personal motives prompting the altogether disinterested stand of those who play an heroic part in it. (75)

A particular intellectual’s political motivations might differ from the class interests of intellectuals as a whole, in short. What “purely personal motives” might allow intellectuals to lead a working class revolution, then? Nomad summarizes Machajski’s rudimentary psychological portrait of such intellectuals:

These personalities . . . as a rule, motivated by the wrongs or aspirations of their own group, are not urged by the prosaic desire for comforts or the more common aspects of power. Their will-to-power often takes on the aspects of personal self-denial and sacrifice for the sake of fame or immortality. And some of them, for a multiplicity of motives—once the more crude form of egoism is eliminated—occasionally may assume the leadership of social groups below their own. (75)

In short, these intellectuals—perhaps alienated from their fellow-intellectuals, or seeking recognition from them—will lead for the sake of *glory* rather than material goods. The test of honest revolutionary intellectuals, in other words, is to be found in the psychology of “purely personal motives.” And while the vocabulary here is Nietzschean (“will-to-power”), the passage offers what might just as well be understood as a discerningly Freudian view of politics. Leaders will as a matter of course act according to “a multiplicity of motives,” not all altruistic: in short,

intellectual leadership of the working class will be *overdetermined*. The only trick is to make sure that “the more crude form of egoism is eliminated.” It is as if Nomad and Machajski were appropriating Freud’s famous aphorism regarding the goal of analysis, “Where the id was, there shall ego be” (*New Introductory* 100). If the intellectual’s political *id* of self-interest is held in check by a self-aware political *ego* that truly sought the good of the working class, even if in part for the sake of his or her personal glory, they argue, then the intellectual’s leadership of the working class could be a respectable, indeed adventurous and noble, pursuit.<sup>9</sup> Thus despite its deep skepticism of intellectuals’ class politics, “White Collars and Horny Hands” ultimately offers a proto-Freudian criterion to determine the merits of individual intellectual leadership of working-class struggles.<sup>10</sup>

The American theory of an intellectual class was first articulated, then, largely by one Italian (Lewis Corey) and one Austrian (Max Nomad) émigré to New York City in the early 1930s.<sup>11</sup> Despite its sometime neoconservative employment in later years, the theory originated in passionate attempts to analyze and promote intellectuals’ involvement in revolutionary politics. Holding that intellectuals belonged to a class other than the proletariat, the theory appealed to intellectuals’ desire for autonomy at work as a primary reason for their participation in revolution. But its articulation in *Culture and the Crisis* and “White Collars and Horny Hands” shows us that from the beginning this theory provoked at least two critical political questions. First, if intellectuals are part of a separate class, can they sincerely be committed to the proletariat in itself, or will self-interest always find its way into their political commitments?

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<sup>9</sup> The fuller passage in Freud runs thus: psychoanalysis’s “intention is, indeed, to strengthen the ego, to make it more independent of the super-ego, to widen its field of perception and enlarge its organization, so that it can appropriate fresh portions of the id. Where the id was, there shall ego be” (*New Introductory* 99-100).

<sup>10</sup> Though not in *Culture and the Crisis*, in his 1935 work *Crisis of the Middle Class* Lewis Corey also sometimes conceived of his middle class in terms of psychology: “The middle class today is wholly a split personality, tormented by the clash of discordant interests” (151).

<sup>11</sup> Corey was born as Luigi Carlo Fraina in Italy in 1892, and moved to New York City when he was three (Denning 99).

Second, and consequently, are intellectuals to help *lead* the working class in a revolutionary movement, or simply to be its ally? Born in the hyphen of that uneasy synthesis that Stalin had only recently come to call “Marxism-Leninism”—at the uncertain intersection between Marx’s sense that intellectuals might only follow the working class once revolution was inevitable, and Lenin’s belief that revolutionary working-class politics and parties required some element of intellectual leadership—questions of political psychology and strategy animated the theory of an intellectual class from its earliest days.<sup>12</sup> Part I of this dissertation demonstrates that prominent and influential New York novelists and essayists of the 1930s and ’40s, often living only blocks away from where the theory was hatched, and friends with its original proponents, wrestled with these same questions as well. Tess Slesinger’s first and only novel, we shall see now, breathed emotional life into them early on.

### 3. Narcissism and Autonomy in *The Unpossessed* (1934)

Slesinger’s connections to the creators of intellectual class theory were plentiful and direct. Largely through her marriage to Columbia graduate Herbert Solow in 1927, she began her literary career as one of a small group of intellectuals and writers gathered around Elliot Cohen and his *Menorah Journal* in the late 1920s, an “elite carefully selected by Cohen, [its] creator and molder” (Wald, *New York* 32). The bond between Cohen and Slesinger was particularly

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<sup>12</sup> Though this is not the place to make a full case for it, I would argue that such questions of group psychology and strategy continued to animate debates over even 1970s descendants of the theory, such as Barbara and John Ehrenreich’s Marxist account of a Professional-Managerial Class (PMC) and the neoconservative theory of a New Class. The Ehrenreichs essentially offered a New Left update of Lewis Corey’s work in *Culture and the Crisis* and (especially) *The Crisis of the Middle Class*, insisting on the need for a revolutionary alliance between an ascendant middle class (the PMC) and the traditional working class. The neoconservatives meanwhile explained away the student New Left by adopting a particularly cynical version of the Machajskian thesis that intellectual workers would only pursue their own class interests to the detriment of the working class. The substance of the 1970s split between left and right versions of the intellectual class idea, in other words, was present from the theory’s exclusively left beginnings in the 1930s. For the Ehrenreichs’s argument, see their lead essay in the Walker anthology *Between Labor and Capital*; for the neoconservative argument, see for example the Introduction to Bruce Brigg’s *The New Class?*

strong: he gave her work “a good deal of attention” and she in turn “strongly admired” him (Sharistianian 363). These marital and mentoring associations with Solow and Cohen put her in the ambit of many of the early proponents of intellectual class theory. For the *Menorah Journal* group also included Solow’s friend Felix Morrow, a signatory to *Culture and the Crisis*, and it was Elliot Cohen who convinced James Rorty in 1932 to become the secretary of the League of Professional Groups (Wald, *New York* 58), which soon wrote and published the manifesto with its rhetoric of a class of “brain workers.”<sup>13</sup> There were thus only a very few degrees of separation between Slesinger and the creators of the theory of an intellectual class.

The connection between Slesinger’s novel and the authors of *Culture and the Crisis* did not go unnoticed upon its publication, either. Selecting the novel as his “Outlook Book Choice of the Month” for *New Outlook* in June of 1934, Robert Cantwell framed the book’s genesis as follows:

In 1932 a group of writers, organized to work for the election of the Communist candidate for President, quickly became a rallying point for the most devoted opponents of the Communist party. It was a time of resignations from committees, of quarrels between friends, of political disputes in the offices of literary magazines. . . .

“The Unpossessed” deals brilliantly with one segment of this apparent chaos and expresses the bewilderment and waste almost perfectly. (53)

While Cantwell connected Slesinger’s novel to the League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford at the outset, however, he did not elaborate on its significance. And in the nearly eighty years since Cantwell’s review, the novel’s connection to the League has gone almost entirely

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<sup>13</sup> For biographical material on Slesinger, see Biagi, and especially Sharistianian 359-71. Wald also offers biographical “portraits” of Cohen (31-33) and Solow (37-42).

unremarked.<sup>14</sup> While the novel's relationship to the *Menorah Journal* group has been explored by critics in depth, no critic has examined the particular political and literary significance of the novel's connection to the League of Professional Groups.

In this concluding section I will attempt to do so. For the intellectuals depicted in the novel all understand *themselves* as part of the class of intellectuals that the League's manifesto envisioned; and Slesinger herself and some of her novel's first critics on the left explicitly grappled with this relatively new idea that intellectuals might constitute a class separate from both capital and proletariat. The novel's satire serves to criticize this intellectual class. Viewing intellectuals through the prisms of race and sex, but above all through the psychological concept of narcissism, *The Unpossessed* characterizes the intellectual class as one politically isolated from both the proletariat and society at large. In both comic and heart-rending ways, the intellectuals of *The Unpossessed* are too narcissistically cut off from society to have any real role in it. But while this critique seems to be the novel's chief intent, at the margins it also offers an appreciation of intellectuals' isolation: their lack of participation *in* the world, the novel admits at certain moments, does serve the real purpose of preserving a measure of unbiased judgment *for* the world. While the novel mostly satirizes intellectuals as a class cut off from the politics of the real world, then, it nevertheless simultaneously posits the need for an "objective" stratum of thinkers who preserve a type of thought that is independent and autonomous. I will suggest in conclusion that this political ambivalence toward the intellectual class—an ambivalence encapsulated in the founding documents of intellectual class theory reviewed in the previous section, and dramatized in Slesinger's novel—had a far-reaching influence on both later portrayals of an intellectual class, and on the postmodern itself.

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<sup>14</sup> The sole exception I have found is Alan Wald, who notes only in passing that its characters are "composites designed to express a variety of themes emanating from the milieu engaged in . . . the League of Professionals" (*New York* 68).

In its satire of three male intellectuals attempting to form a Marxist magazine, *The Unpossessed* presents characters who—despite their hopes to be engaged in proletarian struggle—nevertheless persistently understand intellectuals as a class separate from the proletariat. Their understanding is, like all else that they believe in the novel, subject to debate and qualification and hesitation; yet it is continuous. Two of the novel’s debates between the Black Sheep and its male intellectuals, for instance, inspire speculation about the class status of intellectuals. Bruno reflects on the difference between the working-class Black Sheep and intellectuals like himself: “it was not merely their youth that set them off, that blinded as it fired them, it was their poverty. Perhaps poverty, undercutting everything else, removed them a priori from the class of intellectuals,” Bruno meditates (199-200). Intellectuals are a separate class from the working class. Bruno however then separates intellectuals from “the class war,” declaring that “it’s not our war; we’re not eligible. We’re neither fish nor flesh nor good red herring. Just lousy intellectuals.” But even if Bruno here follows Marx’s belief that the only two classes of ultimate consequence are capitalists and the proletariat, he still thinks of intellectuals as a distinct (if less consequential) class: “He was aware that he was sentimental, that he drew a gold line around the intellectuals and put them in some holy place beyond the economic; but each man for his class . . .” (205). Intellectuals occupy a place at least “sentimentally” “beyond the economic,” but Bruno also casually and confidently refers to intellectuals as both a “class” and more precisely “his class.” Bruno’s class consciousness is that of an intellectual.

A running debate between Miles and the Black Sheep at the concluding party also addresses the issue of intellectuals’ class status. The narrative figures the hubbub of conversation in fragmented form, capturing its fervor:

“only two classes,” Firman said “and no use trying to bridge them over” said a Maxwell “nor inventing smaller classes inbetween” said Little Dixon “because in a war after all,” said Cornelia leaning forward, “there can only *be* two sides” “the fellows in No Man’s Land in between are shot from both trenches” said Firman, taking Cornelia’s hand. “But intellectuals,” said Miles. (292, emphasis in the original)

Here Miles argues for intellectuals as a third class distinct from capitalists and proletariat, as against the Black Sheep’s more rigid conception of two classes alone. Yet later on even Firman unceremoniously offers that “intellectuals as a class . . . are dying out, their function’s dead—nobody’s left to support them” (302): even the Black Sheep in the end interpret intellectuals as a third class, if a dying one. Both Miles and Firman, then, like Bruno, understand intellectuals as a distinct class.

A letter from Slesinger herself to publishers Simon and Schuster offers authorial imprimatur for the idea as well. Furthermore, it may be considered part of the original text, as it was printed on the back right flap of the novel’s 1934 dust jacket.<sup>15</sup> Slesinger there asserts that

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<sup>15</sup> Since the first edition of the novel is no longer easily obtainable, I take this opportunity to reproduce its autobiographical back flap in full:

About Tess Slesinger  
In a letter to her publishers  
MISS SLESINGER writes:

“I was born with the curse of intelligent parents, a happy childhood and nothing valid to rebel against. So I rebelled against telling the truth. I told whoppers at three, tall stories at four, and home-runs at five. From six to sixteen I wrote them in a diary. Instead of being spanked I was dressed up one day for a visit to the psychoanalyst; he listened while I lied for an hour and agreed that I might as well settle down to writing my lies for a career. My further equipment for writing is an insatiable memory for unimportant details, and (still more uninteresting) the fact that unlike most of my writing friends I get a kick out of writing.

“Although the background of my novel is New York, the idea in my head is intellectuals anywhere (but Russia) in the twentieth century. I discovered when travelling abroad that national barriers were nothing compared to class barriers, and similarly that class bonds were stronger than any bond I could have, even in Budapest, with a New Yorker who hadn’t read Proust. Whether we like it or not I think intellectuals are a class by themselves, belonging rather less than any other class to society as it functions today; which is why I called the novel *The Unpossessed*. I can’t attempt any dogmatic definitions, because many intellectuals seem unintelligent; but let’s say the doubters, the worriers, the weighers of the world; the class interested in things not essentially economically remunerative.

“Whether we like it or not I think intellectuals are a class by themselves, belonging rather less than any other class to society as it functions today.” Indeed this whole assertion of intellectuals’ class identity apart from the rest of society “is why I called the novel *The Unpossessed*.” Slesinger gave the novel its very title based on the concept of an intellectual class, in other words. She first defines that class by way of intellectuals’ qualities of mind: “I can’t attempt any dogmatic definitions because many intellectuals seem unintelligent; but let’s say the doubters, the worriers, the weighers of the world . . . .” Seemingly uncomfortable with such an idealist definition, however, Slesinger’s next clause explains intellectuals more as an economic class, albeit a quasi-bohemian class aloof from the profit-motive: “the class interested in things not essentially remunerative.”<sup>16</sup> The book’s dust jacket thus told Slesinger’s original readers that intellectuals are a “class by themselves,” and that the definition of intellectuals as an independent class was important enough to be, echoes of Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed* aside, the primary reason for the novel’s very title.<sup>17</sup>

Slesinger’s dust-jacket assertion and her use of the concept in her novel were bold enough to elicit objection from her more left-leaning reviewers at the time, moreover, making the idea of an intellectual class an important part of the novel’s reception on the left. Philip Rahv’s *New Masses* review, for example, protested the idea that intellectuals are “a socially independent

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“I picture them—us, my contemporaries, my fraternity-brothers—‘on board the fast twentieth century express, the twentieth century unlimited, hell-bent for nowhere’ on which one of my characters very consciously pictures herself.

“I do not mean at any point to treat my characters lightly or view their quandaries with nasty amusement. Neither do I wish to portray them as singularly tragic. But I have attempted to catch them at the vital point in their lives, both individually and collectively, the point from which they split off and save themselves or acknowledge and face their defeat. If they seem unusually hard-hit and too self-knowing, it is because I have tried to picture them on the level in their own consciousness where they are forced to tell themselves the truth.”

<sup>16</sup> In using the phrase “quasi-bohemian class” I am primarily alluding to the idea of bohemia advanced by Pierre Bourdieu in his essay “Flaubert’s Point of View,” a bohemia which created an “upside-down economy where the artist could win in the symbolic arena only by losing in the economic one (at least in the short term) and vice versa” (201). In other words, Slesinger’s “class interested in things not essentially remunerative” seems akin to Bourdieu’s later bohemian literary *field* (rather than class) and its “upside-down economy.”

<sup>17</sup> Dostoevsky’s novel may now be more familiar with the English-language title of *Demons*; but during Slesinger’s time (and for many years thereafter) it was best known in Constance Garnett’s translation as *The Possessed*.



group” (26). Joseph Freeman’s review in *The Daily Worker* addresses the issue both more directly and at more length. He asserts that “all reviewers read” Slesinger’s letter and that “many of them [took] their cue” from it, and then charges that a “metaphysical notion leads the author into one of the commonest errors extant among the intellectuals about themselves, and among other classes of the population about the intellectuals—the illusion that ‘intellectuals are a class by themselves.’” But “**Intellectuals are not a separate class,**” Freeman boldly insists; they are instead merely “the auxiliary troops of the various contending social groups. They are an integral part of the social class into which they are born or with which, under pressure of events or voluntarily, they affiliate” (bold in the original). A significant part of the novel’s reception on the left thus revolved around its portrayal of intellectuals as a class.

These reviewers were astute, for indeed much of the novel is devoted to understanding the ways in which the intellectual class it depicts is “separate” (Freeman) and “socially independent” (Rahv) from the other classes, and indeed the world itself. The novel pursues this single thought with a range of metaphors. Perhaps most uncomfortably for readers today, the novel partakes of two kinds of biological argument to instantiate its point about the separation of intellectuals from society at large: race and sex. We will start with race. The novel’s main characters consistently mix “race” with “class” as conceptual categories to describe their social function. This slippage is most evident at the party. When Firman explains that “intellectuals as a class . . . are dying out, their function’s dead,” Miles asks a page later, “what happens to the intellectuals . . . if our race is dying out?” (303). Bruno’s speech at this same party again brings in both racial and class conceptions of intellectuals. “We have no parents and we can have no offspring; we have no sex; we are mules,” he begins (327). Intellectuals are a dying race, as Miles has suggested earlier. Bruno then even denies, temporarily, his earlier conception of

intellectuals as a coherent class: “We have no class,” he pronounces with frustration; “our tastes incline us to the left, our habits to the right; the left distrusts, the right despises us” (327-28). This denial is only to again assert intellectuals’ identity as a race, one dying in much the same way that Firman thought the intellectual class was: “Our race . . . is dying out; our function’s dead, our blood is blue” (328). The intellectuals of *The Unpossessed* thus frequently figure themselves as a race in danger of extinction.

One might dismiss Miles’s and Bruno’s talk of race as mere metaphor—as the somewhat melodramatic trope of characters who despair of their ability to connect to people unlike themselves, or to serve some social purpose. But this won’t do, for the plot of the novel itself countenances the idea of intellectuals as a “dying race.” Conspicuously, none of its middle-class intellectuals reproduce. Isolated in intellectual circles, Norah has even forgotten that people still have children (“I thought they’d gone out, like horse-cars” [305]). She and Jeffrey—neither of whom indicate any belief that intellectuals are a dying race—have personally refused to have children because, as Norah blithely relates, they are “making some sort of protest against something . . . sometimes I forget just what” (305). Similarly, Bruno’s two main possible sexual interests in the novel are Emmett Middleton, the youngest of the Black Sheep, who often acts like a prepubescent boy, and Elizabeth Leonard, his cousin. Neither are consummated. The novel thus depicts Bruno as a man whose sexual interests are either homosexual (with an insinuation of pederasty) or incestuous, and accordingly it strongly suggests that this representative intellectual will never produce a healthy progeny. Last but not least, the novel ends grimly with Margaret’s abortion. Margaret understands her abortion in explicitly social terms of a fear about intellectuals’ inability to reproduce: looking at the ordinary people on her street, Margaret thinks

These are the people not afraid to perpetuate themselves (forbidden to stop, indeed) and they will go on and on until the bottom of the world is filled with them; and suddenly there will be enough of them to combine their wild-eyed notions and take over the world to suit themselves. While I, while I and my Miles, with our good clear heads will one day go spinning out of the world and leave nothing behind . . . only diplomas crumbling in the museums. . . . (354, ellipses in the original)

Here the novel unfortunately participates, perhaps unwittingly, in a longer tradition of nineteenth-century pseudo-scientific fears about the education of women. As Lillian Faderman notes,

Most of the attacks on women's higher education centered on the ways in which it would render them unfit for the traditional roles that the writers believed vital to the proper functioning of society. . . . Even into the twentieth century such writers, often imbued with racist and classist theories of eugenics, feared what they called 'race suicide' and prophesied that since 'the best [female] blood of American stock' went off to college and probably would not marry, the mothers of America would eventually all be 'from the lower orders of society' and the country would be ruined. (13-14, brackets in the original)

Coming after Norah's blithe reference to her childless marriage, and Bruno's failure to couple even with his female cousin, in short, Margaret's understanding of her "failure" to reproduce summarizes the novel's fear that intellectuals constitute a separate "race" from the non-intellectuals, a sterile race incapable of leaving behind anything but diplomas. Thus the plot of the novel, along with many of its characters, recognizes intellectuals as a biologically separate

race in decline. This biological theory/fear underpins one significant part of its larger portrayal of an intellectual class fundamentally isolated from the rest of the world.

An essentialist conception of gender also enters into the novel's indictment of the intellectual class's isolation from the rest of society. This may best be seen again in the case of Margaret, whose meditations on her marriage—invariably centered around a tension between (male) politics and her (female) bodily needs—open and close the novel. Margaret's struggle to reconcile her ostensibly internationalist politics with her own distinctly local, New York-centered personal experience is perhaps the key motif of the first chapter—and thus a major motif of the novel itself:

Now you and Miles, you live in a room on Charles street [sic] . . . you have never been out of your country or even to the south of it; yet you make out checks from your meager income to the Scottsboro boys quaking in Alabama jails; you subscribe to a German paper which names writers you will never read; you visit Russian movies whose characters you comprehend no more than you do their machines. (7)

She is troubled by the disconnection between her intellectual milieu's Marxist politics—often formidably abstract—and her own more daily life: “it was some thread, some meaning she was looking for; some way of finding the world without reading papers from Germany . . .” (11, ellipses in the original). This disconnection explains the otherwise strange metaphor she employs when buying groceries in the novel's first scene: “Oh no,” she thinks of saying to the grocer, “give me the world all wrapped in bundles; let me carry it home resting on my breast; let me bring it home to Miles and lay it at his feet. A dash of salt, a skillful stir; and I will serve him the world for his supper” (4). She hopes her cooking will make “the world” of politics personal and

authentic to her—and she hopes to bring the political world, after cradling it on her breast, quite literally into the body of her dour husband. Thus in the first chapter she hopes to assimilate (masculine, abstract) politics into her feminine body, and thence return this more organically *lived* politics to her husband as a gift.

Margaret’s attempt to make politics somatic, a bodily experience rather than a mental abstraction, grows more pointed as the novel moves along and we see that her true hope is to have a child. “*Norah, why don’t we have children?*” (93), Margaret imagines asking out loud when pinpointing the entire trouble with her intellectual circle, the intellectual class she inhabits. Margaret’s subsequent pregnancy then underlies the upswing of the novel, the period of worldly activity and intellectual ferment surrounding the creation of a magazine, which is itself figured as a kind of fecundity. Bruno at one point jokingly searches for the magazine “under Norah’s skirt” (77), and when they indeed decide to create the magazine, the narrative is symbolically interspersed with Margaret’s thoughts of when she might give birth if she were to conceive that night (“Why, it might be in August!” [99]). She does conceive, but the sad point of the novel’s figuring of intellectuals as men is brought home in the novel’s final chapter, with her abortion. Margaret and Miles agree to an abortion because “in a time like this . . . to have a baby would be suicide—goodbye to our plans, goodbye to our working out schemes for each other and the world—our courage would die, our hopes concentrate on the sordid business of keeping three people alive, one of whom would be a burden and an expense for twenty years” (349-50). A child’s physical life might, in short, overtake the abstract political “schemes” Miles imagines himself to be engaged in.<sup>18</sup> Though Margaret accedes to this rationale, she nevertheless resents

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<sup>18</sup> Slesinger’s friend Lionel Trilling asserts the novel’s veracity on this point, noting that in the 1920s and 1930s “intellectual men thought of [children] as ‘biological traps,’ being quite certain that they must lead to compromise with, or capitulation to, the forces of convention.” “That Tess, like Margaret Flinders . . . should want to be a parent and should avow her wish,” he concludes, “was a cultural choice of no small import” (“A Novel” 7).

the results in the most bitter and bluntly sexual of terms: “He was a man, he could have made her a woman. She was a woman, and could have made him a man. He was not a man; she was not a woman. In each of them the life-stream flowed to a dead-end” (350). The last words of the novel then suggest how the decision to have an abortion—the intellectual suppression of Margaret’s female body—has irrevocably sealed her and Miles off from “the world” at large: “she had stripped and revealed herself not as a woman at all, but as a creature who would not be a woman and could not be a man. And then they turned . . . and went in the door and heard it swing to, pause on its rubbery hinge, and finally click behind them” (357). By implication this ending summarizes the novel’s indictment of an entire and specifically *male-dominated* intellectual class whose unrelenting abstraction causes it to be isolated from society at large, from the bodily, experiential “world” that Margaret Flinders seeks. Margaret’s hope in the first chapter, to assimilate the male world of politics into her female body, is repudiated. The abstraction of masculine intellectual class politics triumphs over the bodily reality of female reproduction.

But if the novel thus engages the biological rhetorics of a dying race and a disembodied male sex in an attempt to understand the social isolation of the intellectual class it depicts and satirizes, the most important of its registers for analyzing the intellectual class—and the most influential for the tradition this dissertation examines—is that of psychoanalysis. *The Unpossessed* in fact offers its fullest account of the class character of intellectuals precisely in its development of character, and Slesinger developed her intellectual characters along a Freudian model. Freud permeated Slesinger’s family life. In the 1920s, her mother Augusta had secured Freud’s former colleague and thence opponent, Alfred Adler, as a teacher at the New School for Social Research. As her daughter wrote fiction in the 1930s, Augusta Slesinger became a lay analyst herself, and soon thereafter a patient and student of both Erich Fromm and Karen Horney

(Sharistanian 360). Tess Slesinger herself saw a psychoanalyst early on in her life, once again according to the original edition's dust jacket: Slesinger relates that "Instead of being spanked" for her youthful habit of lying, she was instead "dressed up one day for a visit to a psychoanalyst; he listened while I lied for an hour and agreed that I might as well settle down to writing my lies for a career." Most importantly, of course, Freud permeates the novel itself. Often he does so in caricature: his chief emissary in the novel is the comical character of Dr. Vambery, Emmett Middleton's mother's Hungarian psychoanalyst. Dr. Vambery is often inane. He opines on the subject of proletarian revolution, for example, by asking sententiously, "What makes you think . . . that revolution is superior to war? Are they not both killing? Are they not both fruit of the same psychological germ?" (198). Having efficiently dismissed any political dimension to human existence, he then pronounces that "War . . . will be on earth for as long as men are born of mothers" (198). Through Dr. Vambery, in short, the novel lampoons the new fad of psychoanalysis, and perhaps offers us a narrow-minded stand-in for Freud himself.

But despite such caricature, it is important to note that the novel nevertheless also depicts its male intellectuals—and thus its male intellectual class—as neurotic in an attentively Freudian fashion. More specifically and most importantly for my argument, it depicts intellectuals as a *narcissistic* class. A brief summary of Freud's account of narcissism is needed here. We should first note that Freud uses "narcissism" as a dispassionate clinical term, rather than the character flaw now denoted by colloquial use of the term.<sup>19</sup> For Freud, one's first and healthy primary libidinal attachment is to oneself—this is "primary narcissism" ("On Narcissism" 75). But with the advent of parental and social admonitions, the child creates a secondary form of narcissism in the creation of an "ego ideal": denied the pure satisfaction of "primary narcissism," one loves an

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<sup>19</sup> Freud's term "egoism" comes closer to this latter sense. See the *Introductory Lectures*: "When we speak of egoism, we have in view only the individual's *advantage*; when we talk of narcissism we are also taking his libidinal satisfaction into account" (519, emphasis in the original).

idealized conception of oneself instead (93-94). Freud describes these libidinal attachments using the metaphor of an amoeba, with its extending “false feet,” or pseudopodia. Just as the amoeba moves a part of itself outward in the form of pseudopodia in order to capture food, so does the healthy adult ego form libidinal attachments to others while still retaining its narcissistic attachment to the ego ideal (75-76). But in the neurotic forms of narcissism, Freud explains, the libido has been frustrated in its goal of attaching to some external object, and hence “regresses” to its earlier attachment: the libido reattaches itself to the ego ideal, or, to use Freud’s analogy, the amoeba removes its pseudopodium (*Introductory* 524). Hence the self-love characteristic of narcissistic neurosis in its most recognizable form, named for the mythological character Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection.

On a quite personal level, the three male intellectuals of *The Unpossessed* all suffer from a form of narcissistic regression. The physically beautiful Jeffrey Blake suffers from narcissism in the most obvious sense. He literally loves himself, or more accurately his romantic perception of himself. During his seduction of Margaret Flinders, Margaret notes that he was “obsessed with the importance of himself and his enthusiasms” (63), and eventually that he was “trying, at bottom, to seduce himself” (69). In a later seduction, Jeffrey more directly reveals his love of his own idealized self (or “ego ideal”), this time as reflected in his lover. His conquest is would-be communist Ruthie Fisher, whose main claim to political authenticity, it would seem, involves having slept with some eminent Russian communists. Yet this is enough for Jeffrey to seduce a suitably romantic image of himself. Fisher’s

experience became his. He was Comrade Turner lying with Comrade Fisher in his arms and planning the tactics of the strike. He was the raw-boned mill-worker who led the strike. He was the many mill-hands singing the International. . . . He



was the personal medium for the strike, the interpreter of Lenin, the battlefield for revolution. He was the strike. He was the revolution. His blood rose; his fingers grew tense as claws; gratitude toward Comrade Fisher overwhelmed him like love. (232)

“Like” love, indeed, but really only what Freud might have diagnosed as a megalomaniac libidinal attachment to his own ego ideal. In a very real sense, Jeffrey Blake *is* the “lone wolf” he perpetually claims to be when seducing women (66). His seductions involve no true libidinal attachment to anyone other than himself.

Bruno Leonard’s two quasi-romantic attachments in the novel involve narcissistic regression as well. Bruno recognizes in Emmett Middleton a reflection of his own weakness and indecision: he wonders “what weakness in himself had made him choose the weakest of [the Black Sheep’s] number to befriend” (119), and ultimately “knew he had . . . allowed the boy to grow dependent [on him], through a shameful corresponding weakness in himself” (162). Bruno likewise recognizes that his cousin Elizabeth is a “reflection of himself” (125), and Emmett jealously notes that she is “closer than a wife” to Bruno: “they bent along together closely parallel, following each other’s devious routes” (260). Thus when all three stay in the same apartment, Elizabeth, talking to Bruno, rightly dubs the circumstance not a “*ménage à trois*,” but a “*ménage à toi*” (285): a narcissistic household of the familiar “you,” rather than three. For this reason, Bruno’s love for Elizabeth is not especially sexual (138, 169). Furthermore, in depicting Bruno’s attachment to Emmett the novel seems to reflect Freud’s understanding of homosexual attachment as a narcissistic perversion.<sup>20</sup> In Freudian terms, then, Bruno’s two romantic attachments involve types of narcissistic regression.

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<sup>20</sup> See for example “Narcissism” 73, 88, 90, 96; and *Introductory* 530.

Finally, Miles Flinders suffers from a different type of narcissistic regression, which Freud names melancholia. This pathology occurs when the narcissistic libido reacts to the loss of a love-object—lost for example via the object’s death, as in the case of mourning, or lost more metaphorically, as in the case of, say, romantic rejection (“Mourning” 245). The libido is *ambivalent* toward the object, which it loves but also now hates because it has been frustrated by that object (250-51, 256). Unable to consciously admit such ambivalence, though, the melancholic libido turns its aggression on the *ego* rather than the object. Melancholia—what we more familiarly describe now as depression—is thus on Freud’s account the narcissistic projection of one’s unconscious hatred of an *external* object onto the ego, oneself, instead (257). The novel partially explains Miles’ self-hatred by recourse to Miles’ New England Puritanical heritage, it is true; but it also and more fully explains it through a Freudian family drama leading to Miles’ melancholia. The second chapter details his childhood encounters with the domineering father figure of his Uncle Daniel. This uncle is a taciturn and stern man who punishes Miles with floggings (14), and consequently offers the young boy little if any libidinal satisfaction: Uncle Daniel was one “whose approval he had struggled for and never won” and whose approval “even now he desired and could never win” (43). His uncle’s cruel behavior furthermore provokes Miles to wish him dead. When his uncle does die, Miles thus feels guilty for it, and believes he is owed punishment: “he had killed him . . . . Did not some sort of justice point . . .” (43, second ellipses in the original). Miles’ anger at his Uncle Daniel for not loving him is thus repressed and instead projected onto himself. This displaced anger at his uncle then becomes the origin of Miles’ melancholic existence, a neurotic self-hatred that ultimately defines accepting the love of his wife as tantamount to going “soft” (345).

But crucially, these depictions of narcissistic regression do not remain solely personal in the novel. By depicting each of the novel's three male intellectuals as suffering from some type of narcissistic regression personally, the novel also makes an implicit argument about the *political* narcissism of intellectuals *as a class*. For the intellectual class's politics are a form of fantasy in *The Unpossessed*; their political thought is, if you will, the manifest content of a latent personal wish. Jeffrey's fantasy of himself as the leader of revolution has already been cited, and provides perhaps the most obvious example of the intellectual class's politics as wish fulfillment. Miles' haunting recollection of an early familial trauma offers a less obvious but no less compelling example of narcissistic regression's effects on the intellectual class's politics. The reverie details the death of the family's beloved dog, King, who makes the mistake of enthusiastically killing several chickens on a neighbor's farm. This canine libidinal frenzy is punished by Miles' Uncle Daniel, who—though King was “the only living thing he loved” (50)—nevertheless grimly metes out the dog's penalty with a shotgun. (To use later Freudian terminology, it is as if Uncle Daniel were an impersonal superego punishing the dog's momentary outburst of id.) This uncompromising and emotionally difficult form of punishment on the part of Uncle Daniel then symbolically constitutes the young Miles' ideal of politics and justice itself: “Miles knew well that day that there was something bigger in men than themselves, that could drive them to do what alone they would never have dared” (53). Desperately seeking his Uncle's approval, the young Miles begins to identify justice itself with self-punishment—a not-too-difficult trick, since Miles' melancholic libido is already given to self-punishment. The novel thus understands Miles' particularly dour brand of communism as a politicized form of his identification with, and unrequited love for, his Uncle Daniel, and his consequent hatred of himself.

Bruno's ending speech at the party summarizes and indeed confirms such an understanding of intellectuals' politics as neurosis. After a great deal of wittily ironic self-flagellation—itsself a symptom of ego-punishing melancholy—the speech reaches one of its climaxes in a rare earnest moment:

“The only way,” he continued as though he pulled his finger from his verbal dykes, “to come to this cause is to come ‘clean’—that is to come not in order to solve one's individual neuroses, but to come already free of them. My friends and myself are sick men . . . You may think me sentimental; but the lie in our private lives is important, it makes our public lives unreal and fraudulent—a man can't do good work with an undernourished psychic system.” (330-331)

Intellectuals' politics are the projection of a “private lie.” But Bruno goes on to identify not just a psychoanalytic, but a *social* explanation of intellectuals: “In each individual case a Vamberg could give you valid special reasons—but when an epidemic's so widespread, it has a deeper basis than the individual. I suppose we're victims of the general social catastrophe in some way we're too close to figure out” (331). That “deeper basis than the individual,” the novel suggests—and in their clearer moments the novel's intellectuals may also realize—is class. The intellectuals of *The Unpossessed* have never seen a proletarian (302, 331), a communist (325), communism (331), or “life” itself (331), as Bruno suggests in his speech. Their political existence is pure narcissistic fantasy. And thus the neurotic libidinal attachment of the intellectual class is neither to the workers nor to communist revolution, but to itself.

The chief irony and source of satire in *The Unpossessed* is that its politically-obsessed intellectual class doesn't get around to politics. Jeffrey, Miles, and Bruno's narcissistic fantasies manifest themselves as promiscuity, self-aggrandizement, unrequited domestic love, witty but

ultimately debilitating self-irony, and above all an unlaunched Magazine—but never as actual socialist activism. That isolation from proletarian politics and society itself—expressed through metaphors of race, sex, and psychoanalysis—is, as we have seen, the novel’s chief analysis (and satire) of the intellectual class. It is the critique that lies at its heart. In a mode more comical than genuinely mistrusting, Slesinger’s novel suggests, along with Nomad’s “White Collars and Horny Hands,” that intellectuals as a whole are incapable of standing in solidarity with proletarian workers’ struggle.

But we may now see in the novel one last important motif in relation to its depiction of an intellectual class, and one with surprisingly contradictory meanings. That is the theme of intellectuals’ freedom. Most often, “freedom” is a word to watch warily in *The Unpossessed*: the novel is deeply critical of intellectuals’ commitment to a certain conception of freedom. Bruno’s cousin Elizabeth, for example, goes to Paris in part at Bruno’s urging. He has told her that in order to be an artist “you’ve got to be free, my dear, free, as free as a man, you must play the man’s game and beat him at it” (131). Elizabeth accordingly runs through a string of lovers, making herself more and more unhappy and lonely. She starts with Ferris, who, when Elizabeth asks him if moving in with him just days after his old girlfriend had moved out wasn’t “a little bit cheap,” replies, “*Cheap*—what you see around here isn’t *cheap*—why it’s better than that, he said, laughing and laughing—it’s *free!*” (132, emphases in original). The most recent lover in Elizabeth’s cycle is Denny, whom she mentally asks a telling question while leaving him: “What will become of us, Denny my dear, my lost abandoned unloved lover . . . we wept because we could not weep, we wept because we could not love, we wept because we loved before, we care about nothing, believe in nothing, live for nothing, because we are free, free, free—like empty sailboats lost at sea . . .” (136). Elizabeth’s pitifully ironic summary here speaks for the novel in

regretting a certain conception of freedom, one that conceives individual freedom as the absence of commitment to both other people (“we could not love”) and ideals (“we care about nothing, believe in nothing”). In a personal as well as political register, she regrets her friends’ conception of freedom as a freedom *from*, rather than a freedom *to*. And the theme is not limited to Elizabeth, either. Margaret’s abortion, recall, is also the sorrowful result of (male) intellectuals’ claims to an extreme conception of intellectual freedom and autonomy: “in a régime like this, Miles said, it is a terrible thing to have a baby—it means the end of independent thought and the turning of everything into a scheme for making money . . . goodbye to our plans, goodbye to our working out schemes for each other and the world” (349). The novel thus consistently implies that an essentially negative (and male) conception of freedom, always a freedom *from* rather than a freedom *to*, results in loneliness and an absence of any personal or political purpose and meaning in life.<sup>21</sup>

But while this is the novel’s main engagement with its intellectuals’ attachment to notions of freedom and autonomy—a belief that intellectuals’ “freedom” is often a fetish designed to avoid having to feel any mundane sense of humanity—the novel does seem to allow

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<sup>21</sup> We may note briefly here that the novel’s scorn for intellectuals’ conception of “freedom” as only a detached “freedom *from*” in essence critiques what Isaiah Berlin would later call (and defend as) “negative liberty,” the type of liberty favored by political liberalism. In this sense, it seems to me that *The Unpossessed* implies an at least nascent political philosophy, again via its psychological insight into character. In critiquing intellectuals’ individual lack of commitment in personal and political realms—their “unpossessed” nature, as it were—the novel essentially rejects so-called “radical” intellectuals’ politics as a mere procedural liberalism, as a failure to posit any substantive and thus to her mind genuinely political conception of the good. On “negative liberty,” see Berlin’s “Two Concepts of Liberty.”

One might even speculate that Slesinger’s frustrations with liberalism’s emphasis on negative liberty—more specifically with what she considered to be intellectuals’ promotion of a “freedom” free of any actual personal or political commitments—encouraged her support for communism under Stalin in the years after writing her novel. With a lightly scolding tone Trilling reminds us that Slesinger “found it possible to give her assent” to Stalinism “during her Hollywood years” as a screenwriter after writing *The Unpossessed* (“Novel” 19); and Dickstein notes more specifically that Slesinger even signed a “notorious letter attacking the Dewey Commission” which had after study “exonerated Trotsky from the heinous charges of betrayal that the Soviets had leveled against him” (*Dancing* 512). However we should not take such speculation about Slesinger’s support for an illiberal Stalinism too far: Alan Wald’s correspondence with Slesinger’s widow and friends reveals that though she continued to support the Soviet Union until her death in 1945, she nevertheless “became significantly disillusioned with the Soviets at the news of the Hitler-Stalin pact” in 1939 and may have even reconciled with some of her erstwhile-Trotskyist friends before dying (*New York* 65).

for at least one sense in which intellectuals' dedication to such ideals might be important and valuable. The novel expresses this belief in its portrayal of a running conflict between Bruno and the Black Sheep over the nature of the Magazine. For the Black Sheep, there is no such thing as intellectual objectivity and autonomy, and accordingly they don't want a magazine that has any other goal than the expression of forthright political views. Reacting to Bruno's rejection of "propaganda" for the Magazine, their leader Firman insists that "Every written word is propaganda"—no need to understand opposing points of view, he seems to imply. And as for art, likewise, the Black Sheep assert that poetry is only an "opiate," or "propaganda for spending your life sitting on your ass reading it" (117). Most chilling, however, is Firman's political distillation of such arguments about art's social uselessness. "I'd have all the lyric poets jailed for counter-revolutionaries," he remarks simply (117). The Black Sheep's proto-fascist denials of the values of objectivity and art thus reveal their least attractive qualities, from the novel's point of view. And though their extremism is often excused as youthful political fervor in the novel, *The Unpossessed* nevertheless certainly depicts them as narrow-minded ideologues in the present, rather than as true intellectuals.<sup>22</sup>

Bruno, by contrast, defends his position on the Magazine in earnest, and his defense suggests that the novel itself supports intellectuals' dedication to intellectual freedom and autonomy. "Myself I'm frankly after two things: truth, regardless of propaganda; and art," he declares at a meeting about the Magazine (197). Acknowledging that the material problems of "full bellies" must be attended to first in politics, he nevertheless also asserts that in

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<sup>22</sup> Morris Dickstein supposes that Slesinger identifies most with the Black Sheep's activism, as against intellectuals' defining "ambivalence, reflectiveness, and self-consciousness" (*Dancing* 511), and thus he deprecates the novel's anti-intellectualism. I think he is right to bring attention to this troubling facet of her work. But I also think that the novel's pointed satire of the Black Sheep's proto-fascism—which Dickstein does not note—demonstrates that Slesinger never wholly sympathizes with *any* of her major characters. This refusal to simply side with any of her characters, I would argue then, marks Slesinger as more of an ambivalent, reflective, and self-conscious intellectual than Dickstein gives her credit for.

revolutionary politics “someone’s got to take the long view, someone’s got to keep his eye on what comes after [the revolution] . . . We—the intellectuals—have to step in and show them what else there is; keep them from aiming at a fuller and fuller belly to the exclusion of everything else” (201). Intellectuals have a valuable social role to play precisely because they *won’t* engage in mere propaganda. Bruno recognizes the privilege that underpins his position: he knows that intellectuals “come of a long and honorable line of full bellies” (200). Indeed he wishes to defend that privilege as necessary to intellectuals’ existence; recall that in reflecting on the Black Sheep, Bruno thinks “it was not merely their youth that set them off, that blinded as it fired them, it was their poverty. Perhaps poverty, undercutting everything else”—undercutting, in other words, their ability to be objective in the pursuit of truth—“removed them a priori from the class of intellectuals,” he speculates (199-200). He accordingly thinks that “intellectuals engaged in a property war would lose their identity as intellectuals” (206). Intellectuals need their privilege of “full bellies” in order to keep their neutrality, the dedication to intellectual freedom and autonomy that he insists is a socially and politically important belief. “Being an intellectual,” he asserts, “surely implies . . . to some extent the power of rising above individual or immediate circumstances . . . the privilege of bringing to the conflict something abstract, something resembling a universal truth—something else beyond the status of his private person and his bank account” (197, second ellipses in the original). When set against Firman’s proto-fascist exclamations in particular, Bruno’s measured and undeceived defense of intellectuals’ autonomy appears to be nothing less than the novel’s own. Bruno’s defense represents a rare moment of sympathy for intellectual endeavor in a novel otherwise given to a thorough-going satire of the intellectual class’s “politics.” Like *Culture and the Crisis* two years earlier, *The*



*Unpossessed* believes in—indeed justifies and promotes—the intellectual autonomy of the intellectual class.

Thus while the great bulk of the novel's energies are spent in criticizing intellectuals' separation from proletarian politics and society at large—in figuring the intellectual class as a sterile race, as men disconnected from bodily life, and above all as narcissists unable to acknowledge the existence of others—it nevertheless does imagine some benefit in intellectuals' seclusion, in their autonomy from the currents of active politics. Imaginatively engaging with the debates about an intellectual class started by her acquaintances in the League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford, and exhibiting some of the classed skepticism about intellectuals' role in proletarian politics reflected in Max Nomad's article on "White Collars and Horny Hands," Slesinger created a novel that largely skewers the intellectual class's habit of living in its own narcissistic world apart from the rest of the society and from genuine political action. But following *Culture and the Crisis*'s appeal to the values of intellectual autonomy, her novel also finally admits—against the spirit of her Communist milieu—the value in having an intellectual class set apart from the narrowest sorts of political demands. In unequal measure to be sure, then, the American intellectual class's first fictional portrait allowed for *both* the political dangers *and* the political virtues of an intellectual class separated from society and politics at large.

In Slesinger's 1934 novel of Marxist intellectuals, we are seemingly a long way from the postmodern moment of the 1960s. Rooted in 1930s debates over the role of intellectuals in revolution, *The Unpossessed* is most often read, and rightly so, as a satire on the difficulties of intellectuals' participation in a particular era's (proletarian) politics. But the novel's reflections on the simultaneous political dangers and values of intellectual autonomy, we shall see, were foundational for the emergence of postmodernism decades later. For in *The Unpossessed*'s

critique of intellectual detachment from the world of proletarian experience and politics, as well as in “White Collars and Horny Hand”’s sense that intellectuals had class interests implacably opposed to those of the working class, we have the beginnings of what would become a surprisingly widespread and influential critique of intellectual labor in the twentieth century. As we shall see in the remainder of Part I, *The Unpossessed*’s broad critique of an intellectual class detached from the proletariat was subsequently given greater theoretical heft and political consequence in the Trotskyist critique of a proletarian Russian Revolution co-opted by the “bureaucratic collectivism” of a separate class of government mental workers. And as a result, Slesinger’s critique of intellectuals’ social isolation also lay behind a 1950s campus novel that mocked academic workers’ bureaucratically isolated and narrow habits of thought. The critique of intellectual workers’ isolation in fact ultimately underlay even much of postmodernism’s 1960s metafictional self-consciousness about that increasingly institutionalized intellectual labor known as the writing of fiction. But in both *Culture and the Crisis*’s and *The Unpossessed*’s celebration of intellectuals’ autonomy, in their sense that intellectuals had to look after the *truth* above all, we also have important roots of the campus novel’s consistent promotion of intellectual freedom and aesthetic autonomy—and thus, I will argue, of postmodernism’s brief for undecidability, for the inherent unpredictability of a world still in need of (intellectuals’ free) interpretation. In both satirical and sympathetic fashion, then, *The Unpossessed* marks an early if relatively light-hearted fictional expression of intellectuals as a class isolated from society at large. And from the debates about intellectual labor that the novel helped spark, some of the most important roots of postmodernist literature and thought themselves were laid.

## Chapter Two

### **Portrait of the Intellectual as a Bureaucratic Collectivist: Mary McCarthy's Neurotic New Class**

#### **1. "A Minor Furor"**

Reviewing Mary McCarthy's first novel in the *New York Times Book Review* when it appeared in May 1942, Edith Walton predicted that it was "probably destined to create a minor furor." For one thing, *The Company She Keeps's* "original and sensational" (i.e., sexually active and frequently adulterous) heroine was "open to debate, query, revulsion and downright disbelief." For another, in its success in recreating New York intellectual circles on the page, parts of the novel rivaled another novel of New York intellectuals: "Miss McCarthy comes as close as did Tess Slesinger, when she wrote 'The Unpossessed,' to reflecting the exact talk and temper of certain circles in New York." Like Slesinger, McCarthy had "viciously and unfairly" modeled some of her characters on "actual literary figures" in New York City.

Walton was right about the novel's effect, at least. It did indeed, like *The Unpossessed*, create a minor furor in New York City intellectual circles, setting the pattern for many of McCarthy's novels to come. (Her next novel, 1949's *The Oasis*, based one of its main characters quite closely upon her ex-lover Philip Rahv. Rahv sued to try to stop its publication.) Clifton Fadiman, writing a short review in *The New Yorker*—a piece whose bile would make you think *he* had been personally attacked<sup>1</sup>—was also perturbed by what he took as the novel's *ad hominem* tone. "One has the feeling that her characters are drawn from life and that all of them are really much pleasanter and decenter people than Miss McCarthy gives them credit for being,"

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps he wasn't wrong, of course: Wald suggests that McCarthy indeed may have meant to attack Fadiman (among many others) in her portrayal of Jim Barnett, since like Barnett, Fadiman "in no sense had the theoretical abilities or sense of commitment to be central to the formation and development of the anti-Stalinist left" (156). Fadiman, incidentally, was Slesinger's editor at Simon & Schuster (Sharistanian 363).

he grouched (61). As a parting shot, he offered the dubious compliment that the book has “the definite attraction of high-grade back-fence gossip” (61). A minor furor in the tradition of Slesinger’s *The Unpossessed*, indeed.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, a furor of gossip has tended to dominate what little critical discussion of the novel there has been. In 1967 Doris Grumbach could testily and truthfully note of Mary McCarthy’s critics that “It is remarkable that such a small amount of good prose has produced so much bad criticism” (13). Fifty years after the novel’s publication, Carol Brightman surveyed the continuing impressionistic remarks and fascinated gossip about McCarthy as intellectual celebrity, and then remarked with equal justice that “McCarthy hasn’t received the critical attention she deserves” (*Writing* xvi). Regarding *Company*’s “Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man,” she could honestly note that “one looks in vain in the 1940s, or later for that matter, for a critical discussion of its content” (229). Today, seventy years after the novel’s publication, one still looks mostly in vain for an extended critical discussion of the content of *any* of the “episodes” contained in *The Company She Keeps*, her first and (I think) best work of fiction.<sup>3</sup> The book as a whole has suffered a similar fate, especially in academic quarters. Paula Rabinowitz’s *Labor and Desire* (1991) discusses the book for a scant four pages (12-15). The MLA database turns up only one article, and that’s also a mere five-page commentary, of which two pages are given over—helpfully, it must be said—to quoting the entire text of the first

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<sup>2</sup> Speaking of high-grade back-fence gossip, there was one other connection between McCarthy and Slesinger. In the mid-to-late 1930s McCarthy became friends with Slesinger’s ex-husband Herbert Solow, who was not only the original of Miles Flinders, but a major architect of the Dewey Commission, which exonerated Trotsky of Stalin’s accusations against him in the late 1930s. McCarthy later indignantly told the story of how Solow had invited her out alone once in the summer of 1937, despite knowing that she was sharing an apartment with Philip Rahv, who had even answered the phone when Solow called (*Intellectual Memoirs* 84).

<sup>3</sup> “Episodes” is the book’s acknowledgment’s word for the chapters of this novel; to call them “short stories,” as some critics do, tends to undermine the paradoxically fragmented unity which McCarthy achieves with the novel. See McCarthy’s own comments on the novel’s composition and eventual unity in her *Paris Review* interview with Elisabeth Niebuhr (“Art” 7).

edition's dust-jacket.<sup>4</sup> The *Company She Keeps* has never received the close reading it so richly merits.

This is a pity for many reasons, but high among them is the fact that it is difficult to overestimate McCarthy's importance to the portrayal of intellectuals in the twentieth-century American novel. Nearly all her fictional output, from 1942's *The Company She Keeps* through to 1979's *Cannibals and Missionaries*, was devoted to understanding intellectuals: at first the influential intellectuals of New York City, and then a much wider swathe. And accordingly, I will argue in this chapter, McCarthy's first novel had more in common with Tess Slesinger's *Unpossessed* than its first reviewers knew. *The Company She Keeps*, too, imagines its intellectuals as a class, and examines that class through the lens of psychoanalysis. We should not agree without qualification, however, with Paula Rabinowitz's statement that the novel accordingly demonstrates "that the leftist intellectual was best read [at the time] through narratives of psychoanalysis rather than political economy" (143). For *The Company She Keeps* updates its literary portrayal of an intellectual class beyond where Slesinger began it eight years earlier, and engages quite directly with a theory of political economy. Substantially influenced by the late 1930s' and early 1940s' Trotskyist debates over a New Class of intellectuals, *The Company She Keeps* takes the political desires of its intellectual class more seriously, if no less satirically, than Slesinger's debut. More specifically, it offers a portrait of intellectuals as a class caught between a politically dangerous desire for higher status under a system of what her Trotskyist friends scornfully called "bureaucratic collectivism," and a more salutary and genuine desire for economic justice under a democratic form of socialism. This opposition to the

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<sup>4</sup> See Crowley. The only study of Mary McCarthy not yet mentioned, Sabrina Fuchs Abrams' *Mary McCarthy*, focuses on McCarthy's postwar work and thus offers only cursory discussion of this novel.

bureaucratic, I will suggest in conclusion, laid further and crucial foundations for a postmodernism that emerged only decades later.

## 2. The American Question

Mary McCarthy first came to political consciousness during the Moscow trials of 1936, when Stalin accused Trotsky and other Bolsheviks of counterrevolutionary plots and conspiracies. Her belief that Trotsky was entitled to a fair hearing led her to begin attending meetings of the Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky with her friend the novelist James Farrell and her soon-to-be-lover Philip Rahv (who had reviewed Slesinger's *The Unpossessed* for the *New Masses* only two years earlier). With the still-radical Sidney Hook for an instructor (Brightman, *Writing* 311), McCarthy educated herself in Marxism and Trotskyism thereafter, and soon helped found the newly born, Trotsky- and modernist-friendly *Partisan Review*.<sup>5</sup> Through this involvement in the Trotskyist intellectual circles of New York, McCarthy was privy to some of the earliest and most historically influential elaborations of the intellectual class theory first promulgated in 1932's *Culture and the Crisis* and "White Collars and Horny Hands." Consequently, the concept of an intellectual class is a foundation of her first novel.

The Trotskyist influence on the theory of intellectuals as a class stems from the debates surrounding Trotsky's analysis of the class character of the Soviet Union under Stalin. In 1937's *The Revolution Betrayed*, he argued that the democratic and communist revolution of the Bolsheviks had been undermined by Stalin's subsequent leadership of the Bolshevik party. Under Stalin the democratic revolutionists of Lenin's generation had been swept aside to make way for an "administrative apparatus" (135) of "*chinovniks*," the "professional governmental

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<sup>5</sup> Brightman's *Writing Dangerously* offers a fine summary of the intellectual and biographical milieu of McCarthy's introduction to Trotskyism and the *Partisan Review*, 130-50.

functionaries” of a bureaucracy that wielded state power for its own interest (98). This bureaucracy of professionals was a ruling *stratum*, and not a class, Trotsky was careful to argue. It had “neither stocks nor bonds,” and was “recruited, supplemented and renewed in the manner of an administrative hierarchy, independently of any special property relations of its own” (249). Under this bureaucratic ruling stratum, the new Soviet Union was still a “workers’ state,” but one with a “dual character” (52): it was socialist to the extent that property had been nationalized, but capitalist to the extent that the distribution of “life’s goods” was still unequal (54). It was a “transitional” society that could either go forward toward a truly democratic (soviet) form of socialism, or slide back into capitalism (254). In sum, the revolution had been betrayed, but not yet overthrown, by Stalin’s bureaucratic stratum of professional functionaries (252).

In the small but influential Trotskyist circles of the New York City-dominated Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the events surrounding the outbreak of World War II quickly made this a contested analysis. In August of 1939, the Soviet Union and Germany signed a non-aggression pact, enabling Hitler to invade Poland on September 1<sup>st</sup> and thus begin the Second World War. Two and a half weeks later the Soviet Union invaded and occupied the eastern part of Poland. While Trotskyists came better prepared to comprehend such actions of the Soviet Union than did those Stalinists who still believed in the unqualified success of the Russian Revolution, the actions nevertheless provoked many crucial political and intellectual questions on the Trotskyist left. A bitter factional fight in the SWP ensued. What did the USSR’s alliance with Nazi Germany mean? Was the Soviet Union still a kind of workers’ state, as Trotsky had said, or had it turned its back irrevocably on the revolution which had given it birth? How should the SWP view the Soviet Union now, and how should revolutionary socialists act in relation to the USSR?

In short, what was the class character of the Soviet Union, and should the SWP support it in the war?

Trotsky himself, along with the majority faction of the SWP led by James Cannon, insisted that the Soviet Union was still a “*workers state*,” however “*degenerated*” (“Again” 73, emphasis in original), and therefore should be defended. No doubt, the Soviet Union’s invasions supported Hitler’s imperialist aims. But the invasions and occupations were not imperialist in the Marxist sense. Coming from a merely “degenerated” workers state, they did not stem from the economic impulse of *capitalist* expansion (71). And whatever the intentions behind them, the invasion and occupation of Poland (and later Finland) constituted an attack on private property; the Soviet Union was wresting the means of production from capitalists in Europe and giving it to a state. To this extent the Soviet Union was waging a progressive war (“USSR” 60-62, “Petty-Bourgeois” 116-18). The state in question was Stalinist, of course, and so the proletariat would still have to revolt against the bureaucracy and seize state power, and hence the means of production. But despite its degeneration under Stalin and its aid to Hitler, the Soviet Union retained the character of a workers’ state and was on that basis (and that basis alone) worthy of “unconditional defense” (“Again” 75)—i.e., a defense not predicated on the condition of Stalin’s overthrow—in the event that it was attacked by Allied troops.

The minority faction, whose intellectual leaders were New York University philosophy professor James Burnham and long-time socialist Max Shachtman, disagreed. The Soviet Union had joined forces with Germany and was engaged in imperialism plain and simple, they asserted. Revolutionary Marxists thus ought to oppose *both* the Scylla of a familiar Anglo-French imperialism *and* the Charybdis of a new joint Nazi-Soviet imperialism. Declaring themselves adherents of a “Third Camp” fighting for international socialism as against these twin



imperialisms, they split from the SWP to form the Workers Party (WP) in April of 1940. There they began to elaborate their new diagnosis of the class character of the Soviet Union, a theory they soon labeled “bureaucratic collectivism.”<sup>6</sup> The Soviet Union, they argued, was an unpredicted and more stable formation than Trotsky’s “degenerated workers state” precariously caught between socialist property forms and a bureaucratic ruling stratum. It was instead a collectivist economy ruled quite securely by an exploiting bureaucratic *class*. This unexpected and new class, sometimes later in fact called the New Class, could, like the capitalist class, practice its own form of imperialism.<sup>7</sup>

The debate in the SWP thus often hinged on what was called “the Russian question.” What was the class nature of the USSR under Stalin? In the newly-formed WP, however, this first theoretical destination was soon followed by what I will dub “the American question.” What was the class nature of the U.S.A. under Roosevelt’s New Deal? Could a new class of bureaucrats arise at home, as it had in Stalin’s Russia? In a New Deal rife with bureaus—a rapidly proliferating alphabet soup of acronyms—the state had taken hold over much of the economy. To a remarkable extent, the state had been seized by what Max Shachtman called, in

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<sup>6</sup> Ironically, Macdonald and eventually (though not immediately) Shachtman adopted this term from Trotsky, who named the theory for them in 1939 while rejecting it during the SWP split (“USSR” 50-52). When naming the term, Trotsky himself cited the work of the eccentric Italian ex-Trotskyist and sometime fascist Bruno Rizzi, who had self-published his *Bureaucratization of the World* in France that year. Rizzi’s work was not widely available to American readers until after the war, and there is no real evidence that anyone who participated in the SWP schism, save Trotsky, was aware of the book’s arguments—nor in any substantial way of the origin of the term “bureaucratic collectivism”—at that time. See Rizzi, and especially the informative introduction by Adam Westoby.

<sup>7</sup> For the remainder this dissertation, then, I will frequently use the shorter term “New Class” when referring to the concept of an intellectual class.

The SWP split described in these two paragraphs was epoch-making for Trotskyism in the U.S. For a fuller account of the schism, see Wald, *New York* 182-92. For readers seeking primary sources, Trotsky’s side of the debate over the Soviet Union (as opposed to the questions of party organization raised by the dispute)—along with Burnham’s final rebuttal (“Science and Style”) and letter of resignation from the WP—is collected in Trotsky’s *In Defense of Marxism*. The debate may also be followed in contemporary issues of the SWP’s *Internal Bulletin* and the *New Internationalist*; Shachtman and Burnham took over the *New Internationalist* (the SWP’s theoretical organ) for the WP when they left the SWP. Last but not least, some key works contributing to the theory of “bureaucratic collectivism,” including those of Shachtman, Burnham, and Dwight Macdonald (on the latter two of whom more below), are gathered together in Haberkern and Lipow’s *Neither Capitalism Nor Socialism*.

the Russian context of bureaucratic collectivism, “a whole host and variety of experts” (200). Furthermore, such changes were occurring under the leadership of a strong executive who had assembled the bureaucracy. If not quite a dictator like Stalin, Roosevelt—with his immensely popular “fireside chats,” an unprecedented third term in the offing, and a legislative record deeply influenced by his Brains Trust of academic advisors—was certainly a charismatic leader who had awarded an unusually large share of executive power to bureaucratic agencies and mental workers. Given all this, the “American question” asked, what were the chances of a bureaucratic collectivist U.S. ruled by the New Class?

In the Trotskyist and ex-Trotskyist circles in which Mary McCarthy ran, a number of thinkers expounded at length on both the Russian and the American questions. McCarthy was undoubtedly familiar with SWP schism leader James Burnham’s work: her first novel references Burnham’s idea of “the Managerial Revolution” as a topic of “official conversation” amongst the protagonist’s intellectual friends (287). Burnham had written his best-selling treatise, *The Managerial Revolution: What Is Happening in the World Today*, shortly after declaring himself no longer a Marxist and resigning from the WP he had helped to form in 1940. Published in 1941, the book explicated in popular form Burnham’s disagreement with Trotsky over the class character of the Soviet Union. World-wide capitalism was ending, the book asserted, but it would not be replaced by socialism, as Marxists (like Trotsky) thought. Rather, capitalism was giving way to a third type of society, “managerial society,” in which a *new class* of managers—those who possessed technical knowledge of production processes, including both corporate managers and governmental bureaucrats and administrators—dominated the state-planned economy and continued to exploit workers. This “managerial society” was best typified by the Soviet Union (221), but Nazi Germany and even New Deal America were managerial too. The

somewhat dystopian (if still scientific-sounding) book predicted that the new managerial class would rob the proletariat of its current capitalist freedom to find another employer, since the manager-run state would be the only employer (131-32). Furthermore, it asserted, the managerial class might not need or desire truly democratic governance when its bureaucratic agencies had full authority to plan the economy (168-71). The book did not include cultural intellectuals such as Burnham himself in its more technical-minded class of managers,<sup>8</sup> but it nevertheless offered a significant and influential contribution to theories of a New Class of mental workers who seek their *own* class power rather than that of the capitalists above or the working class below—even when they claim to represent the working class.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to being familiar with Burnham’s popularization of the theory, McCarthy was also directly familiar with the SWP split, as she confirmed years later in an interview with Elisabeth Niebuhr.<sup>10</sup> Most likely, she became aware of the divide at the time through her friendship with schism participant Dwight Macdonald, whom she had known since 1936 (Brightman, *Writing* 142) and who joined the editorial board of the newly-organized *Partisan Review* with her in late 1937 (Wald, *New York* 141). With Burnham’s editorial encouragement, Macdonald began writing for the SWP’s *New Internationalist* in 1938; he then joined the SWP

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<sup>8</sup> Burnham, a professor of philosophy at the time, states that his “personal interests, material as well as moral, and my hopes are in conflict” with his belief that managerial society is the most likely result of the contemporary developments he presents (273).

<sup>9</sup> Burnham is sometimes considered a New York Intellectual: see Wald’s portrait, *New York* 175-182, and *passim*. For an account of Burnham’s career early to late—from Communist to arch-conservative—see Chapters 4 and 8 of Diggins’ *Up from Communism*; the story of his break with Trotsky and its result in *The Managerial Revolution* is told on pp. 184-198. Latter-day New York Intellectual Daniel Bell, recognizing the interconnectedness of New Class theory and theories of bureaucracy (a connection important to the early development of the campus novel, as I will argue in Part II), explicates Trotsky’s and Burnham’s ideas in *The Coming of Postindustrial Society* 86-94.

*The Managerial Revolution*’s dystopian picture made it the first *deradicalization* of New Class theory published in America—its first use to suggest that capitalism would be preferable to anything concocted by knowledge workers whose supposed passion for controlled economies would exploit more ruthlessly than the capitalists ever could. From there, the theory became important on the intellectual right: its historical importance for neoconservatives’ New Class theorizing in the sixties and seventies is confirmed by its frequent citation in Bruce-Briggs’ anthology *The New Class?*, for example.

<sup>10</sup> In this 1962 interview, she makes brief reference to “a split in the Trotskyite movement” during World War II (“Art” 14).

soon after Hitler and Stalin signed their non-aggression pact (Wald, *New York* 200-01). Like Burnham, Macdonald sparred with “the Old Man” in print during the schism, enough to receive jabs back. In an article published soon after the split and Burnham’s declaration of apostasy from Marxism, Trotsky called Macdonald “not a snob [like Burnham], but a bit stupid” (“On” 275), and prophesied that he would “abandon the [Workers] party just as Burnham did” (277). (He was also careful, and catty, to note that “possibly because he is a little lazier, it will come later” [277].) Having quit the SWP to form the WP with Burnham, Macdonald did indeed quit the WP soon after Burnham did. His involvements with the SWP and the WP alike were thus relatively short-lived.

But intellectually they were quite fruitful, and certainly influential: a full review of Macdonald’s resulting thoughts on “bureaucratic collectivism” and the American question is indispensable to understanding McCarthy’s portrait of an intellectual class in *The Company She Keeps*. In the late spring of 1941, Burnham published a summary of his managerial thesis in *Partisan Review*.<sup>11</sup> But Macdonald rejected Burnham’s idea of a managerial society. Reviewing the book, Macdonald astutely decried it as “so vague, unhistorical and often self-contradictory, that it would take another book to correct errors of fact and to qualify, unravel and properly define his terms” and assailed it, inaccurately but no less passionately, as an “attempt . . . to justify fascism in terms of materialistic progress” (“Burnhamian” 76). Despite such disagreements, it is important to realize that, as Macdonald himself noted, he and Burnham nevertheless agreed that “a new non-capitalist and non-socialist form of society” had emerged in the world (76). For both thinkers, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were of “essentially the same politico-economic nature” (“End” 429), neither capitalist nor proletarian.

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<sup>11</sup> See “The Theory of the Managerial Revolution.”

The nature of Nazi Germany in particular fascinated Macdonald in the first years of the war, and Macdonald's understanding of the Nazi regime offers us his fullest vision of what he meant by "bureaucratic collectivism" and the emergence of a new class. Germany's bureaucratic collectivism functioned as a kind of "black socialism," Macdonald asserted ("National" 253). It combined the imperialist war-mongering which constituted "the most hideous social and political features of decaying capitalism" with "the centralized state power and conscious economic planning of socialism" (253). In Germany, the centralized planning of bureaucratic collectivism had thus produced a formidable war economy whose technical successes were all too apparent in Hitler's numerous victories. At first Macdonald thought that it "didn't seem to be true" that the Nazi bureaucracy constituted a new ruling class (256); the bureaucracy was instead simply a temporary development necessitated by the German war economy. But he soon changed his mind. In his obituary of Trotsky, published in the September-October *Partisan Review* of 1940, he described the bureaucratic collectivism of the Soviet Union as a "new form of class exploitation" ("Trotsky" 350). By May 1941, his opinion had solidified regarding Nazi Germany as well. The governmental bureaucracy which had produced this German war economy was "a new ruling class" by virtue of its control of the means of production ("Fascism" 84). In his discussions of the German war machine, Macdonald, like Burnham, thus promoted a form of New Class theory that spied a convergence between the Nazi and Soviet political economies.

Macdonald was also one of the WP's premier theorists regarding the American question, most often in relation to the German question. New Deal America was still an essentially capitalist society, he realized. But the economic difference between New Deal America and Nazi Germany was only one of degree. For as in bureaucratic collectivist Nazi Germany, "two economic systems" (emphasis in original) existed in the U.S. at once:

the familiar capitalist system with its apparatus of prices, profits, private property, money, the market, etc.; and a new sort of system, which might be called bureaucratic collectivism, in which production is ordered not by the interplay of capitalist factors but by official decrees and regulations based on a plan worked out consciously by state bureaucrats . . . the diehard Republicans are right when they detect in various New Deal measures (SEC, TVA, Wages and Hours Act, Wagner Act, AAA, RFC, FCC, FDIC) a non-capitalist tendency. The question is: which of these systems is dominant?

In America, he finished, capitalism was “clearly” dominant (“Fascism” 84), despite the New Deal’s anticapitalist tendencies. The New Deal was part of a “*trend* towards bureaucratic collectivism” in America (“End” 430, emphasis in the original), but the trend hadn’t yet borne fruit, and might not ever.

While Macdonald thus understood America to be clearly capitalist in the present, he also held that if America were to defeat a German war machine which owed its monstrous birth to the undoubtedly effective “production for use” (rather than profit) of bureaucratic collectivism, the American economy would very soon require still more centralized planning itself, possibly along the lines already hinted at in the New Deal. The U.S. would need, in short, a non-capitalist “totalitarian economy” of its own if it were to defend itself against Germany’s imperialist aggressions (“American” 46). Macdonald imagined three ways that such a planned war economy could come about. The first was “a mass political movement like fascism” (46), as had happened in Germany. The second and more probable option was an economic plan “imposed administratively, from the top” by Roosevelt—what Macdonald dubbed a “‘white’ or ‘cold’ fascism” (46). Last and best, of course, was the possibility of a revolutionary and democratic

socialism, with the economic goals planned by the working class rather than a bureaucracy. But in any case, it was clear that only such a revolutionary socialism, or an American fascism—a bureaucratic collectivism to rival Germany’s—could produce an American war economy capable of defeating Hitler.

In the late spring of 1941 it was “a question in [Macdonald’s] mind” whether the U.S. could produce a fascist movement from below (“End” 430). But a mere four months after Macdonald declared the U.S. “clearly” capitalist, famed literary critic Van Wyck Brooks gave a speech at Columbia University that shook Macdonald’s relative optimism. In “Primary Literature and Coterie Literature,” Brooks declared that modernist heroes Joyce, Eliot, and Proust were pessimistic and elitist “secondary” writers arrayed in opposition to such optimistic and popular “primary” writers as Tolstoi, Dickens, and Thomas Mann, who wrote literature that “somehow follows the biological grain” and “in some way conduces to race survival” (qtd. in “Kulturbolschewismus” 450). Macdonald was quick to warn the readers of *Partisan Review* that Brooks’ paper heralded something in America very much like the anti-intellectual literary propaganda of the Soviet Union, with Nazism’s racial tinge. In short, his article title declared, “Kulturbolschewismus”—Stalinism’s so-called “Bolshevik culture,” with a German accent—“Is Here.” (This incident explains the appearance, in *The Company She Keeps*, of “Van Wyck Brooks” as a topic of “official conversation” immediately following Burnham’s “Managerial Revolution” [287].) For Macdonald, Brooks’s attack represented the leading edge of a “growing official esthetic” (451) that threatened the “free inquiry and criticism of the intelligentsia” (450). If the intelligentsia were to preserve that freedom, he argued, the “old battles” for modernism in its 1920s heroic phase would have to be “fought again, the old lessons learned once more” (451). The once “clearly” capitalist U.S.A. was now only a precious few degrees removed from the

official culture of bureaucratic collectivism, and all intellectuals who loved freedom of thought must fight such fascist-inclined avatars of bureaucratic collectivism as Brooks. For Macdonald, then, America was capitalist, but only thinly so. The danger of bureaucratic collectivism foisted upon America by such intellectuals as Brooks was conspicuously real to him.

Thus both Burnham's theory of a managerial revolution and her friend Dwight Macdonald's fight against Brooks' bureaucratic collectivist "Kulturbolschewismus" had been on McCarthy's mind enough to be labeled as topics of the protagonist's "official conversation" in *The Company She Keeps*. Last but not least, then, we should note that such theories about the role of mental workers in the creation of a bureaucratic form of socialism were almost certainly part and parcel of McCarthy's home life at the time as well. For her second husband, the eminent literary critic Edmund Wilson, had, like so many other intellectuals of his generation, signed his name to 1932's *Culture and the Crisis*, and hence to an understanding of intellectuals as a distinct class. After his marriage to McCarthy in 1938, he spent two more years finishing his classic account of the European revolutionary intellectual tradition, *To the Finland Station* (1940), with its warm if critical portrait of Trotsky.<sup>12</sup> Wilson's analysis of both Nazism and Stalinism indeed reflected his familiarity with "the Russian question" in Trotskyist circles. More precisely, his analysis of both Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany apparently borrowed quite heavily from his friend Macdonald's picture of a New Class-run bureaucratic collectivism. In Hitler's Germany, Wilson wrote in 1941,

a new kind of middle class, as in Russia, came out of the petty bourgeoisie and did not find the slightest difficulty in enlisting ambitious members of the working

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<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, the acknowledgments for that book thank Max Nomad (xxxiii), who had, recall, written 1932's "White Collars and Horny Hands," which promoted Machajski's precocious accusation that intellectual workers had hijacked the Russian revolution. It's likely that Wilson would have consulted Nomad for information on the anarchist tradition, including a chapter on Bakunin, whose criticisms of Marx are often cited as an early source of New Class theory.



class. This group succeeded in setting up a new kind of state socialism, in which the government planned and directed in the interests of the new governing class, without actually taking over the industrial plant, but eliminating the big capitalists, if necessary, and seeing to it that the working class were well enough off so that they did not become seriously recalcitrant. (“Marxism” 489)

For Wilson, the New Class of both Germany and Russia was a “new kind of middle class,” one that emerged from the “petty bourgeoisie” to become the shrewd and ruthless “governing class” of a society that represented neither the capitalism of Adam Smith nor the socialism envisioned by Karl Marx. Thus while he used the term “state socialism,” Wilson nevertheless seemed to believe in something quite similar to Macdonald’s theory of a “bureaucratic collectivism” run by a new class.

And again like Macdonald (and Burnham), Wilson feared the development of something similar in America. “By the early 1940s,” Carol Brightman notes, “a few intellectuals . . . had begun to enter the state apparatus via Archibald MacLeish’s new Office of Facts and Figures” (*Writing* 211). The liberal poet and New Deal supporter MacLeish was in fact a quite potent symbol of the sudden rise to power of select intellectuals during the early years of the war. In 1939, he had become Librarian of Congress. In the early 1940s he became director of the Office of Facts and Figures, and deputy director when the agency was renamed the Office of War Information—the office principally responsible for the American propaganda effort in World War II. There he vigorously promoted the war as a struggle to preserve and indeed extend the promise of New Deal America abroad (Brinkley 313). By the end of World War II, he was assistant secretary of state. Wilson’s friend Malcolm Cowley had himself joined MacLeish in the Office of Facts and Figures (Brightman, *Writing* 211), but he nevertheless mistrusted the trend of

intellectual involvement in the New Deal state. Writing to Wilson in 1940, he considered that the “character assassinations” so common to contemporary literary and political journalism “would be real murders . . . if the intellectuals controlled the state apparatus” (qtd. in Brightman, *Writing* 210-11). Soon thereafter similar fears of an intellectual-run American state crept into Wilson’s thoughts about literature’s role in politics. He and Mary’s friend Macdonald had worried that Roosevelt’s administration might impose a bureaucratic collectivist fascism “administratively, from the top” (“American” 46). In June of 1942, as reviews of his wife’s first novel came in, Wilson similarly wondered whether “second and third-rate writers” like MacLeish and playwright Robert Sherwood might “represent merely the beginning of some awful collectivist cant which will turn into official propaganda for a post-war state socialist bureaucracy.”<sup>13</sup> “With MacLeish and Sherwood at the White House as they are now,” he went on, “the whole thing makes me rather uneasy.” If Macdonald’s reaction to the stirrings of bureaucratic collectivist sentiment in the aesthetic field (“kulturbolschewismus”) was to urge a renaissance of modernist aesthetics, Wilson’s strategy for fighting state socialism was to return to a different, but no doubt related, tradition: “It may be necessary for a subsequent set of writers to lead an attack on phony collectivism in the interests of the American individualistic tradition” (“To” 385). Having once advocated intellectuals as a potentially revolutionary class in 1932’s *Culture and the Crisis*, a decade later McCarthy’s husband feared that authors might provide ideological ammunition for

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<sup>13</sup> Wilson was likely thinking here of MacLeish’s “The Irresponsibles,” a widely-read and highly controversial article written for *The Nation* in 1940, in which MacLeish indicted “scholars” and literary “writers”—the eponymous “irresponsibles”—for not using their work to decry the rise of fascist and communist tendencies at home and abroad. Against such a comparatively instrumentalist conception of intellectual and literary politics, Wilson had expressed his own view three years earlier:

from the moment one is not trying to function as an organizer or an active politician (and agitational literature is politics), one must work in good faith in one’s own field. A conviction that is genuine will always come through—that is, if one’s work is sound. You may say, This is not the time for art or science: the enemy is at the gate! But in that case you should be at the gate: in the Spanish International Brigade, for example, rather than engaged in literary work. There is no sense in pursuing a literary career under the impression that one is operating a bombing-plane. (“American Critics” 650)

their fellow knowledge workers to create a stifling “state socialist” regime from the raw materials of New Deal America.

Mary McCarthy was no Marxist (or ex-Marxist) theorist like Burnham, her friend Macdonald, or even her generally less theoretically-inclined husband, Wilson. In 1953, she wittily claimed that after meeting “the learned young men” who attended the Trotsky Committee meetings, she had concluded that Marxism was “something you had to take up young, like ballet dancing” (“My Confession” 102). The joke is a good one, vintage McCarthy both in its satirical deflation of intellectual politics and in its feminization of subjects conventionally understood as masculine. Who else but Mary McCarthy would think to compare the rigors of Marxist theory to those of ballet dancing? But it is also overly self-deprecating. For if she was neither so self-conscious nor even so *interested* as her friends, and had even begun, like her husband, to move away from Marxism more generally, McCarthy was nevertheless a better student of Marxist debates of the era than she admitted in this article written at the height of the (Senator) McCarthy era.<sup>14</sup> In the *Intellectual Memoirs* she was working on upon her death in 1989, for example, we learn that the idea of an intellectual class was very much present in her daily life around this time. “I liked to think that I came from a superior class [to the middle class], the professionals,” she recalled (35). She defended the values of “the professional class I issued from” when arguing with her lover Philip Rahv in 1936, too (68-69). She also felt some identity with victims of

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<sup>14</sup> Despite taking McCarthy’s intellectual life more seriously than the Gelderman and Kiernan biographies, Carol Brightman’s *Writing Dangerously* nevertheless generally follows the later McCarthy in downplaying her investment in political Trotskyism: McCarthy was attracted to the “novelist’s Trotsky,” and not “the author of theories about Permanent Revolution,” Brightman remarks (134). But she makes a point similar to mine about the 1953 “My Confession” article. “In her own way,” Brightman notes, “Mary McCarthy—who repudiated that other McCarthy and *his* trials in a few lectures at the time—had nevertheless accommodated herself to the end-of-ideology ethos that ruled the period. By embracing the role of chance in politics, she had, in effect, reduced her own political ‘turning-point’ to a harmless level of anecdote” (135, emphasis in original). Diana Trilling feels similarly about the essay, which she calls McCarthy’s “light-minded romp through her fellow-traveling youth”: McCarthy “made the radicalism of the intellectuals the target of her sharp wit and allowed it no seriousness of purpose,” she complains; accordingly McCarthy had done “a disservice to history” (*Beginning* 206).

Stalin's Moscow trials (she mentions Zinoviev, Kamenev, Radek, Pyatakov, and Bukharin by name) because they were "brain workers like ourselves" (86)—a class consciousness, not to mention a theoretical vocabulary, she likely would have gained from attention to her Trotskyist friends' publications and conversation. New Class theory was hard to avoid in the Trotskyist circles of the late 1930s and early 1940s, and it is difficult to imagine that McCarthy was unfamiliar with the debates.

And more to the point, her first novel itself understands intellectuals as a class. John Crowley speculates that the original dust-jacket for *The Company She Keeps* may have been written by McCarthy herself (113). But in any case, the first edition's jacket material prompted readers to see the setting of the novel in terms of class: "The milieu is the world of advertising men, radicals, writers, publishers, lawyers, teachers—glorified white-collar workers and declassed professional people" (qtd. in Crowley 112). Such a description, it is relevant to note, comes very close to Trotsky's own designation for the "intellectuals and white collar workers" whom he believed to constitute the minority faction in the SWP ("Scratch" 181). Writing against Max Shachtman and the rest, including Dwight Macdonald, Trotsky typically branded them as representative of "the declassed petty bourgeoisie" (199). Thus the novel's original dust-cover suggested that its characters were to be understood as part of the "white-collar workers and declassed professional people" whom Trotsky excoriated in the SWP split, and whom McCarthy called her friends.

More importantly, the plot bears all the marks of this class milieu, particularly through its intellectual protagonist, Margaret Sargent, who is indeed a white-collar worker always threatening to be "declassed." Despite her obviously thorough education and ample cultural capital, Margaret temporarily works an awful secretarial job for a shady art dealer in "Rogue's

Gallery,” and later loses employment at a magazine in “Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man.” Understandably then, Margaret is ambivalent about her class status. Much like McCarthy herself at the time, she reviles the “ugly cartoon of middle-class life,” but fears that she is still, at least economically, *of* that class: “Ah God, it was too sad and awful, the endless hide-and-go-seek game one played with the middle class. If one could only be sure that one did not belong to it, that one was finer, nobler, more aristocratic. The truth was that she hated it shakily from above . . . ” (260). Feeling sociocultural superiority over “the middle class” (and of course the working class), but economically having only “some [money] but not enough” (260), Margaret resides in *a* middle class that is not quite *the* middle class. She is, in short, an intellectual.

In “The Genial Host,” McCarthy’s novel even depicts its intellectuals engaged in nothing short of class conflict with a capitalist, or at least a bourgeois representative of capital. Pflaumen, the eponymous host of the story’s party, is a prosperous German-Jewish American who aspires to be a man of society (139-141). Of his working life we are only told that he has an “office” (141), but his smoking jacket and “carefully exercised body” suggest wealth (139). His guests however are almost all hard-working professionals, those whom *Culture and the Crisis* had identified as part of the intellectual class of brain workers. In addition to Margaret, the Trotskyist bohemian-intellectual writer, the party’s attendees include a Communist (Stalinist) literary critic, a publisher, a psychoanalyst, a writer for *Time*, and a Marxist law professor. The one possible exception to this overwhelmingly professional company, a banker, comes as close as a banker can to being a part of the intellectual class. He is described as “a bright young man” whose wife “painted pictures” (151), and this atypical banker takes an enthusiastic interest in Margaret after her outburst about the murder of Trotskyist Andrés Nin in Spain (158). Thus while Pflaumen is a seemingly idle man of some wealth, his guests represent an intellectual class beneath him.

Accordingly, the relationship between Pflaumen and his guests is one of domination and subordination. Pflaumen's professional friends are invited to his party not because he likes them individually or even collectively, but because their attendance confirms his own cultural distinction, and, more meanly, his very economic power over them. In the words of the story's second-person narration, "he loved you for that patched fur. It signified that you were the *real thing*, the poet in a garret, and it also opened up for him the charming vistas of What He Could Do For You" (141, emphasis in original). For Margaret in particular, he offers the possibility of a salary: he gives her letters of introduction to several employers (143-45). His party also offers his guests a chance to overcome their isolation, at least superficially. Margaret unenthusiastically initiates an affair with Erdman, the Marxist law professor, and "What had happened to you with Erdman was happening with others all over the room. Men were taking out address books or repeating phone numbers in low voices. There was a slight shuffle of impatience; nothing more could be done here; it was time to go and yet it was much too early" (158). Thus Pflaumen grants the intellectual class he befriends a chance to gain employment and love alike. But he does this only insofar as such acts ensure his own social and economic gain: his house was "a house of assignation, where business deals, friendships, love affairs were arranged, with Pflaumen, the promoter, taking his inevitable cut" (161). Pflaumen's intellectual friends are thus *collectively* embarrassed by their dependence on him: "you poor [friends] knew that he had bought your complaisance with his wines and rich food and prominent acquaintances, and you half-hated him before your finger touched the doorbell" (139); with a kind of self-loathing each wonders what "weakness," "flimsiness of character," "opportunism or cynicism" had made the other befriend him (157). Socially and economically dependent on Pflaumen, the intellectual class at the party resents him.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For my purposes here it isn't essential to define Pflaumen's exact class location. Thus in the previous paragraph I

The crux of the story occurs when Margaret, finally unable to tolerate this dependence, resists Pflaumen's power. She refuses to let him know about the possibility of a future affair with Erdman. He responds by attacking her reputation: "'You're not drinking too much, are you?' he asked, in a true stage whisper" (160). The specifically economic aspect of his control over her is made clear in the startling metaphor describing Margaret's reaction to this attack: "At last, you thought, the bill had come in. The dinners, the letters of introduction, the bottle of perfume, the gardenias, the new Soviet film, the play, the ballet, the ice-skating at Rockefeller Plaza had all been invoiced, and a line drawn underneath, and the total computed" (160). In the end, Margaret capitulates to Pflaumen, accepting another of his arranged dinner invitations (this time with the banker and his wife) for both social and economic reasons: "you were still so poor, so loverless, so lonely" (163). Her attempt to rebel against Pflaumen's control fails.

The story is thus in essence an allegory of the class conflict between an intellectual class and capital. The intellectual class gathered at the party sells its labor-power of ideological production and cultural distinction in exchange for Pflaumen's ability to grant them employment and emotional satisfaction. Margaret's refusal to tell Pflaumen about her personal life thus constitutes a kind of intellectual strike; for a time, she refuses to give Pflaumen some part of what she normally sells him, her cultural distinction. The sad and bitter point of the story is that Pflaumen, like any capitalist, can "fire" intellectual workers who refuse to produce. Pflaumen

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write only that he is "a capitalist, or at least a bourgeois representative of capital." But it is worth noting that because of his ability to give his guests employment a good case can be made for viewing Pflaumen as a capitalist plain and simple. E. P. Thompson famously reminds us that a class "is a relationship, and not a thing" (*Making* 11). And following Thompson, Harry Braverman notes specifically that though "the operating executives of a giant corporation are employed by that corporation, and in that capacity do not own its plants and bank accounts," they nevertheless possess great wealth, direct the flow of vast amounts of capital, and control the labor of masses working beneath them: thus they "are the rulers of industry, act 'professionally' for capital, and are themselves part of the class that personifies capital and employs labor" (280). They are in short "the form given to capitalist rule in modern society" (280). Arguably, McCarthy instinctively understood the capitalist class in a similar fashion. Thus I would argue that she created Pflaumen as a character who, while he does not himself own the means of production, nevertheless *functions* as a capitalist, by virtue of his economic control over the party-goers.

can ruin her reputation, and refuse to find work for her in the future. But it is important to realize that his power extends not just to an individual, though Margaret Sargent's actions here dramatize his power; his power extends collectively over all his poorer "friends" at the party. In effect, these "friends" symbolically constitute an intellectual class subordinate—at least for the time being—to capital.<sup>16</sup>

Born amid and occasionally referencing the aftermath of the SWP schism and its attendant intellectual debates over a new class, *The Company She Keeps* thus represents its American intellectuals as part of a class of professionals and brain workers in the tradition of *Culture and the Crisis*, chafing against capitalist control. In historical context, its main characters are part of a "whole host and variety of experts" who might, in the minds of James Burnham, Dwight Macdonald, and Edmund Wilson, constitute the New Class of a managerial, bureaucratic collectivist, or state socialist society in the United States. Even if it doesn't do so quite "in the interests of the American individualistic tradition," McCarthy's book nevertheless may fulfill her then-husband's hope that writers would "lead an attack on phony collectivism." And more precisely, through the psychoanalysis of its main character, *The Company She Keeps* offers a satirical but sympathetic critique of an American New Class drawn to the Nazi and Stalinist bureaucratic collectivism McCarthy and her friends feared.

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<sup>16</sup> This paragraph's allusions to "cultural capital" and "distinction" refer most familiarly to Bourdieu's work in *Distinction*; but Alvin Gouldner's work on cultural capital as a new alternative to "moneyed capital," part of his 1979 theory of the New Class, is probably more relevant to the discussion. (See *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class*, especially Thesis Five.) If McCarthy's work is crucial to the depiction of a New Class in American literature, part of what her first novel documents, too, with a sometimes dazzlingly cynical glow, is the growing importance of cultural capital in relation to moneyed capital in at least certain New York City circles in the 1930s.



### 3. “Clinical Authenticity”: Super-Ego in *The Company She Keeps* (1942)

Six years after publishing *The Company She Keeps*, McCarthy would deride novelists who provided their characters with “the Oedipal fixation or the traumatic experience which [gives] that clinical authenticity that is nowadays so desirable in portraiture” (*Cast* 163).<sup>17</sup> But like Trotskyism, psychoanalysis was an integral part of McCarthy’s intellectual and personal life while she wrote her first novel, and it shaped her sense of character there. She had studied *The Interpretation of Dreams* while at Vassar (Brightman, *Writing* 70), and a few years later in New York City went to a debate on “Freud and/or Marx” that she remembered well enough to recount over a decade later (“My” 83). Beginning an affair with Edmund Wilson in 1937, McCarthy could only have increased her familiarity with Freud. Wilson believed that artistic achievement was inseparable from psychological disease, and eventually said so in book form with 1941’s *The Wound and the Bow*. And only four months into their already rocky marriage, Wilson committed McCarthy to a hospital for psychiatric observation. Even after being released, she continued to see a steady stream of analysts, including one of the few in America to have undergone treatment by Freud himself (Gelderman, *Mary McCarthy* 91; Brightman, *Writing* 181). Psychoanalysis thus unsurprisingly supplies the setting for the autobiographical last story of *The Company She Keeps*, “Ghostly Father, I Confess.” And while Margaret is suspicious of therapeutic practice—she criticizes it as an operation to remove the conscience and all traces of a distinct personality (276)—she nevertheless wittily recognizes herself as the clichéd Freudian character McCarthy would soon lampoon. “She was a real Freudian classic,” she thinks; so predictable as to be “faintly monstrous, improbable, like one of those French plays that demonstrate as if on a blackboard the axioms of the Romantic movement” (262). Margaret is

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<sup>17</sup> This sardonic remark comes from McCarthy’s autobiographical narrative “Yonder Peasant, Who Is He?” It was first published in *The New Yorker* in 1948, and was then included in 1950’s *Cast a Cold Eye*, from which it is cited here. It finally constituted a chapter in 1957’s *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*.

thus not only representative of the novel's intellectual class; she is by her own admission a figure of quite some "clinical authenticity."<sup>18</sup>

That clinical authenticity may be traced readily through Freud's thinking on the narcissistic origins of the development of an ego ideal and super-ego. More specifically, as I will argue in this section of the chapter, Margaret's adult personal life is largely conditioned by the drive of a powerful—indeed, sometimes overpowering—super-ego intent on gaining a narcissistic satisfaction denied it in childhood. We will recall that for Freud all children are born with what he calls a "primary narcissism," where the infantile ego understands itself to be perfect in every respect. This primary narcissism is greatly diminished, however, with the advent of parental and social admonitions against various childhood behaviors. Freud tells us that in reaction to this loss of primary narcissism, the ego seeks to restore its ideal vision of itself; it creates an "ego ideal" which represents all the perfection the ego had once understood itself to represent. Since it is in essence a reaction to those forces that denied the primary narcissism, the ego ideal is created as an amalgam of parental and then more generally social norms. Another psychological agency is created to see that the ego lives up to its new ideal, and hence that "narcissistic satisfaction from the ego ideal is ensured" ("On Narcissism" 95). Freud names this

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<sup>18</sup> Katie Roiphe celebrates McCarthy as a principled critic of Freudian psychoanalysis, arguing that McCarthy rejected psychoanalysis as a "paralyzing" force that replaces individual agency with reductive theories (132). But while this is true of McCarthy in her later years, Roiphe overstates *The Company She Keeps'* hostility to psychoanalysis. Noting Margaret's bitingly humorous criticism of Freudian therapy in general and of her therapist in particular, Roiphe writes that "[i]n the competition [between Margaret and her therapist] for interpretation [of her life], the push and pull for control over the narrative that characterizes Meg's relation to the psychiatrist, such a vivid comic perspective [as Meg's] gives the victory to her" (132). But the contest is more of a tie than this acknowledges, and Roiphe's reading shortchanges the subtlety of McCarthy's portrait of Margaret. One joy of the novel's last chapter is precisely the fine *balance* McCarthy keeps between Margaret's spot-on satire of her therapist, and her therapist's nevertheless telling revelations about Margaret. That a dull-witted and predictably Freudian psychiatrist can nevertheless make such incisive observations about her is part of the ironic joke: Margaret is struggling against psychoanalysis both for legitimate reasons, *and* as an all-too-predictable form of resistance.

agency the “super-ego.” The super-ego is thus responsible for ensuring the narcissistic satisfaction of living up to an ego ideal.<sup>19</sup>

The purposefully disjointed form of the novel admittedly obscures Margaret’s development along such lines. The first four episodes of the book represent Margaret’s adult life in an only quasi-linear fashion. “The Man In the Brooks Brothers Shirt,” for example, takes place in the midst of the action of “Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man,” placed two stories afterward.<sup>20</sup> And it is only at the end of the novel, in “Ghostly Father, I Confess,” that we are finally given the bulk of Margaret’s childhood history, to make sense of all that has come before—and there we must sort it out from the novel’s stream-of-consciousness narrative. Nevertheless, her childhood follows the Freudian narrative quite closely. She remembers her early childhood in such idyllic terms as befit primary narcissism. She had been, she remembers, “such an elegant little girl” (262), a “pretty little girl” dressed in an ermine neckpiece and muff and diamond finger rings (263). But Margaret’s primary narcissism is assailed in a particularly brutal fashion: her mother dies in the 1918 epidemic of influenza, and thereafter her Protestant father takes her to live with her cruel and Catholic Aunt Clara. Her Aunt Clara’s sense of discipline is “antiquated” and vicious (265); she scolds and beats Margaret for being “stuck-up” when she wins a prize for her writing (263), locks her in closets, and forbids her to read, have a doll, or see the movies (270). Along with these physical attacks on her original narcissism, Margaret’s self-regard continues to be indexed sartorially. The ermine accessories and diamond

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<sup>19</sup> 1914’s “On Narcissism” establishes the development of an ego ideal from the loss of primary narcissism. It only speculates about the existence of an agency that would enforce the demands of the ego ideal. Years later, in *The Ego and the Id*, Freud confirmed this earlier observation and named the enforcing agency the “super-ego.” For the very basic purposes employed here, Freud’s arguments about the super-ego are nicely summarized in the essay on “The Dissection of the Psychological Personality” in the *New Introductory Lectures*, 71-100. Readers wanting more detail should consult *The Ego and the Id* (1923).

<sup>20</sup> “Portrait” has Jim Barnett recalling that after her affair with him, Margaret had gone “out West somewhere, where she came from,” in order to “secure her father’s blessings for her second marriage” (209). A few pages later she is “back from the Coast and—mysteriously—no longer engaged to be married” (212).

rings are put away, and “long underwear, high shoes, blue serge jumpers that smelled, and a brown beaver hat two sizes too big for her” become the order of the day (263). In no small measure, Margaret thus loses her love of self through the actions of her aunt.

But her father is also complicit in this loss. Though he does not approve of the harsh discipline his daughter is subjected to, he nevertheless watches on in silence, out of a misplaced scruple of religious tolerance for his sister-in-law’s (and his former wife’s) Catholicism (268-73). Margaret knows that he loves her, but cannot see why he will not protect her. She seeks his attention as compensation, often through bad behavior: one particularly poignant episode finds her running away to hide in a museum, behind a cast of the famous statue of Laocoön, only to be discovered by her disappointed father the next day (267). This action in itself, we may note in passing, reveals the novel’s Freudian sense of unconscious motivation. Where else would the young, suffering future writer trained in Latin classics wish to go, but behind a work of art, and furthermore behind one that depicts a Roman father valiantly *defending* his offspring from attacking serpents? But unfortunately the action remains only Margaret’s unconscious attempt to realize a fantasy. Her aunt indeed attacks her, and her father does not protect her.

Thus the young Margaret feels on some unconscious level that her father has conspired with her Aunt Clara to punish her (289-91). She accepts their judgment that she is morally deficient; she believes that she has deserved her Aunt Clara’s cruel discipline. For her Freudian analyst Dr. James, this feeling of inferiority stems from a perfectly normal female castration complex and ensuing penis envy (257): “you suspected that you would have been treated differently if you were a boy,” Dr. James explains to Margaret (290); she felt that she would have been undeserving of punishment if she had had a boy’s organ. “You began to think that there was something ugly about being a girl and that you were being punished for it” (290).

Margaret's discovery that she lacks a penis leads to a feeling of inferiority and guilt which her aunt's tyrannical actions and father's silence only seem to confirm, Dr. James believes. For her part, however, Margaret declares her disbelief in the castration complex (257). She shoots back at her therapist with a proto-feminist refusal of the gender politics implicit in the theory. "You think I ought to welcome my womanly role in life," she accuses him; "keep up [her husband Frederick's] position, defer to him, tell him how wonderful he is, pick up the crumbs from his table and eat them in the kitchen" (281). Like her protagonist, McCarthy herself rejected the Freudian account of a female castration complex as, in the words of one of her more understanding male therapists at the time, "a very masculine idea" (Brightman, *Writing* 177). But neither we nor the novel need accept Freud's masculinist theory (nor Dr. James' diagnosis) of penis envy in order to understand the larger and simpler truth that Margaret is indeed forced to trade some of her primary narcissism, her original healthy self-regard, for a feeling of inferiority, through the brutality of her aunt and complicit silence of her father.<sup>21</sup>

Accepting this judgment of herself, she creates an ego ideal to replace the feeling of her lost primary narcissism, an ego ideal profoundly influenced by her aunt's overwrought brand of Catholicism, and her father's in some ways just as strenuous, if less shrill, moral sense—one typified by his misplaced but nonetheless inarguably firm adherence to a principle of religious tolerance in letting his daughter be punished by his sister-in-law. She then seeks to gain narcissistic satisfaction from this ego ideal via the creation of a particularly demanding, indeed unreasonably demanding, super-ego. Thinking about the moment she broke from her Aunt Clara and her Catholic school, Margaret perpetually wonders, "Would she have had the courage . . . to have taken up that extreme position if she had not known, unconsciously, that deep down in his soul her father was cheering her on?" (273). Would she have had the courage to do it without

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<sup>21</sup> Freud offers a short account of his theory of girls' castration complex in the *New Introductory Lectures*, 154-162.

help? “It had not been a real test” (273), she thinks, since she had not been *utterly* alone. This causes Dr. James correctly to observe to Margaret that “You have set yourself a moral standard that nobody could live up to” (275). Lacking parental love and indeed having a surfeit of parental admonitions and abuse, Margaret creates a zealous super-ego that attempts to attain the narcissistic satisfaction imposed by her high ego ideal.

The adult symptoms of this strict super-ego are reflected in the novel’s representation of Margaret’s repeated tendency to wish for, and sometimes feel as though she had, an audience for her everyday life. Never having received praise as a child, Margaret desires the public approbation of an audience to give her narcissistic satisfaction. In “Cruel and Barbarous Treatment,” for example, she imagines her affair as a form of theater in which the audience grows larger as the action progresses. She conceives of her early public appearances with her secret lover as “private theatricals” where “it was her own many-faceted nature that she put on exhibit, and the audience, in this case unfortunately limited to two, could applaud both her skill and her intrinsic variety” (6). Eventually, however, the affair could not be kept secret: “it needed the glare of publicity to revive the interests of its protagonists” (8), she thinks. And the love triangle had to be resolved not only because “It was not decent” to carry it on, but also because her watching friends “would be bored” if it weren’t (15). Her super-ego thus imagines her friends as an audience that gains pleasure from her actions, which somehow, despite her immorality, offers her love and approval.

At other times, however, her imaginary audience judges her more harshly, as her Aunt Clara did in her youth. Freud notes that the existence of the super-ego allows us to understand the so-called “delusions of being noticed” or more correctly, of being *watched*, which are such striking symptoms in the paranoid diseases . . . . This complaint is

justified; it describes the truth. A power of this kind, watching, discovering and criticizing all our intentions, does really exist. Indeed, it exists in every one of us in normal life. (“On Narcissism” 95, emphasis in original)

Something of this paranoia may be glimpsed in the course of Margaret’s affair with the man on a train in “The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt.” Her first thoughts about the still only potential affair are suggestive of her constant self-surveillance:

the whole thing would be so vulgar; one would expose oneself so to the derision of the other passengers. It was true, she was always wanting something exciting and romantic to happen; but it was not really romantic to be the-girl-who-sits-in-the-club-car-and-picks-up-men. She closed her eyes with a slight shudder: some predatory view of herself had been disclosed for an instant. She heard her aunt’s voice saying, “I don’t know why you make yourself so cheap,” and “It doesn’t pay to let men think you’re easy.” (83-84)

Her speculations about the passengers reveal Margaret’s keen sense of an audience, and her recollection of her aunt’s voice reminds us of the foremost influence on her ego ideal—an influence still powerful enough to make Margaret physically close her eyes, unconsciously wishing to be spared for once the act of watching herself. Later, drinking with the man in a compartment with an open door—it feels “exactly as if they were drinking in a shop window” (88)—she talks to him “as if he were an audience of several hundred people” (95). In this recurring motif of an audience, whether admiring or judging, Margaret’s strong super-ego is consistently on display.

Margaret’s many love affairs, adulterous and not, are, I would argue along with Dr. James, motivated by this same strong super-ego. The affairs bear all the marks of the Freudian

compulsion to repeat. They are motivated by her super-ego's desire to pose the "real test" of surviving her childhood over again (273). At first, this compulsion causes Margaret to seek power over her lovers, to "morally" dominate them in the manner of the aunt who dominated over her in childhood. For example, Margaret begins her first marriage happily enough, but soon starts to cry frequently and to heap abuse upon her husband—with just the same vocabulary and mannerisms, she realizes, as those of her Aunt Clara (293). For a time this particular return of the repressed repeats with every serious love affair as well (295). As she gets older and stronger, however, Dr. James notes, she is able to come closer to recreating her actual home life in an unconscious attempt to repeat that trauma and gain control over it (297). She attempts to recreate her childhood state—the feeling of being unjustly punished by a tyrannical aunt, and held hostage by an unsympathetic father—in order to see whether she can extricate herself *without* help this time, as her super-ego demands.

The novel confirms this analysis amply in "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt," where Margaret's affair with the Man clearly replays her childhood trauma. She often identifies the man with her own father. He speaks in a "kind, almost fatherly voice" (87), and his use of the word "visit" takes Margaret "straight back to her childhood and to her father, gray-slippered, in a brown leather chair" (95). The contradiction between the man's occupation and his political attitudes—he works as an executive for a steel company (87) but secretly wants to vote for the socialist candidate Norman Thomas (92)—also reminds her of the "former day" of her father's Progressive Era youth, when, she thinks, a "wildcat radical" who fought the railroads could eventually become a corporation lawyer, without ever feeling a fundamental change in values. The man in the Brooks Brothers shirt "was not even a true survival" from her father's youth, she



knows, for he must be thirty years younger than her father (96). But her unconscious association and compulsion to repeat is strong enough to overcome such anachronisms.

After a drunken and tawdry night—the then-scandalous sex scene in the story, which led Delmore Schwarz to refer to it privately as “Tidings from the Whore” (Brightman, *Writing* 206)—the man insists over Margaret’s objections that she take a bath. The event fully brings to light the ways in which Margaret’s affairs unconsciously replay her childhood traumas. A maid runs the bath for her, but

though, ordinarily, the girl had no particular physical modesty, at this moment it seemed insupportable that anyone should watch her bathe. There was something terrible and familiar about the scene—herself in the tub, washing, and a woman standing tall above her—something terrible and familiar indeed about the whole episode of being forced to cleanse herself. Slowly she remembered. The maid was, of course, her aunt, standing over her tub on Saturday nights to see that she washed every bit of herself. . . . Not since she had been grown-up had she felt this peculiar weakness and shame. It seemed to her that she did not have the courage to send the maid away, that the maid was somehow the man’s representative, his spy, whom it would be impious to resist. (116-17)

The scene replays her aunt’s power over her (with the Catholic tinge: it would be “impious” to resist), reinforced by her father, for whom the aunt is only a “spy.” The feeling of weakness and shame, of powerlessness to resist, is that quintessential feeling of her childhood which her super-ego here tries, unsuccessfully as yet, to repeat and overcome.

As Dr. James astutely explains to Margaret, her marriage to Frederick (depicted in the last story) is the strongest case in her life yet of this repetition compulsion, and more generally of

the super-ego-driven dynamic that has dominated her life. She marries Frederick, gets rid of her former friends, and quits her job. In so doing, she recreates the social isolation and economic powerlessness of her childhood. Furthermore, Frederick's "own insecurity makes him tyrannical and overpossessive; his fear of emotional expenditure makes him apparently indifferent. On the one hand, he is unjust to you, like your aunt; on the other, like your father, he pretends not to notice your sufferings and to deny his own culpability in them" (298). Frederick is aunt and father rolled into one, in other words. He is a trap she wants to be strong enough to escape: "You have run a terrible risk, the risk of severe neurosis, in putting yourself to this test. For that's the thing you are asking: will I be able to get out?" (298-99). Her affairs and now her marriage are all attempts to pose moral tests for herself. Having endured a tyrannical aunt and complicit father who lead her to create a strenuous ego ideal, Margaret's vigorous super-ego consistently attempts to gain the narcissistic satisfaction denied her in her youth. Thus in one way or another, the vigorous strivings of her super-ego seem to inspire all the significant actions of her adult personal life. The key to understanding the character of Margaret—to understanding the primary representative of the intellectual New Class depicted in *The Company She Keeps*—is recognizing the seminal nature of the super-ego.

#### **4. Psychoanalyzing the New Class**

Margaret's romantic strivings are thus the result of her childhood development of a lofty ego ideal and correspondingly strong super-ego. But the effects of such trauma do not limit themselves to her romantic life. They reveal themselves in her political life as well, as Dr. James notes (297). The psychological causes of Margaret's politics are indeed central to *The Company She Keeps*'s project of evaluating the politics of the intellectual class more generally. Theorizing

that politics is always motivated by the super-ego, the novel posits two contradictory facets of that ego ideal which the super-ego seeks to attain. On the one hand, the ego ideal may be a shallow sort of *social* ego ideal, one constituted by cultural capital alone—an ideal of superiority and status. On the other hand, that ego ideal may be concerned with and desire justice itself. The super-ego may thus be understood as the source of a shallow or a sincere politics, a goad alternately to status-seeking or a conscience. The *political* difference between these objects of the super-ego in the novel, I will now argue, constitutes the difference between the New Class-dominated bureaucratic collectivism of the Soviet and Nazi type, and a truly democratic form of socialism. Viewing intellectuals as a New Class precariously caught between the desire for class status and for universal justice, between a politics of bureaucratic collectivism and democratic socialism, *The Company She Keeps* suggests that the crucial psycho-political task of the New Class is to be able to recognize the difference between these desires and their corresponding politics.

The efforts of Margaret's super-ego in the novel often result in nothing more than a faux-socialist politics that serves as a veil for the acquisition of cultural capital and status. As noted earlier, as an intellectual Margaret considers herself to be in a middle class that is not *the* middle class. But this is as much passionate desire as it is dispassionate analysis: she “detest[s]” “the ugly cartoon of middle-class life,” and longs to “be sure that one did not belong to it, that one was finer, nobler, more aristocratic” (260). Her elevated ego ideal is thus not composed of simply personal desires, but also of *class* desires. This socialism, she then reflects, isn't primarily motivated by sympathy *for* the poor; it is more a rebellion *against* the “ugly cartoon” of middle-class life. It has nothing to do with a revolt against capitalist exploitation of the working class: “it was not really the humanitarian side of socialism that touched her” (261). Margaret senses that

this psychological truth about herself is related to a sociological truth about intellectuals' politics in general. Accordingly, she transposes her super-ego's desire for status into the socialized language of "snobbery":

her proletarian sympathies constituted a sort of snub that she administered to the middle class, just as a really smart woman will outdress her friends by relentlessly underdressing them. Scratch a socialist and you find a snob. The semantic test confirmed this. In the Marxist language, your opponent was always a *parvenu*, an *upstart*, an *adventurer*, a politician was always *cheap*, and an opportunist *vulgar*. But the proletariat did not talk in such terms; this was the tone of the F.F.V. What the socialist movement did for a man was to allow him to give himself the airs of a marquis without having either his title or his sanity questioned. (260-61, emphases in the original)

In such moments of insight, the novel understands the intellectual class's socialism as a form of "social anxiety" stemming from the need to see itself as better than the middle class (260), a need that the novel readily explains in Margaret's case as a function of her particularly demanding ego ideal.

This view of socialism as snobbery is also borne out by the intellectual class gathered in the story "The Genial Host." In that tale, the professionals collected at the party understand politics and political discourse as one more social nicety. The voices of the guests rise "in lively controversy over the new play, the new strike, the new Moscow trials, the new abstract show at the Modern Museum" (146). But this air of "lively controversy" ultimately seems performed rather than felt; the desire to discuss these topics simply stems from the fact that they are "new." Since neither aesthetics nor proletarian political struggle is at the last taken seriously by anyone

present at this party, “Nobody was incoherent; nobody made speeches; nobody lost his temper. Sentences were short, and points in the argument clicked like bright billiard balls” (146). Paramount to the party are social graces: “Everyone felt witty” (146). When the exiled Russian Jew Erdman, whose “Marxist study of jurisprudence had created a stir,” refuses a glass of wine, the guests are thus outraged: “This act of abstention was a challenge to everyone at the table, an insult to the host” (148). His decision not to drink strikes them as an irruption of true (if obscure) ideological fervor into an otherwise pleasant party. After a tense minute, someone at last asks him why he has refused, whereupon he explains that the alcohol would go to his head and he doesn’t want to embarrass himself. The guests are relieved; “Thank God, was the general feeling, he had turned out not to be one of those Marxist prigs!” (149). The intellectual class’s politics are here not so much socialist as socialite, a form of snobbery which cringes at true political belief.

If psychoanalytic and sociological concerns explain Margaret’s attraction to socialism in general, her status-oriented ego ideal also helps explain, as she herself recognizes, her self-appointed role as “angry watchdog of the left” (275). Even her Trotskyism is in part an attempt to gain status over the Stalinists of the 1930s intellectual class. As with her socialism in general, her Trotskyism in particular thus typically fails to embrace a specific political program or agenda. In “Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man,” the editors of the *Nation*-like magazine called the *Liberal* discuss what they perceive as Trotsky’s poor political judgment in publishing an article in the bourgeois press deriding Stalin.<sup>22</sup> Though newly hired and hence subordinate, Margaret angrily and intelligently defends him, even insulting the *Liberal*’s leftist credentials along the way. But afterwards she admits to Jim Barnett that she is not truly a “Trotskyite,” as

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<sup>22</sup> Here again we may see the influence of both Dwight Macdonald and the SWP schism more generally on McCarthy’s first novel: this argument is based loosely on Macdonald’s criticism of Trotsky’s decision to publish a comparison of Hitler and Stalin in the January 27, 1940 issue of *Liberty* magazine. For Trotsky’s rebuttal to this particular criticism, see “Back to the Party!” 237-38.

she had seemed in the dispute. “I’m not even political” (194), she asserts. She just hates the “smug” and complacent politics of those who edit the *Liberal*. She does “admire Trotsky” (my emphasis), of course, but only because “He’s the most romantic man in modern times” (194). For Margaret, Trotsky is not so much the brilliant leader of the Russian Revolution and political theorist in the tradition of Marx and Lenin, as a sort of left intellectual’s Rudolph Valentino—dashing, but without much political point. Thus Margaret’s socialist politics are satirized as the mere desire for a certain “romantic” image of herself, the result of an ego ideal that compels her to be better than the middle class, and better than the Stalinists around her.

Yet one should not overstate the satire of Margaret’s politics offered in the novel. If Margaret’s socialism and Trotskyism are shallow, they are nevertheless certainly more thoughtful and just than the “smug” liberalism and/or Stalinism of the rest of the intellectual-class company she keeps. Her ego ideal of Trotskyism is based not just on status, but also on justice. And if the super-ego as goad to status-seeking is the object of the novel’s satire, the super-ego as true conscience is also the novel’s only hope against the New Class’s leanings toward bureaucratic collectivism. The novel’s satire of the intellectual attraction to bureaucratic collectivism, in the form of Jim Barnett, indeed reveals its sympathy for something much like Margaret’s Trotskyism. Jim Barnett becomes attracted to Communism in 1932 (170)—an iconic year representing that entire generation’s intellectual attraction to Communism, as epitomized by the publication of *Culture and the Crisis*. As an open-minded and pragmatic (read: politically superficial) Yale (172), however, Barnett never commits to any specific school or system. He flirts first with (Stalinist) Communism, then with Lovestoneism, then with Trotskyism, and then with a Farmer-Labor party some friends from Yale were starting (171). Confused in his political opinions, then, in intellectual practice he is willing to support bureaucratic collectivism in its

budding American and more fully-formed Soviet incarnations. Thinking about an on-going argument with his boss Mr. Wendell over the abuses of human rights under Communism, he considers that surely *no* regime has ever allowed equal liberties for everyone. Thus he supposes that “you could probably trust Mr. Roosevelt and Comrade Stalin to abrogate liberty only just so much as was absolutely necessary—and always in the right direction, that is, to abrogate your opponent’s liberty rather than your own” (179). Politically shallow and uncommitted, Jim Barnett represents the thoughtless attraction of a New Class to bureaucratic collectivism in the late 1930s.

But upon meeting Margaret while working at the *Liberal*, Jim’s agreeable—i.e., only loosely principled—political ego ideal begins to reform. He becomes attracted to Margaret precisely because she functions as a kind of political super-ego for him, and thus allows him to fulfill some part of his ego ideal of himself as a daring political intellectual. “For almost as long as he could remember,” Jim reflects of himself, “there had been two selves, a critical principled self, and an easy-going, follow-the-crowd, self-indulgent, adaptable self” (226)—an ego ideal based in a passion for justice, and an ego ideal concerned only with status, we might translate. These warring urges had existed comfortably together before he met Margaret, allowing him a successful (if in the end uninspiring) career at the *Liberal*. But now “it was as if, during the Moscow trials” that sparked Margaret and her creator’s identification with Trotskyism, “the critical principled self had thrown up the sponge; it had abdicated, and a girl’s voice had intruded to take over its function” (226). In political terms, the “easy-going” nature of his status-oriented ego ideal had made Jim a confused pseudo-Stalinist. But his newly-acquired feminine “critical principled self” irritates him toward something closer to Margaret’s Trotskyism, which doesn’t support the abrogation of liberties under either Mr. Roosevelt or Comrade Stalin. He begins to

believe it might be true that some Trotskyists were being blacklisted from magazines (219ff.), and signs on to a letter condemning the Moscow trials, despite the *Liberal's* support for them (229). For as long as Margaret functions as Jim's political super-ego, he takes principled stands against Stalinist bureaucratic collectivism.

But this period of principle in Jim's intellectual career collapses quickly. When Margaret is dismissed from the *Liberal*, Jim quits in protest. Still under the sway of the high ego ideal Margaret has loaned him, he hopes to begin a book with the promising topic of "the transportation industries and their relationship to the Marxist idea of the class struggle" (230).<sup>23</sup> But the book doesn't work out. Despite his new ambitions, Jim has neither the intellectual depth nor the literary skill to finish it. In the meantime he loses touch with Margaret and begins to write for a respectable magazine called, frighteningly enough, *Destiny*. Much like the real-life *Fortune* magazine of Henry Luce's empire, *Destiny* was "the businessman's *Vogue*" (239), whose publisher "was a reactionary in many ways—potentially, he might even be a fascist" (242). His friends who in the past have admired Jim's non-dogmatic but seemingly still principled politics think he must hate his work there, but "The truth was that he enjoyed working on *Destiny*" (240). He is well-paid, and relatively unconcerned about his ability to be heard on political matters. If he writes an article that is deemed "too 'strong,'" he reflects contentedly, "it was given to someone else to modify" (240). Happy without Margaret as his super-ego, Jim turns into "a comfortable man, a man incapable of surprising or being surprised" (244). Thus ends the Intellectual as Yale Man's struggle with his Trotskyist conscience. Easily sliding from a thoughtless and uncommitted Stalinism into a bland and uncommitted liberalism, and poised

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<sup>23</sup> Yet again, another event borrowed from her friend Dwight Macdonald's life. Macdonald had written a four-part series on U.S. Steel for *Fortune* magazine. When the last article, complete with an epigraph from Lenin's *Imperialism*, was severely edited for publication in the spring of 1936, Macdonald resigned in protest. He then attempted, unsuccessfully, to turn the articles into a book on the history of the steel industry. Like his fictional counterpart Jim Barnett, Macdonald had also graduated from Yale. See Brightman, *Writing* 141-42.



under the thumb of a “potentially fascist” publisher, Jim Barnett typifies the dangers of a New Class without a super-ego in the sense of a true conscience.

The novel’s hope for a conscience-driven politics, on the other hand, is perhaps best embodied in Mr. Wendell, Jim and Margaret’s boss at the *Liberal*. A liberal from the previous generation, Mr. Wendell holds views that cause him to be seen as “a tiresome old fuddyduddy” with “failing powers” by “most of his staff and many of his readers” (179). But driven by his conscience, he retains his unfashionable opinions nevertheless. In many ways his conscientious politics represent a point of view that would have pleased McCarthy’s (ex-) Trotskyist friends who were opposed to the “bureaucratic collectivism” they saw in Germany and Russia, and worried about at home:

Mr. Wendell was uncompromisingly against what he called, in a public-auditorium voice, this new spirit of bureaucracy, this specter that was haunting the world under the name of progressivism or communism. He believed in socialism, but he held out for an economy of abundance, for a free judiciary, and trial by jury. He stood for inviolable human rights rather than plans or programs; and no plan, he declared, was worth a nickel that would sacrifice these rights at the first hint of trouble. (179)

The integrity and candor of these beliefs break like a breath of fresh air in the otherwise fetid atmosphere of intellectual political discourse in the novel. Mr. Wendell’s upright support of such liberal and universalist principles—for the “inviolable human rights” of a “free judiciary, and trial by jury”—as would have meant justice for Trotsky, while still supporting a socialist (but *not* “bureaucratic”) economy that does not exploit the working class, makes him unusual in a novel full of shallow and insincere intellectual carping. His speech is the exception that proves the

satirical rule of intellectual politics as neurotic social climbing in the novel. Mr. Wendell is, in other words, the novel's tattered standard of intellectual-political sincerity, of a super-ego-driven politics that is wholly honorable.

But it is ultimately the protagonist Margaret Sargent who most fully reveals the novel's simultaneous skepticism and hope regarding the psychology of New Class politics. The importance the novel assigns to New Class psychology may be shown by the fact that its last words and pages are preoccupied by them. There Margaret recalls a dream she has recently had. In this dream, she is attending "Eggshell College" (302). In an outing cabin nearby, Margaret attends a "rude party" with, among others, three tall men who looked "like the pictures of Nazi prisoners that the Soviet censor passes" (302). She kisses one of the men, thinking "There was something Byronic about him" (303). But the Byronic air quickly fades when he gives her a "coarse, loutish" kiss, and she recognizes him as the more Nazi-like figure she had originally seen. But soon he looks Byronic again. When he kisses her a second time, "she kept her eyes shut, knowing very well what she would see if she opened them, knowing that it was now too late, for now she wanted him anyway" (303). Her dream then ends.

Margaret analyzes the dream and realizes that in some sense *she* is the Nazi prisoner, in the sense that like the Nazi she becomes Byronically beautiful only in someone *else's* imagination. Still under the influence of her aunt's harsh judgments, she imagines herself as morally corrupt like the Nazi, and Byronic only in another's eyes: "it was some failure in self-love"—in her ability to live up to her high ego ideal—"that obliged her to snatch blindly at the love of others, hoping to love herself through them, borrowing their feelings, as the moon borrowed light" (303). "The mind was powerless to save her," she thinks hopelessly; "Only a

man” might give her the narcissistic satisfaction she has lost (302), and which she seeks to regain through a thousand stratagems of personal and political behavior.

Margaret’s analysis of her “failure of self-love,” and her desire to make it up through relationships with men, is astute. It explains among other things why each of the chapters of *The Company She Keeps* revolves around Margaret’s relationship to some male figure. In some cases the relationship is straightforwardly romantic, as with the Young Man, the Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt, and the Yale Man. In others the attachment is more professional, though still emotional, as in the case of Mr. Sheer of “Rogue’s Gallery.” The last chapter finally sums up the novel’s combination of New Class theorizing and psychoanalytic critique by depicting an attachment that is equally professional *and* libidinal. In a very funny portrayal of the transference, Margaret ends her session “like a girl in love” (301), imagining that Dr. James, the psychoanalyst or “Ghostly Father” to whom she confesses, is in love with her. (The “Father” joke is surely Freudian as well as Catholic.) She eventually shakes off the idea that she might be in love with him, too, but not before wondering what she would do if he wanted to run off with her. Would she be able to recognize him for the “fussy, methodical young man” he is (302), so dull and “deplorably YMCA” a representative of the intellectual class (296), and resist his advances?

This speculation is indeed what causes her to recall her dream again. For she knows that she is not only the Nazi in the dream, receiving love from others who can perceive her as Byronic. She is in the dream as herself, too. Margaret’s description of “matriculating at Eggshell College” (250 and 302) articulates a “womb fantasy,” as Margaret herself recognizes (250), and as the Latinate roots of the twice-spoken word “matriculating” also suggest. This “womb fantasy,” Margaret’s unconscious hope to regain the original sense of wholeness found in the

mother's womb, or the primary narcissism experienced in her childhood before her mother's death, recreated in the form of an ego ideal, consists of knowingly committing herself to a Nazi-like figure who sometimes reminds her of the romantic figure of Byron. Her narcissistic attachment is of course to the Byronic figure, who represents the ego ideal Margaret is perpetually trying to fulfill. Byron was "the most romantic man" of the Romantic era itself, we might say, recalling Margaret's earlier description of her attraction to the more modern Trotsky. But what her dream reminds her is that the dream-figure is, after all, not the old Romantic rebel Byron, who had died fighting in the Greek revolution—nor the modern romantic rebel Trotsky, who had died while fighting for a permanent, international revolution—but in fact a Nazi prisoner modeled on "the pictures . . . that the Soviet censor passes." His image thus condenses, in much the same way as the idea of "bureaucratic collectivism," Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. The man she kisses is in short an avatar of that New Class-run state which McCarthy's friend Dwight Macdonald and her husband Edmund Wilson feared: the "white" or "cold" fascism potential in Roosevelt's New Deal, and in Van Wyck Brooks's antimodernist "kulturbolschewismus"; the state socialism which might arise after the war, with Archibald MacLeish and Robert Sherwood as its mediocre literary apologists. On the political level, the dream signifies that in her relatively thoughtless and status-driven attraction to such figures as Trotsky, Margaret may in fact embrace the bureaucratic collectivism that so many other nominally socialist movements, in Germany and Russia alike, had come to. The political danger is as real to her as the romantic one. "[I]f she had not yet embraced a captive Nazi," she thinks, "it was only an accident of time and geography, a lucky break" (303).

Margaret takes from the dream a hope that she may "still detect her own frauds" (303). By detecting these frauds, she hopes to recognize her emotional needs as just those, and to meet

them *herself* rather than through domineering lovers like the man in the Brooks Brothers shirt and Frederick—or through domineering states like Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. “She could,” she says hopefully, “still distinguish the Nazi prisoner from the English milord, even in the darkness of need” (304). Margaret’s prayer to retain this ability to distinguish between Nazi and Byron, the closing passage of the book, should thus be understood politically as well as personally: ““Oh my God . . . do not let them take this away from me. If the flesh must be blind, let the spirit see. Preserve me in disunity. *O di,*’ she said aloud, ‘*reddite me hoc pro pietate mea*” (304) (“O gods, grant me this in return for my piety”). She prays that her disunity, her super-ego-driven desires for intellectual status on the one hand and a truly democratic form of socialism on the other, may be preserved by one newly strong ego which comprehends and thus discriminates between such desires.

If this prayer for political wisdom is the book’s closing hope for Margaret and the intellectual class she represents, its political analysis—lightly summed up in the book’s last sentence—nevertheless remains skeptical of the prayer’s efficacy: “It was certainly a very small favor she was asking, but, like Catullus, she could not be too demanding, for, unfortunately, she did not believe in God” (304). A prayer for intellectual-political wisdom, predicated on an atheist supplicant’s piety, stands only a dubious chance of succeeding. American intellectuals like Margaret (and Jim, and the guests at Pflaumen’s party) might indeed be drawn toward the “phony collectivism” which was the essence of a bureaucratic state socialism, and whose seed was already contained in the New Deal.

*The Unpossessed*’s intellectual class of 1934 consisted of comically deluded narcissists who were incapable of creating communism in America. With McCarthy’s first novel, however, the fictional portrayal of intellectuals as a class grew simultaneously more serious and more

skeptical. In 1942's *The Company She Keeps*, the American New Class would need to cast a cold eye indeed on its libidinal-political attachments, if it were to distinguish between the admirable narcissistic satisfaction of a truly democratic socialism, and the more ominous narcissistic satisfaction of its own class power under a system of bureaucratic collectivism like that of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Recognizing and acting upon that distinction was the intellectual class's central psychological, political, and ethical task.

Looking ahead we may now note briefly and in conclusion that this stressed political distinction, with its fiercely antibureaucratic charge, formed one important root of postmodernism's most characteristic traits when it emerged decades later. The New York Intellectuals of McCarthy's generation in the late 1930s and early 1940s fought passionately with Trotsky and his followers over whether the Soviet Union was an only temporarily degenerated workers' state governed by a "bureaucratic ruling stratum," or instead an example of a new and more permanent system of "bureaucratic collectivism" that could engage in a straightforward form of imperialism. But no one in this era-defining Trotskyist fight doubted that the problem was bureaucracy. Bureaucracy was the enemy of *all* on the socialist left who refused to believe that the Soviet Union had achieved a workers' democracy. The spirit of struggle against a bureaucracy that constricted or even eliminated free inquiry—whether in the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, or even the U.S.—would thus go on to become central to the New York Intellectuals' sense of not only their own politics, but of what ailed "the culture," as they called it, at large. And the 1960s postmodernist attacks on a "disciplinary" society, and promotions of a self-conscious metafiction appropriate to an era of fiction produced in academic institutions, we will see, emerged in part as a reaction to the New York Intellectuals' generational sense that the

bureaucratic organization of politics and culture was a central and disturbing feature not merely of middle-class, but of all modern cultural, social, and political life itself.

## Chapter Three

### **From Intellectual Class to Ideology: Lionel Trilling's Masked Will and the New Liberal Imagination**

#### **1. Trilling's "Great Decade"**

Publishing his first short story in 1925 and his last essays in 1975, Lionel Trilling wrote thoughtful and often influential prose for five decades. Yet the 1940s in particular were definitive both for Trilling himself and for his subsequent prestige in American intellectual and cultural life. Mark Krupnick rightly calls the era Trilling's "great decade," a time when Trilling "carved out his distinctive role as a critic in recoil against the dominant left-liberal values of his New York intellectual milieu" (17). Having established himself with a widely-praised study of Matthew Arnold in 1939, Trilling's reputation as a literary critic grew exponentially over the next ten years as he published a string of noteworthy essays in such venues as *Partisan Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, and *The Nation*. The subtle yet firm moral and political force of these essays, combined with their consistent elegance, made men and women of letters take especial notice. After seeing his work come out in periodicals or hearing it read from platforms, many wondered what Trilling "ha[d] been up to all along," noted R. P. Blackmur (166). During this same period, Trilling's short stories—unjustly neglected today—established him as a fiction writer to watch in the intellectual communities of New York City and beyond. Two stories especially, "Of This Time, Of That Place" (1943) and "The Other Margaret" (1945), compelled immense interest, and the latter provoked heated debate among readers on the literary left.<sup>1</sup>

When Trilling published his first and only novel, 1947's *The Middle of the Journey*, *Commentary*

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<sup>1</sup> In *The New Internationalist* James Farrell assailed "The Other Margaret" as "reactionary," while Irving Howe defended the story in the first of his many articles for *Partisan Review*—see Wald, *New York* 236-39. Incidentally, Wald's work nicely demonstrates that Trilling's "The Other Margaret" *still* provokes heated criticism on the literary left. For him, Trilling's presentation of the story's main theme represents nothing less than "an aesthetic and intellectual catastrophe" (235). Chapter Four will offer a close reading of "Of This Time, Of That Place."



magazine observed only a few months later that it was “already one of the two or three most widely discussed books in intellectual circles today” (Warshow 538).

Finally, when Trilling revised some of his strongest essays and collected them in 1950’s *The Liberal Imagination*, he secured his reputation in the world at large—not simply as a literary critic and writer of fiction, but much more profoundly as an observer and critic of American culture itself. Blackmur’s review of that volume in fact suggested that Trilling had purposefully cultivated a “public mind” (169), one which thought *with* the public in an effort to become “an administrator of the affairs of mind” who exerted conscious influence (168). If Blackmur was correct about Trilling’s cultural ambitions in the forties, then Trilling succeeded admirably. By 1957, sociologist Daniel Bell—striving to be a “public mind” himself—could matter-of-factly list Trilling among the “intellectual nestors” of his scarcely younger generation, a figure to be reckoned with alongside such diverse literary-political eminences as Sidney Hook, Edmund Wilson, Reinhold Niebuhr, and John Dos Passos (*End* 300).<sup>2</sup>

And indeed, Trilling was not only widely-read and respected, but a formative influence on a whole generation of both literary and intellectual figures. Allen Ginsberg was a devoted if rebellious student of Trilling’s, as were Norman Podhoretz, Cynthia Ozick, John Hollander, Steven Marcus, Carolyn Heilbrun (a.k.a. mystery writer Amanda Cross), John Berryman, and Morris Dickstein, the latter of whom has called Trilling one of the “Critics Who Made Us.”<sup>3</sup> Expanding further outward, Trilling’s protégés, readers, and formal reviewers constitute a who’s who of mid-twentieth-century thought, cutting across several aesthetic and political boundaries:

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<sup>2</sup> Though I cite 1960’s *The End of Ideology* here, I have dated Bell’s remarks on his “intellectual nestors” from 1957 because they were first published in the April 1, 1957 edition of the *New Leader* (*End* 450).

<sup>3</sup> Some of this list comes from Diana Trilling’s memoir of her marriage to Lionel, *The Beginning of the Journey* (86, 401). For an interesting explication of Allen Ginsberg’s relationship with Trilling and thence to literary modernism, see Genter. Podhoretz discusses Trilling in many publications; see for example the excerpt of *Breaking Ranks* in Rodden’s *Lionel Trilling*. Ozick’s “The Buried Life” recalls her experience of Trilling in class and speaks of his “now nearly incomprehensible influence” (115), while Heilbrun’s *When Men Were the Only Models We Had* recounts the effect Trilling had on her career.

Raymond Williams, R. P. Blackmur, Richard Chase, Stephen Spender, Joseph Frank, R. W. B. Lewis, Russell Kirk, Daniel Bell, C. Wright Mills, George Steiner, and a host of others grappled with Trilling's work at some point in the fifties or sixties.<sup>4</sup> In ways that we sometimes forget now, Trilling's ideas circulated widely not only in mid-century American literary circles, but in the larger English-speaking intellectual world. Beginning with the essays and fiction of the 1940s—of his “great decade”—Trilling at the least exercised an immense influence not just upon the hothouse life of New York City's intellectuals, in short, but upon American literary, intellectual, and political culture as a whole.

Thus by studying Trilling's 1940s career in this chapter and the next, we move from an investigation of the margins of New York City's intellectual left to an attempt to comprehend the center of American literary and intellectual life itself in this period. In this chapter I will make three related arguments about Trilling's ideas in these crucial early years of his critical maturity. First, I will draw out a neglected, but nevertheless fundamental, source of Trilling's most important ideas in the decade. As a detailed examination of his criticism from the early thirties through the late forties will show, during his “great decade” the newly liberal Trilling essentially accepted the revisionary Trotskyist, anti-Stalinist critique of intellectual workers as a power-hungry New Class attempting to gain hegemony in both the Soviet Union and the United States. With this theory he in fact fashioned one his most characteristic concepts of the late forties, that of a “masked will” that proclaims the intellectual's political virtue while secretly desiring nothing more than his or her own dominance. Second, through a reading of *The Middle of the Journey* I will show that Trilling's particular imagination of the New Class did not merely parrot

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<sup>4</sup> Most of these wrote reviews of Trilling's work; see Rodden's invaluable anthology, *Lionel Trilling and the Critics*. But the influence may also be traced outside of reviews. C. Wright Mills approvingly cites Trilling several times in *White Collar*, and thanks him for his advice (355), while Russell Kirk's seminal work on *The Conservative Mind* took Trilling's critique of liberalism as proof that the time had come for a renewed conservative intellectual movement (480).

the Trotskyist account, but instead drew out the idea's more conservative implications, indicting intellectuals' leftist politics with so broad a brush as to make its political affinities largely unfamiliar to his now-deceased friend Tess Slesinger and his acquaintance Mary McCarthy.<sup>5</sup> More specifically I will argue that his work anticipates a cynical version of the New Class idea that emerged in the neoconservative movement three decades later. But most importantly for the dissertation's argument as a whole, I will suggest in conclusion that Trilling's account of the New Class in the forties transmuted the comparatively specific theory of a politically ambitious intellectual class into a broader and ultimately much more influential account of the conceptual and political dangers of "ideology." This was a momentous shift. For the newer concept's powerfully idealist, often moralizing indictment of an uncritical, quasi-religious mode of thought occluded materialist explanations of the growing social significance of intellectual labor—including class-based explanations that might have adequately accounted for or even more thoroughly influenced postmodernism when it arrived thereafter. In short, this chapter will demonstrate that Trilling's 1940s work paradoxically expanded the labor-leftist theory of a New Class to the point of its own negation in mid-century liberalism's account of "ideology." Trilling helped transform dissident Trotskyism's relatively precise account of an intellectual class into a more popular and sweepingly idealist postwar repudiation of class-based political and cultural thought.

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<sup>5</sup> Trilling recounts his friendship with Slesinger in his afterword to the 1966 edition of Slesinger's *The Unpossessed* ("A Novel of the Thirties"). He was also acquainted with McCarthy in the late 1940s. Biographers tell of an unpleasant dinner Trilling and his wife had at McCarthy's apartment in 1947 (McCarthy's version of the encounter is the basis for Brightman *Writing* 426; Diana Trilling's version is the basis for Kiernan 331, and of course her own *Beginning of the Journey* 124-25). A journal entry from Lionel Trilling also shows that in 1948 McCarthy attempted, unsuccessfully, to enlist him in the Europe-America Groups (EAG) ("From" 510). The short-lived EAG, spearheaded by McCarthy, sought to unite and support left-leaning anti-Stalinist intellectuals from the two continents in the aftermath of World War II. (For good summaries of the EAG and especially of McCarthy's involvement in it, see Kiernan 288-97 and Brightman, *Writing* 305-11, 319-22.) Last but not least, Geraldine Murphy speculates that in his unfinished novel, well under way by the mid-forties, Trilling even based the character of Garda Thorne on McCarthy (xviii-xx).

## 2. From Intellectual Class to “Masked Will”

Lionel Trilling was famously given to addressing critical arguments to a community of his own invention. Judgments of “us” and assertions about what “we” must do are speckled across all his writings, early and late. One need look no further than some of the most quotable (and quoted) gems from *The Liberal Imagination*: “with us it is always a little too late for mind, yet never too late for honest stupidity” (17), for example, or, “Unless we insist that politics is imagination and mind, we will learn that imagination and mind are politics, and of a kind that we will not like” (96). In 1965’s *Beyond Culture*, Trilling takes note of writers who complained that his use of “we” was “imprecise and indiscriminate” (vii). One reviewer had objected that sometimes “we” meant “just the people of our time as a whole; more often still Americans in general; most often of all a very narrow class, consisting of New York intellectuals as judged by [Trilling’s] own brighter students in Columbia” (qtd. on vii). Trilling, however, defends his use of the word “we,” claiming that there is indeed enough cultural continuity between these groups to make it an apt usage. Even when the word refers most to the “narrow class . . . of New York intellectuals,” Trilling asserts, the *influence* of these New York intellectuals on the mass media of journalism, television, theater, and cinema is strong enough to justify the term’s use; the intellectuals of New York hold such sway over the culture industries that eventually their ideas constitute an “us” in actual fact (viii-ix). Furthermore, this supposedly “narrow class” is much broader than one might think. It indeed extends beyond the boundaries of America to become a kind of global class: “between this small class and an analogous class in, say, Nigeria, there is pretty sure to be a natural understanding” (ix). For Trilling in 1965, intellectuals from New York and Nigeria alike constitute a coherent and powerful social class.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The critique of Trilling’s “we” was truly solidified shortly *after* *Beyond Culture*’s publication in Graham Hough’s 1966 *New Listener* article on “‘We’ and Lionel Trilling.” Other explanations for Trilling’s “we” than I present here

No matter whether we agree with Trilling's sweeping assessment of the class's influence or the idea of its international homogeneity in the mid-sixties, it is nevertheless striking that he so easily and confidently asserts both. He was able to do so, I would argue, because the concept of an important and influential intellectual class was not at all new to him. While it is commonly recognized that some of Trilling's ideas in the sixties had an influence on the neoconservative iteration of a "New Class" in the late sixties and seventies (a lineage we will examine in the next section of the chapter), no one to my knowledge has ever demonstrated that Trilling had in fact been working with a version of the New Class concept since at least the late 1930s.<sup>7</sup> In this section of the chapter and the next, then, I will show that beginning in this period Trilling borrowed the concept of the New Class from his anti-Stalinist (often Trotskyist) circle, and then spent nearly a decade expanding its critique in order to help discredit contemporary "liberalism" itself as much as Stalinism. By the time of his mature works of the 1940s—both critical and fictional—the existence of what Trilling called an "intellectual class" formed an unspoken sociological bedrock for not only his sense of an audience and community of peers (the famed and controversial "we" of his later years) but also and perhaps more importantly for many of the most important concepts and characteristic themes of his "great decade." In this section I will trace specifically how the concept of an intellectual class led to Trilling's concept of the "masked will."

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exist as well. Elinor Grumet notes that Trilling used this characteristic "we" from his earliest days of publishing for the *Menorah Journal* in the 1920s, and suggests that he was thus adopting a Victorian "language of ethical meditation on the state of society" in the context of a well-educated Jewish audience (165). His "we" thus created a "community-by-incantation" which shares and validates the culture as he perceives it" (165). But as astute an explanation as this is for Trilling's early usage, it doesn't fully explain his use of "we" in the forties. In this era, only infrequently did Trilling's community-by-incantation "validate" the culture as Trilling perceived it. Much more often, as in my examples above, Trilling was arguing *against* "us."

<sup>7</sup> For an example of the critical discussion of Trilling's influence on neoconservatism in the sixties and seventies, see Krupnick 147-50.

From the earliest days of his career, Trilling publicly worried over intellectuals' collective identity. Max Nomad's "White Collars and Horny Hands"—as we recall from Chapter One, the first American explication of the most suspicious mode of New Class theory, an exposé of the intellectual workers who attempted to sabotage proletarian revolution for their own class interests—first appeared in the Autumn 1932 issue of *The Modern Quarterly*. Reviewing a biography of Thomas Carlyle in the same journal, only one issue before Nomad's article appeared, Trilling offers a theme remarkably similar to Nomad's. He presents Carlyle as an erstwhile liberal intellectual whose politics, rooted in the worship of "great men" and "heroes," eventually turned proto-fascist. Then he uses Carlyle's conversion to reaction in order to draw his own skeptical moral for contemporary intellectuals:

Today, when so many of our middle-class intellectuals are swinging left, it is well to remember that the position of the bourgeois intellectual in any proletarian movement has always been an anomalous and precarious one. However sincere he may be, the mind of the intellectual is so apt to be overlaid with conflicting values that it is impossible to be sure of his position; having so many values, he is likely to betray one to defend others. In this dilemma the recognition of his own training and nature can be his only safeguard against confusion and eventual missteps.

(109)

Thus from the start of his remarkable career, Trilling speculated on intellectuals as a discrete social group, and his primary concern was with those intellectuals who might be identified as "middle-class" and "bourgeois." He furthermore urged his own class consciousness—the middle-class intellectual's "recognition of his own training and nature"—as a vital principle of

intellectuals' participation in proletarian politics, a self-knowledge required in order to avoid supporting fascism.<sup>8</sup>

Such concerns were consistent with Trilling's politics during this period. While never a card-carrying Communist, Trilling had nevertheless been "converted" to Communism in 1931 (D. Trilling, *Beginning* 179). The 1932 review of Carlyle's biography had furthermore been written while Trilling was, in Alan Wald's words, "as close as he ever would [be] to collaborating with a self-proclaimed Marxist organization" (*New York* 64): his fiancée Diana had worked for a short time (starting in 1931) in a Communist front organization, the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners. Some contemporaries even remembered the couple as "ardent Leninists" at the time (Wald, *New York* 60). Many of Trilling's first publications had been dedicated to reviewing proletarian novels in the *Menorah Journal* as well, the publication for which his friend Tess Slesinger also wrote. Over the course of the thirties, however, Trilling became disaffected from the Communist Party, if not from socialism altogether. After Communists roughly broke up a rally of the American Socialist Party at Madison Square Garden in 1934, he and others from the *Menorah Journal* circle openly criticized the Party—a move that earned him a rebuke by name from the editors of the Party journal *New Masses* (Wald, *New York* 63).<sup>9</sup> Stung but not yet estranged from leftist politics, for the next several years, as he worked on the Columbia University dissertation that would become *Matthew Arnold*, Trilling was an independent anti-Stalinist with socialist inclinations, at least intellectually. Like Mary McCarthy, he was sympathetic to Trotsky. Trilling's wife Diana tells us

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<sup>8</sup> Trilling continued to view Carlyle as a proto-fascist throughout the decade, the comparison growing more direct in 1939's *Matthew Arnold*. There he compares Carlyle's views to Mussolini's, and notes Carlyle's popularity in fascist Italy (54).

<sup>9</sup> The *New Masses* editorial of March 27, 1934 sarcastically referred to "the erstwhile *Menorah Journal* group—these loop-de-loopers from Zionism to 'internationalism': the Brenners, the Cohens, the Bergs, the Novacks, the Trillings, the Morrows, the Rubins . . ." (qtd. in Wald, *New York* 63). The "Rubin" referred to is Diana Rubin, Trilling's wife since 1929, who still used her maiden name for at least political purposes.

that though Lionel did not go to Mexico for the hearings, he nevertheless joined the 1937 Dewey Commission, which exonerated Trotsky of Stalin's accusations. And though neither she nor Lionel had ever been a Trotskyist, nor even "much of a Trotskyist fellow traveler," she claims, nevertheless "as between Stalin and Trotsky, we for a long time took the side of the latter" (*Beginning* 213).<sup>10</sup> The thirties, in other words, saw Lionel Trilling convert from a modestly activist Communist-identified intellectual into a politically inactive but Trotskyist-identified intellectual.<sup>11</sup>

With that anti-Stalinist, Trotskyist sympathy in mind, it is unsurprising that Trilling's 1932 suspicion of Carlylean intellectuals on the left who might sanction authoritarianism only grew in his later work. Trilling's study of Matthew Arnold, for example—the crowning product of his graduate work in the nineteen-thirties—admires Arnold for understanding thoughtless action to be not only the province of the contemporary "commercial and industrial classes," but "no less the creed of the advanced intellectuals who see the world as the field upon which they may religiously exercise their souls" (100-101). For Trilling, Arnold represented a necessary counterexample to these uncritical and fervent intellectuals. Unlike them, Arnold believed in "a world where will is not everything," where thought would hold equal place with action (7). In contrast to the unthinkingly religious perception of the "advanced" intellectual, "*To see the object as it really is* was the essence of Arnold's teaching" (8, emphasis in the original). Matthew Arnold's particular mode of intellectualism, Trilling hoped, would serve to correct contemporary intellectuals' tendency to simplify the world according to their activist beliefs.

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<sup>10</sup> Trilling's affection for Trotsky lasted decades, in fact. Reviewing a book about Trotsky's assassin in 1960, Trilling admitted that Trotsky could be "ruthless" ("Assassination" 369), but nevertheless insisted on his "charismatic charm," and called him an "'intellectual' in every good sense of that abused word" (370).

<sup>11</sup> In addition to Wald and Diana Trilling, I have relied on Krupnick (35-46) for this account of Trilling's political beliefs in the thirties. Krupnick wisely offers this caveat, however: "It is very difficult to be certain about Trilling's politics in the thirties because he left few traces" (40). This in turn may be because Trilling became markedly less political, in any standard sense of the term, over the course of the decade.



In the same year as *Matthew Arnold's* publication—1939, also the year of the New York-centered split in the Socialist Workers Party, with its passionate debate over the possible existence of a “New Class” creating “bureaucratic collectivism”—Trilling reached a landmark in his understanding of intellectuals as a whole. In a contribution to *Partisan Review's* symposium on “The Situation in American Writing,” he first formulated his mature understanding of the group as an “intellectual *class*.” It was an understanding, or at least a phrase, that would stay with him until his death: in 1975, one can still find him unselfconsciously referring to an “intellectual class” in his introduction to a republication of *The Middle of the Journey* (vii, xx, and xxi).<sup>12</sup> In the 1939 symposium Trilling declares his literary interests to be

in the tradition of humanistic thought and in the intellectual middle class which believes that it continues this tradition. Nowadays this is perhaps not properly pious; but however much I may acknowledge the historic role of the working class and the validity of Marxism, it would be *only* piety for me to say that my chief literary interest lay in this class and this tradition. . . . it is for this intellectual class that I suppose I write (120-21, emphasis in original).

Trilling hedges on his commitment to Marxism here (“*however much* [he] *may* acknowledge” it). But he is sure that an intellectual class, distinct from the Marxist working class, exists.

He goes on to offer a fundamental criticism of that class. “What for me is so interesting in the intellectual middle class,” he writes, “is the dramatic contradiction of its living with the greatest possibility (call it illusion) of conscious choice, its believing itself the inheritor of the great humanist and rationalist tradition, and the badness and stupidity of its action” (120-21).

While the intellectual class proclaims its belief in the ideals of “the great humanist and rationalist

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<sup>12</sup> In an autobiographical lecture given at Purdue University in 1971, Trilling similarly discusses the 1920s as a decade that revealed a “growing sense of identity and solidarity [in] the rapidly developing *intellectual class*” (“Some Notes” 230, emphasis in the original).

tradition” of the Enlightenment itself—in universal liberty and equality—its supposedly “conscious choice” of such ideals is only an “illusion.” In actual practice, we may infer from this Trotskyist sympathizer, the intellectual class has deluded itself into championing a Communist Party responsible for the “badness and stupidity” of Stalin’s purges and gulags, a system diametrically opposed to human liberty. Much like the dissident Trotskyists, in other words, in 1939 Trilling postulated an intellectual class marked by a fundamental contradiction between its consciously lofty ideals and its “bad and stupid” actions.

Armed with this understanding of the internal contradictions of his intellectual class, Trilling soon imagined the class in more detail, offering it a long and ultimately damning history in 1943’s *E. M. Forster*. The intellectual “first came into historical notice” during the French Revolution when lawyers and priests in the Assembly spoke out against the aristocracy, Trilling remarks there. Thus “The French Revolution was the first great occasion when Mind—conscious, verbalized mind—became an important element in national politics” (91). But the social type of the intellectual did not just originate in the French Revolution, he argues. Once again, intellectuals are not simply inheritors of the Enlightenment, despite what they tell themselves. For the intellectual also descends from the many religious sects of the eighteenth century (91-92), and this has had profound consequences for the subsequent history of the intellectual class. The liberal intellectual has retained from this sectarian period the forms of argument and invective common to religious dispute. From this alternative genealogy Trilling in fact fashions a startling broadside against liberal intellectuals in general, who, he now tells us, “have always moved in an aura of self-congratulation. They sustain themselves by flattering themselves with intentions and they dismiss as ‘reactionary’ whoever questions them” (92). Furthermore, despite his pretensions to social transcendence, the liberal intellectual is in fact “the

most class-marked and class-bound of all men” (92). This “class-bound” man bears an uneasy relationship to “the business-man” whom he despises, yet depends upon for financial support. He is also uneasy with the working class, since he is separated from that class by virtue of his articulate speech. Yet he insists on speaking for the working class in a “paternal, pedagogic, even priestlike” fashion (92-3), since he regards “the mass of men as objects of his benevolence” (93). Thus the liberal intellectual, in Trilling’s ever more critical view, is a smug and self-deceived creature descended from the smug and self-deceived religious sectarians of the so-called Enlightenment era. Just as importantly, he is part of an intellectual *class* with its own class interests, caught between the capitalist class that feeds him and the working class to which he condescends and yet claims to represent.<sup>13</sup>

Such a biting critical, class-based understanding of intellectual and political self-deception sets the stage for the emergence of one of Trilling’s most characteristic and important phrases of the late forties: “masked will.” The phrase does much to explain Trilling’s politics in that decade and those that followed, as we shall see in the remainder of this chapter. It finds its best explicit definition in Trilling’s famed essay on Henry James’s *The Princess Casamassima*, originally published in 1948 and then reprinted in 1950’s *The Liberal Imagination*. A tour de force—over a decade later Joseph Frank still hailed it as one of the “finest performances of contemporary criticism” (259)<sup>14</sup>—Trilling’s essay interprets James’s story of revolutionary intrigue as a morality tale of “the masked will.” The eponymous Princess, when young, foolishly “sold herself for a title and fortune. She regards her doing so as such a terrible piece of frivolity

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<sup>13</sup> Following then-standard linguistic usage for “generic” examples, Trilling designates the liberal intellectual a “he.” But in practice, when he cared to embody the concept, Trilling most often envisioned his misguided and intellectually weak liberal intellectual as a woman. As we shall see, his best exemplars of the liberal intellectual are Nancy Croom in *The Middle of the Journey*, and the Princess Casamassima in Henry James’s novel of the same name.

<sup>14</sup> I say “over a decade later” because even though Frank’s essay on Trilling was first published eight years after Trilling’s *Casamassima* essay appeared in 1948—i.e. not quite a decade later—Frank was nevertheless willing to reprint his high praise in 1963’s *The Widening Gyre*, a full fifteen years after Trilling’s first publication.

that she can never for the rest of her days be serious enough to make up for it” (qtd. on 87). Thus when she meets the proletarian revolutionary Paul Muniment, Trilling argues, she finds a way to escape her mistake—to be, in her own estimation, a serious person. She hopes for a more daring life, a life opposed to her pale aristocratic existence, via the certainty, the “reality,” of revolutionary politics. She is “a perfect drunkard of reality” (87), in Trilling’s evocative phrase. Soon embroiled in Muniment’s political machinations, she at last hopes to aid an underground revolutionary society by assassinating a duke. In this moment of murderous impulse, justified consciously by her proletarian sympathies but founded actually in a desire to change her own life and atone for her earlier “frivolity,” Trilling finds her to be

the very embodiment of the modern will which masks itself in virtue, making itself appear harmless, the will that hates itself and finds its manifestations guilty and is able to exist only if it operates in the name of virtue, that despises the variety and modulations of the human story and longs for an absolute humanity . . . [She is] a striking symbol of that powerful part of modern culture that exists by means of its claim to political innocence and by its false seriousness—the political awareness that is not aware, the social consciousness which hates full consciousness, the moral earnestness which is moral luxury. (87-88)

Much like the members of Trilling’s intellectual class, the privileged Princess is possessed by a will that masks itself with sociopolitical virtue, while in actuality it only attempts to realize its selfish desires, possibly by bloody means. In sum, Trilling’s nearly two-decades-long meditations on the perils of intellectuals’ political involvement on behalf of proletarian causes—from 1932’s worry over Carlyle’s conversion to a forerunner of fascism, to 1943’s damning history of the smug and self-deceived religiosity of intellectuals since the French Revolution—

was crystallized in this late-forties critique of the “masked will.” Intellectuals engaged in class politics risked mistaking their own class desires for those of others—sometimes with violent results.

But while the “masked will” obtained its best definition in the *Princess Casamassima* essay, it was not the first time Trilling had used the phrase in print. The phrase “masked will” was first coined the year before, in Trilling’s 1947 novel *The Middle of the Journey* (334). And it is in Trilling’s novel that we may see his most detailed attempt to work out the phrase’s precise political meaning. We will thus turn now to *The Middle of the Journey* in order to fully understand Trilling’s conception of intellectual class politics in the late forties.

### **3. Masked Will and New Class in *The Middle of the Journey* (1947)**

As we have seen, the idea that intellectuals might constitute a distinct class originated on the left in America. It arose from heterodox Communist and then Trotskyist circles, among left intellectuals who were speculating on the role of intellectuals in proletarian revolution, whether in abstract theory or in the actual Soviet Union. But historically speaking, the New Class idea did not remain forever on the left. In the 1970s, the neoconservative movement—populated at first by former Democrats deeply upset by the activism of student and middle-class radicals of the previous decade—created its own version of New Class theory in order to explain the existence of this “New Left.” They postulated the existence of “a newly dominant class that function[ed] as a kind of radical fifth column within the government, media, and academe to mold society according to its own ‘anti-American,’ anticapitalist views” (Krupnick 147). In neoconservative Irving Kristol’s formulation in the *Wall Street Journal* in 1975, the New Class’s anticapitalist

politics were derived from its attachment to abstract “ideals,” ideals whose realization would—not coincidentally—necessitate the New Class’s rise to power:

The “new class”—intelligent, educated, energetic—has little respect for . . . (business) civilization. It wishes to see its “ideals” more effectual than the market is likely to permit them to be. And so it tries always to supersede economics by politics—an activity in which *it* is most competent, since it has the talents and the implicit authority to shape public opinion on all larger issues. (qtd. in Bruce-Briggs 4, emphasis in original)

Convincing themselves they were doing good for society, the New Class in reality merely created or expanded a slew of political bureaucracies (from classic New Deal programs like Social Security to the newer environmental regulation agencies) that would offer them and their children employment—and power—for years. So ran the neoconservative narrative of a liberal New Class in the seventies.<sup>15</sup>

It is widely acknowledged that Trilling had a great influence on this conception of a New Class via his 1965 exposition of an “adversary culture”—that is, his account of a powerful contemporary cultural movement, descended from both post-Enlightenment modernity and twentieth-century modernism, that habitually and unthinkingly valued the rejection of all dominant cultural trends.<sup>16</sup> Many of the contributors to B. Bruce-Briggs’ chiefly neoconservative volume, 1979’s *The New Class?*, for example, cite Trilling’s “adversary culture” in order to give

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<sup>15</sup> On the neoconservative idea of the New Class largely in its own words, see Bruce-Briggs. Barbara Ehrenreich, the socialist author of another late-1970s iteration of New Class theory—one vastly influential on the left, the “Professional-Managerial Class” or PMC (see Walker)—also offers a capsule history of the neoconservative account of a New Class in her *Fear of Falling*, 146-54.

<sup>16</sup> See *Beyond Culture*, especially the Preface and “On the Teaching of Modern Literature.” The concept of an “adversary culture” would be indispensable if one were to trace the trajectory of Trilling’s skepticism of intellectual labor and class to the end of his career.

an idea of what they mean by a “New Class.”<sup>17</sup> But Mark Krupnick denies any true connection between Trilling’s “adversary culture” and the neoconservative “New Class.” He asserts that neoconservatives were guilty of “politicizing concepts originally intended to be more specifically cultural in their reference,” and that there is “nothing in fact in Trilling’s own writing to indicate that [Trilling] shared the neoconservative belief” in a New Class (147). And it is true that in his critical writings at the time Trilling never portrayed an explicitly political New Class hostile to America and capitalism alike. Certainly Trilling never descended to advocating the cartoonish version of New Class theory that his former student Norman Podhoretz and others embraced in the 1970s.

But while we may agree with Krupnick’s insistence that Trilling’s mid-sixties idea of an “adversary culture” was more cultural than political, it is nevertheless worth bearing in mind that this invokes a dichotomy and distinction that Trilling himself had become famous for blurring, in essays that “assume[d] the inevitable intimate, if not always obvious, connection between literature and politics” (*Liberal* ix). We can’t separate culture and politics so easily as Krupnick suggests, especially not in Trilling’s case. And in fact, as Krupnick writes elsewhere, we would do well to note that Trilling often “revealed more in his fiction than in his critical essays on fiction about the specific social preferences implied by [his] abstractions” (75). His fiction made material what Trilling often conceived in the abstract. In this section, then, I will argue that Trilling’s own novel, *The Middle of the Journey*, demonstrates that Trilling had essentially created the neoconservative idea of the New Class by 1947, at least two decades before it emerged as a crucial weapon in that movement’s ideological arsenal. This argument should

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<sup>17</sup> See the essays by Norman Podhoretz (Trilling’s former student), Robert Bartley, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Daniel Bell, respectively on pages 22, 58, 85, and 179-80. Nash’s history of American conservative thought also discusses Jeffrey Hart’s use of the phrase in a *National Review* article in 1970 (299-300), though Nash seems unaware of its origins in Trilling’s work.

contribute vital historical background to debates about Trilling's relationship to neoconservatism in the sixties and seventies—debates that have commonly assumed that Trilling only started thinking about intellectual workers in the sixties. But we should be careful to note that it does not identify Trilling as a neoconservative *avant la lettre*.<sup>18</sup> As we shall observe in the concluding section, Trilling is best seen in this period as an influential representative of what was then known as “the new liberalism.” In this proleptic identification of the neoconservative version of the New Class idea in Trilling's novel, then, I propose only to show that the idea of intellectuals as a class, first articulated in Communist and Trotskyist circles in the thirties, could be—and was—used for surprisingly conservative ends by the latter half of the forties. Trilling's depiction of the “masked will” in *The Middle of the Journey* shows us that the left concept of a class of intellectuals could, like many *people* on the left in this era, become deradicalized.

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<sup>18</sup> The literature on Trilling's relationship to neoconservatism is extensive. Aside from Krupnick, Trilling's widow Diana, while admitting that she cannot speak for what her husband would have believed had he lived longer (he died in 1975), also denies any affinity between his work and the neoconservative movement. She cites his refusal to support Nixon in the 1972 presidential election—despite being asked to do so by neoconservative Gertrude Himmelfarb, and despite his unease with McGovern (*Beginning* 404-05). More recently, Tom Samet argues that Trilling's ideal of the “dense, weighty, fixed, and morally centered self” (469) stands in noble opposition to the “already decentered and profoundly *deconstructive* social actuality” (470, emphasis in original) of an advanced capitalism whose exploitation now requires such flexibility of identity. From this point of view, Trilling's celebration of the fixed moral self may be more anticapitalist and liberatory than many of postmodernism's sometimes avowedly leftist ideals.

But others have found in Trilling an at least partial ally of neoconservatism. Trilling's one-time Columbia student, Norman Podhoretz, for example, claims Trilling as a strong influence on the movement. For him, Trilling was at bottom just as opposed to the radicalism of the sixties as he was to that of the thirties—even if his manner was disappointingly quiescent (see the excerpt from Podhoretz's *Breaking Ranks* in Rodden, *Lionel Trilling* 367-71). William Barrett also notes Trilling's profound influence on neoconservatism via his challenge to the “Marxism and modernism” of the *Partisan Review* circle—but Barrett also holds that Trilling “remained a thoroughgoing liberal to the end” (40). (It should be noted that his use of the term “liberal,” however, is in truth apolitical. In the same sentence he equates it with a “rational, secular, and non-religious” mind—despite Barrett's implication, something clearly not required for *political* liberalism.) Other intellectuals have placed Trilling in the neoconservative camp with comparatively few reservations: Himmelfarb happily claims him (Rodden, *Lionel Trilling* 372-76), while socialist Cornel West indicts him as the “Godfather of Neoconservatism” (Rodden, *Lionel Trilling* 395-403).

My own view accords with that of Morris Dickstein, another of Trilling's students, who believes that Trilling was simply and consistently averse to intellectual-political certainty as such. Dickstein remarks that Trilling “never buys fully into the neoconservatism already in the air when he died,” and that “[h]ad he lived, the pendulum [of his thought] would no doubt have shifted yet again” (qtd. in Rodden, *Lionel Trilling* 22). Both early and late, Trilling valued flexibility of mind over the truths of any political or intellectual trends. Consequently he was loath to identify wholly with any political movement, however much he found himself in sympathy with some of its beliefs.



*The Middle of the Journey* takes place in the middle to late 1930s, and its protagonist is John Laskell, an expert on public housing who normally lives in New York City. But as we meet him he is traveling on a train from New York to rural Connecticut. He is going there in order to recuperate from an outbreak of scarlet fever—a *red* disease, we eventually understand in the context of Trilling’s highly symbolic and anti-Communist novel. In this pastoral setting he is taken care of by his friends Arthur and Nancy Croom, who are living there for the summer. Arthur is a professor of economics whose growing prestige may soon land him a job in the Roosevelt administration (60). Both he and his wife are liberal fellow travelers of the Communist Party throughout these Popular Front years. Later the Crooms and Laskell are joined by Gifford Maxim, a friend of theirs who had gone underground in order to perform “special and secret” work (140), possibly involving violence, for the highest levels of the Party. He has now dramatically abandoned Stalinist Communism for a dogmatic Christian conservatism, however, and seeks a career in literary-political journalism. The novel contains little action beyond this, for at its heart it details a shift in political thought, particularly Laskell’s growing estrangement from both the fellow-traveling Crooms and the newly conservative Maxim. Narrating this clash within a clique of social and political experts (Laskell on public housing, Arthur Croom on economics, Maxim on politics), then, *The Middle of the Journey* offers another miniaturized drama of the intellectual class. It is a novel of explicit ideological intra-class conflict in the tradition of Slesinger’s *The Unpossessed* and McCarthy’s *The Company She Keeps*.

Trilling’s continuing concern with the class nature of intellectuals in the late forties may be seen primarily in the novel’s portrait of Arthur and Nancy Croom. Early on in the novel, John Laskell thinks of the Crooms as “a justification of” not only “human existence” in general (81), but of middle class Americans in particular. The “middle class, for all its failures,” he considers,

could yet produce the models for the human virtue of the future. . . . [H]e could want nothing better for the world than what the Crooms suggested. He could want nothing better than this much sturdiness and this much grace, this much passion and this much reason, this much personal concern and this much involvement in large affairs. (82)

Laskell thus begins the novel with nothing but respect and admiration for the middle-class Crooms, and the political idealism they espouse. They represent the hope of illimitable human progress and the desire for collective change (93). Most importantly for our purposes here, for Laskell and indeed the novel itself the Crooms represent the specific social and political potentials of the American middle class.

But the Crooms do not just represent the middle class in this novel, I would argue; they more specifically represent the intellectual class, or New Class. The novel accordingly understands the Crooms' politics as those of the seemingly idealistic masked will. On the level of character, for example, the novel's critique of intellectuals' masked will can be seen in the Crooms' persistent fawning over their working-class handyman, Duck Caldwell. Caldwell demonstrates continual irresponsibility and indeed brutality of mind. He forgets to pick Laskell up at the train station when he first arrives (10), and later mockingly relates one of the Crooms' private and intimate moments to a group of his friends at the bar (111-12). Toward the novel's close, he even drunkenly slaps his daughter twice, accidentally killing her (283-84). But despite these manifestations of Caldwell's crudeness and even malignancy, the Crooms habitually make excuses for him: they suggest that his failure to pick Laskell up at the station is due to his "constitutional weakness" for alcohol, or some vague "unhappiness," for example (12). And at most other times the Crooms simply admire him, talking about him "as if he were not so much a

man as a symbol” of the noble working class itself (105). Their view of this working class man is in short blinded by their conception of what “the working class” is supposed to be in (Marxist) theory. Much like the Princess Casamassima, their political idealism masks a personal will that sanctions violence, in this case Duck’s own violent behavior.

More directly, the Crooms are similarly willing to tolerate Stalin’s purges of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union during the Moscow trials. Once again, like the Princess Casamassima, they justify their support for such grisly business by a hard-headed appeal to the real. The otherwise idealistic Arthur Croom, for example, makes an oblique case for the purges as against what he conceives to be a soft liberalism unwilling to confront “reality”:

You find a good many people these days who think things can be made perfect overnight, that a revolution insures a Utopia in an instant, without difficulty and trouble, without compromise and without the use of force. . . . The great danger to the progressive movement these days, as I see it, is that liberals are going to confuse their dreams and ideals with the possible realities. You see that happening already—people become disappointed and disaffected because everything isn’t the way they would like to have it. They see economic democracy developing over there and that doesn’t satisfy them—they begin shouting for immediate political democracy, forgetting the realities of the historical situation. (177)

Thus while Arthur supports the benign cause of economic progress, he simultaneously tolerates the bloodiest forms of coercion in its name. Both in relation to Duck Caldwell and to the Soviet Union, in other words, the Crooms personify a will that is masked; their idealism masks their tolerance of both personal and political violence.

Nancy Croom in particular demonstrates the masked will on a more intimate, and therefore perhaps more terrifying, level. Many critics have noted that Nancy Croom is often figured in the text as a child (e.g. Tanner 67), a revealing symbol of her simplistic—and often dangerous—world view. The novel’s first description of Nancy notes that she had “clear eyes that could show a child’s wonder but could also show a child’s strong, demanding anger” (9-10). This original observation is borne out later as well. Her child’s wonder is shown when Laskell searches his wallet for a picture of his deceased lover to show to Nancy, and the narrator remarks that “There really was a good deal of the child about her and he had diverted her by making her curious about what he had to show” (121). But her child’s anger reveals itself in several of her arguments with Laskell, and more subtly when she tells Laskell, who is stepping on some of her flowers, to “step out of the cosmos” (81). Edward Shoben overstates the case, but nevertheless usefully draws out the ominous overtones of this “lighthearted pun” in the form of a Freudian slip when he notes that Nancy is “capable of striking cruelty” and that the accidental pun “only emphasizes . . . Nancy’s willingness to move from the larger cosmos virtually anyone who seems to stand in the way of her realizing the politicized actualization of her inner longings” (136-37). Thus we should not be surprised to find out that Nancy is considering joining the Communist Party, as she says in a moment of pique, because she’s “so damn tired” of liberals, “with their civil liberties and their Jeffersonian democracies” (206). She may have even directly aided political violence, we learn, when she agreed to forward some letters to Maxim, as part of his “special and secret”—quite possibly lethal—work for the Party (166-67).<sup>19</sup> As a number of critics have pointed out, Nancy Croom, with her unconscious will to have John “step out of the cosmos” when he disagrees with her one-sided and seemingly virtuous politics, is an ideological

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<sup>19</sup> This scenario was modeled on a similar request the real-life Whittaker Chambers made of Diana Trilling. Unlike Nancy Croom, Diana Trilling refused the request (D. Trilling, *Beginning* 216-17).

sister to Trilling's Princess Casamassima. She is *The Middle of the Journey*'s best representative of the intellectual class's masked will.

But the novel's most memorable summary of the dangers of masked will comes in symbolic form. It occurs in a startling and almost surreal scene, whose placement at the end of the first chapter makes it serve as a keynote for the remainder of the work—a thesis statement, as it were, in this academic literary critic's novel. The Crooms, who live in an unfinished house, arrange for Laskell to stay with their neighbors, the Folgers. On Laskell's first day there, he hears a horrendously bizarre, inarticulate, and yet mournful sound coming from the porch below his room. He soon discovers that the sound is actually only the old and deaf Alwin Folger talking to his three hounds, playfully representing their supposed angst over the tardiness of their coming dinner. But Alwin's imaginative mimicry carries symbolic political weight as he repeatedly calls the hungering dogs "*poor boys*" (emphasis added): "*Way-ra dirra, way-ra dirra, way-ra dirra forra poo-oo-oo-rrr boys?*" he cajoles them; "Where's the dinner, where's the dinner, where's the dinner for the poor boys?" the narrator translates (32). Almost immediately, if in the main unconsciously, Laskell perceives the political implications of Alwin's actions: "The voice was terrible in its imitation of human reason. . . . It almost seemed to [Laskell] that the voice was expressing the grievance of others, was commiserating with others, speaking of their sorrow, for the sorrow of other deprived minds. And this power of generalization, this appeal, as it were, to justice, was more terrifying than anything else" (30). On some level Laskell thus recognizes that Alwin treats the hungry dogs much as Trilling believed that left-liberal intellectuals treat the hungry poor: he does not genuinely communicate with them, but nevertheless contrives to speak for them in the name of justice. Alwin's sad, other-worldly howling—an "insane exposition of grief and injustice" (31)—is the voice of masked will.

Over the course of the novel, Laskell comes to reject such pseudo-benevolent appeals to justice, which seem to drive his friends' politics. He perceives that his friends are less concerned about those they are representing than about the satisfaction of their *own* desires. "It was not [the Crooms' and Maxim's] wills that wearied him," he judges in the end, "but the necessity they shared to make their wills appear harmless" (324). And when he challenges their political dogmatism, they berate him, allowing him to finally name their intellectual and political malady: their anger at him is "the anger of the masked will at the appearance of an idea in modulation" (334), the inability of the masked will's dogmatism to countenance complexity. In Trilling's narrative, the intellectual class's masked will refuses, sometimes angrily, to recognize the existence of its *own* will, its own class interest, in defining its opinions.

A few years earlier, in 1943's *E. M. Forster*, Trilling had implied a *liberal* justification for liberals to beware their masked will. He writes there that liberalism "prefers to make its alliances only when it thinks it catches the scent of Utopia in parties and governments, the odor of sanctity in men; and if neither is actually present, liberalism makes sure to supply it" (8). Trilling here articulates something close to the concept of masked will that he would only name a few years later: *creating* utopian sentiment when they cannot find it in reality, liberals project their own utopian desires onto others even when those being spoken for do not share those liberal desires. In the liberal imagination, in short, every working-class person is transformed into a member of the valiant and revolutionary proletariat. Trilling goes on to explicate the harm liberalism does to itself when indulging in such political fantasy. Continually understanding their own desires to be those of others, liberals are persistently disappointed, and because of this, he maintains, "liberalism is always being surprised" (8). Thus "There is always the liberal work to do over again because disillusionment and fatigue follow hard upon surprise, and reaction is

always ready for that moment of liberal disillusionment and fatigue—reaction never hopes, despairs, or suffers amazement” (8). When those being spoken for do not fulfill the liberal fantasy, as inevitably they do not, reactionary politics eagerly fills the vacuum left by dashed utopian hopes. In the end, for this dry run of the concept of “masked will,” the liberal’s imposition of his or her fantasies onto others only causes setbacks for liberalism’s own noble goals.

But if *E. M. Forster* thus offered a critique of the masked will that demonstrated an essential sympathy with liberalism’s goals, in *The Middle of the Journey* the critique obtains a much more conservative basis. For by exclusively presenting lower-class characters that enjoy or even seem to deserve their subservient status, and hence definitively don’t want or need help, *The Middle of the Journey* seems to deny the left-liberal proposition that social inequality is a problem at all. The Folgers, for example, live a perfectly content life in a story line that can only be described as a paean to feudalism. Tending to the needs of “local squireess” Julia Walker and her property (262), Mr. Folger gives her advice as if he were “a great minister of state who gives to an aged queen . . . his counsel” (80). He drives Miss Walker around in a car she has bought for him, and he and Mrs. Folger cheerfully wait for Miss Walker to build them a house on her property—a modest house intended only “to bring Mr. Folger within easier reach, permitting him to look after Miss Walker’s little estate” (79), but which the couple treats as if a “duchy . . . was to be their reward” (80). Happily meditating on this idyllic scenario toward the end of the novel, Laskell contentedly realizes that Mrs. Folger’s “loyalty of commitment to Miss Walker . . . was very deep,” and that “Loyalty was a virtue” (311). Contrary to what liberal intellectuals with masked wills may think, these loyal serfs are content. The Folgers don’t need to be saved.

On a more symbolic level, Alwin Folger's "poor" hounds, too, do not *really* have such a bad life. When one dog is taken forcibly but kindly into Folger's hands—or on the level of political symbolism, into his *control*—the dog is "divided between happiness and unhappiness, caught and held, yet loving the game that was being played with him" (33). For their part, the other two hounds watch "their captive comrade half with pleasure, half with apprehension" (33), nervous but not ultimately displeased with his and their dependent position. The choice of "comrade" to describe the dogs' relationships with each other is both purposeful and ironic in the novel's anti-Communist context: anything but the revolutionary proletarians that "comrade" would normally imply, in the main these dogs seem to enjoy their servility. In perhaps the most outrageous phrase of the book, looked at in this light, by the end of the novel Laskell knows that the hounds "were very lazy and on hot days they gasped and looked at the world with suffering eyes, but they really had a very easy life and were well fed and much petted" (340). Lovingly cared for by their respective masters, both the poor dogs and their serf-like owners the Folgers do not want or even need benevolent attention from those better off. In *The Middle of the Journey*, liberal concern for those less well-off is simply misplaced.

It is also often unmerited. For if the Folgers and the hounds both represent economic underclasses as content and well-kept, handyman Duck Caldwell is the worst kind of human being and, we are meant to think, the worst kind of proletarian. In *The Liberal Imagination*, Trilling notes that the literature of "our liberal democracy" "pets and dandles its underprivileged characters, and, quite as if it had the right to do so, forgives them what faults they may have" (83). An irresponsible and finally vicious scoundrel, the character of Duck stands as a (one-sided) corrective to the entire fictive tradition Trilling identifies as liberal. There is nothing inherently wrong with representing a vicious member of the working class, or content and loyal



serfs, of course; but it is fair to say that the novel's portrait of the working class exhibits little of Trilling's supposedly balanced and imaginative political liberalism. If the liberal intellectual with masked will risks bad faith when he or she speaks for the working class, when *The Middle of the Journey* speaks for them, they definitively do not want, and in some cases do not deserve, such advocacy at all.

Indeed at times Trilling's novel accepts the existence of classes with frank appreciation. "Laskell had sometimes thought that people in their imposed functions were rather better than the same people when they stepped outside their functions," we are told (210). The "girls in the office" who were "notable for the simplicity and directness in their characters," as well as their cheerfully "efficient" demeanor, become "petulant and self-pitying people with no firmness of character at all" at the office Christmas party. Likewise the "colleague whose sense of performance organized him so well when he was being professional, became, when you had cocktails with him . . . as soggy as a soul could be" (210). The "imposed functions" Laskell admires, in short, are those of class, the limits of specified professional labor. His ruminations on the value of vocational limitations also apply to Emily Caldwell, whose "profession" is that of a mother. She does not interest Laskell as "an intellectual or as a rebel," he realizes. "But in her function as Susan's mother . . . in her function as housekeeper . . . Laskell had found her more and more impressive. She had a womanly dignity that did not depend on intellect" (211). Trilling's *The Middle of the Journey* thus even offers a brief for the positive value of "imposed functions" such as class and gender roles. In this, it is ideologically quite close to Russell Kirk's description of the conservative's "Conviction that civilized society requires orders and classes"

(8), articulated only six years after Trilling's novel in Kirk's seminal book on *The Conservative Mind*.<sup>20</sup>

And recognizing this conservative trend in Trilling's novel, we may now see that *The Middle of the Journey*, published over two decades before the emergence of neoconservatism, portrays a New Class that very much resembles the neoconservative one. If the neoconservatives' New Class did not seek to help the poor, but only to advance its own interests, then in *The Middle of the Journey* the masked wills of both Nancy Croom and Alwin Folger seek not so much to help the poor (dogs), as to assert their own will and desires. In the context of this novel, where the working class uniformly does not want or deserve the aid of intellectuals, the cynical implication that left intellectuals do not genuinely wish to help the poor is a conservative one. Gifford Maxim, the novel's newly-converted Christian conservative, is accordingly its most direct exponent:

And never has there been so much talk of liberty while the chains are being forged. *Democracy* and *freedom*. And in the most secret heart of every intellectual, where he scarcely knows of it himself, there lies hidden the *real* hope that these words hide. It is the hope of power, the desire to bring his ideas to reality by imposing them on his fellow man. We are all of us, all of us, the little children of the Grand Inquisitor. The more we talk of welfare the crueler we become. (243, emphases in the original)

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<sup>20</sup> While it is not my main subject here, there are indeed many links between Trilling's work and the traditionalist strain of conservatism that came to prominence in the 1950s, then called the "new conservatism," or what we would now call "paleoconservatism." For a still-excellent mid-fifties evaluation that does much of the work necessary to link Trilling to this Burkean conservatism—as Kirk elaborated it, a conservatism that rejected innovation in favor of the status quo, tradition, and order—see Joseph Frank's penetrating essay "Lionel Trilling and the Conservative Imagination."

In “Manners, Morals, and the Novel,” an essay published the same year as his novel, Trilling echoes the conservative Maxim. “Some paradox of our natures,” he writes, “leads us, when once we have made our fellow men the objects of our enlightened interest, to go on to make them the objects of our pity, then of our wisdom, ultimately of our coercion” (*Liberal* 208). In Trilling’s mid-forties meditations on intellectual leftism, then, the desire to help subaltern others seems always to be an instance of masked will. Like the neoconservative New Class of the seventies, the intellectual class in Trilling’s novel demonstrates a selfish will to power that in fact hurts those it claims to aid.<sup>21</sup>

If Maxim’s speech describes the philosophical will to power characterizing the intellectuals of the New Class, the intellectual class’s economic opportunism may be glimpsed in the uninspiring narrative of Laskell’s conversion to liberalism. At the party of a liberal friend, Laskell finds himself in a heated conversation with a man over the issue of public housing. He takes an immediate dislike to the man and searches for any way to contradict him:

He did not know where he got the ideas he used for his arguments. No doubt they came from his opponent’s own laboriously acquired store, needing only to be turned upside down. He was pleased when the man became abusive and denounced not only Laskell, but what he called Laskell’s “whole school of thought.” Suddenly there he was, a member of a school of thought in a profession he had never before considered. . . . The ideas that Laskell had produced only to be contrary seemed to him suddenly right and important. (36)

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<sup>21</sup> Many contemporary readers will no doubt also be reminded of Foucault in the Trilling passages cited here. Agreed, though this similarity should not be understood to prove that Foucault, either, was somehow a neoconservative *avant la lettre*. See the conclusion of Chapter Four for an explication of Trilling’s relationship to poststructuralist and postmodern writers, including Foucault.

Having discovered that certain ideas can lead to membership in a profession, Laskell “suddenly” and unconvincingly believes in them: the neoconservative New Class, with its masked will of seeming benevolence, is born. Both the blunt desire for power and the coarsely economic motivations of Trilling’s intellectual class accurately prefigure the neoconservative account of the New Class in the seventies.

Once again, however, I do not seek to claim Trilling for conservatism or neoconservatism, in the forties or the seventies or at any other time. Deep and cutting skepticism of an intellectual class and its political motivations is not equivalent to neoconservatism itself, a movement with multiple beliefs and political agendas, whose effects we are still living out today, in America, the Middle East, and elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> As we shall see in the next section, Trilling’s cultural politics during the forties are more helpfully characterized as part of a contemporary movement then known as the “new liberalism.” My point is rather that Trilling’s avowedly liberal politics in this era displayed a growing and remarkably strong animus against actual

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<sup>22</sup> I should take this moment to address the discomfort that sympathizers with one or the other group may feel upon seeing an argument connecting Trotskyism to neoconservatism. On the left, Alan Wald seeks to separate the 1930s and 1940s radical left, including Trotskyism, from neoconservatism. He instead asserts neoconservatism’s continuity with a thoroughly deradicalized Cold War liberalism alone (see *New York* 352 and “Are Trotskyites”). On the right, Bill King offers a thorough refutation of the alleged Trotskyist-neoconservative connection as well (see his online article, “Neoconservatives and Trotskyism”). Wald and King both point out that most neoconservatives never participated in any kind of Marxist politics, and that the very few who did did so briefly. And thus they are right about their main point: when pundits suggest that there is something fundamentally “Trotskyist” about the political stands of neoconservatives in either the 1970s or the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, they are engaged in sloppy thinking at best, and shallow name-calling at worst.

But I am talking here about the history of ideas, which sometimes makes for stranger bedfellows than politics itself. For as this dissertation shows via the cases of Lionel Trilling and Mary McCarthy, Cold War liberalism *learned from* Trotskyist thinking, including the debates over a “New Class” of intellectual workers and their propensity for supporting “bureaucratic collectivism” in the Soviet Union and U.S. alike. And as Wald points out, most neoconservatives began as Cold War liberals. Thus while I agree with Wald that it won’t do to call neoconservatives “inside-out Bolsheviks” (*New York* 352), I would insist as well that we cannot ignore or deny significant points of continuity between Trotskyist and/or ex-Trotskyist thinking in the late thirties and early forties and neoconservative thought in the late sixties and seventies. There is a continuity of ideas between the two movements (including the “New Class” idea), even though those ideas obtain radically different meanings in different political contexts. To note a point of intellectual continuity, then, as I am doing, is not to confuse the two movements; nor is it to suggest that one inevitably leads to the other. With a genuinely wide ideological and political gulf between them, neither Trotskyists nor neoconservatives need fear being tainted by their sometimes shared conception of intellectual workers as a class.

liberals, so much so that it could resemble and even contribute to the later phenomenon of neoconservatism in one crucial respect. And more importantly for the argument of Part I of this dissertation, I have shown that Trilling's imagination of an intellectual class, developed from the earliest days of his critical career but expressed most fully in his 1947 novel, revealed one of the most damning critiques of left intellectuals yet produced in the influential milieu of New York anti-Stalinist intellectuals. In the thirties and early forties, Slesinger's narcissists had become McCarthy's sometimes well-meaning but easily-deluded proponents of bureaucratic collectivism. In both these cases distinctly Freudian psychological motivations, rather than coarsely economic ones, played the main role. And the worst outcome directly visible was either a tragicomic domestic life, or a tenuously preserved psychological disunity.<sup>23</sup> But in 1947's *The Middle of the Journey*, Laskell's first political motivations are socioeconomic ones, and Nancy Croom's childish anger and desire to have Laskell "step out of the cosmos" hints at a violence reminiscent of Stalin's purges—or Gifford Maxim's "special and secret" work.<sup>24</sup> Thus the intellectual class of *The Middle of the Journey* was not merely comical or ethically dubious. At its best, it was positively dangerous. And the New Class idea was accordingly no longer solely the province of the left, but rather a concept available for use by a wide range of political perspectives, many of them repugnant to the idea's original proponents.

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<sup>23</sup> Despite Slesinger's more comic treatment of the intellectual class, however, I would argue that Trilling's interpretation of *The Unpossessed* in 1966 nevertheless effectively read it as another treatise on his conception of the "masked will." Slesinger's novel, he suggested, depicted a fundamental dialectic between "the desire to make life as good as it might be" and "life" itself (23). Such a dialectic resembled what he had described in the 1940s as the struggle of intellectual workers to thoughtlessly impose their own political desires ("life as good as it might be") upon the (naturalized) "life" of the working class. In short, Trilling's 1966 interpretation recruits Slesinger's novel—with some justice, as we have seen—as a depiction of the (for him malevolent) politics of an intellectual class.

<sup>24</sup> In this harsh depiction of an intellectual class, we may note, Trilling ironically echoed some features of the most skeptical origin of New Class theory in America, though from much farther to the right politically. Recall that Max Nomad's 1932 essay "White Collars and Horny Hands," opposed to *Culture and the Crisis*'s romantic vision of intellectual-proletarian solidarity, had described the stratum of intellectual workers in terms of a "will-to-power" (75), and accused intellectuals of harboring strong economic motivations that would likely undermine the proletariat. For more on Nomad's article and *Culture and the Crisis*, see Chapter One.

#### 4. “Haunted Air”: The End of Interest and the Beginning of Ideology in the New Liberal Imagination

Trilling’s profound mistrust of intellectual workers was not the only or even the most important result of his early participation in a (post-) Trotskyist milieu of speculation on the existence and nature of an intellectual class, however. For the politics of intellectual work and intellectual workers lay at the heart of Trilling’s whole literary, intellectual, and political influence in the forties. Both at the time and since, Trilling’s politics in that era have been identified as a contribution to what contemporaries called “the new liberalism.” R. W. B. Lewis, for example, recognized Trilling’s kinship to the movement in his contemporary review of *The Liberal Imagination* (151); more recently Thomas Schaub has offered a longer explication of the work’s new liberalism in his *American Fiction in the Cold War* (20-22). Amongst other things, the new liberalism was a politics whose philosophical hallmark was an aversion to what it called “ideology.” Accordingly, this last section will suggest that Trilling’s increasingly far-reaching meditations on intellectual labor shaped not only his own ideas, but ultimately those of the “end of ideology” ethos that in retrospect thoroughly marked the forties and (especially) the fifties. By transforming his severe critique of a politically dangerous intellectual class into the broadly anti-ideological politics of his new liberalism, Trilling simultaneously gave the New Class idea its most sweeping social influence and obscured its keenest sociopolitical insights. The occlusion of class represented by the concept of “ideology” was in fact to have profound consequences for mid-century political thought in general, and, I will argue, for the broader history of postmodernism’s emergence in the sixties and seventies.

A brief review of the new liberalism will allow us to see Trilling’s place within the movement. Politically speaking, the new liberalism originated in left-liberal disillusionment with the Soviet Union following the Moscow trials in 1936 and the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939, and

more generally with the Soviet Union's refusal to institute any kind of meaningful workers' democracy, one that would protect civil rights and freedoms. Faced with these failures, many on the Soviet-identified left began to question the beliefs that had guided their political lives. The political consequences of these doubts varied widely: over the course of the 1940s, erstwhile enthusiasts of the Soviet experiment began to embrace positions ranging from a revolutionary internationalist Trotskyism that sought to redeem the early promise of the Russian Revolution, to an aggressively nationalist archconservatism that sought to achieve American (capitalist) military and political dominance over the globe.<sup>25</sup> The new liberalism, however, defined itself as part of what Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. famously called "the vital center."<sup>26</sup> Often stung by the connection between their once-utopian hopes and the reality of Soviet repression, and horrified as well by the rise of Nazism, these "new" liberals sought to avoid any radical plan that aimed to recreate American society or the world itself from scratch. Consequently they committed themselves to the gradual, liberal reform of a democratic welfare state at home, and to a relatively cautious policy of containing Soviet influence abroad. They believed in a political process that brokered between diverse interests, and that positively welcomed compromise and (better yet) consensus.

But the new liberalism was arguably as much a cultural and philosophical mood as it was a political movement, and it was here that Trilling's influence was decisive. Literary critic Richard Chase—Trilling's younger colleague and protégé in the Columbia English

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<sup>25</sup> James Burnham, whom we last encountered in the previous chapter breaking away from the (Trotskyist) Socialist Workers Party and thence the Workers Party in 1941, represents a particularly dramatic example of this range. Over the course of the decade he soon became a respected liberal; then a neo-Machiavellian critic of the illusions of popular sovereignty, who argued the need for an elite that lies to the populace for the sake of preserving liberty and freedom; and then a hard-edged Cold Warrior of the Right who advocated American world dominance via a monopoly of nuclear weapons the country should be willing to use. By 1955, he was an associate editor of William F. Buckley's newly-minted and soon influential *National Review*. On Burnham's post-Trotskyist career, see for example Diggins 303-37, 370-86, and *passim*.

<sup>26</sup> See Schlesinger's book by the same name.

Department—provides a useful and succinct summary of its more philosophical beliefs.<sup>27</sup> For Chase, the new liberalism was “that newly invigorated secular thought at the dark center of the twentieth century which . . . now begins to ransom liberalism from the ruinous sellouts, failures, and defeats of the thirties” (v). The new liberalism thus had to be understood negatively, through a series of distinctions from what must henceforth be known as the “old liberalism,” or what we would now call the Old Left. The new liberalism

must present a vision of life capable, by a continuous act of imaginative criticism, of avoiding the old mistakes: the facile ideas of progress and “social realism,” the disinclination to examine human motives, the indulgence of wish-fulfilling rhetoric, the belief that historical reality is merely a question of economic or ethical values, the idea that literature should participate directly in the economic liberation of the masses, the equivocal relationship to communist totalitarianism and power politics. (v)

The only point to take issue with in Chase’s account is his belief that the new liberalism was “secular thought,” for sometimes the new liberalism was precisely a theology, as in Reinhold Niebuhr’s employment of the concept of original sin as justification for a humble and pluralistic democracy. This exception aside, Chase’s description of the movement’s philosophical skepticism and intellectual open-mindedness is masterful.<sup>28</sup>

One way to summarize the new liberalism’s stance—and one that highlights its influence and centrality in relation to mid-century American thought as a whole—is to name its politics

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<sup>27</sup> Chase explicitly acknowledges Trilling’s influence in his Preface to *Herman Melville*, avowing that his “greatest debt” belongs to Trilling, a mentor “from whom I have learned so much during the last ten years” (xi).

<sup>28</sup> I have derived a good portion of these two paragraphs on the new liberalism from Thomas Hill Schaub’s helpful overview of the subject in his *American Fiction in the Cold War*, especially Part I, and Pells’s *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age*, especially 130-47. The specific Niebuhr work I have in mind as representative of a new liberalism based in theology is 1944’s *The Children of the Light and the Children of the Darkness*.



*anti-ideological*. Here I do not use “ideology” in the sense that some theoretically-inclined literary critics are apt to understand it now, as something that “represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser 162), something impossible to escape and anyway necessary for political practice (170). Rather, the term should be understood in an historically specific sense, expressed best by Daniel Bell in his era-defining work *The End of Ideology*. There ideology is described as an “all-inclusive system of comprehensive reality . . . a set of beliefs, infused with passion, [that] seeks to transform the whole of a way of life” (400). The new liberalism defined itself by a rejection of this kind of ideology. It sought to reject any passionate, systemic thought which claimed to explain all of reality, and therefore to guide political action absolutely, in the service of an utterly new social order. Bell’s thesis—that the fifties had thankfully produced, in the words of his book’s subtitle, an “exhaustion of political ideas” in the grand style of ideology—may indeed be regarded as the best theorization we have of the new liberal ethos. For Bell had been part of the same New York intellectual and new liberal milieu that witnessed hope for, and then profound disillusionment with, the Soviet Union, and by extension Marxism itself. Reviewing the political disappointments and traumas of the thirties and forties, including the Great Depression, the betrayal of the Russian Revolution’s hopes, and the Holocaust, Bell articulates new liberal intellectuals’ experience of these events precisely: “For the radical intellectual who had articulated the revolutionary impulses of the past century and a half, all this has meant an end to chiliastic hopes, to millenarianism, to apocalyptic thinking—and to ideology. For ideology, which once was a road to action, has come to be a dead end” (393). Disillusioned with all “final solutions” to perceived social problems, the new liberalism often envisioned itself less as a positive political program and more as a rejection of ideological thinking per se.

And the capstone work of Trilling's "great decade," *The Liberal Imagination*, may rightly be understood as a characteristically new liberal attack on ideological thinking in all its contemporary forms. While the book offers analyses of many seemingly disparate literary and cultural trends of the forties, beneath them all lies a single theme: contemporary liberalism—the "sole intellectual tradition" active in the United States, Trilling writes (vii)—precisely *lacks* imagination.<sup>29</sup> It is crude and simplistic, devoted to a moralistic conception of life that denies ambiguity. In a word, it is ideological. Liberalism instead requires a sense of nuance, complication, and complexity. Thus the book's opening essay on "Reality in America" famously attacks the popularity of V. L. Parrington and Theodore Dreiser as symptomatic of an impoverished conception of "reality" that moralizes rather than thinks; it instead urges that "reality" be understood as complex and conflicting. "Freud and Literature" presses a still-young psychoanalytic criticism to reject all-too-straightforward assumptions about how an author's work reflects his or her unconscious mind. Rather, it counsels that art is to be understood as a *conscious* creation whose manifold and indirect means of affecting the world at large are not unlike those of the unconscious mind when influencing dreams. "The Kinsey Report" critiques the eponymous study of sexuality for understanding sexual behavior as a mere physical fact, and instead recommends that sexuality be comprehended in the wider context of its social, psychological, and indeed moral dimensions. The book as a whole, then, realizes Trilling's critique of contemporary ("old") liberalism as simplistic and recklessly moralizing—as

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<sup>29</sup> In his review of the book, Stephen Spender rightly questioned Trilling's broad claim that there was no conservative intellectual tradition in American life; such a claim had blinded Trilling to the fruitfulness of conservatism's own critique of liberalism, he argued (164-65). And indeed three years after *The Liberal Imagination*'s publication, as we have noted, Russell Kirk's seminal tome *The Conservative Mind* would explicitly (and quite convincingly) rebut Trilling's claim (476); Kirk argued that Trilling's critique of the liberal mind had made the need for a revival of conservatism nothing short of self-evident (480). Trilling's by no means solitary ignorance of the existence of conservative intellectual thought was then soon remedied by a tidal wave of conservative intellectual publication. For a comprehensive history of the postwar conservative intellectual movement, see Nash.

ideological, in short—where it instead needs to be complex and genuinely ethical. The book’s very title embodies its theme, yoking together in dialectical tension “the liberal” with its currently countervailing ideal of “imagination”—an imagination best embodied in literature, “the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account” of the watchwords of new liberal politics: “variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty” (xiii).

But if we are to understand one important terminus of New Class discourse in American thought and fiction, we must see that it was only *through* his post-Trotskyist meditations on an intellectual class that Trilling eventually created this critique of ideology, the essence of his thoroughly influential new liberal politics. To understand this historical connection, we may begin by noting more closely Daniel Bell’s explication of the central term in his *End of Ideology*. Bell begins by recalling Karl Mannheim’s distinction between *particular* and *total* ideology. The first could be defined as a finite set of beliefs derived from the particular “interests” of their holders, whether those interests were economic or more broadly political. It is “in this sense that we can talk of the *ideology* of business, or of labor, or the like,” Bell writes (399, emphasis in original). Particular ideology is thus a descendant of the historically Marxist understanding of ideology as an “attempt . . . to claim universal validity for what was in fact a class interest” (396). But Bell declares that *total* ideology, on the other hand, is the true focus of his thesis; total ideology is the ideology he refers to when claiming “The End of Ideology in the West” (393). More encompassing and mentally demanding than particular ideology, total ideology is an “all-inclusive system of comprehensive reality . . . a set of beliefs, infused with passion, [that] seeks to transform the whole of a way of life” (400). Where particular ideology is a finite (often class-based) set of interested social and political positions, and at least potentially knowable by its holders, total ideology is instead “a secular religion” that seems to possess its holders entirely,

without their conscious knowledge. Unlike particular ideology, total ideology is a kind of irrational faith, and therefore “is *not* necessarily the reflection of interests” (400, emphasis in the original).

Bell’s invocation of Mannheim’s distinction is useful for many reasons, but here especially because it allows us to see that Trilling began his critical career in the late 1930s with a strong attention to something like the first, more Marxist type of ideology, where thought was a product of material (usually class) *interest*; and that he ended the 1940s concerned with something much closer to the second type of ideology, an “all-inclusive system of comprehensive reality” that needn’t be related to material interest at all. In a 1938 review of Dos Passos’ *U.S.A.* trilogy, for example, Trilling defends Dos Passos from the criticism of “radical admirers” like fellow-traveling critics T. K. Whipple and Malcolm Cowley. Such critics complained that for all his social observation, Dos Passos was in the end unconcerned with the struggle between classes. But Dos Passos *had* written about a class struggle, Trilling counters; such critics could not see this simply because their conception of “class” was unnecessarily limited. A “useful but often undetermined category of political and social thought,” class could mean one thing to the “political leader and the political theorist,” and another to “the novelist,” Trilling believed (“America” 108). For the (likely Marxist) political leader and theorist, class could be seen in “income-extremes or function-extremes” (107), and its importance was to be found in the impact of class consciousness on politics—“people’s perception that they are of one class or another and their resultant action” (108). But for the novelist, Trilling continues, class must also be an index of social “‘interest’—by which we must mean *real* interest (‘real will’ in the Rousseauian sense) and not what people say or think they want” (107-108, emphasis in

original).<sup>30</sup> For the novelist, class implies not just income-level, but *interests*—a set of real if sometimes unconscious class-related desires. Accordingly, for the novelist “the interesting and suggestive things” about class “are likely to be the moral paradoxes that result from the conflict between real and apparent interest” (108), between what people *say* they want and what they *actually*, materially, want. While it was true that Dos Passos ignored the “external class struggle,” then, he had nevertheless succeeded in depicting the class struggle “*within* his characters” (108, emphasis added). Dos Passos had depicted the class struggle via characters caught between their genuine, largely unconscious class interests, and their openly stated desires. Thus Trilling’s relatively early conception of class, while already in flight from unimaginatively Marxist accounts, nevertheless balances, to use a Marxist idiom, an objective and a subjective component to class. For the young Trilling, class inheres in one’s wallet *and* in one’s thoughts, conscious or not. Class interest helped to create ideology, in short.

And as we have seen, this fundamental connection between material existence and ideological thought persisted for Trilling throughout the late thirties and most of the forties. It shaped his understanding of “the intellectual class” he soon evoked in 1939’s “The Situation in American Writing.” If a year earlier he had championed Dos Passos’s fascination with characters whose stated desires contradict their underlying and active material interests, now Trilling explicitly saw the same contradiction in his own class, the intellectual class. Recall the passage discussed earlier: “What for me is so interesting in the intellectual middle class is the dramatic contradiction of its living with the greatest possibility (call it illusion) of conscious choice, its

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<sup>30</sup> Contrary to what Trilling implies here, Rousseau never uses the phrase “real will” himself. Trilling’s reference to “‘real will’ in the Rousseauian sense” actually refers to Bernard Bosanquet’s explication of Rousseau in his *Philosophical Theory of the State*, which Trilling takes care to cite and gloss in the more scholarly milieu of his *Matthew Arnold*: “Bosanquet calls the will acting with complete knowledge of the situation the *real will*; the will acting without this knowledge he calls the *apparent will*” (281, emphases in original). Thus Rousseau (via Bosanquet), along with Kant, Freud, and many others, is made an ancestor of Trilling’s obsession with individual and collective (class) self-deception.

believing itself the inheritor of the great humanist and rationalist tradition, and the badness and stupidity of its action” (“Situation” 120-21). In other words, while the intellectual class believes it exists *beyond* class interest, and chooses to act on behalf of a universal, “humanist and rational” good, it nevertheless self-servingly embraces a Stalinist ideology that might achieve its class and political power over capitalists and the working class alike. Thus, we will recall from 1943’s *E. M. Forster*, the intellectual was “the most class-marked and class-bound of all men” (94). The intellectual was a social type determined in strong measure by his material position between—and consequent political disdain for—both the capitalists who control him and the working class to whom he condescends and for whom he speaks. As we have seen, too, Trilling’s belief in the effects of economic interest on intellectuals’ thought persisted even into his 1947 portrait of John Laskell’s political conversion upon discovery that liberalism could lead to a whole professional “school.” Throughout most of the forties, in short, Trilling retained an understanding of the intellectual class that offered both an objective and a subjective analysis, that understood ideas to be necessarily influenced by material interests.

It is possible, however, to understand Trilling’s concept of the “masked will,” explicated in both 1947’s *The Middle of the Journey* and 1948’s essay on *The Princess Casamassima*, as a transitional term. For by using that term, Trilling theorized the political *interests* of his erstwhile intellectual class as a much more abstract *will*. In doing so he enabled that “will” to shed its class origins altogether, and eventually to emerge as a critique of an immaterial “ideology.” By the time of the later essays printed in *The Liberal Imagination*—“Art and Fortune” (1948) and “The Meaning of a Literary Idea” (1949) particularly—Trilling’s materialism, never strident in the first place, indeed visibly fades into a more abstract critique. In these late-forties essays Trilling first names the social problem of what he now explicitly calls “ideology,” and though it also

involves intellectual self-deception, it is clear that the problem exists above and beyond his earlier critique of an intellectual class. Ideas “have acquired a new kind of place in society,” Trilling begins.

The increase of conscious formulation, the increase of a certain kind of consciousness by formulation, makes a fact of modern life which is never sufficiently estimated. . . . [that] politics, and not only politics but the requirements of a whole culture, make verbal and articulate the motive of every human act: we eat by reason, copulate by statistics, rear children by rule . . . (258)

But if intellectuals were once the principal source of ideas, in the modern era the life of such “ideas”—“or, to be more accurate, [of] ideology”—is no longer limited “to avowed intellectuals.” It extends instead to “the simplest person” (258). Ideological thought is no longer the property of an intellectual class, but is in fact something universal.

What exactly is “ideology,” this thing shared by intellectuals and “the simplest person” alike? Ideology is not merely the set of ideas by which ordinary people live their daily lives, by which they eat, copulate, and raise children. In fact, it ought not to be confused with ideas at all: “Ideology is not ideas; ideology is not acquired by thought but by breathing the haunted air” (259), Trilling observes poetically. Ideology is instead simply “the habit or the ritual of showing respect for certain formulas to which, for various reasons having to do with emotional safety, we have very strong ties of whose meaning and consequences in actuality we have no clear understanding” (269). The “consequences” of these passionately held, formulaic pseudo-ideas could be vast and malign in Trilling’s view. “To live the life of ideology with its special form of consciousness,” after all, “is to expose oneself to the risk of becoming an agent of what Kant called ‘the Radical Evil,’ which is ‘man’s inclination to corrupt the imperatives of morality so

that they may become a screen for the expression of self-love” (259). Not simply the ideas of “the simplest person” about eating, copulating, and raising children, ideology is in fact a set of self-serving mental formulae that may sanction the gravest of moral consequences.

If we look closely, we can still see the specific dangers of Stalinist purges and gulags lurking beneath Trilling’s invocation of “Radical Evil,” a corrupt pseudo-morality rooted in the pseudo-ideas of (Marxist) “ideology.”<sup>31</sup> But it’s nevertheless clear that in these late essays from *The Liberal Imagination*, “ideology” is to be understood not as the thought of an intellectual class influenced by its material interests—as Trilling had earlier conceived of Stalinism, for example in his Dos Passos essay—but as ultimately classless thought now derived from “the haunted air” itself (259), in Trilling’s pretty but mystifying phrase. It suffers not from economic self-interest but from such universal psychological defects as a longing for “emotional safety” and “self-love” (269, 259). And if the results of such poor thinking are clearly dire, as a concept “Radical Evil” nevertheless lacks, like “ideology” itself, both determinate content and determinate cause. In other words, by the time of these late-forties essays the vague but universalized conception of “ideology” as secular religion had papered over the more distinct, limited, and engaged concern of Trilling’s youth, that of the politics of intellectual work and intellectual workers. Over the course of a decade the still at least partly Marxist origins of Trilling’s description of thought rooted in intellectual class *interest* had been negated and then synthesized (as it were) into something closer to Bell’s broadest conception of an “ideology” free

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<sup>31</sup> We might see a reference to Hitler’s Holocaust as well. But the book contains only one direct reference to the Holocaust (249), while Stalin and more generally a debased form of Marxism absolutely permeates the concerns of *The Liberal Imagination*. And even if we interpret the phrase “Radical Evil” as an oblique reference to the Holocaust, we should remember that the Holocaust, too, could be seen as one of the sins of the intellectual class: as we saw in the previous chapter, the theory of a “bureaucratic collectivism” governed by a New Class was used to explain Nazi evils as much as Soviet ones.

*The Liberal Imagination*’s one reference to the Holocaust perhaps speaks to the cause of Trilling’s curious silence about the issue, relatively speaking: “the great psychological fact of our time which we all observe with baffled wonder and shame is that there is no possible way of responding to Belsen and Buchenwald. The activity of mind fails before the incommunicability of man’s suffering” (249).



of class interests, an abstract but powerful and vast “secular religion” that seeks to transform the world.

This de-materialization and expansion of Trilling’s concepts is of course in keeping with his cast of mind more generally, which has often been faulted for its abstraction. Critics of Trilling’s novel were among the first to criticize this tendency toward the nebulous in Trilling’s work. In the *New Yorker*, J. M. Lalley felt that the characters of *The Middle of the Journey* “seem to have no objective existence” and would likely “vanish from the universe should Laskell cease to think about them” (126); while in the *New York Times* Orville Prescott called the story “entirely bare of warmth and life.” Robert Warshow’s review in *Commentary*, to my mind the most penetratingly observant of the novel’s faults, called Trilling to account for being “removed from experience *as* experience” (543, emphasis in original). The novel’s characters exist in a “void of moral abstractions, without a history,” and its plot takes “the form of an intellectual discussion [merely] reinforced by events” (545). Rather than discussing politics politically, Trilling “makes it appear as if the surrender to Stalinism or its rejection was mainly a matter of philosophical decision” (543). Critics of his novel thus recognized Trilling’s tendency toward sometimes bloodless generalities.

In a similar and often more directly political vein, even sympathetic reviewers of *The Liberal Imagination* nevertheless regretted that central terms like “liberal” and “liberalism” went almost wholly undefined in the book. Indeed, in Trilling’s hands, the terms seemed to lack any political reference whatsoever. Thus while admiring the book overall, Irving Howe could rightly note that Trilling’s work ignored liberalism’s essential connection to capitalism, instead reducing liberalism to a mere habit of mind (“Liberalism” 155-56). More recently, Morris Dickstein has observed that for Trilling the word “liberalism” has “very little in common with the usual

economic, administrative, and electoral meanings” (“Critics” 378). Rather, he speculates that “‘liberalism’ is a code word for *Stalinism*” in the book, one “that relocates the debate on higher”—i.e. non-material—“ground and indicts a whole set of assumptions about progress, rationality, and political commitment” (378, emphasis in original). As should be clear, I agree with Dickstein’s sense that Trilling’s “liberalism” is often a sweeping circumlocution for the more specific “Stalinism.” In fact, as we have seen, one of Trilling’s most important abstractions (“masked will”) is historically rooted in a specific post-Trotskyist analysis of Stalinism as the political thought of an intellectual class. But such a genealogy of the concrete political origins of Trilling’s thought should not be made to obscure a larger truth, namely that the central terms of Trilling’s maturity—capacious terms like “liberalism” and indeed “ideology” itself—in practice lacked the material and political weight they claimed to invoke.

If Trilling has been noted both then and now for his particularly abstract habits of mind, however, it’s important to remember that they were not his alone. Partly due to his influence, they were often those of the new liberalism itself. And here we may see in Trilling’s career a central irony in twentieth-century American intellectual history. For I would argue that the new liberalism’s particularly abstract conception of “ideology” may ironically be recognized as the ideology—in a more traditionally Marxist sense—of a significant portion of that intellectual class that Trilling attempted to describe early on. This was so in two ways. First, the idealist character of the concept of “ideology,” the idea’s removal from concrete social existence, may be understood as a characteristic product of specifically intellectual labor—that is to say, of labor performed by a growing class of workers paid to create and manipulate *abstractions*. Producers of abstractions are trained to apprehend reality in abstract terms, and the new liberal conception of a vast and vague “ideology” (leading to a vast and vague “Radical Evil,” for Trilling) is a

prime example of this phenomenon. In *The Future of the Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class*, a much later entry in the annals of New Class theory, Alvin Gouldner suggests something similar about intellectuals' use of language. The "situation-free character of [the New Class's] language," he charges, "dulls its sensitivity to the uniqueness of different situations" (86). As a result, "Its talents for political *tactics* . . . are inferior to its capacity for diagnosis and *strategy*. The New Class's political skills are limited also by its theoreticity, which generally sours it for action and impairs its sensitivity to the feelings and reactions of others" (86, emphases in the original). The new liberal conception of "ideology" fits Gouldner's description of the New Class's "situation-free" language to a tee. It was perhaps useful for "diagnosis" of an intellectual problem at the heart of bad politics, but certainly not for imagining "tactics" that would combat the problem of grandiose abstraction via material means. The product of an ascendant class of intellectual workers who dwelt in abstractions, "ideology" was a term distinctly limited by its "theoreticity," its inability to recognize the sociopolitical importance of the intellectual workers who produced the concept in the first place. The new liberalism's influential conception of "ideology" whisked intellectuals' thoughts away from their own social labor and class interests, and into Trilling's "haunted air."

This turn away from the concrete also marks the second way in which the fifties' conception of "ideology" might be understood as ideological in a traditionally Marxist sense. For the concept's ethereal nature obscured intellectuals' power and interests not only from themselves, but from the public at large. It allowed intellectuals to speak about ideas as if they were neutral brokers, hiding the fact of their specific class interests and alignments from both capitalists above and—perhaps more importantly, given "ideology's" frequent critical use in the fifties and sixties as a code-word for any form of socialist belief—proletarians below. To turn

Trilling's concepts on himself and his new liberal peers from a left perspective, we might say that the concept of "ideology" was itself a weapon of the intellectual class's "masked will." As new liberal intellectuals in particular gained financial security and social status, their characteristically idealist critique of "ideology" served to obscure their material politics—an increasingly anti-liberal, pro-business politics—from fellow intellectuals and all other political players. It was a term that could function, in the words of *The Middle of the Journey*, "to make [intellectuals'] wills appear harmless" (324). In sum, the vastly influential new liberal discourse of "ideology" in the fifties might be understood as the new liberal intellectuals' misrecognition, and then social mystification, of both the growing importance and the increasingly conservative politics of their own intellectual labor and class existence. In this way, the concept of "ideology"—so adamant in its rejection of blind political thought—was ironically the largely unknowing class ideology of no small portion of intellectuals in the American mid-century. The irony is only more rich when we consider that the concept's origins, in Trilling's case at least, lay in explicit reflections on the politics of an intellectual class.

Thus the New Class motif in what I have called American "intellectual labor fiction" found one of its ends in the "anti-ideological" politics of Trilling's new liberalism. Mutating from its origins in Slesinger's despairing satire of an intellectual class merely playing with Communism, through McCarthy's darker observation of intellectuals' potential to embrace the bureaucratic collectivism of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, the concept of an intellectual class became in Trilling's hands solely a means of strident abuse. He imagined the intellectual class as the mass manifestation of a "masked will" that promoted intellectuals' economic interests while somewhat cynically claiming pious intentions toward the working class. And from such a critique Trilling was ultimately able to fashion his influential conception of

“ideology,” the new liberal and indeed often antileftist critique of crude political thought per se. That powerful new concept came at a high price. By separating “ideology” from his original analysis of a growing intellectual class, Trilling, and all who learned this from him, lost the ability to intelligently comprehend and then perhaps change a society and culture increasingly driven by intellectual labor and intellectual workers. Ironically, Trilling had helped expand the New Class theme so broadly that for many—even and especially tragically those on the left—a simple allusion to the perils of “ideology” in politics now sufficed to forestall any serious discussion of class and class structure in America. Despite Slesinger and McCarthy’s early attempts to psychoanalyze intellectuals as a class, we might say, class unconsciousness reigned again. For most intellectuals, the latent content of their own class interests was now manifest only in a displaced obsession with “ideology.”

It has been said, not infrequently and with some justice, that this “end of ideology” ethos led directly to the distinctly postmodern discomfort with “totalizing” explanations of social reality (if not with “reality” itself).<sup>32</sup> What the history of Trilling’s contribution to the “end of ideology” moment suggests, then, is that one ultimately conservative genealogy of postmodernism might run from the Trotskyist critique of bureaucratic collectivism, to mistrust of intellectual radicalism *tout court*, to the “end of ideology,” and thence to an apolitical or at best class-unconscious liberal postmodernism. And I would note too that the “ideology” concept’s forgetting of its own origins in specific concerns about (intellectual) workers and class—a forgetting no doubt also materially shaped by the historical disappointments of the laborist left in this period, as well as outright McCarthyist repression—provides one essential explanation of how postmodernism’s roots in the radical left’s New Class idea of the thirties and forties, as well

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<sup>32</sup> E.g. Fredric Jameson, who writes that “in general, full postmodernism (particularly in the political field) has turned out to be the sequel, continuation, and fulfillment of the old fifties ‘end of ideology’ episode” (*Postmodernism* 263).

as its (intellectual) class significance more generally, could remain unnoticed for so long. But as we shall see in Part II, if the New Class idea was sometimes simply lost to the discourse of “ideology,” this was not *always* the case. For the concept’s materialist reflections on intellectual labor did not die—not even in Trilling’s own work. On the contrary, the meditations on intellectual workers as a *class* we have been tracing in Part I were sometimes transformed into the more *institutional* meditations on the bureaucratization of intellectual labor we shall examine in Part II. Encapsulated by the rebirth of the campus novel in the fifties, this institutional critique of bureaucratic intellectual labor—the more mainstream byproduct of the radical left’s earlier fears of a class of intellectual workers tempted by the “bureaucratic collectivism” of the Soviet Union—was in fact integral to the emergence of the American “postmodern” novel in the sixties and beyond.

## **Part II**

### **The Groves of Postmodernism, 1943-1962**

“Doctor Leonard. The Black Sheep need a mouthpiece of their own. We want a chance to speak. . . . We feel that college students don’t live in glass houses, the campus is a miniature fascist state, run by the same lousy factors that the outside world is run by.”

—Tess Slesinger, *The Unpossessed* (1934)

Even if you have a dialectic instinct—and I do not undertake to judge this—it is well-nigh stifled by academic routine . . .

—Leon Trotsky, “An Open Letter to Comrade Burnham” (January 7, 1940)

## Interlude

### **A Theory of the Campus Novel**

Generally thought of as a harmless if perhaps still guilty pleasure, the American campus novel is a popular genre that has garnered only modest critical attention or respect. John Lyons' *The College Novel in America* (1962), the first book-length study, set the tone by opening with an annoyed remark about the genre's "general lack of excellence" (xiii). More recent studies have explored the genre with greater respect, but still underestimate both its literary and its social importance. Kenneth Womack's *Postwar Academic Fiction* (2002) presents the genre as one whose primary concerns include "the academy and the hegemony of its institutions, the questionable morality of its denizens, and the fractured philosophical underpinnings of its mission" (19). Though the book occasionally discusses the social or political aims underlying a particular novel, its focus on an "ethical" humanist criticism tends to reduce the campus novel to a repository of moral lessons and ignore its sociopolitical meanings as a genre. Elaine Showalter's chatty and informative *Faculty Towers* (2005) likewise presents itself as a "personal take" (13), and understands the genre chiefly as a form of "narcissistic pleasure" for academics (1). In her book the campus novel thus serves to document professors' experiences across the decades. In short, criticism on the campus novel has generally depicted it as a genre isolated from the mainstream of literary history, and lacking in any social significance much broader than that of the academy itself.<sup>1</sup>

In Part II of this dissertation I hope to show to the contrary that the campus novel has played an important role in postwar American literary history, and one more socially significant

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<sup>1</sup> Scholarly discussion of academic novels in the British context similarly views academic fiction as representative of no more than the academy itself. See Carter and Rossen, for example, both of which use British academic fiction to examine the classed and gendered realities of British university life.



than has been recognized. In part, the importance of these novels in literary history is due simply to their merit. Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* (1952), Randall Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution* (1954), Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin* (1957) and *Pale Fire* (1962), Saul Bellow's *Herzog* (1964), John Barth's *The End of the Road* (1958) and *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* (1971), Alison Lurie's *The War Between the Tates* (1974), Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), Jane Smiley's *Moo* (1995), and Richard Russo's *Straight Man* (1997) might all be called campus novels. All are well-crafted, and some are brilliant and already canonical. But even if this were not the case, I still would argue that the campus novel should be accorded a significant place in any history of postwar American fiction and culture. For the campus novel is far from being merely a quaint genre about the behavior of professors. It is, as I will suggest in this Interlude, a genre profoundly representative of and inseparable from the service economy of predominantly mental labor that has defined postwar American life. Part II as a whole will argue moreover that the campus novel of the 1950s and 1960s created an important space for the development and emergence of postmodern literature. Looking at the wide sweep of academic novels' history from the early nineteenth century onward, then, this Interlude offers a theory of the postwar campus novel's social causes and meanings, one that will provide important literary-historical and sociological context for the analyses of American academic fiction that follow in Chapters Four through Six.

It is standard to discuss the campus novel, much like the mainframe business computer and the TV dinner, as an invention of the 1950s. In an article on the topic for *The Guardian*, Aida Edemariam remarks simply that "the campus novel began in America," and then cites such works of the fifties as McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe*, Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution*, and Nabokov's *Pnin*. While Showalter's book acknowledges that novels about academic life had

been written earlier, she nevertheless asserts the conventional wisdom too when she remarks that “the genre has arisen and flourished only since about 1950” (1). But scholarship on the campus novel would do better to begin by giving full weight to the fact that novels about academic life were written well before the fifties. John Kramer’s annotated bibliography of the “American college novel” in fact begins with Nathaniel Hawthorne’s first and ultimately disowned novel about Bowdoin College, 1828’s *Fanshawe*. So I will begin by drawing a distinction between the “academic novel” more generally—any and all novels about academic life, with an American history spanning nearly two centuries—and the campus novel specifically, which is best understood, I will argue, as a *subset* of academic novels that arose in the 1950s.

The history of the academic novel in America may be roughly divided into four eras. According to Kramer’s bibliography, after Hawthorne academic novels appeared throughout the nineteenth century only sporadically. Most of the nineteenth century thus constitutes a first, sparse era in the production of American academic novels. Yet at some point the output jumped, and then grew: Kramer discusses a “first great wave” of novels about undergraduates in the 1880s and 1890s (xv), and Lyons, writing in the sixties, remarks that “since 1925 there has been a spring tide” of college novels more generally (180). The graph below justifies both scholars’ observations, and may help us further see phases of the academic novel in America. Using Kramer’s attempt at an “exhaustive” (x) bibliography of the “American college novel”—novels about American academic life—I have charted the number of such novels published over the course of the century starting in 1880. Though counting novels set on campus cannot be an act of absolute precision, and this particular illustration relies on Kramer’s judgment of what constitutes an “American college novel,” as well as his skill in finding examples, the chart may nevertheless accurately suggest trends:

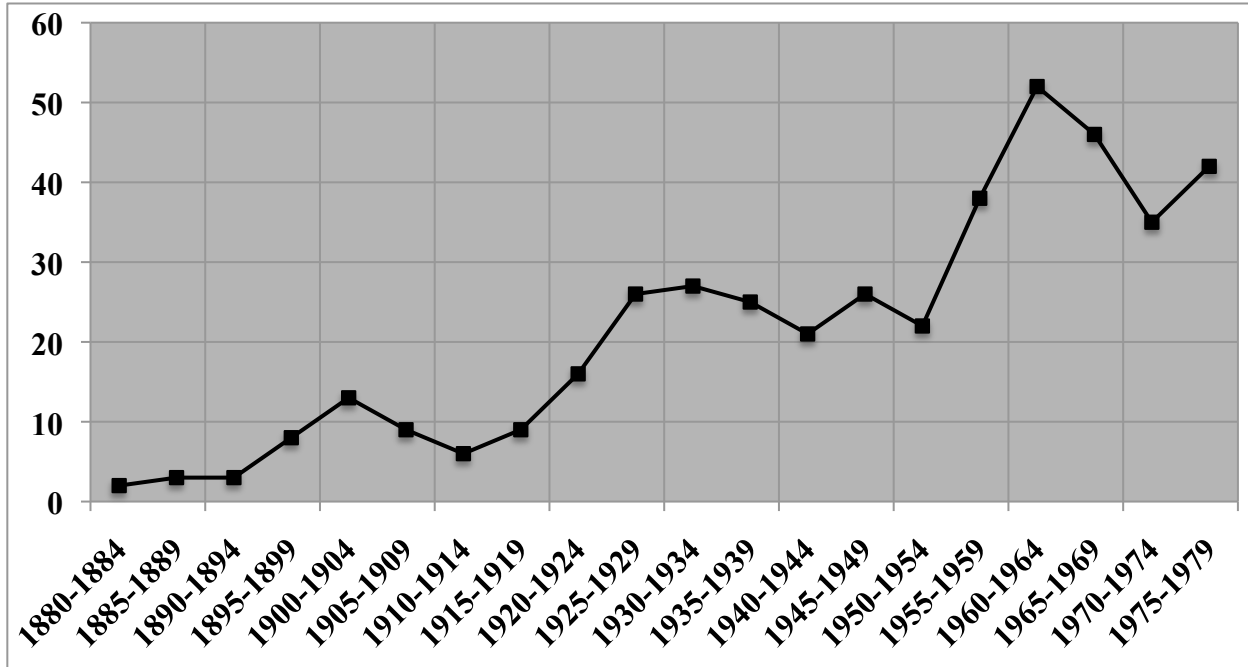


Figure 1: Publication of American College Novels in America, 1880-1979 (Five-Year Totals, Derived from Kramer 2004)<sup>2</sup>

Kramer’s “first great wave”—what I would call the *start* of the second era of the academic novel—is represented in the ascent from 1880-1904. Lyons’s “spring tide” of novels since 1925—the third era—is represented by a high plateau on which the academic novel remained for about three decades. Last but not least, the graph also offers considerable evidence for the conventional wisdom that the campus novel began in the 1950s, as the latter half of that decade

<sup>2</sup> For the numerical information depicted in the charts for this Introduction, I have used Kramer’s updated bibliography of 2004, rather than the 1981 edition. In addition to examining novels written since the original, the 2004 edition adds slightly to the number of novels from the time period covered in 1981. But for all other citations to Kramer (those in prose) I have used the 1981 edition, which offers both more fulsome descriptions of the novels covered, and some valuable observations on methodology.

Kramer discusses his method of determining what counts as an “American college novel” on pages x-xiii. For the purpose of drawing any conclusions from this data about Americans’ particular experience of American higher education, it should be noted that Kramer’s definition of the “American college novel” is based on the novel’s content, rather than its author’s citizenship or national experience, or even the novel’s place of publication: he is tracking novels about an American college, and not necessarily “American” novels about college. For example, he includes David Lodge’s *Changing Places*, a novel written by a British author, but satirizing American university life in part. Non-American authors like Lodge are exceptional to the genre as Kramer defines it, however. The vast majority of novels about American higher education—over 400 of the 425 novels listed by Kramer in 1981, according to my count—have been written by Americans who lived in the United States all their lives, so Kramer’s bibliography may still yield useful information about the trends of Americans’ interest in writing, publishing, and even (assuming some rough correlation between production and consumption) reading campus novels.

marks a third spurt of publishing growth for such novels. The campus novel is the fourth era of the academic novel in America.<sup>3</sup>

What accounts for these periods of growth, and the growth of academic novels in general since Hawthorne's first effort? It is common, and reasonable, to tie the growth of academic novels to the growth of American higher education itself. Kramer's "first great wave" in the 1880s and '90s certainly coincides, perhaps unsurprisingly, with the first great wave of American universities, and the overall growth in American higher education that accompanied them. Lyons in turn ascribes the growth of academic novels in the 1920s mostly to "the growth of college enrollments after the First World War" (180). And Showalter voices the standard explanation when she notes that the mid-century campus novel arose "when American universities were growing rapidly, first to absorb the returning veterans, and then to take in a larger and larger percentage of the baby-booming population" (1). Novels about academic life, these critics collectively argue, have kept pace with the growth of higher education itself, a phenomenon measurable in rising enrollment numbers.

But while such quantitative observations certainly help explain individual periods of the academic novel's growth, they should play only a part—and indeed a comparatively small part—in understanding the significance of such novels' proliferation in the "long" twentieth century. A fuller and more suggestive explanation for the growth of the American academic novel must also be qualitative. More specifically, I would argue that the academic novel's significance and popularity ought to be set against higher education's role in the rise of professional labor during the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We may now rehearse that history in brief.

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<sup>3</sup> Focused on the campus novel alone, the chart does not take into account the concomitant growth of published fiction as a whole; and some of the increase in published campus novels may reflect growth in the publishing industry overall. Nevertheless, the increases shown here are too large to not represent growth in the genre itself relative to published fiction as a whole.

The Industrial Revolution that swept the country in the 1800s, and especially after the Civil War, required educated workers. Engineers were needed to design the machines which replaced craft labor, architects to design the factories which housed increasingly “deskilled” workers, accountants to keep track of now-complicated books, and managers to keep the ever more intricate enterprise running. Doctors and nurses were needed to handle the new-born and sick of an exponentially expanding population, journalists and editors to accompany the new printing presses, lawyers and more lawyers to handle the increased commerce and wealth. The middle classes took advantage of these needs, organizing collectively into professions. The new jobs required specialized skills, they argued, and these skills could only be learned and then taught by experts, the “professionals” who would keep track of developments in these complicated fields.<sup>4</sup>

Their argument prevailed, and the institutional winners were universities, which emerged in greater numbers after the Civil War. These American universities, created largely by either wealthy philanthropists or state legislatures, and staffed by professors themselves arrayed in various professional associations, would serve to create a pool of experts who could train the middle class in the specialized skills required by the new economy. These universities were soon joined by a tide of “university colleges” that formed in order to feed undergraduates into the university’s professional programs. (Colleges of the older, self-contained type often re-formed in order to suit the new hierarchy.) Thus, as Burton Bledstein has argued, over the course of the nineteenth century “higher education emerged as the seminal institution within the culture of professionalism” (121).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> On the material bases of the emergent professions, see Larson, especially 1-18, Bledstein 8-39, and Mills 65-70. On “deskilling,” see Braverman.

<sup>5</sup> Veysey still remains the standard source for understanding the creation of American universities, though Bledstein 287-331 sheds some light as well. On the transformation of the old colleges into “university colleges” that conformed to university standards, see Jencks and Riesman 20-27, and Bledstein 248-86.

This “academic revolution,” as Christopher Jencks and David Riesman famously named it, along with the rise in professionalism it facilitated, had profound effects on the American class structure. Bledstein emphasizes the “vertical vision” of professionalism as a social form of labor. Displacing “horizontal” discourses of solidarity within and even between classes, the notion of the profession shaped middle-class ambitions into the form of a “career,” where one struggled only upward within the profession itself (105-20). Magali Larson likewise emphasizes professionalism’s promotion of “democratic elitism” (243)—an ideology that believes democratic society *requires* the expertise of professional elites in order to benefit society as a whole. The ideological work of professionalism, she suggests, is to legitimize social inequality by suggesting that expert credentials, gained only via an often expensive education, are the sole index of ability per se (237-44). Higher education—with its student competition for grades in order to gain better employment, and its familiar hierarchy of professors, seemingly misnamed from assistant (to whom?) to associate (of whom?) to “full” (as opposed to quarter or half?)—thus trains ever more students not only in the specialized skills required for their economic advancement, but in the career-oriented values and culture of professionalism itself (200-201). Hence the academic revolution meant that institutions of higher education became increasingly central to the class structure of America, even as they obscured that structure with a discourse of “meritocracy.”<sup>6</sup>

This relationship of post-Civil War higher education to class structure, I would argue, provides a better and more fundamental explanation of the academic novel’s proliferation from the 1880s onward than does the essentially superstructural phenomenon of growing enrollments.

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<sup>6</sup> The whole of Larson’s masterful last chapter, 208-44, details the ideological work of professionalism; Bledstein 121-28 also explains the particular importance of higher education to this ideology. More satisfied with the trend of “democratic elitism” than Larson, Jencks and Riesman prefer to call it “meritocracy”; see their *Academic Revolution* 8-12, as well as the scattered remarks throughout the rest of the text as noted in the book’s index.

The American academic novel's growth, in other words, has been ineluctably tied to the professional and class aspirations that have worried and inspired institutions of higher education since the end of the nineteenth century. The academic novel flowered in the twentieth century as a response not merely to the sheer size of American higher education, but to higher education's central role in American hopes for upward mobility. From the 1880s onward, the academic novel in America has served as a significant cultural index of higher education's growing centrality to the "American dream" itself.

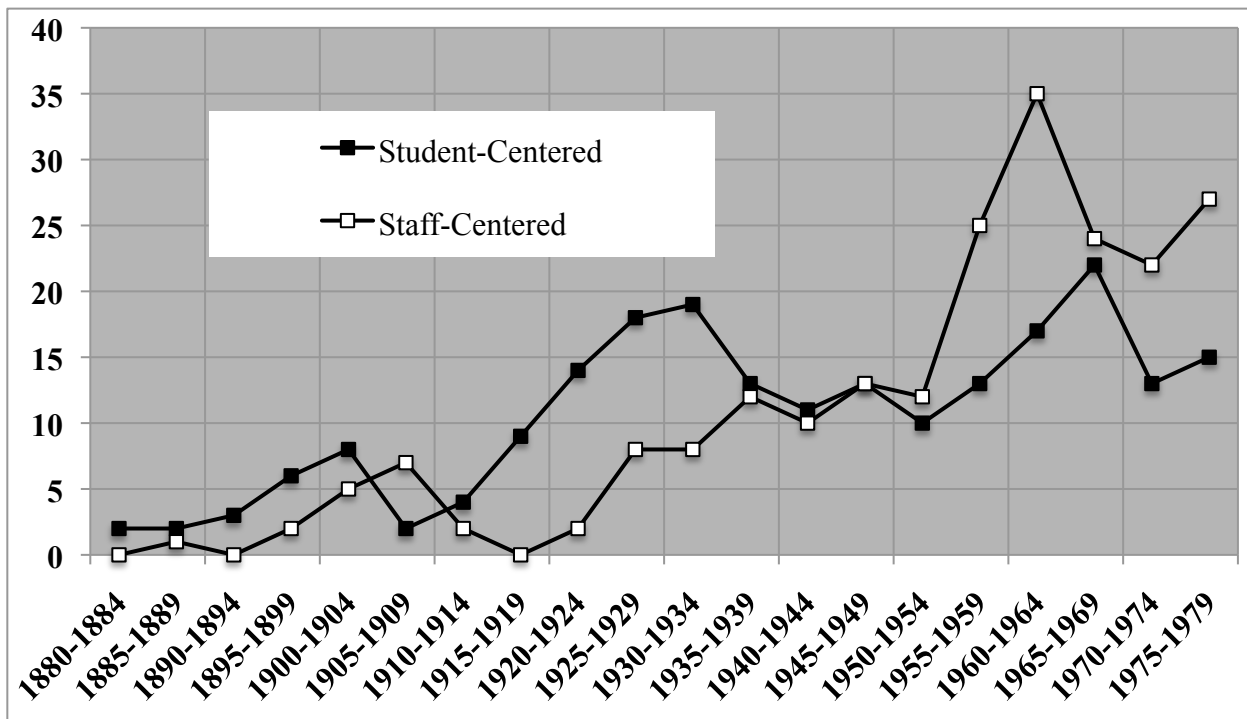
The post-Civil War rise of professionalism may furthermore help explain an important thematic trend of the academic novel. Dedicated to the idea that expertise can only be recognized and monitored by other experts, a profession is typically understood as a "colleague-oriented" occupation: the professional is only answerable to other professionals.<sup>7</sup> The impact of such an orientation on the academic novel may be measured at least partially by the success of Kramer's synchronic organizing principle, which separates American college novels—most of them "easily" (xii), he says—into one of two categories, the "student-centered" or the "staff-centered." The academic novel, in short, typically depicts *either* undergraduate life *or* faculty and administrative life, and rarely both. No matter how much they are concerned to satirize higher education, then, such novels have nevertheless conformed to higher education's professional, colleague-oriented workplace. Generally wedded to the preconceptions of professionalism, the academic novel's representation of higher education dutifully separates professionals (faculty and administration) from their clients (students).

Thus the academic novel in America has registered both the remarkable growth of universities and colleges over the past 125 years, and the inextricably related class characteristics of the age of professionalism. But if the American academic novel has in actuality existed for

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<sup>7</sup> See Jencks and Riesman 201-02, and Larson 226, for example.

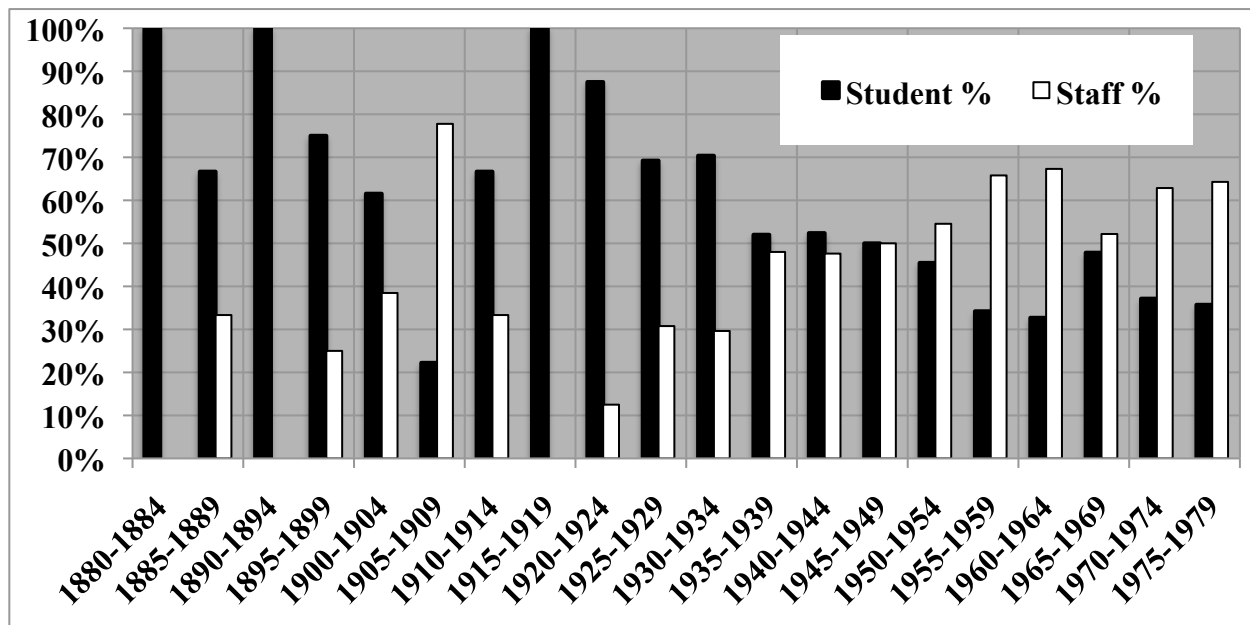
well over a century, what of the common understanding that the *campus* novel dates from the comparatively recent 1950s? How are we to explain this? We have seen that the sheer quantity of academic novels produced in the 1950s, and especially since 1955, explains some part of it (Fig. 1). But the academic novel had already experienced comparable periods of growth in the 1890s and 1920s, as we have seen too. Mere growth, then, is not enough to explain the common conception that the campus novel arose in the 1950s. However, if we look at Kramer’s bibliography once more, utilizing the distinction between student-centered and staff-centered academic novels, we may make a final set of quantitative observations about the academic novel that will help answer the question. As Figure 2 shows, starting in the 1920s—the third era—academic novelists began to pay steadily more attention to the staff of colleges and universities, and by the 1950s—the fourth era—they (or at least their publishers) were demonstrably more interested in staff than students:



**Figure 2: Publication of Student- and Staff-Centered Academic Novels, 1880-1979 (Five-Year Totals, Derived from Kramer 2004)**



While the common perception of the campus novel’s origins in the 1950s is undoubtedly corroborated by one of the academic novel’s three main surges in publication, then, what chiefly distinguishes the fifties from the rest is an epochal shift in the *composition* of academic novels. For as we can see in Figure 3’s depiction of proportional emphasis over time, the 1950s marks the academic novel’s transformation from a primarily student-centered to a primarily staff-centered genre:



**Figure 3: Percentage Publication of Student- vs. Staff-Centered Academic Novels, 1880-1979 (Derived from Figure 2)**

This decisive transformation from student-centered to staff-centered explains why, in her 2005 examination of the postwar campus novel, Showalter can so briefly remark that “students have long been important characters in fiction; [and] coming-of-age narratives and *Bildungsromane* have been numerous from early days”—before sweeping the entire consideration aside for the remainder of the book with the comfortable admission that “To me, however, the most interesting academic novels are about the faculty, the lifers—what one critic has called

*Professorromane*” (2).<sup>8</sup> The student-centered novel, so dominant in “early days,” has now faded to an aside in our imagination of novels about academic life. When we speak of academic novels today, we most often refer to the *Professorromane*—the campus novels—that came to dominate the academic novel in the 1950s, at the start of its fourth era.

It should be noted that the academic novel’s postwar focus on faculty and administrators holds true despite conditions that might have been comparatively unfavorable for it. It holds true despite the skyrocketing enrollments of undergraduates in the 1940s and 1950s under the G. I. Bill, which provided a free education for nearly eight million veterans (Davis 191), and which numerically dwarfed increases in faculty hiring during this same period. It holds true also for the 1960s and 1970s, when countercultural or otherwise rebellious students may well have offered more tempting material than faculty and “establishment” administrators.<sup>9</sup>

What then accounts for the academic novel’s in some ways improbable shift in emphasis from student to staff? Decisive for the emerging dominance of the postfifties *Professorroman*, I think, is a phenomenon related to but distinct from the broader rise of professionalism that underwrote the academic novel as a whole in the twentieth century: the emergence of a society increasingly grounded in intellectual labor employed by large bureaucratic organizations. C. Wright Mills has described the shift in his 1951 classic *White Collar*. As “big business and big government” grew larger in the twentieth century, coordinating goods and services on a larger scale (68), with them grew the number of managers and other “middle-men” (mostly men) who coordinated, and the number of office workers (here were the women, increasingly) who coordinated the coordination. These personnel were mental workers in the broadest sense; their

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Robert F. Scott’s similar remark in 1994 that “students do not often figure prominently in academic novels” (84), a statement that surely would have puzzled prewar observers. Showalter notes that she has borrowed the term *Professorromane* from Richard G. Caram’s 1980 dissertation on campus novels, “The Secular Priests.”

<sup>9</sup> In fact, interest in the counterculture likely explains the brief resurgence of the student-centered novel in the late sixties, as seen in Figures 2 and 3.

multiplication meant that “as a proportion of the labor force, fewer individuals manipulate *things*, more handle *people* and *symbols*” (65, emphases in original).

Taken as a whole, these white-collar people were different from their middle-class predecessors. If the old middle class of the nineteenth century had consisted of mostly small and independent regional entrepreneurs, the twentieth century’s new middle class consisted mainly of office workers and salaried professionals who were hired by, and dependent on, the large organizations that now provided goods and (more and more) services on a national scale. In Mills’s pungent metaphors, the new white-collar people constituted a “managerial demiurge” that facilitated the increasingly bureaucratic organization of American social and political life. A middle-class Leviathan, these workers collectively made up a “great salesroom,” an “enormous file,” and even a “Brains, Inc.” where millions of subordinate employees each performed, and conformed, to some specialized task necessary to maximize efficiency in the system as a whole. William H. Whyte famously depicted this dependent worker of the new middle class as a passive and mediocre “organization man,” a figure visible in all sectors of middle-class life:

The corporation man is the most conspicuous example, but he is only one, for the collectivization so visible in the corporation has affected almost every field of work. Blood brother to the business trainee off to join Du Pont is the seminary student who will end up in the church hierarchy, the doctor headed for the corporate clinic, the physics Ph.D. in a government laboratory, the intellectual on the foundation-sponsored team project, the engineering graduate in the huge drafting room at Lockheed, the young apprentice in a Wall Street law factory. (3)

Embracing a “Social Ethic” opposed to the “Protestant Ethic” of yore, the Organization Man—I will capitalize the term to refer specifically to Whyte’s imagining of this social type—believed

that the individual must subordinate himself to the group; he lived in suburbia and never openly disagreed with his superiors. Thus the middle-class trend had run from the nineteenth century's self-directed entrepreneur to the twentieth century's bureaucratic and comparatively passive Organization Man.<sup>10</sup>

Significantly for the history of the campus novel, these influential theorists felt that ominous changes in the character of higher education had contributed to the creation of the Organization Man. The colleges were turning into "organization" institutions, Whyte lamented, and "at the same time that the colleges have been changing their curriculum to suit the corporation, the corporation has responded by setting up its own campuses and classrooms. By now the two have been so well molded that it's difficult to tell where one leaves off and the other begins" (63). Curricula, and the students who learned from them, were becoming more specialized every year as courses became less intellectual and more technical, and students turned away from the humanistic knowledge of the liberal arts (78-100). Academic scientists were increasingly under the sway of government money offered for specialized and applied rather than basic research (217-219). Mills argued that "in the social studies and the humanities," too, "the attempt to imitate exact science narrows the mind to microscopic fields of inquiry, rather than expanding it to embrace man and society as a whole" (131). A narrow kind of entrepreneurial instinct had ironically become revived *within* the bureaucratic universities, Mills believed. A certain type of academic was now much like Whyte's career-oriented Organization Man: "This type of man is able to further his career in the university by securing prestige and small-scale powers outside of it" in research foundations and the like (135). In many respects, these critics warned, the professor was now a prototypical Organization Man, going along to get

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<sup>10</sup> For the economic background of this shift, see Mills 63-76; Whyte details the "ideology" of his Organization Man in Part I of his book, 3-59. For an excellent work of literary criticism on the role of the Organization Man in mid-twentieth-century American literature, see Hoberek's *Twilight of the Middle Class*, especially the Introduction.

along in a large bureaucratic institution that rewarded group-oriented mediocrity rather than individual insight.<sup>11</sup>

In any case the professor was certainly a professional engaged in mental labor, employed by a large and bureaucratic organization. I would thus argue that campus novelists of the fifties could easily make the professor symbolic of broader occupational trends of the professional middle class. The academic claim to love pure knowledge alone, independent of worldly interest, offered a heightened irony. For, as Larson notes, “the ethics of disinterestedness claimed by professionals [at first] appear to acquit them of the capitalist profit motive” (xiii). Thus the campus novelist, just as much as the social critic, could use the stereotypes of a scholarly “calling” and academic disinterest to put the sometimes coarse actualities of bureaucratic professional work in sharp, satiric relief. Janice Rossen accordingly suggests that “All novels about academic life and work exploit the tension between [the] two poles of idealism and competition, or scholarship as a means to an end and as an end in itself” (140). David Lodge, a critic and famed practitioner of the campus novel—the creator of the character Morris Zapp, whose foremost ambition in several novels is to be the best-paid professor of English in the world—agrees: “The high ideals of the university as an institution—the pursuit of knowledge and truth . . . are set against the actual behaviour and motivations of the people who work in them, who are only human and subject to the same ignoble desires and selfish ambitions as anybody else. The contrast is perhaps more ironic, more marked, than it would be in any other

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<sup>11</sup> Whyte spends his seventh and eighth chapters, 78-109, discussing the mutually destructive influence of business and higher education upon each other, as business demands specialization of higher education, and higher education gladly obliges for the sake of research funding. Mills discusses “the bureaucratic context” of academic work in several sections, most notably 129-36 and 151-52; he discusses intellectuals and intellectuals’ work more generally in his seventh chapter, “Brains, Inc.,” 142-60.

professional milieu” (qtd. in Edemariam).<sup>12</sup> The campus novel has in short frequently traded on the contrast between high professional ideals and low competitive impulses.

But it is not true, *pace* Rossen, that *all* novels about academic life exploit a tension between idealism and careerism; and likewise it is not true that the contrast between these two ideals had always been socially “marked” in academic fiction, as Lodge’s extemporaneous comment might be taken to imply. In fact, Kramer’s annotated bibliography notes that “early-day faculty novels”—unlike later campus novels—tended to depict professors as “tragic, romantic figures” (164). So it would be more accurate to note that the contrast between academic ideals and petty careerism only *became* marked in the fifties, just as the spectacle of bureaucratized professional work became a fixed and widespread trope among social critics.<sup>13</sup> Coming of age when consciousness of the bureaucratic cast of professional work patterns was acute, the staff-centered campus novel became synonymous with academic novels more generally. The campus novel’s comical deconstruction of professionalism, not to mention its lampoon of the growing market in mental labor more generally, resonated with broad social trends and anxieties in the fifties and beyond. The new *Professorroman* exposed the once-noble academic as a mere Organization Man, motivated by the same dulled and materialistic aspirations as the rest of a middle-class America increasingly dependent on large institutions and corporations. Always responsive to the hopes and anxieties of the middle class in America, in other words, the academic novel’s fourth and most popular era—that of the campus novel—now served to satirize the bureaucratic intellectual labor of that class.

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<sup>12</sup> For Lodge’s entertaining portrait of Morris Zapp, see *Changing Places*, *Small World*, and *Nice Work*.

<sup>13</sup> Note that I am not claiming that professional work suddenly became bureaucratic in the fifties. As Larson’s penultimate chapter points out, professionalism was always intertwined with bureaucracy; professional credentials were indeed created in part as a way of securing advancement *within* a given bureaucratic structure of middle-class work (184). I am only claiming that *consciousness* of white-collar work as bureaucratic work became dominant in the fifties, likely for multiple reasons, a critical mass of workers in such positions prominent among them.

We now turn to examples of American academic fiction from the early 1940s through the early 1960s, in order to trace in more detail the emergence of the campus novel in this period—and of postmodernism from there. If Part I demonstrated the burgeoning influence of the theory of an intellectual class on New York Intellectuals' intellectual labor fiction, the remainder of Part II will suggest how academic fiction in the mid-century learned from this intellectual class theory and then gave birth to an essentially “new” genre, the campus novel, that offered a keen and comic critique of the bureaucratic labor of that class. Anticipated by Trilling's short stories in the 1940s and then coming into its own with Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* (1952), the campus novel cleared an essential space for the postmodern to develop, both as an attack on bureaucratic mental labor and as a declaration of utopian hopes for the autonomy of intellectual work.

## Chapter Four

### **Ideology and the Consciousness of the Professoriat: The Potential Postmodern in Lionel Trilling's Academic Imagination<sup>1</sup>**

#### **1. "Danger: Intellectuals at Work!"**

A scene from his novel *The Middle of the Journey*—as we saw in Chapter Three, Lionel Trilling's fullest imagining of what he called an "American intellectual class"—demonstrates Trilling's sense of the growing influence of that class, as well as its penchant for ideological self-delusion, or what Trilling called its "masked will." John Laskell and Arthur Croom are spending some leisurely hours outdoors, painting the Crooms' summer house in Connecticut. They discuss the house, and Arthur, who is a professor of economics at a school in New York City, suggests that someday he and his wife Nancy might have to move in to it permanently. His left-leaning political stances at the university may be endangering his job, he asserts. Laskell, thinking of Arthur's growing public stature and the frequent rumors that he might be hired to work in the Roosevelt administration, doesn't believe him. "Your only danger is that they'll decide to make you a dean or something," he banters (199). Arthur is hurt by this denial of what the narrative itself, sharing Laskell's skepticism, calls Arthur Croom's "fantasy of danger" (199). But Arthur does not get the chance to offer a rebuttal. For out comes his wife Nancy, who has some teasing of her own to do. As the men continue to paint the house, she declares, "Danger: Intellectuals at work!" (200).

There is something strange going on here, for Nancy has answered Laskell's bantering phrase "your only danger," and even the narrator's summation of Arthur's "fantasy of danger," with her own mocking "Danger: Intellectuals at work!" She has echoed, in other words, the key

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this chapter have appeared previously in Henn, "Trilling's University." I thank the *Arizona Quarterly* for permission to reprint them here.



word of a conversation—not to mention an authorial voice—that she hasn’t heard. Thematically this is no coincidence. For precisely what is at issue in the scene is the untruth of Professor Croom’s “fantasy of danger” at work; this only perceived “danger” is explicitly set against the actuality of Arthur’s increase in power and prestige, whether now at the university or eventually in New Deal Washington, D. C. In this narrative of intellectual labor, Nancy’s uncanny echo of the word “danger” thus implies that Arthur’s academic work is about as dangerous as two intellectuals painting a house on a lazy summer day. It is nothing like the working-class labor playfully alluded to by her phrase, drawn from the familiar “DANGER” signs at construction sites. This scene thus presents another facet of Trilling’s conception of an intellectual class. Trilling not only condemns the intellectual class’s politics, but he also insists that its moralizing is hypocritical. While intellectual workers imagine themselves as beleaguered and marginal, in actuality their power and influence grows daily, shaping the highest reaches of American culture and government.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In relating this scene of an essentially dismissed fear about the consequences of political belief and action in the university, I feel it would be remiss to ignore—especially in our own era, when academic freedom is sometimes threatened in the name of national security, or of “ideological diversity”—how much more ominous the scene becomes when one remembers the McCarthyist purges of the academy that followed just a few years later. For a similar complaint about Trilling’s 1945 short story “The Other Margaret,” which features a “radical teacher [who] had ‘corrupted’ her student,” see Wald, *New York* 238.

The history of McCarthyism is in fact directly relevant to Trilling’s career, and at the risk of a substantial digression, I wish to correct a widespread falsehood about Trilling’s relationship to McCarthyism. In 1953, Trilling headed a faculty commission charged with making guidelines for Columbia University’s treatment of Congressional witnesses. Over the past twenty years, some important Trilling scholars have mistakenly linked this committee’s findings to the subsequent dismissal of a Columbia faculty member. At the end of a paragraph explaining Trilling’s stance on Fifth Amendment testifiers, Alexander Bloom mentions that one Columbia faculty member who took the Fifth was refused a new contract, and then notes that Columbia denied any connection between her act of pleading the Fifth and the university’s subsequent refusal to grant her a new contract (249). If Bloom’s passage thus only *implies* a connection between the Trilling committee and Columbia’s removal of a Fifth Amendment testifier, Daniel O’Hara cites Bloom and transforms the insinuation into a full-blown indictment. He writes that Trilling headed the committee “with the result that ‘only’ one Columbia anthropologist’s contract was not renewed,” and sarcastically calls this an act of “measured, tactful scapegoating and tasteful internal housekeeping” (25, my emphasis). Completing this game of scholarly telephone, John Rodden—in an otherwise immensely useful and no doubt widely-consulted compilation of Trilling’s interlocutors, *Lionel Trilling and the Critics*—then cites O’Hara and makes the flat statement that “based on the committee’s report, one junior professor [did] not win a contract renewal” (xxxiii; he cites O’Hara as his source regarding Trilling’s committee on page 24).

But just as importantly, the scene also highlights Trilling's concern with the growing prominence of that particular segment of the intellectual class at work in the classrooms and offices of the academy. The governmental influence of this academic fraction of the New Class would not have been lost on Trilling: Raymond Moley, Adolf Berle, and Rexford Tugwell formed the core of President Roosevelt's famed "Brains Trust" in 1932, and each had been plucked from his post at Columbia University at the end of Trilling's fifth year of doctoral work there.<sup>3</sup> But Trilling, who by the time of his novel's publication was himself only a year away

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Ellen Schrecker's *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* sets the record straight. Feminist and anthropologist Gene Weltfish had taken the Fifth when called before the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee (a.k.a. the McCarran Committee). Columbia, whose administration was "relatively liberal" and whose commitment to academic freedom was in fact "stronger than that of most universities during the McCarthy era" (255), had retained two other Fifth Amendment testifiers during that time. But when in June of 1952 it was reported that Weltfish had accused the U. S. of using germ warfare in Korea, no less a figure than Columbia President Grayson Kirk determined to oust her. She was dismissed from Columbia at the end of the spring semester in 1953. However, Kirk accomplished this by the *indirect* method of creating new university rules that curtailed the rehiring of lecturers after a certain number of years on the faculty. Weltfish, in her seventeenth year of non-tenured employment, became "automatically" ineligible for rehire (255-57). Since the method of her ouster was unrelated to Columbia's official policy on Fifth Amendment testifiers, then, both O'Hara's first sarcastic accusation and Rodden's subsequent iteration that she was not rehired "based on the [Trilling] committee's report" are groundless.

This does not exonerate Trilling and his committee from charges of complicity with McCarthyism, of course. The committee declared federal investigations of universities "unnecessary and harmful," and thus rebuked one aspect of McCarthyism. But the committee also displayed open hostility toward academics enrolled in "Communist organizations" of any sort, alleging that such membership "almost certainly implies a submission to an intellectual control which is entirely at variance with the principles of academic competence as we understand them" (qtd. in Wald, *New York* 274). In that judgment, Alan Wald rightly observes, Trilling's committee upheld and indeed adopted the very rationale of McCarthyism on campus, which assumed that scholars who were members of the Communist Party, or even any "Communist organization," could not possibly be committed to open inquiry and balanced teaching. Perhaps intentionally alluding to one of Trilling's favorite terms, then, Wald's scornful summation is that Trilling and the other liberals who served on such committees "only wanted to *modulate* the witch-hunt" (274, my emphasis). The assessment is harsh, but not unjustified.

In the late-thirties narrative of *The Middle of the Journey*, in other words, Arthur Croom's fears of punishment for political activity on campus are simply a wish-fulfilling fantasy of intellectual heroism and martyrdom. But in real life only a few years after the novel was published, Croom's fears would be justified, and his creator's defense of academic freedom—perhaps influenced by a belief that fellow-traveling professors like Arthur Croom were simply self-deceived members of a powerful and ambitious New Class—was timid at best.

The fullest account of Trilling's involvement with the Columbia committee is Alexander Bloom's *Prodigal Sons*, 248-50. While this account is the best existing, however, I have not encountered any truly complete explication of Trilling and the committee's work, or indeed of Trilling's institutional work in general. Perhaps the most thorough account of Trilling's attitudes toward McCarthyism I have seen, one generally sympathetic toward Trilling, is Michael Kimmage's *The Conservative Turn* 252-57; the Trilling committee's work is recounted on pages 255-56.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Croom is thus likely modeled, in a general way, on these Brains Trusters. I would argue that Adolf Berle is likely the most direct model for him. For while Berle taught law at Columbia, rather than economics (as Tugwell did), in 1932 he nevertheless published "a landmark in the economic literature of the twentieth century" (Rosen 201): *The Modern Corporation and Private Property*. Berle's co-author was Gardiner Means, a graduate student at

from attaining the rank of full professor at Columbia, had never had a strictly political interest in academic labor. For him the fascination and anxiety regarding academic life was always quite personal as well. So here we must acknowledge a fact that is no less than central to Trilling's life and work, though it is rarely mentioned in the criticism. Throughout his adult life, Lionel Trilling felt a profound ambivalence about his own labor as an academic.

Starting in the late 1920s, as he entered graduate school and became a college instructor, Trilling underwent what Lewis P. Simpson, the only critic to have acknowledged the importance of the event, has aptly called a "crisis of vocation" (411). An excerpt from Trilling's journal in December of 1933 begins to tell the story eloquently. In the seventh year of his doctoral program at Columbia University, immersed in writing a seemingly interminable dissertation on Matthew Arnold, Trilling had just seen a letter Ernest Hemingway had written his friend Clifton ("Kip") Fadiman. It was "a crazy letter, written when [Hemingway] was drunk—self-revealing, arrogant, scared, trivial, absurd," he acknowledged ("From" 498). Yet Trilling went on to record, poignantly, that he

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Columbia whose time at the university substantially overlapped with Trilling's own graduate years. Thus Trilling may have found inspiration for economics professor Arthur Croom in both Berle and Means.

Berle's and Means's possible "presence" in Trilling's novelistic depiction of an "intellectual class" provides an added fascination in our context here, since *The Modern Corporation and Private Property* has exercised nothing less than a decisive influence on New Class theory in America. The book is primarily known today for launching an epochal debate over "ownership" versus "control" in modern capitalist economies, highlighting a disparity between the theoretically democratic nature of corporations owned by many stock-holders, and the reality of their control by a small and politically unaccountable elite of managers. But its contribution to New Class theory stems from its use as an acknowledged (if critiqued) cornerstone of Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution* in 1941 (see 88-95), which essentially expanded Berle and Means's thesis so that it might apply to property owned by the public itself. Just as stock-holders did not *control* the corporations they owned under recent capitalism, Burnham insisted, the public would not control the property it supposedly "owned" via the state. This theoretical ownership without practical control was in fact an essential feature of the political and economic tyranny he was calling "managerial society." Berle's work has since required attention from every and any treatise of New Class theory that claims an empirical basis.

On Berle's importance as a foundational figure for American New Class theory, see Bruce-Briggs 10-11, and Gouldner 95. On the subject of Roosevelt's "Brains Trust" more generally, complete with succinct intellectual biographies of Moley, Berle, and Tugwell, see Rosen's *Hoover, Roosevelt, and the Brains Trust*. Tugwell's own volume, *The Brains Trust*, offers an eye-witness account of the group's formation during the spring and summer of 1932.

felt from reading it how right such a man is compared to the “good minds” of my university life—how he will produce and mean something to the world . . . . And how far-far-far- I am going from being a writer—how less and less I have the material and the mind and the will. A few—very few—more years and the last chance will be gone. (498)

His graduate years were virtually defined by this intensely personal conception of creative and academic lives as conflicting polarities. The first was a dedication to experience, the second to pallid abstraction. Academic employment threatened his literary ambitions, he felt.

Yet Trilling was also drawn to academic life, as an incident taking place a little over two years after his journal entry makes clear. Not yet done with his dissertation, after nearly nine financially-pressed years in graduate school had passed, the English Department at Columbia notified him of his dismissal from teaching there—a move that threatened Trilling’s main source of income, and thus his only hope to finish his degree. With a cold fury, the usually impassive Trilling fought to stay. He systematically confronted individual faculty over the decision to terminate his contract. Even his dissertation director Emery Neff was unspared: “made date to annihilate him on Thursday,” the journal entry notes (“From” 500). Trilling eventually won, retaining his teaching contract and then finishing his dissertation two years later, in 1938. He published his dissertation as the highly-acclaimed *Matthew Arnold* the next year, became an Assistant Professor at Columbia in the fall of 1939, and would go on to become the first Jew ever to receive tenure in the Columbia English Department.<sup>4</sup> Thus even as Trilling despaired over what he conceived as the stifling and uncreative nature of academic life, he nevertheless felt attracted enough to it—at the least as steady income—to fight to stay in it. As we know, his

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<sup>4</sup> The incident is chronicled in Trilling’s febrile notebook entries from April and May of 1936 (“From” 498-503). Diana Trilling also chronicles this period in “Lionel Trilling: A Jew at Columbia” (422-24) and *The Beginning of the Journey* (266-81).

continued academic employment did not mean that he gave up his hopes of being a fiction writer, either. If he devoted the thirties primarily to his dissertation at the expense of his fiction, the forties saw him producing a great deal of fiction and criticism alike. As both Simpson and Trilling's widow Diana Trilling note, Trilling's conflict between a creative and an academic-critical self defined his development then and thereafter. It was a conflict decisive to his life as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

Since Simpson's 1987 article on Trilling's "crisis of vocation," however, a cordon between Trilling's private anxiety and public work has largely reasserted itself in the critical literature.<sup>6</sup> No critic has ever fully addressed the effects of Trilling's crisis on his critical and fictional writing. Furthermore, no critic has suggested any broader implication that such a crisis and its effects might have for our understanding of American literary and intellectual history in that era and beyond. In this chapter I will attempt to do both. Primarily examining Trilling's 1943 short story "Of This Time, Of That Place," and his most famous work, 1950's *The Liberal*

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<sup>5</sup> See Diana Trilling, *Beginning* 368-76. One index of the longevity of Trilling's anxiety may also be found in a second despairing notebook entry about Hemingway—this one written nearly three decades after the first, on the occasion of Hemingway's suicide in 1961. Trilling remarks that except for D. H. Lawrence's, "no writer's death has moved me as much.—who would suppose how much he has haunted me? How much he existed in my mind—as a reproach?" ("From . . . Part II," 10). Though established as a full professor at Columbia for over a decade, and long revered as a literary critic in the world at large, Trilling continued to use the figure of Hemingway as a rebuke to his life choices. The intensity of this rebuke had indeed *grown* since the first entry on Hemingway, written when he was only twenty-eight. Writing the very day before his own fifty-sixth birthday in 1961, Trilling relates a conversation that morning with his wife Diana, in which he had observed that Hemingway's father had committed suicide at the age of fifty-six. He had then speculated, quite ominously, that "Perhaps [his father's suicide] was the act of courage [Hemingway] was facing all his life." With what one can only admire as a truly remarkable combination of severe intelligence and yet compassion for her husband, Diana had immediately replied, "Perhaps the act of courage he was facing all his life was to stay alive" (10).

Another episode of Trilling's life-long vocational anxiety (from 1948, after the publication of *The Middle of the Journey* and his subsequent promotion to full professor) will be discussed in the final section of this chapter. <sup>5</sup> I except my own article on Trilling, which is drawn from this chapter. (This chapter, however, offers an argument distinguishable from that of the article, and allows for richer context.) For a different reason, I also exclude the recent debates sparked by James Trilling's supposition that his father was afflicted by Attention Deficit Disorder. While such conjectures may possibly advance our biographical understanding of the senior Trilling, they have not so far fostered genuine criticism of his work: Rodden surveys this dialogue, and wisely dismisses it as an overall distraction from understanding Trilling's ideas ("Case" 63). As this chapter should demonstrate, however, I do not believe that biographical speculation *must* lead away from an understanding of Trilling's work, or its wider literary significance.

*Imagination*, I will make two related claims. The first is that Trilling's whole conception of "the liberal imagination"—his critique of an ideological thought which *lacked* imagination; the critique so definitive of Trilling and indeed of Trilling's wide influence on American literary and intellectual history—originated in and was shaped by Trilling's anxiety regarding the nature and value of academic labor, an anxiety amplified and deepened by his political concerns regarding an "intellectual class" defined by bureaucratic labor. My second claim is that Trilling's largely unconscious response to such anxiety, specifically in 1948's essay on "Art and Fortune," provided one important and largely unknown intellectual basis for postmodernism's mistrust of all-encompassing metanarrative, and its valorization of metafiction. In his realism-oriented conception of a novel driven by ideas, Trilling surprisingly laid out a political and crypto-institutional justification for literary work that would only be fully realized in the self-conscious, often metafictional writing of such postmodern authors as Vladimir Nabokov, John Barth, and Thomas Pynchon. Despairing journal entries were only the most visible manifestations of Trilling's "crisis" of academic purpose, in other words. It was also a personal crisis that could ramify beyond its immediate origins and into the themes of American intellectual and literary history more generally.

## **2. New Class, Bureaucracy, and the Academic Imagination**

Outside of his journal entries, Trilling's crisis of vocation left its most legible mark on his short fiction. Produced during two separate decades of his young life, in the late 1920s and early 1940s, the short stories are notable not only for their characteristically graceful style, but for their unwavering, perhaps genuinely obsessive, concern with the intellectual quality of academic life. These stories are important to Part II of this dissertation because they constitute a body of

academic fiction whose themes of triviality, pedantry, and boredom, as we shall see in later chapters, went on to dominate the campus novel when it emerged in the 1950s. But in Trilling's own life, writing them arguably served primarily as a way of asserting his creative and artistic identity as against the perceived encroachment of his academic milieu. The climax of Trilling's first published story, 1925's "Impediments," is an intensely earnest undergraduate's exclamation to his ironic and unflappable friend: "Don't you ever feel the pressure of the awful boredom that hangs over university life—if it is life? That endless, mild, eventless routine. If something would only happen, something new!" (9). Next year's "Chapter for a Fashionable Jewish Novel," one of the few stories in Trilling's oeuvre *not* set on campus, nevertheless frequently parodies academic discourse and registers its protagonists' boredom and even disgust with academic thought. After catching himself silently denigrating the habit of drinking before dinner as "the profanation of the very essence and godhead of drinking in whose compound divinity the divinity of purposelessness was implicit, Ding-an-sichkeit contained" (277), for example, the protagonist immediately mocks his thought as so much academic pedantry: "Clever, highbrow nonsense, that; thus one writes in Sophomore Composition. The next two weeks, gentlemen, will be occupied with the study of the purpose and technique of the familiar essay, as it is called; this charming form had its genesis . . ." (277, ellipses in the original). The year after that, "Funeral at the Club, With Lunch" returned to the university setting, depicting a young professor taking lunch at a faculty club before heading off to teach. Later that day at the club there will be a funeral for Fitch, a dull and uninspiring "classical professor who was not one of the sort students are supposed to call 'good old' and seek to have their parents meet at Commencement" (380). The protagonist of 1929's "Notes on a Departure" suffers through a deadening year teaching at a midwestern university before going back home to New York City. Psychologically speaking, in

short, throughout the second half of the twenties Trilling seems to have written stories largely in order to resist his continuing attraction to academic life.<sup>7</sup>

As was the case with most of his characters, Trilling's struggle was unsuccessful; he entered Columbia's Ph.D. program in 1927. With the difficulties of his doctoral work at Columbia and the onset of the Great Depression, he stopped writing stories. Yet when Trilling resumed publishing fiction in 1943, "Of This Time, Of That Place" revealed nearly all the same anxieties as his 1920s fiction. To my mind his best work of fiction, and certainly among his most celebrated, "Of This Time" is also the story that most amply reveals Trilling's conception of the values and dangers of academic employment. If we look at this story in depth, we may see how Trilling feared that academic labor could reduce lively and complex thought to a narrow and bureaucratized routine; and yet also how Trilling believed the reverse, that higher education could nurture a profound and complex understanding of human nature itself. Such ambivalence, routed through his reflections on a bureaucratic New Class, left its sizable mark on the document now most associated with Trilling, and Trilling's formidable influence at the time—1950's *The Liberal Imagination*. Over the course of the 1940s, as he climbed the ranks from Assistant to Associate to "full" professor at Columbia University, the academy became both Trilling's model for an ideal of intellectual freedom and his vision of the bureaucratized intellectual labor underlying the flaws of contemporary liberalism itself.

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<sup>7</sup> Even after he became a professor, all of Trilling's stories but one refer to academia. "The Lesson and the Secret" (1945) somewhat comically depicts the struggle of an instructor attempting to teach wealthy women how to write fiction, despite their often more pressing interest in how to *sell* their fiction. Though Diana Trilling asserts that the story is based on an adult education course Lionel taught at the Junior League (*Beginning* 264, 384), the story specifies its setting as a university (63). (The story was to have been part of a novel; the incomplete draft of that novel has recently been published as *The Journey Abandoned*. It features an autobiographical character named Vincent Hammell, who is writing a biography of a living author while supporting himself through newspaper work and teaching gigs.) "Of This Time, Of That Place" (1943) will be discussed in depth in the main text.

The sole exception to the rule of academic reference in Trilling's stories is 1945's "The Other Margaret." But even that story is rooted in institutions of education. It features "Miss Hoxie," a radical middle school teacher, as well as a protagonist whose first recognition of his own mortality comes upon hearing a sentence from Hazlitt in a high school class (14-15).



The protagonist of “Of This Time, Of That Place” is Joseph Howe, a young instructor of English at rural Dwight College. Once a bohemian poet in New York City, Howe discovers that he doesn’t enjoy the literary life of “genteel poverty” so much as he once did (79), and thus pursues an academic career. The story turns around Howe’s relationship to two students at Dwight, Ferdinand Tertan and Theodore Blackburn, whom he teaches respectively in the Fall and Spring semesters.<sup>8</sup> From an East European immigrant family and on scholarship, Tertan is a serious and in some respects brilliant student. Ideas excite him, and he is a surprisingly profound thinker. He wants desperately to participate in intellectual life; he writes philosophy outside his classes. Yet Tertan is also somehow inarticulate—or if articulate, only in a convoluted, nonlinear fashion. While both his papers and his speech possess an intuitive sense, their expression is near-incomprehensible and devoid of rational argument. Howe struggles to help Tertan for most of the semester. He reads his extracurricular work, and is impressed enough by his in-class insights to give him an A- at the midterm. But eventually he discovers the truth: whatever his gifts and talents, Tertan is nevertheless, clinically speaking, “mad” (90). Unsure of his course at first, and not wanting to betray his student’s trust and indeed abilities, Howe at last reports Tertan’s condition to the Dean, resulting in Tertan’s eventual institutionalization and thus dismissal from the college.

Theodore Blackburn, on the other hand, is an ambitious young man and intelligent enough; he is Vice President of the Student Council, manager of the debating team, and secretary of the undergraduate literary society. Yet unlike Tertan, he slights culture, in the Arnoldian sense of that word. He views aesthetic experience (“fancy,” he sometimes calls it) as a diversion from “reality”; literature is only useful for creating a respectable, “well-rounded” man (86). Worse, his ambitions warp any moral sense he might have. He is both cynical and manipulative in his search

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<sup>8</sup> Trilling pronounced Tertan’s name “with the accent on the last syllable: *Tertan*” (Commentary 782).

for power and worldly success. For example, when Howe grades one of his exams an F—characteristically, Blackburn has somehow judged the haunted world of Coleridge’s *The Ancient Mariner* to be “a honey-sweet land of charming dreams [where] we can relax and enjoy ourselves” (102)—Blackburn confronts his teacher in conference, and attempts (unsuccessfully) to bully him into raising the grade. When later faced with a C- on a quiz, he even tries to threaten Howe by implying he would draw the Dean’s attention to a recently-published article that is highly critical of Howe’s poetry. When Howe calls his bluff and in fact regrades the quiz as an F (what it always deserved), Blackburn breaks down in tears, gets on his knees, and actually begs for a better grade (107-109). Though unsuccessful in changing this individual grade, Blackburn nevertheless passes the course and graduates. But Howe makes his disdain for him clear. At graduation, Howe contemptuously tells Blackburn that he has only given him the passing grade in order “to be sure the college would be rid of you” (114). Soon thereafter the Dean arrives and announces to Howe that Blackburn is the first in his class to secure a job after graduation. Howe remains conspicuously silent, bluntly refusing to congratulate his former student (114-15). Yet despite these derisive gestures, Howe has nevertheless passed the intellectually shallow Blackburn out of his class, and thus aided his unethical advancement in the world. Howe ends the story uncertainly, rushing off to participate in Commencement ceremonies.

Written only a few years after the schism in the Socialist Workers Party in 1939, and published in the same year as Trilling’s *E. M. Forster* offered up the history of a smug and self-deceived “intellectual class,” Trilling’s 1943 short story is undoubtedly influenced by the political concerns we examined in Chapter Three. The character of Blackburn begins to reveal this political aspect of the story. Asking Howe to allow him to take a course in romantic prose, Blackburn notes that he began college majoring in English, but then shifted to the social

sciences. “Sociology and government,” he elaborates, and then explains his attraction to them: “I find them very stimulating and *real*” (86, emphasis in original). Anyone who has read Trilling on the topic of “Reality in America” will recognize Blackburn’s point of view as a concrete example of “the liberal imagination” at its worst. Blackburn suffers from “the chronic American belief that there exists an opposition between reality and mind and that one must enlist oneself in the party of reality” (*Liberal* 10). In “Of This Time, Of That Place,” such cultural beliefs are indeed, as Trilling’s sardonic metaphor (“the party of reality”) implies, associated with a specific politics: Blackburn’s condescension toward literature is suspiciously Stalinist, reminiscent of a politics that firmly subordinates the aesthetic to considerations of power. Blackburn’s cynical attempts to pressure Howe for a higher grade, too, resemble the tactics of Trilling’s unscrupulous “intellectual class”: he grasps for material power by all means available to him, from pitiless blackmail to pitiful grade-grubbing. Blackburn is in short the youngest of Trilling’s representatives from the intellectual class. He is an undergraduate descendent of the French Revolution, and an antecedent of Nancy Croom and (Trilling’s interpretation of) the Princess Casamassima.

But Howe is integral to the story’s skeptical considerations of the New Class as well. For Howe is not the wholly sympathetic character that he appears to be on a first reading. Nor is he for that matter the Trilling stand-in that previous critics have assumed him to be, an earnest professor torn only between professional duty and human(ist) sympathy. From its start, Trilling’s World War II narrative figures Howe’s pleasure in academic life as a kind of proto-totalitarian, New Class hunger for power. As Howe goes to his first day of class, we learn that “the lawful seizure of power he was about to make seemed momentous” (73). It is as if he were taking over a country rather than a classroom. Howe writes his name on the blackboard for his students, and

“The carelessness of the scrawl confirmed his authority” (73). He explains to his students that the course will primarily consist of discussion, in which all will be expected to share their opinions. “But you will soon recognize,” he dryly remarks, “that my opinion is worth more than anyone else’s here” (74). A few of his students understand the witticism and laugh, followed by the rest of the classroom. “All Howe’s private ironies protested the vulgarity of the joke,” of course—but nevertheless, his students’ “laughter made him feel benign and powerful” (74). The potentially political nature of Howe’s attraction to such power is further underscored by the narrative’s recurrent allusions to military rank. For example, as Tertan first enters the class, his martial bearing is unmistakable: “He advanced into the room and halted before Howe, almost at attention. In a loud clear voice he announced, ‘I am Tertan, Ferdinand R., reporting at the direction of Head of Department Vincent’” (75). Whenever Tertan takes leave of Howe, he bows to him (77, 85). Such tropes suggest that Howe’s relationship to Tertan is akin to that of general to private. And Howe’s enjoyment of teaching thus may be as much about the pleasure of such power, analogous to a dictatorial political power, as it is the joy of knowledge.

The distinct *displeasure* he feels toward Blackburn, then, may conversely be about his dislike of challenges to his authority. Howe’s first encounter with Blackburn, like that with Tertan, also invokes the military, but in an altogether different manner. As Blackburn introduces himself to Howe, he brashly declares that “I was once an English major, sir” (85). The self-satisfied tone of this utterance leads Howe to momentarily (and comically) misinterpret Blackburn’s abrupt disclosure of his academic past as a proud declaration of service in the British military. Howe quickly perceives his mistake. But he still cannot resist making a lightly aggressive joke to undermine Blackburn’s unearned confidence, a joke he acknowledges to be “not really in good taste even with so forward a student”: “Indeed? What regiment?,” he asks

archly (85). If Tertan imagines *himself* as a subordinate soldier, with Blackburn, it is *Howe* who must do the imagining. Denied Blackburn's actual deference, Howe subordinates him symbolically. Blackburn does not give in easily, however. Soon thereafter, for example, he contrives to escort Howe into his own classroom, his hand on his professor's elbow. Howe is displeased, to say the least: he "felt a surge of temper rise in him and almost violently he disengaged his arm and walked to the desk, while Blackburn found a seat in the front row and smiled at him" (87). Deriving no small amount of his pleasure in academic life from the status it affords him, Howe is galled by Blackburn's challenge to his power.

It would be wrong to proclaim baldly that Howe's love of Tertan is his love of students' deference, and that his hatred of Blackburn is his hatred of having his authority challenged. Howe remains a largely sympathetic character, genuinely dedicated to teaching on some level, even if he is not so innocent as critical opinion has thought. But it is accurate to say that Howe's love of his own power is dangerously akin to the unscrupulous ambition shown by Blackburn, whom Howe so reviles. In fact, the pitilessness of Howe's various rejections of Blackburn—a refusal to shake his hand (110), the frank admonishment that his last exam was just as much a failure as earlier ones (114), the pointed silence when he is expected to congratulate Blackburn on his job (114), and the positively melodramatic declaration that "Nothing you have ever done has satisfied me and nothing you could ever do would satisfy me, Blackburn" (113)—though certainly motivated by Blackburn's manifest odiousness, may be read equally as products of Howe's unconscious aversion to confronting his likeness to Blackburn. While critics of this story have frequently understood Tertan as a repressed part of Howe's psyche, we must insist that *Blackburn*, just as much as Tertan, is Howe's double, his "secret sharer."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> On the subject of the Dostoevskian "double" in "Of This Time," see Chace 20-21, 26-28; on the notion of Conrad's "secret sharer" in relation to the story, see Krupnick 82-83.

But this counterintuitive comparison of the morally pained Howe to the ruthless Blackburn risks suggesting that “Of This Time, Of That Place” is *primarily* another tale, like *The Middle of the Journey*, about the politics of an ambitious intellectual class. It is not. It is instead, I would argue, more centrally a story about academic employment. The story announces its institutional themes from the outset when Howe begins his first class of the year by directing his students to write an impromptu essay on “Who I am and why I came to Dwight College” (74). The question might just as well be asked of Howe; it connects the ontological and the institutional, the self’s relationship to the academy. The importance of this question is built into the frame of the story as well. The first paragraph offers Howe’s appreciation of a beautiful day in the early fall and his eager anticipation of the coming semester, “a moment when he could feel good about his profession” (72). The story’s last sentence more symbolically describes how he “hurried off to join the procession” of professors at Commencement (116). From start to finish, the narrative concerns itself not with politics, but with the implications of academic employment for Joseph Howe’s life.

If the story is not primarily focused on the New Class, then, it nevertheless uses its New Class allusions—rooted in theories of “bureaucratic collectivism” abroad and at home—to amplify its critique of academic employment. For academic labor in this story is New Class labor *par excellence*: it is bureaucratic. Here again, the story’s portrait of Howe is not wholly sympathetic. For Howe is attached to the mental and emotional comforts of academic bureaucracy, to the decorum and orderliness of academic routine. Howe’s enjoyment of academia’s bureaucratic rituals forms the simplest and most innocuous demonstration of this attachment: the first day of Convocation “was a busy and official day of cards and sheets, arrangements and small decisions,” we learn, “and it gave Howe pleasure” (78). Though he

complains with the rest of his colleagues about having to assist in the Convocation, “actually he got a clear satisfaction from the ritual of prayer and prosy speech and even from wearing his academic gown” (78).

But on a more serious level as well, Howe himself recognizes his deep attachment to the bureaucratic order of his profession, its need to classify what is sometimes unclassifiable. His resistance to this part of himself in fact creates much of the story’s drama. Weber dubs the outlook and habits of bureaucracy as “officialdom,” and Howe conceives his decision to report Tertan as a capitulation to such officialdom: his consideration of a response to Tertan’s illness is self-consciously filled with the language of bureaucratic efficiency and routine.<sup>10</sup> Upon first

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<sup>10</sup> Weber’s influence on Trilling is both easily observable and intriguing. But note that I am not arguing that Weber’s specific sociology of bureaucracy influenced Trilling in this story. It is highly unlikely that Trilling had read Weber’s work on bureaucracy by the time he wrote “Of This Time, Of That Place.” Weber’s mammoth tome, *Economy and Society*, though written somewhere between 1910 and 1914, was not published until 1921 (a year after his death)—and then of course in German. (For Weber’s work on bureaucracy there, see Volume 2, 956-1005.) The first English translations of the sections on bureaucracy and charisma were made by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, and published in a 1946 selection of Weber’s work. Thus any affinity between Trilling’s conception of the university and Weber’s conception of bureaucracy in “Of This Time, Of That Place” is, appropriately enough, intuitive (charismatic) rather than studied (rational). The Weberian conception of bureaucracy, I contend, nevertheless remains a surprisingly precise theoretical analogue for Trilling’s conception of the university in this story.

That being said, another book by Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, most certainly influenced Trilling by the late 1930s, and perhaps even in “Of This Time, Of That Place.” Talcott Parsons translated Weber’s work into English for a 1930 edition, and Trilling read this edition at some point in the following decade: he cites it in the bibliography of 1939’s *Matthew Arnold*, and spends two pages summarizing Weber’s argument in the text (226-28). Weber’s conception of the modern era’s “iron cage” of soulless productivity (*Protestant* 181) thus may well have provided intellectual reinforcement for Trilling’s doubts about his (and Joseph Howe’s) academic employment in this era. One can imagine that Weber’s sorrowful summary of those caught in the iron cage—lines borrowed from Goethe—may have held special resonance for Trilling when creating a self-conscious Joseph Howe joining the procession of professors at commencement: “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved” (182). The notion of a “Protestant ethic” is of course Weber’s most well-known analysis of the larger problem of rationalization and specialization, the problem also underlying his later analysis of bureaucracy.

But though Trilling’s reading of Weber had been limited to *The Protestant Ethic* while writing “Of This Time,” by the late 1940s—when he was writing many of the essays later incorporated into *The Liberal Imagination*—Trilling had certainly read Weber’s specific work on bureaucracy. He did so quite likely under the tutelage of C. Wright Mills, who arrived at Columbia’s sociology department in 1944, published his Weber anthology in 1946, and had Trilling read the galley proofs of his 1951 book *White Collar* (Mills 355). Thus in 1948’s essay on *The Princess Casamassima*, for example, Trilling describes the revolutionary Paul Muniment as being possessed with “what the sociologists . . . call *charisma*” (*Liberal* 86, emphasis in original). Much of *The Liberal Imagination*, in other words, may have been influenced by Trilling’s reading of Weber on bureaucracy—a reading that was likely motivated in part by his ongoing concerns about academic and more generally New Class labor.

realizing Tertan's illness, Howe wonders if he could "hurry to assign to official and reasonable solicitude what had been, until this moment, so various and warm?" (92). Reflecting on Tertan's belief that material existence could not define a self, "Some sure instinct told [Howe] that he must not surrender the question [of Tertan's identity] to a clean official desk in a clear official light to be dealt with, settled and closed" by a psychiatrist (94). But the metaphorical desk and light of officialdom are precisely what he encounters as he nevertheless goes through with his "simple, routine request" to see the Dean: he sends "everything down the official chute," laying the issue "on the Dean's clean desk" in a room whose glow in the "golden light" of the snow made all its "commonplace objects of efficiency" shine (94). Howe reports Tertan without knowingly desiring to do so: "it was one of the surprising and startling incidents of his life" (94). Yet he follows his unwanted urge; and this bureaucratic action in some sense defines him.

At the broadest level, Howe's desire for the comforts and routines of bureaucratic life wins out at the story's end, too, as he chooses to remain an academic. On graduation day, the Dean genially comments to Howe on their shared labor, in terms that underscore its repetitive and predictable qualities: "Another year gone, Joe, and we've turned out another crop" (114). He goes on to say that "After you've been here a few years, you'll find it reasonably upsetting—you wonder how there can be so many graduating classes while you stay the same." "But of course," he immediately corrects himself, "you don't stay the same" (114). Though the Dean then interrupts himself, saying, "'Well,' sharply, to dismiss the thought" of how academic workers *do* change (114), it is nevertheless clear that Howe will change after deciding to remain a professor at Dwight.

The story's last section suggests that these changes may be ominous, and summarizes the story's almost despairing indictment of the bureaucratic character of academic intellectual labor.



Earlier on graduation day, Howe encounters the Dean's niece, Hilda, who wants to take a picture of him. The scene repeats, with a difference, the one that opens the story, where Hilda photographs a peach tree in front of the house where Howe is lodging. In the opening scene, she employs a rudimentary camera, and her method of art is simply to twist herself around until she finds the appropriate angle for the shot. She then snaps the shutter (72). In the last scene, however, her method has changed dramatically: she assembles a new, higher-grade camera onto a tripod, and then carefully measures the distance and angle of the shot with other photographers' instruments (112). No longer concerned with the natural beauty of a peach tree, she requires Howe to pose in a precise manner (112-13), and Howe wears the formal academic robes he secretly fancies (111). Thus already we see the stark contrast between the first scene's depiction of a natural aesthetic practice, and the last scene's formal procedures.

Appropriately enough, Blackburn arrives in the midst of this scene of routinized aesthetic production. As we saw before, Howe repudiates him, and then the Dean arrives to announce Blackburn's success in obtaining a first job. As the Dean does so, he holds the arm of both Howe and Blackburn, "still linking" them (114). Meanwhile Tertan has been hovering in the background. Decked out in an eerily (madly) grand outfit—an old and yellowing, too-tight raw silk suit on his body, a panama hat on his head, and a whangee cane in hand—and seemingly unaware of the scene before him, Tertan comments into the air three times, "Instruments of precision" (115). Saddened and moved by this spectacle, Howe is nevertheless unsure of what Tertan is referring to, if indeed anything real. But it is clear that Tertan's characteristically evocative phrase may be equally applied to Hilda's method of photography, Blackburn's mercilessly utilitarian mind, and even now to Howe himself, linked by arm and by profession to the story's best representatives of academic-bureaucratic worldliness. Howe has been promoted

from lecturer to official professor (110). The political analogue of such academic achievement may be glimpsed as the Dean leaves: Blackburn is walking “*stately* by his side” (115, my emphasis). Having had his picture taken in academic regalia, and thus with his institutional identity at last confirmed, a guilty Howe “hurrie[s] off,” in the story’s final phrase, “to join the procession” of graduates and professors marching in commencement ceremonies (116). Invoking such a compacted image of orderly movement in its concluding words—one that might well have recalled the marching fascist soldiers populating newsreels in 1943—the story confirms Tertan’s seeming judgment of academic minds as “instruments of precision,” of academic labor as the reduction of thought to categorization, the routinization of intellect.<sup>11</sup> In large measure, academic employment in this story stands for a betrayal of Tertan’s intellectual sincerity, complexity, and depth. Howe’s promotion to professor stands for the promotion, whether intentional or not, of the shallow and ruthless ambition of Blackburn’s New Class, bureaucratic mind.

But it is important to remember that the force of this story’s disappointment is utterly contingent on its surprisingly vivid hope and longing for an ideal university. Tertan—with whom Howe so strongly identifies, and with whom the story encourages readers to empathize, as well—best embodies and articulates that narrative hope for an ideal university. Tertan’s respect for academic and intellectual life shows with his first entrance—or rather, refusal to enter. On the first day of class, standing “on the very sill of the door” to Howe’s classroom, unwilling to go in “until he was perfectly sure of his rights” (75), he asks if he is at the correct class. His devotion to education, in other words, is such that he will not tread upon so important a space as a

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<sup>11</sup> To anticipate this chapter’s concluding remarks about Trilling’s relationship to postmodernism, I would observe as well that “Of This Time”’s orderly, routinized commencement procession of intellectuals might be seen looping around to the more purely bourgeois convoy of station wagons that famously begins Don DeLillo’s 1985 postmodern campus novel *White Noise*: “a long shining line . . . in single file” that “coursed through the west campus” (3), an image itself no doubt anticipated in the grainy film of a Leni Riefenstahl epic to be viewed in Jack Gladney’s Advanced Nazism class.

classroom without good reason. Later, with more than half the semester over, Tertan still cannot rid himself of the habit of standing before he speaks in class. “He seemed unable to carry on the life of the intellect without this mark of respect for it” (89). Indeed, as Howe asserts in a recommendation for him, “Mr. Ferdinand Tertan is marked by his intense devotion to letters and by his exceptional love of all things of the mind” (106). Tertan refuses to distinguish between his love of the mind and his love of Dwight College and academia itself.

This “intense devotion” and “exceptional love” for “all things of the mind” also describes Tertan’s feelings toward his professor. Howe’s profession symbolizes true intellectual pursuit for Tertan, and thus Tertan consistently expresses a powerfully Platonic affection for Howe and his role in the academy. “Some professors,” he notes after their first class together, “are pedants. They are Dryasdusts. However, some professors are free souls and creative spirits. Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche were all professors” (76). With that succinct assessment of professorial extremes, Tertan tells Howe straightforwardly (and touchingly) that “It is my opinion that you occupy the second category” (76). Later, after Howe has discovered Tertan’s illness and discussed it with the Dean, the Dean shows Howe a letter Tertan has written to him. The letter contains a long passage describing Howe’s importance in his life, and in this passage Tertan offers a vision of the professor as one among the “free souls and creative spirits” who are not beholden to “what is logical in the strict word” (100)—a charismatic thinker akin to Howe’s formerly bohemian self, in other words, unmastered by academic rationality. Tertan imagines the professor as poet rather than pedant, and he thus offers a vision of hope for academic labor in a story otherwise pessimistic about its bureaucratic characteristics.

Indeed, in Tertan’s respect for Howe and the ideals of higher education, we can see one of the most poignant aspects of Tertan’s tragedy and thence the story as a whole. Tertan, though

lonely and mad and destined to leave his beloved classrooms, nevertheless keeps alive a utopian and entirely commendable vision of the academy as a place where visionary thinkers—Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and in some admittedly deformed sense Tertan himself—are respected and nurtured. It is Tertan's pure desire *to know* that sparks Howe's tender identification with him, and (in part) his conversely fierce antipathy toward Blackburn. The story as a whole consequently mingles its distaste for higher education's bureaucratic worldliness with a lingering, undimmed hope for the academy's potential to engender thought precisely unconcerned with the dull and narrow utility which bureaucracy demands. As much as anything else, "Of This Time, Of That Place" gains its full power from the conflict between the story's passionate fear of academic routinization (the proto-Stalinist Blackburn) and its no less passionate yearning for an institution of charismatic intellectual labor (the intuitively humanist Tertan).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Here I join a distinguished tradition of those speculating on the source of the story's affect in some binary opposition, beginning with Trilling himself and including one of his most gifted interpreters, Mark Krupnick. I disagree with both their interpretations of the story in some measure, however.

In 1967, Trilling speculated that "what power the story may have" lay in the tension between "the judgment of morality [and that] of science" (Commentary 784). The moral judgment of Tertan commends his dedication to the mind. The scientific judgment recognizes his mind as defective. Trilling goes on to note that many readers have wanted to believe that Tertan is *not* mad, thus ignoring or even negating the scientific judgment. But Trilling insists that the scientific judgment must be taken seriously. As he remarks of the real student upon whom Tertan is based, "he was on the way to being beyond the reach of ordinary human feelings" (782). (That real student is not Allen Ginsberg, as is sometimes assumed: Trilling did not have Ginsberg for a student until after writing the story [D. Trilling *Beginning* 384].) As he remarks of Tertan himself, "Nothing, I fear, can reverse the diagnosis of [his] illness" (784). For Trilling in 1967, Tertan is at least as insane as he is noble, and Joseph Howe's decision to institutionalize him and remain in an academic job ought to be respected accordingly.

But I think that Trilling's interpretation of the story he had written over two decades earlier is unduly influenced by his contemporary concerns. For by the mid-sixties, Trilling's cultural worries had shifted away from the supposedly "scientific" ideologies of any now-aging Stalinists, and toward the almost reverse problem of a sometimes antirationalist counterculture given to mixing politics with aesthetic experience—a 1960s cultural politics more likely to sympathize with the mad, literature-loving Tertan than with the stodgy and "straight" Howe. Such concerns about counterculture politics formed the basis of Trilling's contention in 1965's *Beyond Culture* that "art does not always tell the truth or the best kind of truth and does not always point out the right way, and that it can even generate falsehood and habituate us to it, and that, on frequent occasions, it might well be the subject, in the interests of autonomy, to the scrutiny of the rational intellect" (xiv). Thus while Trilling's reminders that Tertan is truly mad are well-taken, I believe his 1967 interpretation of the story favors his recent concern for "the scrutiny of the rational intellect" too much, and downplays the story's more powerful brief for aesthetic consciousness as employed against cold and impersonal (Stalinist, bureaucratic) "instruments of precision." The later Trilling

I will now argue that Trilling's anxiety and hope with respect to academic labor, so eloquently expressed in "Of This Time, Of That Place," is in fact key to understanding the sources of his intellectual influence as a whole in the forties and beyond. His understanding of professors as bureaucratic New Class workers, for example, was ahead of the curve. Two years after readers met Joseph Howe in the pages of *Partisan Review*, the magazine began an occasional column entitled "Report from the Academy," detailing (usually satirically) the habits and folkways of the American university. The column's first installment, Newton Arvin's "The Professor as Manager," based its satire explicitly on a comparison between James Burnham's controversial post-Trotskyist theory of a rising "managerial class" and academic life. Arvin—yet another signatory to *Culture and the Crisis*, nearly a decade and a half earlier—now viewed a significant portion of the once-proletarianizing professional workers as "something like" members of an emergent ruling class of managers. "The American academic type that emerged in the period between the two wars, and is now everywhere ascendant and authoritative," he maintains, "belongs to an age when, whatever one may feel about the phrase, something like a Managerial Revolution has quietly taken place, and he trims his clothes to the cut prescribed by that fateful process" (275). As a result, these managerial professors were not intellectuals in any true sense. Their character was instead defined by

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underestimates, in other words, the broadly antiscientific (and anti-scientific materialist) animus of his 1943 story. In a very modest way, his story contributed to the antirationalist sixties zeitgeist he came to deplore.

Krupnick finds the "key to the power of the story" in its "perilous balance of [the] contradictory impulses" of Howe's desire to be "both bohemian and respectable, poet and professor, adolescent and grown-up" (84). He also notes that "It's hard not to surmise that the ambivalence was Trilling's own, caught between the claims of his generation's vision of social justice and his powerful craving for success, acceptance, and assimilation into the larger society" (84-85). The only substantive difference I have with Krupnick's reading is that I see the story as much more critical of what Krupnick benignly reads as "success, acceptance, and assimilation." The story considers the desire for success and acceptance, I agree. But the particular kinds of success and acceptance examined in the story are *Stalinist*, in a full and distinct anti-Stalinist sense of that word. They are not so much blandly bourgeois as they are representative of a shrewd intellectual class willing to use nearly any means that serves its ends.

the veneration of quantity, the lust of the tangible, the mental ingenuousness, the passion for organizational machinery, the instinct for the immediate and the solidly visible, and (to put it negatively) the contempt for ideas, the hatred of literature and the arts, the fear of criticism, and (singular as it sounds) the distrust of learning itself. (276)

This describes Blackburn precisely, we may note. The myopic specialization of bureaucracy, Arvin goes on to say, was a hallmark of the managerial professor as well:

True learning in the old sense—in the sense of wide-ranging, curious, adventurous, and humane study—has gone into eclipse: you cannot be learned in that sense and manage your own office effectively at the same time. You must get results; and it is well known that you cannot get results quickly if you dissipate your activities in a thousand directions. You must “specialize,” and know more than anyone else could hope—or indeed wish—to know about Milton or Melville D. Landon. (277)

For Arvin, the modern professor was in short a bureaucrat of the managerial, New Class type: a drone of rote and inflexible habit, a master of increasingly fractional tasks who nevertheless steadily advances in power. In overall effect, this managerial professor is a caricatured portrait of Howe’s worst, bureaucratic instincts—his love of cap and gown and other academic rituals, most superficially, but his unconscious need for power and the betrayal of Tertan’s “true learning” to the “specialized” knowledge of clinical psychiatry, most seriously—all in search of order, stability, and prestige. He is an amalgamation, in short, of the desires and habits Trilling feared most in his own intellectual life. Trilling’s apprehensions and criticisms of academic life anticipated and likely influenced the views of the influential *Partisan Review* crowd, right down

to the post-Trotskyist (here Burnhamian) conception of intellectual labor. We shall see in the next chapter that they also influenced the genesis of the campus novel, via Mary McCarthy's 1952 novel *The Groves of Academe*.

If Trilling's short stories thus anticipated a whole intellectual-political discourse critical of academic labor, I would now note that his fears of academic labor also shaped his most substantial contribution to the new liberalism itself. In important respects, 1950's *The Liberal Imagination* might just as well have been named *The Academic Imagination*. Having spent two decades writing fiction and journal entries about the university, in *The Liberal Imagination* Trilling figures the university as representative of—and sometimes responsible for—the defects of the liberal imagination. In his essay on the Kinsey Report, for example, Trilling notes and praises the fact that Professor Kinsey's Report could only be produced in a culture of democratic pluralism, one singularly open to the acceptance of all behaviors and peoples, no matter how socially unpopular. He identifies this admirable habit of mind with academic thought in general: such tolerance “shows itself in those parts of our intellectual life which are more or less official and institutionalized,” and is thus “far more established in the universities than most of us with our habits of criticism of America, particularly of American universities, will easily admit” (227). Furthermore, this characteristically academic “generosity of mind” deserves credit “as a sign of something good and enlarging in American life” (227).

Yet this respect for the pure fact of peoples and behaviors has disadvantages, too, Trilling insists. The academic mind is loathe to holistically judge its atomized facts in the service of any larger cultural or moral end. The institutional habit of merely accepting social facts such as sexual behavior

goes with a nearly conscious aversion from making intellectual distinctions, almost as if out of the belief that an intellectual distinction must inevitably lead to a social discrimination or exclusion. . . . [The proponents of this view] have taken it as their assumption that all social facts—with the exception of exclusion and economic hardship—must be *accepted*, not merely in the scientific sense but also in the social sense, in the sense, that is, that no judgment must be passed on them, that any conclusion drawn from them which perceives values and consequences will turn out to be “undemocratic.” (227-28, emphasis in the original)

In the name of a supposed “democracy,” the Kinsey Report ignores the relationship of facts to a cultural and ethical whole. The academic mind considers facts as a technical specialist might consider them, ignorant of wider context. And in another essay—originally published in 1942, the year before “Of This Time, Of That Place”—we even learn that such atomization and simplification is frequently the *product* of university life:

The educated classes are learning to blame ideas for our troubles, rather than blaming what is a very different thing—our own bad thinking. This is the great vice of academicism, that it is concerned with ideas rather than with thinking, and nowadays the errors of academicism do not stay in the academy; they make their way into the world, and what begins as a failure of perception among intellectual specialists finds its fulfillment in policy and action. (182-83)

In Trilling’s estimation in *The Liberal Imagination*, in other words, the university’s rational character—the bureaucratic mind it produces—tends to apprehend narrow facts, but ignores the



wider cultural question of values.<sup>13</sup> It promotes the specialist's technical *ideas* rather than the *thought* characteristic of a true intellectual. The university of *The Liberal Imagination*, in short, fosters a kind of narrow, ideological thinking that is the counterpart of Theodore Blackburn's callow mind.

This academic worship of the isolated fact and simplistic idea, the product of a myopic specialization characteristic of bureaucracy—a theme compulsively examined in his fiction, and leaving scattered traces in his criticism—was then one great model of the flaws that Trilling came to see as characteristic of “liberalism” more generally. In the famous preface to *The Liberal Imagination*, Trilling asserts that liberalism's characteristically bureaucratic institutions have produced its enfeebled imagination. “It is one of the tendencies of liberalism to simplify, and this tendency is natural in view of the effort which liberalism makes to organize the elements of life in a rational way,” Trilling writes. Furthermore there is both “value and necessity” in this “organizational impulse.” But we must also understand that organization “means delegation, and agencies, and bureaus, and technicians, and that the ideas that can survive delegation, that can be passed on to agencies and bureaus and technicians, incline to be ideas of a certain kind of simplicity: they give up something of their largeness and modulation and complexity in order to survive” (xii). True ideas cannot survive in bureaucratic institutions, Trilling asserts, without a loss of complexity and nuance, without taking the simpler, more dangerous form of ideology.

Trilling's immediate reference in this passage—to “agencies, and bureaus, and technicians”—is of course to the New Deal programs of the thirties and forties. And this was also the preoccupation, as we have seen, of the dissident Trotskyists who created the anti-Stalinist New Class theories that Trilling adapted. No doubt, some of Trilling's fear indeed

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<sup>13</sup> Daniel O'Hara makes a similar point, arguing that Trilling's “antiprofessional” stance is “derived from the institutionalized separation of moral questions from the professed academic standard of systematic ratiocination that functions to rule out of court beforehand any serious or sustained consideration of the ethics of criticism” (6).

centered around the idea of having intellectual ideas vetted by *state* institutions. Yet as my narrative of Trilling's "crisis of vocation" should demonstrate, such political concerns were comparatively abstract and recent ones for Trilling. His fear that *academic* institutions might impoverish his flexibility and creativity of mind, on the other hand, was both personal and long-lived. Indeed, on an emotional level it might not be too much to say that the academic mind's resemblance to bureaucratic Stalinism would have been of less concern to Trilling than Stalinism's resemblance to the bureaucratic mind of academia. If Trilling's short stories and journal entries reflect a deep revulsion to academic life, and his later criticism assumes the academic quality of the liberal imagination, then both suggest that his career-long fight against ideology was not only a fight against the simplifications endemic to the "masked will" of an ambitious, quasi-Stalinist New Class. It was also and more personally a fight against the simplifications and specializations of academic-bureaucratic labor itself.

We might end the story of Trilling's relationship to academic labor right there. But to do so would be to wrongly place emphasis on Trilling's perception of the deficiencies of university life, and to forget the utopian moment of his academic dialectic, so to speak. In the same year he published "Of This Time," his book *E. M. Forster* defended the connection between academic life and creative endeavors. "According to the American myth, less powerful now than formerly, which assumes a mortal antagonism between the creative and the intellectual life, the university is a particularly deadly influence upon the creative mind," Trilling begins (22); and in this he accurately summarizes his worst fears. But he debunks this "myth" in the remainder of the paragraph, noting that at least "in England forty-odd years ago, a student at Cambridge [such as Forster] was not likely to suppose that the university of Marlowe, Milton, Dryden and Coleridge was going to dessicate him by scholarship or make him into a don when he wanted to be a poet"

(22). The passage as a whole thus stands as a testament of Trilling's belief that the university *could* provide a platform for the charismatic work of creative mental labor. And we have already seen that while "Of This Time" revealed Trilling's great skepticism of the bureaucratic reduction of mind in institutions of higher education, it also recalls the past achievements of the university in producing such giants as Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche. Trilling's critique of the university was thorough and deep, no doubt. But it was inspired by an equally high hope for that institution.

The oft-quoted final words of Trilling's Preface to *The Liberal Imagination* recommend the study of literature to liberal readers because it is "the human activity which takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty" (xiii). If literature was the human *activity* wherein such qualities were to be found, Trilling still hoped that the university would provide a human *institution* equally suited to those ideals. His 1940s portrait of an institution mired in bureaucratic routine and reductionist ideology, of an academy that served an intellectual class's social and political ambitions, gained its bitter animus precisely from his underlying and persistent hope for an institution devoted to the charismatic work of thought. Trilling's ambivalence about the bureaucratic dangers and charismatic possibilities of academic-intellectual labor—the product of long agony, registered first in his short stories and journal entries, and ultimately manifested in the fiction and essays of his maturity—was central to his experience of the 1940s. In the abstracted form of his hope that liberals might possess imagination, that ambivalence toward bureaucratic higher education constituted perhaps his most significant contribution to American literary-political culture in the mid-twentieth century.

### 3. Ending Ideology: Towards the Postmodern in Trilling's Novel of Ideas

As we saw in Chapter Three, both at the time and since critics have commonly and correctly identified Trilling with the new liberalism of the 1940s and 1950s. But to my knowledge there has not been a word in recent criticism on Trilling's relationship to—and influence upon—a phenomenon we are much more familiar with today: postmodernism.<sup>14</sup> In this final section of the chapter, then, I wish to show that Trilling's anxiety regarding academic and bureaucratic labor influenced more than his conception of liberalism in *The Liberal Imagination*. His academic anxiety even may have informed key postmodernist intellectual and cultural trends that emerged a generation later. For if *The Liberal Imagination* as a whole imagined American intellectual life as a macrocosm of the bureaucratic university's narrow habits of mind, Trilling's 1948 essay "Art and Fortune"—collected in *The Liberal Imagination*—nevertheless persists in advocating a specifically realist aesthetic practice whose value derives precisely from Trilling's hope for a university capable of producing charismatic and holistic thought. And in that essay's theorization of a self-conscious novel of *ideas* dedicated to antibureaucratic complexity, Trilling offers an early theoretical basis—rooted in realism—for the antirealist body of fiction later writers would call "postmodernism."

Trilling first read "Art and Fortune" at a gathering of the English Institute in New York City in September of 1948. It was only a year after he had published his first and (as it turned out) only novel to mixed though respectable reviews. In order to understand Trilling's motives for writing "Art and Fortune"—motivations central to my claims about Trilling's contribution to the foundations of early postmodernism—we have to understand both the reviews of *The Middle of the Journey* and their profound effect on Trilling. The negative assessments reanimated

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<sup>14</sup> I again except my own article on Trilling. I would also note that in his 2004 article "'I'm Not His Father'" Robert Genter discusses Trilling's direct relationship to literary *modernism* in the person of his pupil Allen Ginsberg.

Trilling's old anxiety about his career, for they almost uniformly ascribed the novel's aesthetic flaws to its author's academic employment as a critic. This was the case indirectly when J. M. Lalley jibed in the *New Yorker* that "much of the dialogue reads as if it were a pasting together of excerpts from the *New Masses* and the *Partisan Review*" (126). More directly, Orville Prescott opined in the *New York Times* that "When the critical sense is strenuously exercised creative power seems to atrophy" (23). Robert Warshow's long review in *Commentary* was particularly cutting. Trilling's characters, he said, exist in an "academic void of moral abstractions" (543), and because Trilling seemed unable to record experience without reference to a master idea, "Mr. Trilling has not yet solved the problem of being a novelist at all" (545). One consensus of these negative reviews, then, was that Trilling's dedication to criticism and intellectualism had stunted his capacity to write fiction.

Once again, as when he encountered Hemingway's letter in graduate school, Trilling turned to his journal. "The attack on my novel is that it is gray, bloodless, intellectual, without passion," he wrote in December of 1947, referencing Lalley, Prescott, and Warshow by name.<sup>15</sup> Trilling believed that such accusations gained their peculiar animus from a more general resentment against academics and critics who attempted to write fiction. Each attack, he wrote, was "always made with great personal feeling, with anger.—How dared I presume?" ("From" 509). In another entry, written only months later, he continued to meditate on the potential conflict between his academic life and his aspirations as a novelist, this time taking the conflict more to heart. Receiving official word of his promotion to full professor at Columbia, Trilling feared that "I pay for the position [as professor] . . . with my talent—that I draw off from my

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<sup>15</sup> The editor labels the entry only "1947," but Trilling's reference to Warshow and Prescott—whose comparatively late and hostile reviews were both published in December—demonstrates that the entry was written sometime that month. In fact, it is likely that Warshow's review directly prompted the entry; years later Trilling remarked that he took the review "quite personally" and that his "resentment" of the review "apparently went quite deep" (qtd. in Shoben 46).

own work [as a novelist] what should remain with it” (511). But this repetition of his vocational crisis now came with a difference. For instead of remaining mired in such fears about academic employment, Trilling rallied against them. They ultimately emanated less from himself, he wrote, than from his “downtown friends,” the ones who congregated so many blocks south and a world away from his own Morningside Heights.<sup>16</sup> “Suppose I were to dare to believe that one could be a professor and a man! and a writer!—what arrogance and defiance of convention,” Trilling shouts. “Yet deeply I dare to believe that, and must learn to believe it on the surface” (511), he concludes more quietly: he intends to reconcile his academic and literary identities. This time, Trilling self-consciously determined to overcome his fears and to live the life of both professor *and* novelist.

His first public assertion of the ability to be both—to “believe it on the surface”—came in September of that same year, with his reading of “Art and Fortune” aloud to the English Institute, a gathering of literary (and often academic) intellectuals. The essay was published in *Partisan Review* three months after its delivery, and in *The Liberal Imagination* two years later. Deeply rooted in Trilling’s renewed crisis of vocation, the essay outlines both a theory of the novel and a political rationale for the intellectual labor of authorship itself in the Cold War.

“Art and Fortune” begins by declaring its intent to contemplate the specter of the novel’s death as a genre, much-discussed after the age of Joyce and Proust (*Liberal* 240-42). Seeking to defend the novel’s viability, Trilling’s essay imagines how it might respond to conditions that now threaten its existence. The soul of the novel whose crisis concerns him, we may begin by noting, is that of nineteenth-century realism. What Trilling persistently and sweepingly calls “the

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<sup>16</sup> On the conflict between Trilling’s “uptown” and “downtown” lives, see the perceptive third chapter of Krupnick’s *Lionel Trilling*. In a sense, one might characterize my own two analyses of Trilling’s work similarly: the previous chapter primarily details the downtown, post-Trotskyist influences on Trilling’s career, while the present chapter primarily examines the uptown, academic influences.

novel” is in fact indissolubly bound up with the realist novel’s specific hopes to represent social life in clear and simple prose: his chief examples of “the great novels” at the center of the tradition he is examining are, tellingly, *Lost Illusions*, *The Sentimental Education*, *War and Peace*, *Jude the Obscure*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*” (244). Though it speaks uniformly of “the novel,” then, “Art and Fortune” seeks to understand the specific dilemma of realism in the current era.<sup>17</sup>

Classically, Trilling asserts, the novel was motivated by two concerns: anxieties regarding money and class, and the desire to shape ideas (242-44). The novel’s contemporary difficulties, he goes on to say, stem from the fact that these two provocations have faded in the contemporary era. Class—never as important to America as to Europe—no longer plays a decisive role in social life; in the new welfare state as well as under Communism, its influence has been substantially replaced by the more direct exercise of state power (244-247). Ideas are in retreat as well, perhaps pushed back by the straightforward action of such a blunt, state-centered politics: “all over the world the political mind lies passive before action and the event” (247). If the nineteenth century had occasioned rich and galvanizing traditions of both conservative and radical thought, in the twentieth century “we are in the hands of the commentator” (247), who is unable to grasp reality by means of true ideas.

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<sup>17</sup> One might object that since elsewhere in the essay Trilling defends Joyce’s (modernist) *Ulysses* as an example of the novel he thinks to be still living (255), he isn’t concerned with realism exclusively. But Trilling justifies his inclusion of *Ulysses* as part of “the novel”’s tradition in a strange and ultimately revealing manner. The discussion takes place in the context of Trilling’s objection to novelistic prose that veers too far in the direction of poetry, and his preference instead for “a straightforward prose, rapid, masculine, and committed to events, making its effects not by the single word or by the phrase but by words properly and naturally massed”—his preference for the prose of classic realism, in short. Knowing that his defense of *Ulysses*—but explicitly not of Djuna Barnes’ *Nightwood*—will raise eyebrows in this context, he then argues in a footnote that *Ulysses*’ “basic prose, which is variously manipulated, is not without its affinities with the prose I ask for” (255). To laud the prose of *Ulysses*’ later chapters (say) as mere “manipulations” of “basic prose” strikes me as pushing the stated and fundamental hope for “a straightforward prose” to the breaking point. But the salient point here is that with this description Trilling essentially claims Joyce *for realism*, severely downplaying *Ulysses*’ shocking formal innovation. His strange characterization of *Ulysses* only further proves that his standards and hopes in this essay are those of the realist novel.

This decline of ideas does not reflect any decrease in thought per se. On the contrary, thought of a certain kind now multiplies throughout the culture. Such thought has become powerful and indeed permeates daily existence: “we eat by reason, copulate by statistics, rear children by rule, and the one impulse we do not regard with critical caution is that toward ideation, which increasingly becomes a basis of prestige” (258). In short, we now have a society of *ideology* rather than true ideas, a “strange submerged life of habit and semihabit in which to ideas we attach strong passions but no very clear awareness of the concrete reality of their consequences” (259). With the rise of this abstract and politically unconscious society, then, “ideological organization has cut across class organization” (258). The *ancien régime* of money and ideas has been succeeded by the *nouveau régime* of state authority and an uncritical “ideation” leading to prestige. “Art and Fortune” argues that in this era when state power and ideology have replaced class and ideas, the novel has lost its traditional (realist) roots and rationale, and this loss primarily accounts for its present crisis.

But the novel has not yet expired, Trilling asserts. Indeed, these otherwise damning circumstances may actually present an opportunity for it. If *economic* class can no longer motivate the novel, then *ideological* class might. The new novel might dramatize the ideologies that presently constitute the world of social and political action. Furthermore, the novel may have a political duty in the age of ideology, for a novel that deals “in a very explicit way with *ideas*” may help revive the cause of ideas as against ideology, in part by simply and directly discussing them (256, emphasis added). In revitalizing ideas, this new novel may “remind us forcibly of the ideological nature of institutions and classes” in the present era (257). All this is not to put the novel to exclusively political uses, Trilling is quick to point out. For the essay’s title refers to his ultimate belief (along with Aristotle and Agathon) that “Art fosters Fortune, Fortune fosters Art”



(qtd. on 260). The novel (Art) must foster Fortune by disrupting the certainties of political ideology, yes, but the haphazard nature of Fortune must also foster a novelistic Art that continues to be grounded in an only “relaxed,” rather than directly political, will.<sup>18</sup> The new novel would encourage the *play* of ideas, which then only might disrupt the dominance of ideological thought. This new novel would essentially revitalize the nineteenth-century realist novel’s concern with ideas, for an age in which class had been replaced by ideology.

We should note once again the post-Trotskyist underpinnings of Trilling’s thought in this essay. His portrait of a world dominated by a direct form of state politics unconcerned with serious ideas, for example, is deeply influenced by New Class theory, however much (as we saw in Chapter Three) that critique has begun to be obscured by the abstraction of “ideology.” The New Class’s power, we recall, was derived not from the ownership of capital—money—but from direct, managerial control of the state itself, a power gained partially via its ability to transmute once-rich ideas (Marx) into a merely self-serving ideology (Stalin and even Lenin himself, for Trilling). Furthermore, in its recommendation of a novel of ideas opposed to ideology, the essay essentially revives Friedrich Schiller’s early-nineteenth-century concept of “aesthetic education” and updates it for the era of the New Class. After the Russian Revolution (rather than the French), “Art and Fortune” advocates the “relaxed will” of a novel of ideas (a kind of *Spieltrieb*) as the appropriate counterweight to the ideological will characteristic of New Class politics. Trilling’s essay responds to New Class theory by imagining a novel that would encourage the play of ideas and thus disrupt the dominance of the New Class’s ideological thought.

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<sup>18</sup> The “relaxed will” is E. M. Forster’s phrase, much admired by Trilling; see *E. M. Forster* 5. The first chapter of *E. M. Forster*, where Trilling coins the phrase “liberal imagination” and introduces Forster as a corrective to liberalism’s failings, may be read as essentially a rehearsal for *The Liberal Imagination* as a whole, and “Art and Fortune” in particular. Indeed, compared to the later works, *Forster* may be recommended for its often refreshingly concrete explication of Trilling’s argument.

But in the context of some poor reviews for *The Middle of the Journey*, and Trilling's renewed determination to be both an academic and a novelist, it is hard not to read the essay also as a defense of Trilling's own practices and profession. Here I would build upon Lewis Simpson's sharp intuition that around 1946, "when he was working with equal assiduity both as critic and novelist," Trilling "envision[ed] the possibility of resolving his divided career as writer" (412). Simpson argues that 1947's *The Middle of the Journey* was accordingly "an attempt to unify criticism and poetry in the form of a novel" (412). "Art and Fortune," I would argue in turn, is Trilling's 1948 attempt to *theorize* this unification. It is Trilling's attempt to unify fiction and criticism—to justify his dual career as novelist and academic—via the concept of that revitalized realism he commends for the future novel, a new novel that "No less than in its infancy, and now perhaps with a greater urgency and relevance, . . . passionately concerns itself with reality" (259). If critics had complained that *The Middle of the Journey* was too cerebral, too given to letting its ideas override the novelist's higher calling to represent "reality" and "experience" (Fiedler 128, Warshow 543), Trilling retorts that the novelistic attention to ideas is not a *retreat* from reality and experience, but rather a means to approach them. Ideas have always been central to the realist novel, he points out; and in an era when the power of intellectual labor and expertise grows daily, and ideology threatens to overtake somatic reality and experience itself ("we eat by reason, copulate by statistics"), genuine ideas may disrupt such ideology and hence help to restore experience. And if this conception of the novel can save the near-moribund genre itself, we might add, who better to champion a novel of *ideas* than a man daily engaged with them? Who better than a professor? "Art and Fortune" is thus at once a meditation on the novel's problems and potentials in the age of the New Class, and an

affirmation of the literary and political importance of ideas—of Trilling’s academic and novelistic labor, potentially—in that same era.<sup>19</sup>

Trilling himself, however, remained displeased with his account of the novel’s new possibilities. Shortly after reading it to the English Institute (likely that same evening), he wrote that he was “very unhappy about my essay which I consider academic, simple-minded, philistine, regressive” (“From” 512). Why was Trilling so critical of his essay? I suspect that he ultimately believed the novel should never require justification, even partially, by an appeal to politics or utility. And thus “Art and Fortune”’s vision of the novel as against ideology ironically made the essay a perfect specimen of ideological thought itself—a “philistine” and “academic,” rather than purely aesthetic, defense of the novel. So when the largely academic audience at the English Institute praised this philistine defense of the novel, it only confirmed Trilling’s disappointed sense that he was in fact not a true novelist, but just another cog in the bureaucratic academy. Consequently he imagined the more charismatic figures in the English Institute’s audience as a kind of silent tribunal: “wanted desperately to be praised by [Mark] Schorer and [Leslie] Fiedler, who said nothing—Schorer having vanished. . . . great sense of the superiority of the ‘others’—Warshow, Fiedler . . .” (512). As for the rest in attendance, their praise actually condemned him;

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<sup>19</sup> Trilling’s explication of the novel of ideas may have taken inspiration from a review of *The Middle of the Journey* by Morton Zabel in *The Nation*. In that glowing—and for our purposes still quite interesting—piece, Zabel argues that Trilling’s novel is part of “a new genre among novelists,” set in “the milieu of the contemporary literary and political intelligentsia” (414). Other exemplars of this new genre include Edmund Wilson’s *Memoirs of Hecate County* and Eleanor Clark’s *The Bitter Box*. But for Zabel, Trilling’s novel of the intelligentsia in particular is perhaps a “classic,” and at the least a “brilliant example of [the] new mode of fiction,” a mode that “brings the best critical intelligence now discernible in America into play with an absolutely honest creative talent” (416). Zabel thus may have given Trilling the courage to believe not only that intellectual and creative capacity could coexist in the same work and man, but also (in “Art and Fortune” especially) that novels like his own might be seminal to the future of the novel itself.

Zabel’s speculation about a new genre of the American intelligentsia should interest us as more than a source of psychological inspiration for Trilling, however. It should indeed be accorded some small bit of attention in American literary history itself. For it marks an early identification of what I have called (in Part I) “intellectual labor fiction.” And as Part II of this dissertation makes clear, the serious genre of intelligentsia fiction that Zabel identifies was something like a less popular cousin of the satirical campus novel that took off in the 1950s—and thus may also be considered an ancestor of the postmodern novel in America.

it “profoundly depressed me—utterly—sickened me with my profession” (512). Thus Trilling’s triple discontent—with his essay’s argument, with its unthinkingly positive reception by a predominantly academic audience, and with what he believed all this said about himself as a novelist—caused him once again to doubt his career choices. His simultaneous attempt to advocate the novel of ideas and to synthesize his academic and literary vocations, he believed, was misguided and a failure.<sup>20</sup>

But despite Trilling’s disappointment, the essay nevertheless merits serious attention in the history of literary ideas. For “Art and Fortune”’s detailed suggestions regarding the formal characteristics of this realism-inspired novel of ideas—the formal characteristics that on a personal level might justify Trilling’s academic labor, and that on a broader plane might aid the novel in disrupting the sway of New Class ideology—in retrospect constitute a bellwether for what would come to be called the postmodern novel. The essay’s fifth section begins by critiquing one proposed answer to the novel’s problems, Sartre’s theory of “dogmatic realism.” According to Trilling, Sartre’s aesthetic intends that “the novel is to be written as if without an author and without a personal voice and ‘without the foolish business of storytelling’” (253). This novel of dogmatic realism would keep the reader immersed in its fictional world; its reader

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<sup>20</sup> In September of 1948, Trilling had especial cause to be jealous of Fiedler and to desire his praise. Only three months earlier, in June’s *Partisan Review*, Fiedler had published his (still) famous, (still) infamous essay on homosociality and race in American literature, “Come Back to the Raft Ag’in, Huck Honey!” Like Trilling, Fiedler was a professor: in 1948 he was teaching at Montana State University. But in this essay Fiedler had proven himself capable of a distinctly unbuttoned critical effort, one that no one would have thought to label “academic.” The lively and wild essay had shaken up the intellectual establishment at Rahv’s *Partisan Review* and beyond. On the other hand, Trilling’s work, while greatly admired, had never occasioned any such reaction. It was clear that “Art and Fortune” wouldn’t either. This may explain a great part of Trilling’s despairing tone as he goes on to relate the praise his essay had garnered from Jacques Barzun and Philip Rahv. They each “called me & said the piece was a great cultural statement, both using the same phrase. I had sent it to Ph. R. to tell me whether it was suitable for *P[artisan] R[evue]* & now he is wild for it.—What am I after?” (512). Where Fiedler’s essay had provoked outrage, his own more measured effort elicited only dull piety, perfectly symbolized by the uncanny repetition of the all-too-respectful and contentless phrase, “a great cultural statement.” To continue the Weberian motif, where Fiedler had been charismatic, Trilling had only occasioned the routine and mechanical repetition of banal critical acclaim.

For an account of Fiedler as “Enfant Terrible, American Jewish Critic, and the Other Side of Lionel Trilling”—Trilling’s critical alter ego or “double,” as it were—see Walden.

“is to be prevented from falling out of the book,” is in fact “made to forget that he is reading a book” written by an author at all (253). No prose is permitted that might remind the reader of anything outside the book.

Trilling’s description already begins to highlight his objections to such an aesthetic. Using politically-charged vocabulary, he argues that Sartre’s theory of dogmatic realism aims to keep the reader “as strictly as possible within [the novel’s] confines and power by every possible means.” His objections then become explicit: “The banishment of the author from his books, the stilling of his voice, have but reinforced the faceless hostility of the world and have tended to teach us that we ourselves are not creative agents and that we have no voice, no tone, no style, no significant existence” (253). The reader of “dogmatic realism” is engulfed by the aesthetic field, and shepherded away from actuality. Her or his consciousness is submerged into the hidden author’s *Weltanschauung*. Politically speaking, Trilling spies a brace for fascism and authoritarianism in Sartre’s aesthetic theory. Dogmatic realism’s complete capture of readerly consciousness, we might say, finds its best political analogy in the “big lie” of modern (New Class) political propaganda. It is the aesthetic of ideology. Readers caught in such an aesthetic, an aesthetic dedicated to the occlusion of what the young Marx called “sensuous reality,” are robbed of their role as what Trilling calls “creative agents.” If we were to phrase Trilling’s objections in Lukácsian terms, we would say that dogmatic realism propagates the reader’s *reified* consciousness, held in thrall to a fetishized novel that slyly represents the master consciousness of an author whose labor is purposefully hidden from sight.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Here is perhaps the best place to address the intent of my chapter’s title, “Ideology and the Consciousness of the Professoriat.” Students of Marxist theory with an eye for allusion may have noticed that it alludes to the title of Georg Lukács’s celebrated chapter in *History and Class Consciousness*, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat.” Lukács had been amongst Weber’s circle in Heidelberg from 1912 to 1916, as Weber was writing *Economy and Society*; and so Weber’s critique of bureaucratic discipline and the rationalization of thought strongly affected Lukács’s concept of reification: “The specialisation of skills leads to the destruction of every image of the whole,” Lukács opines in one particularly Weberian passage (103). (The Marxist Lukács, of course, ultimately turns

Trilling's remedy for such political-aesthetic ills follows immediately: "Surely what we need is the opposite of this, the opportunity to identify ourselves with a mind that willingly admits that it is a mind and does not pretend that it is History or Events or the World but only a mind thinking and planning—possibly planning our escape" (253-54). This more or less repeats

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to the commodity fetish, more than institutional authority, to explain reification's source. Lukács's early development in Weber's circle is explored in Löwy 37-40, Congdon 82-89, and Gluck passim.) Given Weber's eventual influence on Trilling as well, observed in a footnote above, it should not be surprising that there is a family resemblance between Lukács's critique of reified thought as an instance of the commodity fetish and Trilling's rejection of ideology: "pellets of intellection" was one of Trilling's most evocative, and notably material, metaphors for ideological thoughts, for example (*Liberal* 284). Hence my chapter title's substitution of Trilling's "Ideology" for Lukács's "Reification" is only partially tongue-in-cheek. Trilling's conception of a would-be hegemonic New Class in the academy, of course, accounts for the substitution of "Professoriat" for Lukács's "Proletariat."

But in addition to this indirect family resemblance between Trilling's "ideology" and Lukács's "reification," via the ur-source of Weber, Lukács had a surprisingly direct influence on Trilling, in a manner thus far unremarked in the critical commentary. As Mark Krupnick has noted, Trilling persistently appropriated the term "dialectic" in the thirties and beyond as an honorific means of describing complex thought (51-55). It is in this ongoing attraction to the "dialectical" that we may see the Lukácsian heritage in Trilling's work. Trilling did not learn the importance of the dialectic from Lukács directly, but from a contemporary Marxist student of John Dewey's—the famously formidable philosopher Sidney Hook. It is in fact nearly impossible to overestimate Hook's influence on Trilling's forty-year dedication to "dialectical" thought itself, however much Trilling eventually molded the concept to his own purposes. Diana Trilling relates that Hook was responsible for converting both her and Lionel to Communism while they all stayed at the Yaddo artists' colony in the summer of 1931 (179-83). Hook then became a mentor to Trilling's dissertation work for much of the thirties (Krupnick 44-45, 51). And in Hook's celebrated 1933 book on Marx, *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*, Hook rightly acknowledged his "indebtedness" to the work of Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* (xii). For Hook had followed Lukács in heretically considering dialectical thought, more than any specific social or political belief, to be Marx's essence. Thus it is quite plausible to say that the mature Trilling's great theme of the need for complex, anti-ideological thought—the flexible and imaginative thinking we most associate with him today, that he frequently called "dialectical"—found its original inspiration, via Hook, in Lukács's 1923 "Studies in Marxist Dialectics" (as the subtitle of *History and Class Consciousness* has it). Even if the intent was to be ironic, then, the title of Martin Jay's classic study of the Frankfurt School, *The Dialectical Imagination*, echoes Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination* quite appropriately: Trilling's most famous and representative book indeed has important roots in Western Marxism's attempts to emphasize the specifically dialectical heritage of Marx.

None of this intellectual genealogy suggests that the mature Trilling was a closeted Marxist, of course; not even so eccentric a Marxist as the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness*, or for that matter the Sidney Hook of *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*. But it does serve as clear evidence that the concept of "dialectical" thought, emphasized by Lukács and then Hook, profoundly influenced a young Trilling who sought to assert the value of intellectual autonomy while still evincing his commitment to Marxist politics. An irony of American intellectual history, then, is that through Trilling—and no doubt others of his generation who followed a similar trajectory—the "dialectic" of Lukács and Western Marxism more generally helped form the "end of ideology" ethos in mid-century American thought. The most iconic anti-Marxist idea of the 1950s, in short, came to being only with the help of an equally iconic Marxist concept. From there, as this section of the chapter will go on to show, the notion of the dialectic also helped create the anti-ideological literary and intellectual phenomenon we have come to call postmodernism.

For an account of how the Lukács-inspired Frankfurt School influenced American intellectual life, including the work of the New York Intellectuals, much more than is typically thought, see Wheatland. The Frankfurt School, of course, was housed along with Trilling at Columbia University from 1934 to 1950, in the form of the Institute of Social Research; see Jay 39 and 286 regarding the beginning and the end of the Institute's time at Columbia.

in brief, with greater political emphasis, what Trilling had once admired about E. M. Forster's fictional habits:

He teases his medium and plays with his genre. He scorns the fetish of "adequate motivation," delights in surprise and melodrama and has a kind of addiction to sudden death. Guiding his stories according to his serious whim . . . Forster takes full and conscious responsibility for his novels . . . Like Fielding, he shapes his prose for comment and explanation, and like Fielding he is not above an explanatory footnote. . . .

In all this Forster is not bizarre. He simply has the certainty of the great novelists that any novel is a made-up thing and that a story, in order to stand firmly on reality, needs to keep no more than one foot on probability. (*E. M. Forster* 5)

An epiphanic scene from his 1945 story "The Other Margaret" likewise documents Trilling's fascination with the contrast between the pleasure of aesthetic absorption (*à la* Sartre's dogmatic realism) and the greater pleasure of a *knowingly* aesthetic creation:

When Elwin . . . had listened to his daughter playing her first full piece on the recorder, he had thought that nothing could be more wonderful than the impervious gravity of her face as her eyes focussed on the bell of the instrument and on the music-book while she blew her tune in a daze of concentration; yet only a few months later, when she had progressed so far as to be up to airs from Mozart, she had been able, in the very midst of a roulade, with her fingers moving fast, to glance up at him with a twinkling, sidelong look, her mouth puckering in a smile as she kept her lips pursed, amused by the music, amused by the frank

excess of its ornamentation and by her own virtuosity. For Elwin the smile was the expression of gay and conscious life, of life innocently aware of itself and fond of itself, and, although there was something painful in having to make the admission, it was even more endearing than Margaret's earlier gravity. Life aware of itself seemed so much more life. (28-29)

By the time of "Art and Fortune," this aesthetic of deliberately teased mediums and genres, of amused sidelong looks and "frankly" excessive ornamentation—this "life aware of itself"—constitutes not merely a set of pleasures, but in fact an unsurpassed aesthetic education. For Trilling asserts that "To know a story when we see one, to know it *for* a story, to know that it is not reality itself but that it has clear and effective relations with reality—this is one of the great disciplines of the mind" (254, emphasis in original). Such awareness has political as well as purely mental value, Trilling believes, since the mind that can exist *between* fiction and reality in this manner, maintaining a firm distinction between the two, is a mind resistant to New Class society's urge to drown the varieties of individual and political experience in the shallow pool of ideology. Hence "liberating effects . . . may be achieved when literature understands itself to be literature and does not identify itself with what it surveys" (254). A reflexive aesthetic was thus one cornerstone of Trilling's response to the dangers of narrowly bureaucratic, ideological thought.

Both Trilling's critique of rigid, bureaucratized ideas, and his consequent promotion of a conscious fictionality, we may now note, bear more than a passing resemblance to central tenets of what was later called "the postmodern." In his imagination of a society (and aesthetic) where bureaucratically-produced ideology has permeated the core of daily existence, in other words, we have a forerunner of the postmodern emphasis on reality as a kind of fiction (ideology) in itself.



And in his hope for a novel of ideas that would disrupt such ideology, we have a forerunner of the postmodern belief that a playful incredulity toward metanarratives—perhaps in the form of meta-fiction, wherein “literature understands itself to be literature”—might be an appropriate response to a world dominated by abstractions.<sup>22</sup> By inventing the concept of a reflexive novel of ideas that would justify the academy’s potential for thought as against the bureaucratized and ideological world at large—an ideal of the novel rooted in realism’s hopes to represent social reality—Trilling had taken steps toward the creation of some of postmodern fiction’s most frequent legitimating theories and self-understandings. Trilling’s attack on ideology might lay foundations for the postmodern mistrust of “reality” itself; and his promotion of a self-conscious novel purveying contestable *ideas*, rather than an uncontested and all-encompassing ideology, might conduce to a postmodern metafiction that emphasized its existence as nothing *more* than fiction.

To say all this is not to call Trilling a postmodern, of course. Stephen Tanner notes that Trilling’s “was essentially a nineteenth-century conception of the novel”—that is to say a still realist one—and thus argues that Trilling’s prediction that the coming novel would deal directly with contemporary ideas “simply revealed his conservative hopes” for a novel that would partake as much of social and intellectual life as his Victorian idols’ creations did. In the end, he observes, Trilling’s predictions “proved embarrassingly wide of the mark” (101). And indeed, while Trilling admired E. M. Forster’s reflexive penchant for the open play of ideas, one can only guess how he might have reacted if Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*, say, had descended from the heavens onto his desk while he was writing the essay. (It is hard to imagine he would have come down with his own case of Jes Grew.) This holds equally true for Trilling’s own

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<sup>22</sup> “Incredulity toward metanarratives” is, of course, Jean-François Lyotard’s famous short definition of the postmodern; see Lyotard xxiv.

practice of fiction. For example, 1947's *The Middle of the Journey*—with its intense and open discussion of ideas, and only a straightforward if sparse plot to sustain it—is much closer to the “realistic” political fiction of Trilling’s beloved Henry James novel, 1886’s *The Princess Casamassima*, than to such postmodern political fiction as Robert Coover’s 1977 novel *The Public Burning*. Thus we should not call Trilling, and I am not calling Trilling, a postmodernist *avant la lettre*.

I am saying, however, that Trilling’s literary-formal response to both Stalinism and academic labor was an aesthetic theory and indeed a body of ideas, rooted in realism, recognizably capable of developing *into* postmodernism. For with Trilling’s skepticism of New Class power, of a masked will that dominates most at the moment it seeks to speak for others’ good, we are potentially on the way to Foucault’s skeptical account of disciplinary power, a power so often advanced under the academically-trained and bureaucratic auspices of experts in mental health, prison reform, and psychoanalysis. Likewise, Pynchon’s vast conspiracies may appear in this light simply as delirious amplifications of the bureaucratic “organizational impulse” that Trilling imagined as central to higher education and contemporary liberalism (*Liberal* xii). But simultaneously, with Trilling’s flexible new liberalism opposed to any simple understanding of “reality,” and his conception of a self-consciously fictional novel of ideas, we are potentially on the way to Nabokov’s impish, joyous proliferation of narratives and interpretations, and to Barthesian *jouissance*. We are even potentially on the way to Derrida’s poststructuralist celebration of a “play” that evades all logocentric claims to absolute truth.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Regarding the topic of Trilling’s possible relationship to poststructuralism, it’s intriguing to note that during a public lecture delivered near the end of his life in 1975, Trilling grouched that structuralism was “another system” akin to the Stalinism of his youth, a system that was “antithetical to will and individual freedom” (Langbaum 65). Thus he would certainly have been sympathetic to ideas challenging structuralism. Nevertheless, it’s simultaneously true that had he lived longer Trilling might have mistrusted the eventually profound influence of poststructuralism as well, particularly if he believed that influence to be essentially antirationalist and determinist (as in the common caricatures of Derrida and Foucault, respectively). My only argument here, in any case, is that in the 1940s and

Trilling's mid-century new liberalism and his realist novel of ideas, predicated upon his simultaneous skepticism of and hope for the possibilities of intellectual and academic labor, provided openings for two central strains of postmodern thought and aesthetics. Both the quasi-paranoid and the giddily liberatory were possibilities to be extrapolated from this famously moderate author's mind.

Trilling's duality and ambivalence was integral to his career, and it is part of what continues to make him fascinating. I have argued in Chapter Three and here alike that his ambivalence was rooted in a deep skepticism regarding intellectuals generally, and academic labor more specifically, a skepticism that in turn shaped the anti-ideological stance characteristic of his new liberalism and his novel of ideas. But more surprisingly, I have also argued—and I think the point bears repeating—that the chastened politics of his new liberalism and the oftentimes brooding quality of his fiction were not built solely on skepticism. For what lay behind his critiques and concerns, back of Trilling's characteristic reticence and nuance, was a profound hope for intellectual autonomy and intellectual freedom. Understood in the concrete social terms that Trilling usually submerged beneath his abstractions, it was a hope for the autonomy and freedom of intellectuals themselves. His outlook on intellectual labor in the forties, especially, thus consisted of equal parts fear and desire. It feared the increasingly ideological nature of New Class society; it desired a political existence for intellectuals as free as that of a physically healthy and philosophically firm John Laskell, unfettered by the ideological thinking of both Maxims and Crooms. It feared the bureaucratization of intellectual life in the academy; it desired academics' labor to be as free as Tertan's mind, existing beyond the immediate concerns of this time and that place. It feared the debasement of fiction held to the

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1950s he had contributed to an antibureaucratic, antisystemic intellectual milieu where poststructuralism and indeed "postmodernism" itself might later thrive.

narrow and Stalinist standards of “socialist realism”; it desired artists’ freedom to delight in pure creation, much as a Forster or a Mozart would—it desired, in other words, an aesthetic practice in which intellectual workers could openly traffic in ideas, without thinking to apologize for the inevitable discontinuity between their roaming imaginations and the actual, material world.

Trilling’s pervasive anxieties about academic life and his utopian hopes for a life of autonomous thought and intellectual labor thus molded his career from beginning to end. In equal measure, we shall see, such institutional fears and political hopes offered a rich basis for both the campus novel’s characteristic themes, and the anti-ideological and intellectually utopian culture of postmodernism itself.

## Chapter Five

### **On the Campus Novel and the Possibility of Postmodernism: Antibureaucratic Politics in Mary McCarthy's *Academe*<sup>1</sup>**

#### **1. Mary McCarthy and the Invention of the Campus Novel**

Shortly after the publication of Trilling's "Of This Time, Of That Place," and in the same year that *Partisan Review* began a series of columns offering a "Report from the Academy," Mary McCarthy herself went back to college—as a professor, teaching at Bard College for the 1945-1946 academic year. She tried her hand at teaching again in the spring semester at Sarah Lawrence in 1948, but in the end gave up on academia permanently in order to continue her career as a freelance essayist and novelist. Why? Though she enjoyed what she later called "this business of studying" ("Art" 10)—the focused and detail-oriented reading necessary for preparing her classes—she nevertheless found the work as a whole simply too grueling to want to do again. "It was all quite mad, crazy. I had never taught before, and I was staying up till two in the morning every night trying to keep a little bit behind my class," she joked ruefully (9). Though she did not have as much experience with academic life as Trilling, nor did she agonize over it as much, then, Mary McCarthy's time as a professor nevertheless made a firm impression on her.<sup>2</sup>

And like Trilling as well, she determined to make fiction out of her experience. But McCarthy's uproarious satire of academic life, 1952's *The Groves of Academe*, was quite different from any of Trilling's earnest stories, and thereby holds a special place in American literary history. In writing *The Groves of Academe*, Mary McCarthy sparked something new. She

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<sup>1</sup> A portion of the last section of this chapter has appeared previously in Henn, "Realism By Other Means?" I thank *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* for permission to reprint it here.

<sup>2</sup> Kiernan's biography offers the most material regarding McCarthy's time teaching; the year at Bard is recounted on pages 235-60, while McCarthy's stint at Sarah Lawrence is discussed on pages 282-84.

created what we now call “the campus novel,” a postwar genre satirizing higher education, especially faculty and administrators. As we saw in the Interlude, novels about academic life in America may of course be traced back to Bowdoin graduate Nathaniel Hawthorne’s first novel, *Fanshawe*, published in 1828. More such academic novels—the term I use here to label all novels about academic life, from which the specifically satirical genre of the campus novel emerged—were then published sporadically in the nineteenth century, and by the 1890s there was a dependable yearly stream of them. The latter half of the 1920s in particular witnessed a remarkable increase in their production.<sup>3</sup> But if before the 1950s academic novels had primarily concentrated on undergraduate hijinks, or the occasional tragedy befalling sensitive professors, with McCarthy’s *Groves* the tide seemed to turn. Comparatively bare-knuckled satire of the now ignoble faculty became more common, and indeed dominant. In America alone, the genre has since flourished with such comic novels as Randall Jarrell’s *Pictures from an Institution* (1954) (often thought of as an answer to McCarthy’s *Groves*), Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pnin* (1957) and *Pale Fire* (1962), Saul Bellow’s *Herzog* (1964), John Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), Alison Lurie’s *The War Between the Tates* (1974), Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985), Jane Smiley’s *Moo* (1995), and Richard Russo’s *Straight Man* (1997). Critical reflections on this postwar genre thus rightly (and routinely) cite McCarthy as its progenitor.<sup>4</sup> Though novels about academic life

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<sup>3</sup> In this context, and with Trilling’s academic short stories now under our belt, it is time to note that this 1920s generation of academic novels may have influenced Trilling’s fiction. Trilling knew two academic novelists from his work at Columbia. Early in his Ph.D. program, Wanda Fraiken Neff—the wife of his future dissertation advisor Emery Neff—published a novel called *Lone Voyagers* (1929), set in a fictionalized University of Minnesota. Four years later, in 1933, John Erskine, creator of Columbia’s “Great Books” concept (Krupnick 47) and Trilling’s cherished undergraduate mentor, published *Bachelor—of Arts* while still teaching English at the university. On Neff’s book, see Kramer 94; on Erskine’s, see Kramer 75. I refer to the older edition of Kramer’s bibliography, which generally offers fuller plot descriptions of its novels; in the 2004 edition, Neff’s novel is described on 187, while Erskine’s is recounted on 37.

<sup>4</sup> *Guardian* critic Aida Edemariam, for example, states unequivocally that “The campus novel began in America, with Mary McCarthy’s *The Groves of Academe*.” In the more careful statements of scholars, McCarthy also retains pride of place in the genre’s history. In his introduction to Nabokov’s 1957 campus novel *Pnin* (“Exiles”), critic and celebrated campus novelist David Lodge writes that McCarthy’s novel “has some claim” to being the first campus

existed for over a century by the time she wrote *The Groves of Academe*, in other words, McCarthy was largely responsible for the campus novel's mid-twentieth-century birth as a comic genre.<sup>5</sup>

But outside of a few brief sections in monographs dedicated to McCarthy, *The Groves of Academe* has been the subject of little analysis, and even fewer close readings. What has caused this novel's comparative critical neglect? Many factors, doubtlessly. But the novel's uneven quality itself likely bears a large share of the responsibility. McCarthy's friend Nicola Chiaromonte may have hit on the novel's central flaw when he wrote a letter to Dwight Macdonald about the one chapter he had read. It was "very clever and confused," he told Dwight Macdonald (qtd. in Kiernan 336). "If Mary only learnt to stick to some line of consistent development, instead of showing off in all directions" (336).<sup>6</sup> What Chiaromonte found true of one chapter, I would argue, is a telling critique of the work as a whole: *The Groves of Academe* is a novel that never confidently decides upon its primary ideas, or how they all relate to each other.

This roughness of form will be important to my analysis of the novel's role in American literary history in this chapter, and so it bears a bit more examination at the outset. Much of the problem almost certainly lay in the process of composition. McCarthy complained at the time that she didn't know *how* to present the ideas in her novel, and her efforts on this front may well

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novel; while in the online *Literary Encyclopedia*, Charles Knight observes most precisely that the "satiric campus novel, in its contemporary form" begins with McCarthy's work.

<sup>5</sup> Making allowances for the exaggerations typical of grant proposals, it's interesting to note that McCarthy herself thought she was engaged in a pioneer effort when writing her campus novel: "the [academic] milieu is relatively unexplored by fiction," she told the Guggenheim Foundation in the late forties (qtd. in Gelderman *Mary McCarthy* 167). For sociological speculation on the causes of the campus novel's emergence in the fifties, see the Interlude.

<sup>6</sup> Chiaromonte had read the chapter "on the College setup," "on advise [sic] from Hannah Arendt" (qtd. in Kiernan 336). Kiernan assumes that by this he means he read the first chapter (336), wherein Henry Mulcahy first learns of his termination and determines to fight it. But that chapter sets up the novel as a whole, rather than presenting "the College setup" specifically. Thus it is more plausible that Chiaromonte is referring to the fourth chapter, "Ancient History," where McCarthy presents the history of Jocelyn College, satirizing several of its perennial disputes about matters of pedagogy—a chapter that is admittedly especially multidirectional, even within the context of *Groves*.

have interfered with her ability to arrange and unify the ideas themselves. As she was in the midst of making a last push to finish *Groves* in June of 1951, she confessed to her friend Hannah Arendt that she found it “harder and harder to blend the action with the opinion of the action” (Letter of 27 June 1951, 4). How to convey the (many) ideas animating it? She did not want to write a “talk-novel where the characters discuss the ideas—*while* they are being enacted. This seems a bit too packaged, like the spaghetti and the sauce and the cheese all in one box *for your convenience*” (4, emphases in the original). She had determined to write from the point of view of her largely unsympathetic protagonist Henry Mulcahy (“Characters” 286), but never found the method satisfactory. “There are moments when one would like to drop the pretense of being Mulcahy and go on with the business of the novel,” she confessed years later (287). The novel bears the marks of her struggle over perspective too, I would argue, for she does indeed increasingly “drop the pretense of being Mulcahy” in the novel’s last hundred pages. Mulcahy’s relative absence there allows for the more frequent presence of John Bentkoop, a professor of religion whose wise and conspicuously analytical speeches make him akin to a Greek chorus for the novel. With Bentkoop, in short, an element of McCarthy’s feared “talk-novel” infiltrates her otherwise Mulcahy-centered satire. (This is not an altogether bad thing, since Bentkoop’s speeches often tie together previously disparate ideas in what is, after all, a novel of ideas—a novel that lives or dies by its ability to encourage thought.) In any case, one surmises that it was difficult and frustrating for McCarthy to convey her many ideas while stuck inside Mulcahy’s necessarily limited consciousness; and yet that she did not want to write omniscient narrative either. Thus thinking through and arranging her ideas may have taken a back seat to the more basic problem of exposition. As a result, this insistently satiric and intellectually extravagant novel never entirely gels.



But despite the novel's limitations—which should not detract from its many pleasures, both local and global—I will argue in this chapter that McCarthy's foundational campus novel does have something like a coherent political philosophy. On its surface level, the novel is a send-up of McCarthyist academic politics in the 1950s: it features a visiting professor at a liberal arts college (Mulcahy) who actually *claims* past membership in the Communist Party in order to generate sympathy from the novel's ostentatiously progressive faculty, and thereby secure reappointment for another year. Understandably, then, critical discussion has often dealt with the novel's politics in relation to McCarthyism. In this chapter, however, I want to establish a broader sociological and philosophical basis for the novel's politics.<sup>7</sup> I will begin by arguing that

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<sup>7</sup> Though it is thus not my concern in this chapter, the debate over McCarthyism is too central to the novel to ignore entirely. For those interested, then, I comment here on this elephant in the unusually small room of criticism on the novel. For critics on the left, the novel's send-up of liberal (Senator Joseph) McCarthy-era politics has never been a comfortable one: *The Groves of Academe* mocks its professors' blinkered eagerness to embrace the anti-McCarthyist cause on campus much more than it does McCarthyism itself. (This fact doubtless also helps explain the novel's failure to attract attention from many academic critics.) Nevertheless, over the years two main lines of liberal-left defense for the novel have been established. The first and most subtle is that the novel offers a philosophical attack on McCarthyism; the second is that the novel's satire is simply narrowly-aimed, attacking the hypocrisy of anti-McCarthyists without denying the evils of McCarthyism per se. Both these interpretations are unconvincing, I think. The novel's relationship to McCarthyism should remain disconcerting at best for left-leaning critics.

Sabrina Fuchs Abrams argues for the novel's underlying philosophical opposition to McCarthyism. She admits that the novel is, in part, "a comment on the tendency of fellow-traveling liberal intellectuals in the Cold War atmosphere of persecution and paranoia unquestioningly to defend the academic freedom of accused Communists" (72). But she also insists that it stands as "a warning against the all-consuming power of ideology," and thus "can also be seen as an indictment of the anti-Communist hysteria consuming America in the 1950s" (73). I agree that the novel attacks ideology. But I'm not persuaded that the novel's attack on ideology in general can then be so easily translated into an attack on McCarthyism in particular. As I will make more clear below, actual McCarthyism never makes a direct or emotionally serious appearance in the novel; the only ideology consistently on (satirical) display in the novel is anti-McCarthyist liberalism itself. Any reading of the novel as an attack on McCarthyism thus strikes me as overly generous.

Mary McCarthy herself defended the novel as a satire aimed narrowly, a send-up of only *hypocritical* anti-McCarthyists. When interviewed by William F. Buckley on his PBS program *Firing Line* in June of 1971, McCarthy defended the moral and political legitimacy of her satire in *The Groves of Academe* thus: "there was a lot of hypocritical breast-beating going on among people who talked about the loss of their cultural freedom" during the McCarthy era. "They had not lost it," she averred bluntly ("Is America" 147). Before further analysis, it is enormously important—historically, politically, and even ethically—to note that McCarthy's statement has a definite basis in fact. Ellen Schrecker, our preeminent historian of McCarthyism on campus, essentially agrees with McCarthy when she somewhat bitterly points out that "support for the anti-Communist crusade [in higher education] was superficial and . . . resistance to it entailed far fewer risks than people imagined" (337). There *was* hypocritical breast-beating among intellectuals and academics in the McCarthy era, in short. Liberal intellectuals' laments that they had "lost" their cultural freedom were frequently only expressions of cowardice—all too common excuses for a personal refusal to speak and otherwise act against McCarthyism, excuses that prolonged and effectively aided the purges. Thus the real criticism to be made of Mary McCarthy's denial that McCarthyism had succeeded in robbing

with however light a satiric touch and subtle a political current, Mary McCarthy's invention of the campus novel in 1952—much like *The Company She Keeps* in 1942—rests on a conception of middle-class brain workers as the metaphorical foundation of a potentially totalitarian society. But where the earlier novel imagined a class basis for its mental workers' politics (the politics of “bureaucratic collectivism”), this novel instead offers a primarily *institutional* portrait of bureaucratic intellectual workers (faculty) who at their worst share only a reified consciousness, and are thus akin to totalitarian masses incapable of seeing anything that contradicts their prefabricated conceptions of the world. And if *The Groves of Academe* evokes such immense

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intellectuals and academics of their “cultural freedom” is not that it was untrue. It is rather that she used the truth of McCarthyism's limits to downplay the danger of McCarthyism itself, rather than to attack liberal cowardice in the face of an otherwise real threat.

And her novel, I would argue, unfortunately reflects this belittling of McCarthyism as a serious threat. There is one meaningful mention of McCarthyism's effect on Jocelyn early on, no doubt. At Jocelyn, Mulcahy reflects, there had been “a suicide among the former Students for Wallace, an attack from the Catholic pulpit, the withdrawal of a promised gift, [and] a deepening of the budgetary crisis” (12). But the gravity of this declaration is almost immediately undermined by its satiric use: Mulcahy notes that these somber events mean (to him) only that “the dismissal of an outspoken teacher, at this turning point in the college's affairs, might seem a *leetle* too opportune, especially if it could be shown that the teacher in question had engaged in political activities of the type now considered suspect” (12). The real facts of McCarthyist repression serve primarily as an opportunity to reveal Mulcahy's self-serving cynicism as a publicly liberal academic. Of Mulcahy's own genuine harassment at a previous college all we are told (a page earlier) is that the legislature had accused him of “‘Communitic, atheistic tendencies,’ as evidenced by a few book reviews in the *Nation*, of all places, a single article in the old *Marxist Quarterly* (‘James Joyce, Dialectical Materialist’), and a two-dollar contribution to the Wallace campaign” (11). This ultimately only amused account of McCarthyism on campus pokes as much fun at the *victim* (the embarrassing reductiveness of his article's title, the cheap shallowness of his commitment to the Wallace campaign) as it does the McCarthyists themselves. And in any case these two solitary, early, and jokey references to McCarthyism are soon forgotten as the novel moves on to its nearly three hundred pages documenting a foolish anti-McCarthyist crusade at Jocelyn. The novel thus lacks any sustained and serious treatment of the McCarthyist threat, and principally attempts to satirize *anti*-McCarthyists only.

As such, Mary McCarthy's novel could easily give aid and comfort to the enemy, as it were. In the 1971 interview, for example, the arch-conservative Buckley reads *The Groves of Academe* as proof that “to have been an anti-McCarthyite made it much, much safer for you in academic circles and even in government circles” (McCarthy, “Is America” 147). It would be surprising if Buckley's essentially pro-McCarthyist interpretation were his alone. For this reason the novel's politics in relation to academic McCarthyism, as well as its author's, should remain difficult to celebrate for left-leaning literary critics.

A brief coda, however: all this should not distract us from the fact that Mary McCarthy herself was by and large an open opponent of the Senator who bore her last name. She published a number of essays critical of McCarthyism (most of them collected in *On the Contrary*: “No News,” “The Contagion of Ideas,” and “My Confession”), for example, and at one point she even seriously considered dropping her literary career in order to pursue law school and then argue civil rights cases arising around McCarthyism. Though her single-minded satire of McCarthyism's liberal opponents was often misguided, her opposition to McCarthyism as a whole should not be doubted. To my mind Carol Brightman's excellent chapter on “That Other McCarthy” offers the best synoptic analysis of Mary McCarthy's sometimes lethargic but no doubt sincere opposition to McCarthyism (*Writing* 351-61).

and fundamental political problems, its implicit solution is no less sweeping: the novel advocates a universalist vision of liberalism opposed to the reifying and isolating habits of bureaucratic society. Finally, however, this chapter will move beyond a close reading of the novel's social and political philosophy to a discussion of its role in American literary history—as both the first campus novel and, I will contend, a precursor of postmodernism in both literature and thought. By examining the antibureaucratic cast of McCarthy's later literary criticism, we may see that *The Groves of Academe* marks a point where for many socially conscious authors the basic assumptions of realist fiction were no longer tenable, and consequently where postmodern themes of epistemological undecidability and decentralized power became viable. As both the product of a crisis in realism and an attempt to create an antibureaucratic liberalism that addressed the concerns of intellectual workers, the first campus novel anticipated many of the central sociopolitical and aesthetic hallmarks of postmodern literature and theory.

## **2. Bureaucratic Reification and the Totalitarian Campus**

Most of the fun and sparkle of *The Groves of Academe* lies in its gleeful parody of academic life as a typical bureaucracy. One cannot read the work without laughing at the petty struggles for power, the inefficiency, and the ultimate inability to accomplish anything that often defines Jocelyn College. The comic reversal of the novel's conclusion is enough to substantiate this: a college President is forced to resign in the hope that his *successor* might be able to exercise enough authority to refuse to reappoint Henry Mulcahy, an often incompetent professor. Along the way to that conclusion, we see a multitude of comic squabbles that seem to constitute Jocelyn. Mulcahy rails not only against the termination of his job, but against an imagined plot to reroute eggs meant for the dining hall to an outside buyer. (He archly calls on the dietitian “to

*unscramble*, if she would be so good, for her colleagues, the history of the twenty thousand eggs” [4, emphasis in the original].) Almost the whole of the fourth chapter is set aside to establish the pettiness of Jocelyn’s governance debates. There, in often great detail, we are treated to the history and controversy surrounding such burning and regularly-discussed issues as the long-standing January “field-period” (71-75), the concept of “individual instruction” (75-82), and whether the college should “drop the term *progressive* and substitute *experimental* on page three of the catalogue”—not to mention the appropriate spelling of “*catalogue (catalog?)*” (70). “From its inception, the college had been rent by fierce doctrinal disputes of a quasi-liturgical character” (69), we are told, but “nobody cared, beyond the immediate disputants, how the issues were resolved” (70). The surface level of plot, in short, confirms professor Domna Rejnev’s judgment that Tolstoy would have wisely pronounced the faculty and administrators “fools” (251) for being “so concerned with trivialities” (252). In the most immediate sense, *The Groves of Academe* is a brilliant parody of bureaucratic triviality.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Two essays from the early fifties also confirm that McCarthy understood and worried about higher education as an increasingly bureaucratic institution. The more widely-known of the two, “The Vassar Girl,” was first published in *Holiday* magazine in May of 1951; it was republished in her essay collection *On the Contrary* in 1961. Going back to her alma mater nearly two decades after graduation, McCarthy finds that Vassar students aren’t living up to Vassar’s reputation for bohemian independence and intellectuality. In her time away, proudly contrarian Vassar had become “a miniature welfare state” (208); the once independent Vassar student now depended “on the college and its auxiliary agencies to furnish not only education but pleasure, emotional guidance, and social direction” (207). There was thus an “administrative cast” to “the present Vassar mold”; a “uniform, pliant, [and] docile undergraduate” was the result of a contemporary Vassar education (210). In the course of a generation, the “Vassar girl” had gone from adventurous bluestocking to sheep-like bureaucrat.

A largely unknown talk for BBC radio listeners in 1952 offers McCarthy’s other contemplation of higher education in this era. If “The Vassar Girl” had concentrated her fire on her alma mater alone, “New Trends in American Education” attempted a general analysis, decrying a change taking place across every one of the 1,301 American colleges in existence (136). The college of old, “a sheltered refuge from the world of action” dedicated to intellect alone, was now threatened by “the strengthening of its ties to commercialism and to the so-called realities of world politics.” The “professor who used to be napping in his study is today on an aeroplane or a sleeper with his briefcase, indistinguishable often from the sales executive who occupies the next seat” (137). Those who were not aiding business were advising politicians: “Nowhere today, except in Washington itself, does one hear so much political lowdown as in the university faculty rooms” (137). Much as at Vassar, the Arcadian college of old was now caught up in the bustling and conformist bureaucracies of corporate and governmental life. By the early fifties, in short, McCarthy understood the academy as a bureaucratic institution representative of the wider bureaucratized world itself.

But a key essay written by McCarthy shortly after *Groves* suggests that she took bureaucracy—whether in academia or at large—as more than just a subject of lively fun. In an ostensible review of Edgar Johnson’s biography of Dickens, McCarthy draws a connection between capitalism, bureaucracy, and “the whole of modern ‘humanistic’ culture” itself (“Recalled” 224). She suggests that Dickens’s contemporary critics suffer from the same problem as his characters: the “thingification of man, to use Kant’s term.” What is the thingification of man? In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, she writes, all of Dickens’s characters “have lost their humanity” and instead “obdurately become things” (222). Those that do not become cold and vicious react to the Industrial Revolution’s “mechanization” and “alienation” (221) of humanity by living as if they were integral parts of the “shatterproof hierarchical structures” that have formed in response to the need for efficient production (222). They have “officialized” themselves, “like Mr. Dorrit, the Father of the Marshalsea, receiving his testimonials; or Mr. Bounderby, who has invented his own authorized biography; or Mrs. Gamp, who has invented her own reference, the imaginary Mrs. Harris” (222). When they are not villainous, in short, Dickens’s characters nevertheless betray an inhuman distance and lack of warmth all too characteristic of the Industrial Revolution’s drive for efficiency.

Dickens’s critics betray the same sins, McCarthy suggests. Each of them “clears his throat with a vast administrative harumph” (218) before writing something that resembles “the report of some officially constituted commission” (217). Such reports shoddily rely on “the metonymic principle”: a “part” of Dickens “is substituted for the whole, and a single ‘incriminating’ utterance is produced in court to lay bare the man in his totality” (218). Associating Dickens’s critics with bureaucracy, then (“officials,” “commission,” “administrative”), McCarthy notes a tendency of all of them, friendly and not, to offer an only

partial view of the man and his work. These “administrative” critics see aspects of Dickens, taken out of context, but never observe the whole of him. In McCarthy’s sweeping conclusion, she suggests that the bureaucratic alienation and resultant inability to think about the whole that she spies in Dickens’s characters and critics alike “perhaps underlie[s] the whole of modern ‘humanistic’ culture” (224). What we might call the Industrial-Bureaucratic Revolution has led modern intellectuals to view culture as a series of partial objects, rather than a whole.

Strange as it is to say, in this essay McCarthy’s perhaps unconscious blend of a young Marx (“alienation”) and a mature Weber (“mechanization,” “administrative,” “officialized”), as well as her insistence on the importance of seeing things in their totality, recalls the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness*. Like him, at least, she is a critic of abstracted thought who traces its roots to a bureaucratically-inflected capitalism. So without suggesting an equation between the two figures or their political beliefs—McCarthy was never a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist, nor at this point was she even much of a socialist—I want to suggest that we might profitably replace her citation of “Kant’s term,” the “thingification of man,” with Lukács’s term: reification. Not only is the word more felicitous than “thingification,” but it also more readily calls to mind what I will argue is the antibureaucratic social critique of contemporary capitalism informing much of McCarthy’s thinking (not to mention that of many a liberal New York Intellectual) in the early fifties. No matter how much McCarthy’s satire depicts bureaucratic culture in higher education as a source of comic triviality, *The Groves of Academe* nevertheless also attacks bureaucratic thought as the source of grave ethical and political consequences. More specifically, the novel depicts its faculty as bureaucrats whose reified conceptions of the world block their access to reality itself—thus allowing them to lie to themselves and others. This theme of bureaucratic, reified thought indeed offers the novel not only a greater degree of

intellectual coherence than has been recognized, but also political heft. If taken beyond the campus, the novel ultimately suggests, such bureaucratically-induced dishonesty may even lead to a proto-totalitarian political culture.

A brief summary of this relatively unread novel at the outset will prove helpful. *The Groves of Academe* opens with literature professor Henry Mulcahy's discovery that his job at Jocelyn, a liberal arts college, is not being renewed. He is outraged, and immediately begins scheming to keep his job. Enlisting the help of sympathetic students and faculty, he tells his allies both that his wife Cathy is gravely ill, and that he is being fired because Jocelyn President Maynard Hoar fears what would happen if his brief membership in the Communist Party is revealed to the public. At comically hyper-progressive Jocelyn, the mere accusation of red-baiting is enough to secure many allies, and Mulcahy—despite what we learn is his decidedly mixed record as an educator—becomes a *cause célèbre*. But we eventually discover that his two claims are false: his wife Cathy is not seriously ill, and he was never a member of the Communist Party. He is being let go from the faculty only because the cash-strapped college can't afford to keep him; and he was warned of this probability from the start of his year-long appointment. President Hoar had only hired him in the first place as an earnest attempt to give temporary shelter to a professor who indeed had been unjustly harassed over falsely alleged past Communist activity at his previous job. Despite Mulcahy's dubious standing, however, faculty pleading wins him a one-year reappointment. Some time later in the spring semester, Mulcahy then manages to catch the President in the act of investigating (for the first time) whether Mulcahy is now, or ever has been, a member of the Communist Party. The President's actions are not motivated by any McCarthyist animus, of course. Hoar only wants to discover if Mulcahy has *lied* about his Party membership, including before a state legislature previously: for if he has,

then the President and Jocelyn College itself have protected a perjurer—a fact that could damage both President Hoar himself and the institution he represents. But Hoar’s inquiries into Mulcahy’s political past nevertheless *look* enough like McCarthyism to allow Mulcahy to blackmail him. The novel ends as Hoar decides to resign: as long as Mulcahy has the ability to blackmail the President for his apparent “investigation,” the college will never be able to rid itself of the errant professor. Thus the dishonest and self-centered Mulcahy keeps his job for at least another year, while the comparatively noble President quits—with a considerable sense of relief.

Early on in the novel, Mulcahy draws our attention to a critique of bureaucratic thinking we are already familiar with: the new liberal discourses initiated by Lionel Trilling in the 1940s, best summarized in his 1950 essay collection *The Liberal Imagination*. Trilling’s influence on the novel may be spied in the novel’s first pages, as Mulcahy declares that President Hoar possesses “a simple intelligence,” “an administrative mentality that feels operationally, through acts” (5). Hoar’s is a bureaucratic mind, in other words, opposed to Mulcahy’s own supposed (and Trillingsque) “imagination that is capable of seeing and feeling on many levels at once” (5). Sounding more and more like Trilling, Mulcahy guesses that Language and Literature professor Domna Rejnev, too—his principal ally on the faculty—suffers from a liberal lack of imagination: “she was a true liberal . . . who could not tolerate in her well-modulated heart that others should be wickeder than she, any more than she could bear that she should be richer, better born, better looking than some statistical median” (52). She was “a perfect example of these mental processes, even when one would have thought that her eyes would have been opened to a darker truth about human nature than her philosophy admitted” (52-53). Trilling’s *Liberal Imagination* in fact finally figures by name into Mulcahy’s scheme to keep his job at



ultra-“progressive” Jocelyn. “The idea that a man in his right mind would run the risk of proclaiming himself a Communist when the facts were the other way would simply occur to no one,” Mulcahy realizes, for “the ordinary liberal imagination . . . could not encompass such a possibility” (99). Mulcahy’s whole dishonest plot, which in fact sets in motion the otherwise comic plot of the novel itself, is thus founded on a Trilling-like belief that the liberal imagination, rigidly limited to the bureaucratic norms of “statistical medians,” is unable to comprehend evil and deception.

But a central irony of the novel is that Mulcahy possesses a “liberal imagination” himself, a mind warped by reification. John Bentkoop, the wise professor of religion, offers the most incisive summary of this point. “Hen has a remarkable gift, a gift for being his own sympathizer,” Bentkoop opines to Domna. However, he continues, this “gift” is actually “a species of self-alienation” (205). The result of such self-alienation is that Mulcahy is “loyal to himself, objectively, as if he were another person” (205). He has in fact “foregone his subjectivity and hypostasized himself as an object” (205). In short, Mulcahy’s self-alienation has led to the reification of his very being. And as Bentkoop further suggests, Mulcahy’s reified consciousness has also led to the creation of a self utterly unmoored from empirical reality:

The criteria of truth and falsity, as we know them, don’t exist for Hen. He doesn’t examine his statements from the point of view of the speaker, but from the point of view of the listener. He listens to himself as you or I might listen to him and asks himself, “Is it credible?” Even in private soliloquy, credibility is the standard he applies; that is, he looks at truth with the eyes of a literary critic and measures a statement by its persuasiveness. If he himself can be persuaded he accepts the moot statement as established. This is real alienation. (206)

Mulcahy's self-alienation is so complete that his sense of "the truth" has become detached from reality. He reifies his self and "the truth" alike, turning them into *things* capable of being fashioned independently of external evidence, and thence examined only for their ability to sound "credible." Reification causes Mulcahy to lie to himself and to others.

Bentkoop's acute observations are substantiated by the novel's opening pages, which detail what is perhaps the most important and telling example of Mulcahy's reified thought process. Upon reading the letter notifying him that he will not be reappointed, Mulcahy meditates that "To be fired at this juncture, when he was halfway to tenure, was unthinkable. Consequently, he refused to be fired" (9-10). We may make at least three observations about these conjunctive statements. For one, despite Mulcahy's framing of his discontinuance, no one has contemplated "firing" him. He is simply not being reappointed. Second, Mulcahy's inability to imagine the loss of his job comes, as we eventually discover, well *after* Jocelyn's President has offered him clear and written warnings that this might happen. Delusionally dedicated to a reified conception of his own permanence at Jocelyn, in other words, Mulcahy forgets and ignores all evidence that contradicts it. But most importantly, Mulcahy's whole inability to imagine a world in which he could be "fired" is presented here as the actual *source* of his determination to stay in his job. It is "unthinkable" that he should not have the job, and so "consequently" he refuses to be "fired." He simply and literally cannot imagine losing his job; ergo it shall not be. His reified conception of himself ("I am a professor at Jocelyn College") causes him to lie to himself and thence the rest of the campus. The plot of the novel is thus predicated not just on Mulcahy's estimation of *others'* liberal imagination, of the bureaucratic and reified conception of reality that makes them incapable of comprehending evil, but on Mulcahy's own reified conception of his permanence at Jocelyn.

Lest we think the problem of reification is Mulcahy's alone, however, we should note that more sympathetic faculty in the novel share it. Critic Timothy Waples has made a case for regarding professor Alma Fortune as the sadly unelaborated feminist heroine of *The Groves of Academe*, and views with admiration Alma's bold decision to resign in protest over Mulcahy's termination (82-84). But though Alma is clearly to be admired for her independence and courage, she is drawn with more irony than Waples recognizes. For Alma's resignation is based on a reified conception of Henry's righteousness, one that refuses to examine its preconceptions. McCarthy is still somewhat the Freudian in this novel: Alma's quick resignation may easily be read as the repetition of a childhood gesture, that of leaving her abusive father when she was fifteen (150). But while her father was unjust, President Hoar has not been; and so in the case of Henry Mulcahy, like most faculty in the novel, she has been readily duped. She accepts Mulcahy's "truth" without serious investigation and defends him because it *seems* a righteous thing to do—that is, it fits her reified conception of a world in which father figures like President Hoar unjustly punish their faculty children. Just as importantly, she defends Mulcahy because it allows her to re-fashion, as in her childhood, a brave and daring self in rebellion against unjust authority. Too caught up in this reified image of herself and then Mulcahy, both derived from her own history of a decisive break from abuse, Alma does not seek the truth. Something less than a feminist heroine pure and simple, she resigns hastily and without true cause. By this action she in fact becomes akin to Mulcahy. She creates a "truth"—Mulcahy's supposed persecution by Hoar—based not in reality, but on a reified image of her heroic self.

Domna Rejnev is perhaps the novel's most sympathetic character, whom in later years McCarthy lamented too closely resembled herself (*Intellectual Memoirs* 99). But she is likewise revealed as an ideologue willing to bend the truth to fit political purposes. She is first introduced

to us as “a smoldering anachronism, a throwback to one of those ardent young women of the Sixties, Turgenev’s heroines, who cut their curls short, studied Hegel, crossed their mammas and papas, reproved their suitors, and dreamed resolutely of ‘a new day’ for peasants, workers, and technicians” (37). Her personality itself is thus an instance of reification, a model derived from previous examples rather than created in response to the empirical world it inhabits. Her body, full of sharp angles and firm divisions, serves to confirm her mental inflexibility: her nostrils are “finely cut,” her hair “dark, straight,” her profile “severe” and “clear-cut,” her lips “fine-drawn” (37), and her voice “low, concise, even” (38). Taken as a whole, “Her very beauty had the quality, not of radiance or softness, but of incorruptibility; it was the beauty of an absolute or a political theorem” (37). Dedicated to a self out of Turgenev and possessing more than a whiff of political rigidity, Domna’s reifying mind then fails to exercise appropriate skepticism toward Mulcahy’s explanations. When she first tells another faculty member Mulcahy’s story of political persecution, she in fact reflects that the story “was incredible”: literally, something one can’t or at least shouldn’t believe. But then “her training”—as a scholar, as a (bureaucratic) academic—assures her that this “did not make it any the less true” (87). As she later realizes, “I think really, in my heart, I knew all along” about Henry’s mendacity. “I think I hid from myself what I did not want to see” (214). But her reified conception of her own righteousness, and of Henry as a “cause,” prevents her from even looking for the truth.

Moreover, much like Alma and Mulcahy himself, Domna’s rigid dedication to Mulcahy’s supposed cause induces her to lie. Her first reaction upon hearing his story is to dress it up; she treats it as an object to be molded to the cause. A few years earlier Mulcahy had testified to a state legislature (in reality, truthfully) that he was not a member of the Communist Party. Domna realizes that this fact will make him look bad to other faculty once he now “confesses” his

present membership, so she asks him: “You don’t mind, do you, if I date your last active membership back a few years, say, *before* you were investigated by the legislature?” (59, emphasis in the original). (Mulcahy indeed does not mind if she lies for him.) And when she tells Mulcahy’s “incredible” tale to another faculty member, she similarly makes “certain little modifications and additions that [as she rationalizes it] would make the President’s guilt more evident to an a-political audience” (87). Later she lies to the President himself in order to defend Henry, telling Hoar that students admire Mulcahy, when in fact she has no evidence for this (185). Much like Mulcahy and Alma, in short, Domna’s reifying mind—a mind which allows her to fashion empirical reality according to an abstract sense of “justice”—impels her to lie, to herself and to others.

Themes of reification and dishonesty do more than inform the portrayal of character in *The Groves of Academe*, we may now see. They also run prominently through the novel’s varied—and otherwise seemingly unrelated—philosophical dialogues, revealing the concept of reification to be central to the novel as a whole. For example, the theme of reification underlies the conversation about love that follows Domna’s discovery that Mulcahy has been lying all along, and that his wife Cathy has been complicit in the ruse. Realizing Domna’s disappointment in Henry, Cathy obliquely explains that “What you love in a person is his essence, not the dross of appearance” (199). “Love is the discovery of essence,” she posits (199): there is no necessary connection between the self you love and the outward actions of that self, between Henry’s “essence” and his dishonest scheming; they are separate. A sadder and wiser Domna now disagrees with this rationalization. One’s outward actions and one’s inward being must coincide. “Appearances intimate to us; they do not flatly deceive,” she declares (199). “One must love in depth,” she insists; “Fair without and foul within has no charm for me” (200). The self cannot be

understood as a disconnected essence that one can love, a reified object apart from the world it acts in.

This credo against the reification of “appearances” as opposed to essence also has an aesthetic dimension in the novel, where it is posed as the problem of content and form. “Your department’s monstrously one-sided,” John Bentkoop tells Domna; “you’re concerned with formal questions exclusively: Tolstoy’s method, the method of Virginia Woolf, the elucidation of Mann’s symbols, the patterns of Katherine Anne Porter” (209-10). The educational effects of such a “monstrously one-sided” formalist pedagogy, he goes on, are to create a generation of “sophisticated literary hollow men, without general ideas, without the philosophy or theology that’s formed in adolescence, without the habit or the discipline of systematic thought. Our students have literally no idea what they think or believe except in questions of taste . . .” (210). Trained only to look at the formal patterns of literary works, these students never learn to truly *think*. The faculty’s obsession with form is another kind of reification, in other words. Much as Cathy’s love for Mulcahy depends on the reification of his actions as something separate from his being, the Literature department’s formalism isolates and reifies art, turning it into a formal object separate from its roots in thought.

If the entire Literature department thus reifies form over content, one Literature professor in particular takes formalism to its extreme in the novel. Poet Herbert Ellison’s formalism permeates every part of his life, both his likes and his dislikes. Frankly bored by “most general ideas”—by content, in short—he is naturally also not interested in the work of James Joyce, for it was “too naturalistic,” too focused on material existence (223). Nevertheless, Ellison likes to hear Mulcahy read Joyce out loud, “for the rhythms and vocabulary” alone (223). He loves the game of charades too (223); it is a game where one subjugates content (what one is in actuality)

to form (what one shows to the other players). The comic apogee of Ellison's formalism, however, comes when we discover that "the legend put about by the students, that he wore nothing under his outer clothing, was correct" (223). Concerned with all things exterior, and dismissive of all things interior—whether ideas in art or underwear on his person—Ellison reifies form as something utterly separate from content.

But just as importantly for my analysis, Ellison also demonstrates that in this novel reified consciousness has not just philosophical and moral consequences, but political ones as well. To understand this, we must pause to note the profound effect that reading her friend Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) had on McCarthy while writing her novel. In an effusive note to Arendt in April of 1951, McCarthy exalted her path-breaking treatise as "a truly extraordinary piece of work, an advance in human thought of, at the very least, a decade" (Letter of 26 April 1951, 1). It was at this time, after reading *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in its entirety and sending her letter of praise, that McCarthy entered into a period of intense work on *Groves*. By her own account, she "worked terrifically all summer to finish it, eight or nine hours a day" (qtd. in Gelderman, *Mary McCarthy* 165). Frances Kiernan tells us that the "last third of the manuscript" in particular "had been completed in one great spurt, by dint of her writing as many as eighteen hours a day" (333). Thus a great part of her novel about Jocelyn College was written with Arendt's treatise on totalitarianism fresh in the author's famously exact memory.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> I should take this moment to clarify my purpose in using the words "totalitarianism" and "totalitarian" in this chapter. I am employing such words only to describe a central concept of McCarthy's (and of course Arendt's) political thought. One should not take the appearance of such terms, then, as tacit acceptance of Arendt's specific thesis in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In fact I think that Arendt's work—while I admire it immensely for its irreplaceable insights into modern political life, both then and perhaps even more so now—offers only a thin discussion of Stalinist Russia, and thus remains unconvincing in its claim that the Nazi and Soviet states were essentially identical.

The exhilarating experience of reading the *Origins* seems to have focused McCarthy's attention on the more saturnine possibilities of Ellison as a character, at the least. Ellison emerges from the background in the last third of the novel—the third McCarthy wrote primarily after reading her friend's tome on totalitarianism—to become Mulcahy's coldly political lieutenant:

The fact that [Ellison] was not liked in the department neither grieved nor interested him; he saw that the voting strength was divided three to two against himself and Mulcahy, with [Literature Department head Howard] Furness as the pivotal figure, and he treated Furness frankly for what he was—a pivot—making no attempt at friendship and merely assuming, at critical junctures, that Furness would want to be told how to vote. . . . He did not forget, either, that Domna had only half a vote, which seemed to him, in fact, her primary characteristic; he did not, like Mulcahy, worry over what she might think or do if she “caught on” to what was being planned against her. “She has only half a vote,” he replied tranquilly, whenever such conjectures were broached. (222)

Here we may see a crucial link between the novel's concerns with reification and its political meditations. For Ellison's reifying habits—Furness becomes a “pivot,” Domna “half a vote”—let him treat others strictly as objects to be used for a given end. Such ruthlessness in politics, albeit faculty politics, is reminiscent of the “cynicism” Arendt felt characterized totalitarian movements, especially at the elite levels (*Origins* 382).<sup>10</sup> Looking ahead in Arendt's work, we might also say that in comical fashion, the methodical and ruthlessly reifying Ellison plays

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<sup>10</sup> All citations of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* refer to the “New Edition” of Arendt's 1951 work, which incorporates revisions made in 1958 and 1966. I have used this edition because it is the most widely available. But all passages cited in this chapter were also included in the original edition, the edition McCarthy read while writing *Groves*. (For Arendt's account of the changes made between 1951 and 1966, many of which involved simply finding a new home for passages from the deleted “Concluding Remarks” of the original edition, see xxiv-xxv).



Eichmann to Mulcahy's Hitler. He is the professor's cynical *aide de camp*, responsible for the execution of tasks without regard for any larger truth.<sup>11</sup> Only an extreme example of the other faculty whose reification of Henry's "cause" blinds them to any facts contradicting his story, the totalitarian Ellison carries out his Leader's plan with an astonishing lack of curiosity regarding any person or thing that might contradict the Leader.

In describing the techniques used to plan a conference on contemporary poetry, the novel in fact directly compares Ellison's methods to those of totalitarian movements. When his invitation list for the conference is revealed—a few older and established poets will be surrounded by an overwhelming number of newer poets who are Ellison's personal friends—Domna calls his plan an attempted "*putsch*" in the world of poetry. "Is she accusing me of being a fascist?" Ellison incredulously asks the rest of the faculty at the meeting (239). Though only a short silence, punctuated by a lone cough, comes in reply, the answer seems clear. So does the justice of Domna's characterization.

Furthermore, the formalist Ellison's attempts to drum up attendance for the conference-cum-*putsch* are modeled on Nazi propaganda techniques, one main subject of Arendt's analysis of totalitarian movements (341-64). "WHERE ARE THE POETS OF THE MASSES?" reads the at first mysterious sign blazoned across campus in "crude red ink" (231). We soon discover that Ellison, rather than some radical student, is behind this. Ellison justifies his dishonest gambit as

an appropriate device . . . for stirring up interest in the conference. There can be no proper debate if the passions are not roused. You mistake what Hen and I have been doing, sowing fear and anticipation among the students. They're being taught to take poetry seriously, like a baseball game. . . . Choosing up sides. It's

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<sup>11</sup> See Arendt's 1963 "Report on the Banality of Evil," *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

the only way to run these things, to give them the quality of a mythic contest.  
(234-35)

If Ellison seems reminiscent of Eichmann in his unquestioning loyalty to Mulcahy and his thoughtless efficiency, here he is nothing less than Goebbelsian in his mastery of propaganda. Determined to arouse student “passions,” sow “fear and anticipation,” and create “the quality of a mythic contest”—without regard to any truth that might interfere with his reified political goals—Ellison’s propaganda for his poetry conference resembles the epic (and on some level ridiculous) propaganda of Nazism.

Last but certainly not least, the structure of the novel recalls Arendt’s account of the structure of totalitarian movements, a part of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that McCarthy singled out for praise in her admiring letter to Arendt.<sup>12</sup> For Arendt, totalitarian movements were arranged in multiple levels of ascending commitment to the movement, each primarily in contact with only the level immediately above or below it. Thus fellow-travelers form the lowest level, and they only meet the ordinary members of the totalitarian party; these members in turn fraternize with party elites, who are themselves in touch with the Leader’s intimates; while finally the intimates are of course gathered around the Leader himself. This linked structure had two primary functions. First, it served to shield adherents at every level from any belief that might deviate too far from their own. Second, as a consequence it “normalized” and confirmed each adherent’s belief. The beliefs of those followers “below” seemed less fervent but nevertheless authenticated their own more “firm” beliefs, while the beliefs of those “above” seemed perhaps “overstated” but nevertheless essentially right. As an attempt to understand why McCarthy so admired her friend’s analysis, we may say that in Arendt’s account, the totalitarian

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<sup>12</sup> She “liked particularly,” she told Arendt, the section “on the structure of the totalitarian movement, with the fellow-travelers representing ‘reality’ to the members, the members to the cadres, and so on” (Letter of 26 April 1951, 2).

movement's structure of largely self-contained levels serves to *reify* its followers' beliefs. Fundamentally unchallenged at all levels, the adherents of a totalitarian movement live "in a fools' paradise of normalcy; the party members are surrounded by the normal world of sympathizers and the elite formations by the normal world of ordinary members" (368). Along with propaganda techniques, this structure made totalitarianism—in the words of McCarthy's letter to Arendt—"a scheme in the minds of certain displaced men to rob other men of their sense of reality" (26 April 1951, 2). In the *Origins* itself, Arendt concludes her discussion of the danger of totalitarian movements with a memorably chilling summary. "In a totally fictitious world," she writes, "failures need not be recorded, admitted, and remembered. Factuality itself depends for its continued existence upon the existence of the nontotalitarian world" (388). If universalized, the totalitarian organization of isolated levels could serve to destroy fact itself, transforming the world into a tissue of falsehoods.

The structure of McCarthy's novel similarly emphasizes the hierarchical dissemination of lies throughout an organization. Patiently mimicking the structure of Jocelyn College, the novel depicts false information—Cathy Mulcahy's supposedly critical illness, Henry Mulcahy's supposed membership in the Party—percolating upward through the campus bureaucracy without serious dispute. Each of the first four chapters, for example, ends with a gesture toward this progression of misinformation. At the end of the first, Henry tells his student that he was fired. A smart propagandist, he knows that his misinformation about the event will spread across the campus, to his benefit. "He had consolatory visions of student petitions, torchlight parades, sit-down strikes in the classroom," and so "like a conductor, he thought, with raised baton over the woodwinds of [his student's] feelings," he sets his orchestrated plot in motion (19). At the close of the second chapter, he leaves to tell Domna (35). Domna closes the third chapter by

making a list of Mulcahy's faculty supporters (60), and ends the fourth by reporting Mulcahy's firing to the head of the Languages Department, Aristide Poncy (89). The rest of the novel continues to limn the circulation of misinformation, as the next two chapters depict faculty debate and resolutions on the matter. The seventh chapter, appropriately titled "Oh What a Tangled Web We Weave," ends with Mulcahy reluctantly deciding to stop the student petition he himself had encouraged in the first chapter (165-66). The eighth chapter at last reaches the level of the President's office, where, amazingly, the facts of Mulcahy's story are challenged for the first time. Domna finally discovers the truth—or at least most of it—in the ninth chapter. In this way, carefully hiding facts until well over half the text is over and a multitude of characters at various levels of the campus bureaucracy have credulously accepted Mulcahy's fabrications, the novel imposes on the reader some semblance of the experience of the totalitarian circulation of reified lies. The novel is thus not content to indict its characters alone as dupes of reification; as its readers, we too are surprised by the sin of our participation in mass gullibility via a kind of reification.<sup>13</sup> Like the faculty, we are participants in a campus structure resembling the structure of a totalitarian movement.

The remaining four chapters depict the consequences of Jocelyn's swarm of information and misinformation, as Henry is reappointed and begins planning and hosting a poetry conference for the Spring semester. The conference itself, which occupies the last three chapters, provides some perspective at last: though it does not make them any more immune to petty rivalries than the faculty, the poets' existence outside of the college nevertheless provides a balance to the hothouse of Jocelyn campus politics in which the rest of the novel has immersed us. Accordingly, visiting poet Vincent Keogh offers the last and best word on the bureaucratic

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<sup>13</sup> I borrow the term "gullibility" from Arendt's *Origins* as well; she argues that "a mixture of gullibility and cynicism . . . became an everyday phenomenon of [the] masses," who would thus credulously accept the tenets of totalitarian propaganda (382).

campus's relationship to the circulation of reified information, and its consequences for ethics and politics. After participating for a bit in Jocelyn's internal politics—telling President Hoar and some faculty that Mulcahy wasn't a member of the Communist Party, and then telling Mulcahy that they were asking about his politics—he debates telling Domna that he has told Mulcahy. But soon he rejects the idea, and in the process he rejects the whole complex of information and misinformation that is Jocelyn College:

*No*, he inwardly shouted to himself; *Keogh, keep out of this, or they will get you*. . . . Within twenty hours, he perceived, they had succeeded in leading him up the garden path into one of their academic mazes, where a man could wander for eternity, meeting himself in mirrors. *No*, he repeated. Possibly they were all very nice, high-minded, scrupulous people with only an occupational tendency toward backbiting and a nervous habit of self-correction, always emending, penciling, erasing; but he did not care to catch the bug, which seemed to be endemic in these ivied haunts. (295, emphases in the original)

He refuses to become a part of this bureaucratic system, a system that in his metaphorical estimation both perpetually circulates new information, as in the revision of a scholarly essay (“always emending, penciling, erasing”), and perpetually *distorts* that information, much as a hall of mirrors distorts images. He refuses to be claimed by Jocelyn's mix of reified gossip and information, so dangerously akin to totalitarianism's unquestioned ideologies.

The novel's epigraph, from Horace, reminds readers that truth is to be sought in the groves of academe: “*Atque inter silvas academi quarere verum*,” it reads; in English, “and into the groves of academe to seek the truth.” But for Keogh, and one senses for the novel itself, the academy is the last place one should hope to find the truth. Its “groves” are rather a “tangled

web” of bureaucracy where reified information circulates largely without reference to any empirical truth that might challenge its preconceptions. In this web of reified, propagandistic misinformation and organizationally-reinforced lies, Mary McCarthy’s bureaucratic campus resembles, in comic form, nothing so much as Arendt’s “totally fictitious world” necessary for the victory of totalitarianism. The postwar campus novel thus begins its tenure (forgive the term) with a distinctly philosophical and political set of reflections on what happens to truth in a bureaucratic society where reified information circulates without vigorous debate.

### **3. Truth, Freedom, Responsibility, and Justice; or, Universalist Liberalism against Bureaucracy**

McCarthy’s novel thus depicts bureaucratic intellectual labor and reified thought as conducive to both personal dishonesty and a proto-totalitarian political culture. But it also advocates a more constructive set of values. *Groves* implies solutions to the problems it defines. For example, a real and vigorous search for truth—as opposed to the pseudo-truths or even falsehoods found ready-made via bureaucratic reification—is one of the novel’s most cherished political goals. The importance of the search for truth is indeed the affirmative creed that forms the primary basis for the novel’s satire: the epigraph’s assumption that one seeks truth in the groves of academe offers an earnest keynote against which readers can measure all the failures of that ideal that follow. But the antibureaucratic politics evinced in *The Groves of Academe* are more thorough-going than this belief in the importance of seeking truth. I will now suggest specifically that by borrowing from certain Sartrean themes and again from contemporary theories of totalitarianism, *Groves* also champions a distinctly universalist conception of such values as freedom, responsibility, and justice. Taken as a whole, these values add up to an

affirmation of cosmopolitan liberalism against an age of middle-class bureaucracy that McCarthy saw emerging both on and off campus.

McCarthy was not always enthusiastic about Jean-Paul Sartre (nor especially about the woman whom French tabloids called “Notre-Dame-de-Sartre”—Simone de Beauvoir [Brightman, *Writing* 328]), but there is no use denying the influence of Sartrean existentialism on her novel.<sup>14</sup> She seems to have been particularly fascinated by the Sartrean charge that every individual bears a moral responsibility for all of humanity. Sartre’s existentialism, recall, asserts first that humanity is defined by its absolute and terrifying freedom in a world without any transcendent meaning or purpose. The corollary of this absolute freedom is that each individual of necessity bears an absolute and universal responsibility for all others: for Sartre, every action taken in a world without transcendent purpose necessarily implies one’s personal moral judgment of what is right for all. This ever-present and vast ethical charge means that “anguish” (“Existentialism” 292), rather than exhilaration, is the natural state of human beings “condemned to be free” (295), forced to make choices in a world of absolute freedom and therefore universal responsibility.<sup>15</sup>

In *The Groves of Academe*, it is Domna Rejnev who thinks most about existential themes in general. Like her creator, she is prone to making domestic metaphors out of serious ideas: she “had to force herself to do the dishes,” we are told, “by deciding every night not to do them, which, as she pointed out to one of her tutees, was a homely illustration of Kierkegaardian freedom; by deciding not to do the dishes, she recovered her freedom to choose to do them” (251). And in a more specifically Sartrean fashion, Domna furthermore connects an idea of

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<sup>14</sup> For a sense of McCarthy’s skepticism regarding Sartre, see for example her cutting review of his play *Les Main Sales* in 1949 (“Sartre and the McCoy”). On McCarthy’s experience of existentialism and existentialists more generally, and her acidulous feelings about de Beauvoir in particular, see Brightman’s biography, 327-50.

<sup>15</sup> This very basic summary of Sartre’s position is taken from his popular essay of 1946, “Existentialism is a Humanism.”

existential freedom to the idea of personal responsibility, refusing (for example) to forgive Henry's lies simply because of his upbringing and environment: "No doubt this cringing soul reflects social conditions; one has only to look at Henry to imagine the matrix that formed him . . . . But there is also in each individual the faculty of transcendence; there is in each of us a limited freedom" (213). In Domna's more tempered version of Sartrean freedom, Henry is at least partially free, and thus responsible for his own actions despite whatever has shaped them.

But even if she dilutes the absolute nature of Sartrean freedom when discussing Henry, in one of the novel's more touching scenes we may see that she does no such thing when examining herself: a distinctly Sartrean anguish in the face of her infinite responsibility weighs heavily upon Domna. Near dawn, at the end of a late-night talk with John Bentkoop wherein Domna debates her complicity with what she now knows to be Henry's lies, Bentkoop tries to reassure her. Discussing their advocacy of Henry when speaking to President Hoar, Bentkoop has suggested that the President was relieved by their strong support; it allowed him to keep Henry, which was what he had wanted to do anyway. They had "accepted responsibility" for Henry, thereby absolving Hoar of that responsibility (215). But instead of comforting her, "The word, responsibility, seemed to lie on her shoulders like a burden," and "sunk her into new perplexities" (216). "'Responsibility,' she whispered, 'what does it mean, we accept responsibility for Henry? Does it mean we underwrite him for one year, or are we stuck for life?'" She then laughs, but "rather nervously" (216). Her laughter attempts to mask how serious the question is for her: does responsibility ever end, or is it, as Sartre said, an infinite responsibility that is the ineluctable condition of human existence? Bentkoop, practical and comforting, tells Domna that responsibility has limits—their responsibility for Mulcahy lasts a



year only, he answers—but Domna isn't as sure (216). She and the novel itself are influenced by the strenuous ethical charge of existentialist concepts of responsibility.

This theme of “responsibility” is not merely an ethical concern in the novel, however; it is political as well. A politicized conception of “responsibility” standing opposed to bureaucracy was in fact the keynote of at least two articles regarding totalitarianism prominent in McCarthy's circle during the forties, and these articles will help us see the novel's own antibureaucratic liberalism more clearly.<sup>16</sup> Hannah Arendt's “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility” (1945), for example, takes as its occasion the then-growing discovery of the full extent of the Holocaust. The title's first half, “Organized Guilt,” refers to the article's claim that Nazi Germany has *organized* the guilt of its citizens, their culpability in mass murder, so as to eliminate the distinction between (ordinary, innocent) German and (extraordinary, guilty) Nazi. The Nazis have been able to do so, Arendt argues, because “the family man” has been transformed—not just in Germany, but everywhere—“from a responsible member of society, interested in public affairs, to a ‘bourgeois’ concerned only with his private existence and knowing no civic virtue” (22). Attuned only to this private existence, “When his occupation forces him to murder he does not regard himself as a murderer because he has not done it out of inclination but in his professional capacity” (23). He has succumbed, in short, to “the bureaucratic organization” of what amounts to an “administrative mass murder” (22, 21). The

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<sup>16</sup> Though I cease to discuss existentialism after making this transition to a discussion of the political ramifications of the word “responsibility” in McCarthy's circles, I am not suggesting thereby that existentialism was apolitical. Sartre's existentialism was political in the forties already, as a reading of his postwar article “Portrait of the Antisemite” (published in *Partisan Review*) should make clear. (There, Sartre presented the antisemite as a man terrified by his absolute freedom, haunted by and in flight from a world that offered no metaphysical guidance; the antisemite shores up his sense of self by indicting “the Jew.”) Arendt herself, whose political thinking in the mid-forties is discussed below, had deep personal and philosophical connections to German existentialism: having had an intense youthful affair with her mentor Martin Heidegger, and close friends with her former teacher Karl Jaspers, Arendt could not help but be influenced by *Existenzphilosophie*. (See her 1946 article “What is Existenz Philosophy?” in *Partisan Review* for an example. One can observe as well that Arendt's later political philosophy—for example in such terms as “natality,” the ability of human beings to create what is new—sometimes sounds like an existentialist paean to the radical freedom of human beings in a world without moral absolutes. See *The Human Condition*, 8-9 and 176-78.)

second half of Arendt's title, "Universal Responsibility," refers to the article's hope and ideal: our only response to bureaucratically organized guilt can be the revival of a sense of universal responsibility, a newly politicized humanism that transcends national, racial, or any other parochial feeling of solidarity between human beings. For the "idea of humanity, when purged of all sentimentality, has the very serious consequence that in one form or another men must assume responsibility for all crimes committed by men and that all nations share the onus of evil committed by all others" (23). (A slightly altered version of this sentence was incorporated into *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as well [*Origins* 235-36].) For Arendt, then, universal responsibility was not just the corollary of existential freedom; it was also the only legitimate moral and political response to an historical circumstance in which human beings were isolated from one another by the bureaucratic structures of professional life.

McCarthy's close friend Dwight Macdonald also published a celebrated and controversial article two months later in his *Politics* magazine, titled "The Responsibility of Peoples." As the war was nearing an end, Macdonald followed Arendt's lead (citing her article in fact) and raised similar questions. Meditating on how to treat the German people as a whole in relation to Nazi crimes, Macdonald believed that a central problem of contemporary politics was bureaucratic labor's effects on social and civic life:

The principles on which our mass-industry economy is built—centralization of authority, division of labor (or specialization of function), rigid organization from the top down into which each worker fits at his appointed hierarchical level—these have been carried over into the political sphere. The result is that . . . the individual has little choice about his behavior, and can be made to function, by the

pressure and terror wielded by the masters of the Organic State, in ways quite opposed to any he would voluntarily choose. (91)

And again: “Modern society has become so tightly organized, so rationalized and routinized that it has the character of a mechanism which grinds on without human consciousness or control. The individual . . . is reduced to powerlessness vis-a-vis the mechanism. More and more, things happen TO people” (87, emphasis in the original). Bureaucratic workers and societies under the control of vastly powerful states thus posed “the dilemma of increasing political impotence accompanied by increasing political responsibility,” Macdonald asserted (93). His solution to the bureaucratization of politics was similar to Arendt’s politicized humanism: if we are to solve the problem of bureaucratic nation-states, we must look to “our essential humanity and to a more sensitive and passionate respect for our own and other people’s humanity” (93). Where we are increasingly held responsible for the actions of “our” states, we must disavow all parochial and “specialized”—in short, all bureaucratic—forms of responsibility in favor of that universal responsibility called humanity. The “responsibility of peoples” is to *all* people.

Such antitotalitarian political meditations on universal responsibility are explored most fully in what is quite tellingly the novel’s only depiction of a sustained and open democratic debate. In the chapter titled “Lucubrations,” Jocelyn’s literature faculty meet to determine the department’s response to Mulcahy’s discontinuance. Still believing Mulcahy’s lies, they discuss many issues beyond the immediate one of whether to support him: during the course of this long chapter, the faculty debate in scholarly detail whether members of the Communist Party retain the intellectual freedom that would make them fit to teach (118-19); how to judge such nebulous goods as pedagogical worth (120-23), intellectual talent (125-26), and even (by way of analogy) aesthetic beauty (123-24); whether institutions have an obligation to keep dissenters on staff

(127-32); and whether isolated protections for minorities and disadvantaged groups ultimately only reinforce the wider discriminatory practices that make the protections attractive in the first place (135-39). The debate's many twists and turns, with all their niggling detail, are of course comic. Yet as so often in this novel, beneath the satire of bureaucratic triviality lies a deeply serious concern. When all is said and done, the faculty debate revolves around the nature and extent of the department's *responsibility*—to Henry Mulcahy, to Jocelyn College, and to the American republic.

Much as in her late-night scene with Bentkoop, Domna argues for an extended sense of responsibility. When deciding whether to let an employee go, she argues, one must take into account at least three concerns. “Professional competence” is the primary one; but one must also consider “the employee’s need and future prospects,” and “what one might name the exemplary effects of such a decision. If Maynard lets Henry go, how many other college presidents, seeing what Maynard as a professional progressive has done, will cease to feel any qualms about proceeding against their own Communists, ex-Communists, quasi-Communists?” (136). “*Other things being equal*”—i.e., if it is granted that Mulcahy is as competent as the rest of them—they should take into account more than just the professional concerns of his teaching ability and scholarly merit, she argues (136; emphasis in the original).

Identifying the word whose definition separates them, department head Howard Furness disagrees: “Maynard’s *responsibility*, I should say, began and ended here at Jocelyn. To cultivate his own garden here and maintain the teaching standard is to set a sufficient example. To debase the teaching standard—however low you may think it already—on behalf of some vague social need would be an act of malfeasance, like the watering of stock or the currency” (137, my emphasis). For Furness, Domna’s extension of responsibility beyond the directly professional

can only mean the devaluation of professional concerns. If they value Mulcahy simply because he is politically endangered, they perforce devalue the importance of his teaching—the latter being their central professional and indeed ethical responsibility, he asserts.

And yet it is important to note that Howard's arguments do not deny the *existence* of the wider responsibilities Domna values. In fact, his consideration of responsibility is ultimately more capacious than Domna's. For his two-pronged argument is not only that undue focus on Mulcahy's home life and the college's political responsibilities will ultimately debase their immediate responsibility to Jocelyn's students, but that such inattention to their students will furthermore make them less effective in forcing both Henry Mulcahy and American society to take responsibility for their personal and political freedoms. For example, when Domna argues the need to protect specific groups that have been discriminated against—and by extension argues that Jocelyn should serve as a haven for unpopular political dissidents like (supposedly) Mulcahy—Howard counters that such a policy of protecting specifically named populations will lead only to “vying groups of separatist minorities organized for self-protection,” rather than to Domna's ideal of the substantial equality of all (135). When she similarly argues that women's colleges are right to grant preference to women, and historically black colleges to blacks, Howard asserts that such policies only provoke more discrimination in the long run. With these policies in place, “Harvard feels no moral pressure to hire women, since they have their own colleges, and the same is true of the Negroes and the Jews” (137). Without commenting on the merits of either Domna's or Howard's views—and their debate of course cleverly opens up central questions of the identity politics that would occupy postwar American culture, including debates over affirmative action—we may note that Howard's contention is not that the faculty have no wider responsibilities, but that those indeed wide responsibilities are sometimes best

served by insisting on a more rigid definition of professional responsibilities. Despite their serious disagreements, Howard and Domna fundamentally agree that responsibility is universal.

Her realization that this is the case eventually causes Domna to back down. She recognizes that she hasn't considered the wider implications that Howard has: "she had been secretly struck by the perspicuity of Howard's analysis" (141), and thus despite her previously fervent advocacy of Mulcahy, she abstains when the time for a vote comes (144). Despite her embrace of universal responsibility as an ideal, Domna realizes that here she has seen Henry's plight myopically, wishing to address his suffering immediately and only via local means. Though Howard has been admittedly motivated in part by his dislike of Mulcahy, he has nevertheless been more the universalist here, looking at the problem from a holistic point of view and attempting to imagine what effects a vote in favor of Mulcahy would have on larger systems of professionalism and social discrimination. Ironically, we may note, it is Domna who has thought as a well-meaning bureaucrat would, with a limited and narrow perspective focussed on Mulcahy's good alone. By contrast, Howard—the department chair who begins the debate by complaining vociferously that Mulcahy doesn't fill out his "achievement sheets" on time (113)—ultimately offers a less bureaucratic and parochial notion of political responsibility. In so doing, he argues for a universal political responsibility philosophically akin to that which McCarthy's friends Macdonald and Arendt were calling for.

Thus universalist conceptions of the search for truth, as well as freedom and responsibility, are central to the novel's politics. But we must note one last value that Howard defends in the same chapter: justice, which for him is ineluctably tied to the rule of law. Here we should remember that the importance of law was a recurrent theme of Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* as well. It was so especially in the section "on the elite and vice and crime"—

along with the section on the structure of totalitarian movements, one that McCarthy told Arendt she “liked particularly” (Letter of 26 April 1951, 2). Arendt argues that once European elites considered Judaism to be a fashionable vice, rather than the crime it used to be, the machinery of the Holocaust became possible (79-88). For the notion of crime merely prohibits defined practices, while the notion of vice rebukes being itself. A crime could be “met with punishment,” while a vice could “only be exterminated” (87). The only way to eliminate the supposed vice of Jewishness, in other words, was to eliminate “the Jew” itself. And “the first essential step on the road to total domination,” Arendt similarly declares in a discussion of totalitarian states, “is to kill the juridical person in man” (447), to isolate people, both mentally and practically, from all legal systems. Once Jews had been understood as a social problem, rather than a political or legal one, it was comparatively easy to deny them national citizenship, which would guarantee the protection of a state with laws. From there it was but a small step to throw the Jews into concentration camps—camps purposefully designed to hold them outside any system of law and thus break down their resistance to Nazi power. Totalitarianism was therefore partly defined by, and certainly thrived on, its ability to dispense with justice and law, and to “kill the juridical person in man.”

Thus when Domna claims that the faculty owe Henry a vote of confidence based on the principle of *aidôs*—an ancient Greek term signifying the compassion one should show toward someone who arouses horror and pity—we should understand that metaphorically, though filled with good intentions, she proposes a non-judicial basis for the department’s action. Since Henry has suffered so much, she believes, the department ought to show *aidôs* for him, ought to keep him on out of respect for his suffering, rather than because he has adhered to the department’s agreed-upon standards of conduct (133). Furness disagrees based on judicial principle: “In strict

justice, there is no *aidôs*, and I for one propose to deal justly” (134). While the rest of the faculty bring in the supposed political and health issues surrounding Mulcahy’s ouster, Furness stoutly refuses to consider them at all. For him, the standard for keeping a teacher ought to be as consistent as a law. Mulcahy’s professional competence alone should be considered. And Furness argues that Mulcahy consistently falls short of that standard: Mulcahy is irresponsible about his work for the department (113-15), and doesn’t even subscribe to Jocelyn’s progressive educational beliefs, refusing to do the very things he was hired to do (127-28). While Domna and Alma are free to plead for Mulcahy personally, then, “We can’t let clemency become the official business of the department” (134). The department must follow a kind of law in judging all faculty members’ competence.

And with Arendtian rigor, the novel itself sides with Howard Furness’s brief for justice before *aidôs*, clemency, or any other subjective criterion of action. Domna’s inability to act in “strict justice” is the same inability that leads to President Maynard Hoar’s downfall in the novel’s last pages. If Domna wishes to treat some populations (*viz.* Mulcahy) differently than others, based on what Howard calls a “vague social need” (137), in the end Maynard Hoar similarly makes the mistake of treating Mulcahy *differently* from other professors. He takes into account something other than Mulcahy’s professional competence. Worried that public knowledge of Mulcahy’s supposed membership in the Communist Party will now make it appear as if Jocelyn has sheltered a known Communist (not to mention one who has perjured himself in front of a state legislature on the matter), and thereby damage his presidency and Jocelyn as a whole, Maynard seeks to discover whether the rumors of Mulcahy’s Party membership have any basis in fact. But by this act Maynard betrays the idea of the rule of law, of universal standards. For Mulcahy’s political affiliations, imagined or real, are—just as Howard Furness insists—not



germane to any judgment that a college president needs to make about keeping on a member of the faculty. And it is this mistake—this disregard for the strict standards of universal, equally-applied law, as it were—that allows Mulcahy to triumph over Hoar at the novel’s end, essentially blackmailing a President who by even inquiring about Mulcahy’s politics appears to have participated in the McCarthyist witch-hunt he claims to abhor.

Demonstrating the centrality of such concerns to *Groves*, the novel ends with explicit reflections on the nature of justice and the rule of law. “I’m concerned with justice,” Mulcahy tells Hoar when the President exasperatedly asks him why he has lied and manipulated so many people (301). “Justice for myself as a superior man and for my family,” Mulcahy elaborates (301). But in saying this, Mulcahy reveals his flawed understanding of the central term—and not only because he has lied in order to obtain his so-called “justice.” For in strict justice, there is no reference to the particularities of supposedly “superior men” or their families. Justice operates, as Rawls would put it a few decades thereafter, from behind a veil of ignorance about such particularities. There is no justice “for”; there is only justice—it is universal or nothing. Once again, Furness’s insistence on the impersonal and universal quality of justice is vindicated.<sup>17</sup>

Once Maynard admits his mistake to himself, that he has erred in asking about Mulcahy’s politics, he is in a position to identify with the rule of law again, as against the breaking of law

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<sup>17</sup> This interpretation answers two questions that McCarthy herself, in an unpublished lecture on her novel, thought lay at its heart: “Is there such a thing as justice on earth[,] and can you have justice without equity or equality, which Nature refuses to dispense?” (qtd. in Abrams 67). My argument here is that while McCarthy’s novel certainly unsettles the idea that justice can exist on earth in any pure form, it nevertheless persists in believing that a human form of justice *can* exist without reference to any supposed equality, whether of income or ability. Through impersonal and universally-applied laws, justice may indeed exist on an earth without substantial equity or equality.

My belief that McCarthy’s conception of justice is an impersonal one also accords with Deborah Nelson’s perceptive argument that Arendt and McCarthy, unusually for women or even men of their time, “heartlessly” insisted on the political importance of solitude and a clear-eyed view of facts, over and against the usually empathic appeals to solidarity that have characterized progressive politics since World War II. This is not the place to comment on Nelson’s implicit valorization of such “heartlessness” as the basis for a superior (anti-therapeutic) politics. But I would note that McCarthy’s “heartlessness” was more than an insistence on the value of dispassionate political thinking. It was just as importantly a means to the universalism I have been describing here. An impersonal “heartlessness” was a way of extending moral and political consideration beyond those whom it was easiest to consider, of expanding moral and political regard beyond one’s bureaucratic department or even nation.

due to supposedly higher “social needs,” whether those of his personal career or those of Jocelyn College itself. Thus the final image of the novel is that of President Hoar reciting Cicero’s first Catiline oration: “‘*Quo usque tandem, Catilina, abutere patienta nostra?*’ ‘How far at length, O Catiline, will you abuse our patience?’” (302). The allusion here is to the famed conflict between Catiline, the rebel who threatened to overtake the Roman consulate by force, and Cicero, the consul who discovered and destroyed his plot. Recounting her participation in a childhood play based on the Catiline Conspiracy in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957), McCarthy provides a helpful gloss. Though she plays the part of Catiline and is determined to use the opportunity to glorify the rebel for the rest of her schoolmates, to her distress she finds herself eventually doubting Catiline. What if he was “merely a vulgar arsonist, as Cicero and his devotees contended?” (145). Eventually these “first stirrings of maturity” (145) come to fruition with the conviction that Catiline indeed *was* “a gangster and a ruffian, just as that old bore, Cicero, said” (159). In the italicized postscript to this lightly fictionalized story of her youth, McCarthy sets out its moral: despite her belief in the importance of questioning and rebellion, in the end and “*To my surprise, I chose Caesar and the rule of law*” (166). And so too when that old bore Maynard Hoar quotes Cicero at the novel’s end, he rejects Mulcahy’s Catilinian tactics and chooses the rule of law.

“I suppose, in a certain sense, I must be saying farewell to progressivism,” Hoar remarks of his condemnation of Mulcahy’s dishonest demagoguery (302). And indeed, both Hoar and the novel itself say goodbye to what they consider to be a myopically rebellious “progressivism,” embracing instead a universalist liberalism that values the formal equality of law above any valorization of substantial equality that disregards the means by which it is achieved. The constellation of liberal values championed in *Groves*—the dedication to a search for truth via

debate and contestation, the recognition of human freedom and its attendant universal responsibility, and an impartial and universal justice under equally-applied laws—may seem to have gone rather far from the antibureaucratic animus we have been tracing previously. But in fact they all take their cue from that quintessentially 1950s animus. The search for truth via debate, as we have seen, is counterposed to the bureaucratic structures of totalitarianism, in which information is segmented and separated, reified and incapable of being contradicted seriously. So too absolute freedom and universal responsibility stand opposed to the bureaucratic habit of moral segmentation, the dubious ability to separate one's responsibility to the department or the nation from one's responsibility to all of humanity. And finally the ideal of universal justice under law stands against any bureaucratic division of humanity that might threaten to treat one human being differently from another. In the postwar groves of McCarthy's academe, in short, the only cure for a bureaucratic, proto-totalitarian narrowing of mind was a liberalism based in universalist, cosmopolitan ideals.

#### **4. Antibureaucratism, Literary Realism, and the Possibility of Postmodernism**

*The Groves of Academe* thus solidified McCarthy's universalist critique of the bureaucratic tendency toward reification and fragmentation. But by no means did McCarthy drop such a critique thereafter. Though manifested at first in her skeptical examinations of higher education, offered in both her novel and contemporary essays, antibureaucratic themes became a mainstay of her work in the fifties and sixties. In McCarthy's hands, I will now argue, this universalist critique of bureaucratic intellectual labor and society helped open the way for many postmodern theories and literary practices—a surprising irony of American intellectual history, given postmodernism's later hostility toward universalism. By examining two remarkable essays

from the early sixties, “The Fact In Fiction” (1960) and “Characters in Fiction” (1961), we may see that McCarthy’s antibureaucratism animated her analysis of the state of realist fiction in the early sixties. That analysis of realism’s troubles suggests, however unwillingly, the lineaments of postmodern thinking about both literature and society. Such proto-postmodern essays thus ultimately reveal that *The Groves of Academe*—and by extension a whole antibureaucratic tradition of depicting mental labor, crystallized by the postwar campus novel—could create a space for the development of postmodernism.

“The Fact in Fiction” and “Characters in Fiction” together form a summa of McCarthy’s thinking about contemporary fiction in the early sixties. Their nearly identical titles, original publication in the same journal (*Partisan Review*) less than a year apart, and subsequent publication next to each other in her essay collection *On the Contrary* suggest they were meant to be read together at the least.<sup>18</sup> And much as Trilling’s “Art and Fortune” did in 1948, both these essays begin by contemplating the possible death of the realist novel. “Fact” contends that with the exception of Faulkner’s work, no great novel has been written since the death of Thomas Mann; it even suggests that it may not be possible to write novels at all anymore (250). Likewise, “Characters” opens with the assertion that since Joyce and Proust, there have been no great characters in the novel (274). In the early sixties, McCarthy believed that the novel was in crisis, perhaps terminally so.

McCarthy finds two main social culprits for the novel’s impasse. They are most clearly articulated in “The Fact in Fiction,” but despite McCarthy’s more formalist bent in “Characters,” they have ramifications there as well. The first culprit is what McCarthy calls the “irreality” of

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<sup>18</sup> A third essay, on “The American Realist Playwrights,” is grouped together in the last section of *On the Contrary* as well. First published only months after “Characters in Fiction,” it takes realism as its subject and offers themes similar to “Fact” and “Characters.” But it was originally published in *Harper’s Magazine*, not *Partisan Review*, and treats the theater specifically—an art form that, it contends, consistently lags behind the novel anyway (293-94). For reasons of space and focus, then, I am restricting my discussion to McCarthy’s criticism regarding the realist novel.

the twentieth century (267). The novel, she asserts in “Fact,” has always been invested in the real: “The distinctive mark of the novel is its concern with the actual world, the world of fact, of the verifiable, of figures, even, and statistics” (250). The novel was the genre most capable of depicting, and the most reliant upon, the minutiae of reality. But in the era of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, she believed, it was difficult to feel that reality was itself real. The novelist could not write about quotidian happenings without feeling their “inverisimilitude,” their essential triviality and insignificance when placed alongside the world of the Holocaust and the atom bomb. Yet if a novelist “tries, on the other hand, to write about people who make lampshades of human skin”—about the horrors of contemporary reality—“he feels still more the inverisimilitude of what he is asserting” (267). In the twentieth century, the real had become alternately trifling or obscene. Both conditions seemed to make the novel’s traditional rationale, that of depicting everyday reality, ring hollow.

Twentieth-century horrors appear to underlie the central complaint of “Characters in Fiction” as well: writers can no longer assume the “common humanity” that had once made fully developed and sympathetic characters a worthy goal of novelistic portraiture (285). “The world of twentieth-century sensibility, in contrast to that of Tolstoy,” McCarthy writes, is “a world of paralyzed grief, in which little irrelevant things, things that do not belong, are noticed or registered on the film of consciousness, exactly as they are at a funeral service or by a bored child in church” (279). This atmosphere of “grief,” no doubt inspired by Auschwitz and Hiroshima, then seems to provoke in part her subsequent assertion that contemporary writers could no longer depict characters who shared a “common humanity.” The “grief” of a funereal twentieth century could lead to a trauma that repressed or “paralyzed” the desire to comprehend such humanity. Rather than trying to descry a common humanity, then, novelists had turned to

depicting extremes—to depicting “soul[s] so foreign or so foetal as to seem beyond grasp” (284). This extremist trend is rooted in “a desire to comprehend, which seems to be growing stronger as the world itself becomes more incomprehensible and dubious” (285). Thus, as in “The Fact in Fiction,” “Characters” ascribes the troubles of contemporary novelists to the “irreality” and inhumanity of the twentieth century.

But for McCarthy the second main cause of the novel’s dilemma, more central to my analysis here, was the newly bureaucratic working conditions of writers themselves. “Today the writer has become specialized, like the worker on an assembly line whose task is to perform a single action several hundred times a day or the doctor whose task is to service a single organ of the human body,” McCarthy declares in “Fact” (268). Crucially, such specialization defines not only the writer’s labor, but also his or her very “social existence” (268). With many a writer teaching at universities (a telling example), the writer’s “colleagues are writers [themselves] or at any rate they ‘publish,’ and his students, like his girl friends, are hoping to write” as well (268). Thus the contemporary writer “sees only other writers; he does not know anyone else” (268). McCarthy is quick to stress that this is more than a moral problem of cliqueishness:

The isolation of the modern writer is a social fact, and not just the writer’s own fault. He cannot help being “bookish,” which cuts him off from society, since practically the only people left who read are writers, their wives and girl friends, teachers of literature, and students hoping to become writers. The writer has “nothing in common” with the businessman or the worker, and this is almost literally true; there is no common world left in which they share. The businessman who does not read is just as specialized as the writer who writes. (269)

Readers and writers, in other words, compose a kind of bureaucratically specialized—and hence socially isolated—group in society. Accordingly, “common sense in terms of broad experience” has “become inaccessible to the writer” (268).<sup>19</sup> In the act of becoming a “writer,” the novelist loses contact with broader and *shared* reality itself, the very stuff of novels. Thus, “The worst thing, I would say, that can happen to a writer today is to become a writer” (268-69).

Bureaucratic isolation, as much as “irreality,” was responsible for the impasse of the realist novel in McCarthy’s estimate. Separated from all those who did not write themselves, the novelist could no longer grasp life outside a literature department, as it were.

In “Characters,” I would argue, McCarthy observes along similar lines that bureaucratic isolation has destroyed the perception of a common humanity grounding realist character development. McCarthy refers to bureaucracy early on with the observation that, despite the stereotypes of conformity that the term “bureaucracy” evokes, bureaucratic life has created many types of characters that an author might wish to catalogue: “the very forces and institutions that are the agents and promoters of conformity in America—bureaucracies public and private and the regimented ‘schools’ and [psychoanalytic] systems of healing and artistic creation—are themselves, through splits and cellular irritation, propagating an array of social types conforming to no previous standard” (273). This bewildering “array of social types” arguably underlies the

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<sup>19</sup>“Common sense” was again an Arendtian theme; see Deborah Nelson’s helpful explication of Arendt’s usage, 89-92. Nelson’s article also offers an interesting and I think related reading of the term “fact” in McCarthy, contending that “What makes something a fact seems to be less its informational content than its capacity to alter the observer” (94), its ability to be *other* than the observer. Nelson closes this part of her argument by suggesting that McCarthy’s career was dedicated to promoting such a conception of fact—that is to say, to promoting “a discipline of perception” that always contains this “capacity to alter the observer” (95)—and to demanding that intellectuals thereby “enter a process of self-alienation that is never ending” (95). This is true and perceptive as far as it goes, and it dovetails with my own earlier analysis of McCarthy’s attack on reification as a kind of thought impervious to contradiction. But its ethical cast risks neglecting the importance of McCarthy’s social and material analysis. In these early-sixties essays especially, it is bureaucratic specialization and its consequent social isolation that has separated intellectuals from facts that might alter their perception of the world. Bureaucracy, and not just cowardice and/or laziness, militates against intellectuals’ acquisition of an Arendtian “common sense,” the experience of facts that would open up multiple points of view. In McCarthy’s work, both fiction and essays, in other words, the material and indeed specifically institutional conditions under which intellectuals think are as important as their moral dedication to perceiving self-altering facts.

essay's central contention that the sense of a "common humanity" that used to ground literary realism no longer exists, making novelists less inclined to depict recognizable and sympathetic characters. If "The Fact in Fiction" argued that the realist novel of "common sense" and common facts was no longer possible because writers and businessmen (like everyone else) now had "no common world left in which they share" (269), "Characters in Fiction" notes something similar when arguing that a "common humanity" was no longer assumed in fiction. The world was becoming "more incomprehensible" to the writer, and not only because of Auschwitz and Hiroshima (285). The multiplication of reified social types inherent in bureaucratically organized societies was also destroying the commonality of experience that realist authors had relied upon in creating characters.

A theory of bureaucratic social ills also underlies McCarthy's assertion in "Characters" that contemporary novelists could no longer identify "with the hero or the heroine, a sympathetic figure whose dreams and desires resembled the author's own" (284). McCarthy is at least open to social and even political explanations for this literary development when she calls the absent hero of realism an incarnation of "our subjective conviction of human freedom" (289) and "a bearer of human freedom" (292). Here again, I would argue, the notion of a specifically bureaucratic social structure is at work: bureaucracy, with its specialization of thought and promotion of an atomized social existence, so prevents consciousness of the world at large (outside the department) that the contemporary writer's ability to imagine *any* active subject, any "bearer of human freedom" who could be aware of and then act upon the social realm, is fettered. Unlike the realist authors of an earlier era, the novelist in the age of bureaucracy could imagine neither a common humanity that would form a basis for creating sympathetic characters, nor an active subject who could become the "hero" of a novel. In both "The Fact in Fiction" and



“Characters in Fiction,” we discover at work a theory of the relationship between contemporary bureaucratic labor and the difficulties of literary realism. With no shared reality (“fact”) in a departmentalized society and no ability to imagine a common and socially active humanity (“characters”) in a bureaucratic culture, the realist mode of representation faced severe difficulties.

We may now note that the arguments of these two essays, and especially their antibureaucratic strain, also make for suggestive explanations of postmodern literary and cultural trends. Indeed, taken collectively, the essays may be read as an early attempt to understand postmodern conditions of literary production. Certainly McCarthy’s account of the “irreality” of the twentieth century may provide (and often has provided) some explanation for a postwar eschewal of literary realism. Writers faced with an unrealistic world might well have desired to spearhead a postmodern tendency to create fictions openly, to disavow any responsibility for transcribing “reality” per se. But McCarthy’s discussion of realism’s bureaucratic troubles is even more suggestive in explaining certain postmodern literary habits. If, for example, writers were increasingly specialized, writing only for each other, the 1960s and 1970s trend of fiction about fiction—postmodern metafiction, in short—might be understood as a natural result of the bureaucratic narrowing of readership to other writers.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, if a bureaucratized culture was removing the last vestiges of a common humanity from the writer’s sight, and even from existence, it would be surprising indeed if writers were able to create fiction that movingly

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<sup>20</sup> A narrowing of audience is at the heart of at least two arguments about postmodernist reflexivity that I am aware of. In a deeply critical tone, Charles Newman ascribes postmodernist self-consciousness (“The Threnody of Solipsism” [40]) to “a heightened sense of the unreality of the audience, which is more than a philosophical problem” (41). Less judgmentally (and even optimistically in the larger context of his work), Mark McGurl essentially echoes McCarthy’s sense that writers are bureaucratically isolated from non-writers when he suggests that we might “see the metafictional reflexivity of so much postwar fiction as being related to its production in and around a programmatically analytical and pedagogical environment” (47-8), in and around the ubiquitous creative writing programs of what he calls *The Program Era*. (See 37-56; and especially 46-56, which discusses the campus novel).

depicted the travails of ordinary and sympathetic characters. Hence the postmodern's frequent indifference to realistic, "round" characters—in Jameson's famed terms, its "depthlessness," "superficiality," and "waning of affect"—could be understood as the predictable result of a bureaucratic labor and social organization that separates people from each other and makes them less interested in others per se.<sup>21</sup> (If we wished to be Weberian about it, we might label Jameson's "waning of affect" a rationalistic "waning of charisma" instead.) Without necessarily assenting to these arguments, we can in any case see that McCarthy's attempts to describe the bureaucratic difficulties of realism look very much like prototypical attempts to explain what we have since come to call the postmodern.

And if in this way McCarthy's antibureaucratic essays seem to prefigure the postmodern, I would suggest that in a number of crucial respects *The Groves of Academe*—McCarthy's earlier, novelistic account of the dangers of bureaucratic labor and culture—also prefigures the postmodern impossibility of realism limned in the later essays. We may begin to see this by examining this foundational campus novel in light of the genre's subsequent history. Discussing the campus novel as a postwar form, Steven Connor notes that the campus setting offered

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<sup>21</sup> On the terms cited, see Jameson, *Postmodernism* 6-16. More generally, one might note that just as McCarthy locates the troubles of realism in bureaucracy, Jameson similarly explains much of postmodernism as a result of bureaucratic existence and thought. See for example his early (1982) explanation of why, in the postmodern era, a norm-less pastiche has nearly replaced the satirical aims of parody. The postmodern, Jameson suggests, may be understood as "the age of corporate capitalism, of the so-called organization man, of bureaucracies in business as well as the state"; it is a bureaucratic era where the "older bourgeois individual subject no longer exists" (115). And thus he wonders if

in the decades since the emergence of the great modern styles society has itself begun to fragment . . . each group coming to speak a curious private language of its own, each profession developing its private code or idiolect, and finally each individual coming to be a kind of linguistic island, separated from everyone else? But then in that case, the very possibility of any linguistic norm in terms of which one could ridicule private languages and idiosyncratic energies would vanish, and we would have nothing but stylistic diversity and heterogeneity.

That is the [postmodern] moment at which pastiche appears and parody has become impossible. ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 114)

In sum, then: for McCarthy, bureaucracy makes realism impossible; and for Jameson, bureaucracy makes postmodernism nearly inevitable.

novelists a relatively closed, yet still permeable world to write about. He goes on to suggest that the campus novel may accordingly partake of two paradigmatic genres:

the one concerns the disruption of a closed world, and the gradual return of order and regularity to it, while the other concerns the passage through this closed world of a character who must in the end be allowed to escape its gravitational pull. The one is institutional . . . the other is individual . . . . Typical of one is the detective story, in which the aim is to neutralise the menace of an enigma; typical of the other is the *Bildungsroman*, or novel of development, in which the aim is to define the terms of a freedom. (*English* 70)

The two correlate genres Connor identifies, I would point out, are central to nineteenth-century realism itself: the detective novel is thought to begin with Poe's influential tales of empirical ratiocination, and the *Bildungsroman* is central to McCarthy's own beloved Dickens, in such works as *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*. Connor identifies the postwar campus novel as heir to such realist traditions, or at least their broader philosophical impulses.

And in many respects *Groves* fits into Connor's schema of realist genres. It is, I think, primarily a narrative of the first type, dedicated to depicting the disruption of an institution, and thence an at least partial restoration of order to it. While Domna Rejnev seems to be the novel's imperfect heroine, and Henry Mulcahy its sometimes oddly sympathetic villain, both characters ultimately recede into the background by novel's end. The college itself, summed up by Vincent Keogh's analogy of a hall of mirrors, becomes the true focus of the narrative. The "menace of an enigma" is neutralized, and much as in a detective story, Mulcahy's lies are discovered in the end, restoring order to Jocelyn College. Yet lurking in the closing subplot of Maynard Hoar we may nevertheless see a narrative resembling Connor's second, *Bildungsroman*-like type, wherein

an individual succeeds in extricating himself from the campus's "gravitational pull." Like *Lucky Jim*'s Jim Dixon would two years later, Maynard Hoar ends the novel by extricating himself from the mad alternate reality of Jocelyn; he has achieved maturity in this novel of political growth by rejecting progressivism's ambivalence about law and justice.

But one key to understanding *The Groves of Academe*—and thus its capacity to influence the campus novel at the start of its boom period in America, as well as its relationship to postmodern literature—is that through its satire of bureaucratic thought and labor it ultimately frustrates both these realist expectations. For if the novel ends with the status quo of Mulcahy's renewed appointment, this does not mean that order is fully returned to the closed world of Jocelyn College. The irritant Mulcahy remains and he effectively triumphs, at least for the moment, over his enemies. One should have no optimism that the enigma of Mulcahy, so bound up with the problem of truth itself, has been solved and thence neutralized at Jocelyn. Nor is any unambiguous freedom defined by the most prominent individual to leave the college at novel's end. Maynard Hoar does not free himself from either Jocelyn or higher education at large when he quits; he merely steps aside in the likely vain hope that some *future* president might be able to exercise hierarchical authority at thoroughly bureaucratic Jocelyn. Recalling Connor's two ideal-typical campus novel genres, then, we might say that the first campus novel is a detective story without a solution, and a *Bildungsroman* without growth. In the "totally fictitious" world of McCarthy's proto-totalitarian, bureaucratic academe, the ineluctably political pursuits of truth and of a whole self—so central to realist expectations of narrative resolution—end in defeat.

Epistemological, ontological, political, and aesthetic irresolutions such as these make the campus depicted in *The Groves of Academe* begin to resemble the postmodern itself. With its constant confusion over the nature of truth, this inaugural campus novel anticipates in satirical

fashion the thoroughgoing skepticism characteristic of postmodern thought. As we have seen, seeking truth in the groves of Jocelyn College is at best an elusive activity, and at worst a fool's errand. Politically, with what we might call its micropolitics of bureaucratic intrigue, McCarthy's picture of academe anticipates the radical de-centering characteristic of postmodern literary and social theory as well. If Foucault, for example, admonished us to move past older questions of political sovereignty and law, and told us that in political theory we have yet "to cut off the King's head" ("Truth" 121), in *Groves* Mulcahy does the job for us, forcing the President's resignation and thereby symbolically leaving the political field of Jocelyn in the hands of innumerable scheming faculty bureaucrats. In this novel of bureaucratic intrigue, President Hoar would ruefully tell us, power is most certainly "a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege that one might possess" (*Discipline* 26). It is even possible to look at this bureaucratic comedy of a campus run amok with (mis)information as an ancestor of postmodern cyberpunk and hypertext, with their computerized cities of interlinked data and interminable cross-referencing. The intricate network of human gossip, (pseudo-) knowledge, and petty faculty plots anticipates the crowded futuristic cityscapes and hyperlinked nodes. And much as in cyberpunk particularly, McCarthy's depiction of a scheming campus regards the burgeoning "information society" nervously, in potentially dystopian terms, as a structure of reified, ideological thought control akin to that exercised by totalitarianism. In its influential depiction of campus politics, then, *The Groves of Academe* can be seen to anticipate a number of postmodern themes and even genres.

If many postmodern theorists later came to *celebrate* absolute "undecidability" and *différance*, and likewise became fascinated with various micrological forms of power and political resistance ("rhizomes," the "practice of everyday life"), in McCarthy's satiric campus

novel we can thus see that such concepts did not always inspire admiration when first identified. It may be that such central strains of postmodern philosophical and social thought were in fact often simply radical transvaluations of the bureaucratic world McCarthy sought to satirize. What was conceived historically as the difficulty of seeking truth in a society dominated by bureaucratic intellectual labor could become the impossibility of truth per se; what was understood historically as the breakdown of democratic and juridical forms of authority under the spread of bureaucratized social networks could become a truism about the ubiquitous and diffuse nature of power in general. The social and political concerns of intellectual workers in an increasingly bureaucratic society could become universalized as “the postmodern,” in short. In the name of a cosmopolitan political responsibility that would soon become problematic in postmodern social thought’s emphasis on fragmentation and partiality, in any case, McCarthy had created a campus that looked like a photographic negative of the postmodern’s most optimistic image of thought and political action. Where later theorists would find the light of pure unpredictability and fragmentary play, she saw the darkness of proto-totalitarianism, the systematic bureaucratic disintegration of universal truth, responsibility, and the rule of law—of all that was required for democratic societies. Thus the groves of academe—in McCarthy’s rendering, the tangled webs of bureaucratic intellectuals’ self-deception and reified pseudo-thought—may also have been the groves of postmodernism. With the postwar birth of an antibureaucratic campus novel, the postmodern could take shape in dystopian terms.

## Chapter Six

### **The Intellectual Class Unbound: Vladimir Nabokov's Craft and the Birth of Postmodernism**

#### **1. The Postmodern Campus Novel**

Though Mary McCarthy had spent the first two years of the 1960s openly worrying about the future of the novel in such essays as “The Fact in Fiction” (1960) and “Characters in Fiction” (1961), in the spring of 1962 she experienced a sudden burst of optimism. The “modern novel that everyone had thought was dead . . . was only playing possum,” she exclaimed breathlessly to readers of the *New Republic* (“Bolt” 34). A friend from long ago, Vladimir Nabokov, had published *Pale Fire*. She was absolutely enchanted with it. Readers who have seen the Vintage International edition of *Pale Fire* will recognize the charismatic words of McCarthy’s review, which still grace the front and back covers as a blurb. Nabokov’s novel is a work of “perfect beauty, symmetry, strangeness, originality, and moral truth,” McCarthy declares; it is “one of the very great works of art of this century” (34). Though certainly not all reviewers shared McCarthy’s astonished admiration, in the nearly fifty years since then the critical consensus has come around.<sup>1</sup> Today *Pale Fire* is a cornerstone of Nabokov’s reputation; only *Lolita* challenges it as the novel most often recommended to represent Nabokov’s fiction as a whole. The novel is central to Nabokov’s oeuvre.

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Reading’s excellent article on the novel vividly recounts the initial critical confusion over whether *Pale Fire* proved Nabokov to be a “serious” writer (77-80). Some of McCarthy’s own friends were much less enthusiastic about the novel’s worth than she as well, as she found out after writing her review. In a letter praising her review as the only one that “really grappled with the book,” her ex-husband Edmund Wilson nevertheless pronounced himself “irritated and bored by all [Nabokov’s] little tricks” (qtd. in Kiernan 495). McCarthy’s old friend Dwight Macdonald, writing about the novel in *Partisan Review*, wrote bitinglly that only Herman Wouk’s *Youngblood Hawke* offered it competition as “the most unreadable novel I’ve attempted this season” (437). Even more amusingly, he declared that he was “unable to explain [McCarthy’s] enthusiasm [for it] except by the hypothesis that she enjoys solving double crostics more than I do, and in fact that she thinks they are a form of literature” (441).

It also holds an important place in two wider literary canons. Written at the end of Nabokov's nearly twenty years of work as a professor at Wellesley and Cornell—and taking the form of a sometimes bathetic poem composed by a professor named John Shade, followed by the laughably delusional annotations of Shade's academic colleague Charles Kinbote—*Pale Fire* is also a classic satire of professorial labor in both its creative and “critical” forms.<sup>2</sup> Thus the novel looms large not only in the Nabokov canon, but in the canon of postwar campus novels that were begun by Nabokov's friend McCarthy and continued by himself, before the publication of *Pale Fire*, with 1957's *Pnin*.<sup>3</sup> (The character of Pnin turns up ever so briefly in *Pale Fire*, in fact, suggesting the continuity of academic worlds between the two novels.) But most significantly for this dissertation, Nabokov's second campus novel is also, as John Burt Foster, Jr. notes, “often viewed as a masterpiece of emerging postmodernism in fiction” (231). This most celebrated of Nabokov's novels is not only a prized midway entry in the annals of the campus novel, in short; for many it is a foundational postmodern novel as well.

Not every critic is willing to label *Pale Fire* “postmodern” without reservation, of course. While critics such as Maurice Couturier have declared it an “archetypal postmodernist novel” (258), others, such as Brian McHale and Martine Hennard, have insisted that it occupies a cusp between modernism and postmodernism.<sup>4</sup> Though I am more inclined to Couturier's conclusion,

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<sup>2</sup> After emigrating to America, Nabokov began his academic career as a Resident Lecturer at Wellesley in 1941; he stayed there until spring of 1947, with only one year off—and in that year he gave lectures at an array of other colleges and universities. Then in the fall of 1948 he began over a decade of teaching at Cornell University. He retired from academic work only once the surprising royalties from *Lolita* had enabled him to do so, in January of 1959. See Chapters 2 through 16 of the second volume of Brian Boyd's biography, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (hereinafter referred to as *VNAY*).

<sup>3</sup> On the “campus novel” as a genre, see both the Interlude and Chapter Five.

<sup>4</sup> Briefly, Couturier defines the postmodernist movement as writers' collective reaction both to the loss of faith in any “natural” social or even theological order following the atrocities of WWII, and to the rise of truly mass media that effectively supplanted traditional “reality” with Baudrillardian simulacra (255-56). He suggests that late-modernist texts, new to these social circumstances, tend accordingly to be “militant” in suggesting this lawless world of unmoored images (257), while fully postmodernist texts simply assume it. *Pale Fire*, he argues, simply assumes the fundamentally interpretive nature of the world, and is thus an “archetypal postmodernist novel” (258).



both arguments undoubtedly have merit. And the debate is ultimately immaterial to my argument here. For I am not as interested in the literary-historical classification of the novel as I am in understanding how it reveals the social origins of those particular literary traits and discourses that came to be known as “postmodern.” And *Pale Fire* undeniably exhibits postmodern traits at the start of the postmodern era. Taking the form of a poem annotated by a madman, with the poet and critic both professors at an institution winkingly named “Wordsmith,” *Pale Fire* is in large measure literature about literature. It might even be called literature about literature about literature (a novel about commentary on poems). It is a work of metafiction, in short. Certain of its characters exist only on the page, Kinbote suggests early on: “We shall accompany Gradus in constant thought,” he writes,

as he makes his way . . . through the entire length of the poem, following the road of its rhythm, riding past in a rhyme, skidding around the corner of a run-on, breathing with the caesura, swinging down to the foot of the page from line to line as from branch to branch . . . steadily marching nearer in iambic motion . . .

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Brian McHale, on the other hand, is among the most prominent advocates of *Pale Fire* as a work straddling modernism and postmodernism. For him, modernism is primarily concerned with epistemological questions (can we *know* the world?), while the postmodern is more focused on ontological questions (what worlds, plural, *exist*?). He argues that *Pale Fire* is “a text of absolute epistemological uncertainty” (18), whose uncertainties lead inexorably to speculation on the existence of other worlds themselves. We do not know if Zembla exists or not in the novel, and thus we are forced to focus on it as a (possibly) separate world, completely invented as fiction. For him, then, *Pale Fire* is a text in which the proliferation of epistemological questions (a sort of modernism in the extreme, in this sense) seems to forcibly compel the ontological questions that dominate postmodernism. Thus it is “perhaps the paradigmatic limit-modernist novel” (19). Poststructuralist critic Martine Hennard similarly finds it to be “located on the frontier ‘in-between’ the modernist and postmodernist movements”; for her it questions, in predictably poststructuralist fashion, “the literary historian’s drive to distinguish them as separate modes of writing” (300).

I have not mentioned the opinion of distinguished Nabokov critic and biographer Brian Boyd in the main text, both because it would be a distraction from my argument and because his view is an outlier in the criticism. Nevertheless, it represents an interesting third view regarding the literary-historical classification of the novel. He has written an entire book on the novel that claims to *solve* all the uncertainties that most other critics (Couturier, McHale, and Hennard alike) have judged to be constituent features of the text. Thus he self-consciously “confutes the claim that the novel is quintessentially ‘postmodern’” (*Nabokov’s Pale Fire* 5; henceforth cited as *NPF*). While he does not offer any classification of the novel in the place of “postmodernism,” I would argue that his ingeniously literal-minded explication actually reclaims *Pale Fire* as a work of *realism*, albeit one that takes the concept of an afterlife with ghosts seriously. As much as I admire Boyd’s detective work in finding Nabokovian allusions and puzzle-solutions, I don’t find it convincing on this score, and am more sympathetic to those critics who see the point of the novel lying in its “undecidability,” to use the poststructuralist terminology.

entering the hall of a hotel, putting on the bedlight, while Shade blots out a word, and falling asleep as the poet lays down his pen for the night. (78)

Kinbote relates a dream he had once, too, in which he learns that his Queen Disa “had become a character in a novel” (212). Last and perhaps most importantly, such metafictional nods extend to Kinbote himself. In the novel’s last pages he suggests that he himself is nothing more than a literary invention: “My notes and self are petering out,” he tells us, implying the identity of writing and self (300). In what we would now call a classic gesture of postmodern metafiction, “Kinbote” then points the reader’s attention to someone sounding much like The Author: “I may turn up yet, on another campus, as an old, happy, healthy, heterosexual Russian, a writer in exile, sans fame, sans future, sans audience, sans anything but his art” (300-301). *Pale Fire* is thus a novel that undermines readers’ confidence in the “reality” of not just some but every one of its main events and characters, gleefully hinting at its own status as fiction. Furthermore it exhibits what we have since come to recognize as a classically postmodernist trope of indeterminacy (or poststructuralist “undecidability”). Kinbote’s extravagantly subjective “interpretation” of a poem, after all, eventually reveals that much (or maybe all?) of his commentary—his depiction of his life as royalty in the kingdom of Zembla—is the fantasy of a madman. Reflexivity, metafiction, indeterminacy, an emphasis on the inevitability of interpretation: the novel *does* representative postmodern things at the beginning of the postmodern era, even if one denies that such things cement its status as a postmodern novel.

And no matter how we classify the novel, studying *Pale Fire* will also aid our study of the origins of postmodernism because it and its author were undoubtedly influential in the emergence of a self-consciously postmodern novel. As D. Barton Johnson notes, the “rise of the postmodernists—John Barth, William Gass, John Hawkes, Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme,

Thomas Pynchon, and Gilbert Sorrentino—coincided almost exactly with the Nabokov decade of the sixties,” the time of Nabokov’s greatest, post-*Lolita* fame (145). And as Couturier observes, though Nabokov had a long career before the sixties and was thus “only marginally a contemporary of the postmodernists” and indeed “knew little or nothing about them,” the representative postmodernists cited nevertheless “knew much about him and often were afraid of being eclipsed by him” (253-54). Postmodern authors like John Hawkes and John Barth regularly named *Pale Fire* as a formative influence on their own work, and the novel was thus a “key text for the movement” of postmodern literature as a whole (Johnson 145). Analyzing *Pale Fire*’s social roots and motivations will thus tell us something important about the roots of postmodernist discourse.

This chapter reads Nabokov’s famed campus novel—and seminal postmodernist novel—and makes two main points about the intimate relationship between early postmodernism and intellectual labor in the 1960s. First I argue that *Pale Fire*, like its predecessor campus novel *The Groves of Academe*, is a satire of bureaucracy, particularly in higher education. But rather than offering McCarthy’s universalist liberalism as the solution to bureaucracy’s ills, *Pale Fire* presents the holistic experience of a complex *art* as the charismatic antidote to higher education’s bureaucratic thought and soullessness. I argue secondly that *Pale Fire*’s characteristically postmodern metafiction and insistence on the inevitability of interpretation are rooted not only in this antibureaucratism, but in a deeper and utopian sense of the value and importance of a holistic intellectual labor—namely the *creation* (and not just consumption) of art. Though many on the laborist left today have assumed that postmodernism offers only a politically disabling skepticism, this concluding chapter suggests to the contrary that the earliest ludic postmodernism of the 1960s—even at its most apolitical—often constituted an exuberantly defiant celebration of

workers' ability to make a product wholly from their own thought and labor, as against the narrowing forces of bureaucratic employment.

## 2. Academe versus the Re-enchantment of the World

Over the half-century of *Pale Fire*'s existence, critics have debated the "reality" of nearly every aspect of its plot. Does the country of Zembla exist in the novel, for example, or only in Charles Kinbote's mind? Or more fundamentally: did two separate authors, poet John Shade and mad scholar Kinbote, write the poem and commentary—as it appears at first glance—or did only one of them?<sup>5</sup> But one seemingly humble such question has gone entirely unnoticed. Is the institution of higher education that houses both John Shade and Charles Kinbote a college, or a university? Is it, in other words, a comparatively small and organizationally simple school for undergraduates, or a larger and more complex congeries of distinct schools with graduate programs? *Pale Fire* leaves the question decidedly open. In casual mentions of Wordsmith,

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<sup>5</sup> While in one scene Kinbote represents, with a seeming degree of realism, other faculty at Wordsmith casually discussing the country and Kinbote's resemblance to its king (264-69), Kinbote's narrative of Zembla over all seems indubitably fantastic. Thus several critics have discussed whether the country of Zembla can be said to exist in the novel at all. Boyd, for example, dismisses Kinbote's narrative of faculty discussing Zembla and instead believes that Zembla is wholly invented by Kinbote. He quite ingeniously argues instead for Kinbote's "real-world" existence as an exile from Russia via a Scandinavian university (*NPF* 90-98). Pekka Tammi argues against such straightforwardly "realist" solutions, believing that much of the fun of the novel lies precisely in its indeterminacy on this as on several other questions. In support of this approach, he quotes a letter Nabokov's wife Vera wrote to a publisher: "Nobody knows, nobody should know—even Kinbote hardly knows—if Zembla really exists" (qtd. on 575).

Likewise the question of *who* has written *Pale Fire*, fictionally speaking, keeps critics busy. As against the straight-forward reading that the poem is Shade's and the rest of the text (foreword, commentary, and index) Kinbote's, "single-authorship" theories argue that the entirety of the novel is written solely by one or the other of them. Such theories are admirably if naturally leadingly summarized by Boyd, *NPF* 114-26. Boyd, formerly a Shadean (one who believes John Shade to be *Pale Fire*'s single author), has now added another possibility to the debate by arguing that the novel is written instead by *multiple* authors. These would be not only John Shade and Charles Kinbote, as the novel's surface suggests, but also the ghosts of a posthumous John Shade and his deceased daughter Hazel, as well as a very much alive and self-consciously represented Nabokov himself. In this chapter, however, I simply assume the straight-forward interpretation of *Pale Fire*'s (fictional) composition by two authors, since the authorship debates do not touch directly upon my main points.

references to “the college” or “the university” are pretty well divided in the text.<sup>6</sup> But more surprisingly, the institution’s *proper* name fluctuates in the novel. We are first introduced to Wordsmith’s name in passing reference to a historical photograph of “Wordsmith College at it was . . . in 1903” (20). Later, Kinbote tells us that Paul H. had been head of “the English Department of Wordsmith College” since 1957 (194). Kinbote also mentions hearing, at 6:00 p.m. on July 5, 1959—i.e. in the recent past of Kinbote’s writing that summer—the “clocks of Wordsmith College” (158). However, elsewhere in Kinbote’s glosses he refers without hesitation, three separate times, to “Wordsmith University” (82, 92, 248). He also reproduces a letter he has written to Queen Disa in April of 1959—again, the recent past of the novel—where he gives his return address as “Wordsmith University, New Wye, Appalachia, USA” (257).<sup>7</sup> Whether discussing 1903 or 1959, in short, *Pale Fire* offers no firm picture of the institutional type or even name of its primary “real-world” setting.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The text refers to a “college” on pages 19 (“preparing to leave for college in [a] powerful red car”), 25 (“the president of the college”), 92 (“the college was considerably farther from them than they were from one another”), 186 (“college pranksters” at Wordsmith), 237 (a “college porter”), 248 (“I have just called up the college,” says Sylvia O’Donnell, a trustee there), 249 (O’Donnell compares the president of Wordsmith favorably to most other “American college presidents”), 250 (“the college hall stairs”), 283 (“the college directory”), and 291 (“the college indoor swimming pool”).

But the text mentions a “university” on pages 256 (Izrumdov gives Gradus “the name of the university where [Kinbote] taught”), 257 (Kinbote discusses his “work at the university”), and 280 (Gradus asks “what hotel was nearest to the university”). Kinbote also informs us that Hazel Shade is taking a class with a Wordsmith psychology professor who studies his own students for a project he calls “Autoneurynological Patterns among American university students” (187).

The somewhat greater frequency of references to a “college” probably stems from the fact that in America—Nabokov’s as well as Kinbote’s adopted home country, with its distinct usage—“college” is a more generic term than “university.” For example, Americans generally speak in the abstract of students “going to college,” rather than “going to university.”

<sup>7</sup> Though less compelling as evidence of the institution’s proper name, we may also note that the downtown part of New Wye is named “College Town” (poem l. 339, commentary pages 240, 280), and that Kinbote mentions “the College Library” (216). But even the latter reference is countered by a brief narratorial reference to looking up old newspapers in the “WUL”—presumably, Wordsmith University Library (275). (I call this a “narratorial reference,” rather than naming Kinbote specifically, because the particular voice that cites the “WUL” is almost certainly not Kinbote’s, given that Kinbote frequently bemoans his lack of access to a library at the cabin where he writes. On the importance of this moment to establishing the [fictional] authorship of *Pale Fire*, see Dowling’s online article “Who’s the Narrator of Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*?,” especially the section titled “Access to a Good Library.”)

<sup>8</sup> Predictably, then, the novel’s critics have mirrored this confusion of names in their work. Brian Boyd’s excellent book on *Pale Fire* points out the fictional campus’s similarity to Cornell University, where Nabokov taught for many years, and goes on to refer to it as Wordsmith University (79). He indeed imagines it as a university with

It seems doubtful that Kinbote has simply been careless about Wordsmith's name. Despite his mental instability, everywhere else in the text his attention to narrative detail is full and firm. It also seems unlikely that we can ascribe Wordsmith's nomenclatorial flux to Nabokov's desire to assure *Pale Fire*'s status as something other than *roman à clef*. With its professors serving mostly as background, and in any case not "realistically" drawn, most readers wouldn't think to search for real-world equivalents in *Pale Fire*. And it is hard to imagine Nabokov worrying about such things in the first place, since—unlike Mary McCarthy—he had no reputation for writing directly about real acquaintances.

Why, then, is Wordsmith's status as college or university ambiguous? I would argue that *Pale Fire*'s inconsistency in this regard reflects, and indeed comments upon, the increasingly homogenous nature of higher education in the mid-century. After all, as Christopher Jencks and David Riesman note in their classic study of the growth of American higher education, *The Academic Revolution*, the distinction between colleges and universities had become decidedly less meaningful over the course of the twentieth century. With the rise of an increasingly national and competitive industrial society after the Civil War, they argue, the ideology of "meritocracy," however biased in its sense of what constituted "merit," soon replaced older hiring judgments based frankly on ethnic and racial status, or regional origin. In practice, this ethos required workers to gain *credentials* that would prove their merit. Universities sprung up to provide the credentials. And the "traditional colleges" of old—until then primarily regional in focus and certainly not professionalized—struggled to become feeder schools to these universities. They

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enough research specialization to include a Department of Scandinavian Studies (91-92). Many other critics, however—perhaps following the first reference they find in the text—have simply and without comment labeled the institution Wordsmith College (e.g. Tammi 574, Belletto 757, Condren 139, Reading 82, Reierstad 7). Alvin B. Kernan single-handedly represents the critical confusion—and remains more faithful to the text—when, in an article that stakes some of its central claims on *Pale Fire*'s sources in academic life, he mostly refers to it as Wordsmith University (101, 105, 107, 111), but nevertheless lets slip one reference to Wordsmith College (108).

hired credentialed faculty, and reformed their curricula to prepare undergraduates for graduate work at a university. They became what Jencks and Riesman call, in a phrase that previously might have sounded oxymoronic, “university colleges.” The competitive ethos of “meritocracy” thus bent the trajectory of colleges and universities remarkably close together.<sup>9</sup> *Pale Fire*’s refusal to answer whether Wordsmith is a college or a university accordingly may be understood in part as the novel’s knowing reflection of an historical moment in which the distinction between the two types of institution simply mattered less than at any point before.

But the institutional ambiguity of the novel reveals more than a moment in the history of American higher education, I would argue. It also reflects the novel’s suspicion that in the contemporary world *all* institutions had become increasingly undifferentiated, homogenized. More specifically, in the world(s) depicted by *Pale Fire*, contemporary existence itself has become institutional and bureaucratic: trivial, unimaginative, and rule-bound. Primarily through its depiction of Wordsmith, I will now argue, Nabokov’s novel thus offers an extended satire of bureaucratic organization as the cultivation of a mindset prone to both myopic specialization and, in the end, a kind of soullessness. If this is the novel’s critique of bureaucratic mind and spirit, *Pale Fire*’s primary response to this bureaucratic world, I will show, is the valorization of aesthetic experience. Both Shade’s poem and Kinbote’s Zembla, the novel’s affectionate (if in each case lightly mocked) symbols of art, serve as counters to the kinds of thinking and experience that the novel satirizes in its archetypal bureaucracy of higher education.

Published six years before Jencks and Riesman drew attention to the phenomenal twentieth-century growth of American higher education, *Pale Fire* simply assumes an “academic revolution” as its social background. Kinbote describes the “Wordsmith College” depicted in a

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<sup>9</sup> This narrative is drawn from Jencks and Riesman 1-27; the rise of the “university college” is specifically discussed on pages 20-27.

1903 photograph as “stunned and shabby” (20); the college of old was a squat non-entity. But when Kinbote offers us a description of Wordsmith in 1959, he reveals how much the place has grown:

Here are the great mansions of madness, the impeccably planned dormitories—bedlams of jungle music—the magnificent palace of the Administration, the brick walls, the archways, the quadrangles blocked out in velvet green and chrysoprase, Spencer House and its lily pond, the Chapel, New Lecture Hall, the Library, the prison-like edifice containing our classrooms and offices . . . (92)

Thus as a first observation we may note that Nabokov’s novel takes care to limn the history of American higher education in the twentieth century. The “real-world” setting of *Pale Fire* embodies higher education’s compositional transformation from the sleepy and comparatively unambitious colleges of old to the sprawling postwar “multiversities” that Clark Kerr described and promoted in the sixties.<sup>10</sup> Kinbote’s very reason for offering no further description of Wordsmith—he claims that anyone who wishes to know more can simply stop by Wordsmith’s Publicity Office (92)—itself points to the newly-expanded size and complexity of institutions of higher education in the era.

Kinbote’s description of Wordsmith furthermore implies that higher education has become a colorless bureaucracy akin to every other modern institution. He repeatedly suggests Wordsmith’s commonality with other, less flattering institutions. Housing resembles asylums for the insane: the “great mansions” are “of madness,” the dorms are “bedlams.” The classrooms and faculty offices—the places of teaching and learning—are likewise housed in an unattractively “prison-like edifice.” Every inch of this college or university is depressingly rigid, from the “planned” dormitories to the “blocked out” quadrangles, and onward to the unimaginatively

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<sup>10</sup> On the “multiversity,” see Kerr’s *The Uses of the University*, especially the first chapter.



named “New Lecture Hall.” The unquestioned centrality of administrators—bureaucrats—to the whole enterprise cannot be doubted from the outsize “palace” in which they reside. It is not coincidental, then, that after this description of an opulent but sterile college or university, Kinbote ends his note with an otherwise unexpected cry: “Dear Jesus, do something” (93). His plea for Jesus’s help accentuates the perhaps literal soullessness of higher education in the novel. Kinbote’s cry for divine intervention is at least in part the cry of his hope to escape a drearily bureaucratic institution.

But a central conceit of the novel shows that Kinbote hasn’t managed to escape becoming a creature of that institution. For the entirety of Kinbote’s narcissistic commentary—founded on his assumption that Shade’s poem revolves around his supposed life as Zemblan royalty—may be understood as a parody of narrow, bureaucratically specialized, department-bound thought. Kinbote never names the department in which he teaches. But it is clear that he teaches in a department with a strong component of what we might call “Zemblan Studies.” His department head is Oscar Nattochdag, a “distinguished Zemblan scholar” (237), and Wordsmith trustee Sylvia O’Donnell notes that he has been hired to teach “Zemblan” (248). Thus the central joke of the novel, Kinbote’s assumption that nearly every line in Shade’s poem refers to his life as the king of Zembla, may be taken as a satire of the dangers of academic specialization: Kinbote interprets the whole world in terms of his research interest. In the vast majority of the text that is Kinbote’s detailed “exegesis,” Shade’s poem is refracted through the astonishingly myopic mind of a bureaucratic specialist in Zembla, with wildly entertaining and of course thoroughly wrong-headed results.<sup>11</sup> Thus with this early postmodern campus novel, we might say that Tess

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<sup>11</sup> As discussed in a footnote above, a number of critics believe that Kinbote has invented the entire country of Zembla, rather than just his supposed life as royalty there. Such arguments are debatable, but this is not the place to go into depth on the topic. (Readers seeking an admirably succinct introduction to the central and perhaps defining conundrums regarding the “reality” of events in *Pale Fire* should read Tammi’s article on *Pale Fire* in *The Garland*

Slesinger and the young Mary McCarthy's mutual fascination with personal and political narcissism in the thirties and forties takes on a specifically institutional cast, with Kinbote's scholarly expression of his narcissism serving as a comically exaggerated expression of the academic-bureaucratic norms of increasing specialization.

The novel furthermore offers a small but quite telling display of its antibureaucratism in a memo written by Paul Hurley, the head of the English Department. Hurley warns his faculty that Shade's "manuscript fell into the hands of a person who not only is unqualified for the job of editing it, belonging as he does to another department, but is known to have a deranged mind" (195). The phrasing here is worth parsing out. "Not only" is Kinbote "unqualified for the job of editing it," Professor Hurley asserts, "but"—in other words, as a *separate* issue from Kinbote's editorial competence—he "is known to have a deranged mind." Outrageously (and comically), in other words, Hurley never considers the possibility that Kinbote's sanity might have something to do, positively or negatively, with his competence as an editor. This is because Hurley can imagine no greater test of competence than departmental affiliation, ultimately. In Hurley's mind, Kinbote is unqualified to edit the manuscript simply because he "belong[s] . . . to another department." Kinbote's sanity is a separate and secondary consideration. In a certain sense, Kinbote is thus exactly right to describe Hurley as a "fine administrator and [an] inept scholar" (194). A quintessentially bureaucratic manager, this administrator refuses to consider intellectual ability outside the terms of a department. In one brief sentence, Hurley's memo thus reveals the novel's sense that academic bureaucracy's policing of departmental boundaries and overall narrowness of intellectual perspective undermines true scholarship and learning.

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*Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*; the existence of Zembla is discussed on pages 574-75.) I only raise the point because the denial of Zembla's reality might seem to cast doubt on my point about a "Zemblan Studies" joke in the novel. However, even if one believes that Zembla is entirely Kinbote's invention, we can at least say with certainty that in Kinbote's *mind* his department is that of Zemblan Studies, and so on this level of the text, the point of the novel's antidepartmental satire holds.

It is Shade's poem, however, that best reveals the novel's antibureaucratic parody of higher education. On its surface, the poem meditates on the relationship between art (specifically poetry) and mortality. But in considerable measure and especially in its third canto, the poem also satirizes bureaucratic institutions and intellection—the institutions including, I would argue, Wordsmith itself. Canto Three opens with an intricate series of puns and plays on words:

*L'if*, lifeless tree! Your great Maybe, Rabelais:

The grand potato.

I.P.H., a lay

Institute (I) of Preparation (P)

For the Hereafter (H), or If, as we

Called it—big if!—engaged me for one term

To speak on death . . . (ll. 501-06)<sup>12</sup>

Kinbote's gloss tells us that the I.P.H. is a fictionalized version of an "institute of higher philosophy" in the southwest, whose terminal initials are "HP"—HP evidently standing for "Higher Philosophy," since the institution has students who, in this era of breakthroughs in home stereo sound, jokingly call their school "Hi-Phi" (223). The insistence on "higher *philosophy*" may furthermore hints at an institution that specifically produces Doctors of Philosophy: the I.P.H. as an Institute (I) of Ph.D's, in short. It is modeled on a university.

If Kinbote tells us that the I.P.H.'s "real-world" analogue is a southwestern institute, symbolically it nevertheless suggests the institution of Wordsmith itself. As the passage notes, the I.P.H. can be jokingly pronounced as a single word, "If." Via the canto's first line, this word also recalls (homographically) the French "*l'if*," or yew tree—a tree Western poetry often

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<sup>12</sup> Here and throughout this chapter, citations of the poem are marked by an explicit reference to line numbers (e.g., "*l.* 543" or "*ll.* 321-25"). Citations without an "l." or "ll." refer to page numbers.

associates with death, a concern central to both the Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter and Shade's specific lecture topic there. (Hence also the passage's allusion to Rabelais's dying words about journeying to a "great Maybe"—the "*grand peut-être*" which Shade ironically deflates as a "grand potato.") This much lies more or less on the surface of the poem: the I.P.H., "If," is associated with the yew tree, *l'if*, in order to pun on the institution's concern with the subject of death. But further punning and play on the word "yew" in the poem has gone unnoticed in the critical commentary. Most broadly, "yew" is a homophone for "U," or university: in this way the poem suggests the I.P.H.'s affinity with other institutions of higher education (I.P.H. = if = *l'if* = yew = U). But more directly, the word "yew" is also an anagram (one of Nabokov's favorite word puzzles) of "Wye." Thus when Shade writes that his stint at the I.P.H. required a move "from New Wye / To Yewshade, in another, higher state" (ll. 508-09), we should note more than the poem's obvious allusions to death and the existence of life after death; more than the metaphysical ring of "another, higher state," and the ghostly association of "Yew" with "shade." We should note that the Yew/Wye anagram associates Shade's time at the I.P.H. of "Yewshade" with his ongoing career at the Wordsmith of "New Wye." In other words, Yewshade exists in "another, higher state" than New Wye more than geographically (north of New Wye) or even metaphysically: Shade's move to the I.P.H. is a poetic move to the "higher state" of aesthetic representation itself, to an abstracted reflection of the New Wye of Wordsmith, where he normally teaches. The I.P.H.'s imagined home in "Yewshade" in particular—the town name combining "Yew" and Shade's own name—suggests that Shade's time at the I.P.H. represents in disguise something of his experience of New "Wye." The I.P.H. of Canto Three thus symbolically represents a "big if," big *l'if*/yew/U, indeed. It represents not only the southwestern

“institute of higher philosophy” that Kinbote tells us is the I.P.H.’s real-world source, but Wordsmith itself.

This association allows us to see that Shade’s poem parodies not just the I.P.H., but Wordsmith itself—and by extension all of contemporary higher education—as a quintessential bureaucracy. The parody of the I.P.H. and higher education offered in Canto Three indeed summarizes some of the novel’s key social critiques of bureaucratic thought and feeling. At the Institute, for example, death is not a mystery to be respected, but a problem to be solved with uncomprehending efficiency. Of the experience of death, the Institute can only ask, “What if there’s nobody to say hullo / To the newcomer, no reception, no / Indoctrination?” (ll. 538-40). In short, what if (IPH) death is not an orderly office or a dogmatic classroom? With that grave fear in mind, the Institute quickly reduces the great mysteries of spirit and afterlife to manageable, bureaucratic size. It

offered tips

(The amber spectacles for life’s eclipse)—

How not to panic when you’re made a ghost . . .

.....

How to locate in blackness, with a gasp,

Terra the Fair, an orbicle of jasp.

How to keep sane in spiral types of space.

Precautions to be taken in the case

Of freak reincarnation . . . (ll. 551-53, 557-61)

A bureaucracy at its core, in short, the Institute tackles the vast problem of death by breaking it into reified sub-problems, each of which may be addressed, no doubt, by a separate department

with relevant experts. Like the rest of the novel, the poem *Pale Fire* thus satirizes the bureaucratic tendency—typical, it implies, of institutions of higher education like the I.P.H. and Wordsmith—to reduce even intractable mysteries like death to a series of technical questions that miss and trivialize the significance of the whole.<sup>13</sup>

Last but not least, the name of the town where Wordsmith itself resides also hints at higher education's bureaucratic deficiencies. Just as in the case of the "I.P.H." and "Yewshade" in Canto Three of Shade's poem, the seemingly simple name of Wordsmith's "New Wye" also offers an abundance of puns. Critics routinely observe that New Wye is a sly reference to New York ("New Y"), the state where Nabokov lived during his years teaching at Cornell University. But "New Wye" also implies, likely with some irony, the larger mission of any post-secondary institution that engages in research: a university or college constantly proposes new questions, new "why"s, and hence always claims it has answers, "new why"s, that perhaps prove it "knew why" all along.<sup>14</sup> These puns also allow us to illuminate one meaning of the name of Wordsmith's sister institution, the I.P.H. The questioning of the "if" pun in Canto Three runs parallel to the questioning "Wye" pun of Wordsmith's address: both puns hint at the novel's larger theme of an academic bureaucracy that produces questions and answers with clockwork routine rather than thought, of institutions that arrogantly claim to "know why" about the little matters while not evincing appropriate respect for vast and intractable mysteries. *Pale Fire's*

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<sup>13</sup> Belletto makes a similar point: "The 'grand potato' / 'grand peut-être' pun does not seem to 'stress lack of respect for Death,' as Kinbote insists, but rather stresses lack of respect for institutions . . . that are designed to explain away the mysteries of the universe" (764).

<sup>14</sup> Nabokov himself sanctioned such a derogatory understanding of academic claims to knowledge when describing the goal of teaching literature to one of his classes: "I have tried to make of you good readers who read books not for . . . the academic purpose of indulging in generalizations," Nabokov told his students. (He thereby condemned the academic habit of merely seeking new "why"s.) Instead, he continued, "I have tried to teach you to feel a shiver of artistic satisfaction"—in other words, to read with more respect for those certainties that cannot be thought, or taught, rationally ("L'envoi" 381-82).

My thanks to John Bradley for pointing out the new "why" as "new questions" pun.

parodies of the I.P.H. and of Wordsmith reveal the novel's pervasive skepticism of narrow bureaucratic thought and feeling.

This antibureaucratic animus in *Pale Fire*, I believe, even motivates what has frequently been regarded as its central theme, that of the joy and importance of art. The aesthetic theme has recently fallen out of favor in criticism on the novel. But for the novel's first thirty years, critics regarded it as paramount. Frank Kermode's contemporary review of the novel in the *New Statesman*, for example, read Nabokov as a pure "formalist" (146), and much criticism afterward followed suit by looking at *Pale Fire* as part of a larger Nabokovian *Escape Into Aesthetics* (the title of Page Stegner's 1966 book). As Laurie Clancy opined in 1984, it is a novel that "seems to have been conceived out of the express desire to demonstrate the force of its author's aesthetic theories" (125) and as a partial "*hommage* [sic] to art itself" (126). With the advent of poststructuralist criticism on the novel in the 1980s, *Pale Fire*'s aestheticism was more often than not merely rephrased into linguistic terms. These critics read the novel's affection for both Kinbote's imagination of Zemblan life and his insistence on seeing it in Shade's poem as an anticipation of deconstructive criticism's insistence on the critic as creative rival to the artist (Torgovnick in 1986), or as an exemplar of a distinctly postmodern fascination with the funhouse mirror of representation itself (Couturier in 1993, Hennard in 1994). Most criticism since the 1990s, however, has fallen into two major groups, the metaphysical and the political. Following Vladimir E. Alexandrov's intention in 1991 to "dismantle the widespread critical view that [Nabokov] is first and foremost a meta-literary writer" and suggest instead "that an aesthetic rooted in his intuition of a transcendent realm is the basis of his art" (3), one significant trend has been to examine Nabokov's beliefs in *potustoronnost'*, loosely translated as "the afterlife."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Boyd's influential 1999 book, which posits the ghostly influence of Hazel and John Shade on Kinbote's composition, offers perhaps the most developed example of this trend. It also contains a footnote that nicely

Meanwhile, in the twenty-first century more political critics have argued for *Pale Fire*'s relatively liberal attitudes toward sexuality (Miller in 2002, Belletto in 2006), or for *Lolita*'s proto-feminist sympathy (Moore and—much more skeptically—Patnoe, both in 2002).<sup>16</sup>

Generally speaking, critics have moved away from taking Nabokov's formal proclivities at the author's own quite frequent word, and toward insisting on a spiritualist and even a political Nabokov. The aesthetic Nabokov has fallen out of favor.

But the original critical fascination with Nabokov's formalism wasn't misplaced, I would argue. It was merely one-sided. For in *Pale Fire*, aesthetic experience is presented as a counter to the intellectual flaws and soullessness of bureaucratic thinking we have been examining. And a thematic keynote of the novel—a theme we may recognize in the “new liberal” consensus of the fifties and early sixties more generally—is that the aesthetic offers a complex type of thought opposed to the ideological thought typical of bureaucratic social organization in higher education and elsewhere. Moreover, *Pale Fire* intimates that the experience of the aesthetic preserves something importantly *ir-rational* as against the organized and bureaucratic world represented by the Wordsmith campus: for *Pale Fire*, the aesthetic offers a human pleasure not subject to reason

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summarizes the work of other critics who have pursued the afterlife theme in Nabokov: William Woodin Rowe, D. Barton Johnson, Julian Connolly, Gennady Barabtarlo, and Maxim Shrayner (*NPF*, 277 n.13).

<sup>16</sup> Since my own work contributes to political criticism on Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, I should mention that while both Miller's and Belletto's articles offer real insights into the novel, to my mind they also represent a central flaw of Nabokovian political criticism thus far: they recruit Nabokov's novels for the political left far too easily. For Miller, Nabokov's constant destabilizations of sexual identity—for example, Kinbote's lover Bob has a crewcut, which normally would signify a military, heterosexual masculinity—suggest that the novel gamely reveals the only tenuously constructed nature of sexuality. For Belletto, Nabokov's thematic emphasis on the importance of the random and coincidental serves to undermine all ideologies depicted in the novel, including the “Cold War homophobic narrative” of homosexuality as unreliable, subversive, and potentially treasonous (757). In essence, both argue that Nabokov's playfulness in the novel amounts to a political rejection of 1950s homophobia. Perhaps overly eager to foster appreciation for Nabokov in a literary academy that leans left in its politics, neither takes seriously enough—though Belletto is admirably more cautious about his claims than Miller—the simple, unpalatable, and much more persuasive interpretation that *Pale Fire*'s comic treatment of Kinbote's sexuality mostly reveals a pervasive anxiety about homosexuality, and works mainly to contain discourses of homosexuality rather than to heroically subvert those of heterosexism.



alone. *Pale Fire*'s celebration of art is significantly motivated by, and ultimately inseparable from, its antibureaucratism.

Not coincidentally, the end of the same canto mocking the I.P.H. offers the novel's first and most significant passage on the aesthetic's recognition of intellectual complexity as against bureaucratic ideology. Having recently suffered a near-death experience in which he sees a gleaming white fountain, Shade happens upon a newspaper article describing a woman who has also seen a fountain when near death. Does their common vision reveal something true about life after death? Shade travels a long distance to meet the woman, and discovers that the newspaper account of her experience featured a misprint. She had not seen what Shade had—a lovely white “fountain”—but a “mountain” instead. Rather than leading to despair, however, this realization provokes an epiphany for Shade about the meaning of life and death:

... all at once it dawned on me that *this*

Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;

Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream

But topsy-turvical coincidence,

Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense. (ll. 806-10, emphasis in original)

The many iterations of the meaning of Shade's epiphany here consistently oppose the simple to the complex, in favor of the latter. He finds the “real point” of mortal life not in a “text” visible and clear on a page (the word “fountain”), but in the “texture” of a rich reality surrounding it (the long trip to discover that it was supposed to read “mountain”); not in “the dream” of some ready-made meaning of death (a reassuringly common experience of the afterlife), but in the reality of “topsy-turvical coincidence” and chance (a misprint); not in the “flimsy nonsense” of some straightforward meaning of death, but in the stronger “web of sense” that can be *created* (spun)

from life. Life is to be found in a rich, “contrapuntal” complexity, not a falsely comforting ideological simplicity.

This rich experience of reality, as Shade elaborates it, is quintessentially aesthetic:

Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find  
Some kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind  
Of correlated pattern in the game,  
Plexed artistry, and something of the same  
Pleasure in it as they who played it found. (ll. 811-15)

After experiencing the coarse trivialization of death at the bureaucratic I.P.H., Shade realizes here that the meaning of life instead obtains in understandings that are simultaneously rational *and* playful. The meaning he has found involves the logic implied by “link,” but also the fanciful avian flight and song suggested by the rhyming word “bobolink.” It is the rational “correlated pattern” to be found in what in the end is a “game.” It is, in fine, “plexed”—com-plex—“artistry.” For Shade, life’s meaning can only be found in aesthetic experience. The aesthetic experience of complexity affords what “pleasure” there is for those playing the “game” that is life itself.

Shade persistently conveys this aesthetic experience of complexity with a metaphor of intertwinement. The word “plexed” itself derives from the Latin *plexus*, “braided,” and Shade extends the braid metaphor in the passage as he tells us that the beings fortunate enough to “play” the game of life—much as an artist does, “Making ornaments / Of accidents and possibilities” (ll. 828-29)—live in an “involute” (spiral, twisted) “Abode” (ll. 817-18). They exist in intertwined complexity itself, in short. While the I.P.H. worries that the afterlife *assaults* one’s sanity, promising to teach one “How to keep sane in spiral types of space” (l. 559), these wise

and aesthetic beings instead live in their spiral abode happily, content with its strange richness and complexity. Nor are such metaphors of twisting confined to the third canto. They are hinted at early on in Canto One, for example, when we realize that Shade's "favorite" tree (l. 49)—the shagbark that he often pauses under while composing verse (89)—is marked by its "black, spare / Vermiculated trunk" (ll. 50-51). From the first canto onward, in short, a twisted tree provides the symbol of and inspiration for Shade's art, which insistently strives to acknowledge a "topsy-turvical," "plexed" reality.<sup>17</sup> The consistency of such metaphors thus suggests that unlike the bureaucratic I.P.H., Shade's poem insists upon the complexity of a non-ideological, department-transcending world that art must try to recognize. It insists on the irreducible diversity and sheer tangled messiness of the reality from which art fashions meaningful and pleasurable patterns.

As Shade's poem *Pale Fire* thus suggests the importance of intellectual-aesthetic complexity as against bureaucratic narrowness, so too does Kinbote's undeniably aesthetic creation of the larger work (including foreword, commentary, and even index) called *Pale Fire* as well, most of which is given over to the loving creation of a legend about royalty in Zembla. Though Kinbote is satirized as a bureaucratic specialist in Zemblan Studies, as we saw earlier, we must also recognize at one and the same time that he is precisely antibureaucratic by virtue of all that he has *created*, as a work of art, about a Zembla existing outside his employment at

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<sup>17</sup> Nabokov also associates this comfort with aesthetic complexity with the experience of death and the afterlife. Shade clearly links his vermiculated tree to the death of his daughter Hazel: "The setting sun / bronzed the black bark, around which, like undone / Garlands, the shadows of the foliage fell. . . . White butterflies turn lavender as they / Pass through its shade where gently seems to sway / The phantom of my little daughter's swing" (ll. 51-53, 56-57). The images of sunset, shadows, and shade—as well as the allusion to Housman's "To an Athlete Dying Young," with his "garland" "briefer than a girl's" (also alluded to by Kinbote on page 196)—all suggest Hazel Shade's young death. If we accept Brian Boyd's argument that the white butterflies imply Hazel Shade's butterfly-like transformation into another and better being after death (*NPF* 137), then we can see furthermore that the concepts of death *and* the afterlife in the novel, along with the images of an aesthetic existence suggested by images of twisting, together form a tangle of associations that all suggest the complexity of worlds—this one and the next.

Wordsmith.<sup>18</sup> Just as much as Shade, Kinbote is an artist. In Nabokov's writings elsewhere, he consistently expresses a belief in the artist's preference for the specific over the general. To offer one example from scores, he asserts that "the main delight of the creative mind is the sway accorded to a seemingly incongruous detail over a seemingly dominant generalization" ("Art" 374).<sup>19</sup> Such beliefs surely find perfect life in Kinbote's astonishingly detailed evocations of Zemblan language, land, and people. Upon even a first reading of *Pale Fire*, to say nothing of further immersions, the sheer detail of Kinbote's imagination is striking. Kinbote lovingly proffers a whole Zemblan language with roots in other languages, and includes Zemblan translations of lines from Goethe's *Erlkoenig* and Marvell's "The Nymph on the Death of Her Faun" (239, 242). Throughout the text he conjures a fully mappable Zemblan geography. The country stretches eastward from the rural seaside communities of Western Zembla (where the Gutnish fisher-folk flourish), over the Bera Range, and onward to the more urban Eastern Zembla (where the towns of Aros and Grindelwod mingle with the capital city of Onhava), only fading into the water at the eastern coast's Gulf of Surprise. It expands from the lonely town of Embla at the edge of the northern peninsula, with its quaint church, to the beautiful Emblem Bay in the southernmost part of Western Zembla, with its striped rocks. Last but not least, Kinbote provides nearly every curious relative of the royal family (not to mention a host of other

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<sup>18</sup> Laurie Clancy finds this dichotomous attitude toward Kinbote to be a novelistic fault. "Nabokov is never really quite sure what he wants Kinbote to be—the boring pedant of the tedious pseudo-scholarly commentary or the brilliant visionary Shade praises as the creator of a tinsel but glittering world of fantasy," she complains (134). But this demands of Nabokov precisely the pin-downable realism that his novel flouts in every other respect. I am inclined instead to see the novel's contradictory attitude toward Kinbote as wholly compatible with its shifting and multiple layers of "reality." In a novel so fascinated with mirror-images and inversions, with the interconnections between real and imagined worlds, we should not be surprised (or disappointed) to see paradox in the depiction of characters as well as symbols.

<sup>19</sup> De la Durantaye's "Kafka's Reality and Nabokov's Fantasy" also offers two fine paragraphs on this Nabokovian preference for the specific in literature, detailing both his pedagogical insistence that students comprehend the details of plot in a given work (the contents of Anna Karenina's handbag, the course of the Liffey through Dublin), and his aesthetic condemnation of authors who traffic in large ideas while failing to achieve complete verisimilitude in a work (for example, the apparently unrealistic depiction of spring-time mosquitoes in Shanghai in Malraux's *La condition humaine*) (318-319).

Zemblan notables) with a full and consistent, if still highly fanciful, back-story. The Index, for example, confirms and expands our knowledge of King Uran the Last, who ruled Zembla with an iron fist from 1789 to 1799, and it minutely details the life of Walter Campbell, the jack-of-all-trades who tutored Kinbote from 1922 to 1931 before settling in Iran. These details, one must recognize, usually exist in the novel only for their own sensual sake, in firm excess of any thematic purpose. Whatever one's opinions about the "reality" of Zembla, one must at least concede that in Kinbote's hands the place takes on a full and complex *aesthetic* reality. An artist like Shade at last, against the dreariness of Wordsmith ("Dear Jesus, do something" [93]) Kinbote creates a rich menagerie of linguistic, geographic, and human detail incapable of being reduced to, or experienced as, ideology.

Indeed, *Pale Fire* symbolically figures Zembla as art itself. Relatively late in the novel, Kinbote narrates his encounter with a visiting lecturer from Germany who is astonished by the close resemblance between Kinbote and the pictures he has seen of Zembla's king. Fearing his identity will be revealed, Kinbote tells him that the name "Zembla" is "a corruption not of the Russian *zemlya*"—in English, "land"—"but of Semblerland, a land of reflection, of 'resemblers'" (265). All Zemblans resemble each other, so there is nothing special about his strong resemblance to the king, Kinbote misleadingly suggests. But Kinbote's etymological explication also offers a broader point about Zembla as a land of reflection and resemblers. Zembla is indeed a land (*zemlya*) of mimesis (re-semblance), however refracted, indirect, and indeed sometimes unreliable such representations are implied to be in the novel. It is a land of aesthetic representation. Zembla's very name hints at its aesthetic role as well. In addition to being a *zemlya* of "semblance," its name runs from Z to A, the mirror-reflection length of the English alphabet itself; and it has the root of "emblem" in between—a point underscored when

Kinbote describes the geography of the country as stretching from “Embla Point to Emblem Bay” (212). Zembla is a land of emblems, then, of representation through language. It is Kinbote’s own resplendently detailed and complex work of art, and recursively it represents art itself.

But for *Pale Fire* art is not only a matter of complex thought, of rich and surprising, twisted mimesis. It is also on some level irreducibly *ir*-rational. I use this word in a sociological sense: for Nabokov, art serves as a bulwark against Weberian rationalization. Weber defined rationalization as the “increasing theoretical mastery of reality by means of increasingly precise and abstract concepts” and the “methodical attainment of . . . definitely given and practical end[s] by means of an increasingly precise calculation of adequate means” (“Social” 293). I would argue that as faithful inheritors of Romanticism in this respect, both Nabokov and Weber feared the modern growth of rationalization—and its structural cause and effect, bureaucracy—because its coldly impersonal efficiency erased possibilities of “love, hatred, and [the] purely personal, irrational, and emotional,” denying the possibility of “personal sympathy and favor,” of “grace and gratitude” in the world (Weber, *Economy* 975). No less than Weber, Nabokov deplored “the ‘disenchantment of the world’” (Weber, “Science” 155), its evacuation of the personal, irrational, and magical.<sup>20</sup>

This Weberian context then sheds light on *Pale Fire*’s frequent insistence on the *magic* of the aesthetic. As critics have noted, Kinbote’s story of Zemblan royalty at times recalls both medieval courtly tales and later romantic novels.<sup>21</sup> Upon his daring, story-book escape from

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<sup>20</sup> The phrase “disenchantment of the world” comes from Friedrich Schiller originally—not coincidentally, one of the Romantic movement’s most distinguished theorists of the aesthetic. Weber’s sociology of rationalization and bureaucracy, descended from such figures, was a touchstone of much social thought in the 1950s and early 1960s, as Nabokov was writing his novel. As I have discussed in Chapter Four, the work of C. Wright Mills in the fifties was clearly built on his earlier, 1940s immersion in Weber. Other classics of 1950s sociology—Whyte’s *The Organization Man*, Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd*—also acknowledge their Weberian imprint.

<sup>21</sup> See for example Boyd, *NPF* 70.

Zembla—after being trapped in a castle’s turret, like a damsel in distress—Kinbote stays with a “gnarled farmer and his plump wife, who, like personages in an old tedious tale offered the drenched fugitive a welcome shelter . . . where he was given a fairy-tale meal of bread and cheese” (140). Likewise the capital of Zembla, where Kinbote’s castle is located, is Onhava. Kinbote tells us that the word “*onhava-onhava*” means in the Zemblan language “far, far away” (255). The heart of Zembla, in other words, exists where most fairy tales take place, in a “wild, misty, almost legendary Zembla!” (255). Zembla is thus often explicitly described in terms of the wondrous, otherworldly fairy tale and legend.

Furthermore, Zembla’s existence as a counterweight to the bureaucratic rationalism of Kinbote’s life at Wordsmith may even be glimpsed in what we could otherwise expect to be Zembla’s *most* bureaucratic and rational aspect: its politics. Kinbote’s reign, he assures us,

will be remembered by at least a few discerning historians as a peaceful and elegant one. . . . [T]he People’s Place (parliament) worked in perfect harmony with the Royal Council. Harmony, indeed, was the reign’s password. The polite arts and pure sciences flourished. Technicology, applied physics, industrial chemistry and so forth were suffered to thrive. A small skyscraper of ultramarine glass was steadily rising in Onhava. The climate seemed to be improving.

Taxation had become a thing of beauty. The poor were getting a little richer, and the rich a little poorer . . . Medical care was spreading to the confines of the state .

. . . Everybody, in a word, was content. (75)

The Zemblan utopia depicted here is a very specific and political one. It is an advanced constitutional monarchy—parliament plus Royal Council—with a capitalist economy held in check by a strong welfare state. While the “polite arts and pure sciences flourished,” the

capitalized disciplines of applied physics and industrial chemistry are merely “suffered to thrive,” successful but watched over by a benevolent state that features a progressive tax policy and increasingly universalized medical care. But even this specific social content is allied with Kinbote’s insistence on the aesthetic characteristics of Zembla. It is a place of almost classical “elegance” and “perfect harmony,” we are told, where even *taxation*—and here one can only imagine Nabokov chuckling as he wrote the sentence—“had become a thing of beauty.” Thus in Kinbote’s pre-Revolutionary Zembla, politics are not the art of the possible; they are art *per se*. Though the drearily planned campus of Wordsmith lacks any aesthetic warmth, even the most mundane and indeed rationalized aspects of Kinbote’s fervently imagined, compensatory Zembla are beautiful. In every detail, Kinbote’s dream of Zembla replaces Weber’s modern rationality with timeless art.

Kinbote’s (and one suspects, Nabokov’s) sense of art as a force opposing bureaucratic rationality is also often expressed in terms of magic. Kinbote and Shade both refer to Shade’s poem, for instance, as a piece of enchantment. Upon registering his disappointment that Shade’s poem isn’t really about Zembla, Kinbote at first laments that it was “void of my magic, of that special rich streak of magical madness which I was sure would run through it” (296-97). But after further consideration he soon believes in the poem’s aesthetic quality despite its lack of explicit references to Zembla. Thus when introducing the poem he can only describe the experience of watching Shade compose it by narrating a wondrous event:

I experienced the same thrill as when in my early boyhood I once watched across the tea table in my uncle’s castle a conjurer who had just given a fantastic performance . . . I stared at his powdered cheeks, at the magical flower in his buttonhole where it had passed through a succession of different colors and had



now become fixed as a white carnation, and especially at his marvelous fluid-looking fingers which could if he chose make his spoon dissolve into a sunbeam by twiddling it, or turn his plate into a dove by tossing it up in the air.

Shade's poem is, indeed, that sudden flourish of magic: my gray-haired friend, my beloved old conjurer, put a pack of index cards into his hat—and shook out a poem. (27-28)

For Kinbote, Shade's process of composition is nothing short of magic.

Shade himself recognizes his poem's potential for magic when naming it: "But *this* transparent thingum does require / Some moondrop title. Help me, Will! *Pale Fire*" (ll. 961-62, emphases in original). Critics routinely point to the title of Shade's poem (and Nabokov's novel) as an allusion to "Will" Shakespeare's lines in both *Timon of Athens* and *Hamlet*.<sup>22</sup> ("[T]he moon's an arrant thief, / And her pale fire she snatches from the sun" [*Tim.* 4.3.437-38]; "The glowworm shows the matin to be near, / And gins to pale his uneffectual fire" [*Ham.* 1.5.89-90].) But a second and less obvious allusion to Shakespeare is just as significant here. Shade's hope for a "moondrop" title alludes to a speech by Hecate in *Macbeth*, in which the goddess angrily complains to the three witches that she has not been called upon to "show the glory of our art" (3.5.9), its true demonic power. She thus tells them what she will do to Macbeth herself:

Under the corner of the moon  
There hangs a vap'rous drop profound;  
I'll catch it ere it come to ground,  
And that, distilled by magic sleights,  
Shall raise such artificial sprites  
As by the strength of their illusion

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<sup>22</sup> See for example Boyd, *NPF* 33-34 and 177-78.

Shall draw him on to his confusion. (3.5.23-29)

Shade's hope for his poem with the "moondrop title" is that it will, like Hecate's spell fashioned from a "drop" of the "moon," show the glory of *his* art, raising art-ificial sprites who will create strong illusions that are simultaneously aesthetic and magical.

Thus *Pale Fire* understands both Shade's poem and Kinbote's Zembla—its two most important emblems of the aesthetic—as not only intellectually complex and detailed, beyond ideology, but also and crucially as *ir*-rational, incapable of being reduced to the bureaucratic categories and rational sorting to which a college or university would subject them. In Shade's moondrop poem celebrating a complexity that transcends the I.P.H.'s comic trivialization of death and life, and in Kinbote's fantastic narrative of a Zembla that imaginatively frees him from the reality of his comparatively dreary existence at Wordsmith, *Pale Fire* offers the aesthetic as a counter to the intellectual simplifications and inhuman sterility of Weber's modernity. Satirizing a sometimes narrow and soulless bureaucratic academe, Nabokov's novel celebrates art as the enrichment and re-enchantment of the world.

### **3. The Work of Postmodernism**

The reading of *Pale Fire* I have just offered might be understood as a distinctly 1950s interpretation of the work. In effect, it understands the novel as an aesthetic protest against the bureaucratic Organization and Organization Man of William H. Whyte's sociology; and it reads *Pale Fire* as the champion of an art that must be preserved and indeed fostered in the face of an organized, dehumanizing world. Looking at literary history more broadly, then, one might say that I have read *Pale Fire* as a work of late but typically antimodern modernism. But as I noted at the outset, *Pale Fire* is also often thought of as a representative of early postmodernism, as a

work that heralds some of the most interesting fiction of the 1960s and 1970s. So here I will turn to the matter of *Pale Fire*'s place in literary history more fully. I will first show that *Pale Fire*'s postwar hostility toward bureaucracy accords with an early-postmodern celebration of Derridean *différance*, and hostility toward Foucault's carceral spaces and "discipline." There is a genetic relationship, I will argue, between the 1940s and 1950s antibureaucratism we have been tracing since Chapter Two (expressed variously in theories of intellectual workers as a bureaucratic class, speculations on the bureaucratic causes of literary realism's troubles, and skeptical fictions of bureaucratic intellectual and academic labor) and the distinctly postmodern intellectual moment of poststructuralism. Second, I will argue that *Pale Fire*'s postmodern affinities are rooted not only in this antibureaucratism, but more specifically and positively in a potentially class-conscious understanding of artistic creation as *unalienated labor*—work that is both meaningful and publicly valuable, and that transcends even the supposedly immutable divide between mental and manual labor. In sum, I will argue that the poststructuralist themes and postmodern metafiction of *Pale Fire* reveal the social and political desires of intellectual workers who, in the face of their labor's ongoing bureaucratization, insisted on the value of work that was autonomous, holistic, and meaningful. The 1960s zeitgeist of poststructuralism and early postmodernism, even as expressed by a largely apolitical author, had roots in intellectual workers' most utopian desires for their labor.

*Pale Fire*'s affinities with the poststructuralism that would emerge in America a few years after its publication seem obvious in retrospect. Offering a panoply of parallels between Nabokov's text and the ideas of Nietzsche, Derrida, Kristeva, and Lacan, critic Martine Hennard offers the fullest brief for its poststructuralist credentials. The novel "inscrib[es] the postal supplement which reveals (and revels in the recognition) that meaning never arrives except as a

distorted, misread message” (300), she argues, and its “metacritical activity challenges the conventional distinction and conceptual boundaries between critic and creator, fiction and non-fiction, writing and reading” (304). The novel thus suggests that all “textual activity . . . does not re-present: it generates and creates, ensuring further writing, reading and interpretation since language is the place and play of *différance*” (304). Kinbote’s conspicuously and self-consciously *written* self, she observes as well, reveals the linguistic and provisional nature of identity (305-08). Hennard thus usefully identifies the poststructuralist sensibility regarding language and identity that permeates *Pale Fire*.<sup>23</sup>

Such poststructuralist affinities are of a piece with the novel’s antibureaucratic celebrations of the aesthetic, I would argue. Perhaps most obviously, *Pale Fire*’s conception of art as a type of antibureaucratic thought that denies univocal, simplistic solutions—a point of view revealed most clearly in Shade’s celebration of “plexed artistry”—anticipates the poststructuralist celebration of conceptual flux and indeterminacy. If Shade’s poem insists that the meaning of life lies in the valuation of “not text, but texture,” poststructuralism would only insist that “text” always already *is* the endlessly relational “texture” of *différance*. Likewise, Shade’s favored game of “word golf”—wherein the serial alteration of one letter in a word moves players to the original word’s conceptual opposite—anticipates a poststructuralist conception of language. Kinbote illustrates the game in his Index. “*Word Golf*, S[hade]’s predilection for it, 819; see Lass,” an initial entry reads. Then we follow to “*Lass*, see Mass”; then “*Mass*, *Mars*, *Mare*, see Male.” Crucially, the entry for Male directs us again to “*Word Golf*,” thereby beginning the game again, to be played ad infinitum. The meaning of the original word “lass” is thus symbolically differed and deferred infinitely, *à la différence*. Moreover this

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<sup>23</sup> Marianna Torgovnick also argues—though less sweepingly than Hennard—for *Pale Fire*’s proleptic instantiation of poststructuralist themes. See her article “Nabokov and His Successors: *Pale Fire* as a Fable for Critics in the Seventies and Eighties,” published eight years before Hennard’s.

particular game additionally serves as a textbook illustration of deconstruction: Shade's favorite game here undermines a binary opposition (lass/male) through an almost literal deconstruction of signifiers, letter by letter. *Pale Fire's* antibureaucratic valuation of art and irrational play, revealed in both Shade and Kinbote's creations, is close kin to poststructuralism's insistence on the slipperiness of meaning itself.

And if poststructuralist criticism on the novel like Hennard's has focused on the linguistic and philosophical dimensions of the novel's postmodernism, I would note that one could just as well find a less obvious poststructuralist social critique in the novel, again by noting its antibureaucratic themes. *Pale Fire's* antibureaucratism specifically offers a persistent parodic critique of what Foucault would soon formulate as the disciplinary form of power. For a start, recall that Kinbote's description of the Wordsmith campus calls "the impeccably planned dormitories . . . bedlams of jungle music," and refers to the building in which he teaches as a "prison-like edifice" (92). In this aesthetically critical description of Wordsmith's campus, we have a version of Foucault's famous question in *Discipline and Punish*: "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?" (228). On a symbolic level at least, Kinbote's dreary Wordsmith is indistinguishably school, mental hospital, and prison all at once. His antibureaucratic description of the campus architecture suggests the monotonous rudiments of a disciplinary society.

But the usually unremarked subplot of Judge Goldsworth and Jack Grey provides the best evidence for a Foucauldian sensibility or animus in *Pale Fire*. Each of Judge Goldsworth's comical habits offers yet another clue to the novel's antibureaucratism, and proto-Foucauldianism. He names his daughters, in order of birth, Dee, Candida, Betty, and Alphina (83): the evidence suggests that he has methodically planned to have four children, and then

named them using the order of the alphabet as his guide, moving backwards from D to A. (“Alphina”’s alphabetical resonance finally explains the method, in case anyone wasn’t clear.) Goldsworth furthermore leaves a flurry of detailed notes about every object in his house when Kinbote moves in. The slit for safety blade disposal in the bathroom mirror is full, he writes, and the refrigerator should not contain “national specialties” which might create a lingering odor (84). The place is additionally littered with Goldsworth’s “plumbing instructions, dissertations on electricity, [and] discourses on cactuses” (84), as well as a series of schedules that command the resident to feed the cat a specific kind of meat on each day of the week, and even to manipulate the curtains of various windows daily in order to prevent the sun from fading the upholstery (84-85). In effect, Judge Goldsworth’s exacting behavioral instructions—those of a bureaucratic rage for order at the smallest level—attempt to make a disciplinary prison of his own home. More chillingly, the meticulous and unkind judge creates an album in which he “lovingly pasted the life histories and pictures of people he had sent to prison or condemned to death” (83). Judge Goldsworth is thus an almost cartoonishly rational and orderly advocate of an unforgiving and inhuman “justice.” He is *Pale Fire*’s equivalent of *Discipline and Punish*’s Bentham. His satirized presence accordingly affords the novel a cutting critique of disciplinary mind and habits, and their cruel consequences in the world.

The character of Jack Grey stands opposed to Goldsworth’s disciplinarity. Kinbote tells us that Grey (“Jacob Gradus” in his Zemblan narrative) has escaped from the Institute for the Criminally Insane, where he was imprisoned by Judge Goldsworth. Kinbote promptly puns on a hypothetical acronym for the Institute, writing “*ici*, good dog”; “here” in French, followed by the cliché of human encouragement to canines. For Kinbote, Gradus, an agent of the Zemblan police

state, is merely a dog-like follower, a bureaucratic cog unimaginatively taking orders (295).<sup>24</sup> But though in Kinbote's fantasy Gradus is a hyper-rational emblem of bureaucratic thought, we should recall that the real-world Jack Grey is someone who has *broken* the rules of his institution, has escaped from the Institute that Goldsworth sent him to. Metaphorically, Kinbote and Grey are *both* madmen who have been trapped (mentally or physically) in an institution. Accordingly, the escapee Grey may be viewed more charitably than the would-be assassin Gradus: Grey is a victim of bureaucratic thinking, of disciplinary power, who escapes his institution in order to avenge himself upon the judge whose lock-step logic put him there. And though his attempt to murder Judge Goldsworth is despicable—to the extent it is not excused by insanity—symbolically Jack Grey should nevertheless be a key character for any comprehensive social or political interpretation of the novel. For Grey suggests the rudiments of an antibureaucratic, antidisciplinary folk hero of *Pale Fire*, a “madman” emerged from some obscure corner of *Discipline and Punish* (or was it *Madness and Civilization*, published in French the year before *Pale Fire*?) to attack the rationalist power of Judge Goldsworth. The character of Jack Grey exists in the novel as a return of the bureaucratically repressed—a figure, in Foucauldian terms, of resolute antidisciplinarity.

But even this neat interpretation—in the form of a binary opposition pitting the bureaucratic against the antibureaucratic, the disciplinary versus the antidisciplinary—is deconstructed by what Hennard notes is the novel's near-constant insistence on the fact of error in the world. Jack Grey is *not* after all the novel's antibureaucratic, antidisciplinary folk hero. This is the case not merely because one suspects that Nabokov sanctions Kinbote's maxim that “the one who kills is *always* his victim's inferior” (234, emphasis in the original). (Nabokov's

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<sup>24</sup> In this sense Kinbote's punning on an institutional name is similar to Shade's similarly punning abbreviation for the Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter, or “if”: both artists use such puns to deflate the institutions they signify.

father was himself, like Shade, killed by an errant gunshot from a would-be assassin.) Jack Grey also cannot be *Pale Fire*'s antibureaucratic, antidisciplinary folk hero for the simple reason that he mistakes the object of his attack: he kills the poor poet John Shade instead of the grim hanging judge Goldsworth. In this Grey is much like his Zemblan alter-ego Gradus, who always misses his target. When the would-be assassin Gradus fells a tree across a Zemblan lane in order to trip and kill a motorcyclist, for example, the tree fails to block the lane completely, and so the cyclist survives (151). When Gradus later tries to kill Kinbote-impersonator Julius Steinmann during the Zemblan Revolution, the firing squad incredibly misses its stationary target and Steinmann finds his way to a local hospital (153). From there Gradus himself attempts to gun him down in the hospital ward, but his two shots miss (153). We should thus not be surprised that in the climactic moment of the Zemblan narrative Gradus misses King Kinbote, too. Knowing that in the "real-world" narrative Jack Grey misses his target of Judge Goldsworth as well, we may see that whenever political or even quasi-political violence occurs in *Pale Fire*, nothing comes out as planned. In the Zemblan narrative, the bureaucratic Gradus ironically *aids* the antibureaucratic cause by allowing the cultured and imaginative King Kinbote to survive. In the "real" narrative of Wordsmith, the antibureaucratic criminal Grey ironically *aids* the bureaucratic cause by killing a poet and allowing the hyperrationalistic Judge Goldsworth to survive. Even as *Pale Fire* invites antibureaucratic and antidisciplinary interpretations of the Goldsworth-Grey binary, then, in poststructuralist fashion it nevertheless denies the possibility that any action necessarily results in its intended effect. The novel's would-be assassins, who aim to reduce possibilities in the world, who seek to fix one meaning or outcome via violence, always (already) miss their targets in *Pale Fire*—no matter how sympathetic their goals might be. The novel's sense of the importance and inescapability of intellectual play and unpredictability, of a



*jouissance* so often stifled by bureaucratic social organization, is thus powerful enough to deconstruct even any political conclusions—especially violent ones—that might be drawn from the novel’s own antibureaucratic, antidisiplinary social impulses.

One could elaborate such Derridean and Foucauldian readings of the novel much further, but that is not my intention here. Here I have merely wanted to establish that *Pale Fire*’s antibureaucratic themes lead easily to the poststructuralist-influenced readings of the novel that have already been made, or even those that could be made. This is so because these two intellectual trends are ultimately inseparable in the history of American ideas and culture. A 1950s fear of bureaucratic institutions of intellectual labor and reified thought laid the groundwork for a 1960s celebration of art and all else that defied such strictures on thought, and instead imagined an intellectual, linguistic, social, and political existence without significant hierarchy and rules. The intellectual and cultural shift from deriding William H. Whyte’s passive and hierarchical Organization Man in 1956 to celebrating Derrida’s play-ful and rule-breaking *bricoleur* in 1966 involved a transitional pivot, and not a decisive break.<sup>25</sup> This argument about poststructuralism’s antibureaucratic origins and impulses thus brings to fruition arguments I have made in the previous two chapters about the social origins of postmodernism more generally. Lionel Trilling’s mistrust of academic-bureaucratic routine in the 1940s and Mary McCarthy’s invention of an antibureaucratic, antitotalitarian campus novel in the 1950s both hinted at the self-conscious intellectual freedoms and institutional excoriations that would emerge in the

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<sup>25</sup> On the *bricoleur*, see Derrida’s “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (especially 285-87). Fredric Jameson similarly if indirectly points out poststructuralism’s antibureaucratic ethos in his analysis of Paul de Man’s conception of language as allegory. “[T]he function of [de Man’s] theory,” he suggests, seems to lie “in its effort to discredit the autonomy of the academic disciplines, and thereby the classification of texts they perpetuate, into political philosophies, historical and social speculation, novels and plays, philosophy, and autobiographical writing, each of which is claimed by a separate tradition” (*Postmodernism* 240). De Man’s figuring of language as “allegory”—arguably the signature move of deconstructive criticism as a whole—is on Jameson’s account an attempt to “discredit” the bureaucratic isolation of representative texts into separate academic *departments* (Jameson uses the more abstract word “disciplines”) themselves.

1960s under the banners of postmodernism and poststructuralism. With Nabokov's own campus novel in 1962, however, we no longer need be merely anticipatory, for we have something that partakes of the postmodern moment itself. *Pale Fire* reveals that early postmodernism was inseparable from a midcentury antibureaucratic zeitgeist that rejected any attempt to reify and narrow intellectual labor and thought itself.

Postmodernism may thus be understood in negative social terms, as a rejection of Organization and bureaucracy. But it is possible to conceive of its social origins positively as well. By embracing a view of art as *work*, *Pale Fire*'s postmodernism also shows surprising roots in the laborist concerns of the 1930s, those with which we began this dissertation. Specifically, I will now argue that Nabokov's early postmodernism was rooted in a positive vision of intellectual (authorial) labor as unalienated labor. His iconic postmodern novel promotes a dignified form of work wherein the worker planned *and* executed the work, rather than merely and mindlessly performed piecemeal, Taylorized, bureaucratic tasks. Nabokov's postmodernism is rooted in a vision of meaningful work, in an aesthetic form of labor that holistically creates beauty in the world and thereby secures the artist's value to that world.

Though Vladimir Nabokov and Hannah Arendt were contemporaries and had friends in common, I am aware of no evidence that suggests Nabokov read any of Arendt's work. But *The Human Condition*'s sharp distinction between "labor" and "work," published by Arendt only four years before *Pale Fire*, is nevertheless surprisingly apposite for discussing the novel's celebration of the *act* (rather than the mere fact) of artistic creation.<sup>26</sup> Arendt distinguishes

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<sup>26</sup> As I say, there is no proof that Nabokov read any of Arendt's work. But we should nevertheless recall that Arendt and Nabokov had a common friend in Mary McCarthy (who along with her then-husband Edmund Wilson hosted the Nabokovs at their place in Wellfleet in the early forties), and that McCarthy had reviewed Arendt's *The Human Condition* for the *New Yorker*, where Nabokov frequently published (see "The *Vita Activa*"). Thus it is *possible* that Nabokov read a summary of Arendt's work via his friend's review essay. Be that as it may, we do know that Arendt knew enough of Nabokov's work to be irritated by it. In a letter to McCarthy, she noted with distaste that he wrote "as though he wanted to show you all the time how intelligent he is" (Letter 135).

“labor” from “work” by the purpose of each activity. “Labor” is the activity required to sustain bodily existence and nothing more. Essentially private—and for the ancient Greeks even somewhat shameful—labor is “the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process of labor” (7). When laboring, “the human body . . . concentrates upon nothing but its own being alive, and remains imprisoned in its metabolism with nature without ever transcending or freeing itself from the recurring cycle of its own functioning” (115). The one who labors does not think about his or her activity, but only performs it thoughtlessly to keep alive. For citizens of the Greek polis, labor was thus the realm normally attended to by women and slaves (72). Its representative philosophical figure was the *animal laborans*.

“Work,” by contrast, creates what Arendt calls “the human artifice” (136)—the built environment of lasting objects that humans establish against the ravages of the natural world. The human artifice includes not only shelter but all objects intended to provide a measure of permanence against the world’s fundamental instability. If labor produces only an individual body’s sustenance, work produces an object that outlasts any one human body and contributes to a sense of the continuity of human culture. While labor lives only for the private self and in the present time of the body’s immediate needs, work is inherently public and looks to the future of humanity. Work may in fact lead to the worker’s *immortality*, for the

task and potential greatness of mortals lie in their ability to produce things . . . which would deserve to be and, at least to a degree, are at home in everlastingness, so that through them mortals could find their place in a cosmos where everything is immortal except themselves. . . . [B]y their ability to leave

non-perishable traces behind, men, their individual mortality notwithstanding, attain an immortality of their own and prove themselves to be of a “divine” nature. (19)

The mortal who works in the Arendtian sense thus seeks to transcend mortality by offering a permanent contribution to the human artifice, an object whose value to humanity outlasts his or her mere body. The representative philosophical figure of this worker is *homo faber*.<sup>27</sup>

Like *The Human Condition*, and on startlingly similar grounds, *Pale Fire* offers a stinging critique of “labor.” The truly hated character of Gradus best represents the *animal laborans* in the novel.<sup>28</sup> Gradus performs his actions only for the sake of maintaining his body, rather than for some larger purpose, some striving for immortality in the world. Kinbote is right to see him as a “good dog”—a man who blindly follows orders above all else—for his chief pleasure is only in following orders. In addition to the minute bodily pleasure he feels when killing, which Kinbote compares to the pleasure of popping a pimple (278-79), Gradus enjoys his work for the Shadows only because he has “been given an important, responsible assignment (which happened to require he should kill)” (279). Possessing no true mental or other higher existence, he is, astonishingly, bored upon arriving in New York City: he occupies his time only by counting the numbers of floors in each skyscraper (274). “Spiritually he did not exist,” and “Morally he was a dummy pursuing another dummy,” Kinbote summarizes (278). Furthermore, unlike an Arendtian *homo faber* who seeks to create something that would live on after his death, the *animal laborans* Gradus has no temporal consciousness: on his way to assassinate the king,

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<sup>27</sup> “Labor” and “work” make up two out of the three parts of the *vita activa*—the Greeks’ philosophical conception of worldly life—which Arendt spends the bulk of her book defining. The third is “action,” the realm of the political, of collective effort between humans to create something genuinely new in the world (the celebrated Arendtian quality of “natality”). This category of temporal existence has the least relevance to the often apolitical Nabokov’s work, and so I have left Arendt’s explanation of it out of my discussion.

<sup>28</sup> As Mary McCarthy’s early review noted rightly, “The compassion of Nabokov stops violently short of Gradus, that grey, degraded being, the shadow of a Shade. The modern, mass-produced, jet-propelled, newspaper digesting killer is described with a fury of inanimate hatred” (“Bolt” 29).

“the forward projection of what imagination he had, stopped at the act, on the brink of all its possible consequences” (276), and even his decision to hide away some of his belongings in a train station locker offers only “the illusion of practical foresight” (276). Lastly, as Michael Glynn notes, “In the latter stages of Kinbote’s narrative, Gradus’s gross physicality is emphasized. He eats, he sweats, he micturates” (96). As Gradus roams the Wordsmith campus hunting for Kinbote at the end of the novel, for example, he suffers from a bad case of indigestion. This affliction’s importance to delineating Gradus’s character is revealed by the Swiftian obsession with which it is described by the otherwise genteel Kinbote. Kinbote insistently and uncomfortably tells us of Gradus’s “scalding torrent of indigestion” (280), “a renewal of stabs and queaks [that] caused him to strip his thighs again which he did with such awkward precipitation that his small Browning was all but sent flying into the depths of the toilet” (280), “the liquid hell inside him” (282), and “the inexhaustible lava in his bowels” (283). The latter half of the book thus reveals the *animal laborans*’ mere bodily focus. The loathsome Gradus, who lives in an eternal present and cares only for a job that allows his body to live, gives *Pale Fire* its chief emblem of the *animal laborans*.

Standing opposed to this dessicated *animal laborans* are the novel’s artists, Shade and Kinbote. They share the immortality-seeking worldview of *homo faber*. The opening lines of Shade’s poem “Art,” quoted in one of Kinbote’s glosses, offer an example of this sensibility. “From Mammoth hunts and Odysseys / And Oriental charms / To the Italian goddesses / With Flemish babes in arms,” they read (284). In these four brief lines alone, Shade recognizes the *longue durée* of his subject: whole millenia of art history are touched upon, beginning with prehistoric cave drawings and ending only with the Renaissance, still hundreds of years before his poem’s own composition. And a few pages later, at the start of what is to my mind the

novel's most moving passage, Kinbote himself rhapsodizes about the immortal nature of art as he holds a full copy of Shade's poem *Pale Fire* for the first time:

We are absurdly accustomed to the miracle of a few written signs being able to contain immortal imagery, involutions of thought, new worlds with live people, speaking, weeping, laughing. We take it for granted so simply that in a sense, by the very act of brutish routine acceptance, we undo the work of the ages, the history of the gradual elaboration of poetical description and construction, from the treeman to Browning, from the caveman to Keats. (289)

This passage summarizes many of the main themes of *Pale Fire* already discussed: the magical “miracle” of art, its ability to inspire complex “involutions of thought” (the twisting motif is invoked again here), and the dangers, expressed in Weberian, antibureaucratic language, of a “brutish *routine* acceptance” of all this. But to those themes this passage adds a specific concern with human immortality, our ability to create “the work of the ages” rather than merely the (Arendtian) labor of the moment. Like Shade and Arendt's *homo faber* more generally, Kinbote—and *Pale Fire* with him—understands art as a contribution to a permanent human artifice.<sup>29</sup>

And while much recent criticism has devoted itself to a certain conception of human immortality in Nabokov's work, chasing with a sometimes numbing literalism the presence of spirits and ghosts in his oeuvre, it has ignored what I think is the more interesting form of human immortality in Nabokov's work: not only the work of art, but the artist through it, is guaranteed secular immortality in *Pale Fire*. Kinbote is the primary exponent of this type of immortality in the novel. The otherwise pacifist Zemblan king, who believes, as we have seen, that “the one

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<sup>29</sup> Nabokov himself shared this belief. He went on record multiple times regarding the imperative of immortality for art, admonishing students, for example, that “the prime object of a playwright ought to be not to write a successful play but an immortal one” (qtd. in Boyd, *VNAY* 30).

who kills is *always* his victim's inferior" (234), nevertheless believes that lethal violence *is* justified in some circumstances: namely, when one is "defending the life of his son, or his own, or the achievement of a lifetime" (279). The first two items in Kinbote's list are conventional enough: killing is permitted in the defense of one's own life, or a relation's life. But Kinbote's third circumstance expresses what can only be recognized as *homo faber's* particular point of view: one may kill when "the achievement of a lifetime"—one's *work*, in other words, one's definingly human ability to achieve immortality in a mortal world—is threatened. In this light Kinbote's seemingly unperturbed decision to scoop up Shade's poem immediately after Shade's senseless and sad death is not simply the comically narcissistic act it seems at first glance. His twice-uttered reassurance that "the poem was safe" in the midst of narrating Shade's death is not simply the expression of selfish care for a poem he imagines to be about Zembla, or of comparative disregard for the importance of Shade's life (295). Kinbote's preservation of Shade's poem is also a genuine and heartfelt act of altruism. It reflects his immediate and instinctive sense that Shade's work—the achievement of his lifetime—must be preserved even if, and especially since, Shade's life has already been lost. For the *homo faber*, for Kinbote and Shade alike, the product of one's work matters as much or even more than the physical fact of life itself.<sup>30</sup> When Kinbote subsequently stitches the index cards on which the poem is written into his own clothes, in order to hide it from others as he leaves Wordsmith for his cabin, he likewise offers a telling figure for the poem: "Thus with cautious steps, among deceived enemies, I circulated, plated with poetry, armored with rhymes, stout with another man's song,

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<sup>30</sup> Arendt's *Human Condition* extols the superiority of human work and deeds in comparison to mere biological life as well, lamenting the modern "assumption that life, and not the world, is the highest good of man" (318). The rise of Christianity in particular, she believed, had resulted in a single-minded emphasis on the value of mere biological survival, in this life and through a supposed life in the next world. The importance of contributions to a permanent and secular human artifice (*homo faber's* concern), or of performing great deeds in public in order to collectively create something new in the world (the concern of Aristotle's *bios politikos*, the man of politics), was now in danger of being forgotten. See 313-20.

stiff with cardboard, bullet-proof at long last” (300). His elaborate metaphor of poetry as armature literalizes a truth in the novel, for with Shade’s poem enfolding him Kinbote does indeed become “bullet-proof,” guaranteed of immortality. The poem not only preserves Shade’s immortality, but it affords Kinbote his own through the wildly imaginative commentary he will soon append to it. Both Shade’s poem and Kinbote’s “interpretation” of it create the possibility of immortality for their respective creators. And as the creative seekers of such immortality, Shade and Kinbote are *Pale Fire*’s chief exemplars of *homo faber*.<sup>31</sup>

Concerning itself so thoroughly with the distinction between the essentially thoughtless and private labor of the body on the one hand (Gradus), and the conscious and valuable work of making immortal art on the other (Shade and Kinbote), this early example of the postmodern is thus deeply invested in the human value of work. But *Pale Fire* is just as deeply invested, I would argue, in the nature of that work—in the process of work-*ing* itself. And it is here that we may see the full extent of *Pale Fire*’s surprising devotion to concerns about the quality of labor

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<sup>31</sup> Nabokov’s belief in the work of art as a path to immortality surely also informs the recent brouhaha over whether or not his son Dmitri ought to have preserved and published the notes Nabokov made, not long before his death, for his next novel, *The Original of Laura*. Nabokov had directed his son to destroy the manuscript after his death, but in 2008, after years of debating the matter, Dmitri ultimately decided to publish them. The decision was a matter of controversy in the pages of literary magazines and newspapers.

Nabokov *père* went on record a number of times regarding the worthlessness and indeed repulsiveness of manuscripts. In a 1962 interview, for example, he proclaimed that “Only ambitious nonentities and hearty mediocrities exhibit their rough drafts. It is like passing around samples of one’s sputum” (*Strong Opinions* 4). And more to the point here, in his work on *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov declared that “Rough drafts, false scents, half-explored trails, dead ends of inspiration, are of little intrinsic importance. An artist should ruthlessly destroy his manuscripts after publication, lest they mislead academic mediocrities into thinking that it is possible to unravel the mysteries of genius by studying canceled readings” (qtd. in Boyd, “Manuscripts” 340). One may be tempted to dismiss the author’s revulsion toward manuscripts as merely another quaint Nabokovian bugbear, something akin to his reflex hatred of Freud. But I think it is important to take this expressed animus against manuscripts seriously if one wishes to understand a central Nabokovian conviction about the purpose and value of life. Nabokov disdained manuscripts, I would argue, not for the comparatively narrow and vain reason that they undercut the notion of the artist’s genius. Rather, in an Arendtian sense he felt that manuscript drafts were *dangerous*, because their existence could only attenuate the aesthetic experience of a finished art object that might grant its mortal maker a kind of immortality. Manuscripts could only serve, in short, as a means by which artists might die. Whether or not and to what extent one takes such beliefs seriously should ultimately determine one’s opinion regarding whether *The Original of Laura* ought to have been published.

For more on the decision to publish Nabokov’s novel, see for example Rosenbaum’s article in *Slate* magazine, “Dmitri’s Choice,” written as Dmitri Nabokov debated what to do.



that are more typically thought of as Marxist. Though often ignored as mere throat-clearing before the novel begins in earnest, we should remember that the very first words of *Pale Fire* (after a winking epigraph from Boswell's celebration of Dr. Johnson) are not "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain" (l. 1), but the drably prosaic observation that "*Pale Fire*, a poem in heroic couplets, of nine hundred ninety-nine lines, divided into four cantos, was composed by John Francis Shade" (13). The novel opens with Kinbote calling our attention to work, to the worldly act of writing. Kinbote goes on to offer a quite detailed and indeed tactile description of Shade's labor process, noting that Shade wrote—like Nabokov, incidentally—on "medium-sized index cards." (These are the same index cards that Kinbote affixes to his own body as a guarantee of immortality after Shade's death, we may note in retrospect.) On each card, Kinbote lovingly tells us, "Shade reserved the pink upper line for headings (canto number, date) and used the fourteen light-blue lines for writing out with a fine nib in a minute, tidy, remarkably clear hand, the text of his poem, skipping a line to indicate double space, and always using a fresh card to begin a new canto" (13). The novel's third paragraph continues to reveal Kinbote's fascination with the artistic labor process, detailing Shade's habit of copying out his completed lines daily at midnight (13). Not long into the commentary do we learn how Kinbote knows so much about Shade's nighttime compositional habits: he has spent most of his evenings attempting to watch Shade, his next-door neighbor, write his poem. (Creepy, yes; but wholly indicative of how desperately Kinbote wishes to understand Shade's labor.) Kinbote tells us that he "had learned exactly when and where to find the best points from which to follow the contours of his inspiration" (88), and that his "binoculars would seek [Shade] out and focus upon him from afar in his various places of labor" (88-89), attempting to seek and understand "the mysteries of generation" (89). He compares Shade's moments of creative inspiration to that of a Zemblan

minister communing with God, telling us that in Shade's face he saw "something of that splendor, of that spiritual energy and divine vision" (88). Both Foreword and Commentary thus reveal that Kinbote considers the question of authorial inspiration and labor—of *how* art is created—to be of vast and indeed spiritual importance.

But the fascination is not Kinbote's alone. Shade's poem attends equally to the act and process of literary authorship. Its last canto—coming directly after Canto Three's parody of the bureaucratic I.P.H. and then valorization of "Plexed artistry" (l. 814)—offers an explicit meditation on the *labor* of poetic composition, one that offers the novel an important and utopian, if overlooked, understanding of artistic creation as an activity that implicitly challenges the modern divide between mental and manual labor. Recognizing the novel's Arendtian fascination with labor and work therefore also helps us see *Pale Fire*'s most radically utopian urge: it imagines authorship as not only a form of dignified *work* in the Arendtian sense, concerned with the creation of immortal objects in the world, but also as a form of unalienated labor in Marx's sense, one transcending the supposedly fundamental divide between mental and manual labor. This exemplar of the early postmodern understands authorial labor as a special kind of labor that confounds modern understandings of work itself.

The last canto of Shade's poem opens with bold declarations:

Now I shall spy on beauty as none has  
Spied on it yet. Now I shall cry out as  
None has cried out. Now I shall try what none  
Has tried. Now I shall do what none has done. (ll. 835-38)

Shade thus begins his Canto audaciously, with claims of unprecedented beauty. But even as he does so, his lines simultaneously undermine any claim to absolute originality via a series of

allusions. Shade's pledge that he will "try what none / Has tried" and "do what none has done," for example, seems to recall Milton's similarly daring claim at the start of *Paradise Lost*, that he "pursues / Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme" (1.15-16). And in Shade's "Now I shall cry out" one may also hear the startling invocation of angels at the outset of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*: "Wer, wenn ich schrie, hörte mich denn aus der Engel / Ordnungen?" ("Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels' / hierarchies?") (1.1-2). Shade's opening claims of originality in his final canto allude to the opening declarations of his poetic ancestors in Milton and Rilke.<sup>32</sup>

This is not an instance of clumsy writing, though Shade is capable of that. Self-consciously breaking his empyrean tone, Shade announces the canto's theme in his very next lines: "And speaking of this wonderful machine: / I'm puzzled by the difference between / Two methods of composing" (ll. 839-41). With this theme of poetry's sources and "methods" of creation in mind, we may see that Shade's previous allusions are purposeful. Both Milton's and Rilke's lines allude to mythological sources of poetic inspiration. Milton's declaration that he will write "Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme" is, after all, part of his request to the Muse for inspiration and skill: "Sing Heav'nly Muse," Milton intones at the outset, thereby hoping to gain "aid" for his decidedly "advent'rous song" (1.6, 13). The speaker of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, too, understands the angels to whom he would cry out as inspirations for the poetic beauty he hopes to create; for "Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich" ("Every angel is terrifying"), and "das Schöne ist nichts / als des Schrecklichen Anfang" ("beauty is nothing / but the beginning of

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<sup>32</sup> Nabokov was familiar with and admired both these authors. He appreciated Milton enough to recommend him to a student as required reading for anyone who wished to produce poetry of value in English (Boyd, *VNAY* 317). His admiration of Rilke, however, was expressed with the back of his hand: he offered the poet as a yardstick for praising the truly superlative powers of Kafka. Kafka "is the greatest German writer of our time," he told his students in a lecture (255). "Such poets as Rilke or such novelists as Thomas Mann are dwarfs or plaster saints in comparison to him" ("Franz Kafka" 255).

terror”) (l. 7, 4-5). Far from being clumsy or arrogant, then, Shade’s ironically allusive declarations of originality in the first stanza of this canto—to try what none has tried, and to cry out as none has cried out—are quite purposeful homages. They recall, only half-ironically and self-deprecatingly, the lingering poetic presence of Milton’s heavenly Muse and Rilke’s terrifying angels, classical tropes of the artistic inspiration and labor that Shade proposes as his theme.

The “two methods of composing” that Shade proceeds to describe suggest that artistic creation has something to do with the distinction between mental and manual labor. Shade describes “method *A*” as entirely mental (l. 853, emphasis in original): it “goes on solely in the poet’s mind” (l. 842). While absent-mindedly showering, for example, he writes lines in his head, comparing alternate versions and revising them, without the aid of pen and paper (ll. 841-44). Method *B*, however, is tactile. He sits at a desk in his study and writes on paper, comparing versions and crossing out inferior alternatives and errors. Shade emphasizes its physical nature:

In method *B* the hand supports the thought,  
The abstract battle is concretely fought.  
The pen stops in mid-air, then swoops to bar  
A canceled sunset or restore a star,  
And thus it physically guides the phrase  
Toward faint daylight through the inky maze.

(ll. 847-52, emphasis in the original)

Method *A* is akin to a purely mental labor, while method *B* is literally and figuratively a manual (hand-based) labor.

But in the third and fourth stanzas Shade finds each method to be problematic, incomplete and insufficient in itself. Method A “is agony!,” he complains (l. 853). It is too complicated, requires too *much* mental effort. Implicitly and metaphorically comparing it to method B, he suggests that the complexity of holding multiple drafts in one’s head for comparison is like using “three hands at the same time” (l. 863). But the tactility of method B is not sufficient, either:

For there are those mysterious moments when  
Too weary to delete, I drop my pen;  
I ambulate—and by some mute command  
The right word flutes and perches on my hand. (ll. 869-72)

The mental labor of method A cannot support the hard work and skill of revision, which requires some physical method; but neither can the physicality of method B bring forth the mental inspiration that the mind alone sometimes receives. Methods A and B of composing, while each coherent in themselves, are nevertheless presented in the last Canto as an antinomy.

Shade then moves on again to writing that might seem clumsy: a series of self-deprecating stanzas describe him sleep-walking and shaving. These apparent non sequiturs are anything but, however: they are metaphors for the resolution of the antinomy of artistic creation, of methods A and B. Shade’s account of himself sleep-walking begins by highlighting a double consciousness: “I once overheard / Myself awakening while half of me / Still slept in bed” (ll. 874-76). Further dichotomies proliferate. Shade’s “spirit” manages to observe his bodily self having one existence outdoors, while the other is in bed (l. 876); he wears only one shoe when sleep-walking out on the lawn (half of a pair) (l. 879); and the whole event occurs just as the sun rises, suggesting a liminal period between day and night (l. 878). But as his spirit catches up to

the self on the lawn, he ultimately recognizes that “*this* half too”—the self on the lawn, like the one back in bed—“Was fast asleep” (ll. 880-81, emphasis in original). Nothing about the event is completely conscious. Shade at last wakes up with “both” halves of himself laughing, the contradictions seemingly resolved with joy (l. 881). How have they been resolved? Sleep-walking has suggested to Shade the essential *haziness* of the distinction between waking life and dream, between body and mind. Sleep-walking represents for him a happy confusion between the physical and the mental. And realizing in the morning that “on the damp / Gemmed turf a brown shoe [still] lay!” (l. 883-84), Shade immediately makes this comic symbol of sleep-walking’s liminality of body and mind into a central talisman of his art. He calls the damp, single shoe “My secret stamp, / The Shade impress, the mystery inborn / Mirages, miracles, midsummer morn” (ll. 884-86). Self-deprecating and aggrandizing at once, Shade’s description of sleep-walking and leaving a shoe on his lawn gets at something essential to his aesthetic labor: it is neither mental nor physical, neither method A nor method B, but both at once.

Likewise his homely description of shaving also suggests the union of mental and manual labor. Slyly echoing the daring of his Canto’s opening, which introduced his subject of the methods of poetic composition, Shade now complains how difficult it is to shave:

Now I shall speak of evil and despair  
As none has spoken. Five, six, seven, eight  
Nine strokes are not enough. Ten. I palpate  
Through strawberry-and-cream the gory mess  
And find unchanged that patch of prickliness. (ll. 902-06)

Here again is the repetitive physicality, the manual labor, of method B’s multiple pen strokes. Like poetic composition, the poem suggests, shaving involves multiple and sometimes tortuous

revisions, physically combing over the same ground repeatedly in order to remove “prickliness.” Shade’s next stanza compares his own two-handed shaving technique (“I’m in the class of fussy bimanists” [l. 911]) to the single-handed shaver of commercials on television. Much as the single shoe of the sleep-walking metaphor reminded us of his dual existence in bed and on the lawn, Shade here repudiates any method that involves only *one* thing, one hand. Accordingly he makes an analogy between poetic inspiration—the mental labor of creativity—and the use of commercial shaving soap:

Now I shall speak . . . Better than any soap  
Is the sensation for which poets hope  
When inspiration and its icy blaze,  
The sudden image, the immediate phrase  
Over the skin a triple ripple send  
Making the little hairs all stand on end  
As in the enlarged animated scheme  
Of whiskers mowed when held up by Our Cream.

(ll. 915-22; ellipses in the original)

Shade begins this passage with yet another allusion to the invocation of the muses and angels of inspiration from his canto’s opening: “Now I shall speak . . .” (l. 915). But he then compares such sources of poetic inspiration to the effects of shaving soap: both soap and artistic inspiration should make “the little hairs all stand on end” (l. 920). Shade acknowledges a few lines later that “that odd muse of mine” is thus a “versipel” (ll. 946-47)—“versipel” being a neologism derived from “versipellous,” which means (according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*) “Having the faculty of changing the skin.” In other words, much like his shaving soap, Shade’s muse “Over

the skin a triple ripple send[s] / Making the little hairs all stand on end” (ll. 919-20).<sup>33</sup> Once again, Shade has created an elaborate metaphor to insist on the simultaneously manual *and* mental labor of literary creation. Like shaving, literary creation requires multiple efforts of physical revision (the painfully multiple “strokes” of shaving) and yet also the inevitable presence of a more purely mental inspiration akin to the “soap” that thrills the skin, raising hairs. For Shade, poetic composition, like shaving and sleep-walking, requires both method A and method B.<sup>34</sup>

The canto—and thus the poem itself—closes with the image of “Some neighbor’s gardener . . . / Trundling an empty barrow up the lane” (ll. 998-99). This last image effectively offers both the poem and the larger novel’s best homage to the union of mental and manual labor. In the context of the poem we must first see that the image of the gardener recalls a climactic event from the end of the first canto. There a young Shade, just beginning his eleventh year, lies on the floor and experiences the first of a series of fainting fits as he “watched a clockwork toy— / A tin wheelbarrow pushed by a tin boy” (ll. 143-44). Shade experiences his first personal intimation of mortality then: “A thread of subtle pain, / Tugged at by playful death, released again, / But always present, ran through me” (ll. 139-41). The “clockwork toy” of a boy with a wheelbarrow in Canto One thus suggests the passage of time leading to death.

But Shade’s subsequent depiction of his childhood fit, a “sunburst” followed by “black night” (ll. 146-47), associates the wheelbarrow toy with much more than some blank foretaste of death:

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<sup>33</sup> Shade thus draws on a familiar feeling of aesthetic appreciation that Nabokov would a few years later commend to literary critics: “Rely on the sudden erection of your small dorsal hairs” (*Strong* 66).

<sup>34</sup> For more on the topic of shaving and inspiration in *Pale Fire*, see Dustin Condren’s “John Shade Shaving.” With more elaboration than I offer here, he also concludes that “the picture of John Shade shaving successfully, ‘plow[ing] old Zembla’s fields’, is the picture of artistic bliss, of poetic creation, of the mind and the body attuned” (144—the placement of the comma after the quotation mark is *sic*).



That blackness was sublime.

I felt distributed through space and time:

One foot upon a mountaintop, one hand

Under the pebbles of a panting strand,

One ear in Italy, one eye in Spain,

In caves, my blood, and in the stars, my brain.

There were dull throbs in my Triassic; green

Optical spots in Upper Pleistocene,

An icy shiver down my Age of Stone,

And all tomorrows in my funnybone. (ll. 147-56)

Depicting this “sublime” experience of simultaneous times and spaces (including European countries especially known for their artistic traditions and aesthetic appeal), Shade’s surprisingly vivid and evocative description suggests an early and powerful *aesthetic* experience.

“[C]orrupted, terrified, [and] allured” all at once (l. 163), Shade’s experience compels in him “shame” and “wonder” equally (l. 166). He feels the awfulness of death and yet also the aesthetic power and terror of the sublime, an “icy shiver” (l. 155) akin to the “icy blaze” of “inspiration” (l. 917) that Shade will later introduce in his last Canto’s description of a versipellous muse. The repetition of the image of someone pushing a wheelbarrow in the poem’s last lines thus recalls not only Shade’s childhood intimation of death, but the ultimately space- and time-less aesthetic experience that accompanies it. The final image of a gardener “Trundling an empty barrow up

the lane” brings to mind both the ineluctable fact of death and the artist’s ability to comprehend and thus in some measure triumph over it.<sup>35</sup>

That is the reading offered to us if we take the poem as a self-contained object—a well-wrought New Critical urn of internal evidence. But we must read the image also in the context of the rest of the novel, in which Kinbote reveals to us that the poem’s final image refers to his “real-life” gardener as well. By an astonishing coincidence, this gardener is present at the moment of Shade’s death—an event occurring only moments after Shade has written of “some neighbor’s gardener” in his poem (l. 998).<sup>36</sup> With this in mind, we can see that the presence of the gardener in the poem further suggests the union of mental and manual labor, much as Shade’s images of sleep-walking and shaving do. As Kinbote tells us, this gardener has, and exercises, multiple mental and manual gifts. In Kinbote’s very first gloss (on the first line of the poem, “I was the shadow of the waxwing slain”), we encounter this gardener teaching Kinbote the names of American birds (73). Kinbote later tells us that the gardener knows the names of all the trees, and their appropriate habitats, on the New Wye avenue that displays all the trees mentioned in Shakespeare (291). Though he has most recently been “a male nurse in a hospital for Negroes in Maryland,” ultimately this gardener also “wanted to study landscaping, botany and French (‘to read in the original Baudelaire and Dumas’)” (291). Kinbote, of course, also enjoys the gardener as a “strong and strapping fellow” (291) who occasionally gives him a massage (159). Thus Shade chooses to close his poem with the image of a gardener who is, whether Shade knows it or not, another icon of the transcendence of the divide between manual

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<sup>35</sup> If we furthermore recall from Kinbote’s gloss that the adult Shade still possesses this toy from long ago (137), we may see the Arendtian point, too, that this final image of a gardener with a wheelbarrow functions as a reminder of the artist’s ability to create—as *homo faber*—long-lasting objects in the world.

<sup>36</sup> This is one of a number of uncanny coincidences that resonate, seemingly unintentionally, between Shade’s poem and Kinbote’s representations of the world outside the poem. Such bizarre coincidences are often noted in criticism of *Pale Fire*, especially when being adduced for a single-authorship theory (that either Kinbote or Shade wrote the whole, poem and commentary alike). Brian Boyd’s book on *Pale Fire* usefully enumerates ten of these coincidences in one place (*NPF* 112-13), placing the present coincidence seventh on his list.

and mental labor. The strong and strapping fellow who shovels dirt and lays out a flagstone path for Kinbote is also deeply knowledgeable about the natural world, and aspires to nothing less than a liberal education.<sup>37</sup> Recalling this gardener in the poem's last lines, Shade thus extends his earlier metaphor of shaving and art, that of "plough[ing] / Old Zembla's fields" (ll. 936-37), suggesting that artist and agri-culturalist alike work with *both* hands and mind.<sup>38</sup> The lively and multitalented gardener depicted at the end of both Shade's poem and the novel's plot accordingly serves as a condensed image of the nature of aesthetic creation. The work of the aesthetic, *Pale Fire* suggests, transcends even the distinction between manual and mental labor.

This image of a man exercising his capacities for work to the full, in multiple directions involving body and mind alike, may in fact stand for the most utopian and potentially political urges of *Pale Fire* as a whole. For while Nabokov's novel does not itself politicize its rejection of the mental-manual divide, we may nevertheless see some of its political potential in a class politics if we briefly look at Harry Braverman's book *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, published twelve years later. Braverman notes that the second principle of Frederick Taylor's scientific management was to divorce workers' *conception* of their work from their *execution* of that work. In a process that sociologists after Braverman would call "deskilling," Taylorist managers took workers' holistic craft and broke it down into a series of disconnected motions under managers' control, robbing workers of their understanding of the whole. In a complaint similar to Arendt's

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<sup>37</sup> One may detect an element of caricature in the gardener's perhaps only seemingly wide-ranging interests, of course: landscape and botany are in the same intellectual-horticultural neighborhood, and the detail about his otherwise surprising interest in French literature might be a subtle Nabokovian joke about this gardener's specific attraction to Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* and Dumas fils's *La Dame aux camélias*. But even if we grant this, the gardener is undeniably an autodidact who loves *knowledge* of his subject, cultural and scientific, as much as the manual labor that accompanies it.

<sup>38</sup> Shade's reference to Zembla, of course, also uncannily suggests a connection to *Kinbote's* Zembla, which, as we have seen, serves as the novel's primary metaphor for art in general. I would also point out here that Kinbote's gardener is not the only agricultural icon in the novel who embodies the union of mental and manual labor. Kinbote tells us that Shade, "Delighting as he did in the right word"—the Flaubertian *mot juste*—"esteemed" farmer and taxidermist Paul Hentzner "for knowing the names of things" as the pair went on walks in the woods and fields of New Wye and Dulwich (185). Shade's admiration for the farmer's linguistic precision is thus similar to Kinbote's esteem for his gardener, who teaches him the names of American birds and Shakespearean trees.

about the life of the *animal laborans*, Braverman argues that this “dehumanization of the labor process” reduced workers “almost to the level of labor in its animal form” (78). The Taylorist “*separation of conception from execution*,” he concludes, is now given “the common name of the separation of mental from manual labor” (79, emphasis in the original). The divide between occupations of mental labor and those of manual labor, he charges, is only the sad result of a managerial attempt to remove thought and planning—creativity, in a word—from the labor process at *all* levels. Thus we may say that Nabokov’s novel, with its satire of bureaucratic higher education and its unreserved disgust for the merely laboring character of Gradus, exhibits a deep-seated scorn for this loss of craft under the Taylorization of all industry, including even higher education, via the bureaucratic organization of labor. *Pale Fire* deplores what Braverman’s book calls “the degradation of work in the twentieth century,” or what Arendt would call thoughtless “labor.” Championing an holistic labor that instead transcends the mental-manual divide, *Pale Fire* insists upon the value of an artist-craftsperson who conceives, and then creates, an object from beginning to end—whether that object is a garden or a literary world.<sup>39</sup>

Thus *Pale Fire*’s postmodern traits, we may now see, are rooted in far more than a suspicion of bureaucratic thought. The deconstructive and postmodern pleasure of Shade’s game of “Word Golf” and a self-consciously “Plexed artistry” find their origins in more than *Pale Fire*’s satire of bureaucratic narrowness; and the surprising narrative sympathy for the vigilante, anti-disciplinary rebellion of Jack Grey stems from more than a satire of Judge Goldworth’s devotion to bureaucratic institutions and control. *Pale Fire*’s postmodernism is also and

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<sup>39</sup> For Braverman on Taylorization, see especially Chapters 4-5. Thinking of the scope of this dissertation as a whole, it is interesting—but in the end not surprising—that Braverman cut his teeth in Trotskyist politics. He was active in the Socialist Workers Party from the late thirties through 1953, and then left (along with Bert Cochran, of the “Cochranite tendency”) to found the Socialist Union, publishing “The American Socialist” until 1959. Both Dave Renton’s chapter on Braverman in his *Dissident Marxism* (162-83) and Michael G. Livingston’s article “Harry Braverman: Marxist Activist and Theorist” make the case for *Labor and Monopoly Capital* as a Trotskyist work. For a Braverman-inspired work specifically on the rise of *bureaucracy* as an attack on the earlier form of craft labor, see Clawson, especially 126-201, and the summary on 256-57.

conversely committed to nothing less than a utopian vision of the pleasures of dignified labor. Its conspicuously metafictional moments—Kinbote’s hints that characters like Gradus and even himself exist on the page of a book alone, for example, or the sly reference to “an old, happy, healthy, heterosexual Russian” suspiciously like Nabokov—are prominent winks and nods that tell us yes, indeed, an author has *created* this, whomever that author might be. Such moments are signs of self-conscious planning and creating. They form pointed and fun references to the authorial labor (or Arendtian *work*) that has gone into imagining and then making, in a physical as well as mental sense, the novel we are reading. As Laurie Clancy notes, Nabokov’s vision of the artist is that of “a maker, a builder, what [he] calls in *Ada* ‘an habitually intoxicated labourer’” (11). Nabokov’s intoxicated, relentlessly highbrow metafiction points us toward the existence of an intellectual worker aware of, and even aggressively proud of, his labor.<sup>40</sup>

Likewise, the novel’s persistent emphasis on undecidability, its eternal regress implying that there is no part of reality that stands apart from interpretation, offers readers as much as authors the opportunity to *make* meaning, again to *work* in the Arendtian sense. It insists that readers, like authors, look at the whole of the text, determine what solution works best and most pleasingly, and then create/interpret it from beginning to end. The much-vaunted competition

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<sup>40</sup> A significant part of Nabokov’s reception has in fact always revolved around this perception of his intellectual pride. The perception has not always been to his favor, of course. We have already seen in a previous note Hannah Arendt’s peevish remark that Nabokov writes “as though he wanted to show you all the time how intelligent he is” (Letter 135). In a more academic mode, Peter Rabinowitz registers a similar complaint when he supposes that Nabokov may “derive an almost sadistic satisfaction from knowing that his authorial audience”—his imagined ideal reader—“is intellectually well above his actual readers” (213). These critics haven’t *liked* Nabokov’s insistence on his own brilliance, his pride in his intellectual labor, but they do confirm it.

Others have enjoyed Nabokov’s pride in his labor more straightforwardly, I imagine. I may risk some of my audience’s good will by noting anecdotally that for many Nabokov fans I have personally known—and I do not exempt myself here—a perhaps unseemly amount of the pleasure in reading him also comes from readers’ attempts to prove “how intelligent” and superior they are themselves, to imagine or confirm themselves as members of an elite. If for some critics Nabokov’s pride has been a turn-off, I suspect that for no small amount of others the pleasure of reading Nabokov may involve *sharing* Nabokov’s pride in himself as an intellectual worker.

But whatever psychology one might wish to impute to Nabokov or his readers, my larger point stands. Nabokov’s aggressively highbrow style undeniably insists—proudly, even arrogantly—on the value of intellect, and thence of intellectual *work*.

between author Shade and critic Kinbote in *Pale Fire* is in this sense an illusion: the point of the novel is that both author and critic are afforded the true pleasure of work. In a world overrun by *animal laborans*, *Pale Fire* not only celebrates but *elicits* the holistic pleasures and aims of *homo faber*.

As we saw in the previous chapter, McCarthy's essays in the early sixties foreshadowed the postmodern world of skepticism and localized micropolitics in dystopian terms. In her work, the postmodern could be anticipated as a mere reflection of the narrow thoughtlessness of intellectual labor in bureaucratic institutions. The "totally fictitious" world of her proto-postmodern campus in 1952 likewise corresponded to Arendt's vision of totalitarianism. But we can see from Nabokov's metafictional work that when it arrived, the openly fictitious world of the postmodern could also express—even unintentionally—a *hope* for intellectual work, and a sign of resistance to the way it was currently organized. The postmodern campus novel of *Pale Fire* could desire an Arendtian work that was not subject to false divisions between concepts, the tell-tale signs of bureaucratic thought. In Marxist terms, it could even celebrate any human activity, whether aesthetic or agricultural, that transcended a false division between mental and manual labor. Kinbote's and Shade's similar abilities to create falsehoods—"totally fictitious" worlds—were not the *result* of proto-totalitarian bureaucratic social organization; they were the antidotes to it. They were representative of, and could even conjure from their readers, an holistic type of labor that expanded beyond bureaucrats' narrow purview, transcending departmental divides and even the most fundamental social divisions of labor.<sup>41</sup> *Pale Fire*'s postmodern attributes, in short, testify to its creator's insistence on the pleasure and value of work in its most dignified and indeed ambitious form. No less than the League of Professional Groups for Foster

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<sup>41</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, McCarthy's awestruck enthusiasm for Nabokov's novel, expressed in both her *New Republic* review and private letters at the time, implicitly recognizes this possibility as well. See my article "Realism By Other Means?"

and Ford in 1932, the ludic, postmodernist *Pale Fire* in 1962 imagined a world in which brain workers were able to “perform freely and creatively their particular craft function” (League 18).

## Epilogue

### **The Politics of Postmodernism in the Sixties and Now**

In this dissertation I have argued that postmodernism in America emerged in significant measure from an intellectual and aesthetic milieu created by middle-class intellectuals, especially academics, who resisted the bureaucratization of their working conditions and hoped for an autonomous intellectual labor instead. As we saw in Part I, the theory of an intellectual class, hatched from the Communist Old Left's wary hope for an alliance of autonomous "brain workers" with the proletariat, mutated through ever more skeptical takes on the "bureaucratic collectivist" urges of a New Class in order to become, in Trilling's hands, the vague, vastly influential, and surprisingly conservative notion of "ideology." As Part II has demonstrated, however, some specific critique of intellectuals' working conditions lived on in the animosity toward bureaucratic structures of intellectual work—and corresponding celebration of autonomous intellectual labor—so characteristic of the fifties and sixties campus novel. The academically-filtered fears and hopes for intellectual labor characteristic of this milieu then became foundations for an early postmodernism.

But the intellectual and literary tradition that *Class Work* has described, I would now note, was integral not only to postmodernism but to the watershed political moment of "the sixties" broadly understood. The antibureaucratic tradition detailed here specifically shaped a New Left that began on campus, and thus helped define a generation whose political youth has profoundly affected nearly every facet of American politics, society, and culture since then—including of course postmodernism. Given its pervasive influence, then, in this Epilogue I wish briefly to sum up the tradition's political weaknesses and strengths. A 2005 article by Sean



McCann and Michael Szalay, “Do You Believe in Magic? Literary Thinking after the New Left,” has sought to question and perhaps even discredit the legacy of the New Left and postmodernism on American political thought in the academy. Thus it offers a useful point of entry for my task here. It is not my intent to judge McCann and Szalay’s arguments about postmodernist politics in the time *since* the early sixties, as that would require a different historical narrative from the one I have written. But I do want to defend the New Left, and the roots of postmodernism, from some of McCann and Szalay’s accusations against them. While acknowledging the cogency of their critiques, ultimately I insist on the political value of the tradition I have defined here, both in the 1960s and today.

McCann and Szalay begin by arguing that the New Left was essentially hostile toward states, and toward participation in partisan politics. Its hostility toward states was no doubt motivated and in part even justified by the failures of the federal government in this period, they recognize: Kennedy’s Cold War-focused negligence of domestic policy (on racial issues in particular), and especially Johnson’s dramatic escalation of the Vietnam War, robbed this student-based left of hope for change through established channels (438-39). But McCann and Szalay also argue that the New Left’s hostility toward the state and conventional politics was motivated by the specific frustrations of young professional workers who, despite college training and no lack of ambition, found themselves excluded from the corridors of state power (452-54). Furthermore, these frustrations could lead the New Left to hold surprisingly conservative beliefs: their suspicion of state and federal bureaucracies even put them in frequent dialogue with a nascent New Right (442). And after 1967 especially, when the war seemed unstoppable and urban riots prompted despair over race relations—but also when the counterculture seemed to reach its peak of influence in the “summer of love”—this New Left

that was always skeptical of governmental power increasingly became enamored of various forms of mysticism and magical thinking. “Human Be-Ins” and the attempted levitation and exorcism of the Pentagon at an antiwar march in October of 1967 characterized the new political style (436-38). This irrationalism and its corresponding suspicion of ordinary political action lives on, they charge, in a literary academy enamored of postmodern authors and theories that place an unwarranted faith in the power of culture to effect political change, and that stupidly dismiss partisan politics as an effective method of change. For McCann and Szalay, postmodernism was created by a muddle-headed New Left engaged in a surprisingly conservative rejection of state politics—an antipolitics, in truth, often motivated by dashed hopes for professional and political advancement. Postmodernism consequently suffers from a political outlook that imagines the analysis of culture, the work of professionals, to be somehow politically effective, on its own and without corresponding state action.

Unsurprisingly, such an indictment of the political youth of many a baby boom professor, and the beliefs of many a literary academic of whatever generation, has provoked sometimes heated responses. For good reason in part: as history, much of McCann and Szalay’s essay is suspect at best, and bunk at worst. To their credit, they invited others to say so in the 2005 special issue of the *Yale Journal of Criticism* where they published their essay. Sarah Winter comes to the heart of the problem when she argues that McCann and Szalay paint history with a startlingly broad brush. They “proceed by linking a series of similar statements in order to assimilate a disparate group of writers into a common intellectual and ideological trajectory” (473), she notes, and generously calls this an “unsatisfactory” method that “reduces . . . the specificity of these statements” (473). David Bromwich likewise calls out their frequent elision of the early New Left and the counterculture in particular, noting that C. Wright Mills, whose

work on the “cultural apparatus” figures large in “Do You Believe in Magic?,” offered “no religiosity . . . no magical thinking, no final hostility toward state action” (469).<sup>1</sup>

McCann and Szalay blunder perhaps most embarrassingly in this regard, I would note, by ascribing a supposed “libertarian turn” (441)—along the lines of Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek, whom they describe as “the founding voices of contemporary libertarianism” (458)—to the New Left and then postmodernism. Their essay scans the works of Thomas Pynchon, Michel Foucault, Toni Morrison, Don DeLillo, Jean-François Lyotard, and Gilles Deleuze, and finds across them all a suspicion of states and of state-focused political organization and action. This constitutes almost their sole evidence for a postmodern “libertarian turn.” But their argument here reveals either a profound ignorance of libertarianism, or simple bad faith. For a mere suspicion of states and/or state politics does not prove libertarianism. A suspicion of, or even hostility toward states is common after all not only to libertarians, but to anarchists; to some types of communists and socialists; to some types of conservatives who are, unlike libertarians, also suspicious of large-scale capitalism; and even to (I suspect this applies to Morrison and DeLillo in particular) cynical or disillusioned liberals. But to be libertarian in the mold of von Mises and Hayek one must furthermore actively support the workings of an unregulated market. Largely because there isn’t any, McCann and Szalay never supply any substantive evidence of this support from the authors they discuss. Their portrait of postmodern

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<sup>1</sup> In this vein I would also point out that McCann and Szalay’s use of Paul Potter as their chief representative of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) is telling, and perhaps misleading. They cite Potter’s admittedly confused statements from the late 1960s and early 1970s—years after his turn as SDS President in 1964-65, and one of them simply to the effect that he was now concentrating on his personal life (447)—to prove their argument about the New Left’s antipolitical, antistatist beliefs. Picking Potter to represent SDS loads the dice, however: what of Potter’s fellow SDS President Tom Hayden, for example, who throughout the 1980s and 1990s pursued his New Left ideals as a California state legislator?

In addition to “Do You Believe in Magic?,” see McCann and Szalay’s opening essay for the special issue, “Introduction: Paul Potter and the Cultural Turn.”

libertarians banded together in support of an untrammelled capitalism, red in tooth and claw, thus grossly distorts the historical record.<sup>2</sup>

This being said, it is nevertheless important to salvage from McCann and Szalay's article the truth of the political dangers they identify in postmodernist discourse. For example, we only need look at the previous chapter to corroborate McCann and Szalay's argument about the prominence and potential dangers of magical thought in postmodernism. Nabokov's *Pale Fire* celebrates the "magic" of Shade's poem and Kinbote's *Zembla*, the *frisson* of an art opposed to institutions of bureaucracy. And for Nabokov this awe of aesthetic magic was indeed part of a rejection of all politics conventionally understood. Nabokov's pointed refusal to discuss or write about politics in any detail did not constitute an endorsement of libertarianism, of course; but undoubtedly it did encourage ignorance of what to him were the tedious details and machinations of state politics. Along with Kinbote, who couldn't help but think of taxation as "a thing of beauty" (75), Nabokov's antibureaucratic postmodernism in general promotes the charisma of magic at the expense of the rational "strong and slow boring of hard boards" that Max Weber recognized as the essence of state politics ("Politics" 128). From this innocuous start, the postmodernism I have sketched in this dissertation could indeed risk lapsing into what McCann and Szalay depict as an irrationalist antipolitics.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The sloppy argumentation I have identified here may also be seen outside of McCann and Szalay's work, unfortunately. In a recent interview in the online magazine *Jacobin*, for example, Walter Benn Michaels can be found suggesting that Foucault's work, motivated by horror at what the Nazis had done in the name of a state, "sort of marks the beginning of neoliberalism in Europe"—again, as if skepticism of state power somehow automatically demonstrates support for the globalized "free" market. In a similar vein Benn Michaels goes on to argue that "You get a different vision of what postmodernism, for example, is when you begin to see postmodernism as the official ideology of neoliberalism." This is undoubtedly true in a literal sense: one's vision would indeed be "different" if one understood postmodernism to be the official ideology of neoliberalism. But it would not have improved, as Benn Michaels implies.

<sup>3</sup> While McCann and Szalay make their argument from the standpoint of a traditional liberalism, one could just as well imagine a similar complaint about irrationalism and antistatism in New Left and countercultural politics coming from a socialist or social-democratic position. Indeed, the New Left was faced with many such complaints at the time, as for example in socialist Irving Howe's 1968 article, "The New York Intellectuals: A Chronicle and a Critique." There Howe argued that the younger generation "breathes contempt for rationality, impatience with mind

Additionally and I think most importantly, McCann and Szalay are right to note that the antistatist urges of the New Left, and of postmodernism, could be (and were) all too easily recuperated for the New Right. As John McClure summarizes, “the movement [of the sixties] . . . so discredited state institutions and traditional strategies of disciplined social mobilization that it could not effectively resist Reagan’s assault on the social safety net” (127). These post-New Left biases against the state and traditional politics were sometimes rooted in the antibureaucratism I have traced here. Thus with misgivings similar to those of McCann and Szalay, I have pointed out the potentially conservative consequences of the New York Intellectuals’ antibureaucratic ethos. Even in the 1940s, Trilling’s keenly skeptical portrait of a self-interested New Class of bureaucratized intellectual workers provided foundations not only for the comparatively quiescent new liberalism of 1950s figures like Daniel Bell and Arthur Schlesinger, but for a 1970s neoconservative backlash against an imagined New Class (read: New Left) of intellectual workers who sought to capture the bureaucratic state for essentially selfish purposes. Trilling’s portrait of the New Class supplied an important rationale to the influential neoconservative intellectuals who supported Reagan’s dismantling of the welfare state in the 1980s. Thus the cultural and political attitudes of an antibureaucratic postmodernism, built in part on Trilling’s foundations, no doubt helped the post-1970s New Right attacks on the state-run bureaucracies of social security, health care, welfare, environmental protection, and a host of other social goods. And while the antistatist sentiments of the New Left might have been appropriate or at least

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. . . It despises liberal values, liberal cautions, liberal virtues” (47). Accordingly its politics, “insofar as it approximates a politics, mixes sentiments of anarchism with apologies for authoritarianism; bubbling hopes for ‘participatory democracy’ with manipulative elitism; unqualified populist majoritarianism with the reign of the cadres” (45). And culturally, Howe charged most flamboyantly, the young generation was “impatient with literary structures of complexity and coherence,” wanting instead “works of literature—though literature may be the wrong word—that will be as absolute as the sun, as unarguable as orgasm, and as delicious as a lollipop” (47). Like McCann and Szalay, too, though more in sorrow than in anger, Howe takes Norman Mailer to task as a primary symbol of late-sixties irrationalism on the left (47, 49, and especially 50; cf. McCann and Szalay 435-38 and *passim*). For the socialist Howe in 1968 as for liberals McCann and Szalay in 2005, in short, the literature and politics of the 1960s believed too much in magic.

understandable for an era in which the water hoses of a state-run fire department were trained on Civil Rights protesters by state-hired police, and in which a state-run military relentlessly carpet-bombed Vietnam, McCann and Szalay are right to ask how much the antibureaucratism and antistatism of the New Left—and of postmodernism—has served the left since Reagan won power by declaring that government was the problem and not the solution.

Thus I agree with a number of McCann and Szalay's political critiques of the New Left and postmodernism. But even as I agree specifically that the New Left's antibureaucratism was vulnerable to a New Right that excoriated "the federal bureaucracy that Barry Goldwater dismissed as 'dimestore New Deal'" ("Do" 442), I nevertheless must simultaneously insist that the political meanings of the antibureaucratic tradition I have detailed in *Class Work* cannot be reduced to, or held responsible for, the "libertarian" politics that McCann and Szalay highlight. Indeed, the antibureaucratic tradition I examine here led to some of the most inspiring successes of the New Left, and still has relevance today.

When a group of activist students gathered in Port Huron, Michigan in June of 1962—intellectually curious students who even might have read Mary McCarthy's review of *Pale Fire* in that month's *New Republic* ("A Bolt from the Blue")—they produced a document whose conclusion urged students and faculty to "wrest control of the educational process from the administrative bureaucracy" in order to "make debate and controversy, not dull pedantic cant, the common style for educational life" (Students 374). This campus-based antibureaucratism was plainly inherited from the intellectual tradition examined in *Class Work*. A young Tom Hayden had, after all, created the first draft of *The Port Huron Statement* after immersing himself in 1950s social and democratic theory—above all, that of his idol C. Wright Mills (Miller, *Democracy* 78-105). And Mills was closely attuned to the antibureaucratic concerns of the New

York Intellectuals in his formative years. He wrote frequently for Dwight Macdonald's *Politics* in the forties, and, as I note in Chapter Four, he was a friend of his Columbia University colleague Lionel Trilling in the late forties.<sup>4</sup> His pioneering translations of Max Weber during this same period no doubt also gave theoretical justification and firmness to his career-long skepticism of bureaucratic institutions, including the academy.

And *The Port Huron Statement* drew on Mills's antibureaucratic thought (among others') in order to give birth to what would become bureaucracy's great antipode in the radical student imagination: "participatory democracy." This term was *The Port Huron Statement*'s electrifying contribution to the thinking and political practices of the young New Left; and it self-consciously attempted to solve a quintessential problematic of the fifties—the bureaucratic squelching of disagreement and debate via intellectual departmentalization and isolation—by imagining a ubiquitous deliberation of public affairs carried out in thousands of self-styled *poleis* across the country. "In a participatory democracy," *The Port Huron Statement* proclaimed, "politics has the function of bringing people out of isolation and into community" (Students 333).<sup>5</sup> This democratic hope for "debate and controversy" on campus and beyond, it must be said, offered nothing like—indeed it promoted something radically opposed to—McCann and Szalay's imagined irrationalist antipolitics, or "libertarian" hatred of states. For whatever "participatory democracy"'s conceptual limitations, we must account for at least the most obvious of its political successes. The quasi-Rousseauian vision of political association, motivated in large part by the antibureaucratic tradition examined here, helped spur not only a Civil Rights movement that demanded universal access to democratic rights of participation (and got a long way there

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<sup>4</sup> Mills and Trilling's friendship is documented in part by Mills's various admiring references to Trilling in 1951's *White Collar* (147, 153, 320) and more directly in the book's acknowledgments (355).

<sup>5</sup> In using the term *poleis* to describe the aims of 1962's *Port Huron Statement*, I am thinking particularly of Arendt's roughly contemporary hope to bring people "out of isolation and into community" via a revival of the Greek *polis* in 1958's *The Human Condition* (see especially 196-99).

with the Voting Rights Act of 1965), but a truly national movement that ended the Vietnam War.<sup>6</sup>

McCann and Szalay thus unjustly ignore the political gains of an antibureaucratic New Left's belief in "participatory democracy." But they also have little good to say about the antibureaucratic dedication to professionalism that they argue was a self-interested motive of the New Left all along. Here is perhaps my most passionate disagreement with McCann and Szalay, and my most central defense of the tradition I have examined here. The activists of the New Left, McCann and Szalay argue, "despised . . . bureaucratic management and, in particular, its capacity to interfere with the independent operation of professional expertise" (452). They argue as well that such an "antibureaucratic sensibility" was "often consistent with the interests of aspiring young members of the postwar era's burgeoning professional class and, more significantly, . . . [with their] investment in the professional ethos of autonomous vocation" (452). All of this is correct. The student New Left's antibureaucratism resonated deeply with, and indeed encouraged, its class-based attachment to professional ideals of autonomy. But my objection is that McCann and Szalay write as if there were something *bad* about this. They cynically cast the New Left rejection of bureaucracy and promotion of autonomous work as something sprung only from its members' temporarily blocked hopes for their own upward mobility, rather than as a more profound and genuine—class-based, yes, and potentially even class-conscious—belief in the value of autonomous and self-directed work.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> James Miller also suggests how the term "participatory democracy" offered a useful ambiguity for this generation, one that could galvanize and hold together large numbers of people despite likely political differences. Did "participatory democracy" suggest a supplement to representative democracy, or a substitute for it? Was it an Americanized euphemism for the old word "socialism," or an exciting transformation of its meanings? The term's elasticity was key to its effectiveness. See Miller's chapter on the term in *Democracy Is In the Streets* (141-54).

<sup>7</sup> A portion of the student and largely middle-class New Left of course did in fact become quite class-conscious, as the spate of 1960s and 1970s theorizing about the "new working class" and "Professional-Managerial Class" attests—and as McCann and Szalay implicitly acknowledge in the midst of making their argument about the professional origins of the New Left (452ff., especially footnote 68). As this dissertation shows, this New Left



It has often been said that the New Left succeeded by taking the idea of democracy much more seriously than their teachers intended. Something similar might be said with regard to the New Left and professionalism: the New Left took seriously the ideal of intellectual autonomy, of the democratic freedom to think without economic or political interference, that was often only implicit in the middle-class professional ethos. One may see this, for example, in *The Port Huron Statement*'s passionate insistence that work should be "educative, not stultifying; creative, not mechanical; [and above all] self-directed, not manipulated" (Students 333). And in this sense the history narrated by *Class Work*, of the long emergence of postmodernism from the radical professionals of the 1930s through to the antibureaucratic professionals of the 1950s, may count as a prehistory of not only postmodernism but of the New Left. For the hope to gain autonomy for intellectual workers was the great bequest of the Old Left to the New. The dream of middle-class brain workers' control over their own labor—a dream common to both *Culture and the Crisis* (1932) and *The Port Huron Statement* (1962)—made for a profound continuity between two movements otherwise often separated by the cruel effects of a McCarthyism that had thinned a generation of activist knowledge and experience into near-irrelevance. Thus the antibureaucratic New Left hope for intellectual workers' autonomy—consistent indeed with the middle-class ethos of professionalism native to a student-based movement, but not reducible to mere class striving—had nobler roots and greater political resonance than McCann and Szalay imagine.

This continuity of conviction between Old and New Left, incidentally, should likewise provoke more caution when we hear the now all-too-easy knock against the New York Intellectuals' attachment to their own "independence." Alan Wald notes critically that it was the

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flowering of class-consciousness was in many respects simply a revival of the 1930s and 1940s class-consciousness typified by the Old Left debates over an "intellectual class" or "New Class."

“very ideology of becoming ‘independent critical thinkers,’ indeed intellectuals beyond the blinding grip of ideology itself, that became the chief means by which the New York intellectuals masked their shift in political allegiance” (*New York* 369). The New York Intellectuals’ latter-day refusal to declare any political commitment, he charges here, merely disguised their actual slide into a toothless liberalism or even a fanged neoconservatism. And he is right. But we should nevertheless remember that intellectual “independence” was also the most cherished hope of the “intellectual class” idea that first inspired the New York Intellectuals in their radical and still politically-committed youth. The desire for independence lay behind *Culture and the Crisis*’s assertion of intellectuals’ right “to live and to function” as thinkers and “not permit business men to teach us our business” (League 3). To be independent was to fulfill the intellectual class’s highest political aspirations: freedom to think and, yes, plan, without interference from the market—autonomy from capital itself. By the 1950s, no doubt, for many New York Intellectuals this ideal of independence had become a deradicalized and even depoliticized fetish. But not for all: some social critique of intellectuals’ unfreedom still lived on in the quite common liberal criticism of bureaucratic labor, expressed in part by the campus fictions we have examined in Part II. And thus the New York Intellectual ideology of “independence” could be refashioned by a *new* left in the sixties, one that would rediscover the Old Left’s knowledge that intellectual “independence” was a collective and political achievement, rather than an exclusively moral imperative. We must accordingly think the famed New York Intellectual “independence” of the fifties dialectically. It was both a depoliticized or even conservative ruse, *and* an only dormant expression of intellectual workers’ desire for autonomous labor. Harold Rosenberg’s famous put-down of the New York Intellectuals in

1948—a “Herd of Independent Minds”—might be interpreted more optimistically: the collective herd could yet turn out to be part of a politicized *class* struggling for autonomy at work.<sup>8</sup>

Along these lines, and most centrally to the argument of this dissertation, we may defend the early postmodern from McCann and Szalay’s accusations of political conservatism as well. For early postmodernism advocated an ideal of intellectual autonomy quite compatible with both now-liberal New York Intellectuals and, perhaps even more so, a young New Left. In many ways, Nabokov is the toughest case imaginable for making an argument about early postmodernism’s New Left political affinities. His giddy celebration of the aesthetic seems a far cry from radical students’ attempts to realize “participatory democracy,” to be sure, and it is laughable to imagine him having much use for Tom Hayden or any other luminary of the student left that would emerge on the national stage so soon after the publication of *Pale Fire*. But Nabokov’s novel and *The Port Huron Statement*, for example, were works of the same postmodern moment. Consciously or not, the iconic work of nascent postmodernism and the founding manifesto of the New Left both inherited the Old Left struggles over the significance and organization of intellectual labor, and captured the same early sixties antibureaucratic zeitgeist of restless middle-class intellectual workers. If neither Kinbote nor Shade puts his body upon the gears of what Free Speech Movement activist Mario Savio called “depersonalized, unresponsive bureaucracy” (“End” 329), each nevertheless undeniably stands opposed to the reduced intellectual range of academic and other bureaucracies.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore *Pale Fire*’s

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<sup>8</sup> See Rosenberg’s “The Herd of Independent Minds: Has the Avant-Garde Its Own Mass Culture?”

<sup>9</sup> I allude here to Savio’s famous exhortation during a December 2, 1964 sit-in at Sproul Hall, protesting the prohibition of political speech and action on the University of California, Berkeley campus:

There’s a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can’t take part; you can’t even passively take part. And you’ve got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you’ve got to make it stop. And you’ve got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you’re free, the machine will be prevented from working at all! (“Bodies” 327)

postmodernist, metafictional celebration of aesthetic creation, we have seen, promotes an ambitious intellectual labor that surpasses departmental limits in order to comprehend the *whole* of whatever it examines. Despite what some later theorists of “totality” would suggest, the primary *political* expression of this expansive intellectual urge in the early sixties was not that of totalitarian domination, but rather the reverse. As we saw in Mary McCarthy’s *The Groves of Academe*, the promotion of an holistic intellectual labor was part and parcel of a liberal universalist (and erstwhile literary realist) agenda to create the wide-ranging social curiosity necessary to any true practice of democracy, “participatory” or not. Whether in a proto-poststructuralist epistemological skepticism that would question narrow, bureaucratized perceptions of the world, or in a ludic metafiction that celebrated the pleasure and value of free intellectual labor, then, the early postmodern could share with the New Left an opposition to bureaucracy in the name of both democracy and workers’ autonomy. Contrary to what McCann and Szalay imply, postmodernism’s first affinities were more with a nascent liberal and even socialist New Left than with any subsequent “libertarian” New Right.

This brings me, for a final paragraph, to the present. In this dissertation I have sought to establish a prehistory of postmodernism that is not only true, but—to use that quintessential byword of academic reform in the sixties—“relevant.” Here then, as I have said, is not the place for a full accounting of postmodernism’s changing intellectual, literary, and political history *after* the early 1960s, or of McCann and Szalay’s skeptical take on that postmodernism’s meanings. But it is the place to insist that whatever we think of postmodernism now, the spirit of postmodern origins is due a revival. The antibureaucratic critique of intellectual narrowness and the corresponding advocacy of intellectual autonomy, so central to young postmodernist thought

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Savio’s comment about “depersonalized, unresponsive bureaucracy” comes from a speech he made later the same day, in which he characterized a remote and antidemocratic bureaucracy as likely “the greatest problem” of not just the University of California campus, but of “our nation” itself (“End” 329).

and expression, remain vital. At the very least, they remain vital to the politics of higher education in an era of academic downsizing and speedup. Pressures to narrow intellectual and pedagogical focus have now become greater in response to an ever-tightening job market, and may get worse with looming administrative or state-sponsored attempts to institute quantifiable “outcomes assessments” for teaching—a bureaucratic monitoring of faculty labor that reduces student thought to the most instrumental of terms. Ideological and economic pressures now conspire daily to afford state and campus administrators more control over the labor of faculty, whose increased teaching and service loads often divert them from sustained thought in the first place. For us, then, the early postmodern insistence on the need for intellectuals’ independence should possess new urgency. The dream of intellectual workers’ autonomy and control over their own labor—this Old Left dream of the thirties, this New Left, postmodernist hope of the sixties—today remains an ideal worth fighting for, by every means available. The history of postmodernism thus may teach us still.

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