

The Fiction of Postmodernity: Dialectical Studies of  
Martin Amis, Don DeLillo and Salman Rushdie

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## Abstract

This thesis is a dialectical study of fiction by Martin Amis, Don DeLillo and Salman Rushdie. It situates novels by these three writers in relation to a Western Marxist theoretical understanding of the postmodern and the culture of postmodernity, particularly as developed in the writings of Fredric Jameson. While the thesis is intended to demonstrate how such theoretical accounts help illuminate interpretation of contemporary, postmodern fiction, it also suggests how that fiction might provide a critique, or expose the limitations, of those theoretical or conceptual models themselves.

The thesis traces, in selected examples of Amis's, DeLillo's and Rushdie's fiction, elements of dialectical conflict. It describes the means by which the texts enact simultaneously a form of ideological complicity with what Jameson (borrowing from the economist Ernst Mandel) calls 'late capitalism' and a measure of social and cultural critique. It is with this identification of both the ideological and critical features of postmodern fiction that the thesis is principally concerned.

Chapter 1 charts a Western Marxist model of transition from modernism to postmodernism both through the theoretical writings of Georg Lukács, Theodor Adorno and Fredric Jameson and through brief studies of examples of modernist and late-modernist fiction. It concludes with an acknowledgement of the difficulties Western Marxist aesthetics have had in identifying any critical potential in postmodern culture. Nonetheless, the literary studies which succeed chapter one offer lengthy discussions of postmodern fiction which carry out Jameson's insistence that a properly Marxian analysis must attempt to identify both the affirmative and the critical moments of cultural commodities. This is a step which, though acknowledging its significance, Western Marxist critics have thus far been reluctant to take.

Chapters two to four, which address the work of Amis, DeLillo and Rushdie, focus particularly on issues such as the loss of a cultural (semi)autonomy in the postmodern and the effect this has had on notions of aesthetic critical distance. While they attempt to reassert the continuing worth and validity of that Western Marxist tradition of cultural critique, these studies also imply some necessary revision of its treatment of postmodernity's cultural products. This latter point is addressed in the final chapter.

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And, of course, thanks to Nicola Slater, who has been a source of continuing inspiration and motivation.

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Kenneth and Nancy -- and to my son, Thomas.

I declare that this thesis has been composed by me and is all my own work.

Stephen Baker

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## Preface

*My inclination here and throughout is to insist on an approach which would try to work out the affirmative and the critical moments of the postmodern, or, for that matter, the avantgarde, rather than either celebrating it uncritically or condemning it in toto. If such an approach were to be called dialectical, it would neither be the Hegelian dialectic with its move toward sublation and telos, nor would it be the Adornean negative dialectic at a standstill. But, clearly, I do not believe that a cultural criticism indebted to the tradition of Western Marxism is bankrupt or obsolete today any more than I would concede to the false dichotomy between postmodern cynicism and the strong defense of modernist seriousness. Neither postmodern pastiche nor the neoconservative restoration of high culture has won the day, and only time will tell who the true cynics are.*

*Andreas Huyssen, After the Great Divide*

The following work shares the same critical impulse described above by Andreas Huyssen. Though indebted to a large extent to Adornean analyses of the culture industry and of the fate of commodified art, it is nonetheless motivated by a belief that such theoretical accounts remain incomplete, inadequate both in terms of their theoretical self-understanding and their ability to grasp the complexities of those cultural texts to which they are applied. Unlike Huyssen, though, I am less interested in the postmodern than in postmodern fiction. Subsequent chapters will look closely at examples of that fiction -- novels by Martin Amis (*Money, London Fields, Time's Arrow, The Information*); Don DeLillo (*White Noise, Libra, Mao II*); and Salman Rushdie (*Midnight's Children, The Satanic Verses, The Moor's Last Sigh*) -- in the attempt to identify the coexistence in these texts of precisely those affirmative and critical moments to which Huyssen refers.

In both Amis and DeLillo I shall be looking at the texts' interplay of "high" and "low" culture -- a frequently cited feature in theoretical discussions of the postmodern -- and at the ways in which this cultural situation is portrayed as an agent in our formation as individual and social subjects. In

the chapter on Rushdie, I will be concentrating more on the attempt in the postmodern to envisage and to represent a utopian impulse, an attempt which of course is problematized by that lack of faith in grand narratives by which Jean-François Lyotard has so infamously defined the postmodern condition.<sup>1</sup>

The opening chapter, though, offers a largely theoretical account of the relationship of postmodernism to modernism. It establishes a set of critical and theoretical parameters to which I return in the final, brief chapter which readdresses Fredric Jameson's theoretical writings on the postmodern in light of the literary analyses of chapters two to four. The terms *modernism* and *postmodernism* have been subject to countless definitions and interpretations. It is not, therefore, my intention to attempt a survey of the various theoretical models of transition from modernism to postmodernism. Instead, I trace in Chapter One the development of the account which I find by far the most convincing: namely, that of the cultural critique of Western Marxism, mainly as it has developed through the writings of Georg Lukács, Theodor Adorno and Fredric Jameson.<sup>2</sup>

For the most part, the writings of Western Marxists on postmodern culture have been theoretical; neither Jameson nor Terry Eagleton are noted for their studies of individual postmodern literary texts. Like Huyssen, they write on the cultural phenomenon of postmodernism, developing a historicized concept of 'the postmodern'. Conversely, the focus of this thesis,

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<sup>1</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984), p.xxiv: 'Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.'

<sup>2</sup> Although a number of works by each of these authors will be cited, a reading of the following three texts would convey something of the development I'm describing: Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, 2nd edn., trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin, 1967; repr. 1992); Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

is on the writings of the three novelists cited above. While the literary studies to follow will be consistently and principally informed by that Western Marxist analysis of the cultural sphere of postmodernism, they will also engage -- albeit sometimes implicitly -- with the major literary-critical categorisations of postmodern fiction's stylistic characteristics offered in the work of two of the most influential critics of postmodern fiction: Linda Hutcheon and Brian McHale.<sup>3</sup> The following few pages summarise what I see as the limitations and contradictions of these literary-critical models, reinforcing the need for that historicized theoretical understanding of a cultural situation that we find in Western Marxist critical theory. A number of the issues raised in the context of this discussion of Hutcheon and McHale will therefore return in the studies of postmodern fiction to follow, though with rather different interpretative results.

Hutcheon has of course categorised postmodern fiction as almost a genre unto itself: *historiographic metafiction*. As her term suggests, Hutcheon emphatically does not agree with those who identify postmodern texts with a loss of history: 'Despite its detractors,' she writes,

the postmodern is not ahistorical or dehistoricized, though it does question our (perhaps unacknowledged) assumptions about what constitutes historical knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

The canon of Hutcheon's postmodern fiction is, as Brian McHale notes<sup>5</sup>, particularly circumscribed by her definition of such fiction as '*coextensive with the category "historiographic metafiction"*.'<sup>6</sup> Novels such as Robert Coover's

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<sup>3</sup>See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988);

Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989);

Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987; repr. Routledge, 1989);

Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>4</sup>Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p.xii.

<sup>5</sup>Brian McHale, 'Postmodernism, or The Anxiety of Master Narratives', *Diacritics*, 22.1 (1992), pp.20-21.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid*, p.20.

*The Public Burning*, E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* are quite obviously grist to Hutcheon's mill, focussing as they do on the instability and ideological construction of historical knowledge. Hutcheon insists on the role which historiographic metafiction plays as an *intervention* in our understanding of social relations through discourse. It is in this explicit engagement with the status of historical knowledge that Hutcheon situates the distinction between her form of postmodern fiction and the more radically self-reflexive texts of American "surfiction" which she identifies as late modernist.<sup>7</sup> Postmodern fiction (or historiographic metafiction), she suggests, involves a self-conscious and simultaneous absorption and subversion of realist narrative conventions. Avoiding the outright rejection of such conventions to be found in what Hutcheon calls late modernist texts, postmodern fiction thus attempts to engage us in a process of self-critical rereading:

In challenging the seamless quality of the history/fiction (or world/art) join implied by realist narrative, postmodern fiction does not, however, disconnect itself from history or the world. It foregrounds and thus contests the conventionality and unacknowledged ideology of the assumption of seamlessness and asks its readers to question the process by which we represent our selves and our world to ourselves and to become aware of the means by which we *make* sense of and *construct* order out of experience in our particular culture. We cannot avoid representation. We *can* try to avoid fixing our notion of it and assuming it to be transhistorical and transcultural. We can also study how representation legitimises and privileges certain kinds of knowledge -- including certain kinds of historical knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

Much of what Hutcheon argues seems to me correct and will be echoed throughout the literary studies to follow. For example, an appreciation of the extent to which *Midnight's Children* both internalises and critiques the

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<sup>7</sup>"Surfiction" is a term associated with Raymond Federman and cited by McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction*, p.4.

<sup>8</sup>Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, pp.53-54.

nineteenth-century 'historical novel' (whose contours were described by Lukács<sup>9</sup>) is invaluable to any reading of Rushdie's novel. However, for the purposes of this thesis, Hutcheon's categorisation is inadequate in two principal (and related) respects: firstly, the identification of postmodern fiction as 'historiographic metafiction' is too exclusive -- it would seem unhelpful to allow Don DeLillo's *Libra* into this canon while disqualifying the same author's *White Noise* (a variation on the campus novel); and secondly, Hutcheon insists on postmodern fiction's interrogation of history and historical discourses, without ever offering a historicized analysis of the forms that interrogation might take. In other words, while asserting that postmodern fiction 'contests the conventionality and unacknowledged ideology' of realist forms of historical representation, Hutcheon neglects to study in any depth the ideology of that very critique beyond acknowledging the often contradictory stance which postmodern cultural texts adopt in relation to the societies in which they are produced.<sup>10</sup>

In what might superficially appear a far more exclusively formalist model of postmodernist fiction, Brian McHale asserts more explicitly than Hutcheon ever does (despite entitling a chapter 'Historicizing the Postmodern') the possibility of a mimetic relation of the forms of postmodernist fiction to advanced, late capitalist societies:<sup>11</sup>

Postmodernist fiction at its most mimetic holds the mirror up to everyday life in advanced industrial societies, where reality is pervaded by the "miniature escape fantasies" of television and the movies. The plural ontology of television-dominated

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<sup>9</sup>Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah & Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin, 1962).

<sup>10</sup>See Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, pp.201-221. The critique which Jameson offers in *Postmodernism* (pp.22-25) of Hutcheon's analysis of *Ragtime* is, in this respect, instructive, and is summarised in the next chapter.

<sup>11</sup>McHale avoids the phrase 'postmodern' when dealing with fiction and instead stresses the suffix of 'postmodernist' to underline the extent to which it is a response to modernist concerns and techniques. When summarizing McHale's argument, I shall follow his usage even though it is not my usual practice.

everyday life appears, for instance, in Robert Coover's "The Babysitter" (from *Pricksongs and Descants*, 1969) and Walter Abish's "Ardor/Awe/Atrocity" (from *In the Future Perfect*, 1977); here the ubiquitous television set, a world within the world, further destabilizes an already fluid and unstable fictional reality.<sup>12</sup>

Whilst Hutcheon describes postmodern fiction as an identifiable genre of writing which can be contextualised by comparing it to other forms of contemporaneous discourse (such as the sceptical historiography of Hayden White), McHale is here attempting to ground his postmodernist fiction in a particular social and historical experience. It is, then, perhaps not surprising that, despite McHale's own general reluctance to pursue questions of the cultural and social significance of postmodernist texts, his categories have been found at times useful for more materialist-inclined critics.

McHale's central thesis is that the difference between modernist and postmodernist texts is most easily grasped as a difference in their dominant.<sup>13</sup>

'I will formulate it as a general thesis about modernist fiction,' he writes,

the dominant of modernist fiction is *epistemological*. That is, modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as those mentioned by Dick Higgins in my epigraph: "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?" Other typical modernist questions might be added: What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?<sup>14</sup>

Novels such as Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, which relies to a large extent on the convention of the unreliable narrator, or Kafka's *The Trial*, whose depiction of the individual's persecution withholds any apparent motive for the Court's actions, would clearly fit in well with McHale's categorisation.

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<sup>12</sup>McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p.128.

<sup>13</sup>McHale borrows this term from Roman Jakobson, citing Jakobson's 'The Dominant', in Ladislav Matejka & Krystyna Pomorska, eds., *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT, 1971), pp.105-110. See McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, pp.6-11.

<sup>14</sup>McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p.9.

He subsequently argues that 'the dominant of postmodernist fiction is *ontological*':

That is, postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like the ones Dick Higgins calls "post-cognitive": "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" Other typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world it projects, for instance: What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?<sup>15</sup>

Again it is not difficult to provide suitable examples for McHale's thesis: David Lynch's film *Blue Velvet* and Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* are two which spring readily to mind. The coexistence of different worlds in these texts is not something to be resolved according to the conventions of narrative (un)reliability or by recourse to characters' construction of fantasy worlds. Instead, it is evocative of an ontological instability to which both readers and characters are subject.

David Harvey, in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, uses elements of McHale's argument to show the mimetic relation of postmodernist fiction's ontological concerns to a cultural and social condition of postmodernity:

Our postmodern ontological landscape, suggests McHale, 'is unprecedented in human history -- at least in the degree of its pluralism.' Spaces of very different worlds seem to collapse upon each other, much as the world's commodities are assembled in the supermarket and all manner of subcultures get juxtaposed in the contemporary city. Disruptive spatiality triumphs over the coherence of perspective and narrative in postmodern fiction, in exactly the same way that imported beers coexist with local brews, local employment collapses under the weight of foreign competition, and all the divergent spaces of the world are assembled nightly as a collage of images upon the television screen.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid, p.10.

<sup>16</sup>David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989; repr. 1990), pp.301-302.

Harvey is clearly engaging here with what Terry Eagleton has called 'Lyotard's jet-setters', those typically postmodern subjects who take full advantage of contemporary cultural eclecticism: 'one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner',<sup>17</sup> etc. Missing from Lyotard's formulation, of course, is an acknowledgement of how this eclecticism might be experienced in terms of labour relations and employment practices: the globalisation of consumption has also entailed the globalisation of production, accompanied by a widening of the gap between the rich and poor of western, late capitalist economies since the end of the 1960s.<sup>18</sup> Harvey's exploitation of McHale's thesis is, in one sense, little more than an extension of the latter's own identification of the mimetic function of postmodernist fiction. McHale, after all, writes the following on Jameson's definition of postmodernism as late capitalism's cultural logic:

I do not see that this higher-level, motivating metanarrative is incompatible with the story I have chosen to tell; but I have preferred to remain at a lower level of narrative motivation, in hopes that any loss in scope and explanatory power will have been compensated for by a closer, finer-grained engagement with the mechanisms of postmodernist texts themselves.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Jean-François Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?', trans. Régis Durand, in Thomas Docherty, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1993), p.42.

<sup>18</sup>The source of the following statistics is *Historical Statistics of the United States, Economic Reports to the President*, Harrison and Bluestone, 1988 (see Harvey, p.193).

A rising tide of social inequality engulfed the United States in the Reagan years, reaching a post-war high in 1986; by then the poorest fifth of the population, which had gradually improved its share of national income to a high point of nearly 7 per cent in the early 1970s, found itself with only 4.6 per cent. Between 1979 and 1986, the number of poor families with children increased by 35 per cent, and in some large metropolitan areas, such as New York, Chicago, Baltimore, and New Orleans, more than half the children were living in families with incomes below the poverty line. (Harvey, pp.330-331).

<sup>19</sup>McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism*, pp.8-9.

In another sense, though, the stress which Harvey places on this mimetic function raises the issue of the historical periodization of the postmodern. Here McHale has muddied the waters somewhat by suggesting that both Jameson and Harvey posit a model of the development from modernism to postmodernism

according to which modernism and postmodernism are not period styles at all, one of them current and the other outdated, but more like alternative stylistic options between which contemporary writers are free to choose without that choice necessarily identifying them as either "avant-garde" or "arrière-garde".<sup>20</sup>

Although it is true that Jameson does not define postmodernism as a period *style*, McHale's interpretation seems difficult to comprehend in light of Jameson's forthright repudiation of such practices:

. . . what follows is not to be read as stylistic description, as the account of one cultural style or movement among others. I have rather meant to offer a periodizing hypothesis, and that at a moment in which the very conception of historical periodization has come to seem most problematical indeed.<sup>21</sup>

Instead, McHale seems to be rehearsing the revision which he later offers of his own *Postmodernist Fiction*. He now suspects, he writes in *Constructing Postmodernism*, that the earlier book had offered a misleading account whereby 'a modernist poetics of fiction gave way to a postmodernist poetics.' 'What is missing from *Postmodernist Fiction*, he adds,

is the counter-story according to which modernism and postmodernism are not successive stages in some inevitable evolution from less advanced to more advanced aesthetic forms, but rather alternative contemporary practices, equally "advanced" or "progressive," equally available, between which writers are free to choose.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid, p.9.

<sup>21</sup>Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.3.

<sup>22</sup>McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism*, p.207.

Contrary to McHale's argument, there is in fact little common ground to be shared here by his thesis and the theoretical constructs of Jameson and Harvey.<sup>23</sup> Postmodern cultural texts are, for Jameson, necessarily engagements with something like Harvey's 'condition of postmodernity', the cultural and socio-economic formations of late capitalism. Furthermore, it is in the 'force field' of a postmodern condition that all western, contemporary cultural production takes place. The distinction between modernism and postmodernism is not, therefore, defined by Jameson in primarily stylistic terms, but with reference to the role of the whole sphere of culture in distinct moments of capitalist history. '[E]ven if all the constitutive features of postmodernism were identical with and continuous to those of an older modernism,' he writes,

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<sup>23</sup>In *Constructing Postmodernism* (p.301), McHale cites Jameson's identification of Claude Simon's 'alternation between a Faulknerian evocation of perception and a neo-novelistic practice of textualization' (*Postmodernism*, p.135). However, Jameson prefaces this point by defining Simon's relationship to both the Faulknerian style and the *nouveau roman* in terms which identify it as a *postmodern* stance:

I will suggest, therefore, that his relationship to *both* is pastiche, a bravura imitation so exact as to include the well-nigh undetectable reproduction of stylistic authenticity itself, of a thoroughgoing commitment of the authorial subject to the phenomenological preconditions of the stylistic practices in question. This is, then, in the largest sense what is postmodern about Simon: the evident emptiness of that subject beyond all phenomenology, its capacity to embrace another style as though it were another world. (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.133).

This is a point which McHale concedes in 'Postmodernism, or The Anxiety of Master Narratives', p.24: 'Thus the fiction of Claude Simon can be seen as postmodernist, according to Jameson's account, for the way it pastiches both Faulknerian modernism and the poetics of the *nouveau roman*.'

Harvey's position is rather more complicated. Although his history of the development from modernism to postmodernism is less linear than that of Jameson, he does not allow for the free, individual agency which McHale presupposes. Instead, he suggests that rather than hold fast to a notion of postmodernism superseding modernism it would be more useful to think of stages in the development of the cultural history of capitalism. 'Put more concretely,' he writes,

the degree of Fordism and modernism, or of flexibility and postmodernism, is bound to vary from time to time and from place to place, depending on which configuration is profitable and which is not. (Harvey, p.344).

Thus it is possible, he suggests, that the social and cultural features of modernism might, in certain circumstances, be found useful economically and reemployed. Both terms, though, remain crucially tied to a metanarrative of historical development -- in this case, that of the capitalist mode of production.

the two phenomena would still remain utterly distinct in their meaning and social function, owing to the very different positioning of postmodernism in the economic system of late capital and, beyond that, to the transformation of the very sphere of culture in contemporary society.<sup>24</sup>

The continuation of a modernist poetics and/or aesthetic would not, for Jameson, constitute anything like a continuation of modernism proper. This is not to say that all contemporary cultural production is postmodern, but that the postmodern is 'the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses . . . must make their way.'<sup>25</sup> In a more recent book (*The Seeds of Time*), Jameson describes the postmodern, as it relates to architecture, as 'the situation or dilemma to which the individual architects and their specific and unique projects all have to respond in some way or other.'<sup>26</sup> By extension, it would be fair to say that, although the cultural dominant of postmodernism does not determine the form a novelist's writing may take, it provides the parameters to which that writing is a response and by which its 'meaning and social function' are necessarily informed. Thus the novels of Saul Bellow cannot helpfully be described as postmodern; but they can be seen as engaged in a meaningful response to precisely the social and aesthetic situation which Jameson and Harvey describe as the postmodern, a response in which the novels' reliance on ostensibly realist narrative conventions plays a significant part.

Postmodernism, then, for Jameson, is not a period style but is to be grasped as a cultural dominant through a process of historical periodization. This, as Jameson acknowledges, involves the adoption of what Jean-François Lyotard would call a metanarrative, a Marxist understanding of the historical development of the capitalist mode of

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<sup>24</sup>Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.5.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, p.6.

<sup>26</sup>Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), p.xv.

production. Breaking what McHale calls the 'Prime Directive' implicit in Lyotard's definition of the postmodern condition -- 'incredulity toward metanarratives'<sup>27</sup> -- Jameson attempts to offer an explanation for that very condition, a historicized account of the cultural logic by which such incredulity is asserted. Many of the assumptions with which this thesis is permeated can be traced to a shared faith in the necessity and validity of such historical periodization. It is, moreover, with the intention of identifying postmodern culture's own historicized self-understanding that the following literary studies are undertaken.

The novels to be studied share many of the stylistic and thematic features described by both Hutcheon and McHale; they are, though, also situated quite firmly within, and posited as responses to, the condition of postmodernity that Jameson and Harvey theorise. Siding with Jameson, this thesis will rely on a Western Marxist understanding of cultural development in the twentieth century in the hope that such a framework, an insistence on the inescapability of historical context, will help facilitate productive analyses of the texts studied and suggest something of the complexity and versatility with which the fiction of postmodernity sustains itself. After all, as Harvey writes:

Postmodernism has come of age in the midst of this climate of voodoo economics, of political image construction and deployment, and of new social class formation. That there is some connection between this postmodernist burst and the image-making of Ronald Reagan, the attempt to deconstruct traditional institutions of working-class power (the trade unions and the political parties of the left), the masking of the social effects of the economic politics of privilege, ought to be evident enough. . . . The street scenes of impoverishment, disempowerment, graffiti and decay become grist for the cultural producers' mill, not, as Deutsche and Ryan point out, in

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<sup>27</sup>Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984), p.xxiv.

the muckraking reformist style of the late nineteenth century, but as a quaint and swirling backdrop (as in *Blade Runner*) upon which no social commentary is to be made. 'Once the poor become aestheticized, poverty itself moves out of our field of social vision', except as a passive depiction of otherness, alienation and contingency within the human condition. When 'poverty and homelessness are served up for aesthetic pleasure', then ethics is indeed submerged by aesthetics, inviting, thereby, the bitter harvest, of charismatic politics and ideological extremism.

If there is a meta-theory with which to embrace all these gyrations of postmodern thinking and cultural production, then why should we not deploy it?<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Harvey, pp.336-337.

## Chapter One

### The Broken Promise: Ideology and the Ageing of the New

The principal issue for twentieth-century Marxist aesthetics has been that of cultural or aesthetic autonomy. It is precisely the nature of the *relation* between various aspects of what we shall see Georg Lukács call the social 'totality' (such as the distinct but interdependent spheres of the aesthetic and the economic) that has been the main focus of analysis and interpretation. That this should be so ought to come as little surprise. The aesthetic in itself necessarily occupies an ambiguous and ambivalent position in Marxist thought. As will be shown throughout the course of what follows, Marxist aesthetics in the twentieth century have been preoccupied with the precarious nature and very survival of art and of the aesthetic in the face of the ever more stringent demands of a market economy. On the one hand, then, we shall witness a deep unease with regard to an aesthetic sphere whose claim to autonomy is clearly at odds with perceived Marxist orthodoxy concerning the ultimately determining role of the economic; equally, though, that autonomy is to be prized as it offers a window onto the non-existent, the possible vision of a possible alternative. To affirm this, however, is to do little more than to paraphrase ploddingly the opening sentences of Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*:

Today it goes without saying that nothing concerning art goes without saying, much less without thinking. Everything about art has become problematic: its inner life, its relation to society, even its right to exist.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p.1.

The following argument will posit three precise stages in the development of aesthetic modernism to postmodernism. These will be shown to relate dialectically -- both to each other as distinct but related historico-cultural moments, and to the historical situations which engender them. From aesthetic high modernism, then, represented by Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, we shall move to a later modernism of the 1930s and 40s, preoccupied by its inability to sustain the modernist claim to autonomy and acting out the disintegration of those very assumptions on which modernism itself was based; finally, we turn to postmodernism to analyse the form of its relation to late capitalism and to its modernist progenitors. Of crucial significance to such an argument, of course, is the establishment of a relation between aesthetic form and historical or social forces. For that reason, it is necessary to begin with a consideration of the early work of Georg Lukács, whose *The Theory of the Novel* and *History and Class Consciousness* represent an important breakthrough in the study of formal and historical development in art and philosophy.

## Georg Lukács and the Reification of Consciousness

The key category in *History and Class Consciousness* is that of reification, for it is with the essay 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' that Lukács first attempts to demonstrate what was later to be taken as the cornerstone of cultural critique by members of the Frankfurt School such as Adorno and Max Horkheimer, and by contemporary Marxist literary critics like Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton: namely, that

the problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in economics, but as the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects.<sup>30</sup>

For the Marx of *Capital*, of course, this was already self-evident. In the opening chapter of volume one, 'The Commodity', Marx writes of the magical fetishism of commodities using the analogy of religion: 'There,' he writes,

the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.<sup>31</sup>

That the commodity does not appear as the product of actual labour allows it to transcend (in ideology) the mundane world of class and labour relations - i.e. to transcend history.<sup>32</sup> In effect, though, this process is dialectical; for if the economic commodity has escaped its moment of historical particularity,

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<sup>30</sup>Georg Lukács, 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, 2nd edn., trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin, 1971; repr. 1990), p.83.

<sup>31</sup>Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1976; repr. Penguin, 1990), p.165.

<sup>32</sup>See Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967; repr. 1985), p.79: 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.'

then the relations of production too that have gone into its making have also been wiped clean of their historical markings and appear -- now reified or fetishized themselves -- as autonomous, independent, natural:

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists ... simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things.<sup>33</sup>

For Lukács, this signals that the essence of the commodity structure can best be understood in terms of the reification of human relations. Thus, we find in Lukács an emphasis on the expression of that structure in human consciousness at least equal to that on economic formations:

Just as the capitalist system continuously produces and reproduces itself economically on higher and higher levels, the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitively into the consciousness of man.<sup>34</sup>

Lukács writes that Marxist thought must combat this fetishism or reification by insisting on the inter-relation of consciousness and the economic. However, the reification of consciousness is also wonderfully ideologically efficient, for one of its principal effects is the incapacity of bourgeois consciousness to comprehend that structural inter-relatedness of which its reified form is a feature and consequence; in other words, reified consciousness is unable to grasp itself as reified consciousness and can only think of itself as a given, as *natural*.

It is precisely this argument that Lukács applies in part two of 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' -- 'The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought' -- to German idealistic philosophy (and particularly to the philosophy of Kant): 'Modern critical philosophy,' he writes, 'springs from the

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<sup>33</sup>Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, pp.164-165.

<sup>34</sup>Lukács, 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', p.93.

reified structure of consciousness.'<sup>35</sup> Kantian philosophy, to Lukács, represents the most advanced form of bourgeois thought. As Jay Bernstein, in an important book on Lukács called *The Philosophy of the Novel: Lukács, Marxism and the Dialectics of Form*, writes:

In [*History and Class Consciousness*] Lukács identifies Kant's critical philosophy as the philosophy of our age, as the theory which most completely articulates our experience of ourselves and the world now. Kant's philosophy, for Lukács, is the philosophy of the bourgeois world; it philosophically consecrates the world of capital. Thus, from a Marxist point of view, the Kantian system harbours the essential antinomies (contradictions) of bourgeois thought. The antinomies of Kant's philosophy are the antinomies of bourgeois thought.<sup>36</sup>

Thus the very form of Kant's philosophy is said by Lukács to express and to give ideological justification to the commodified world of capital. It is worth paying close attention to how this argument is made.

It is, for Lukács, Kant's refusal to extend his critique of ethical facts beyond those to be found in the individual consciousness which epitomises the limits beyond which his thought cannot go. This, he writes, has 'a number of consequences.' First of all, the constructedness of these facts is veiled by a mystificatory appearance of naturalness; in Kant they were 'transformed,' writes Lukács, 'into something merely there and could not be conceived of as having been "created".'<sup>37</sup> Secondly, the external world of suffering and exchange is itself depicted as immune to ethical activity (an activity which is the province only of the free-thinking individual): 'in nature and in the "external world" laws still operate with inexorable necessity, while freedom

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<sup>35</sup>Lukács, 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', pp.110-111.

<sup>36</sup>J.M. Bernstein, *The Philosophy of the Novel: Lukács, Marxism and the Dialectics of Form*, (Brighton, Harvester, 1984), pp.xiii-xiv.

<sup>37</sup>Lukács, 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', p.124.

and the autonomy that is supposed to result from the discovery of the ethical world are reduced to a mere *point of view from which to judge* internal events.<sup>38</sup>

That the 'inexorable necessity' with which the world continues its uninterrupted business is, in Kant's formulation, a particular effect of subjective reason is neatly noted in Bernstein's summary of Kant on causality:

Oversimplifying, Kant's thesis is that the world's appearance of being a causally determined domain is to be explained by the *imposition* of the category of causality on it by human beings in their cognitive activities. Thus, the objective world's being causally constituted is, in part at least, a result or product of human activity. Because the objective, spatially and temporally extended world confronting human beings is causally constituted, then human freedom and spontaneity can gain no purchase on it; human freedom remains exiled within human subjectivity, unable to determine or shape the objective world in terms appropriate to it. For Kant our spontaneity, freedom and rationality are what define us as human beings; yet, in the simplest expression of those powers in the act of knowing we construct a world in which there is no room for freedom or reason. What 'is' is determined by relations of cause and effect; human rationality hence becomes an 'ought' forever transcending the objective world.<sup>39</sup>

This then, for Lukács, is the essential antinomy to be found in Kant's philosophy: 'The 'eternal, iron' regularity of the processes of nature and the purely inward freedom of individual moral practice,' he writes, 'appear at the end of the *Critique of Practical Reason* as wholly irreconcilable and at the same time as the unalterable foundations of human existence.'<sup>40</sup> The contradictoriness is not a flaw however; rather, it is an expression of what Adorno would call the work's 'truth content', its own formal disclosure of the essential untruth of society and of itself. Thus Lukács attributes Kant's 'greatness' to the fact that he

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Bernstein, *The Philosophy of the Novel*, p.xvii.

<sup>40</sup>Lukács, 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', p.134.

made no attempt to conceal the intractability of the problem by means of an arbitrary dogmatic resolution of any sort, but that he bluntly elaborated the contradiction and presented it in an undiluted form.<sup>41</sup>

The inability of Kantian philosophy, for Lukács exemplary of bourgeois thought as a whole, to construct a meaningful set of dialectical relations between individual consciousness and dominant social forces is a mark both of its honesty and of its saturation by the structure of reification.

It would be wrong, however, to limit Lukács's discussion of modern, bourgeois philosophy and reification to the formal contradictions found in the former as an expression of the latter's structure. It is necessary also to look at the construction of the sphere of philosophy itself in capitalist society. In 'What is Orthodox Marxism?', the opening essay in *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács writes of the emergence of avowedly *autonomous* disciplines and spheres of study.<sup>42</sup> This too he identifies as an expression of reification and of the fetishistic commodity structure:

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Jürgen Habermas associates this aspect of Lukács's thought with the influence on a strand of Western Marxism of Max Weber's writings on rationalization [Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity, 1990; repr. 1992), p.75]. Weber, writes Habermas,

described as "rational" the process of disenchantment which led in Europe to a disintegration of religious world views that issued in a secular culture. With the modern empirical sciences, autonomous arts, and theories of morality and law grounded on principles, cultural spheres of value took shape which made possible learning processes in accord with the respective inner logics of theoretical, aesthetic, and moral-practical problems (*The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p.1).

The influence of Weber's writings on rationalization runs through the early Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* and the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, most notably Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

The extent to which this narrative has now, in Western Marxist circles, become something of a truism is attested by Terry Eagleton's half-parodic summary in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*:

Let us tell, in crude and fabular form, a Weberian kind of story. Imagine a society sometime in the indeterminate past, before the rise of capitalism, perhaps even before the Fall, certainly before the dissociation of sensibility, when the three great questions of philosophy - what can we know? what ought we to do? what do we find attractive? - were not as yet fully distinguishable from one another. A society, that is to say, where the three mighty regions of the cognitive, the ethico-political and the libidinal-aesthetic

The fetishistic character of economic forms, the reification of all human relations, the constant expansion and extension of the division of labour which subjects the process of production to an abstract, rational analysis, without regard to the human potentialities and abilities of the immediate producers, all these things transform the phenomena of society and with them the way in which they are perceived. In this way arise the 'isolated' facts, 'isolated' complexes of facts, separate, specialist disciplines (economics, law, etc.).<sup>43</sup>

Bourgeois philosophy is another of these specialist disciplines, whose autonomy in capitalist society is an ideological effect of the reification of consciousness.

Lukács's important insight is that capitalist society necessarily encourages the perception of its various elements (such as economics, law, philosophy, art, etc.) as isolated, independent and not meaningfully related. It is not Lukács's intention to substitute for such autonomy the uniform reflection throughout the social totality of some form of social *essence*; rather, he suggests a theory of semi-autonomy:

The apparent independence and autonomy which [the various elements of the social totality] possess in the capitalist system of production is an illusion only in so far as they are involved in a dynamic dialectical relationship with one another and can be thought of as the dynamic dialectical aspects of an equally dynamic and dialectical whole.<sup>44</sup>

He goes on to add that 'the objective forms of all social phenomena change constantly in the course of their ceaseless dialectical interactions with each other.'<sup>45</sup> It is not enough, then, to analyse the formal features of, say, Kantian philosophy or modernist artworks with reference only to the texts themselves;

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were still to a large extent intermeshed. [Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990; repr. 1994), p.366].

See also, for an extended treatment of these themes: J.M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993).

<sup>43</sup>Lukács, 'What is Orthodox Marxism?', in *History and Class Consciousness*, p.6.

<sup>44</sup>Lukács, 'What is Orthodox Marxism?', pp.12-13.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid, p.13.

rather, it is necessary also to trace the specific features of the construction of the spheres of philosophy and of aesthetics themselves in which these texts are produced and take their place. What we might infer from these two essays by Lukács is that the contradictions (or 'antinomies') of capitalist society are reflected both in the relation of philosophy and art to other social spheres and in the formal characteristics of individual philosophical systems or, as we shall see, works of art. The 'antinomies of bourgeois thought', exemplified so fully in Kant, are a further reflection, then, of the ideological lie of transcendence in which philosophy *as an institution* (or as a separate, specialist discipline) is forced to indulge itself in capitalist societies. It is only with an appreciation of how this might be reduplicated in the aesthetic or cultural sphere -- or so at least goes the following argument -- that we can come to a proper understanding of the significance of modernist artworks and, consequently, of their relation to contemporary postmodernist texts.

## Lukács and the Novel

Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel*, according to Jay Bernstein, proposes that 'the novel is essentially antinomic, an impossible or contradictory practice.'<sup>46</sup> Bernstein's thesis is that, though preceding *History and Class Consciousness* and generally regarded as a mish-mash of neo-Kantian and Hegelian idealism, *The Theory of the Novel* is in fact Marxist. A brief summary of the case Bernstein makes should illuminate to some degree the analysis of modernism that is to follow, and -- it is hoped -- will also make it easier to see Theodor Adorno, rather than the later Lukács, as the true heir to these two seminal texts of Western Marxism.

In a passage also cited by Bernstein, Lukács asserts the following:

A totality that can be accepted is no longer given to the forms of art: therefore they must either narrow down and volatilise whatever has to be given form to the point where they can encompass it, or else they must show polemically the impossibility of achieving their necessary object and the inner nullity of their own means. And in this case they carry the fragmentary nature of the world's structure into the world of forms.<sup>47</sup>

The novel here, *as a genre*, is defined in terms of its historical function. That function, as Lukács understands it, is to subject a disordered world to the order of artistic form; moreover, it does this while acknowledging the intrinsic deceit upon which such an act -- the aesthetic act -- is based. While it may be argued that Lukács's definition applies to some degree to all artistic forms, Lukács writes that the novel may be distinguished as the conscious descendent of epic literature in modern times: 'The novel,' he writes, 'is the

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<sup>46</sup>Bernstein, *The Philosophy of the Novel*, p.91.

<sup>47</sup>Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, pp.38-39.

epic of a world abandoned by God.'<sup>48</sup> The distinction becomes clearer: 'The epic gives form to a totality of life that is rounded from within; the novel seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life.'<sup>49</sup> The epic, in creating the semblance of totality through artistic form, is also, for Lukács, carrying out its mimetic function. In the novel, however, these two artistic duties have become contradictory:

The epic and the novel, these two major forms of great epic literature, differ from one another not by their authors' fundamental intentions but by the given historico-philosophical realities with which the authors were confronted. The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life has become a problem, yet which still thinks of itself in terms of totality.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, as Bernstein argues, Lukács's novel 'is to modern society what the epic was to the integrated world of the Greeks. The difference between epic and novel is analogous *and internally related* to the differences between the societies of which they are a part' [emphasis added].<sup>51</sup> The absence of an integrated society means that the novel, for Lukács, becomes a constant dialectic of 'form-giving and mimesis'; thus the novel is continually denying, for mimetic reasons, the validity of a form-giving aestheticization which nonetheless remains its own *raison d'être*. This is the antinomy of bourgeois art, a form of contradiction which, as Bernstein notes, modernism inherits from realism 'now exacerbated and deepened rather than diminished.'<sup>52</sup>

The exacerbation of this inner-contradiction is, suggests Bernstein, largely a product of modernist literature's more highly developed social autonomy. Bernstein's argument seems at times a little confused: he writes,

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid, p.88.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid, p.60.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid, p.56.

<sup>51</sup>Bernstein, *The Philosophy of the Novel*, p.46.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid, p.229.

for example, that the expanding commercialisation in 'the conditions of production, distribution and consumption of literature' were illustrative of its increasing social autonomy in the nineteenth century, as literature became associated with 'non-practicality, uselessness, amusement, pleasure', etc.<sup>53</sup> This, of course, runs counter to that strand of literary-historical analysis -- whose advocates have included Andreas Huyssen<sup>54</sup> and John Carey<sup>55</sup> -- which argues that modernism could be characterised as precisely a reaction to literature's gradual loss of autonomy during the nineteenth century, its developing usefulness as a mass-market commodity. As the discussion to follow of Adorno on the "culture industry" will make clear, I am much more persuaded by this latter argument. However, Bernstein seems to me correct to point to modernism's eschewal of both realist conventions and the 'sustained employment of experiential discourse'<sup>56</sup> as a marker of its assertion of social autonomy.

In this sense, then, the modernist novel can be seen to enact, in an almost exaggerated form, those antinomies with which Lukács identifies the genre as a whole, reasserting its distance from social actuality while offering visions of aesthetic beauty which claim an essential truth more valid than the reality that is lived. Adorno's defence of modernist writing as capturing a historical truth of both a social and an aesthetic situation seems ironically consistent with the thought of the early Lukács while taking the form of an explicit response to the latter's *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*: 'Art,' he writes, 'is the negative knowledge of the actual world.'<sup>57</sup> It is with an

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid, p.242.

<sup>54</sup>Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* (London: Macmillan, 1988).

<sup>55</sup>John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber, 1992).

<sup>56</sup>Bernstein, *The Philosophy of the Novel*, p.241.

<sup>57</sup>Theodor W. Adorno, 'Reconciliation under Duress', trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, Ernst Bloch et al (London: Verso, 1977; repr. 1990), p.160.

appreciation of how these complexities might contribute to the significance of the modernist novel that we shall now look at one of its foremost examples, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, in the attempt to extend this analysis of modernist literature and to show how such an analysis might add to our understanding of an individual work.

## Realism, Modernism, Totality and Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*

*The whole is the false.*  
T.W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

The suggestion that Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* ought to be interpreted as a modernist novel is hardly original. However, it is useful to ponder the sorts of dialectical relations that such an association suggests between the novel and that which modernism appears to disavow; namely, certain aspects of literary realism.

It is necessary then to look briefly at realism -- its claims and assumptions. For Lukács, that great partisan of bourgeois realism (and one of modernism's most hostile critics), realism can achieve 'a comprehensive description of the totality of society'.<sup>58</sup> Likewise, for Erich Auerbach -- author of *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* -- modern contemporaneous realism (which covers the work of writers such as Stendhal, Balzac and Flaubert) developed first in France because of the political and cultural unity which followed the Revolution. 'French reality,' writes Auerbach, 'in all its multifariousness, could be comprehended as a whole.'<sup>59</sup> The chief characteristic of realism is, then, for these critics, its capacity for representing authoritatively the totality and wholeness of lived experience. Thus Fredric Jameson, in an essay called 'Beyond the Cave: Demystifying the Ideology of Modernism', writes that in the work of Lukács and Auerbach 'realism is shown to have epistemological truth, as a privileged mode of knowing the world we live in and the lives we lead in it.'<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Georg Lukács, 'Critical Realism and Socialist Realism', in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin, 1963; repr. 1972), p.96.

<sup>59</sup>Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968; repr. 1974), p.473.

<sup>60</sup>Fredric Jameson, 'Beyond the Cave: Demystifying the Ideology of Modernism', in *Contemporary Marxist Literary Criticism*, ed. Francis Mulhern (London: Longman, 1992), p.174.

In what way then is modernism different? First we shall look at the descriptions and critiques of modernism offered by Auerbach and Lukács, while bearing in mind that Lukács in particular is writing from a consciously pro-realist position. Distinguishing the modernists from their realist predecessors, Auerbach writes of

those modern writers who prefer the exploitation of random, everyday events, contained within a few hours and days, to the complete and chronological representation of a total exterior continuum – they. . . are guided by the consideration that it is a hopeless venture to try to be really complete within the total exterior continuum and yet to make what is essential stand out. . . [T]hey hesitate to impose upon life, which is their subject, an order which it does not possess in itself.<sup>61</sup>

Instead, claims Auerbach, these writers

have invented their own methods -- or at least have experimented in the direction -- of making the reality which they adopt as their subject appear in changing lights and changing strata, or of abandoning the specific angle of observation of either a seemingly objective or purely subjective representation in favor of a more varied perspective.<sup>62</sup>

It is clear how relevant this is in the case of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. There we have four narrative perspectives, reflecting an unwillingness on the part of Faulkner to provide that surface representation of totality that we have seen both Lukács and Auerbach associate with the realist novel. It is on the implications of such a refusal that Lukács concentrates. For him, this unwillingness to offer a representation of objective events, the portrayal of an objectively *knowable* reality, is effectively a 'negation of outward reality', a negation which, he claims, 'is present in almost all modernist literature.'<sup>63</sup>

Totality and wholeness thus appear to give way to fragmentation and disjunction. It is this fragmentation and the neglect of 'objective' experience

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<sup>61</sup>Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p.548.

<sup>62</sup>Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p.545.

<sup>63</sup>Georg Lukács, 'The Ideology of Modernism', in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, p.25.

in favour of the subjective (and often perspectively unstable) refraction of sensations or experiences -- to which we, as readers, are offered no avowedly direct access -- that Lukács condemns as an outright dismissal of the objective world and, therefore, of historical reality itself. The difference between Auerbach and Lukács is significant: for Auerbach, modernism negates the very essence of *realism*; for Lukács, it is reality itself which is negated. For the latter in particular a key factor here is the use of stream of consciousness narration.

Lukács claims that modernism attempts to represent the objective world only as it can be absorbed by the alienated individual subject. Stream of consciousness narration is, then, the paradigmatic example of such a process. There the narrative offers a representation of the thoughts of a particular character without the mediating presence of a narrator or narrative authority, save that inevitably indicated in the narrative's status as written representation (about which I shall say more with regard to *The Sound and the Fury* later). Lukács, then, associates the 'attenuation of reality' with Joyce's stream of consciousness in *Ulysses* and claims that this neglect of reality

is carried *ad absurdum* where the stream of consciousness is that of an abnormal subject or of an idiot -- consider the first part of Faulkner's *Sound and Fury* or, a still more extreme case, Beckett's *Molloy*.<sup>64</sup>

While Lukács admits to some measure of critique in modernist writing -- 'the obsession with psychopathology in modernist literature,' he writes, expresses 'a desire to escape from the reality of capitalism' -- this remains nonetheless an impotent critique, falsely asserting 'the unalterability of outward reality.'<sup>65</sup> From this perspective, modernist texts are seen as escapist. Their avoidance of objective reality is interpreted as an angst-ridden

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid, p.26.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid, p.36.

cry (Lukács specifically cites Kafka) but it also leads to 'the reduction of reality to a nightmare.'<sup>66</sup> Modernism, for Lukács, doesn't take objective reality seriously enough. As a consequence,

the protest is an empty gesture, expressing nausea, or discomfort, or longing. Its content -- or rather lack of content -- derives from the fact that such a view of life cannot impart a sense of direction.<sup>67</sup>

For Lukács, Stephen Dedalus's complaint that 'History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake' contains the essence of almost all modernist literature, which escapes from a nightmarish historical reality to the subjective consciousness of the individual -- whether Molly Bloom or Benjy Compson. There is no attempt, though, to suggest that historical reality might be anything other than a nightmare. Thus might we paraphrase the case for the prosecution.

Those who see something other than self-indulgent escapism in modernism also stress its intrinsic opposition to realism and to the attempt to represent objective social totality. Adorno writes that

Even the suggestion that the world is unknowable, which Lukács so indefatigably castigates in writers like Eliot or Joyce, can become a moment of knowledge. This can happen where a gulf opens up between the overwhelming and unassimilable world of things, on the one hand, and a human experience impotently striving to gain a firm hold on it, on the other.<sup>68</sup>

The critical impotence that Lukács castigates in modernism, portraying it as passive escapism, is itself seen here as a form of critique. Modernist texts, according to Adorno, criticise society by depicting a mind or minds often unable even to grasp the complex workings and interrelations of society, much less analyse them. This inability of the mind to grasp, and of the

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid, p.31.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid, p.30.

<sup>68</sup>Theodor W. Adorno, 'Reconciliation under Duress', pp.162-163.

literary text to represent, social totality is itself a sign of the damage done to the psyche by dominant social forces. In this way, the inability to offer critique *is* a form of critique. 'It is this alone,' writes Adorno,

which gives the work of Joyce, Beckett and modern composers their power. The voice of the age echoes through their monologues: this is why they excite us so much more than works that simply depict the world in narrative form.<sup>69</sup>

Adorno's defence of modernism is, then, a *historical* defence. The impotence of modernist writing expresses an artistic and historical truth, and that truth encompasses the very denial of objective truth as a plausible artistic goal.

So we move to the central critique of realism that modernism embodies. Here it is summarised by Fredric Jameson:

[T]he target of [the modernists'] attack becomes the very concept of reality itself which is implied by the realist aesthetic as Lukács or Auerbach outline it, the new position suggesting that what is intolerable for us today, aesthetically, about the so-called old-fashioned realism is to be accounted for by the inadmissible philosophical and metaphysical view of the world which underlies it and which it in its turn reinforces. The objection is thus, clearly, a critique of something like an *ideology of realism*, and charges that realism, by suggesting that representation is possible, and by encouraging an aesthetic of mimesis or imitation, tends to perpetuate a preconceived notion of some external reality to be imitated, and indeed, to foster a belief in the existence of some such common-sense everyday ordinary shared secular reality in the first place.<sup>70</sup>

Realism, then, in its representation of social totality, implies an external reality which is objective, knowable and representable. Jameson then cites developments in modern science (e.g. the theory of relativity), modern philosophy (e.g. post-structuralism) and the great mass of modern art from the cubists and Joyce to Beckett and Andy Warhol. What does he conclude?

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid, p.166.

<sup>70</sup>Jameson, 'Beyond the Cave', pp.174-175.

[A]ll these things tend to confirm the idea that there is something quite naive, in a sense quite profoundly *unrealistic*. . . about the notion that reality is out there simply, quite objective and independent of us, and that knowing it involves the relatively unproblematical process of getting an adequate picture of it into our own heads.<sup>71</sup>

The highest achievement of realism -- the representation of an objective social totality -- is here interpreted as 'profoundly *unrealistic*'. Thus, characteristic features of realist narrative such as totality, objectivity and strict temporal chronology are negated for the sake of historical truthfulness. 'The whole,' writes Adorno, 'is the false.'

However, the distinction remains rather more complicated than that. For Jameson, 'all modernistic works are essentially simply cancelled realistic ones.'<sup>72</sup> According to Jameson, realism is a decoding of allegory. The meaning of allegory is drawn from an external or transcendent authority: e.g. lamb=Christ; we needn't be told this in the text because it's allegory and we know to look for a meaning in another code system, in this case Christianity. This is discarded by realism, which depicts events which are meaningful *in themselves*. There is no need to look for meaning in another code system, as in allegory; meaning is already there. This is realism as a decoding of allegory. Modernism recodes. The significance or meaning of modernist texts does not exist simply in the representation of particular incidents, as we might find in realism. Instead we find a return to symbolic meaning in the appeal to other coding systems such as myth or to earlier, often Classical, literature. This is very different, though, from allegory or myth itself. Modernism cannot appeal directly to symbolic meaning; so instead, according to Jameson, it rewrites or 'stylizes' a realist narrative *as though* it were a mythic one full of

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid, p.175.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid, p.183.

symbolic meanings. Essentially, then, modernism is here viewed not simply as the negation of realism, but as its conscious repression.

What the text represses we, as readers, reveal. Jameson writes:

. . . when you make sense of something like Kafka's *Castle*, your process of doing so involves the substitution for that recoded flux [which is the modernist text] of a realistic narrative of your own devising. . . . I think it's axiomatic that the reading of such work is always a two-stage affair, first, substituting a realistic hypothesis -- in narrative form -- then interpreting that secondary and invented or projected core narrative according to the procedures we reserved for the older realistic novel in general.<sup>73</sup>

So the modernist writer writes a 'stylization' of a realist narrative and then we, as readers of modernist texts, take that stylization and turn it back into a realist narrative. It is worth looking at this in relation to Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.

Explaining the basic narrative that underlies his novel, Faulkner writes the following :

I saw that they [the children] had been sent to the pasture to spend the afternoon to get them away from the house during the grandmother's funeral in order that the three brothers and the nigger children could look up at the muddy seat of Caddy's drawers as she climbed the tree to look in the window at the funeral, without then realising the symbology of the soiled drawers, for here again hers was the courage which was to face later with honor the shame which she was to engender, which Quentin and Jason could not face: the one taking refuge in suicide, the other in vindictive rage which drove him to rob his bastard niece of the meager sums which Caddy could send her.<sup>74</sup>

This, then, is the story. Reading the novel, it all seems rather more complicated. It is told from four different perspectives; chronological order is disrupted (instead, we get a narrative representation of the flux of

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<sup>73</sup>Ibid, pp.183-184.

<sup>74</sup>William Faulkner, 'Introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*', cited in Frederick R. Karl, *William Faulkner: American Writer* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), p.318.

psychological time). The plot itself, as summarised by Faulkner, is available only in an estranged form, mediated both by the consciousnesses of different characters and by the juxtaposition of their narratives. But if Jameson is right, it is that realist plot that we mentally juxtapose with *The Sound and the Fury* itself. We try to spot the temporal shifts in part one, ordering the haphazard temporal flux of Benjy's narrative into its proper, realist chronology: A and then B and then C. We redo precisely what the text, by focalizing the narrative through Benjy's consciousness, has undone. What, though, might this signify?

Jameson cites Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie* [*Jealousy*]. He refers to the common belief that in Robbe-Grillet's novel chronology is abolished. He points out (quoting Gerald Prince) that one event -- the crushing of a centipede -- takes place *before* a trip taken by two characters, *during* it, and *after* it. The very same incident takes place at three different points in time. This, then, is the abolition of chronology. Jameson disagrees. 'On the contrary,' he writes,

as every reader of Robbe-Grillet knows, this kind of narrative exasperates our obsession with chronology to a veritable fever pitch. . . . So it is quite wrong to say that Robbe-Grillet has abolished the story; on the contrary, we read *La Jalousie* by substituting for it a realistic version of one of the oldest stories in the world, and its force and value come from the paradoxical fact that by cancelling it, the new novel tells this realistic story more forcefully than any genuinely realistic, old-fashioned, decoded narrative could.<sup>75</sup>

In its negation and repression of realism, totality and chronology, modernism ends up provoking in the reader its own rewriting in terms of realism, totality and chronology. And yet it is also doing something else. For while it may provoke in the reader the desire to substitute for it a realist text or narrative, its own aesthetic appearance, its surface disjunction, continues to deny the

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<sup>75</sup>Jameson, 'Beyond the Cave', p.184.

validity of that rewriting. What this contradiction -- on the one hand provoking a desire in the reader for all that the realist aesthetic satisfies, and on the other unmasking the realist representation of objective social totality as a deceitful and comforting illusion -- expresses is, I think, neither totality nor fragmentation, but the process of attempting to construct a totality from fragmentation and alienation. This is a process of utopian wish fulfilment, which texts such as Faulkner's both inscribe and repress.

The representation of totality and wholeness is a lie as long as experience remains that of alienation and suffering. We need only bear in mind the Compsons or Kafka's protagonists. But it can also be seen as the figure of a desire for, and belief in the possibility of, a better life. It is this dialectic that modernist fiction expresses. Moreover, it confronts us with the need to *construct* some form of order, indicating the constructedness, or manufacturedness, of all ordering systems. The modernist slogan 'Make it New' places as much emphasis on the first word as on the last. And yet the negation, the insistence that the whole is the false, remains necessary. The artistic truth of modernist fiction lies in neither side of this contradiction, but in that contradictoriness itself.

In Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* the narrator, Jake Barnes, is impotent. He is in love with Brett Ashley, but can never have sex with her. He stands by while she sleeps with the other male characters. At the very end of the novel, they are together in a taxi; a policeman holds up a baton to stop the traffic (the symbolism is a bit obvious); they fall against one another on the back seat. Brett turns and says, 'Oh Jake...we could have had such a damned good time together.' Here is the nostalgic possibility of wholeness and reconciliation. But for the impotent Jake that possibility exists only as a

pleasing but false illusion. He replies, 'Isn't it pretty to think so.' This is the dialogue that modernist fiction is acting out all the time.

**Caddy and Faulkner's *promesse du bonheur* in *The Sound and the Fury***

*So I, who had never had a sister and was fated to lose my daughter in infancy, set out to make myself a beautiful and tragic little girl.*

*William Faulkner, 'Introduction' to The Sound and the Fury*

In order to see how this might contribute to our understanding of *The Sound and the Fury*, it is necessary to stress the importance of the relationships which Faulkner establishes between his characters -- the Compsons -- and the social locale in which they are situated: Yoknapatawpha Co., Mississippi. For here Adorno's rebuke of Lukács is particularly telling:

The great works of modernist literature shatter [the] appearance of subjectivity by setting the individual in his frailty into context. . . . Lukács evidently believes that when the Habsburg monarchy in Kafka or Musil, or Dublin in Joyce make themselves felt as a sort of 'atmospheric backcloth for the action', it somehow goes against the programme but nonetheless remains of secondary importance. But in arguing thus for the sake of his thesis, he clearly reduces something very substantial, a growing epic plenitude with all its negative potential, to the status of a mere accessory.<sup>76</sup>

Faulkner's novels construct a social environment with both attentiveness to detail and ambition of scale comparable to that of Balzac's *Comédie Humaine*. Yet, the town of Jefferson and the county of Yoknapatawpha are here available to the reader, in all their 'epic plenitude', principally as refracted through the consciousnesses of the various characters. Lukács's suspicions, therefore, may appear to some extent validated: it is, for the most part, only through the inner space of the individual consciousness that the external space of social relations can be all-too-momentarily glimpsed.

What we find in *The Sound And the Fury*, then, is the uneasy coalescence of an outright preoccupation with characters' psychopathology

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<sup>76</sup>Adorno, 'Reconciliation under Duress', pp.160-161.

(as Lukács suggests) and an unrelenting sense of the need to re-establish a picture, in all its totality, of the society in which these consciousnesses were formed. Richard H. Brodhead points astutely to a further complicating factor, the aestheticizing function of the novel itself:

The writing does not fail, eventually, to project a world that has been radically recomposed. And recomposed, the writing tells us, *by* the writing: the world not as it is, but as an act of style has made it.<sup>77</sup>

We shall return to Brodhead in the not too distant future; for the moment, however, it is necessary merely to note the extent to which his point renders problematic the whole assumption of direct mimesis underlying Lukács's critique of modernist narrative: Yoknapatawpha is not available to us merely via the consciousnesses of individual characters but ultimately through the stylized construction of the work of art itself.

'Why,' asks Jean-Paul Sartre, 'is the first window that opens out on this fictional world the consciousness of an idiot?'<sup>78</sup> By focalizing the first narrative through the consciousness of Benjy Compson, Faulkner not only plunges us immediately into a world in which both temporal chronology and relations of cause and effect appear to have evaporated, but he also introduces the crucial theme of absence and loss. As I suggested earlier, absence here also refers to the absence of those elements of literary realism, such as chronology and totality, which modernist fiction tends on the surface to discard. But in this instance it is the absence of Caddy that is most overt. Caddy Compson is almost all that *The Sound and the Fury* contains of love and compassion; and it is the loss of her, as Faulkner writes in his Appendix to the

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<sup>77</sup>Richard H. Brodhead, 'Introduction: Faulkner and the Logic of Remaking', in Richard H. Brodhead, ed. *Faulkner: New Perspectives* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1983), p.5.

<sup>78</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, 'On *The Sound and the Fury*: Time in the Work of Faulkner', in *Literary and Philosophical Essays* (New York: Collier, 1962; repr. 1967), p.84.

novel, that echoes most insistently in Benjy's memory and also, therefore, throughout the novel's opening section:

BENJAMIN....Who loved three things: the pasture which was sold to pay for Candace's wedding and to send Quentin to Harvard, his sister Candace, firelight. Who lost none of them because he could not remember his sister but only the loss of her, and firelight was the same bright shape as going to sleep, and the pasture was even better sold than before because now he and TP could not only follow timeless along the fence the motions which it did not even matter to him were human-beings swinging golfsticks, TP could lead them to clumps of grass or weeds where there would appear suddenly at TP's hand small white spherules which competed with and even conquered what he did not even know was gravity and all the immutable laws when released from the hand towards plank floor or smokehouse wall or concrete sidewalk. Gelded 1913. Committed to State Asylum, Jackson 1933. Lost nothing then either because, as with his sister, he remembered not the pasture but only its loss, and firelight was still the same bright shape as sleep.<sup>79</sup>

The loss of Caddy and of the pasture combine in Benjy's reaction to the cries of the golfers:

The man said 'Caddie' up the hill. The boy got out of the water and went up the hill.  
'Now, just listen at you.' Luster said. 'Hush up.' (*SF*, p.22)

Benjy's wails, as he listens to the call of 'Caddie', are a response to this reminder of his sister's absence. Benjy grasps at this mistaken echo of his sister's name.

In a sense, though, this is something which we too, as readers, are led to do throughout the novel. As Frederick R Karl points out, each narrative section explicitly 'creates' a Caddy for us;<sup>80</sup> for all the apparent immediacy of Faulkner's narratives, Caddy's voice is at best represented to us via her brothers. What I am trying to suggest is that *The Sound and the Fury* is itself

<sup>79</sup>William Faulkner, 'Appendix', in *The Sound and the Fury* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp.299-300. Further references to the text are from this edition and will be cited in the main text, prefixed by the abbreviation *SF*.

<sup>80</sup>Karl, p.328.

the evocation of Caddy Compson, that we should take quite seriously Faulkner's claim : 'So I, who had never had a sister and was fated to lose my daughter in infancy, set out to make myself a beautiful and tragic little girl.'<sup>81</sup> The creation of the novel, it seems to me, is also the creation of Caddy, the imaginative evocation of a Caddy who is absent.

Yet if Caddy represents something of love and affection in the novel, her "fall" is also a figure for that of the South itself, the loss of the Civil War and subsequent economic decline. In the reconstruction of Caddy, then, we, as readers, are also engaged in the reconstruction of a narrative of the South's history, a role which Susan Willis suggests is common to readers of many of Faulkner's narratives:

The fact that so many of Faulkner's works are defined by the need to reconstruct history, apparent in so much of Faulkner's writings, betrays the inability to any longer experience history directly and the haunting remembrance of what this relationship to history was in traditional society. Indeed, we might compare the Faulknerian narrative to a model kit, where information about the past is given in bits and pieces and the characters, along with the reader, work to assemble the fragments in a meaningful way.<sup>82</sup>

Just as the Edenic symbolism which runs through *The Sound and the Fury* suggests both Caddy's and the South's loss of innocence, the fragmentary narrative reinforces in the reading experience of the novel a sense of decay, for which the Tower of Babel might offer a more appropriate biblical allusion. The reader's imaginative recreation of Caddy would thus run parallel to the reconstruction of a historical narrative which charts the decline of the old Southern landowners during the early decades of the twentieth century (e.g. the Compsons' pasture is sold to make a golf-course, the proceeds paying for Caddy's wedding). What must be stressed here, though, is the extent to

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<sup>81</sup>William Faulkner, 'Introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*', cited in Karl, p.318.

<sup>82</sup>Susan Willis, 'Aesthetic of the Rural Slum', in *Faulkner: New Perspectives*, p.182.

which this whole process is subject to that dialectic of utopian wish fulfilment and ironic reinscription of totality described in the previous section.

It is worth taking a moment to look again at some of the ways in which *The Sound and the Fury* problematizes the assumption of direct mimesis which Lukács associates with stream-of-consciousness narration. In Benjy's section, for example, we find his description of the incident which leads to him being gelded:

They came on. I opened the gate and they stopped, turning. I was trying to say, and I caught her, trying to say, and she screamed and I was trying to say and trying and the bright shapes began to stop and I tried to get out. (*SF*, pp.53-54)

Faulkner here stresses Benjy's inability to speak; elsewhere, Luster says, 'He deaf and dumb' (*SF*, p.50). The incapacity to use language is precisely one of the things that Faulkner portrays as most characteristic of Benjy, and the root cause of his mutilation. Yet it is of course only through language that his experiences can be conveyed. Likewise, as Sartre notes of the second section:

Quentin thinks of his last day in the past, like someone who is remembering. But in that case, since the hero's last thoughts coincide approximately with the bursting of his memory and its annihilation, who is remembering?<sup>83</sup>

The implausibility of either of these sections really representing directly the consciousnesses of the characters (an implausibility which the novel itself seems to suggest) pushes to the foreground the role of the artist himself and the aestheticizing function of the novel. 'Everyone agrees,' writes Richard Brodhead,

that *The Sound and the Fury* is the book in which Faulkner first fully discovers how to write like Faulkner. Part of the reason is that it is the novel in which he latches onto his distinctive rhythm of recreation - calculating, with great deliberateness and ingenuity, a style in which his work can be rendered (what we call the characters or points of view in *The Sound and the Fury* -

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<sup>83</sup>Sartre, p.91.

Benjy, Quentin, Jason -- are really so many distinctive ways of composing a world through words), then giving a virtuoso performance in that style, then abruptly abolishing it and going on to construct another (and another, and another) in its place.<sup>84</sup>

The novel's narrative structure thus suggests simultaneously the possibility of the characters' self-expression and the reality of that self-expression's fictionality, its status as the aesthetic product of 'an act of style'.

Tempting though it might be to claim, with an exaggerated sweep of the cape, that Faulkner's novel thus reveals itself as a *mere* fiction, just words on a page, such an act would not remain true, in any meaningful sense of the word, to the experience of reading *The Sound and the Fury*. 'Art,' writes Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory*, 'is the promise of happiness, a promise which is constantly being broken.'<sup>85</sup> In its evocation of an ungraspable Caddy, its intimation of a social history of Southern decline in all its 'epic plenitude', and its suggestion of the impossible expression of Compsons' suffering, *The Sound and the Fury* enacts precisely the promise and betrayal with which Adorno identifies works of art. Here aesthetic autonomy produces a work which almost seems to lament its own helpless alienation from social life, while nonetheless exposing all that is empty in the state of the latter. Exiled from the real life of social relations, Faulkner's novel releases us from the world of aesthetic constructs back into the unredeemed world of actuality, fated to chase, like Benjy, after misheard echoes of Caddy's name.

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<sup>84</sup>Brodhead, pp.5-6.

<sup>85</sup>Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.196.

## Adorno and the Culture Industry

*The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The promissory note which, with its plots and staging, it draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged; the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu. In front of the appetite stimulated by all those brilliant names and images there is finally sat no more than a commendation of the depressing everyday world it sought to escape.*

T. W. Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

The *promesse du bonheur* with which Adorno so gratefully associates works of art can only be retained so long as the 'necessary illusion' of art's autonomy is held to be credible. Here it is worth calling again to mind Lukács's opening essay in *History and Class Consciousness*, 'What is Orthodox Marxism?'. Lukács's insistence that the study of separate aspects of the social totality (such as art or literature) must take into account the relation of that sphere to others (such as the socio-economic) would suggest that any change in that relation should be reflected in a change in our understanding of the significance of, or modes of signification in, each social sphere. What we see in a number of novelists during the 1930s and '40s is an increasing self-consciousness that their art is subject to precisely such a transformation: the illusion of autonomy loses its last shred of credibility and we witness the ageing of the new.

In *After the Great Divide* Andreas Huyssen suggests that modernist art and literature developed to a large extent as a reaction to the burgeoning culture industry of the nineteenth century.<sup>86</sup> The antipathy of many

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<sup>86</sup>See Huyssen, pp.vii-viii.

For a discussion of the irony which attends the novel's increasing respectability as a literary genre in the nineteenth century and its simultaneous increasing commodification in a culture industry, see Terry Lovell, *Consuming Fiction* (London: Verso, 1987), pp.78-81. Huyssen's analysis of the continuity of thematic preoccupations from late nineteenth-century to early twentieth-century literature is also suggested by Peter Keating (in *The Haunted Study*) when he writes of 'the overwhelming force of democratic consumerism' which exerts a continuous influence on literature of the Victorian and modernist periods. See Peter Keating, *The*

modernist artists to "low" culture (or to "the masses" in general) and the painstakingly achieved *difficulty* of their work would both serve as markers in support of Huyssen's thesis. It was partly to distance their work from the more easily consumable cultural goods on offer, runs this argument, that writers from Flaubert to Eliot adopted styles and techniques which would frustrate the more conventional expectations of a reader: Flaubert's stylistic labours are unlikely to have been intended to appeal to a reader such as Emma Bovary; in fact, the opposite is true. But, in the absence of any radical transformation in the economic mode of production, the attempt to retain for art some autonomous space largely outside the market could be successful for a limited time span only. The modernist claim to autonomy, with its grandiose and touching pretension to the making of supreme fictions, appears in retrospect more of a last gasp than a bold, artistic assertion.

The writings of Adorno on the culture industry provide perhaps the most cogent and consistent critique of the process by which art is fully absorbed into the market. In an essay written in response to Walter Benjamin's identification of the radical potential of mechanically reproduced art -- an essay entitled 'On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening' -- and (with Max Horkheimer) in the 'Culture Industry' chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno describes the changes that art must undergo in response to its new position within the social totality. 'The culture industry,' he writes,

can pride itself on having energetically executed the previously clumsy transportation of art into the sphere of consumption, on making this a principle, on divesting amusement of its obtrusive naïvetés and improving the type of commodities.<sup>87</sup>

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*Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel, 1875-1914* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1989; repr. Fontana, 1991).

<sup>87</sup>Theodor W. Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2nd edn., trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1986; repr. 1992), p.135.

Art, then, whose autonomy had already been a consequence of its fetishization, becomes a commodity in a new way. Whilst that previous claim to autonomy had at least expressed some form of negation of actuality, in the distance it established between the aesthetic and the external world of suffering and market exchange, the refusal now to indulge in that illusion seems, for Adorno, to represent a chilling assent to the values and conditions of the present. What adds perhaps even further to the melancholy character of this cultural critique is the suggestion of its virtual inexorability.

According to Jay Bernstein, Adorno's 'aesthetic theory was, almost from the outset, self-consciously delineating the ageing of modernism.'<sup>88</sup> Writing throughout the 1930s and '40s, Adorno describes how the logic of commodification had required art to appear autonomous in order to fulfil that ideological role which Herbert Marcuse calls art's 'affirmative character'. However, the needs of the market change; and it is at this time, the high-point of the totalitarian era, during which Adorno writes, that the necessity that the world of art and of aesthetics be absorbed by the market and be made purposeful becomes more and more overt. The irony which saw Adorno flee the ubiquitous propaganda of Nazi Germany only to find the same principles of domination at work in US advertising is less the product of Adorno's prejudices than of history itself. The increase in commodity production that is the result of assembly-line methods or, perhaps more properly, of Fordism requires a similar increase in consumption. After all, '[w]hat was special about Ford,' writes David Harvey, '(and what ultimately separates Fordism from Taylorism), was his vision, his explicit recognition that mass production meant mass consumption.'<sup>89</sup> To this end, all elements of society must be

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<sup>88</sup>J.M. Bernstein, 'Introduction', in Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.19.

<sup>89</sup>Harvey, pp.125-126.

mobilised; autonomous art, for all its wonderful ideological potential, is sacrificed to the needs of the market. The world of the culture industry and of advertising awaits.

Bernstein's dark appraisal of Adorno's aesthetic theory would appear to be borne out by an early passage in the 'Fetish Character in Music' essay:

The categories of autonomously oriented art have no applicability to the contemporary reception of music; not even for that of the serious music, domesticated under the barbarous name of classical so as to enable one to turn away from it again in comfort.<sup>90</sup>

The desperate attempts by those such as Schönberg to evade absorption are very much a last, desperate stand, for '[w]here [listeners] react at all,' writes Adorno, 'it no longer makes any difference whether it is to Beethoven's Seventh Symphony or to a bikini.'<sup>91</sup> It is not, then, simply the continuing growth of mass culture to which Adorno is reacting, but a transformation in the position and status of culture itself. This offers a redefinition of both "high" and "low" art; it also transforms the subject's understanding of his/her relationship to his/her social environment.

Explaining that latter point, Adorno and Horkheimer write the following:

The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry. . . . The more intensely and flawlessly [the movie producer's] techniques duplicate empirical objects, the easier it

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See also Henry Ford, *My Life and Work* (London: Heinemann, 1923); especially chapters VIII, IX and XI. The following, for example, is from Chapter XI ('Money and Goods'):

The factory must build, the sales department must sell, and the dealer must buy cars all the year through, if each would enjoy the maximum profit to be derived from the business. If the retail buyer will not consider purchasing except in "seasons", a *campaign of education* needs to be waged, proving the all-the-year-around value of a car rather than the limited-season value. And while the educating is being done, the manufacturer must build, and the dealer must buy, in anticipation of business. (p.165; emphasis added)

<sup>90</sup>Theodor W. Adorno, 'On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression in Listening', in *The Culture Industry*, pp.26-27.

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid*, p.33.

is today for the illusion to prevail that the outside world is the straightforward continuation of that presented on the screen.<sup>92</sup>

It is not merely the redefinition of art and culture to which Adorno and Horkheimer's fears are directed, but also to this qualitative shift in the means by which we, as individual cognitive subjects, perceive and reflect on our social relations. The vision which this model suggests of the reconciled worlds of aesthetic images and social praxis is one of barbaric harmony. The previous alienation of art has now been erased in favour of its harmonious reconciliation in the false totality of an unjust society. The same, they suggest, is the fate of the individual subject:

Life in the late capitalist era is a constant initiation rite. Everyone must show that he wholly identifies himself with the power which is belaboring him. . . . Everyone can be like this omnipotent society; everyone can be happy, if only he will capitulate fully and sacrifice his claim to happiness. In his weakness society recognizes its strength, and gives him some of it. His defenselessness makes him reliable. . . . But the miracle of integration, the permanent act of grace by the authority who receives the defenseless person -- once he has swallowed his rebelliousness -- signifies Fascism.<sup>93</sup>

The integration of art and the socio-economic -- the insistence on art's socio-economic purpose -- has a further, internal, consequence for art. Adorno and Horkheimer write of 'a shift in the internal structure of cultural commodities'<sup>94</sup> which follows from this process, principally relating to the dissolution of the division between "high" and "low" art. Just as the alienation of art from other social spheres had expressed some form of 'truth content', a melancholy expressiveness which Bernstein evokes in the phrase 'beauty bereaved', the false distinction within art itself between "high" and "low" had also reflected a social truth of irreconciled contradiction. Art, doubly

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<sup>92</sup>Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.126.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid, p.154.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid, p.158.

alienated, had embodied the social and internal alienation of the beleaguered individual under capitalism. Now, however, the situation is very different.

In one of his most quoted phrases -- from a letter to Benjamin -- Adorno writes of "high" and "low" culture as the 'torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up.'<sup>95</sup> The popular caricature of Adorno as a cultural mandarin, blind to the beauties of all but the most difficult and inaccessible of artworks, is as misconceived as that which portrays him denouncing those who write poetry after Auschwitz. The true object of Adorno's scorn is the easy reintegration of "high" and "low" that the culture industry achieves. This, he argues, is yet another marker of false utopian resolution -- one which, as Bernstein writes, 'forsakes the promise of happiness in the name of the degraded utopia of the present.'<sup>96</sup>

The truly utopian yearning of relatively autonomous art is discarded by the culture industry in its fusion of the aesthetic and the socio-economic. In its disavowal of autonomy, the culture industry indicates its refusal to posit the image or semblance of any alternative to actuality. What is expressed, therefore, is a form of flight: 'not, as is asserted, flight from a wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance.'<sup>97</sup> (Here, in passing, it is worth noting the similarity of Adorno's critique of the culture industry to Lukács's of modernism. This is a point to which I will later return.) The integration of the socio-economic and the aesthetic abolishes the critical distance which art's autonomy had established. By allowing us to experience a sense of disappointment and frustration as social actuality proved unable to redeem the promise of happiness offered by works of art, that critical distance presented to us starkly those utopian possibilities which were denied to us.

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<sup>95</sup>Theodor W. Adorno, 'Letters to Walter Benjamin', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, p.123.

<sup>96</sup>Bernstein, 'Introduction', p.8.

<sup>97</sup>Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.144.

In the age of the culture industry, however, disappointment and frustration have been banished. Now that the worlds of aesthetics and of social praxis have been absorbed by one another, the aesthetic act is depicted as fully sufficient in itself; after all, there is no longer any separate, external reality of which it might be said to be critical: 'Not Italy is offered, but proof that it exists.'<sup>98</sup>

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Following Adorno, a discussion of the implications of these changes to the position and status of art for novelists of the 1930s and '40s would do well also to concentrate on the respective situations in Germany and the United States. What is to come is intended to be less representative than symptomatic. The following discussion of some German and American fiction does not necessarily show that writing to be typical of its time, but it does at least attempt to highlight the ways in which some of the artistic dilemmas described above in theoretical terms begin to find expression in the work of some of the important writers of the 1930s and '40s. As we shall see, these dilemmas are such that they impose a significant measure of self-consciousness in their delineation. As well as providing, then, examples of the fictional treatment of the aesthetic issues raised by the culture industry, a consideration of these novels should also indicate something of the literary-historical logic of the development of literary postmodernism. The novelists at whose work I shall be -- albeit briefly -- looking are John Dos Passos and Thomas Mann. For in their work we see a self-conscious reflection of what Fredric Jameson has called 'the nature of tragedy in modern times':

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<sup>98</sup>Ibid, p.148.

the possession of man by historical determinism, the intolerable power of history itself over life and over artistic creation, which is not free not to reflect what it reacts against.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup>Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974), p.37.

## John Dos Passos's USA

*..there's such a gigantic tradition of hokum behind political phrasemaking that the antihokum phrases are about as poisonous as the hokum phrases.*  
*John Dos Passos, The Fourteenth Chronicle*

The association of the burgeoning American culture industry with fascistic European forces is one which Adorno and Horkheimer make quite pointedly in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but it can also be found in the fiction of John Dos Passos. In the short biography of the media magnate William Randolph Hearst in the third instalment of *USA, The Big Money*, Dos Passos writes of Hearst's voice

praising the comforts of Baden-Baden under the blood  
 and bludgeon rule of Handsome Adolph (Hearst's own loved  
 invention, the lowest common denominator come to power  
 out of the rot of democracy).<sup>100</sup>

Dos Passos' novel, though, cannot fully escape association with that same culture industry. Instead, Dos Passos exploits his work's inability, in Jameson's phrase, 'not to reflect what it reacts against' by foregrounding the mimetic element of the relationship of the novel's form to its social content to such an extent that the reader is forced to recognise a further level to the novel, the ironic stance assumed by Dos Passos in relation to his own literary form. The novel, written in what Alfred Kazin calls 'a machine prose for a machine world',<sup>101</sup> is thus constructed in such a way that the overt (and even excessive) manipulation of both character and reader appears to identify it unmistakably with the deterministic social forces it also appears to criticise.

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<sup>100</sup>John Dos Passos, *USA* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966; repr. 1988), p.1116. Further references to the text will be to this edition and will be marked in the main text, prefixed by the abbreviation *USA*.

<sup>101</sup>Alfred Kazin, 'Dos Passos and the Lost Generation', in *Dos Passos: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Barry Maine (London: Routledge, 1988), p.226.

A consistent feature of *The 42nd Parallel*, part one in the USA trilogy, is a meditation on the practical, ideological functions that culture (and literary culture in particular) is made serve. Throughout the novel, the reader finds presented a whole series of characters whose particular skills or whose occupations involve them in some way in the production of public forms of discourse: Mac, the linotype operator; Gene Debs; Woodrow Wilson; Doc Bingham, the book salesman; "The Boy Orator of the Platte"; J. Ward Moorhouse. There are also repeated references to William Randolph Hearst, whose newspaper empire was the most extensive and powerful of its time, and of whom Dos Passos felt able to write in 1934, 'Hearst is handsome Adolph's schoolteacher.'<sup>102</sup> The way in which the individual subject is caught not only within a mechanistic class and economic system, but also within a network of ideological, cultural discourses thus develops as a major theme of the novel.

Implicit, of course, in the elaboration of this theme is the acknowledgement of literary culture as functional. From Doc Bingham's presentation of literature as commodity to J. Ward Moorhouse's avowed wish 'to educate the public by carefully planned publicity over a term of years' (*USA*, p.211), emphasis is placed on the political and economic motivations that underlie such cultural production. What we are seeing, then, is the novel's focus on the American culture industry and its inevitably violent domination of individual subjects. One example of the novel's overt foregrounding of these concerns is in the opposition portrayed between Gene Debs and Woodrow Wilson. Dos Passos writes that 'Woodrow Wilson had [Debs] locked up in Atlanta for speaking against war'. Wilson, the politician whose rhetoric helps convince Americans to support entry into the war in

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<sup>102</sup>*The Fourteenth Chronicle: Letters and Diaries of John Dos Passos*, ed. Townsend Ludington (London: Deutsch, 1974), p.441.

Europe, has his aims threatened by another's rhetoric. The biography of Debs goes on to explain his former supporters' avoidance of him:

but on account of the flag  
and prosperity  
and making the world safe for democracy,  
they were afraid to be with him,  
or to think much about him for fear they might believe  
him;  
for he said:  
*While there is a lower class I am of it, while there is a criminal  
class I am of it, while there is a soul in prison I am not free.*  
(USA, p.39)

Debs' supporters avoid him because they are convinced by Wilson's slogans -- 'making the world safe for democracy' -- and also because they fear that they might find his slogans equally convincing. The subject is here portrayed as a pawn of rhetoric. Inherent in the Debs biography is the fear that there is something intrinsic to the production of discourse aimed at a mass audience that is incompatible with the retention of some form of autonomy for the individual subjects who make up that audience.

It is not only, though, those to whom such discourses are directed who find themselves manipulated and stripped of even a residual subjectivity. On various occasions, the reader sees characters attempt to influence the reactions of other characters through the construction of a fiction, yet who then find themselves more prey to that fiction than are their intended victims. This is what happens to Doc Bingham when he is sent to spend the night in a barn, having claimed to be a travelling clergyman. We are told that 'Doc Bingham's face was as black as thunder as he wrapped himself in a horseblanket, muttering about "indignity to a wearer of the cloth"' (USA, p.53). The 'muttering' signals that it is unlikely that Doc is keeping up the pretence for others. Instead, he has begun to refer to himself *in private* using terms dictated by the very fiction he has created to manipulate others. His

indignation is, therefore, caused not by their treatment of him, but by their treatment of his fiction -- a distinction which he is, comically, unable to make.

Of greater significance, though, are the ways in which characters are shown to be caught within an inescapable mechanistic structure. Their fictional status is foregrounded by the narrator's tendency to repeat phrases or establish explicit parallels in his descriptions of different characters. Thus, Mac is linked to J. Ward Moorhouse by the echo of the narrator's description of Yuma, a stopping-point on Mac's trip to Mexico, as 'hotter'n the hinges of hell' (*USA*, p.114) in the phrase 'hot as the hinges of Delaware' (*USA*, p.153); Delaware being the birthplace of J. Ward Moorhouse. Moreover, the role of the reader in establishing this association is also prominent at such times: it is left to the reader to make a mental note of these descriptive echoes, thereby rendering him/her complicit with the construction of a textual network of association that binds the characters every bit as tightly as does the industrial capitalist system. This aspect of the reader's role is further emphasized by the fact that the phrase 'hot as the hinges of Delaware' appears in a Camera Eye section and not in a chapter on Moorhouse himself. It is left for the reader to make the connection when, in the very next chapter, he/she reads that Moorhouse was born there. Later, Charley Anderson is also included when the narrator describes New Albany, on Charley's arrival, as 'hot as the hinges of hell' (*USA*, p.326).

Characters' fates are made coincide with a regularity that serves to foreground their helplessness. The use of Mexico as a destination is particularly striking: Mac goes there; J. Ward Moorhouse takes Janey there on a business trip; and Charley Anderson at one point plans to go to the Mexican border with the American militia. Examples of this sort abound throughout the *USA* trilogy so much so that it is not long before the reader learns to

expect that each new character will in some way be forcefully integrated into the social sphere of the others. It appears to matter little whether or not they belong to the same class or share similar aspirations; characters are made enter a mechanistic narrative system in which everything and everyone is reduced to the status of a functional cog, where nothing escapes the most utter absorption and rationalisation; a social predicament described in prose which, as Kazin writes, 'bears along and winds around the life stories in the book like a conveyor belt carrying Americans through some vast Ford plant of the human spirit.'<sup>103</sup>

Even economic success is unable to provide characters with an effective escape route. Throughout the novel, a succession of short biographies of some of the capitalist system's 'success stories' -- Andrew Carnegie, for example -- is paraded before us. The inspirational value of these vignettes is somewhat hampered, however, by their regular (and surely unnecessary) intimations of mortality:

Andrew Carnegie became the richest man in the world  
and died.  
(USA, p.225)

This pattern is repeated with reference to Luther Burbank, Bill Haywood, "The Boy Orator of the Platte", Minor C. Keith, Steinmetz and Bob La Follette. The novel insists on the hopelessness even of its more successful characters: no matter what success or distinction they attain, each of them must be shown to reach their use-by date.

In Dos Passos's novel, then, it is the explicit parallels created between the fictional characters and the historical subjects of these biographies that emphasise the futility of any narrated act or achievement. The description of the young J. Ward Moorhouse (initially 'Johnny') as the 'class orator' at school

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<sup>103</sup>Kazin, p.229.

(*USA*, p.155) ironically identifies him with "The Boy Orator of the Platte", the subject of the previous biography which concludes, 'He was a big eater. It was hot. A stroke killed him' (*USA*, p.153). Likewise, the reader is later told that Moorhouse is attending a course 'in the care of fruit trees' (*USA*, p.211) soon after the biography of Minor C. Keith, 'the pioneer of the fruit trade', which begins and ends with mention of his death. Characters' fates are thus portrayed as predetermined, a suggestion principally achieved through the structural composition of the novel. In effect, the reader is forced to make the connections that highlight each character's hopelessness and mock their continuous and pitifully strenuous efforts, while those same characters continue, oblivious to their predestined fate, to act out the same search for success that establishes those very connections.

The retention of some form of individual autonomy, of the subject's non-identity, is undermined in Dos Passos's novel not only through this overtly manipulative plot structure and repeated use of similar descriptive phrases, but also through the absence of any distinctive relation between characters and their terms of expression. Thus, when the narrator writes of Alice that '[s]he said it made her feel freer to spend a few hours with broadminded people' (*USA*, p.130), the reader would appear to have learned something of that particular character; especially as he/she is aware that Janey's parents are in fact bigots who had prevented their daughter bringing home a black girl. However, the effect of this technique changes when, later in the novel, the narrative is focalized through Eleanor Stoppard and we read, 'Doctor Hutchins was a Unitarian minister and very broadminded and Mrs Hutchins did watercolors of flowers that were declared to show great talent' (*USA*, p.187). Free indirect speech works here not to distinguish

characters, but to blur the lines between them, to indicate a condition rather than a particular perspective.

The overt transformation of human subjects into replaceable components in an aesthetic structure -- Dos Passos's novel -- is a reflection of the social effects of 'Hearstian demagoguery'<sup>104</sup> and the Taylorization of American industry. The effect of assembly-line production on the workers is, for Dos Passos, clearly analogous to that of the emergent mass media upon the consciousnesses of the American public. The novel thus depicts the ideological collusion of that culture industry in which it is itself produced and by which it is to a large extent defined. Modernism's necessary lie of autonomy is no longer sustainable; *The 42nd Parallel* acknowledges this in its formal mimicry of the forces of domination and reification associated with assembly-line production methods.

The mimesis of novel and society in *The 42nd Parallel* is so complete that we have little choice but to recognise it as primarily an ironic work. Dos Passos allows the novel's mimesis of its subject to provide an ironic self-commentary on its own tarnished moral standing, thereby justifying its status as, simultaneously, commodity and instrument of social critique. He suggests that, without this ironic retreat from the ideological collusion of aesthetic form, all art (and particularly that which is politically engaged) must be self-devouring and lead effectively to silence. *The 42nd Parallel* shows similar stories repeated under different names: Mac, Janey, J. Ward Moorhouse, Charley Anderson. The system that is both the novel and society continually repeats the same processes on its way to the temporary conclusion of war. The 1914-18 war is presented as the goal toward which capitalist societies were slowly and inexorably heading; it is present all along as an inevitability

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<sup>104</sup>*The Fourteenth Chronicle*, p.441.

-- of course, for both author and reader, it is from the very start a historical fact -- and for the novel's characters, for Charley Anderson, it is what finally enforces understanding of what is wanted:

The lookout put his hand over his mouth. At last he made Charley understand that he wasn't supposed to talk to him.  
(*USA*, p.341)

Here is the logic not only of industrial utilitarianism's easy adaptation to a wartime situation, but also that of culture's own complicity in the market reification and rationalisation of man: all that is left, without Dos Passos's self-critical detachment, is resignation to the futility of expression. In the culture industry the voice of protest can be no more effective than Charley's affirming silence.

Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*

*Thoughts on holding art up to mockery, breaking out of it, dissolving it --all the while remaining absolutely and ruthlessly devoted to it.*  
 Thomas Mann, Diaries

The novel's formal mimicry of dehumanising social forces is justifiable for Dos Passos as long as it is subject to the ironic stance of the author, since the alternative to this is complete non-expression. There is, however, another, more overtly metafictional alternative that employs the text's self-commentary to extend debate over its ideological function rather than short-circuiting or neutralising it as Dos Passos's option effectively does. In Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* the metafictional element is reinforced by the explicit dramatisation of an artist striving to find a means of regenerating an art that he sees as decadent and debased.

Like Dos Passos, though for different reasons, Adrian Leverkühn, Mann's fictional composer, also relies on a distancing mechanism. Arnold Schönberg's twelve-tone system, whose development is here attributed to Leverkühn, represents an alternative method of insisting on this critical detachment of the artist from his own aesthetic form. The creation of this system allows the artist unlimited freedom as long as he remains within the boundaries determined by the system. Thus, as Adorno writes in *Philosophy of Modern Music*,

Twelve-tone technique . . . enchains music by liberating it. The subject dominates music through the rationality of the system, only in order to succumb to the rational system itself.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup>Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell & Wesley V. Blomster (London: Sheed and Ward, 1987), pp.67-68.

It is precisely this artistic paradox that Mann explores in *Doctor Faustus*, presenting more explicitly its political and historical implications.<sup>106</sup> As Patrick Carnegy puts it:

Here Mann develops his theme of the artistic and political barbarity that is induced by the irrational adoption of a totalitarian principle, and of the once-and-for-all commitment to this principle which is taken as sufficient reason for the suspension of further moral (or aesthetic) scrutiny.<sup>107</sup>

A similar moral uneasiness over the creation of such a mechanism is also expressed by the novel's narrator, Serenus Zeitblom:

Quite generally this claim to ironic remoteness, to an objectivity which surely is paying less honour to the thing than to the freedom of the person has always seemed to me a sign of uncommon arrogance.<sup>108</sup>

Here Mann's narrator pinpoints one of the major problems to result from the artist's ironical treatment of his/her own artistic work: he/she divorces him/herself from the work's listeners/readers and stands alone and aloof in his/her ability to evade both manipulation by the artform and responsibility for it. The impersonality that follows from this ironical stance thereby reinforces the alienation of the artist from both his/her artistic materials and the work's audience. Furthermore, and most significantly, this is effected through the adoption of another systematic process and leads -- as Zeitblom is later aware and as the case of Leverkühn exemplifies -- to the artist's rediscovery of him/herself as another function of form (or of a metaform), this time unable to escape parody and the stance of ironic detachment.

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<sup>106</sup>For a discussion of Adorno's influence on the musical sections in *Doctor Faustus*, see Thomas Mann, *The Genesis of a Novel* (London: Secker & Warburg) and T.W. Adorno, 'Toward a Portrait of Thomas Mann', in *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 2, trans. Sherry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia UP, 1992), pp.12-19.

<sup>107</sup>Patrick Carnegy, *Faust as Musician: A Study of Thomas Mann's Novel 'Doctor Faustus'* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), p.108.

<sup>108</sup>Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, trans. H.T. Lowe Porter (London: Secker and Warburg, 1949; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p.69. Further references to the text are to this edition and are marked in the main text, prefixed by the abbreviation *DF*.

The problem that Leverkühn attempts to address is nevertheless a valid one. As his own devil states the case: "Composing itself has got too hard, devilishly hard. Where work does not go any longer with sincerity how is one to work?" (*DF*, p.232). This dilemma emerges not only (as we shall see) from Mann's own artistic grapplings, but also from his reading of Adorno's elaboration of the artist's difficulties in *Philosophy of Modern Music*:

The material transformation of those elements responsible for expression in music, which -- according to Schönberg -- has taken place uninterruptedly throughout the entire history of music, has today become so radical that *the possibility of expression itself comes into question*. In the process of pursuing its own inner logic, music is transformed more and more from something significant into something obscure -- even to itself. [Emphasis added.]<sup>109</sup>

Leverkühn's answer is to be sincere in his insincerity, to construct a formal framework within which he can mock everything while signalling the mockery's dependence upon the form itself and then subjecting to an ironic distance both the form and 'its' mockery. Mann's novel presents as analogous this artistic impersonality that finds some relief in aesthetic alienation and a political bestiality that celebrates the subjugation of the individual (in the name of the 'Volk') while allowing his/her worst excesses to go unchecked. For Mann, therefore, the problematics of modernism are extended to the artist's attempts to resolve those very problems. It is this extension that particularly distinguishes the question of the justification of self-consciously *modernist* art, a self-consciousness which simultaneously identifies the work as modernist and exposes to it the limited historical horizons of the modernist project itself. Or, as Georg Lukács writes:

Hitherto the tragedy of the artist has, almost without exception, been presented from the standpoint of the relationship and conflict between the artist and life, between art and reality. This

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<sup>109</sup>Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, p.19.

is largely true of the early Mann. Here, however, the work of art itself is called into question. Therefore, its genesis and structure must be shown; the tragic predicament of modern art must be demonstrated by the work of art itself.<sup>110</sup>

Unfortunately, Lukács goes on to try to justify the reading of Mann's novel as a realist critique of modernist aesthetics. *Doctor Faustus* is revealed as far more interesting, however, and far more complex than Lukács would have us believe when we recognise the elements that serve to question and to problematize the novel itself; that is, when we perceive the novel not only as the dramatisation but also as the exemplification of the moral and political dilemmas of modernist art.

The key to such a reading lies in the use Mann makes of the parallels between his novel and Leverkühn's compositions, particularly his masterpiece, *The Lamentation of Dr Faustus*. Echoing Leverkühn's lament, "Why does almost everything sound to me like its own parody?" (*DF*, p.131), Mann too in *The Genesis of a Novel* confesses, 'In matters of style I really no longer admit anything but parody.'<sup>111</sup> His novel draws from as many sources as does Leverkühn's music, while the explicit stylisation of Leverkühn's language, whose significance in pointing to Luther and the doctrine of predestination is missed by the narrator, finds an echo in Mann's own use of leitmotif, which also exposes Zeitblom's ignorance of the influence dictating the story he tells. That influence is, of course, diabolic and is signalled in the leitmotif of laughter, Adrian's laughter in particular. An especially striking example of this use of leitmotif to undermine Zeitblom occurs during his account of the visit he and Leverkühn pay to the home of the theology professor, Kumpf, and their reaction to the professor's claim that the devil is also present:

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<sup>110</sup>Georg Lukács, *Essays on Thomas Mann*, trans. Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin, 1964; repr. 1979), p.67.

<sup>111</sup>Thomas Mann, *The Genesis of a Novel*, p.47.

All this was pretty awful, and I take it Adrian must have thought so too, though his pride prevented him from exposing his teacher. However, when we went home after that fight with the Devil, he had such a fit of laughter in the street that it only gradually subsided with the diversion of his thoughts.

(*DF*, p.97)

Zeitblom is here presented with the image of the devil and with his friend's mocking laughter. At this point, however, he is unable to link them, unable to see the presence already of a demonic spirit that he is later only to recognise through viewing Adrian Leverkühn's mental collapse as analogous to the moral collapse of Germany. In fact, although Zeitblom professes to have learned much since the time of the composer's death, he remains to the very end oblivious to the inevitability, signalled unwittingly in his memoir, of the terrible fate awaiting his friend. It is in this same "innocent" and oblivious manner that he shrugs off his tendency to narrate prematurely events that do not take place until much later in the plot: 'I have fallen into my old, bad habit and got ahead of my story' (*DF*, p.252), he tells us, inadvertently integrating a pattern of predestination into the very narration of that story.

The establishment of an ironic distance between himself and his narrator is an important means through which Mann identifies himself and his creation with Leverkühn and his symphony. As I suggested earlier, the laughter of Leverkühn functions as a leitmotif; one in which, Mann writes, 'the devil, as the secret hero of the book, is invisibly present.'<sup>112</sup> Yet Mann's explanation of the use he makes of his narrator surely raises the question of his own diabolic laughter:

To make the demonic strain pass through an undemonic medium, to entrust a harmless and simple soul, well-meaning and timid, with the recital of the story, was in itself a comic idea.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup>*Ibid*, p.60.

<sup>113</sup>*Ibid*, p.29.

Elaborating on the association of himself with Leverkühn, Mann states that the use of Zeitblom as narrator 'removed some of the burden, for it enabled me to escape the turbulence of everything direct, personal and confessional which underlay the baneful conception.'<sup>114</sup> In fact, throughout *The Genesis of a Novel* the confessional element is emphasized. Mann reports feeling that 'the whole thing has something forbidding about it', that he 'was not at ease about the business'. More to the point, and of far greater centrality in defining the nature of Mann's anxiety, he writes of 'the danger of my novel's doing its part in creating a new German myth, flattering the Germans with their "demonism".'<sup>115</sup> Not only does Mann face the same problem of the regeneration of art as does his fictional composer -- he claims to have been particularly struck by Harry Levin's assertion that Joyce "'has enormously increased the difficulties of being a novelist'"<sup>116</sup> -- but he is also aware that his attempt to resolve the problem may be morally compromised in a similar way to Leverkühn's.

Having shown how Leverkühn's subjection of musical form to an ironic distance, culminating in *The Marvels of the Universe* and the *Apocalypse*, leads to the negation of faith in personal artistic expression and offers an analogy to the anonymous barbarism of political totalitarianism, Mann can hardly resolve his anxieties over *Doctor Faustus* by himself retreating to an ironic distance in the manner of Dos Passos. Zeitblom explains how *The Marvels of the Universe* appears to embody

a luciferian sardonic mood, a sneering travesty of praise which seems to apply not only to the frightful clockwork of the world-structure but also to the medium used to describe it: yes, repeatedly with music itself, the cosmos of sound (*DF*, p.266);

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<sup>114</sup>Ibid.

<sup>115</sup>Ibid, p.48.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid, p.76.

similarly, of the *Apocalypse*, he writes that 'in the searing, sussurant tones of spheres and angels there is not one note that does not occur, with rigid correspondence, in the hellish laughter' (*DF*, p.364). He adds immediately, 'That is Adrian Leverkühn. Utterly.' Leverkühn is thus defined not by musical form, for that he parodies, but by his role as the parodist of that form. In other words, Leverkühn pays the price of accepting that personal expression is no longer possible so that, through parody, he might escape absorption into his musical system; but he does so only to find that he is absorbed into a metasystem, fated to distance himself eternally from all that his art supposedly expresses. The art for which Leverkühn searches, that is "*per du*" with humanity, is consequently further than ever from reach as a result of his attempt to create it from a position of aloofness and detachment.

In his final work, however, Leverkühn does, according to Zeitblom, achieve true expression: 'expression as lament'. He does so by finally renouncing ironic distance and submitting to his musical form. This act of submission is nonetheless a true expression of Leverkühn's despair, of his conclusion that expression is now truly impossible. For Zeitblom, though not for Leverkühn himself, *The Lamentation of Dr Faustus* offers 'a hope beyond hopelessness'.

Mann, too, clings to this same, barely-perceptible ray of hope. He attempts no clear resolution of his moral and artistic dilemma, the dilemma of a morally tainted art. Instead he accepts responsibility for a work whose possible aesthetic complicity with forces of social domination charts the end of autonomous art itself. In *The Genesis of a Novel* Mann ponders the possibility that the artist's submersion of him/herself in art rather than in human relations marks him/her as inhumane, and asks whether the guilt that this knowledge provokes in the artist is enough to redeem him/her. He adds,

'Here is a speculation impious enough to be ascribed to Adrian Leverkühn.'<sup>117</sup> Unable to stand aloof from his literary form, Mann accepts definition by that form, as Leverkühn does, aware however that such acceptance might well provide a further allegorical parallel to political domination, the willing submersion of the subject in the impersonal aesthetic structure. As with his hope that the artist's sense of guilt might 'reconcile others . . . even win their affection', Mann is here left hoping that his awareness of the problems inherent in his acceptance of literary form and renouncement of ironic distance might be enough to express a lamentary ambivalence, an ambivalence that is directly expressive of his thoughts on the future of art and of Germany. That Mann is, then, unable to find a means of resolution to his moral dilemma and consequently submits to his tainted artistic form while still questioning the morality of that submission is surely for him to integrate within his work of art the perpetual moral self-inquiry that is properly his own. The novel itself must, therefore, actually be about the justification of art and can never reach resolution, for at that point the author is guilty of an outright affirmation of, and active collusion in, the violent forces of domination.

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<sup>117</sup>Ibid, p.144.

## Adorno: The Ageing of the New

'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,' writes Adorno in 'Cultural Criticism and Society';<sup>118</sup> by which, of course, he does not mean that poetry should not be written. Explaining his point perhaps more cogently in *Negative Dialectics*, he insists:

All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage. In restoring itself after the things that happened without resistance in its own countryside, culture has turned entirely into the ideology it had been potentially. . . . Whoever pleads for the maintenance of this radically culpable and shabby culture becomes its accomplice, *while the man who says no to culture is directly furthering the barbarism which our culture showed itself to be.* [emphasis added]<sup>119</sup>

Adorno here stresses the dialectical nature of his critique, implying that, particularly in the aftermath of the Holocaust, the cultural critic must affirm Walter Benjamin's dictum that '[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism'<sup>120</sup> and simultaneously negate any suggestion that culture is therefore best jettisoned. While it is common to associate this aspect of Adorno's late thought with the critique of culture he identifies in his essay on Beckett's *Endgame*,<sup>121</sup> I intend here to look briefly at the ways in which, particularly in some of his essays on New Music, Adorno applies something like this dialectic to offer his intimations of the irreversible ageing of modernism.

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<sup>118</sup>T.W. Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel & Shierry Weber (London: Spearman, 1967), p.34.

<sup>119</sup>T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973; repr. Routledge, 1990), p.367.

<sup>120</sup>Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), p.256.

<sup>121</sup>T.W. Adorno, 'Trying to Understand Beckett's *Endgame*', in *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 1, trans. Sherry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia UP, 1991), pp.241-275.

For a comparison of this essay to the above section from *Negative Dialectics*, see Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (London: MIT, 1991), pp.150-177.

In 'Music and New Music' he writes that '[a]s a concept "new music" seems to share the fate of growing old which has so often been its destiny in the past.'<sup>122</sup> The critical content of New Music is itself in danger of being dissipated, lost in a process of cultural commodification through which emerge the values of the culture industry triumphant:

Just as traditional music has culminated in the synthetic illiteracy of the culture industry, it may well turn out that the extraordinary efforts which the new music makes and which it imposes on its audiences will come to grief on the rocks of barbarism. Its fate is not wholly in its own hands, but depends on whether it is possible to break through the fatedness of society, a fatedness before which every bar of its music stands as if hypnotized.<sup>123</sup>

Of course, we have just seen Adorno's fear that the culture industry will change art irrevocably and the suggestion, by Bernstein, that the ageing of modernism was implicit in Adorno's writing from the very outset; but what we find in the essays on New Music of the 1950s and '60s is an oppressive recognition that even those forms which had taken negativity into their core -- for example, in the jarring dissonance of twelve-tone composition -- were now subject to the laws of socio-aesthetic reconciliation:

The sounds remain the same. But the anxiety that gave shape to its great founding works has been repressed. Perhaps that anxiety has become so overwhelming in reality that its undisguised image would scarcely be bearable: to recognize the aging of the New Music does not mean to misjudge this aging as something accidental. But art that unconsciously obeys such repression and makes itself a game, because it has become too weak for seriousness, renounces its claim to truth, which is its only *raison d'être*.<sup>124</sup>

What Adorno fears here is the acceptance of '[t]he detestable ideal of a moderate modernism'. Those very forms which had been developed to

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<sup>122</sup>T.W. Adorno, 'Music and New Music', in *Quasi una Fantasia*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992), p.250.

<sup>123</sup>Ibid, pp.263-264.

<sup>124</sup>T.W. Adorno, 'The Aging of the New Music', *Telos*, 77 (1988), pp.97-98.

shock, to scandalise, to offend have, he suggests, lived on into an age in which they are no longer radical, but 'radically empty'.<sup>125</sup> And yet it remains impossible for the significance of that earlier moment of the New Music ('the twenties') to be wrested back:

... the geological shifts that have taken place since then are such that nobody could step outside of them, no matter how earnestly he wanted to devote himself to a time that already appeared riddled with crises and yet was a paradise compared to what was to come.<sup>126</sup>

The experience which was to follow was, of course, that of the Third Reich. In his essay on Beckett's *Endgame*, Adorno discusses the work's assumption that 'the individual's claim to autonomy and being has lost its credibility.'<sup>127</sup> Here, he argues, such an assumption facilitates the expression of both the historical contingency of the individual subject and, as a consequence, 'the antinomy of contemporary art' -- its post-Holocaust depiction of the end of the self, and its acknowledgement that 'in art only what has been rendered subjective, what is commensurable with subjectivity, is valid.'<sup>128</sup> In the New Music of the Federal Republic, though, Adorno refuses to accept a similar expressiveness. In part, this distinction may perhaps be seen as one of personal taste. More significantly, though, it can be understood as a symptom of the force with which Adorno's argument tore him in separate directions. While accepting that the logic of his argument led, in the final instance, to the end of that bourgeois art which the critical theorists of Western Marxism held so dear, he nonetheless felt the need to retain some affiliation to what he perceived as its final remnants:

... the foundation of music, as of every art, the very possibility of taking the aesthetic seriously, has been deeply shaken. Since

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<sup>125</sup>Ibid, p.110.

<sup>126</sup>Ibid, p.111.

<sup>127</sup>Adorno, 'Trying to Understand Beckett's *Endgame*', p.249.

<sup>128</sup>Ibid, p.250.

the European catastrophe culture hangs on like houses in the cities accidentally spared by bombs or indifferently patched together. . . . Even so, the earnestness that would rather renounce art than put it in the service of a debased contemporary reality may itself be only a disguised form of adaptation to an already universal attitude of a praxis: submission to a praxis that aspires to the given without in any way going beyond it.<sup>129</sup>

If Jay Bernstein is right to claim that Adorno's writings on the culture industry and the ageing of modernism can be seen as his 'judgement in advance on postmodernist culture',<sup>130</sup> it may well be possible to suggest a revision of Adorno's most misunderstood sentence: To write poetry after Auschwitz is postmodern.

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<sup>129</sup>Adorno, 'The Aging of the New Music', p.116.

<sup>130</sup>Bernstein, 'Introduction', p.17.

## Postmodernism and the Avant-Garde

*Older discussions of the space, function, or sphere of culture (most notably Herbert Marcuse's classic essay "The Affirmative Character of Culture") have insisted on what a different language would call the "semiautonomy" of the cultural realm: its ghostly, yet Utopian, existence, for good or ill, above the practical world of the existent, whose mirror image it throws back in forms which vary from the legitimations of flattering resemblance to the contestatory indictments of critical satire or Utopian pain.*

*What we must now ask ourselves is whether it is not precisely this semiautonomy of the cultural sphere which has been destroyed by the logic of late capitalism. Yet to argue that culture is today no longer endowed with the relative autonomy it once enjoyed as one level among others in earlier moments in capitalism . . . is not necessarily to imply its disappearance or extinction. Quite the contrary; we must go on to affirm that the dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture is rather to be imagined in terms of an explosion: a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life -- from economic value to state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself -- can be said to have become "cultural" in some original and yet untheorized sense. This proposition is, however, substantively quite consistent with the previous diagnosis of a society of the image or the simulacrum and a transformation of the "real" into so many pseudoevents.*

*Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*

The above description of the postmodern cultural condition -- by definition, it seems, the postmodern condition per se -- has by now attained a near-canonical status as an attempt to grasp the cultural formations of the contemporary in the language of Western Marxism. Jameson's work has involved, in a sense, the rearticulation of Adorno's critique of the culture industry in an age in which the works of Beckett and Schönberg (as Adorno predicted) have themselves been comfortably integrated into the cultural catch-all of consumer capitalism. That aesthetic space to which Adorno, for all his melancholy prognosis, nevertheless clung is now thoroughly eradicated.

Yet in order to understand more fully the terrible irony of the relationship of the postmodern to modernity and the culture of modernism, it

is necessary, as Terry Eagleton suggests, to take into account the whole critique of aesthetic or cultural autonomy as proposed by the work of the historical avant-garde.<sup>131</sup> In his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* Peter Bürger argues that the art of the revolutionary avant-garde in the early twentieth century was based on an explicit denunciation of art's claim to autonomy or social transcendence. Bürger begins by citing Marx's critique of religion as ideology in the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* -- which asserts dialectically that '[t]he wretchedness of religion is at once an expression of and a protest against real wretchedness' -- and offers the following commentary:

It is in religion that this twofold character of ideology is brought out. 1. Religion is an illusion. Man projects into heaven what he would like to see realized on earth. To the extent that man believes in God who is no more than an objectification of human qualities, he succumbs to an illusion. 2. But religion also contains an element of truth. It is "an expression of real wretchedness" (for the realization of humanity in heaven is merely a creation of the mind and denounces the lack of real humanity in human society). And it is "a protest against real wretchedness" for even in their alienated form, religious ideals are a standard of what ought to be.<sup>132</sup>

Bürger then shows how such ideology critique (*Ideologiekritik*) has been applied in the writings of Western Marxism to the sphere of culture. His principal example is the essay cited above by Fredric Jameson, Herbert Marcuse's 'The Affirmative Character of Culture'.<sup>133</sup> 'It is not difficult,' writes Bürger, 'to recognize that Marcuse is guided by the Marxist model of the critique of religion.'<sup>134</sup> He explains Marcuse's argument that (just as Marx says of religion) bourgeois, autonomous culture is simultaneously affirmative and critical of the society in which it is produced: 'Marcuse demonstrates,' writes

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<sup>131</sup>Terry Eagleton, 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism' in *Against the Grain* (London: Verso, 1986), pp.131-147.

<sup>132</sup>Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p.7.

<sup>133</sup>Herbert Marcuse, 'The Affirmative Character of Culture', in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (London: Free Association Books, 1988), pp.88-133.

<sup>134</sup>Bürger, p.11.

Bürger, 'that bourgeois culture exiles humane values to the realm of the imagination and thus precludes their potential realization,' while he adds that 'Marcuse views the humane demands of great bourgeois works of art as a protest against a society that has been unable to live up to them.'<sup>135</sup>

It is important to grasp, however, that what both Bürger and Marcuse are referring to is not the significance or status of individual artworks in themselves, but the general categorisation of *culture* itself. '[W]orks of art,' writes Bürger, 'are not received as single entities, but within institutional frameworks and conditions that largely determine the function of the works.'<sup>136</sup> Bürger terms these conditions the 'institution of art' and it is to this 'institution', this categorisation of what is deemed 'cultural' in bourgeois society, that he attempts to portray the avant-garde as an explicit and critical response:

...with the historical avant-garde movements, the social subsystem that is art enters the stage of self-criticism. Dadaism, the most radical movement within the European avant-garde, no longer criticizes schools that preceded it, but criticizes art as an institution, and the course its development took in bourgeois society. The concept 'art as an institution' as used here refers to the productive and distributive apparatus and also to the ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works. The avant-garde turns against both -- the distribution apparatus on which the work of art depends, and the status of art in bourgeois society as defined by the concept of autonomy.<sup>137</sup>

An example of such critique is offered by Andreas Huyssen in *After the Great Divide*. Huyssen cites Marcel Duchamp's ready-made *L. H. O. O. Q.*, which consists of a reproduction of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* complete with additional moustache and goatee beard. The title, as Huyssen points out, when spoken in French makes even more apparent the satiric intent: *elle a chaud au*

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<sup>135</sup>Ibid, pp.11-12.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid, p.12.

<sup>137</sup>Ibid, p.22.

cul/she has a hot ass.<sup>138</sup> 'It is not,' writes Huyssen, 'the artistic achievement of Leonardo that is ridiculed by moustache, goatee and obscene allusion, but rather the cult object that the *Mona Lisa* had become in that temple of bourgeois art religion, the Louvre.'<sup>139</sup> Bürger argues that this process is historically driven. Although the autonomy of art as an institution is established in the eighteenth century, Bürger writes that it is really only with late nineteenth-century Aestheticism that the full logic of aesthetic autonomy is properly expressed. The response of the avant-garde to this attempts, though, to preserve something of the critical potential of such autonomy:

The avant-gardistes proposed the sublation of art -- sublation in the Hegelian sense of the term: art was not simply to be destroyed, but transferred to the praxis of life where it would be preserved, albeit in a changed form. The avant-gardistes thus adopted an essential element of Aestheticism. Aestheticism had made the distance from the praxis of life the content of works. The praxis of life to which Aestheticism refers and which it negates is the means-ends rationality of the bourgeois everyday. Now, it is not the aim of the avant-gardistes to integrate art into *this* praxis. On the contrary, they assent to the aestheticists' rejection of the world and its means-ends rationality. What distinguishes them from the latter is the attempt to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art.<sup>140</sup>

What is perhaps most striking in this formulation of the avant-garde project is its similarity to Adorno's horrified description of the achievements of the culture industry. This is acknowledged by Bürger, who notes that '[d]uring the time of the historical avant-garde movements, the attempt to do away with the distance between art and life still had all the pathos of historical progressiveness on its side.'<sup>141</sup> The situation of the culture industry, as Bürger realises, is quite different. It has effected not merely the sublation of art, but also of the avant-garde's radicalism: today, as Huyssen points out,

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<sup>138</sup>Huyssen, p.147.

<sup>139</sup>Ibid.

<sup>140</sup>Bürger, p.49.

<sup>141</sup>Ibid, p.50.

'an assiduous audience admires *L. H. O. O. Q.* as a masterpiece of modernism in the museum.'<sup>142</sup> Or, as Bürger would have it, 'now the protest of the historical avant-garde against art as institution is accepted as *art*.'<sup>143</sup> That this 'art' is no longer autonomous -- as the avant-gardistes wished -- yet remains fetishized as 'culture' in an economically productive culture industry, whose 'means-ends' rationality remains undisturbed, is perhaps the final cruel irony of the avant-garde's failure-in-success.

Terry Eagleton, in one of the most overtly polemical analyses of the postmodern, describes postmodernism as 'among other things a sick joke at the expense of such revolutionary avant-gardism.'<sup>144</sup> For Eagleton, postmodernism is the culture industry triumphant. 'In its early stages,' he writes,

capitalism had sharply severed the symbolic from the economic; now the two spheres are incongruously reunited, as the economic penetrates deeply into the symbolic realm itself, and the libidinal body is harnessed to the imperatives of profit. We are now, so we are told, in the era of postmodernism.<sup>145</sup>

Eagleton's writings on postmodernism are an explicit response to those of Jameson. As we shall see in a moment, Jameson attempts to recuperate some sense of political radicalism for the postmodern, some space for the aesthetic expression of social conflict. For Eagleton, though, the postmodern is quite utterly bereft of conflict (just as the culture industry is for Adorno). This postmodernism is less a condition than an attitude, less the cultural logic of a stage in historical development (as Jameson would have it) than the product of conscious political will. Thus Eagleton hypothesises a political form of contemporary art which combines both modernist and avant-gardist impulses

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<sup>142</sup>Huyssen, p.147. See also Huyssen's description of Andy Warhol's use of Duchamp in the serial portrait "Thirty are better than one", pp.146-148.

<sup>143</sup>Bürger, p.53.

<sup>144</sup>Eagleton, 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism', p.131.

<sup>145</sup>Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990; repr. 1994), p.373.

in a quite different way to the postmodern, creating an alternative response to the culture of modernity and taking a different turn from that of postmodernism.<sup>146</sup> This, as we shall see, is very different from Jameson's insistence on the need for a political art today to be produced through an engagement with postmodernism itself. For Eagleton, postmodernism is -- both politically and culturally -- the false resolution of the dilemmas of modernism. The whole problematic of autonomy is here resolved by the postmodern with a chilling *sang froid*:

If the work of art really is a commodity then it might as well admit it, with all the *sang froid* it can muster. Rather than languish in some intolerable conflict between its material reality and its aesthetic structure, it can always collapse that conflict on one side, becoming aesthetically what it is economically.<sup>147</sup>

A resolution of this sort can be seen by briefly comparing Hermann Broch's *The Death of Virgil* with a contemporary, postmodernist text, Christoph Ransmayr's *The Last World*. Broch's work, written almost contemporaneously with Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, is a tortured (and, at times, tortuously difficult) response to the fate of an art which can no longer pretend to the autonomy of a discrete aesthetic sphere. Broch's Virgil wants to destroy the *Aeneid* because he believes his art to be inimical to the historical age: 'the time,' he tells Caesar,

determines the direction in which the task [of the artist] lies, and he who goes contrary to it must collapse . . . an art that is consummated outside these limits, evading the real task, is neither perception nor help -- in short it is not art and cannot endure.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup>Eagleton, 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism', p.147.

<sup>147</sup>Ibid, pp.140-141.

<sup>148</sup>Hermann Broch, *The Death of Virgil*, trans. Jean Starr Untermeyer (London: Routledge, 1946; repr. 1977), p.335. Further references to the text are to this edition and are marked in the main text, prefixed by the abbreviation *DoV*.

There is, though, a younger generation of poets in whom Virgil seems to see art's future: the love poets Tibullus, Propertius and 'young Ovid who is so full of poor taste' have, he says, 'struggled through to an originality which I am unable to approach' (*DoV*, p.254). The case against is made by Lucius, who views Ovid and the others as weak, ephemeral and, perhaps above all, irredeemably imitative: 'They are imitators of Theocritus, pupils of Catallus, and whatever they can take from our Virgil, that they take' (*DoV*, p.256).

If *The Death of Virgil* really is a novel which charts, in a displaced form, the death of modernism, it is not surprising that the young Ovid (before whom lies the writing of the *Metamorphoses*) should be in some way associated with the future of poetry. Virgil's attempt to make of the *Aeneid* a supreme fiction does not any longer seem credible when the actuality of the Roman state imposes so much more powerfully an image of reality's possibilities on the minds of the citizens. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, however, will reassert art's ability to offer new images of the real by insisting on the fluidity and unceasing mutability of reality itself.

*The Last World* by Christoph Ransmayr is a novel in which the newness of Ovid's work is depicted as itself a transformation of the world. A young Roman dissident named Cotta comes to the island of Tomi in search of the banished Ovid. Ransmayr's Ovid (here called Naso) has been punished for his accidental act of democratic rebellion; he has forgotten to address the Emperor first in the introduction of his speech and has begun instead with the words, 'Citizens of Rome'. Cotta comes to Tomi in search not only of Ovid, but also of his final poem -- the *Metamorphoses* -- which he understands as a work of political subversion -- and which the poet has burned.

As Cotta's search progresses, it becomes clear to the reader that the inhabitants of Ransmayr's Tomi are reworked, debased versions of characters

from the *Metamorphoses*. Here, as Salman Rushdie writes in his review of the novel, we see 'Ransmayr's vision of art conquering defeat by remaking the world in its own image.'<sup>149</sup> In fact, the world of Tomi is Ovid's work of art. The anxieties which haunted Broch's Virgil have gone. The contemplation of art's destruction in the face of an overwhelming reality can now be borne with all the *sang froid* that Terry Eagleton fears; for the world of images and the world of political punishment are one, and the dream of the avant-garde -- 'the attempt to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art' -- has finally been realised. And unto Caesar is rendered what is still Caesar's.

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<sup>149</sup>Salman Rushdie, 'Christoph Ransmayr', in *Imaginary Homelands: essays 1981-1991*, 2nd edn. (London: Granta, 1992), p.293.

## Jameson's Postmodernism

As I suggested earlier, Fredric Jameson is probably the best known of Marxist theorists to have written at length on postmodernism. Following Adorno's writings on the culture industry, Jameson portrays the postmodern as a new and more complete stage of capitalist commodification; while, citing Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, he writes that

the ultimate form of commodity reification in contemporary consumer society is precisely the image itself. With this universal commodification of our object world, the familiar accounts of the other-directedness of contemporary conspicuous consumption and of the sexualization of our objects and activities are also given: the new model car is essentially an image for other people to have of us, and we consume less the thing itself, than its abstract idea, open to all the libidinal investments ingenuously arrayed for us by advertising.<sup>150</sup>

The postmodern is that stage when what had once been thought -- however problematically -- as real, genuine or authentic has been lost completely, not even remaining (as it does with modernism) in the form of a longing or lament for what is now absent. 'Postmodernism,' writes Jameson, 'is what you have when the modernisation process is complete and nature is gone for good.'<sup>151</sup> The end of art's autonomy has, then, led not only to the commodification of culture, but also to the aestheticization of the external object world, producing what we saw Jameson call earlier 'a society of the image or simulacrum', an aspect of the postmodern which, as Jameson acknowledges, has been dealt with most comprehensively by Jean Baudrillard.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup>Fredric Jameson, 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture', in *Signatures of the Visible* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.11-12.

<sup>151</sup>Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991; repr. 1992), p.ix.

<sup>152</sup>See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.234; see also Jean Baudrillard, 'Simulations and Simulacra', in *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), pp.166-184.

Thus far Jameson is little different from either Adorno or Eagleton. Where he takes a step that is quite original is in his insistence on a *dialectical* approach to the study of postmodernism. Taking his cue from *The Communist Manifesto* -- 'Marx powerfully urges us to do the impossible, namely, to think this development [of capitalism] positively *and* negatively all at once' -- Jameson argues that it is the duty of any Marxist analysis of the postmodern to attempt to 'identify some "moment of truth" within the more evident "moments of falsehood" of postmodern culture.'<sup>153</sup> This produces in Jameson's critique not a paralysing ambivalence, but the desire to trace the expression of some element of conflict, of irreconciled ideological significance in the cultural products of the postmodern. If Jameson can trace those, he believes that Marx's insistence on the capitalist mode's necessary contradictions will be shown to remain true, thereby reasserting the validity of Marxist critique itself and identifying postmodernism quite firmly as 'the cultural logic of late capitalism'.

This is not the place to discuss Jameson's identification of postmodernism's principal stylistic characteristics in any detail; instead, these features (such as pastiche, depthlessness, playfulness, etc.) will be looked at in relation to specific texts in the chapters to come. For the moment, however, it is worth stressing the quite striking ahistoricism that Jameson associates with postmodernism. 'It is safest,' he writes in the opening sentence of the *Postmodernism* book, 'to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place.'<sup>154</sup> What he is to offer us -- 'the concept of the postmodern' -- is the historicization of a resolutely ahistorical cultural configuration. To readers of Adorno, the latter should come as little surprise:

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<sup>153</sup>Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.47.

<sup>154</sup>Ibid, p.ix.

'[h]istory is extruded from tales which have become cultural commodities, even and especially there where historical themes are exploited.'<sup>155</sup> Just as we saw in the opening pages how Marx depicts the commodity as a fetishized object wiped clean of the historical markers of its production, Adorno here suggests that such a process might also be identified in cultural commodities. The various ways in which this problem might be seen to relate to *specific* postmodernist texts will be explored in the following chapters on Martin Amis, Don DeLillo and Salman Rushdie.

It is worth noting, though, that the critique Jameson offers of Adorno's analyses of the culture industry is also based on a perceived inadequacy of historicization: 'what has been omitted from the later judgements,' he writes, 'is precisely Adorno's fundamental discovery of the historicity, and in particular, the irreversible aging process, of the greatest modernist forms.'<sup>156</sup> Just as Adorno criticised Lukács's ahistorical prejudice for the realist aesthetic of Balzac and (far more problematically) Mann, Jameson questions Adorno's own reliance on a modernist mode whose time would seem to have passed. Where Adorno saw in the work of modernist writers the expression of a particular historical experience ('[t]he voice of the age echoes through their monologues'), Jameson tries to identify in postmodernism a similar expressiveness:

. . . insofar as postmodernism really expresses multinational capitalism, there is some cognitive content to it. It is articulating something that is going on. If the subject is lost in it, and if in social life the psychic subject has been decentered by late capitalism, then this art faithfully and authentically registers that. That's its moment of truth.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>155</sup>Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Schema of Mass Culture', in *The Culture Industry*, pp.66-67.

<sup>156</sup>Jameson, 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture', p.14.

<sup>157</sup>Anders Stephanson & Fredric Jameson, 'Regarding Postmodernism: A Conversation with Fredric Jameson', in Douglas Kellner, ed., *Postmodernism/Jameson/Critique* (Washington DC: Maisonneuve Press, 1989), p.55.

Jameson's rebuke of Adorno is thus based on what he has called 'the one absolute and we may even say "transhistorical" imperative of all dialectical thought': 'Always historicize!'<sup>158</sup> 'Who, after all,' as Andreas Huyssen asks, 'would want to be the Lukács of the postmodern. . .'<sup>159</sup>

It is with this attempt to historicize both the ahistoricism and cognitive decentering that he associates with postmodernism that Jameson also seeks to find something redemptive, some cultural expression of contemporary social experience. We have already seen -- briefly -- Jameson's identification of that spatial confusion to which postmodern culture contributes with the individual subject's decentering in late capitalism. Jameson's well-known and extensive description of John Portman's Westin Bonaventure Hotel in *Postmodernism* is a good example of the cultural space/social space analogy on which this analysis rests.<sup>160</sup> Probably of greater relevance to the present argument, though, is the way in which Jameson discusses the ahistoricism of postmodern fiction.

Taking E.L. Doctorow as his principal example, Jameson attempts to interpret such ahistoricism as a feature of cultural and historical necessity. 'The historical novel,' he writes,

can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only "represent" our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which thereby at once become "pop history"). . . . If there is any realism left here, it is a "realism" that is meant to derive from the shock of grasping that confinement and of slowly becoming aware of a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>158</sup>Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981; repr. Routledge, 1989), p.9.

<sup>159</sup>Huyssen, p.43.

<sup>160</sup>Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp.38-45.

<sup>161</sup>*Ibid*, p.25.

Thus, Doctorow's novels do not express for Jameson (as they do for Linda Hutcheon) 'an extended critique of American democratic ideals through the presentation of class conflict',<sup>162</sup> but instead the very inability to sustain such a critique. 'Doctorow,' he writes, 'is the epic poet of the disappearance of the American radical past.' For Jameson, then, the 'moment of truth' of a novel such as *Ragtime* is not in its delineation of class conflict, but in its transformation of 'the past into something which is obviously a black simulacrum'<sup>163</sup> and its evocation of the left's 'poignant distress' as it witnesses the disappearance of the historical referent, the disappearance of those historical parameters in which class conflict is situated. Jameson's key claim for Doctorow's writing is as follows:

What is culturally interesting, however, is that he has had to convey this great theme formally (since the waning of the content is very precisely his subject) and, more than that, has had to elaborate his work by way of that very cultural logic of the postmodern which is itself the mark and symptom of his dilemma.<sup>164</sup>

Above all, Jameson is here stressing the inescapability of the cultural logic that is postmodernism. '[O]ne can't,' he writes elsewhere, 'wish this postmodern blockage of historicity out of existence by mere self-critical self-consciousness.'<sup>165</sup> Rather, he insists on the need to work, as he claims Doctorow does, from within postmodernism, using postmodernist techniques and modes of representation to depict the condition of postmodernity itself, and thereby to suggest its own necessary historicization. What Jameson seems to be claiming for Doctorow's writing is nothing less than a form of aesthetic negative dialectics of the postmodern:

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<sup>162</sup>Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, pp.61-62.

<sup>163</sup>Stephanson & Jameson, p.61.

<sup>164</sup>Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.25.

<sup>165</sup>Stephanson & Jameson, p.61.

[Doctorow] suddenly makes us realize that this is the only image of the past we have, in truth a projection on the walls of Plato's cave. This, if you like, is negative dialectics, or negative theology, an insistence of the very flatness and depthlessness of the thing which makes what isn't there very vivid. That is not negligible. It is not the reinvention of some sense of the past where one would fantasize about a healthier age of deeper historical sense: it is the use of those very limited instruments to show their limits. And it is not ironic.<sup>166</sup>

This is as far as Jameson has yet reached in his attempt to recuperate for Marxist theory some element of postmodernist culture. It is, as we have seen, quite a different form of response to that of both Adorno and Eagleton; (the latter, in fact, views Jameson's project as distinctly naïve politically). As Jameson depicts it, at its best postmodernist art and literature can seek to offer a form of 'cognitive mapping' for the decentered subjects of the late capitalist age. This is quite different from those networks of totality that Lukács saw in the novels of Balzac, different even from the solitary (but typical) suffering selves of Adorno's Beckett. Instead, the representation both of totality and of the alienated individual subject is sacrificed for the sake of immanent critique. Although, as we have seen, Jameson identifies it in some examples of postmodern culture, he portrays this form of critique as the goal of a new and truly political postmodernism:

. . . the new political art (if it is possible at all) will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say, to its fundamental object -- the world space of multinational capital -- at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>166</sup>Ibid, p.62.

<sup>167</sup>Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.54.

In my short concluding chapter I return to the theoretical concept of the postmodern as discussed by Jameson, suggesting some revision of his model. For the moment, though, it suffices to note that the argument pursued in the course of the next three chapters is predicated on the assumption that there is adequate complexity in postmodern fiction of the 1980s and '90s to trace those internal dialectics of complicity and immanent critique without anticipating some 'unimaginable new mode' of representation which will somehow make it all easier for us. Better to start, claimed Brecht, with the 'bad new things' than the 'good old ones,' a sentiment cited with ironic approval by Terry Eagleton.<sup>168</sup> Above all however -- since the unimaginable is rarely as anticipated -- it is advisable, as the following chapters are intended to demonstrate, to begin with what is to hand.

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<sup>168</sup>Eagleton, 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism', p.141.

## Chapter Two

### Martin Amis: Of Murderers and their Prose Styles

*If I were not perfectly sure of my power to write and of my marvellous ability to express ideas with the utmost grace and vividness . . . So, more or less, I had thought of beginning my tale. Further, I should have drawn the reader's attention to the fact that had I lacked that power, that ability, et cetera, not only should I have refrained from describing certain recent events, but there would have been nothing to describe, for, gentle reader, nothing at all would have happened. Silly perhaps, but at least clear. The gift of penetrating life's devices, an innate disposition towards the constant exercise of the creative faculty could alone have enabled me . . . At this point I should have compared the breaker of the law which makes such a fuss over a little spilled blood, with a poet or a stage performer. But as my poor left-handed friend used to put it: philosophic speculation is the invention of the rich. Down with it.*

Vladimir Nabokov, *Despair*

In an entry to *The Oxford Guide to Contemporary Writing*, the critic James Wood comments, 'No writer of his generation has been more influential (in both good and bad ways) on younger writers than Martin Amis.'<sup>169</sup> It might also be true to say, though, that no English writer of Amis's generation has been more overtly influenced. His work bears a series of watermarks which at times it seems to proffer as proof of its own literary authenticity. It is that authenticity, that mark of art's distinction (as in distinctiveness), which Amis prizes above all. Yet, as we shall see, there are problems with such a stance, with even such remnants of faith in artistic status. The writers who, for Amis, 'fill up the sky' are Saul Bellow and Vladimir Nabokov. It is hardly possible, in the light of the very considerable influence which these writers' work has exerted over Amis's fiction, to prevent the following from leaning heavily and more or less awkwardly on the points of intersection between their work and Amis's own. But by keeping those influences at the forefront of my reading of

<sup>169</sup>James Wood, 'England', in John Sturrock, ed., *The Oxford Guide to Contemporary Writing* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996), p.137.

Amis's fiction, I hope to show something of the complicated relation that fiction establishes with the contemporary cultural dominant of postmodernism.

### ***Money: The Self-Made Man***

*Money: A Suicide Note*, published in 1984, marked a new stage in Amis's writing. Significantly fatter than his four previous novels, it also operates on a larger scale of ambition. This was the first of his books to which his later claim that 'Everything I know on earth is in the novel I've just finished' might be plausibly applied. It is a book behind which the presence of Saul Bellow is unmistakable:

Aware of all the prescriptive dangers, Bellow nonetheless believes that the time has come for serious (i.e. talented) writers to be serious, without losing lyricism or laughter. 'No more novels about adolescence, career problems, sexual adventure, wounded ethnicity.' Why not address 'the mysterious circumstance of being', and say what it's like to be alive at this time, on this planet?<sup>170</sup>

Conscious that it was precisely this prescribed move away from novels about adolescence (*The Rachel Papers*), career problems (*Success*) and sexual adventure (*Dead Babies* or all of the above) to a larger, less wieldy subject of the survival of the self in contemporary Western society which he was attempting in *Money*, Amis is here acknowledging this shift in breadth of focus that his new novel offered and simultaneously suggesting the higher level of artistic company with which he would henceforth prefer to be associated -- note the reference to 'serious (i.e. talented) writers'.

The story of *Money* is the story of John Self. As a suicide note, it is also, by the crudest of allegorical reckonings, the story of the self-destruction of the individual in late twentieth-century consumer culture. Again writing of Bellow (and, in particular, of his novel *The Dean's December*), Amis is almost

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<sup>170</sup>Martin Amis, 'Saul Bellow in Chicago', in *The Moronic Inferno and Other Visits to America* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987; repr. 1990), pp.206-207.

rhapsodic in his lament for those moral and cultural values which he sees being lost:

Many times in Bellow's novels we are reminded that 'being human' isn't the automatic condition of every human being. Like freedom or sanity, it is not a given but a gift, a talent, an accomplishment, an objective. In achieving it, some will need more time or thought or help. And, put that way, it doesn't sound too hard a lesson to learn.<sup>171</sup>

The self has become, as he suggests in his collection of nuclear-obsessed short stories, one of 'Einstein's monsters, not fully human, not for now.' The word 'human' seems to signify for Amis a set of values which links the self, the individual bourgeois subject, with the world of high art, of culture. What he dramatises in *Money*, then, is the destruction of both of these elevated ideas. Yet, Amis is also trying to do something else, something which takes us to the heart of his aesthetics; the writing of *Money* is the attempt -- aesthetically -- to retain that self, to reconstitute a subjectivity compatible with the "high" culture values that he associates with the 'human'.

In a sense, *Money* is working on a cruel irony inherent in our understanding of the development of the bourgeois subject. That individual may emerge as a product of modern industrial capitalism, but it is also destroyed by the economic system's development into contemporary consumerism. The self and the commodity are perhaps from the very start colluding in a deadly embrace, one whose conclusion Amis portrays in the gluttonous John Self's frantic and headlong plunge into auto-destruction. The retention or conservation of that self, though, (and this, it seems, is Amis's gambit) may now prove more subversive than acceptance of its demise. As Adorno commented in another context: the individual is 'both

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<sup>171</sup>Ibid, p.208.

the outcome of the capitalist process of alienation and a defiant protest against it, something transient himself.<sup>172</sup>

But how does Amis try to reconstruct some form of subjectivity in the novel? The narrative form of *Money* appears to take the form of Nabokov's *Lolita*: *Lolita*, writes Amis, 'constructs a mind in the way that a prose Browning might have gone about it, through rigorous dramatic monologue.'<sup>173</sup> This, of course, foregrounds that very subject under construction: we find out about Self not only through his 'adventures', but (as in any monologue) through his way of telling us about them. Here he is confessing to a few misdemeanours:

I have a confession to make. I might as well come clean. I can't fool *you*. The truth is, I -- I haven't been behaving as well as I've led you to believe. No doubt you suspected that it was all too good to be true. I've gone back to Third Avenue, not to the Happy Isles but to places like it, to Elysium, to Eden, to Arcadia -- no more than once a day, I swear to God, and only for handjobs (and on the days when I'm ill or unusually hungover I don't go there at all). I go to porno-loop parlours. . . . Ah, I'm sorry. I didn't dare tell you earlier in case you stopped liking me, in case I lost your sympathy altogether -- and I do need it, your sympathy. I can't afford to lose that too. Napoleon, the bully: this pig likes his apples.<sup>174</sup>

Like portly Napoleon, Self too may be a bully but here it is his chronic inability to bully or manipulate us that is most graphic. He seems quite touchingly unaware of how appalling his behaviour had already appeared. It is this, perhaps above all, which allows him to retain some measure of sympathy: Self may enjoy his 'apples', but we are given some inkling that he just couldn't cut it in the bully stakes.

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<sup>172</sup>Theodor W. Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia UP, 1991), p.249.

<sup>173</sup>Martin Amis, 'Low Hum & Little Lo', 'Review Section', *The Independent on Sunday*, 25 October 1992, p.24.

<sup>174</sup>Martin Amis, *Money: A Suicide Note* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p.211. Further page references to the novel are from this edition and will be cited in the main text, prefixed by the abbreviation *M*.

Another example suggests a probable further reason for the indulgences with which we favour Self:

The evening, at last, has reached its promised, its destined stage. We've just got back from dinner at Kreuzer's. This was traditional, a matter of convention. Kreuzer's provides the costly setting of our reunions, our foreplay and our lies. There have been rich meat and bloody wine. There have been brandies, and thick puddings. There has already been some dirty talk. Selina is in high spirits, and as for me, I'm a gurgling wizard of calorific excess. (*M*, p.73)

This is not John Self's voice. It is not the prose style of a man who refuses to budge from page 1 of *Animal Farm* because he doesn't know what 'pop-holes' are. Could Self really describe himself as 'a gurgling wizard of calorific excess'? What we are witnessing is not *expression* of self but its overt *aestheticization*. Thus *Money* attempts to portray the retention of self -- the salvage of some form of subjecthood -- through the transformative powers of art. Humbert Humbert, the narrator of Nabokov's *Lolita*, takes no little pride in his literary aptitude: 'You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style,'<sup>175</sup> he promises. The same could not be said of Self. He is defined by his *lack* of culture. *Money*, says Amis, 'is a novel about what happens when people don't have Culture, and how impossible that makes it for them to understand what is going on.'<sup>176</sup> Self's continual bewilderment, his near-realisation at times that he is subject to another's designs and, most obviously, his bathetic vulgarity show him to be Amis's representative of philistinism. The writing that we read, the rhythmic voice that we hear, cannot be Self's. Like the character of Martin Amis in the novel, the author lends his writing talent to the narrator, playfully exploiting Self's half-grasped connection of Amis with plagiarism:

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<sup>175</sup>Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p.9.

<sup>176</sup>Val Hennessy, 'Martin Amis', in *A Little Light Friction* (London: Futura, 1990), p.235.

Fielding, of course, had heard of Martin Amis -- he hadn't read his stuff, but there'd recently been some cases of plagiarism, of text-theft, which had filtered down to the newspapers and magazines. So, I thought. Little Martin got caught with his fingers in the till, then, did he. A word criminal. I would bear that in mind.<sup>177</sup> (M, p.235)

In two of Nabokov's novels -- *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister* -- the author finally spares his protagonists from the furthest extremes of their misery by exposing them to the truth of their fictional status. This very nearly occurs in *Money* too. But just as Self's crimes are never quite as monstrous as those of Paduk in *Bend Sinister*, nor do his sufferings elicit anything like the compassion of Adam Krug's. The horror of children's pain, so recognisably central in Nabokov's work, does not emerge as a major thematic concern in Amis's writing until *Einstein's Monsters* and *London Fields*. In *Money* the punishments are unmistakably adult.

What happens in *Money*, instead of the compassionate leave engineered by Nabokov, is that Self is repeatedly taunted over his role as authorial pawn, but remains unable to grasp the significance of these comments. Here Martin explains to Self some narrative principles:

'The distance between author and narrator corresponds to the degree to which the author finds the narrator wicked, deluded, pitiful or ridiculous. I'm sorry, am I boring you?'

'-- Uh?'

'This distance is partly determined by convention. In the epic or heroic frame, the author gives the protagonist

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<sup>177</sup> Amis was involved in a plagiarism scandal. In 1980 he pointed out that Jacob Epstein's *Wild Oats* plagiarized from his own novel *The Rachel Papers*. The following are his later, published comments on the affair:

MA: All I feel is that on the whole I wish I'd never bothered to bring anyone's attention to it.  
BL: Why?

MA: Just the human reason. I think he suffered inordinately, and it didn't do me any good. Funnily enough, plagiarism is such a weird business that I perhaps was tainted as well. It's not like a normal transaction. It doesn't seem to even out morally at all. If I could do it again, I'd just let it go. I think it should have gone on the record somehow. But I wish someone else had done it.

Brendan Lemon, 'Interview with Martin Amis', *Interview*, March 1990, p.155.

everything he has, and more. The hero is a god or has godlike powers or virtues. In the tragic . . . Are you all right?'

'Uh?' I repeated. I had just stabbed a pretzel into my dodgy upper tooth. Rescreening this little mishap in my head, I suppose I must have winced pretty graphically and then given a sluggish, tramplike twitch. Now I checked the tooth with my tongue. Martin talked contentedly on.... I sipped my drink and sluiced the scotch round my upper west side.

'The further down the scale he is, the more liberties you can take with him. You can do what the hell you like with him, really. This creates an appetite for punishment. The author is not free of sadistic impulses. I suppose it's the --' (M, pp.246-247)

David Lodge has cited the relationship between Self and Amis dramatised here as an example of 'the death of the author', pointing out that the narrator, Amis's creation, goes so far as to throw a punch at the author-figure.<sup>178</sup> What Lodge neglects to mention is that the punch misses by some way, throwing Self off-balance and leaving him in a crumpled heap on the floor, staring up in frustrated and dejected failure at the unscratched and apologetic figure of Amis. Norman Mailer has claimed that the first thing he thinks when he sees a man is 'will I fight him?' and when he sees a woman 'will I fuck her?' In his relations with Martin Amis and Martina Twain, Self is a failure on both these counts: unable to connect with Martin's jaw, he finds it impossible to raise more than an apologetic smile in bed with Martina.

And yet the impotence which this demonstrates is something for which we should be well prepared. The authorial note with which the book begins is itself a marker of Self's outright reliance on, and subjugation to, a higher authority:

*This is a suicide note. By the time you lay it aside (and you should always read these things slowly, on the lookout for clues or giveaways), John Self will no longer exist. Or at any rate that's the idea. You never can tell, though, with suicide notes, can you?...*

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<sup>178</sup>David Lodge, *After Bakhtin: essays on fiction and criticism* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.3.

...To whom is the note addressed? To Martina, to Fielding, to Vera, to Alec, to Selina, to Barry -- to John Self? No. It is meant for you out there, the dear, the gentle. (M, 'Author's Note')

That his own apparent suicide note should be thus prefaced signals to us readers from the very outset the prime importance of our role(s) in the novel. There are, then, two pivotal relationships on which Self's narrative depends: that which links Martin and Martina to Self; and that which is established between Amis, his narrator, and the reader.

Martin rents his artistic skills to Self and the culture industry. The "feelgood" techniques to which he subjects the original script are designed to help Self manipulate the actors; ultimately, however, neither he nor his hedonistic would-be benefactor benefit. John Self's film and career are destroyed; Martin isn't paid. Similarly, Martina attempts to redeem or save Self with the help of "high" culture: she buys him a book; she even takes him to the opera. In return, Self somehow misses the allegorical point of *Animal Farm* and confuses Desdemona with a porn star. The civilising effect of art has gone awry, and the novel's protagonist slips back into the sack with Selina. Looking for Amis's phone-number, Self comments, 'Martin was in the book all right -- in fact he was there twice. . . Some people will do anything to get their names in print' (M, p.235). Martina is the female reflection of Amis, a point which we will soon see to have repercussions for the depiction of other artists-*manqués*. For the moment, however, it is important merely to note that both seem to be trying -- and failing -- to save Self through art.

This aspect of the novel's ostensible content relates of course very closely to those features of the narrative form discussed earlier. Here, then, we return to the question of Amis's non-credible use of dramatic monologue as an attempt to salvage the self (or subject) through aestheticization. The absence of naturalistic credibility in Self's narrative, the extent to which there

is a clear disparity between the characterisation of Self and his mode of expression, is an indication of Amis's view that the self can no longer be seen as an expression of the values of high culture. The element of critique which this disparity generates is, however, fully dependent on a critical distance of the aesthetic to the consumerist culture that Self inhabits. Yet what we have just witnessed is Amis's dramatisation of the aesthetic's complicity with the market (in Martin's rewritten script) and its impotence as a force in changing characters' modes of behaviour (see Martina's failed self-improvement course in culture).

Yet if it is Self who seems initially to be subject to art's educative mission, it nonetheless remains the reader to whom the note (and, therefore, the novel) is addressed. The question of how we actually engage in the act of reading *Money* is clearly marked as significant. The extent to which this role helps associate the reader with Self is signalled in Self's mistaken grasp of a hissed homosexual's insult:

I walked past them.  
 'Reader,' someone seemed to say.  
 I paused. I hung my head. You can walk away but I  
 cannot walk away. I turned, and asked with real interest, 'What  
 did I hear you call me?'  
 'Breeder,' said the man. He held a kind of grappling hook  
 between his legs. 'Big breeder.' (*M*, p.195)

This is an association with which, though, we might be seen to collude. Despite those moments (referred to earlier) when a substantial ironic distance is established between the reader and Self, it is all too tempting at times simply to enjoy the squalor of the narrator's behaviour, to indulge in a certain voyeuristic pleasure -- to go slumming:

I knew Martina from way back at film school, and I used to  
 amble up with whatever stylist or make-up girl I was squiring  
 and say hi to the talented team. It did my rep a lot of good.

Martina always seemed pleased to see me. Perhaps she fancied a bit of rough, even then.

So, towards the end of dinner, as Martina stood at my side pouring out the last of the wine, I rammed my hand up her skirt and said, 'Come on, darling, you know you love it' . . . Relax. I didn't really. (M, p.215)

A passage such as the above shows the extent to which Self is capable of engaging us in a playful relationship, dramatising a moral outrage at which we too are then invited to laugh. Self, though, is not capable of sustaining this intimacy with his reader; at times, as we have already seen, Amis stresses Self's loss of narrative control. Again, the narrative hierarchy which is established in *Money* seems eerily similar to that of Nabokov's *Lolita*:

Morally the novel is all ricochet or rebound. However cruel Humbert is to Lolita, Nabokov is crueller to Humbert -- finessingly cruel. We all share the narrator's smirk when he begins the sexual-bribes chapter with the following sentence: "I am now faced with the distasteful task of recording a definite drop in Lolita's morals." But when the smirk congeals we are left staring at the moral heap that Humbert has become, underneath his arched eyebrow.<sup>179</sup>

In establishing narrative parallels with *Lolita*, Amis would seem to be reinforcing the significance of the theme of cruelty that *Money* shares with Nabokov's novel. Pointing to Nabokov's identification of the sadism at work in *Don Quixote*, he implicitly suggests that both *Money* and *Lolita* indulge in something of the same practices:

The author seems to plan it thus: Come with me, ungentle reader, who enjoys seeing a live dog inflated and kicked around like a soccer football; reader, who likes, of a Sunday morning, on his way to or from church, to poke his stick or direct his spittle at a poor rogue in the stocks; come. . . . I hope you will be amused at what I have to offer.<sup>180</sup>

It is therefore worth switching our attention, for a few moments, from the moral transgressions of John Self to the ethical status of Amis's reader. It is,

<sup>179</sup>Amis, 'Low Hum & Little Lo', p.24.

<sup>180</sup>Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on 'Don Quixote'*; cited in Amis, 'Low Hum & Little Lo', p.24.

for Nabokov, write both Michael Wood<sup>181</sup> and Richard Rorty,<sup>182</sup> the sin of inattentiveness or neglect that is most indicative of our habitual cruelties:

Both Kinbote and Humbert are exquisitely sensitive to everything which affects or provides expression for their own obsession, and entirely incurious about anything that affects anything else. These characters dramatize, as it has never before been dramatised, the particular form of cruelty about which Nabokov worried most -- incuriosity.<sup>183</sup>

'I wonder how many readers survive [*Lolita*],' writes Amis,

without realising that its heroine is, so to speak, dead on arrival, like her child. Her brief obituary is tucked away, with others, in the "editor's" foreword, in nonchalant, school-newsletter form.<sup>184</sup>

To most readers of *Lolita*, the death of Dolores Haze is as much of an immediate concern as is the suicide of Hazel Shade to Charles Kinbote in *Pale Fire*. It is of this same lack of humane concern that John Self is accused by Frank the Phone:

'Remember, in Trenton, the school on Budd Street, the pale boy with glasses in the yard? You made him cry. It was me. Last December, Los Angeles, the hired car you were driving when you jumped that light in Coldwater Canyon? A cab crashed and you didn't stop. The cab had a passenger. It was me. 1978, New York, you were auditioning at the Walden Center, remember? The redhead, you had her strip and then passed her over, and you laughed. It was me. Yesterday you stepped over a bum in Fifth Avenue and you looked down and swore and made to kick. It was me. It was me.' (*M*, pp.217-218)

'I don't remember,' says Self, 'the pale boy with glasses crying in the playground -- but no doubt there were one or two, and I was a mean kid.'

Perhaps even more significantly, Amis attempts to replicate his protagonist's hedonistic surrender in the response of the reader. *Lolita*, he

<sup>181</sup>Michael Wood, *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (London: Pimlico, 1995).

<sup>182</sup>Richard Rorty, 'The barbar of Kasbeam: Nabokov on cruelty', in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), pp.141-168.

<sup>183</sup>Ibid, p.158.

<sup>184</sup>Amis, 'Low Hum & Little Lo', p.24.

writes, 'rushes up on the reader like a recreational drug more powerful than any yet discovered or devised.'<sup>185</sup> *Money*, in a sense, does precisely the same. When the character of Martin Amis explains to Self how Fielding's scam worked (see *M*, p.378), it all seems so simple. Yet few readers, particularly on a first reading, will have noticed the moment when Self mistakenly assumes sole financial responsibility for the movie:

He had me doublesign some contracts on the hood (the usual: once under 'Co-signatory', once under 'Self'). Then he waved, and vanished behind the black glass. (*M*, p.142)

Like Self, the reader is lost in the rush of the novel, in the pull and jerk of Amis's prose. Ignoring the warning to 'read these things slowly, on the lookout for clues or giveaways', most of us will be content to enjoy the sensuous pleasures afforded by *Money*. The didacticism of Amis's novel is therefore inextricably bound up in its elevation of aesthetic pleasure, a force to be simultaneously enjoyed and held suspect.

If 'the point of good art,' as Amis claims, 'is . . . an educative process, a humanizing and enriching process,'<sup>186</sup> it is also, as he acknowledges, an exercise in manipulation. '[E]very character in [*Money*],' he says, dupes the narrator, and yet I'm the one who has actually done it all to him: I've always been very conscious of that.'<sup>187</sup> Raising a question that will be dealt with more fully in *London Fields*, Amis the character asks in *Money*:

'Is there a moral philosophy of fiction? When I create a character and put him or her through certain ordeals, what am I up to -- morally? Am I accountable. I sometimes feel that -' (*M*, p.260)

Does this, though, make Amis just another Fielding Goodney? The characters of Quentin Villiers in *Dead Babies* and Prince in *Other People* have already

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<sup>185</sup>Ibid.

<sup>186</sup>John Haffenden, 'Martin Amis', in *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen, 1985), p.24.

<sup>187</sup>Ibid, p.11.

stood as examples in Amis's fiction of the artist as criminal or murderer. Fielding Goodney is clearly another of these figures; he represents the artist *manqué* who, like Humbert in *Lolita*, 'because they cannot make art out of life, make their lives into art.'<sup>188</sup> Martin Amis, the fictional character, is certainly associated with Fielding: 'Cross dresser!' cries Self to the retreating, battered Fielding; but the term could equally be applied to Amis, doubled in the character of Martina Twain. The association of the two would therefore seem to raise the question of whether, in the age of the postmodern, an author can be anything but *manqué*.

In Martin Amis's *Money* the world of the aesthetic is depicted as deeply complicit with the social and economic forces that are destroying the subject; yet it is only through aestheticization that Amis can try to retain that self. The credibility of such a stance, and the possibility that it is dependent on a now out-of-date set of values which may really only have been those of a narrowly-defined liberal elite will be discussed later in this chapter. The present study of *Money* must leave, then, unresolved the question of whether, in the end, the power of the author's art can salvage Self -- Amis, for example, points to the fact that 'the only semi-colon in the book appears in the last sentence, which is meant to be a mighty clue to the idea that [John Self] is slowing down . . . because at one point he has said that he wants semi-colons in his life'<sup>189</sup> -- or whether, despite its author's best intentions, *Money* is just another reminder that, as in *Lolita*, 'you can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style.'

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<sup>188</sup>Amis, 'Low Hum & Little Lo', p.25.

<sup>189</sup>Haffenden, p.14.

***London Fields: Realism and Relief***

The example of Saul Bellow's later fiction -- 'Late Bellow', as Amis calls it -- offers perhaps the most appropriate perspective from which to approach *London Fields*. The tragedy of Bellow's principal protagonists in at least his last two novels -- *The Dean's December* and *More Die of Heartbreak* -- lies in their recognition that in order to retain any valid notion of self, of selfhood, they must divorce themselves from the social sphere and retreat to an aloof introspection whither neither society nor Bellow himself can follow them. The fates of Albert Corde and Ben Corder reflect the defeat of liberal humanist values and aspirations in contemporary America. However, to this pessimistic retreat to the introspective Bellow opposes both the role of the author and the form of the novel. There is little elegiac in the prose of *The Dean's December*. Instead we find a level of sustained, carefully-weighted polemical critique, whose vigour is sharply at odds with the despair that leads Corde to wish that he need never descend from the frosty seclusion of an astronomical observatory.

Awareness of the interplay of these contradictory impulses in the face of social forces is crucial to an understanding of the artistic dilemmas that Amis inherits from Bellow. Reviewing *The Dean's December*, Amis writes:

Citing Rilke's wartime letters, the Dean observes that there is no effective language for the large-scale terrors; during such times 'the heart must hang in the dark', and wait. But there is a countervailing urge 'to send the soul out into society', 'to see at first hand the big manifestations of disorder and take a fresh reading from them'. The result is head-spin, heart-fever.<sup>190</sup>

It is the very possibility of an adequate literary response to the contemporary world that Bellow explores in this novel, his first since being awarded the

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<sup>190</sup> Amis, 'Saul Bellow in Chicago', p.203.

Nobel Prize in 1976. The critical reception accorded on its publication in 1982 was ambivalent in the extreme; although both Martin Amis and Salman Rushdie reviewed it favourably, others criticised the novel's didacticism, its sermon-like qualities. Bellow's own comments on the intention behind the novel merely add credence to such criticisms: 'I don't think I've ever written a book with so many declarative sentences,' he said. 'The idea was to hit and to hit hard, to make sure that every stroke of the hammer would tell.'<sup>191</sup>

That Bellow believes a certain level of didacticism -- or, more euphemistically, of directness -- to be now acceptable, perhaps even necessary, appears to be borne out by the text of *The Dean's December*. An ever-present threat is that of silence. The pervasiveness of this threat is perhaps why there seems such a sinister edge to one of the questions that Albert Corde is asked by his nephew concerning the death of Rickie Lester, gagged and thrown out a window: "'Would it have been more humane if he wasn't gagged, so he could speak his last words?'"<sup>192</sup> Here also, by implication, the justification of Corde's published attacks on corruption in Chicago is called into question: can literature any longer express an adequate response to the human predicament, or is it no more than a dying man's screams? If Corde by the novel's end is no longer sure that he can answer these questions, the form and style of the novel indicate that Bellow himself is as determined as ever to oppose any notion of the social irrelevance of literature. It is, therefore, for a specific reason -- to combat the silence of irrelevance -- that in *The Dean's December* - Bellow's method becomes so direct and his voice so strident.

The issues with which Martin Amis deals in *London Fields* are extremely similar, though viewed from a slightly different historical and

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<sup>191</sup>Melvyn Bragg, 'Interview with Saul Bellow', *London Review of Books*, 6 May 1982, p.22.

<sup>192</sup>Saul Bellow, *The Dean's December* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p.45.

literary-historical perspective. *London Fields* poses a question that *The Dean's December* does not, that of the historical development, if not determination, of literary form. Bellow's fiction remains significantly reliant upon the conventions of literary realism, his Nobel Lecture being largely a defence of this position (as well as an attack on Alain Robbe-Grillet's theory of the *nouveau roman*).<sup>193</sup> Therein lies one of the great paradoxes engendered by Bellow's fiction: how can a contemporary novelist show the social destruction of liberal humanist values while continuing to practice a realist mode of writing that has historically been based on precisely those values?<sup>194</sup>

*London Fields* is the dramatisation of a writer's attempt to write a novel which reflects the author's immediate social environment, chronicling the effect on a society of the prospect of universal death. In other words, Amis allows us to witness Samson Young's attempts to use the novel as a means of relating individual consciousness to historical experience in the manner of the great realist novelists of the nineteenth century, when the novel is now itself perhaps no longer an appropriate medium for such lofty aspirations. The earnestness of Samson's ambitions seem strangely out of place in *London Fields*. As a would-be realist, trying to adopt something of Balzac's role as public 'secretary', he recounts a story of sex, murder and class which he nonetheless finds somehow developing into more of a literary game-playing exercise than the 'comprehensive description of the totality of society' that we have already seen Lukács associate with the realist aesthetic. Samson seems to be a victim of what Fredric Jameson calls 'the relief of the postmodern':

This is, then, the relief of the postmodern, in which the various modernist rituals were swept away and form production again became open to whoever cared to indulge it, but at its own

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<sup>193</sup>Saul Bellow, 'Nobel Lecture', in *It All Adds Up: From the Dim Past to the Uncertain Future* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), pp.88-97.

<sup>194</sup>For a discussion of the association of realism and the *Weltanschauung* of the bourgeoisie see the essays collected in Lilian R. Furst, ed., *Realism* (London: Longman, 1992).

price: namely, the preliminary destruction of modernist formal values (now considered "elitist"), along with a range of crucial related categories such as the work or the subject. "Text" is a relief after "work", but you must not try to outsmart it and use it to produce a work after all, under cover of textuality. A playfulness of form, the aleatory production of new ones or joyous cannibalization of the old, will not put you in so relaxed and receptive a disposition that, by happy accident, "great" or "significant" form will come into being anyhow. . . . The status of art (and also of culture) has had to be irrevocably modified in order to secure the new productivities; and it cannot be changed back at will.<sup>195</sup>

In effect, Amis illustrates the tragic irony of this situation by placing Samson, a narrator who seems to have stepped straight from a novel by Bellow, in what seems a novel by Nabokov.

The formally postmodern aspect of *London Fields* is based on a Nabokovian twist to the 'whodunit' detective novel genre. Once the principal protagonists have been introduced and their roles identified (e.g. 'Chapter One: The Murderer. Keith Talent was a bad guy'), the supposed surface plot of the novel - the impending and inevitable murder of Nicola Six - gives way to another plot involving the effect of each of the main characters on the creation of the novel. It is as though Amis is reinforcing the point we have already seen him make in relation to *Money*, that it is the author whom the reader must finally identify as responsible for the fates of each character. Consequently, *London Fields* leads the reader to search among the characters for the mind responsible for Nicola's death. This search is the 'elaborate puzzle or game' that Robert Alter identifies as characteristic of the postmodern novel;<sup>196</sup> but here it is also used to expose the ideological content of this trend in the development of the novel. The reading of *London Fields* which immediately follows is then an interpretation which the novel itself pre-empts and to which, as I hope later to show, it cannot be reduced.

<sup>195</sup>Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp.317-318.

<sup>196</sup>Robert Alter, *Motives for Fiction* (London: Harvard UP, 1984), p.6.

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The first to offer himself as an authorial figure is M.A.. The note which precedes the start of Samson Young's narrative is, like all such notes in Amis's previous novels, signed 'M.A.'. At first it appears quite normal, but at its conclusion there is the distinct impression that M.A. is trying to distance himself from the novel, trying to retreat from the action: 'So let's call it *London Fields*. This book is called *London Fields*. *London Fields*. . .' The note is further complicated by the reader's discovery later of the character Mark Asprey (to whom, of course, we shall return); but initially the function it serves, in a similar fashion to the note which prefaces *Money*, is to undermine the authority and the claims to authorial responsibility of the second candidate, Samson Young our narrator.

Samson's cause is, from the very moment he begins his narrative, a lost one. Initially he sees his uncertainties, his lack of control, as a result of his dependence upon external events, a marker of his narrative's authenticity. So Although he perceives himself as an intermediary from the very outset, he believes himself to be an intermediary of social events or of history, not that of another author. 'Real life is coming along so fast that I can no longer delay,' he writes. 'It's unbelievable.'<sup>197</sup> But for the reader the wider perspective created by the preceding note is available. He/She is aware that it is the novel rather than the city which provides the structure for whose needs Samson is to be sacrificed. When Samson asks, 'If London is a spider's web, then where do I fit in?' it is for the reader, remembering the ironic faith with his narrator that M.A. had kept in his choice of title, to see that *London Fields* might easily be substituted for 'London'. Samson's queasy answer, 'Maybe I'm the fly. I'm the fly' (*LF*, p.3), shows that early on in the novel, perhaps like

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<sup>197</sup>Martin Amis, *London Fields* (London: Cape, 1989), p.3. Further page references to the novel are from this edition and will be cited in the main text, prefixed by the abbreviation *LF*.

John Self in *Money*, he already suspects that he is to be a victim; it is, therefore, doubly ironic that, mistaking textuality for reality, his expression of those suspicions is itself part of the structure that overwhelms him.

This perhaps excessive reliance on a naïve notion of what Samson calls 'real life' is what marks him as a pawn even to some of the other characters, to Nicola Six and to Mark Asprey. His lack of aptitude in the imaginative realm is central to others' recognition of his frailty and vulnerability. When he says to Nicola, "I can't imagine how you're going to work it," and she replies, "The story of your life" (*LF*, p.455), it is to this aspect of his insufficiency as an authorial candidate that she is alluding. Nicola's own imaginative faculties allow her to picture herself (as early as p.118) as a character in a story. Lacking these powers, Samson does not even consider this possibility until late in the novel (p.409), and then only as a frustrated and less-than-half-serious reaction to his feelings of persecution. Only at the novel's conclusion -- at the death, as Keith Talent might put it -- does this sense of persecution so crush Samson that he writes, in his letter to Kim, 'I feel seamless and insubstantial, like a creation. As if someone made me up, for money. And I don't care' (*LF*, p.470). Here, though, the prospect of imminent death makes it safe for Samson to accept that he is not the autonomous subject he had thought himself to be.

Of perhaps greater significance in terms of the novel as a 'whodunit' is Samson's open recognition that he has lost any claims to authorship he might once have had, and his subsequent speculations on who the true author might be. These speculations are reflected in Samson's debates over whether he is the father of Missy Harter's expected child:

I am the father of Missy's baby. Or Sheridan Sick is. (I suppose it's Sick's.' 'Don't *call* him that.' 'It's his *name*, isn't it?') (*LF*, p.435)

For 'Sick's' we can of course read 'Six', Nicola Six. 'I failed, in art and love,' writes Samson. Just as the child is not his, nor is the novel on which so many of his hopes depend. This motif of the novel as child is present throughout *London Fields* (just as it is in *Time's Arrow*) and is another pointer to the debt Amis owes to Nabokov, whose suffering children (aestheticized at times almost out of existence), from David Krug to Dolores Haze to Hazel Shade, are acknowledged in the figures of Debee Kensit and Kim Talent. For the moment, though, it is necessary only to register the air of failure that surrounds Samson's acts of devotion, to acknowledge his tragic inability to create.

Samson's knowledge that he has been duped leads him, as the novel and his life both draw to a close, to try to guess the identity of his tormentor, the novel's true author. In his parting letter to Mark Asprey, he concludes with a PPS: 'You didn't set me up. did you?' (*LF*, p.468). But there persists the tempting possibility that the novel is really Nicola's own work, like her death. 'She outwrote me. Her story worked. And mine didn't' (*LF*, p.466). Unable to choose definitively between them, Samson retreats instead to an introspective despair over his own marginalised status, which leads finally to a last, pathetic attempt to claim responsibility:

So if you ever felt something behind you when you weren't even one, like welcome heat, like a bulb, like a sun, trying to shine right across the universe -- it was me. Always me. It was me. It was me. (*LF*, p.470)

Even here, however, in the very last words of the novel, his claims can be seen to undermine themselves. 'It was me' is less an assertion of independence than a gesture of resigned acquiescence to Nicola's often hinted-at murder plan: 'Get you. Aren't *you* the one,' she mocks him (*LF*, p.119).

The murderess herself is an obvious choice for the role of author. We are told that Nicola 'always knew what was going to happen next' (*LF*, p.15).

This foreknowledge allows her to give a constant appearance of control and to flaunt her superiority over Samson in terms of awareness or insight. It was precisely these traits that provoked the novelist Jay McInerney to write in his review of the novel, 'Collaborating in her own murder appeals to her creative instincts. . . . Nicola becomes the real creative genius behind the novel.'<sup>198</sup> McInerney's conclusion is well-founded, for Nicola also proves herself adept at creating different characters and personae, such as her fictional friend Enola Gay and the elaborate fiction she presents to Guy Clinch of herself as an innocent virgin.

Nonetheless, this is not an interpretation which can be supported by a close reading of the text, as it ignores the extent to which Nicola herself is exposed as a literary artefact, as the creation of another artist. Nicola is described in terms plainly borrowed from other literary works (her breasts, for example, are 'so close together, in fearful symmetry'); her story, moreover, is made to follow a determinate course that echoes, both in its general structure and in specific events, past literary models.

The most overt and influential of these models is the story of Lise in Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat*. Lise, too, carefully plans the circumstances of her death and ruthlessly manipulates her unwilling murderer. The echoes in *London Fields* of Spark's novel are copious, often extending beyond elements of plot and structure to direct textual allusion:

Lise touches him on the arm. 'You're coming with me,' she says.<sup>199</sup>

Nicola was laughing with her mouth as long and wide as it would go, when Guy stepped forward.  
'You're going back with me.' (LF, p.461)

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<sup>198</sup>Jay McInerney, 'Review of *London Fields*', *The Observer*, 24 September 1989, p.47.

<sup>199</sup>Muriel Spark, *The Driver's Seat* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p.101.

These scenes serve, of course, different functions in each novel -- in *The Driver's Seat* this is the moment when the murderer is finally identified, while this is emphatically not the case in *London Fields* -- but the effect of this kind of allusion, this foregrounding of the textual-dependency of Nicola and her story, is manifestly part of a strategy to suggest, however covertly, Nicola's status as a literary creation subject to a creator. In this respect, Nicola evinces far greater insight than Jay McInerney:

I said uneasily, 'But you're not in a story. This isn't some hired video Nicola.'  
 She shrugged. 'It's always felt like a story,' she said. (*LF*, p.118)

Although certainly the most obvious, *The Driver's Seat* is far from the only literary model from which Nicola is constructed. Her own description of the terrible thing she did to Mark Asprey, burning his novel, portrays her as a Hedda Gabler figure, torching the manuscript of her former beloved. That particular passage (see *LF*, p.453), is also a reworked version of a similar episode in another of Amis's novels, *Other People*, whose narrator also turns out to be the main protagonist's murderer:

'. . . I'd been writing a play, been writing it the whole year I'd been with her. . . . One day she locked herself in my study, I was banging on the door. I heard the sound of paper being thrashed about -- there was an open fire in there. She whispered through the door that she was going to burn it. My play. Her voice was mad, not like her at all. She knew I had no copy.'<sup>200</sup>

Thematically it is this allusion that is most significant; for not only does it offer further evidence of Nicola's fictionality, but it also puts in implicit doubt the authority of Nicola's version of events. This doubt is the result of the subsequent revisions undergone by the above story from *Other People*. The character telling the story, Michael Shane, adds that his girlfriend, Amy, had

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<sup>200</sup>Martin Amis, *Other People* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p.136.

not destroyed the play but had only been pretending. He goes on to say that he destroyed it himself later because he realised how much she hated it. By this stage, Shane's initial version has been subject to two revisions (or additions); the novel's narrator then intervenes to add a third:

Michael says, 'A week later I burnt it.' This isn't strictly true either. Doesn't he remember? Is he still blinded by smoke and his own ball-broken tears? He burnt it, but she made him. He didn't want to, but she made him. She did. Oh, she did.<sup>201</sup>

This has two principal implications for *London Fields*. The first is that Nicola's story is not originally Nicola's, but that of Amy Hide from *Other People*. The second is that the reader is left unsure as to how far he/she should accept the finality of Nicola's version. "Some things are never over," she tells Samson of her relationship with Asprey. Is the existence of *London Fields* perhaps evidence that Mark Asprey's one good novel was not burnt but is in the process of being written?

Although never a physical presence in the novel, Asprey's influence is nevertheless powerful and consistent. As well as having initials to match those at the foot of the authorial note, Asprey is a former(?) lover of Nicola Six and a successful writer. He likes to taunt Samson (in notes which he signs 'M.A.'), and keeps constant tabs on him by entrusting him to the care of the ever-watchful Incarnacion. Equally suspicious is the enigmatic nature of his relationship with Nicola. Samson sees the photographic proof that their relationship was not without its sadistic and masochistic elements (see above for Amis to John Self on the author's sadistic impulses in *Money*), and Nicola confesses that "[s]ome things are never over" (*LF*, p.305).

Samson's suspicion that Asprey has set him up is thus supported by a vast array of evidence. However, the narrator's judgements are distinctly fallible. The credibility of Asprey as an authorial figure is, therefore,

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<sup>201</sup>Ibid, p.138.

dependent upon the absence of signs *in the text* to indicate that he, like both Samson and Nicola, is merely another's creation. Therein lies the significance of Asprey's non-appearance, in physical terms, in the text; only his writings are present. Asprey never fully shares, for the reader, the same ontological world as the other characters. The clinching clue, however, is Asprey's novel *Crossbone Waters*. Here is the evidence, for both the reader and Samson, that Asprey has in the past used literature to record his amorous conquests. The pseudonym chosen for the book's author, 'Marius Appleby', creates a chinese-box structure of authorship, with the reader (aware, of course, of the name 'Martin Amis' on the novel's dust-jacket) led to associate all three -- Appleby, Asprey and Amis -- with a single, authorial 'M.A.'. This act involves a conflation of the extradiegetic, diegetic and metadiegetic levels, at least in terms of authorship, as Mark Asprey replaces the ostensible author of the novel on the diegetic level, Samson, and is associated through his initials with the metadiegetic and extradiegetic authors (Appleby and Amis, respectively). If the novel is a whodunit, a literary game, then it is Mark Asprey ('M.A.') who is guilty.

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The last few pages have offered, as I indicated earlier, a textually-generated misreading of the novel. In *London Fields* Martin Amis exploits the contemporary temptation to view the novel as simply a game between the author and the reader. It is, in a sense, the result of Amis's reflections on *Money*:

Everyone in the book is a kind of artist - sack-artists, piss-artists, con-artists, bullshit-artists -- and perhaps this will lead on to something I will understand and write about later.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>202</sup>Haffenden, p.5.

But rather than make of this simultaneous profusion and degradation of artists a puzzle based on the 'whodunit', Amis attempts to explore in *London Fields* the historical developments and social conditions that have helped shape contemporary literary conventions, and to analyse some of the political and ethical implications of those assumptions. In the figures of Samson Young and Mark Asprey, then, the reader is presented less with a choice of author than with alternative understandings of the function or role of literature in contemporary, late capitalist societies. The novel is less a search than an enquiry: 'Not a whodunit,' as Samson writes in one of his few moments of illumination. 'More a whydoit' (*LF*, p.3).

*London Fields* thus shares, as a central preoccupation, the theme of the very possibility of an adequate literary response to a contemporary, capitalist society that haunts the later fiction of Saul Bellow. It is therefore no mere accident that its Jewish-American narrator, Samson Young, is so reminiscent, so suggestive of Bellow's habitual protagonists. But the environment in which Samson is placed is more fragmented, more overt in its threat to the individual subject than that in which Bellow's characters are usually depicted. In fact, it soon becomes clear to the reader -- and later to Samson himself -- that Samson's attitudes and the essentially liberal humanist assumptions they embody are hopelessly out of date. In *London Fields* the self is neither alienated nor mocked by its social environment; instead, it has become the flimsy construction of advertising hoardings and tabloid newspapers, no longer able to situate itself at the distance from these social and cultural artefacts that alienation would presuppose.

The character who most readily fits this model of the self as a degraded, tabloid fiction is, of course, Keith Talent. As Samson explains:

It was the world of TV that told him what the world was. How does all the TV time work on a modern person, a person like

Keith? . . . TV came at Keith like it came at everybody else; and he had nothing whatever to keep it out. He couldn't grade or filter it. So he thought TV was real. . . . Of course, some of it *was* real. Riots in Kazakhstan were real, stuff about antiques was real (Keith watched these shows in a spirit of professional dedication), mass suicide in Sun City was real. But so, to Keith, was *Syndicate*, and *Edwin Drood: The Musical* and *Bow Bells* and *The Dorm That Dripped Blood*. (LF, p.55)

Samson may end up feeling 'seamless and insubstantial, like a creation', but in comparison with Keith he initially appears the veritable model of the autonomous individual subject. Keith's description to Guy of a football match might seem to have come straight from the pages of a tabloid newspaper, but to believe that Keith has simply committed the report to memory would be to miss the extremity of the situation. Keith is not merely manipulated by the media, he is fully reconstructed by it; for as Samson realises, 'When Keith goes to a football match, that misery of stringer's clichés *is what he actually sees*' (LF, p.98).

Samson gradually becomes aware, while narrating, that the novel he is attempting to write is out of place in this historical moment: 'It just never is *the time*,' is his repeated lament. He aspires to forms of liberal humanism and literary verisimilitude in an age in which those categories are held no longer really to mean anything in themselves but, as in *London Fields*, appear as pastiche, as the disinterested adoption of one mask among many. Rather than actually representing a liberal humanistic author, Samson can only represent a postmodern version or pastiche of one. He attempts to write a novel based on real historical experience and employing the conventions of realism when those conventions and the social assumptions on which they were historically founded have shattered in the face of the same historical experiences that Samson wishes to reflect. This paradox to which Samson's literary endeavours (his '*London Fields*') are subject is precisely that which we have

seen in relation to Saul Bellow's fiction. Samson is therefore to be seen not necessarily as one of Bellow's protagonists, but rather as a pastiche of Bellow himself, or at least as the embodiment in a postmodern novel of the assumptions and impulses intrinsic to Bellow's authorial craft.

Mark Asprey, on the other hand, is perfectly attuned to the contemporary *Zeitgeist* and well aware of the redundancy of all that Samson represents. The key to Asprey's attitude is to be found in the conclusion to the note he leaves Samson, congratulating him on toiling his way 'to the crux of the Cordelia Constantine business':

You don't understand, do you, my talentless friend? Even as you die and rot with envy. It doesn't matter what anyone writes anymore. The time for it mattering has passed. The truth doesn't matter anymore and *is not wanted*. (LF, p.452)

For Asprey, literature is no longer to be taken seriously, in the sense that it bears no significant relation to external, social forces. His '*London Fields*' is the misreading of the novel that was summarised earlier: the novel as a 'whodunit', as a technical game leading to the identification of the 'author'. According to this view, the successful reader is finally to be congratulated on toiling his/her way to the crux of the Nicola Six business. But the congratulations ring hollow, for if 'it doesn't matter what anyone writes any more,' the author and the reader are involved in simply an economic relationship and novels, as Mary Lamb in *Other People* conjectures, are merely 'lies, imagined for money, time sold'.<sup>203</sup>

Although Asprey denies that novels are seriously related to the social realm or to historical experience, it is clear in *London Fields* that this very denial is socially and culturally determined. Asprey is a writer for whom commercial success is the prime motivation. He writes what Nicola calls 'schlock plays and cute journalism' (LF, p.434); and his bookshelves, as

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<sup>203</sup>Amis, *Other People*, p.69.

Samson discovers, are full of 'stuff like Good Bad Taste or Bad Good Taste or Things You Love to Hate or Hate to Love' (*LF*, p.284). Like Fielding Goodney in *Money* and Dewey Spangler in Bellow's *The Dean's December* -- in fact, even like *London Fields*' own redoubtable Keith Talent -- Asprey is so much the creation of his society that he is unable to summon so much as a critical thought. The exposure of his superficiality, his *fakeness* -- when, for example, Nicola tells Samson, "'The gowns, the baubles, the awards and everything. They're all fake. . . . Look at that translation. It's gobbledegook. He has them printed up'" (*LF*, p.434) -- may perhaps acquire a more broadly cultural significance. For if, as Fredric Jameson writes, 'It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place,'<sup>204</sup> it might be possible to read *London Fields* as an attempt to historicize the postmodern's failed attempt to historicize itself. In this sense, Amis's novel might offer less the critique of 'the conventionality and unacknowledged ideology' of the realist novel that Linda Hutcheon associates with postmodern fiction than the representation of a social and cultural condition of postmodernity informed by the ambitions of nineteenth-century critical realism.

Also addressed in *London Fields* is the issue of the moral anxieties of literary creation that the character Martin Amis raises in *Money*. Asprey clearly transgresses moral boundaries: the writing of *Crossbone Waters*, which its author describes as a 'story of natural love' ('natural love' is, of course, what the Lolita-esque Debee Kensit gives Keith), is itself a shameless act, the result of unmotivated malice. 'There is a type of person who is a handsome liar, a golden mythomaniac, who lies for no reason, without motivation,' says Amis. Although this is ostensibly a description of Fielding Goodney, it could

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<sup>204</sup>Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.ix.

just as easily refer to Mark Asprey (or, for that matter, Quentin Villiers in *Dead Babies*). Asprey's manipulation of Samson Young is similarly unmotivated and significantly more malicious, but the moral status of his actions is referred to neither by him nor by any of the other characters.

Ironically, it is of course Samson, the novel's greatest victim, who is racked by moral anxiety. 'It seems to me that writing brings trouble with it,' he confides, 'moral trouble, unexamined trouble. Even to the best' (*LF*, p.117). The sickly sentimental letter that he leaves Kim Talent shows him attempting to retain a notion of individual moral responsibility by claiming an authority over the events narrated in the novel to which he knows he has no right: 'There was a sense in which I used everybody, even you.' It is the unacceptability, the historical implausibility of sentiments such as these which resonate at the novel's core.

Amis juxtaposes Samson Young and Mark Asprey in part to represent exaggerated facets of his own writing. As he later insisted of the similarly antagonised Richard Tull and Gwyn Barry in *The Information*: 'If anything, both writers are me.'<sup>205</sup> Accounting for something of the novel's realist pretensions, Amis has identified one influence on the writing of *London Fields* as the example of Dickens:

When I was writing about a future London in *London Fields*, Dickens was the writer I thought of most. . . . [H]e likes to write about the whole of society. He likes to see what links Lady Dedlock and Joe the Sweep, and that's very much what I'm interested in, too. He likes to see society as one thing, mysteriously interdependent.<sup>206</sup>

Here Amis clearly signals a desire to represent what, in Lukácsian terms, is a social totality. Yet, as we have already seen, these literary-realist desires,

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<sup>205</sup>Nicci Gerrard, 'Martin Amis: The Year of Living Desperately', *W*, 5 (1996), p.5.

<sup>206</sup>'Martin Amis Interviewed by Christopher Bigsby', in Malcolm Bradbury & Judy Cooke, eds., *New Writing* (London: Minerva, 1992), p.183.

embodied in the figure of Samson Young, remain unfulfilled. Amis is simultaneously subjecting his realist ambitions to the textual playfulness of what Jameson identifies as the relief of the postmodern, while exposing something of the social totality whose cultural logic is postmodernism. In this sense, *London Fields* can be seen both to enact and to critique the cultural logic of postmodernity, expressing perhaps that moment of historicized aesthetic conflict of which postmodernism, for the critical theory of Western Marxism, was supposed to be all but bereft.

And yet Amis's writing remains here, as in *Money*, predicated on the need to distinguish between true aesthetic value (which is good) and fake art (which is corrupt). In other words, there remains a strong association in Amis's fiction of aesthetic and moral worth: the manipulative Asprey, for example, must be characterised by his fakeness; his success is commercial rather than artistic. Although both Samson and Asprey are subjected to irony, it is Samson who retains some measure of sympathy. It might, then, be questioned whether Amis in *London Fields* ever fully takes on board the implications of the loss of aesthetic autonomy; he seems unwilling to contemplate the need to revise an elevated perspective of "true" art. Just as in the above discussion of *Money*, this issue will for now be left unresolved, to be returned to finally in relation to Amis's most recent novel *The Information*. For now, though, I'll turn to *Time's Arrow* to look at the most sustained treatment yet in Amis's fiction of the theme of artistic guilt.

***Time's Arrow: The Art of Justification***

Reviewing *Einstein's Monsters* in the *London Review of Books*, John Lanchester identified 'a new manner and a new range of concerns' in Amis's writing:

Its real imaginative focus is hard to pinpoint, but it is something to do with the death of children -- something to do with dead babies. In any case, however Amis got into this subject, it's too late now: he clearly hasn't finished with it, nor it with him. Middle Amis is upon us.<sup>207</sup>

This judgement now seems remarkably prescient, for Amis's two subsequent novels -- *London Fields* and *Time's Arrow* -- make consistent use of the motif of the child, employed both as a marker of vulnerability (as in Nabokov) and as an implicit metaphor for the work of art, the novel itself. The novel-as-child metaphor in *London Fields* is associated with the prospect of nuclear holocaust and a contemporaneous literary fear of 'the death of the novel' (for Samson, both reading and children presuppose a future; they go 'the other way'), but the metaphor also leads to the association of the novel with destructiveness in the form of Little Boy, the bomb that was exploded over Hiroshima. It is probably in *Time's Arrow*, though, that these concerns are given their fullest expression. Here Amis seems to be attempting to explore the very limits of art's ability to transform our perception of historical events.

Its playfulness of form and narrative mimicry of film or videotape running in reverse marks *Time's Arrow* as a characteristically postmodern text. (In this respect, the connection with Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughter-House Five*, cited by Amis in his 'Afterword', is quite obvious.) The novel tells the story, backwards, of the life of a Nazi doctor, a member of the medical staff in Auschwitz who later (and, therefore, at the novel's outset) practices medicine

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<sup>207</sup>John Lanchester, 'As a Returning Lord', *London Review of Books*, 7 May 1987, p.12.

in the USA. The fact that it applies these features of textual play to the writing or re-imagining of a historical narrative would also seem to identify *Time's Arrow* with Linda Hutcheon's genre of historiographic metafiction. Moreover, in common with the work of a number of postmodern writers, Amis's novel also suggests a certain continuity between the rhetoric of Nazi propaganda and the kitsch melodrama of American tabloid culture (a notable feature, too, of Don DeLillo's writing -- to be discussed in the following chapter). The elderly Tod Friendly sits reading his American tabloid while the narrator inside him reports its contents to the reader:

Greta Garbo, I read, has been reborn as a cat. All this stuff about *twins*. A Nordic superrace will shortly descend from the cosmic iceclouds; they will rule the earth for a thousand years. All this stuff about *Atlantis*.<sup>208</sup>

Later in the novel, when Odilo (formerly Tod) has reached Auschwitz, Nazi propaganda replays the messages he first read in the US:

In the clubroom I am told (I think I've got this right): Jews come from monkeys (from Menschenaffen), as do Slavs and so on. Germans, on the other hand, have been preserved in ice from the beginning of time in the lost continent of Atlantis. This is good to know. A meteorology division in the Ahnenerbe has been looking into it. Officially these scientists are working on long-range weather predictions, in fact, though, they are seeking to prove the cosmic-ice theory once and for all.

It sounds familiar. Atlantis . . . twins and dwarfs. (*TA*, p.140)

The association of Nazi Germany with the trash culture of contemporary America here serves to mock the pseudo-grandiosity of Nazi rhetoric, bathetically exposing its kitschness. It is also, though, in the spirit of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, identifying forms of contemporary mass culture with political barbarism. The novel itself seems to

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<sup>208</sup>Martin Amis, *Time's Arrow* (London: Cape, 1991), p.20. Hereafter, references to the novel will be to this edition and marked in the main text, prefixed by the abbreviation *TA*.

suggest that the contemporary culture of postmodernity, in which it is situated, ought to be regarded with a degree of scepticism and suspicion.

This theme of the ambiguous moral and political status of the text is expressed, as in *London Fields*, through the metaphor of the novel as child. One of Tod's dreams is of a powerful baby who holds the power of life and death over everyone around it. Its 'drastic ascendancy has to do with its voice. Not its fat fists, its useless legs, but its voice, the sound it makes, its capacity to weep' (*TA*, p.54). 'In here,' says the narrator, 'the baby is more like a bomb' (*TA*, p.55). Sentimentality and force are unified in the figure of the child; human concern and manipulation are made one. As well as referring to the text itself, the baby is also a reference to the young Odilo Unverdorben. As Frank Kermode writes, the impotent baby to which Tod/Odilo finally regresses 'has a potential of evil so dreadful that one can think of it as a bomb.'<sup>209</sup> Both Odilo and the text are in some way as dangerous as Little Boy. In *London Fields*, Samson Young dreams of telling the expectant Missy Harter that he will give up his 'wicked book', but his book is not so wicked that it transforms Auschwitz into a fantastical site where men, women and children are born from the womb of the gas chambers or re-assembled on 'Uncle Pepi's' operating table. It takes *Time's Arrow*, where '[c]reation is easy', to do that.

If we want to see why Amis should associate his text so strongly with forces of destruction, it is necessary to look more closely at the way in which *Time's Arrow* rewrites the history of the Nazis' Final Solution. The texts used to shed further light on this aspect of the novel are, for the most part, those cited by Amis in his 'Afterword' to *Time's Arrow: The Nazi Doctors* by Robert Jay Lifton; and *If This Is A Man*, *The Truce* and *The Drowned and the Saved* by

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<sup>209</sup>Frank Kermode, 'In Reverse', *London Review of Books*, 12 September 1991, p.11.

Primo Levi. I will also refer, though perhaps less frequently, to Hannah Arendt's classic study *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

The narrative order of *Time's Arrow*, which I have thus far attributed to the text's postmodernity, might also be ascribed to a mimetic impulse, a narrative reflection of the process of remembering. As James Wood, in his excellent review of the novel, writes:

The backwards momentum of the Nazi's life, narrated by a soul who knows what has already happened, is not unlike the way in which a guilty man (say a Nazi war criminal) goes back, again and again, over past crimes. Memory, especially guilty memory, forces us to live our lives backwards.<sup>210</sup>

However, it would be wrong to believe that the narrator, who for Wood is the Nazi's soul, comes to any true understanding of what Odilo has actually done. The backward repetition of the events of Odilo's life, dictated perhaps by guilty memory, here leads only to an obscene distortion of the facts: 'The world, after all,, here in Auschwitz, has a new habit,' insists the narrator. 'It makes sense' (*TA*, p.138). Rather than offering a morally-informed perspective on the acts committed by Odilo in Auschwitz, the narrative of *Time's Arrow* conforms more closely to the example of how Nazi doctors and camp functionaries have in memoirs sought to excuse or justify their actions. In her preface to the second edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt offers the following comments on such "literature":

I left out, without regret, the rather voluminous literature of memoirs published by Nazi and other German functionaries after the end of the war. The dishonesty of this kind of apologetics is obvious and embarrassing but understandable, whereas the lack of comprehension they display of what actually happened, as well as of the roles the authors themselves played in the course of events, is truly astonishing.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>210</sup>James Wood, 'Slouching towards Auschwitz to be born again', *Guardian*, 'Review Section', 19 September 1991, p.9.

<sup>211</sup>Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2nd edn., trans. Therese Pol (London: Allen & Unwin, 1958), p.xii.

A more specific model for the absence of moral awareness in *Time's Arrow* is to be found in Robert Jay Lifton's *The Nazi Doctors*, a book without which Amis's novel, as he confesses, 'would not and could not be written.' Lifton's approach is psychohistorical: he is interested the psychological states necessitated and formed by specific historical crises. In *The Nazi Doctors* he reports lengthy interviews carried out with those who put into effect the Nazis' genocidal biological programme. From these interviews, Lifton attempts to formulate the general principles of what he calls 'the psychology of genocide'. Early in the book, he reveals one of the most striking features common to all the interviews:

Some part of these men wished to be heard: they had things to say that most of them had never said before, least of all to people around them. Yet none of them -- not a single former Nazi doctor I spoke to -- arrived at a clear ethical evaluation of what he had done, and what he had been part of. They could examine events in considerable detail, even look at feelings and speak generally with surprising candour - but almost in the manner of a third person. The narrator, morally speaking, was not quite present.<sup>212</sup>

Lifton's judgement is similar to Arendt's, but it is these two concluding sentences, in which he hints at the reason why there is no 'clear ethical evaluation' of their crimes, that offer one of the keys to understanding the mode of narration in *Time's Arrow*.

The narrator of Amis's novel is the 'Auschwitz self' created by Odilo to allow him to carry out his genocidal duties unsullied or, as his name suggests, unspoilt. Lifton writes of the Nazi doctors' practice of *doubling*, 'the formation of a second, relatively autonomous self, which enables one to participate in evil' (*ND*, p.6). This second self he calls the 'Auschwitz self', explaining that

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<sup>212</sup>Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (London: Papermac, 1987), p.8. Further references to the text will be to this edition and will hereafter be marked in the main text by the prefix *ND*.

this in a sense replaces the original self, thereby allowing the doctor to convince himself of his own innocence. 'In doubling,' he adds,

one part of the self "disavows" another part. What is repudiated is not reality itself -- the individual doctor was aware of what he was doing via the Auschwitz self -- but the meaning of that reality. The Nazi doctor knew that he selected, but did not interpret selection as murder. (ND, p.422)

It is precisely this distortion of the significance of historical acts and events that the narration of *Time's Arrow* is made to reflect.

The result of Amis's narrative strategy is an intensification of the novel's reflection of Auschwitz from the Nazi doctor's perspective, at least in as far as that perspective is described by Lifton. After all, perhaps the principal (and probably the most shocking) consequence of the narrative's inversion of past and future is the inversion of healing and killing represented in the text. The narrator describes seeing 'an old Jew float to the surface of the deep latrine, how he splashed and struggled into life, and was hoisted out by jubilant guards, his clothes cleansed by the mire' (TA, p.132). His world is that of the healing mugger and rapist, where 'violence is salutary'. The novel thus dramatises a world in accordance with what Lifton identifies as the "'healing" claim' of the Nazi regime: the 'reversal of healing and killing,' he writes, 'became an organizing principle' of the Nazi doctors' work (ND, pp.xii-xiii). The same reversal is so similarly central to *Time's Arrow* that some of Lifton's descriptions look as though they could be summaries of passages from Amis's novel. For example:

[The Nazi doctor] is a recognized healer with special powers; his killing is legitimated by, and at the same time further legitimates, the regime's overall healing-killing reversals. Thus it became quite natural to use a vehicle marked with a red cross to transport gas, gassing personnel, and sometimes victims, to the gas chambers. (ND, 431)

What this reversal achieved was 'the destruction of the boundary between healing and killing' (ND, p.14). The binary opposition is here nullified, as it is in *Time's Arrow*, by the process of inversion. Furthermore, Lifton explicitly states that the destruction of this boundary was dependent upon the medical staff's fictional interpretation of their situation. He writes that those whose job was to kill children in mental hospitals 'proceeded as if these children were to receive the blessings of medical science, were to be healed rather than killed' (ND, p.54). To show how this fictional "as if" operated, he refers to a Dr. Heinze, who later excused his actions in court by claiming that a fatal overdose might have to be prescribed in order to ensure that an excitable child would "avoid endangering itself through its own restlessness". Lifton argues that the psychological adoption of this fiction was so effective and so widespread that it

is quite possible that Dr Heinze not only was consciously lying, but was enabled by the medicalization of the murders partly to deceive himself: to come to believe, at least at moments, that the children were being given some sort of therapy, and that their deaths were due to their own abnormality. (ND, p.54)

Just as the reversal of time's arrow inverts the healing/killing opposition, this inversion naturally extends itself to the roles of the healer and the persecutor. Early in *Time's Arrow* it is Tod and his American colleagues who inflict violence: Tod, we are told, rubs dirt in the prostitutes' wounds 'before the longsuffering pimp shows up and knocks the girls into shape with his jewelled fists' (TA, pp.39-40). Later, as John Young, his violence is more extreme:

Some guy comes in with a bandage around his head. We don't mess about. We'll soon have that off. He's got a hole in his head. So what do we do. We stick a nail in it. (TA, p.85)

When he reaches Auschwitz, however, as Odilo Unverdorben, his role changes to that of healer. The "patients" he treats are remarkably compliant

with all his treatments, though some seem less than grateful afterwards. Even then, though, there are exceptions: 'an old man hugging and kissing my black boots; a child clinging to me after I held her down for 'Uncle Pepi" (*TA*, p.144).

This depiction of the Jews and Nazis as complicit in the experience of the camp indirectly reflects the way in which, according to Lifton, Nazi doctors would attempt to involve prisoner doctors in the murderous process of selection:

To the extent that they could succeed in tainting those they ruled over, they felt themselves to be less tainted. In that way they could blur, at least for themselves, distinctions between victimizer and victim, between physician jailer and physician prisoner. (*ND*, p.218)

It is precisely this distinction that is blurred in Amis's choice of Odilo's surname: Unverdorben. A literal translation would be "unspoilt" or "undepraved". More importantly, however, it alludes to two historical figures, one a Nazi doctor and the other a camp inmate. Eduard Wirths was the chief doctor in Auschwitz who, because of his comparative mildness and compassion, was given the nickname "Dr. Unblütig" (Dr. Unbloody). Primo Levi, on the other hand, writes in *The Truce* of 'a mild touchy little man from Trieste' called Mr. Unverdorben who, recalls Levi, 'had survived the Birkenau Lager.'<sup>213</sup> Not only are Odilo Unverdorben's actions in Auschwitz transformed by the novel into those of a miraculous healer, but his very name symbolically undermines the distinction between victim and persecutor. Levi himself, in one of the books Amis cites as an influence on his novel, comments at some length on the blurring of this distinction:

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<sup>213</sup>Primo Levi, *If This Is A Man* and *The Truce*, trans. Stuart Woolf (Harmondsworth: Abacus, 1987), p.275.

This mimesis, this identification or imitation, or exchange of roles between oppressor and victim, has provoked much discussion. . . .

I am not an expert of the unconscious or the mind's depths, but I do know that few people are experts in this sphere, and that these few are the most cautious; I do not know, and it does not much interest me to know, whether in my depths there lurks a murderer, but I do know that I was a guiltless victim and I was not a murderer. I know that the murderers existed, not only in Germany, and still exist, retired or on active duty, and that to confuse them with their victims is a moral disease or an aesthetic affectation or a sinister sign of complicity; above all, it is a precious service rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators of truth.<sup>214</sup>

Levi here touches on one of the central elements underpinning *Time's Arrow*: that the means by which we interpret or attempt to represent a historical situation are themselves open to moral and ideological critique.

Before turning to the analytical self-reflexivity of Amis's novel, it is important to acknowledge the extent to which language itself was directly implicated in the Nazi programme. 'A leading scholar of the Holocaust,' writes Robert Lifton,

told of examining "tens of thousands" of Nazi documents without once encountering the word "killing", until after many years he finally did discover the word -- in reference to an edict concerning dogs. (ND, p.445)

Lifton lists the euphemisms employed in Auschwitz to disguise what was really happening. Doctors there, he claimed, spoke not of executions but of 'ramp duty', 'medical ramp duty', 'prisoners presenting themselves to a doctor', 'evacuation', 'transfer' and 'resettlement'. The psychological effect of this language is clear:

[it] gave Nazi doctors a discourse in which killing was no longer killing. . . . As they lived increasingly within that language - and they used it with each other -- Nazi doctors became

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<sup>214</sup>Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1989), pp.32-33.

imaginatively bound to a psychic realm of derealization, disavowal, and nonfeeling. (ND, p.445)

This is reflected, in *Time's Arrow*, in the naming of the gas chamber and sprinklerroom as '*the central hospital*' (TA, p.133). More significantly, though, the whole novel represents 'a discourse in which killing was no longer killing'. The title of Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved* is a reference to the victims and survivors of the death camps. *Time's Arrow* draws on the description in *The Nazi Doctors* of how language, too, was victimised, taken apart and reassembled for ideological purposes: 'What was she saying, Irene, what was she going on about, in words half saved, half drowned -- in gasps and whispers?' (TA, p.44).

The bilingual puns, the cartoon names, the playfulness of form and intertextuality all surely indicate to the reader the text's self-reflexivity. The arbitrariness and ease with which the text resurrects the victims of Auschwitz suggests that here death is merely a textual predicament. At the moment of selection, the narrator describes 'fathers, mothers, children, the old scattered like leaves in the wind. *Die. . . die Auseinandergeschrieben*' (TA, p.141). As well as playing on the English "die", the last phrase translates literally into "the written apart" and links with the earlier claim that, when Odilo first arrived at the camp, '[h]uman life was all ripped and torn' (TA, p.124). It is also, however, a more specific reference to Paul Celan's poem 'Engführung' (the following are the first two stanzas only):

Verbracht ins  
Gelände  
mit der untrüglichen Spur:

Gras, auseinandergeschrieben. Die Steine, weiss,  
mit den Schatten der Halme:  
Lies nicht mehr - schau!

Schau nicht mehr - geh!<sup>215</sup>

Celan describes the landscape here as textual. Those driven into that landscape, then, are also driven into a text; they are textualized. It is the violence of this process of textualization in *Time's Arrow* that Amis's narrative here acknowledges in its definition of the Jews to be murdered as *die Auseinandergeschrieben*: the written asunder.

The construction of Amis's novel reflects not only the perspective of a Nazi doctor but also the cultural dominant of postmodernism. In this sense, the novel as a whole reinforces that association of a contemporary, late capitalist, tabloid culture with the rhetoric of Nazi propaganda referred to earlier. *Time's Arrow* may be read as a specifically postmodern attempt to rewrite the history of the Holocaust which simultaneously foregrounds the ways in which that rewriting reflects the Nazi justification of the act in the first place. Thus, the backwards order of narration is determined by both its focalization through Odilo's Auschwitz self and its imitation of a video or film running in reverse (as in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*). It would seem, then, that *Time's Arrow* is at least in part offering a critical dramatisation of a specifically postmodern reworking of historical phenomena.

The reader of Amis's novel is made to undergo a process of disorientation that is also to some extent a reflection of the cognitive dislocation of Nazi doctors in the synthetic environment of the camps:

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<sup>215</sup>Paul Celan, 'Engführung', *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), pp.197-204. For an English translation see *Poems of Paul Celan*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Anvil, 1988), pp.137-149:

Driven into the  
terrain  
with the unmistakable track:

grass, written asunder. The stones, white  
with the shadows of grassblades:  
Do not read any more - look!  
Do not look any more - go!

Doctors assigned there, then, had limited contact with anything but Auschwitz reality. They became preoccupied with adapting themselves to that reality, and moral revulsion could be converted into feelings of discomfort, unhappiness, anxiety and despair. Subjective struggles could replace moral questions. They became concerned not with the evil of the environment but with how to come to terms with the place. (TA, pp.198-199)

Hannah Arendt also emphasises this feature of the camps, though with regard to their intended effect on prisoners. She writes that the total domination which could be practiced there depended 'on sealing off [the camps] against the world of all others, the world of the living in general.'<sup>216</sup> It would seem no mere coincidence that the main camp of Auschwitz appeared to Primo Levi as 'a boundless metropolis'.<sup>217</sup> *Time's Arrow* reproduces this feature of a sealed-off environment through the inverted temporal order of its narration. The reader's need to locate him/herself in the disorientating textual environment of the novel thus creates a literary analogy for the spatial confusion of both the prisoners and personnel of the camps.

But if the novel's reliance on an internal logic sealed-off from the outside world associates it with the Lager, it also identifies Amis's text with the creation of what Fredric Jameson calls 'postmodern hyperspace'. In his analysis of postmodern architecture, Jameson discusses the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles. He compares it with a number of other characteristically postmodern buildings (e.g. the Beaubourg in Paris; the Eaton Centre in Toronto) and argues that, in common with them, the Bonaventure 'aspires to being a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city.'<sup>218</sup> The effect on the individual subject who has entered one of these buildings is, I think, comparable to that experienced on one level by the

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<sup>216</sup>Arendt, p.438.

<sup>217</sup>Levi, *If This Is A Man*, p.194.

<sup>218</sup>Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.40.

reader of *Time's Arrow*, who has imaginatively entered an environment in which Auschwitz 'makes sense':

. . . this latest mutation in space -- postmodern hyperspace -- has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world.<sup>219</sup>

Just as for both Arendt and Lifton the concentration camp is designed to overwhelm, or perhaps to short-circuit, the ability of the individual (whether prisoner or functionary) to comprehend the events that take place with any degree of moral or political awareness, 'postmodern hyperspace' effects a similar confusion of the means by which we relate ourselves to the social and cultural forms that surround us.

*Time's Arrow* does not simply assert a simplistic equation of a Nazi past and the postmodern present, but (like Don DeLillo's *White Noise* -- to be discussed in Chapter 3) rather exposes, while simultaneously exemplifying, the inadequacy of the postmodern reimagining of history. Like *London Fields*, it indulges in the relief of the postmodern -- here, moulding its narrative form to one reminiscent of the capabilities of video -- while silently implying regret for all that the celebration of textual play leaves unacknowledged.

Again reasserting the mimetic element of the novel's inversion of narrative order, James Wood writes that '[t]he Nazis first attempted to turn the Holocaust into a Utopian narrative, not Amis.'<sup>220</sup> The reproduction of that narrative is not, though, in Western Marxist terms, the utopian element of Amis's text. 'The ideology in a great work,' writes Ernst Bloch, 'reflects and justifies its times, the utopia in it rips open the times.'<sup>221</sup> The irony of *Time's*

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<sup>219</sup>Ibid, p.44.

<sup>220</sup>Wood, 'Slouching toward Auschwitz', p.9.

<sup>221</sup>Ernst Bloch, 'Art and Society', in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes & Frank Mecklenburg (London: Mit, 1989), p.39.

*Arrow* lies in its suggestion that it is its utopian reclamation of the history of the Holocaust that is most thoroughly ideological, reenacting in the cultural forms of the contemporary a rhetoric of past justifications.

In contrast, the utopian aspect of Amis's novel can be situated in the continuously (and guiltily) implied expression of what it can never quite openly acknowledge: namely, the horror of its own aesthetic mutilation of a narrative of others' suffering. *Time's Arrow* relies for its power on the reader's appreciation of how its narrative has distorted the history of the Endlösung. 'A dream of reversal, of reconstruction: who has not, in the fifty years since the European devastation, swum off into this dream?' asks Cynthia Ozick. 'As if the reel of history -- and who does not see history as tragic cinema? -- could be run backward;'<sup>222</sup> but *Time's Arrow* suggests that that dream had been dreamt at the outset, had in fact helped to anaesthetise the doctors to the peculiarity of their work. It is in the incidental details -- the motif of the deadly child; the words 'half drowned, half saved'; '*die Auseinandergeschrieben*' -- that the novel signals some acknowledgement of its guilty ideological complicity, expressing something of the guilt and remorse that has been banished from the narrator's account.

The end of *Time's Arrow* is signalled as a boundary point, a point of disorientation as we move out of the novel's textual world. Keats' final line in 'Ode to a Nightingale' -- 'Fled is that music - Do I wake or sleep?' -- conveys the giddy uncertainty of the speaker's state of consciousness as the poem is brought to a close. Amis's narrator too, is confused as the novel finishes, but his uncertainty is temporal. The arrow of time reverses again as the text slips away and a new form of reality rushes on to greet us:

Beyond, before the slope of pine, the lady archers are gathering  
with their targets and bows. Above, a failing-vision kind of

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<sup>222</sup>Cynthia Ozick, *What Henry James Knew* (London: Vintage, 1994), p.323.

light, with the sky fighting down its nausea. Its many nuances of nausea. When Odilo closes his eyes I see an arrow fly -- but wrongly. Point-first. Oh no, but then . . . We're away once more, over the field. Odilo Unverdorben and his eager heart. And I within, who came at the wrong time -- either too soon, or after it was all too late. (TA, p.173)

The narrator, disorientated and confused, disappears with Odilo, leaving the reader to make his/her necessary departure from the text. Amis is aware, though, that his reader has been outside the text all along, measuring up his/her knowledge of the history of the Holocaust to *Time's Arrow's* distortions.

This suggests the limits to ideological domination, the inability of a textualised postmodern hyperspace ever to absorb our cognitive faculties totally; in fact, *Time's Arrow* implies the coexistence in the postmodern of the playful regurgitation of the past and the retention of some necessary historical memory to which the former must eventually appeal. As well as retaining, then, in both *Money* and *London Fields*, some necessary distinction between the values of the aesthetic and the market, Amis's writing also seems to insist on an identifiable, external reality which art transforms, thereby disavowing (whether in an act of critique or evasion) the claims of the postmodern to the dissolution of those very distinctions. A postmodern novel, *Time's Arrow* implies the necessity of its own ideology critique; but it does so by making a seemingly unpostmodern assumption, that there is an external space outwith cultural representation by which those representations might be judged.

### Conclusion: Escape from *Amelior*

Each of the three preceding studies of *Money*, *London Fields* and *Time's Arrow* has concluded with the acknowledgement of an aesthetic dilemma left unresolved. The significance of these can be summarised in the following fashion: it seems unclear, throughout Amis's novel-writing, whether he is truly writing from within the social and cultural condition of postmodernity he depicts, or whether, despite that depiction, his writing attempts to maintain a modernist aloofness as the repository of some form of "humane" value. It seems to me that, at least in part, this latter aspect of Amis's writing is closely connected to his reading or interpretations of both Bellow and Nabokov. In order to come to some greater understanding of those tensions within Amis's work, it might, then, be worthwhile looking at those aspects of Bellow's and Nabokov's writing that he has signalled as particularly pertinent.

Borrowing Northrop Frye's genealogy of literary protagonists, Amis discusses in a review of *The Dean's December* what he sees as one of Bellow's most singular traits as a late twentieth-century novelist:

The heroes of Saul Bellow's major novels are intellectuals; they are also (if you follow me) heroes, which makes Bellow doubly remarkable. In thumbnail terms, the original protagonists of literature were gods; later, they were demigods; later still, they were kings, generals, fabulous lovers, at once superhuman, human, and all too human; eventually they turned into ordinary people. The twentieth century has been called an ironic age, as opposed to a heroic, tragic or romantic one; even realism, rock-bottom realism, is felt to be a bit grand for the twentieth century. Nowadays, our protagonists are a good bit lower down the

human scale than their creators: they are anti-heroes, non-heroes, sub-heroes.<sup>223</sup>

For Amis, Bellow's protagonists 'represent the author at the full pitch of cerebral endeavour.' 'This careful positioning,' he adds, 'allows Bellow to write in a style fit for heroes: the High Style. To evolve an exalted voice appropriate to the twentieth century has been the self-imposed challenge of his work.'<sup>224</sup> This reading of Bellow is surely also a misreading, a failure to appreciate how well attuned Bellow is to the rhythms and varieties of everyday American vernacular. It also ignores, or at least seems to, the extent to which the perspectives of Bellow's intellectuals are subject to critique or revision in light of the dialogues into which they enter with those of his more worldly characters. For example, Charlie Citrine of *Humbolt's Gift* is simultaneously repulsed and fascinated by the gangster (or hoodlum) world of Rinaldo Cantabile: 'As soon as I saw Rinaldo Cantabile at George Swiebel's kitchen table,' narrates Charlie, 'I was aware that a natural connection existed between us.'<sup>225</sup> Later, reflecting on his estranged wife's financial demands and legal manoeuvres: 'What if Cantabile had the right idea after all -- run her down in a truck, kill the bitch.'<sup>226</sup> Equally, despite the intelligence and acuity of Victor Wulpy's social and cultural analyses in 'What Kind of Day Did You Have?' (the lengthiest of the stories collected in *Him With His Foot In His Mouth*), most readers can hardly fail to be struck by his thoughtless and callous mistreatment of his mistress Katrina Goliger.<sup>227</sup> The story ends with Katrina nearing emotional collapse. In Bellow's most powerful writing, the intellectual and emotional force is generated by the suggestion that there

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<sup>223</sup>Amis, 'Saul Bellow', p.5. For the literary-critical model Amis adapts here, see Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1990), p.34.

<sup>224</sup>Ibid

<sup>225</sup>Saul Bellow, *Humbolt's Gift* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976; repr. 1979), p.91.

<sup>226</sup>Ibid, p.230.

<sup>227</sup>See Saul Bellow, 'What Kind of Day Did You Have?', in *Him With His Foot In His Mouth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp.63-163.

might be some emotional or practical inadequacy to the perspectives and actions of his protagonists. Those characters might, as Amis argues, 'represent the author at the full pitch of cerebral endeavour', but the generosity of Bellow's art lies in its frequent dramatisation of the limitations and failings of that endeavour. By elevating the cultural aficionados who people Bellow's novels, Amis's reading of Bellow would seem blind to the richness and pathos of much of Bellow's best writing.

Moreover, in most of his own fiction Amis avoids like the plague the depth of scepticism toward culture that we find given expression in Bellow's novels. Instead, as in *Money*, aesthetic and moral value become entwined. The novels can retain a didactic edge which needn't be explicitly stated, as it is expressed through a form of aestheticism. 'Style,' claims Amis, 'is not neutral; it gives moral directions.'<sup>228</sup> In this sense, Amis's writing (in particular *Money* and, as we shall see, *The Information*) can be described in terms remarkably similar to those Erich Auerbach uses to discuss Flaubert:

Though men come together for business and pleasure, their coming together has no note of united activity; it becomes one-sided, ridiculous, painful, and it is charged with misunderstanding, vanity, futility, falsehood, and stupid hatred. But what the world would really be, the world of the "intelligent," Flaubert never tells us; in his book the world consists of pure stupidity, which completely misses true reality, so that the latter should properly not be discoverable in it at all; yet it is there; it is in the writer's language, which unmasks the stupidity by pure statement; language, then, has criteria for stupidity and thus also has a part in that reality of the "intelligent" which otherwise never appears in the book.<sup>229</sup>

Or, as James Wood writes of Amis's novels: 'The prose, not the world, becomes the container of value.'<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>228</sup>Haffenden, p.23.

<sup>229</sup>Auerbach, p.489.

<sup>230</sup>Wood, 'England', p.138.

Unlike Bellow, though, Amis peoples his novels principally with con-men, manipulators, 'golden mythomaniacs' like Fielding Goodney and Quentin Villiers. The 'heroes' that he sees in Bellow's fiction are conspicuously absent from Amis's novels. Instead, he depicts fake artists who, as he describes Nabokov's Humbert Humbert, 'because they cannot make art out of life, make their lives into art.' The moral transgressions of these characters are of course never allowed to cast into serious doubt the intrinsic value of true art; in fact, their very fakeness consolidates the association of the aesthetic and the moral. Amis's use of characters such as these is clearly informed by his reading of Nabokov. It is interesting to note that, again, this reading is extremely selective and tells us perhaps more about the priorities of Amis's artistic concerns than about the novels of Nabokov.

In direct contrast to Amis's interpretation of Nabokov, Richard Rorty describes *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* as

reflections on the possibility that there can be sensitive killers, cruel aesthetes, pitiless poets -- masters of imagery who are content to turn the lives of other human beings into images on a screen, while simply not noticing that people are suffering.<sup>231</sup>

Kinbote, he claims, is a better writer than John Shade. Humbert, too, 'is exactly as good a writer, exactly as much of an artist, capable of creating exactly as much iridescent ecstasy, as Nabokov himself.'<sup>232</sup> This reading of Nabokov's two major protagonists, which runs counter not only to Amis's interpretation but to the general thrust of Nabokov's own critical writings, is one I find particularly convincing. The cruelty of Humbert's and Kinbote's neglect of others' suffering need not, for Rorty, lead us to identify them as *failed* artists. Rather, he writes, Nabokov's novels dramatise the absence of 'any special connection with pity and kindness' that the artistically gifted

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<sup>231</sup>Rorty, p.157.

<sup>232</sup>Ibid, p.159.

might be thought to have.<sup>233</sup> If this is true, what seems in Amis's writing an allusory motif -- all those fake artists pointing us back to the cruel pseudo-artistry of Humbert Humbert -- is in fact, though probably influenced by Nabokov's *Lectures on Literature*, a far more singular trait of Amis's fiction, one which reinforces the lengths to which he will go in order to preserve an elevated moral status for art and the artist.

And yet in Amis's most recent writing there has been something of a minor revision in his dramatisation of artistic status. Gwyn Barry in *The Information* is drawn along something of the same lines as Mark Asprey of *London Fields*. Gwyn, though, is successful both commercially and critically. Whilst the translations of Mark Asprey's works found in his apartment in *London Fields* are 'gobbledegook', printed privately, Richard Tull is horrified to discover in *The Information* the extent to which his rival has become a figure of *Weltliteratur*:

He *really* didn't mind the central space-platform of floppy discs and X-ray lasers. What he minded were Gwyn's books: Gwyn's books, which multiplied or ramified so crazily now. Look on the table, and what do you find? The lambent horror of Gwyn in Spanish (sashed with quotes and reprint updates) or an American book-club or supermarket paperback, or something in Hebrew or Mandarin or cuneiform or pictogram that seemed blameless enough, but had no reason to be there if it wasn't one of Gwyn's. And then Gallimard and Mondadori and Alberti and Zsolnay and Uigeverij Contact and Kawade Shobo and Magvetö Könyvkiadó.<sup>234</sup>

Gwyn's writing, Amis's narrator assures us, is 'no good'. 'Clearly,' he adds, 'but not demonstrably' (*I*, p.137). Mark Asprey may have been guilty of writing 'cute journalism' but there is, it seems, nothing quite so cutesy as Gwyn Barry's Profundity Requit-al-winning, worldwide bestselling *Amelior*:

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<sup>233</sup>Ibid, p.168.

<sup>234</sup>Martin Amis, *The Information* (London: Flamingo, 1995), pp.19-20. Hereafter, references will be to this edition and will be marked in the main text, prefixed by the abbreviation *I*.

If Richard had chortled his way through *Summertown*, he cackled and yodelled his way through *Amelior*: its cuteness, its blandness, its naively pompous semi-colons, its freedom from humour and incident, its hand-me-down imagery, the almost endearing transparency of its colour schemes, its tinkertoy symmetries . . . What was it 'about', *Amelior*? It wasn't autobiographical: it was about a group of fair-minded young people who, in an unnamed country, strove to establish a rural community. And they succeeded. And then it ended. (*I*, p.43)

Nonetheless, *Amelior* establishes Gwyn as a major literary figure. Here, perhaps for the first time in his fiction, Amis explores the possibility that literary or artistic value might not be intrinsic but the construct of historical circumstances. And who is to say that he might not get away with it? 'Gwyn, or *Amelior*, was *everybody's* favourite,' writes Amis. 'Or nobody's aversion. *Amelior* was something like the missionary position plus simultaneous orgasm' (*I*, p.137). The fear that haunts Richard Tull is less that of Gwyn's present success than the possibility that what he has written might last, that he may have inadvertently given expression to something universal.

*Amelior*, as the title suggests (ameliorate, ameliorative), is an example of naively "improving" literature. In this respect, the hyperbolic disdain that Amis shows in his interview with Val Hennesey for 'the sociological view' of literature is instructive. A brief description makes clear that *Amelior* is a novel suffused with a deadly anodyne political correctness:

Every racial group was represented, the usual rainbow plus a couple of superexotic extras -- an Inuit, an Amerindian, even a taciturn Aborigine. Each of them boasted a serious but non-disfiguring affliction: Piotr had haemophilia, Conchita endometriosis, Sachine colitis, Eagle Woman diabetes. Of this twelve, naturally, six were men and six were women; but the sexual characteristics were deliberately hazed. The women were broad-shouldered and thin-hipped. The men tended to be comfortably plump. In the place called *Amelior*, where they had come to dwell, there was no beauty, no humour and no incident; there was no hate and there was no love. (*I*, p.139)

For all its apparent celebration of difference, what Gwyn's novel seems to have excluded is any sense of distinctiveness. In *Amelior*, egalitarianism has been transformed into an oppressive sameness. There are no fine distinctions to be made, no nuanced judgements to be reached. *Amelior*, having bought literally and wholesale the rhetoric of a confused political correctness, is a novel quite utterly free of discrimination. It is also worth noting how this "improving" form of literature differs so markedly from the literary morality that Amis espouses. Amis values, instead, the importance of detail in literature, the way in which it forces us to notice things we might otherwise pass over. In fact, it is in the very power to discriminate, the insistence on the necessity of subtle distinctions and curious details that Amis locates the morality of literature.

This explains, in part, what often seems the most reactionary elements of Amis's comedy. Here we find Richard Tull in the offices of Bold Agenda, being told the heart-warming story of how John Two Moons got his name:

'Well. You know how Native Americans get their names.'  
 'I think so. It's the first thing the dad sees.'  
 'Right. Now. The night John Two Moons was born there was this beautiful full moon, and his father --'  
 'Was drunk,' suggested Richard.  
 'Excuse me?'  
 'Was drunk. And saw two moons. Well they are meant to be incredible drunks, aren't they? Native Americans? I mean, we're bad enough but they . . .'  
 '. . . And -- and his father walked out, by the lake, and saw the full moon reflected in the water.' (*I*, pp.301-302)

Amis is dependent on his reader's willingness to find funny this way of puncturing the cosy assumptions of American political correctness. The comedy, of course, is aimed not at Native Americans, but at the humourless iconoclasts of Bold Agenda Inc., left aghast that anyone could even think such a thing in this day and age. Just as he seems determined to hold on to some

form of art's distinctiveness, some perhaps outdated measure of aesthetic autonomy, Amis also seems compelled to insist repeatedly on giving expression to biases and prejudices shunned by genteel society, suggesting that to ignore these attitudes and the class, gender or racial distinctions on which they are based is to miss an important facet of contemporary experience in the ludicrous pretence that such things no longer exist. The attempt to retain some sense of what is distinctive, in both aesthetic and social terms, is a prime motivating feature of Amis's writing and also accounts for at least something of the old-fashioned, outdated or apparently reactionary elements of his fiction.

Gwyn Barry is not, though, depicted as a credible artistic figure. Although he clearly gets closer to this than many of Amis's characters, the bland superficiality of *Amelior* is made too horribly palpable to the reader for any serious doubts to linger. The critical dismissal in *The Information* of Gwyn's novel is ultimately too convincing for the reader to be allowed some suspicion of the possible literary worth of *Amelior*. There is another way in which *The Information* offers a clue to Gwyn Barry's artistic inadequacies, but that will be discussed later. For the moment, we turn to Richard Tull to see a more familiar treatment of failure in Amis's writing.

Richard Tull writes but, generally, is not read. Ironically, given his almost mandarin allegiance to the cause of high culture, the figure from Amis's previous fiction that Richard most resembles is John Self. Like Self, he is trapped in what appears at times an exercise in authorial sadism. The more that Richard attempts to manipulate circumstances and plot the downfall of his old friend Gwyn Barry, the surer is his own eventual humiliation. Plots, it seems, have never been his strong suit. The most obvious example of how his actions work against his interests is probably his misplaced attempt to

influence the Profundity Requitall jurists. By Richard's own criteria, the attempts to sully Gwyn's name can only really make the work look richer and more interesting than it is. The way in which he condescends to the jurors, assuming them to share the embarrassingly naive social and literary priorities of the Bold Agenda radicals, sets the scene for an easy inversion by Amis: what had appeared bland and simplistic now takes on the demeanour of a hard-won literary grace under pressure.

More significantly, though, there are linguistic games that Richard seems unaware are even being played. Gal Aplanalp, the agent with whom Gwyn sets Richard up, is a common acquaintance from the past. Her name, then, cannot signal a plot hatched by Gwyn himself, but is part of the author's sadistic tease: Aplanalp is a hardly hidden Plan A, whichever way she is read. The successful publication of *Untitled*, Richard Tull's novel, is thereby signalled in advance as a foretaste of Richard's further suffering, a mirror-image of his plans to hurt Gwyn Barry ('Of TV fame'). Nor does Richard see anything wrong with the name of his prospective editor at Bold Agenda: Roy Biv. Only later can he be made to understand:

'Roy Biv! Tell me. Did he ever sign himself Roy G. Biv? . . . He changed his name to that. If you were American, you'd understand. It's a mnemonic. The rainbow. Red, orange, yellow, green. Blue, indigo, violet. He wanted to please everyone. That's Roy. Poor Roy.' (*I*, p.387)

Richard Tull simply doesn't notice.

The most important example, though, is Demi's confession that Gwyn 'can't write for toffee.' 'Demi's linguistic quirk,' we are told,

is essentially and definingly female. It just is. Drawing in breath to denounce this proposition, women will often come out with something like 'Up you!' or 'Ballshit!' For I am referring to Demi's use of the conflated or mangled catchphrase -- Demi's speech-bargains: she wanted two for the price of one. The result

was expressive, and you usually knew what she meant, given the context. (*I*, p.257)

Richard has presumably had dealings with Demi in this mode before, but on this occasion he has blinded himself to the possibility that Demi means Gwyn can't write for peanuts, that he has to get paid something. It is ironic that it is in linguistic matters that Richard's failings are so mercilessly exploited. Like John Self, Richard Tull is guilty of incuriosity; just as his novels' narratives effectively take the form of a private language, preventing the possibility of a dialogue with readers, Richard himself neglects to take into account others' idiosyncrasies or even to look closely at their names. In retrospect, it hardly even seems surprising that he was incapable of working out that his wife Gina had been screwing Gwyn for money and revenge. The artistic failing of incuriosity costs him more than a novelistic career.

As in *Money*, the novel itself is an attempt to enact a solution to problems it dramatises as irresolvable. *The Information* sets out early on one of its key dilemmas:

We are agreed -- come *on*: we are agreed -- about beauty in the flesh. Consensus is possible here. And in the mathematics of the universe, beauty helps tell us whether things are false or true. We can quickly agree about beauty, in the heavens and in the flesh. But not everywhere. Not, for instance, on the page. (*I*, p.15)

The ability to distinguish between the true and the false is associated with the artist. Despite the failings of both Richard and Gwyn in artistic terms, *The Information* nonetheless enacts a form of aesthetic justice itself. This is achieved through the use of the child motif seen in previous novels and a pattern of Dickensian allusion.

When Marco describes to his father, in the closing pages of the novel, how his abduction by Steve Cousins had ended with the arrival of others intent on doing his abductor harm, he repeats the last words he heard

Cousins say: 'The man said, "I'm a child"' (*I*, p.493). Richard is bemused, mistakenly thinking that the man had been talking about Marco:

No. He said *I'm* a child.  
 'But he *wasn't* a child.'  
 No. He was a man. (*I*, p.493)

In fact, Scozzy (Steve Cousins) is here being identified with a character from Dickens' *Bleak House*, the false child Harold Skimpole. We have already seen Amis's comments on the influence of Dickens on his work, where he specifically cites *Bleak House*. Perhaps more particularly, though, the use he makes of that novel in *The Information* suggests that he is alluding not only to Dickens' work, but to Nabokov's study of it in his *Lectures on Literature*.<sup>235</sup> There Nabokov describes the function of Harold Skimpole as follows:

Skimpole deceives the world, and he deceives Mr. Jarndyce into thinking that he, Skimpole, is as innocent, as naive, as carefree as a child. Actually he is nothing of the sort; but this false childishness of his throws into splendid relief the virtues of authentic childhood in other parts of the book.<sup>236</sup>

Scozzy, like Skimpole, is a false child; and just as Skimpole is instrumental in hastening the death of young Jo the Sweep, Scozzy seems intent on doing unspecified harm to Marco Tull. It is Scozzy, though, who is left to suffer. It seems that *The Information* enforces a form of justice, insisting that on this occasion at least the innocent will be spared. The references which recur throughout the novel to children's violent deaths reinforce a sense of singularity in Marco's escape. It is almost as though Amis is explicitly revising the fate that Dickens delineates, while suggesting that in *The Information* we can view true aesthetic value, a value which allows the artist to distinguish correctly between the true and the false.

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<sup>235</sup>Vladimir Nabokov, 'Charles Dickens: *Bleak House*', in *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (London: Harvest, 1982), pp.63-124.

<sup>236</sup>*Ibid*, p.83.

The pattern of Dickensian allusion extends to a number of the other major protagonists. Lady Demeter ('Demi') recalls Dickens' Lady Dedlock: children, of course, are important for both -- Demi is denied a child by Gwyn, while the secret of Lady Dedlock's child is central to the plot of *Bleak House*. Richard Tull combines two references: Richard Carstone, a decent if somewhat easily led astray ward of John Jarndyce; and Mr. Tulkinghorn, Lord Dedlock's devious legal advisor. In Richard, then, we find a combination of the malign and the benign, as perhaps suits the plotter who is really always the loser. Gwyn Barry is rather more complicated. It is made clear that Gwyn is not Welsh for John, so an analogy with the saintly John Jarndyce, who asks the smallpox-scarred Esther Summerson to marry him, is explicitly ruled out. Here a curious detail comes into play: the rainbow-coalition populus of *Amelior* each bear a physical affliction, but one which is 'non-disfiguring'. The avoidance of disfigurement is clearly part of *Amelior's* more general exclusion of hierarchy, whether of beauty or anything else. It also, though, points to another of Esther's prospective suitors in *Bleak House*, William Guppy, the legal clerk who retracts his proposal of marriage to the scarred Esther. Gwyn is Welsh not for John, but for Will.

Further references are scattered throughout: from a comment on the complexity of Dickensian plot-structure to a brief mention of a biography of Leigh Hunt that Richard has read (it was on Hunt that the figure of Harold Skimpole was said to be based). In part, this reinforces that desire for the representation of a social totality that we noted earlier with reference to *London Fields* (here Amis is interested in what connects Lady Demeter and 13). But it seems to me that the most significant aspect of these allusions is the identification of Scozzy with Skimpole. The novel shows its ability to discriminate between the true and the false, thereby demonstrating, for Amis,

one of the most important facets of genuine aesthetic value. It is *The Information*, then, rather than *Amelior* or *Untitled* that Amis offers as an exemplar for a truly contemporary art, an art which superficially concedes the postmodern incredulity toward notions of intrinsic literary value while nonetheless enacting a form of moral and aesthetic judgement which runs entirely counter to such a concession.

If the postmodern, as Fredric Jameson argues, is merely 'the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses -- what Raymond Williams has usefully termed "residual" and "emergent" forms of cultural production -- must make their way,' it would seem useful to identify Amis's as an art which repeatedly insists on retaining a special place for the "residual".<sup>237</sup> His novels offer a constant reminder that the postmodern condition explains far from the whole story, that there are countless facets of aesthetic and social experience left unaccounted for by an art which adopts wholesale the assumptions and, indeed, the "relief" of the postmodern. If Amis's fiction is often frustrating, it is principally because he has not yet been able to expose the postmodern literary pretence of that fiction while maintaining the reader's willingness to invest emotionally in the desires or predicaments of his characters in the way that perhaps the very best postmodern novelists, such as Salman Rushdie, have. (For me, he comes closest in *Time's Arrow*, where the emotional power is created by the fact that Amis needn't evoke it dramatically.) Generally, it remains all too obvious, as James Wood writes, that Amis is 'always an adjective ahead of his subjects.'<sup>238</sup> Still, though, his writing draws importantly (and often accurately) on values, prejudices and attitudes which were supposed to be left behind. The faith which Amis retains in an outdated, autonomous literary value can be seen as the flip-side of his

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<sup>237</sup>See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.6.

<sup>238</sup>Wood, 'England', p.139.

insistence on the survival of pre-postmodern conditions and distinctions. In this sense, Amis's incompatibility with what we have seen Jameson call 'the relief of the postmodern' is not dissimilar to Terry Eagleton's criticism, noted in the previous chapter, that discussions of the postmodern are all too often based on the situation of a privileged social and cultural elite:

So class and race and gender were supposedly gone (and other things were supposedly going, like age and beauty and even education): all the really automatic ways people had of telling who was better or worse -- they were gone. Right-thinkers everywhere were claiming that they were clean of prejudice, that in them the inherited formulations had at last been purged. This they had decided. But for those on the pointed end of the operation -- the ignorant, say, or the ugly -- it wasn't just a decision. Some of them had no new clothes. Some were still dressed in the uniform of their deficiencies. Some were still wearing the same old shit.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>239</sup>Martin Amis, 'State of England', *Esquire*, September 1996, p.139.

## Chapter Three

### Don DeLillo: Some American Environments

*Baudelaire envisaged readers to whom the reading of lyric poetry would present difficulties. The introductory poem of the Fleurs du mal is addressed to these readers. Will power and the ability to concentrate are not their strong points; what they prefer is sensual pleasures; they are familiar with the "spleen" which kills interest and receptiveness.*

Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire'

*There was something at loose now in American life, the poet's beast slinking to the marketplace.*

Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*

#### A Portrait of the Postmodern: Goods and Simulacra

In common with that of Martin Amis's *Money*, the title of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* perhaps resembles more a deflationary label, applied in a spirit of utilitarian earnestness, than any aesthetic or artistic adornment. In the case of DeLillo's novel, even the vulgar temptation that Amis's title seems to offer is absent, while the cultural expectations excited by such titles as Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred years of Solitude* (to pick two almost at random) are cursorily bypassed. It is as though DeLillo does not want us, as readers, to expect too much. More accurately, perhaps, it is the acknowledgement that his text competes for our time in the same realm as TV ads and computer games; the status of the literary text itself has been transformed and it is to this state of affairs that the title of *White Noise* stands testament.

Of course, it is precisely that society in which such a situation has come to pass which also provides the subject matter of the novel. In its opening

paragraph, Jack Gladney, the narrator, describes the return of the students to the College-on-the-Hill:

The roofs of the station wagons were loaded down with carefully secured suitcases full of light and heavy clothing; with boxes of blankets, boots and shoes, stationary and books, sheets, pillows, quilts; with rolled-up rugs and sleeping bags; with bicycles, skis, rucksacks, English and Western saddles, inflated rafts.<sup>240</sup>

The list of goods, products and belongings continues for some time: 'personal computers . . . controlled substances . . . Dum Dum pops, the Mystic mints.' Books are included in this list, sandwiched between footwear and bedding, but they are hardly conspicuous. As Frank Lentricchia rightly observes, 'these books are things like other things, commodities, too, or -- in the most question-begging of all economic terms -- *goods*.'<sup>241</sup> *White Noise* is therefore a book written about, and written from within, a society in which books have no more worth than, and cannot be differentiated from, any other consumer commodity item: from neither 'small refrigerators and table ranges' nor from 'Waffelos and Kabooms'.

DeLillo's novel, then, can lay no claim to the status of the autonomous work of art. Instead, it is a product of the contemporary, American culture industry, emerging side-by-side with the films of Chuck Norris or the bellybutton of Madonna. Early in the novel, Jack and Babette go shopping in the supermarket, where they meet Murray Jay Siskind, an ex-sportswriter and recent appointee to the college's popular culture department. While Murray talks to them about the packaging of the peanuts and the peaches in his basket, a woman falls into 'a rack of paperback books' (WN, p.19). No explanation is given for her fall. As Jack leaves with Babette and Murray, he

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<sup>240</sup>Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (London: Picador, 1986), p.3. Further references to this text will be to this edition and will be marked in the main text, using the prefix WN.

<sup>241</sup>Frank Lentricchia, 'Tales of the Electronic Tribe', in *New Essays on 'White Noise'*, ed. Frank Lentricchia (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), p.95.

comments, 'The three of us left together, trying to maneuver our shopping carts between the paperback books scattered across the entrance.' The only thing in the passage that distinguishes the books from the peaches in Murray's basket is the fact that they are now lying on the floor, dislodged from their proper place on the supermarket racks. Here, art has finally become functional, a commonplace, everyday, untroubling feature of late capitalist existence, like tinned peaches or the background white noise emitted by the TV.

Two novels later, in *Mao II*, DeLillo proves to be no less preoccupied by this ever-closer relation of the work of art to ordinary commodities. Bill Gray, the character on whom the novel is principally focused, is an author. In the manner of a J.D. Salinger or a Thomas Pynchon (the two role models most frequently cited by the novel's reviewers), Gray has become an obsessive recluse. His status as such renders him more sought-after than ever: for others, it becomes his gimmick, perhaps serving as an inadvertent example of niche marketing. Gray is tracked down by Scott, an event which precedes the novel's point of narration, and is persuaded to employ him as an assistant. It is with the novel's introduction of Scott, who is killing time in a bookstore while on the way to a meeting with the photographer chosen for Bill's first photographs in over thirty years, that DeLillo signals in *Mao II* his acknowledgement of the loss of art's autonomy in the society in which Bill (and, by implication, DeLillo too) finds himself writing:

He examined books stacked on tables and set in clusters near the cash terminals. He saw stacks on the floor five feet high, arranged in artful fanning patterns. There were books standing on pedestals and bunched in little gothic snuggeries. Bookstores made him slightly sick at times. He looked at the gleaming bestsellers. People drifted through the store, appearing caught in some unhappy dazzlement. There were books on step-terraces and Lucite wall-shelves, books in pyramids and theme displays. He went downstairs to the paperbacks, where he

stared at the covers of the mass-market books, running his fingertips erotically over the raised lettering. Covers were lacquered and gilded. Books lay cradled in nine-unit counterpacks like experimental babies. He could hear them shrieking *Buy me*.<sup>242</sup>

Here, downstairs, in the 'section on modern classics', Scott finds copies of Bill's two novels 'in their latest trade editions'. They are not, it seems safe to presume, quite as shameless in matters of self-promotion as their lacquered and gilded cousins, but the bookstore generously finds room to accommodate even such a pair 'banded in austere umbers and rusts'. Like the market itself, the bookstore into which Scott has wandered offers a place for all, but at a price: namely, the substitution of specific, artistic value by the abstract exchange or commodity value; in other words, submersion in the commodity structure. The loss of cultural autonomy can, then, here be perceived in those few easy strides from 'best seller' to 'modern classic'.

It would, however, be wrong to view this loss of cultural or artistic autonomy merely as the integration of what would formerly have been self-avowedly autonomous works of art into the commodity structure. Rather, as we have already seen Fredric Jameson contend, it must be understood dialectically, as a fundamental transformation in the *relation* of two aspects of the social totality. He writes:

What we must now ask ourselves is whether it is not precisely this semiautonomy of the cultural sphere which has been destroyed by the logic of late capitalism. Yet to argue that culture is today no longer endowed with the relative autonomy it once enjoyed as one level among others in earlier moments of capitalism (let alone in precapitalist societies) is not necessarily to imply its disappearance or extinction. Quite the contrary; we must go on to affirm that the dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture is rather to be imagined in terms of an explosion: a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life --

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<sup>242</sup>Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (London: Vintage, 1991), p.19. Further references to this text will be to this edition and will be marked in the main text, using the prefix *MII*.

from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself -- can be said to have become "cultural" in some original and yet untheorized sense.<sup>243</sup>

Thus, on one level, the novel (e.g. *White Noise*) becomes indistinguishable from economic products or commodities; while, at the same time, those same commodities, as Jameson writes elsewhere, take on 'an aesthetic dimension'.<sup>244</sup> How this loss of autonomy should properly be imagined, then, is not as a simplistic, one-sided integration of the cultural realm into the commodity structure or merely as the absorption of that commodity structure by cultural or aesthetic forms; instead, it must be grasped as the operation of both these processes at once.

But how might this help us to understand Don DeLillo's novels? If it is true, as I have been arguing, that these are novels which reflect the loss of cultural autonomy, we would perhaps expect to see, in the light of Jameson's model, the depiction of a society permeated by simulacra and culturally mediated forms of experience occurring simultaneously with the transformation that we have already witnessed of art into mere commodity. In fact, that is exactly what we find. As I plan to show, DeLillo consistently portrays a society in which simulations and images of "the real" increasingly take precedence over "the real" itself. A good place to start is at 'the most photographed barn in America', a passage in *White Noise* whose significance for any understanding of DeLillo's fiction is rightly highlighted by Frank Lentricchia.

Jack Gladney, the first-person narrator of *White Noise*, undergoes in the course of the novel, at the hands of Murray Jay Siskind, a rite of passage into the study of contemporary cultural phenomena (TV, advertising, commodity packaging). His education begins in earnest when he and Murray take a trip

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<sup>243</sup>Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.48.

<sup>244</sup>Jameson, 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture', p.12.

to a local tourist attraction: 'THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA'. While driving there, they pass signs advertising the forthcoming attraction. Arriving, Jack and Murray find themselves among a crowd of tourists, each photographing 'the most photographed barn in America'. There is a man in a booth who sells postcards and photographic slides of the barn to the tourists; there is an elevated spot -- a grassy knoll -- from which the barn might be viewed or, indeed, photographed. Murray feels compelled to explain the significance of what they are witnessing:

"No one sees the barn," he said finally.

A long silence followed.

"Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn." (*WN*, p.12)

Murray's monologue is punctuated by lengthy silences; we cannot be sure whether he is considering his next point or stringing out a performance:

"They are taking pictures of taking pictures," he said. He did not speak for a while. We listened to the incessant clicking of shutter release buttons, the rustling clank of levers that advanced the film. "What was the barn like before it was photographed?" he said. "What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it similar to other barns? We can't answer these questions because we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura. We're here, we're now." (*WN*, p.13)

As such passages indicate, Murray serves as a would-be postmodern guru. His is the celebratory voice of mass, consumer culture; for not only is Murray attuned to the dissolution of the object world into so many images and simulacra of itself, as we have seen above, but he is willing to act as an enthusiastic advocate of this new "reality". "You have to learn how to look," he tells Jack. "You have to open yourself to the data" (*WN*, p.51). His classes, too, he uses to proselytise the new creed:

"I ask my students, 'what more do you want?' Look at the wealth of data concealed in the grid, in the bright packaging, the jingles, the slice-of-life commercials, the products hurtling out of darkness, the coded messages and endless repetitions, like chants, like mantras. '*Coke is it, Coke is it, Coke is it.*'" (WN, p.51)

This advocacy of the primacy of image extends, though perhaps unconsciously, even to Murray's dress sense. Jack tells us that Murray dresses 'almost totally in corduroy'. He adds: 'I had the feeling that since the age of eleven in his crowded plot of concrete he'd associated this sturdy fabric with higher learning in some impossibly distant and tree-shaded place' (WN, p.11). Like Jack himself, who has changed his name to J.A.K. Gladney in order to approximate more closely the image of a head of 'Hitler Studies', Murray is the simulacrum of an academic. The difference between them is that Murray, were he aware of the false shadow he casts (and we cannot be sure that he is not), would no doubt react positively and find the whole thing amusing; Jack, on the other hand, is disquieted when he finds his identity thus uncertain: 'I am the false character that follows the name around,' he says (WN, p.17).

As the novel progresses, Jack discovers that his environment is coming to resemble more and more that alien and disconcerting world described to him by Murray. When the 'Airborne Toxic Event' forces the Gladneys and others to abandon their homes, Jack finds that the evacuation procedure is being overseen by SIMUVAC, an organisation of which he knows nothing:

"That's quite an armband you've got there. What does SIMUVAC mean? Sounds important."

"Short for simulated evacuation. A new state program they're still battling over funds for."

"But this evacuation isn't simulated. It's real."

"We know that. But we thought we could use it as a model."

"A form of practice? Are you saying you saw a chance to use the real event in order to rehearse the simulation?" (WN, p.139)

This is, of course, precisely what they have done. Moreover, the same group later employ Steffie, one of the Gladney children, to act as a victim in one of their simulations. This may be the second time that she has played such a role, as neither Jack nor Babette can be sure whether the medical symptoms exhibited by the girls at the time of the toxic cloud were genuine or merely provoked by radio broadcasts which listed possible symptoms. Even Jack's exposure to the toxic waste has uncertain consequences which destabilise his own claim to victimhood: in response to the question "Am I going to die?" he receives the answer "Not as such" (WN, p.140). In a rather perverse way, then, the role of victim that Steffie plays for SIMUVAC may be the more authentic as it can at least be attributed to a "real" simulation and has an identifiable outcome (Steffie is carried to an ambulance and then goes home). It has a shape and substance lacking in both the girls' nausea and Jack's toxic infection.

For Leonard Wilcox, the depiction of society in *White Noise* is recognisable from, and comparable to, the analysis of contemporary society offered by the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. In a study entitled 'Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise* and the End of Heroic Narrative' he writes thus:

The informational world Baudrillard delineates bears a striking resemblance to the world of *White Noise*: one characterized by the collapse of the real and the flow of signifiers emanating from an information society, by a "loss of the real" in a black hole of simulation and the play and exchange of signs. In this world common to both Baudrillard and DeLillo, images, signs and codes engulf objective reality; signs become more real than reality and stand in for the world they erase. . . . Moreover, for both Baudrillard and DeLillo a media-saturated consciousness threatens the concept of meaning itself.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>245</sup>Leonard Wilcox, 'Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise* and the End of Heroic Narrative', *Contemporary Literature*, 32 (1991), pp.346-347.

It is significant that Wilcox should speak of a 'media-saturated consciousness', suggesting that those cultural or mass-cultural forms now act as determining agents of the human psyche itself, an argument that we saw earlier proposed by Fredric Jameson.

In *White Noise*, the embodiment of this media-constructed self is the character of Willie Mink (a.k.a. Mr Gray), sexual blackmailer of Babette and victim of Jack's gunslinging frenzy. As Wilcox notes, Mink is 'a repository for the rambling, metonymic discourses of a consumer culture'. At times, for no reason, Mink will suddenly start spouting random snatches of TV-speak. "Some of these playful dolphins have been equipped with radio transmitters," he says. "Their far flung wanderings may tell us things" (WN, p.310). Later: "Did you ever wonder why, out of thirty-two teeth, these four cause so much trouble? I'll be back with the answer in a minute" (WN, p.312). He claims to have learned English by watching TV, but it would appear that he has been less educated than fully reconstructed by the Tube.

It is with Mink, too, that Jack witnesses one of the more bizarre side-effects of Dylar, the drug which is meant to suppress fear of death. Mink responds to words as though they need no longer correspond to an external reality but, instead, have themselves replaced that reality. Thus, Jack can cry out, "A hail of bullets," and Mink dives to the floor; he assumes 'the recommended crash position' on hearing the words "Plunging aircraft". It is perhaps this latter feature above all, this side-effect, that justifies Wilcox's analysis that in the world of *White Noise* meaning itself has been dissipated and that, in truth, once they've seen the signs, no one need see the barn.

It is not, however, until DeLillo's next novel -- *Libra* -- that the theme of the constructed self becomes the central preoccupation around which the novel is developed. In *White Noise* it is necessary for DeLillo first to delineate

a social milieu and to depict, as convincingly as possible, the modes of behaviour that such a society encourages or even necessitates; only then can the means by which the inner-consciousnesses of men and women are socially conditioned properly become the book's subject. In *Libra*, by contrast, the thematic structure unfolds in precisely the opposite direction. Lee Harvey Oswald's place in American history is secure; his name is known. Simply by writing a novelistic account of the life of America's most notorious assassin, DeLillo indicates that there is something else to know, something beyond the moment of the assassination itself. From the opening description of the young Lee Oswald riding the subway, it is clear that the Oswald to be portrayed in the pages of *Libra* is to be conspicuously passive, a cipher for external sensations and influences. In other words, the very subject matter of *Libra* implies an interest in the artificiality or constructedness of the self, an interest elevated to the thematic level by the subsequent treatment of that subject matter -- i.e. the portrayal of a passive Oswald, daily prey to the whirling babble of voices that leads him to the Texas School Book Depository and which constitutes the authentic expression of corporate, anti-communist America. The narrative journey that takes us in *White Noise* from the heart of American institutional life to the random mess of media-speak that is Willie Mink thus finds its reverse mirror image in a plot which follows the life of the impressionable young Oswald through the travails and neon-lit dreams of Middle America to the death of an American president and the power games which dictate the courses of lives.

We shall come in a moment to the haphazard cultural formation of Lee Harvey Oswald, but it is worthwhile noting that Oswald is far from alone in *Libra* in his characterisation as a "false" or "unnatural" self. The unwitting partner in Oswald's bloody rite of passage, Kennedy himself, is exposed as

another constructed persona, primarily a photo-fit president. Guy Bannister, reflecting disgustedly on his president's civil-rights programme, grasps at a stroke the image-consciousness that is his great political skill: 'You could photograph a Kennedy all right. That's what a Kennedy was for.'<sup>246</sup> Later, on that fateful day in November, he is again described in terms of his media "self"; in fact, like the photographic barn in *White Noise*, the real Kennedy has long been supplanted by images of himself:

He moved along the fence, handsome and tanned, smiling famously into the wall of opened mouths. He looked like himself, like photographs, a helmsman squinting in the seaglare, white teeth shining. (*L*, p.392)

In his essay '*Libra* as Postmodern Critique', Frank Lentricchia argues convincingly that DeLillo's portrayal of America is that of a society in which one is taught to yearn for a second, transformed self. 'Left with a book more about Oswald than conspiracy,' he writes,

we learn that the question is not what happened in Dallas on 22 November 1963 -- DeLillo gives us a theory about that. The question is not even, who is this Oswald? It is, who is *Lee Harvey Oswald*?<sup>247</sup>

Oswald, himself, is peculiarly susceptible to the belief that he can constantly be remade. When Dr Braufels teaches him Russian, he begins to feel that the very enunciation of these new sounds might have a transformative effect: 'he could almost believe he was being remade on the spot, given an opening to some larger and deeper version of himself' (*L*, p.113). And later, when the dream of entering history via the Soviet Union has faded, Oswald sits alone in a room in New Orleans and routinely narrates fictitious versions of himself on the pages of job application forms (*L*, pp.305-6).

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<sup>246</sup>Don DeLillo, *Libra* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p.141. Further references to this text will be to this edition and will be marked in the main text, using the prefix *L*.

<sup>247</sup>Frank Lentricchia, '*Libra* as Postmodern Critique', in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, ed. Frank Lentricchia (London: Duke UP, 1991), p.203.

When the transformation or re-construction of Oswald is completed, it follows not from his part in the class struggle but from his absorption and subsequent image-projection by the mass-media. Long before Oswald is to be classified as a lone, crazed gunman, we, as readers, witness the shock -- to which our own daily experience has numbed us -- felt by Oswald's Russian wife, Marina, as she passes by a department store window and sees herself and her husband on the TV screen inside. An everyday event, she suddenly finds, has been made part of the TV world, the world of *Racket Squad* and *Dragnet*, shows that the young Lee Oswald would watch with his mother. This is an incident which foreshadows what is perhaps the most disturbing passage of the novel: Oswald's death. As he lies with a bullet in his stomach, the ambulance speeding toward a hospital, Oswald watches his shooting replayed on TV:

He could see himself shot as the camera caught it. Through the pain he watched TV. . . . Through the pain, through the losing of sensation except where it hurt, Lee watched himself react to the auguring heat of the bullet. (*L*, p.439)

Here, the moment of his murder itself becomes a cultural product, a TV-event, later to be re-screened countless times.

But if the media-coverage is to destabilise the authenticity of the moment of his actual murder, it is also responsible for the birth of that new self of which Lee Oswald had always dreamt and which 'Lee Harvey Oswald' represents. The time between his arrest for the assassination of President Kennedy and his own death at the hands of Jack Ruby is a time like no other for Oswald, a time of new beginnings and uncluttered opportunity. Once arrested, he is soon given a hint of the full transformation that awaits: 'Whenever they took him down, he heard his name on the radios and TVs. Lee Harvey Oswald. It sounded extremely strange. . . . No one called him by that name. Now it was everywhere' (*L*, p.416). Earlier in the novel, while in

the Soviet Union, Oswald is given a foretaste of what it might mean to enter into the official history of notoriety recognised by the media:

It occurred to Oswald that everyone called the prisoner by his full name. The Soviet Press, local TV, the BBC, the Voice of America, the interrogators, etc. Once you did something notorious, they tagged you with an extra name that was ordinarily never used. You were officially marked, a chapter in the imagination of the state. Francis Gary Powers. In just these few days the name had taken on a resonance, a sense of fateful event. It already sounded historic. (*L*, p.198)

Now transformed, in Lentricchia's phrase, into 'a triple-named echo of another media child, "John Fitzgerald Kennedy"', Oswald discovers his true vocation: he will study the assassination in minute detail, 'vary the act a hundred ways, speed it up and slow it down, shift emphasis, find shadings, see his whole life change' (*L*, p.434). 'His life,' we are told, 'had a single clear subject now, called Lee Harvey Oswald' (*L*, p.435).

By the end of the novel, the very means by which Oswald grasps his own identity are so thoroughly mediated by consumer-cultural forms that it seems only fitting that his body should be laid to rest under a false name, 'William Bobo', and that the coffin should be carried to the graveside by a team of journalists. Lee Oswald, now renamed (for the very last time) 'William Bobo', may be dead, but Lee Harvey Oswald lives on.

### Postmodern Forms: Pastiche and Electronic Reproduction

The previous section was intended to demonstrate DeLillo's texts' portrayal of, and meditation upon, late capitalist society and its attendant 'cultural logic', postmodernism. It is now necessary to go further and to affirm that these are texts whose very form implicates them in that same social and cultural configuration that they are intent on depicting. In more precise terms, it has become time to note, along with Fredric Jameson, the relevance to the postmodern novel of the critique of the culture industry contained within Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The force of that critique, as Jameson writes, 'lies in its demonstration of the unexpected and imperceptible introduction of commodity structure into the very form and content of the work of art itself.'<sup>248</sup> We shall now, therefore, trace those formal aspects of the texts in question which betray their postmodern status and, through that, the reflection of late capitalist reification in their very own inner-structure.

It seems productive and proper to start by identifying at least one of those formal features associated with the postmodern: namely, a new depthlessness that repulses or repudiates the sort of hermeneutic enquiry, based on multitudinous layers of signification, for which the modernist work of art seemed to cry out. Jameson writes of 'the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense, perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms.'<sup>249</sup> Alan Wilde, in *Horizons of Assent*, appears to be indicating something similar when he contrasts 'modernism's characteristically vertical orderings of

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<sup>248</sup>Jameson, 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture', p.14.

<sup>249</sup>Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.15.

disconnection' And the 'allegiance of late modernism to both depth and surface' with 'postmodernism's reconstitution of a new, horizontal depth: a "surface," as John Ashbery writes, ". . . that is not superficial but a visible core".<sup>250</sup> For Jameson, this new depthlessness (or 'horizontal depth' in Wilde's more ambiguous phrase) is closely linked to a general crisis in processes of meaning and signification, of which a transformation in the nature and uses of irony -- the principal feature of Wilde's construction of the postmodern -- is but one example. First, though, it is worth looking at the 'suspensive irony' that Wilde associates with postmodernism's 'horizontal depth' and its relation to Jameson's own description of postmodern pastiche. The relevance of these concepts to DeLillo's *White Noise* in particular will then be explored.

The distinction between modernism and postmodernism is also *and primarily*, for Wilde, that between 'disjunctive' and 'suspensive' irony. Contrasting the effects of the latter with the characteristic modernist impulse to control and to order, Wilde defines 'suspensive irony' as follows:

an indecision about the meanings or relations of things is matched by a willingness to live with uncertainty, tolerate and, in some cases, to welcome a world seen as random and multiple, even, at times, absurd.<sup>251</sup>

In his *Constructing Postmodernism* Brian McHale compares Wilde's 'suspensive irony' to the following definition of the 'post-modern attitude' offered by Max Apple (in 'Post-Modernism'): "Maybe you could characterize this attitude," writes Apple, 'as a mixture of world weariness and cleverness, an attempt to make you think that I'm half kidding, though you're not quite sure about what.'<sup>252</sup> According to both of these constructions, what is singularly lacking,

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<sup>250</sup> Alan Wilde, *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Post-modernism, and the Ironic Imagination* (London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1981), p.3.

<sup>251</sup> Wilde, p.44.

<sup>252</sup> Max Apple, 'Post-Modernism', cited in Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.21.

whether in postmodernist 'suspensive irony' or in the 'post-modern attitude', is a determinate object of irony; we do not know who or what is being ironized, who or what is the object of the joke, or even indeed if there is one.

I would suggest that, in this respect at least, neither of these formulations are too far removed from Fredric Jameson's analysis of a postmodern pastiche that has replaced the modernist predilection to parody:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry; without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists.<sup>253</sup>

Like Wilde's 'suspensive irony', Jameson's pastiche refuses to construct or to impose an order to which its content might be subjected.

To see how this might operate in postmodern textual practice, we need look no further than *White Noise* and certain interpretative difficulties raised by Jack Gladney's narration. Frank Lentricchia, in 'Tales of the Electronic Tribe', studies the uses served by DeLillo's choice of first-person narrative in some depth. Gladney is, in Lentricchia's words, 'the less than self-possessed voice of a culture that he would subject to criticism and satire.'<sup>254</sup> The implications of Gladney's original satiric intentions need not detain us for now, but it is important to note, with Lentricchia, that Gladney's narration must itself be held suspect, saturated as it is by the values and aesthetic conventions of the society on which it is to reflect. Lentricchia points to a sentence of Gladney's early in the novel: 'It was a cold bright day with intermittent winds out of the east' (WN, p.4). 'Straight or deadpan?' he asks:

A joke about the way we talk these days about the weather, with our voices indentured to the jargon of what is called

<sup>253</sup>Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.26.

<sup>254</sup>Lentricchia, 'Tales of the Electronic Tribe', p.93.

meteorology? A joke that stings us for our inability to muster "real" voice, "real" speech, even about -- or is it especially about? -- matters so ordinary? Or is the sentence delivered unawares, just the way Jack talks sometimes, like a weatherman. Self-parody or a weird, because unconscious, form of "pastiche", a term whose very meaning assumes an act of deliberation?<sup>255</sup>

As Lentricchia suggests, we are left here unable to situate either the origin or object of the irony.

Even when Jack's ironic commentary of the world around him would appear to be functioning quite normally, the reader can suddenly be jarred back into a reevaluation of the narrator's relationship to that which he seems to be subjecting to irony. Another example that Lentricchia offers occurs when Jack later describes the students' arrival, with which the novel opens, to his wife Babette. He describes it from the vantage point of an elevated, if amused, observer:

"You should have been there," I said to her.

"Where?"

"It's the day of the station wagons."

"Did I miss it again? You're supposed to remind me."

"They stretched all the way past the music library and onto the interstate. Blue, green, burgundy, brown. They gleamed in the sun like a desert caravan." (*WN*, p.5)

His ironic tone becomes more pronounced; the more obvious the mockery, the more distanced from its wealthy objects Jack seems to be:

"They've grown comfortable with their money," I said. "They genuinely believe they're entitled to it. This conviction gives them a kind of rude health. They glow a little." (*WN*, p.6)

The spell is broken by Babette: "Not that we don't have a station wagon ourselves." Though certainly less radical than the previous example in terms of preventing the reader from determining precisely who or what is the object of irony -- Jack himself is surely subjected here to an authorial irony -- the above passage does serve to indicate to the reader a crucial factor in the

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<sup>255</sup>Ibid, p.97.

novel's construction of further suspensive ironies or examples of pastiche to add to Jack's meteorological pronouncements; it points to that very assumption upon which Alan Wilde claims suspensive irony is itself predicated: namely, 'the ironist's immanence in the world he describes.'

In order to substantiate this point more fully, we shall look at one final extract from Jack Gladney's narrative -- this time unprompted by Frank Lentricchia. At the end of *White Noise* Jack describes the sensation of waiting in line at a supermarket checkout:

And this is where we wait together, regardless of age, our carts stocked with brightly colored goods. A slowly moving line, satisfying, giving us time to glance at the tabloids in the racks. Everything that we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks. The tales of the supernatural and the extra-terrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity. The cults of the famous and the dead. (WN, p.326)

We have already been made aware of Jack's weakness for parody and for ironic put-down; yet, similarly, we have witnessed the falsity underlying that ironic distance that DeLillo's narrator sometimes attempts to construct (and which the reader is at times all too willing to presuppose). The passage quoted above might well parody the "Aristotelianism of bubble gum wrappers and detergent jingles" which, for Jack, constitutes the work of the college's popular culture department ('known officially as American environments'), but by this stage in the novel such confidence and self-assertion in the use of irony on Jack's part would be unlikely. In fact, the tone is neither caustic nor satiric, but rather elegiac. The blank content of these sentences is akin to the message of mass culture triumphalism that Murray Jay Siskind preaches throughout -- the tone of reverence and quasi-religious awe is the same -- but the celebratory fervour that characterises Murray's sermons is entirely lacking. Instead, there is a placid acceptance, a weary

assent to the world as it is. The years consumed by fear of death; the mad, frantic search for Dylar; the long, slow immersion in the life and writings of Hitler have all taken their toll. Jack perhaps sees finally that to ape, in a sincere way, the truths of his friend Murray and of Alfonse (Fast Food) Stompanato need take no considerable effort and might at least retain an authenticity to which the cultural satirist, the sardonic parodist, can no longer pretend.

It is not only, however, in the prevalence of pastiche or suspensive irony that *White Noise* betrays itself as formally postmodernist. Earlier, we noted that Fredric Jameson extends the notion of postmodern depthlessness beyond the specific example of pastiche or 'blank parody' to include a general repudiation of meaning and signification. The result is what Jameson calls 'schizophrenic art', an art in which meaning itself (the interlocking syntagmatic series of signifiers which constitutes an utterance or a meaning'<sup>256</sup>) has broken down and what we are left with is 'schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers'. The examples which Jameson offers range from the music of John Cage to Samuel Beckett's novel *Watt* and Bob Perelman's poem 'China'. Although DeLillo's *White Noise* is nowhere near as extreme as these texts in its disruption of the hermeneutic process -- a disruption that is here periodic rather than constant -- we can nonetheless identify a similar formal feature at work.

Interspersed at various intervals throughout DeLillo's text, we find mysterious codas or brand names such as the following: 'Dacron, Orlon, Lycra Spandex' (*WN*, p.52); 'Mastercard, Visa, American Express' (*WN*, p.100); 'Leaded, unleaded, super unleaded' (*WN*, p.199); 'Cloters, Velamints, Freedent' (*WN*, p.229); 'Random Access Memory, Acquired Immune

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<sup>256</sup>Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.26.

Deficiency Syndrome, Mutual Assured Destruction' (WN, p.303). They appear, as John Frow observes ('The Last Things Before the Last: Notes on *White Noise* '), 'in the midst of the mundane world of novelistic narrative, detached, functionless, unmotivated . . . without any marker of a speaking source.'<sup>257</sup> The origin of these corporate inscriptions has been the cause of some dispute: for Michael Valdez Moses ('Lust Removed From Nature'), '[i]t is clear that these incursions cannot be directly credited to Jack Gladney's narrative voice';<sup>258</sup> while Frank Lentricchia insists that '[i]t is, of course, Jack who speaks the line[s] because *White Noise* is a first-person novel, and it could therefore be no-one else.' 'Jack in these moments is possessed,' adds Lentricchia, 'a mere medium who speaks.'<sup>259</sup> It seems to me that it is Lentricchia who is right. Valdez Moses associates these 'consumerist mantras' with 'the "white noise" of postmodern America that envelops the Gladneys and the inhabitants of Blacksmith', but Lentricchia, I suspect, grasps the insidious potential of that 'white noise' more fully when he associates these mantras with Jack's own unconscious self.

This is a notion which also suggests itself to Leonard Wilcox, who writes:

These "eruptions" in the narrative imply the emergence of a new form of subjectivity colonized by the media and decentered by its polyglot discourses and electronic networks. They imply the evacuation of the private spheres of self, in Baudrillardian terms "the end of interiority".<sup>260</sup>

Moreover, this interpretation is supported by an incident which occurs while the Gladneys are spending the night with the town's other evacuees. Sitting beside his sleeping daughter Steffie, Jack hears her murmuring two initially incomprehensible words: '*Toyota Celica*' (WN, p.155). He realises that she is

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<sup>257</sup>John Frow, 'The Last Things Before the Last: Notes on *White Noise*', in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, p.187.

<sup>258</sup>Michael Valdez Moses, 'Lust Removed from Nature', in *New Essays*, p.64.

<sup>259</sup>Lentricchia, 'Tales of the Electronic Tribe', p.102.

<sup>260</sup>Wilcox, p.348.

chanting in her sleep, the name of a car. 'She was only repeating,' he thinks, 'some TV voice. Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida.' A distinction must be drawn, however, between these two examples. Steffie's nocturnal chants, like the later TV-chatterings of Willie Mink, are an example of the novel's *representation* of the colonisation of the unconscious by the commodity structure. Jack's own 'consumerist mantras', on the other hand, actually determine the very *form* of the narrative surface itself. The novel thus betrays itself both as a representation and as exemplar of the American culture industry.

A similarly 'schizophrenic' effect is produced by the scattered, apparently random and meaningless transcriptions of utterances emitted by the TV or radio: 'The TV said: "And other trends that could dramatically impact your portfolio"' (WN, p.61); 'The radio said: "It's the rainbow hologram that gives this credit card a marketing intrigue"' (p.122). (Further examples can be encountered on p.96 and on p.201.) As the narrator of DeLillo's later *Mao II* comments on the rush of sensations he experiences while walking through the (post)modern city, 'Nothing tells you what you are supposed to think of this' (MII, p.94). That, of course, is the point. DeLillo's portrait of contemporary America is, as we have seen, one of a society in which meaning and signification have been dissipated. The replication of that same sense of disjointedness in the reading experience of *White Noise* -- an inability on the part of the reader to see how such snatches of electronic media-speak might illuminate (perhaps ironically), or at least stand in some meaningful relationship to, their immediate textual surroundings (see, for a contrasting example, uses of montage in Malcolm Lowry's late modernist novel *Under the Volcano*) -- is thus a means of foregrounding this aspect of the novel's social critique in the mind of the reader, while also allowing the form of that

critique to be determined by a cultural logic which repudiates and discourages any attempt cognitively to establish interrelations and to reach on that basis, determinate conclusions regarding the nature of the social and/or textual environment in which we find ourselves.

In his *Constructing Postmodernism* Brian McHale cites, in the midst of an essay on Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, Fredric Jameson's identification of a trend in postmodern textual production toward 'narratives which are *about* the processes of reproduction and include movie cameras, video, tape recorders, the whole technology of the production and reproduction of the simulacrum.'<sup>261</sup> We have already noted the media saturation of DeLillo's texts, but it is necessary to go beyond this and to insist that the texts are themselves at times actually generated by those same 'processes of reproduction'. Again referring ostensibly to *Foucault's Pendulum*, McHale writes of texts in which 'certain narratological functions that would normally be carried out by the verbal text have been entrusted to some secondary medium (movie, television, computer) represented *in* the verbal text.'<sup>262</sup> We shall now see briefly the relevance of such remarks to DeLillo's *Libra* and *Mao II*.

Although Michael Valdez Moses is surely wrong to associate certain sections of the narrative in *White Noise* with the 'white noise' of postmodern America rather than with Jack Gladney's commodity-saturated consciousness, his judgement highlights a determination of narrative by media of reproduction which it is necessary to acknowledge in some of DeLillo's other novels. In *Libra*, for instance, a surrogate author figure called Nicholas Branch is introduced. He has been 'hired on contract' by the CIA to write a secret history of the Kennedy assassination, a project near enough to that of

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<sup>261</sup>Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.37; see also McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism*, p.181.

<sup>262</sup>McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism*, p.182.

the novel's author to invest Branch's efforts with a certain measure of analogical significance. Branch researches files, films, tapes and books *en masse*; any document that he requires is brought to him by the Curator. His technique for trying to understand, and to reach conclusions about, the assassination is described thus:

We shall build theories that gleam like jade idols, intriguing systems of assumption, four-faced, graceful. We will follow the bullet trajectories backwards to the lives that occupy the shadows, actual men who moan in their dreams. (*L*,p.15)

The possible elision of the narratorial voice at such moments with that of Branch and (presumably) those in the CIA who originally issued his instruction is a topic to which we shall return in a few moments, but for now we need only note of this passage the way in which it anticipates the methodology not only of Branch's study, but also of *Libra* itself. The formal structure of the novel, then, would appear to be modelled on that of the secret history of the Kennedy assassination to be found on Nicholas Branch's computer files.

Moreover, passages in *Libra* may themselves be direct representations of Branch's computer text. For example, the chapter in which Branch is introduced is called '17 April', a date which situates temporally not the narrative of Branch's study and its progress, but that of a completely new character, Win Everett, and the genesis of the plot to kill Kennedy. This other narrative would seem to be generated by Branch's own computer:

He [Branch] enters a date on the home computer the Agency has provided for the sake of convenient tracking. April 17, 1963. The names appear at once, with backgrounds, connections, locations. The bright hot skies. The shady street of handsome old homes framed in native oak.

American kitchens. This one has a breakfast nook, where a man named Walter Everett Jr. was sitting, thinking -- Win, as he was called -- lost to the morning noises collecting around

him, a stir of the all familiar, the heart-beat mosaic of every happy home, toast springing up, radio voices with their intimate and busy timbre, an optimistic buzz living in the ear. (*L*, p.16)

The narrative of the conspiracy that Everett instigates certainly follows chronologically from that of Branch and his studies, and seems in some way to be prompted by it, but we cannot say with absolute confidence that we are reading a direct representation of the computer text that Branch has just called-up on his screen, although it is clearly a suspicion that the novel provokes. Rather, the start of the Everett narrative can be viewed as a concrete example, no longer dependent on the reader's recognition of methodological analogues, of the unsettling complicity of the narrative structure that is *Libra* with the secret CIA project on which Branch has embarked and which is itself a narrated subject. The question of the text's broader complicity with that which it narrates might also be provoked when the reader goes on to discover that the Everett narrative is that of the secret project of ex-CIA operatives, themselves intent, in Everett's words, on "script[ing] a person or persons out of ordinary pocket litter" (*L*, p.28).

In *Mao II*, though, matters are somewhat more direct. There, on three separate occasions, the narrative describes TV news reports as seen by some of the characters. First it is the disaster at Hillsborough, the football fans crushed to death (*MII*, pp. 32-34):

They show the fence from a distance, bodies piling up behind it, smothered, sometimes only fingers moving, and it is like a fresco in an old dark church, a crowded twisted vision of a rush to death as only a master of age could paint it. (*MII*, pp.34)

Later we read the description of the TV coverage of the Tiananmen Square massacre (*MII*, pp. 176-178): 'They show the bicycle dead, a soldier's body hanging from a girder, the row of old officials in Mao suits' (p.178). Finally, there is the report of the Ayatollah Khomeini's funeral (*MII*, pp.188-193):

The helicopter landed with the body in a metal casket, which revolutionary guards carried on their shoulders a short distance to the grave. But then the crowds surged again, weeping men in bloody headbands, and they scaled the barriers and overran the gravesite.

The voice said, Wailing chanting mourners. It said, Throwing themselves into the hole. (*MII*, p191)

These passages must be distinguished from their counterparts in those novels by Umberto Eco (*Foucault's Pendulum*) and Thomas Pynchon (*Vineland*) cited by McHale. Such examples in DeLillo's fiction distinguish themselves by their relative brevity (the longest is five pages) and also by their frequent reminders that what we are reading is a literary representation of a TV report. In fact the narrative shuttles between offering representations of what is on the screen and descriptions of the character's act of watching that TV-screen. Yet although these distinctions are necessary, *Mao II* ought nonetheless to be counted, along with *Libra*, among those postmodernist novels in which the narrative is, at least momentarily, 'entrusted to some secondary medium (movie, television, computer) represented *in* the verbal text.'

### Here and Now: Self-Conscious Postmodernism

What we have seen, then, over the last few pages is the expression *formally* in DeLillo's fiction of the conventions, values and assumptions of a postmodernist, consumerist culture and a late capitalist, commodity-saturated social configuration. This expression comes as a result, as we noted earlier, of the integration of the commodity structure itself into the very form of the work of art, now redesigned as a *text*. In other words, we have been busy indicating some of the *ideological* features of the text.

We shall see later, with the help of Paul Cantor, how a self-conscious recognition of the ideological complicity is expressed in *White Noise*; for now, though, we remain with *Libra* and *Mao II* in order to indicate the means by which a similar self-consciousness finds expression there too. A recurrent figure in DeLillo's novels is that of the author or artist, the 'men in small rooms' who are also Nicholas Branch's subject. Film-makers figure prominently in both *Americana* and *The Names*; *Great Jones Street* is the story of a rock star, *Ratner's Star* that of a child maths prodigy; in *Libra* we find Branch, Everett and Oswald, each in his own way attempting to write (or to rewrite) certain narratives; *Mao II*, attaining a new level of explicitness, is about a novelist. To define Win Everett as some sort of 'author', the creator of a conspiratorial 'fiction', is also to highlight the double significance that DeLillo allocates to the word 'plot'. Everett muses on his own plot, secretly suspecting that what has begun as the simulacrum of an assassination conspiracy will nonetheless result in a death. 'There is a tendency of plots to move towards death,' he thinks. 'He believed that the idea of death is woven into the nature of every plot. A narrative plot no less than a conspiracy of armed men' (*L*, p.221). These thoughts match those of Jack Gladney in *White*

*Noise* (WN, p.26), and offer a further indication of the analogy DeLillo implicitly draws between the construction of his own fiction and that of Everett (not to mention Branch).

'Win Everett,' we read,

was at work devising a general shape, a life. He would script a gunman out of ordinary dog-eared paper, the contents of a wallet. Parmenter would contrive to get document blanks from the Record Branch. Mackey would find a model for the character Everett was in the process of creating. They wanted a name, a face, a bodily frame they might use to extend their fiction into the world. (*L*, p.50)

In a sense, *Libra* is full of authors. As well as attending to the as-yet-fictional 'other' that he wants to become, Oswald himself plans to write a book and is somewhat put out when his mother announces her own authorial ambitions (*L*, pp.277-278). Yet, really, they are all authors-*manqués*, their own stories taken over by others and ultimately submerged in the impersonal totalizing dynamic of late capitalist history and society.

Perhaps an even more extreme case of the author's inability to evade submersion in the consumerist society of the image or simulacrum is that of Bill Gray, the novelist, in *Mao II*. Gray's reclusiveness, the distance he imposes between himself and the outside world, ironically becomes the reason for his unintended prominence in the world. He agrees to be photographed in order to dispel, if only a little, the burdensome mystique that has developed. His re-entrance into the public world, though, when it extends to a planned public appearance in support of a kidnapped French poet, leads eventually to his death. It is curious to reflect on the novel in the light of Ernst Bloch's remarks on the novel of the artist, a genre to which *Mao II* might reasonably be expected to belong:

That which moves one in the novel of the artist itself . . . is the desire to break new ground, with knights, death, and the devil,

to head for the envisioned utopian castle or to that which corresponds to its formation in shape, sound, or word.<sup>263</sup>

But *Mao II* is not really a novel of the artist in Bloch's sense; rather, it is a novel of both the end of the artist and the mass production of artists, a novel in which the loss of cultural autonomy has led inevitably to the artist's direct complicity with, and destruction by, the social forces to which he/she responds.

To point out these aspects of DeLillo's novels, though, is only to indicate the presence on the level of thematics or content of that self-conscious acknowledgement of ideological complicity of which I have been writing. Perhaps even more significant are the means by which such self-consciousness is expressed formally, through the narrative, structural and stylistic techniques the novels employ. In this respect, it is the systematic nature of DeLillo's novels that is most significant. Often, the texts seem to foreground the extent to which they, themselves, constitute a totalizing dynamic, a textual mechanism in which characters -- and even the narrator -- become mere functions of an apparently abstract and impersonal narrative structure.

In DeLillo's novels characters sometimes seem to merge into one another; they can become almost indistinguishable in the course of a short dialogue. Witness, for example, the two Jacks (Karlinsky and Ruby) discussing Oswald and the death of Kennedy:

"People want to lose him."

"You'll see total rejoice. As things now stand, Jack, what are you worth to the city of Dallas? You're a Chicago guy to them. You're an operator from the North. Worse, a Jew. You're a Jew in the heart of the gentile machine. Who are we kidding here? You're a strip joint owner. Asses and tits. That's what you mean to Dallas."

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<sup>263</sup>Ernst Bloch, 'A Philosophical View of the Novel of the Artist', in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, p.277.

"Who are we kidding?"

"Who are we kidding here?"

"When I think of my mother."

"Exactly what I'm saying."

"My mother went crazy in a big way. I can't describe the horror. I used to look in her eyes and there was nothing there that you could call a person. She screamed and raged. That was her life. My father hit her. He hit us. She hit us. She thought we were all shtupping each other. Brothers and sisters having constant sex. I never went to school. I fought. I delivered envelopes for Al Capone."

"I'm saying. This is my point. It builds up a pressure that's bad for us all."

There was a short heavy silence.

"Thank God he's not a Jew."

"Thank God whatever he is, at least he's not a Jew." (*L*, pp. 431-432)

Lentricchia is surely right when he writes that '[t]he two Jacks are hard to tell apart, which is the point.'<sup>264</sup> In fact, we find that the whole narrative operates in this manner. Lentricchia makes much of DeLillo's overall narrative strategy in the novel : a third-person narration with frequent recourse to free indirect discourse. He points out that the narrative voice in *Libra* does not retain the distinct critical distance from its subject(s) that we might normally expect. 'For the narrator in *Libra* is not DeLillo,' he writes, 'but DeLillo in quotation marks: "DeLillo" as a voice crafted to perform virtuoso changes of point of view that function as disconcerting repetitions of his characters' obsessive shifts from first-person to third.'<sup>265</sup> The effect is to reduce the supposedly authoritative voice to the status of another character.

We can see quite clearly what Lentricchia means if we look at the framing of one of Marguerite Oswald's monologues:

Marguerite sat on the sofa watching TV.

It griped him to move to New York, which we travelled all the way in that 1948 Dodge, but that's where John Edward was stationed with his wife and baby and we are a family that

<sup>264</sup>Lentricchia, '*Libra* as Postmodern Critique', p.213.

<sup>265</sup>Ibid, p.210.

has never been able to stay together ... I have made my best effort to raise my boy in this manner, regardless. Whatever is said by them, and they are at it all the time, he knows who has been his main support from the moment I took him home from the Old French Hospital on Orleans Avenue. I am not the looming mother of a boy's bad dreams.

George Gobel appeared on the screen, stubby, crew-cut, with a wholesome smirk, right hand raised to the middle of his forehead in some kind of fraternal small town salute.

Lee was in his room reading about the conversion of surplus value into capital, following the text with his index finger, word by word by word. (*L*, pp.48-49)

The narrative shifts from a third-person description of what Marguerite is doing to her own first-person interior monologue and then back again to the third-person narration without such shifts being marked in any way. This is quite typical of the text; as Lentricchia notes, "'DeLillo's' voice fades into his major characters, he becomes Ruby or Oswald, or the crowd gaping at Kennedy, or Mrs. John Connolly in the limousine speeding to Parkland Hospital ("those men dying in our arms").'<sup>266</sup>

In *Mao II* we see a similar technique at work. Scott's girlfriend, Karen, is watching a TV programme on physical fitness; the narrator starts to comment on her reactions:

She took it all in, she believed it all, pain, ecstasy, dog food, all the seraphic matter, the baby bliss that falls from the air. Scott stared at her and waited. She carried the virus of the future. Quoting Bill. (*MII*, p.119)

The penultimate sentence of this passage would appear to be an example of free indirect discourse -- the narrative is focalized through Scott -- but what about the last sentence? 'Quoting Bill' may be Scott's own comment on his mental description of Karen, but it might equally be the narrator's. In a sense, of course, this is just another instance of suspensive irony; but here it serves to indicate, albeit subtly -- through the reduction of characters and narrator to

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<sup>266</sup>Ibid.

mere transient functions of an impersonal, totalizing narrative -- those social conditions of systematic absorption and domination upon which the cultural dominant of postmodernism (and its characteristic textual strategies, such as suspensive irony) is predicated.

Yet while DeLillo's texts may indicate these social forces, it must be borne in mind that they do so through their own overt and utterly self-conscious reflection and expression of them. In other words, the social critique implicit in the text's mimicry of forms of systematic absorption is here expressed in terms of a further acknowledgement of the literary text's own ideological complicity with such forms and processes. Tom LeClair, in *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*, writes in a very different vein of the systematic construction of DeLillo's texts, preferring to explore the affinities of those texts with certain, rather hazily-defined 'systems theories'. It seems to me that there is little of much interest generated by LeClair's particular approach (other than an extremely diligent and informative chapter on *Ratner's Star*). Nonetheless, the extent to which he highlights as a characteristic feature of DeLillo's texts the absorption of characters into a larger impersonal structure is, I think, incisive and potentially productive for more materialist analyses.

Rather than proposing, then, a general preoccupation in DeLillo's novels with systems and systems theory, I would prefer to interpret that undoubted interest in terms of a more specific response to the systematic structures of late or consumer capitalism. Discussing his novel *Ratner's Star*, DeLillo, in a rare interview, offers the following comments:

I was trying to produce a book that would be naked structure. The structure would be the book and vice versa. I wanted the book to become what it was about. Abstract structures and connective patterns. A piece of mathematics in short. To do

this, I felt I had to reduce the importance of people. The people had to play a role subservient to pattern, form, and so on.<sup>267</sup>

This is also as far as LeClair takes us, noting of the novel that '[n]arration slips rapidly and cleanly without transition among the characters, effectively implying the continuous.'<sup>268</sup> Modes of thought and aesthetic forms are, however, intimately related to social and economic formations. We have already seen how, in *White Noise* and *Libra*, characters are portrayed as the haphazard constructions of dominant and ubiquitous social forces. It is precisely these social conditions of which the subservience of character to abstract pattern and form in DeLillo's texts -- extending beyond *Ratner's Star* to *Libra* and to *Mao II* -- is expressive. That *Ratner's Star* itself follows through the logic of its own formally expressed domination of characters should be evident from the attempt by the scientist Cheops Feeley to convince the fourteen-year-old maths prodigy Billy Twillig to have implanted in his brain a device that will help the business cartel which Feeley represents to manipulate the international money curve, but which has the added side-effect of allowing Billy only to experience and to perceive things in abstract terms.<sup>269</sup> Mathematical or scientific abstraction (which the text itself attempts to mimic) thus serves to reinforce man's subservience to a global capitalist network; or, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer write in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 'The more the machinery of thought subjects existence to itself, the more blind its resignation in reproducing existence.'<sup>270</sup>

Adorno and Horkheimer insist repeatedly on the relation -- which is an expressive one -- of abstract, scientific, or enlightened categories of thought to 'the corresponding conditions of social reality -- that is, of the division of

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<sup>267</sup>Tom LeClair, 'An Interview with Don DeLillo', *Contemporary Literature*, 23 (1982), p.27.

<sup>268</sup>Tom LeClair, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1987), p.121.

<sup>269</sup>See Don DeLillo, *Ratner's Star* (London: Vintage, 1991), pp.243-247.

<sup>270</sup>Adorno & Horkheimer, p.27.

labour.<sup>271</sup> The common feature they share, as DeLillo's texts also attest, is the domination of the specific or individual by general or abstract categories or forms. 'What is done to all by the few,' write Adorno and Horkheimer,

always occurs as the subjection of individuals by the many: social repression always exhibits the masks of repression by a collective. It is this unity of the collectivity and domination . . . which is expressed in thought forms.<sup>272</sup>

While recognising that this is the form in which social domination commonly manifests itself, it must equally be borne in mind that 'even the threatening collective belongs only to the deceptive surface, beneath which are concealed the powers which manipulate it as an instrument of power.'<sup>273</sup> What ultimately concern here both the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and DeLillo are methods of reification, that process by which, in the words of Georg Lukács, 'a relation between people takes on the character of a thing.'<sup>274</sup>

In order to grasp substantially the means by which such a concept might illuminate DeLillo's work, it is necessary to understand the complex and mystificatory forms that social domination (and, subsequently, reification) takes. The logic, therefore, of the last two quotations from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* might be adequately synthesised in the following passage:

It is not merely that domination is paid for by the alienation of men from the objects dominated: with the objectification of spirit, the very relations of men -- even those of the individual to himself -- were bewitched.<sup>275</sup>

Although the human subject might appear to be the dominating agent -- whether through the application of rational abstraction or technology, or in the guise of the baiting crowd -- he/she is in fact dominated by those very

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<sup>271</sup>Ibid, p.21.

<sup>272</sup>Ibid, p.22.

<sup>273</sup>Ibid, p.28.

<sup>274</sup>Lukács, 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', p.83.

<sup>275</sup>Adorno & Horkheimer, p.28.

same structures of domination. It is in the figure of the crowd that DeLillo demonstrates this in his novels.

The opening pages of *White Noise* depict one of DeLillo's many crowd scenes. The families file to the College-on-the-Hill in their station wagon, each bearing the products and belongings that identify their owners as sharers in the good life. As Jack Gladney reflects,

This assembly of station wagons, as much as anything they might do in the course of the year, more than formal liturgies or laws, tells the parents they are a collection of the likeminded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation. (*WN*, pp.3-4)

Like those who assemble in their local supermarkets, the students' parents became a crowd (or late-capitalist community) as a result of commodity consumption. The same is also true of the Gladney family. According to Thomas J. Ferraro ('Whole Families Shopping at Night!'), what DeLillo demonstrates in his depiction of the Gladneys is 'the way the colonization of the home by mass-culture achieves this effect of a "close-knit nuclear family" without the ties of marriage and blood that, at least theoretically, grounded such families.'<sup>276</sup> Instead, the family is united through a shared experience of commodity and image consumption. The family nights in front of the TV and the communal shopping expedition are, in *White Noise*, enough to forge and to maintain a familial bond.

The first chapter in *Mao II*, depicting a mass wedding of Moonies, ends portentously: 'The future belongs to crowds.' But in the course of the novel there are no more crowd-scenes. Instead, there are descriptions of characters watching crowds on TV. For the most part these characters witness violence and destructiveness, which the crowds are sometimes responsible for and at other times are subjected to. Just as important as the crowds on the screen, however, is the other crowd -- that of voyeurs -- that the text implies. In *Libra*,

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<sup>276</sup>Thomas J. Ferraro, 'Whole Families Shopping at Night!', in *New Essays*, p.20.

Beryl Parmenter, watching the replay of Oswald's murder on TV, is convinced that Oswald looks straight into the camera just before his death and that he seems now to be staring at her out of the screen. She thinks that this in some way unites Oswald with the viewers, that they all somehow form a crowd. If they do, it is surely the modern (or postmodern) form of the 'baiting crowd' of which Elias Canetti writes in *Crowds and Power*. Canetti's crowd is one of newspaper readers, but its features remain broadly applicable to the tube-watching populace of DeLillo's texts:

Disgust at collective killing is of very recent date and should not be over-estimated. Today everyone takes part in public executions through the newspapers. Like everything else, however, it is more comfortable than it was. We sit peacefully at home and, out of a hundred details, can choose those to linger over which offer a special thrill. We only applaud when everything is over and there is no feeling of guilty connivance to spoil our pleasure. We are not responsible for the sentence, nor for the journalists who report its execution, nor for the papers which print them. None the less, we know more about the business than our predecessors, who may have walked miles to see it, hung around for hours, and, in the end, seen very little. The baiting crowd is preserved in the newspaper reading public, in a milder form it is true, but, because of its distance from events, a more responsible one. One is tempted to say that it is the most despicable and, at the same time the most stable form of such a crowd. Since it does not even have to assemble, it escapes disintegration; variety is catered for by the daily reappearance of the papers.<sup>277</sup>

Through the mass consumption of images, then, as much as through that of Waffelos and the Mystic mints (a distinction which, in the age of simulacra, is no longer particularly necessary), the characters of DeLillo's texts are drawn into the structures and thought patterns of the crowd. Thus these characters are reified both on the level of narrative technique by their overt absorption into an abstract, impersonal narrative structure (especially in novels such as

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<sup>277</sup>Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), pp.59-60.

*Ratner's Star, Libra* and *Mao II*) and on the level of narrative content by their individual submersion in the crowd of commodity/image consumers.

Yet, as members of a crowd -- and particularly of the (post)modern form of the baiting crowd -- the characters of DeLillo's novels must at least appear, albeit symptomatically, as agents as well as victims of domination. Canetti notes, in connection with such crowds, the following reflection:

The threat of death hangs over all men and, however disguised it may be, and even if it is sometimes forgotten, it affects them all at the time and creates in them a need to deflect death onto others. The formation of baiting crowds answers this need.<sup>278</sup>

Jack Gladney, in the course of a seminar he shares with Murray, comes to a near identical conclusion:

Crowds came to form a shield against their own dying. To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone. Crowds came for this reason above all others. They were there to be a crowd. (*WN*, p.73)

To be part of a crowd is to be dominated, reified, but it is also to attempt to dominate death and may therefore take the form of a need to displace death through the murderous domination of others. The taking of Dylar, then, the consumption of a medication that dispels one's fear of death, works in the novel as a metaphor for any form of consumption (the means by which one becomes part of a crowd).

When Jack finds that Babette's supply of Dylar has been extinguished, he is led to carry out the extreme logic of the equation between the suppression of fear of death that the consumption of Dylar offers and the displacement of death resulting from the violent domination of others: he decides to kill Willie Mink and to steal his stash of Dylar. In doing so, Jack is living out the theoretical speculations of his friend Murray:

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<sup>278</sup>Ibid, p.56.

I believe, Jack, there are two kinds of people in the world. Killers and diers. Most of us are diers. We don't have the disposition, the rage, or whatever it takes to be a killer. We let death happen. We lie down and die. But think what it's like to be a killer. Think how exciting it is, in theory, to kill another person in direct confrontation. If he dies, you cannot. To kill him is to gain life-credit. The more people you kill, the more credit you store up. It explains any number of massacres, wars, executions. (WN, p.290)

He continues:

It's a way of controlling death. A way of gaining the ultimate upper hand. Be the killer for a change. Let someone else be the dier. Let him replace you, theoretically, in that role. You can't die if he does. He dies, you live. See how marvelously simple. (WN, p.291)

Murray's ideas are borrowed directly from Canetti's *Crowds and Power*, where they are discussed in the chapter on 'The Survivor'. In Canetti's portrayal the survivor usually manifests himself as a murderous psychopath for whom killing becomes a passion; the unspoken exemplar of such a figure, haunting Canetti's book as he does more overtly *White Noise*, is of course the subject of Jack Gladney's study: Adolf Hitler.

Where these lead Jack -- the conspiring forces of consumption and domination -- is to the motel room of Willie Mink and there to the very brink of murder. It is at this point in the novel, though, that DeLillo depicts the inter-relation of those forces and the loss of cultural autonomy that we noted earlier providing both the cultural context and subject matter of *White Noise*.

It is worth looking closely at the scene of the shooting:

I fired the gun, the weapon, the pistol, the firearm, the automatic. The sound snowballed in the white room, adding on reflected waves. I watched blood spurt from the victim's midsection. A delicate arc. I marveled at the rich color, sensed the color-causing action of non-nucleated cells. The flow diminished to a trickle, spread across the tile floor. I saw beyond words I knew what red was, saw it in terms of

dominant wavelength, luminance, purity. Mink's pain was beautiful, intense. (*WN*, p.312)

The violence is experienced by Jack in terms of its aesthetic features: he notes the blood's colour, its viscosity, the 'delicate arc' in which it spurts; to Jack, his victim's pain is beautiful. In a sense, then, the side effect of Dylar that forces Mink to react to words as though they were their own referents is merely a more acute reflection of the state of mind that Jack has adopted as a side-effect of commodity reification and the dialectical inter-penetration of the object and cultural realms -- an association which offers yet further evidence of the function Dylar plays in the novel as a metaphor for commodity/image consumption, and therefore for participation in late capitalist society in general.

In *Libra* we see a similar process, although the emphasis is placed on the actual ramifications of this aestheticization of violence. Preparing himself for the forthcoming assassination attempt, Frank Vasquez, one of the hired hit-men, muses on his time in Cuba with Castro:

On his fourth day with Castro he shot a government scout, aiming through a telescopic sight. It was uncanny. You press a button and a man drops dead a hundred meters away. It seemed hollow and remote, falsifying everything. It was a trick of the lenses. The man is an accurate picture. Then he is upside down. Then he is right side up. You shoot at a series of images conveyed to you through a metal tube. The force of a death should be enormous but how can you know what kind of man you've killed or who was the braver or stronger if you have to peer through layers of glass that deliver the image but obscure the meaning of the act? War has a conscience or it's ordinary murder. (*L*, p297-298)

The terrible thing about this violence is that it is an indifferent violence, nonchalant and meaningless, a depthless form of violence for a depthless, postmodern age. For another of the conspirators, the planned assassination itself begins to resemble a movie:

It hit Wayne Elko with a flash and roar that this was like *Seven Samurai*. In which free-lance warriors are selected one at a time to carry out a dangerous mission. In which men outside society are called on to save a helpless people from destruction. Swinging those two-handed swords. (L, p.178)

In the 'Culture Industry' chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer insist on the violence that is a consequence of the culture industry. That violence exists essentially in the role played by the culture industry in carrying out its ideological function and ensuring that the individual 'wholly identifies himself with the power which is belaboring him.'<sup>279</sup> In order to do this, it attempts to impose and to enforce the false identity of the individual and society; all, of course, in the service of the dominant order or class. It is in this 'miracle of integration' that Adorno and Horkheimer find the roots of the culture industry's essential likeness to the barbaric culmination of bourgeois enlightenment: namely, fascism.

Where the culture industry differs from previous -- and similarly ideological -- cultural manifestations of the superstructure is in its loss of autonomy. Whereas the great bourgeois artworks of the past embodied a negative Utopian moment in their professed autonomy from economic life, the culture industry 'can pride itself on having energetically executed the previously clumsy transportation of art into the sphere of consumption.'<sup>280</sup> Consequently, the pleasure that the culture offers is, in Adorno's and Horkheimer's words, that of flight: 'not, as is asserted, flight from a wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance.'<sup>281</sup> Loss of cultural autonomy thus marks a new stage in the history of ideological domination, one in which the relation between the cultural realm (now redesignated the 'culture industry') and other areas of the social totality, such as the economic

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<sup>279</sup>Adorno & Horkheimer, p.154.

<sup>280</sup>Ibid, p.135.

<sup>281</sup>Ibid, p.144.

and the political, has undergone such a transformation that the sinister aestheticization of social conflict that Walter Benjamin associated in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' with fascism is regularly accepted as the daily, democratic norm.

The association of the culture industry, or a cultural realm that no longer claims for itself the autonomy it once did, with forces of domination and terror is one that is distinctly recognisable from the pages of DeLillo's fiction. In *Mao II* this takes the form of a kidnap which is staged from the very outset as a media event. Rather more indirectly, it is an association that might be inferred from the discussions between Bill Gray, the novelist, and George Haddad, the academic spokesperson for the group responsible for the kidnap. George asks Bill whether he uses a word processor; Bill does not. George recommends one: '[T]he machine helps me organise my thoughts,' he says, 'gives me a text susceptible to revision' (*MII*, pp.137-8). Later he brings the subject up again: 'I'm still convinced you ought to get one. Instant corrections ... the text, is lightweight, malleable. It doesn't restrict or inhibit' (*MII*, p.161). The text, he says, 'is lightweight, malleable'; 'the machine helps me organise my thoughts.' What thoughts are these? George goes on to speak of Mao: Mao the poet, Mao the cult. The novelist replies:

The question you have to ask is, How many dead? How many dead during the Cultural Revolution? How many dead after the Great Leap Forward? And how well did he hide his dead? This is the other question. What do these men do with the millions they kill? (*MII*, p163)

On the one hand, there are lightweight, malleable texts; on the other: violence, mass murder. In *White Noise* this same juxtaposition is achieved through the figures of Elvis and Hitler.

What Fredric Jameson has called 'the relief of the postmodern' -- lightweight texts, art as commodity -- is placed side by side with the icons of

terror. The particular question of the juxtaposition in *White Noise* of Elvis and Hitler has provoked somewhat troubled musings among DeLillo's critics. It is therefore worth looking briefly at two diametrically opposed critical responses while noting that both are quite breathtakingly wide of the mark. Both, in fact, proceed from the same, fatally flawed premise: namely, that Elvis and Hitler represent two alternatives in direct opposition to one another. For Bruce Bawer ('Don DeLillo's America'), DeLillo posits contemporary, late capitalist America as the destroyer of man's natural, savage state. 'In DeLillo's overly diagrammatic world,' he writes, 'savagery is the only alternative to depersonalization by means of sensory overload; only through a pure, brutal physicality can one reclaim one's selfhood.'<sup>282</sup> Speculating on the ubiquity of Hitler throughout DeLillo's oeuvre, Bawer writes, 'The reason is obvious: Hitler is the ultimate example of twentieth-century man reverting to primitivism.' DeLillo's point, therefore, is equally obvious (or 'unmistakable' in Bawer's words): 'Hitler was just like us. We are all Hitler.' For Bawer, then, DeLillo's fiction can be summed up in the following terms: 'A craving for primitive destructiveness dwells deep in all our hearts . . . it is what makes us human.' Given the choice of Elvis or Hitler, Bawer seems in little doubt that DeLillo would plump for the greater authenticity of the latter.

Frank Lentricchia, in 'Tales of the Electronic Tribe', comes to precisely the opposite conclusion. Referring to the periodic note of awe and sense of mystery in Jack's voice as he speaks of those commodity cultural forces that bind his family and community together -- principally the supermarket and the TV -- Lentricchia contends that DeLillo offers us the choice of consumer culture or authoritarian terror:

Would we prefer that Jack give up the supermarket, the mall,  
his family, the nights gathered around the TV, for another,

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<sup>282</sup>Bruce Bawer, 'Don DeLillo's America', *The New Criterion*, 3, No. 8 (1985), p.35.

chilling guarantor of community, who lurks in the background of *White Noise*, as in the background of a number of modernist literary monuments -- the specter of the totalitarian, the gigantic charismatic figure who triggers our desire to give in, to merge our frightened selves in his frightening authority? Hitler, another kind of epic hero, voice of national solidarity, is the other object of Jack's awe.<sup>283</sup>

Lentricchia's DeLillo, like that of Bawer, juxtaposes the figures of Elvis and Hitler primarily in order to contrast them, to posit one as the other's contrary alternative. In truth, of course, DeLillo does nothing of the sort. That these two critics should reach opposite conclusions is therefore relatively unimportant; somewhat more significant, instead, is their unwillingness to grapple with the far more troubling and more complex relationship constructed in DeLillo's fiction -- and particularly in *White Noise* -- between the contemporary American culture industry and German Nazism.

This is a relationship treated with rather more attentiveness in a study called "Adolf, We Hardly Knew You" by Paul Cantor.<sup>284</sup> Cantor points to certain problems with Bawer's thesis, particularly to the difficulty of claiming that DeLillo implicitly associates Hitler with a vision of human authenticity in relation to which Elvis and the inauthentic American consumer culture stand in unflattering contrast. Nazi Germany, he writes, is shown to have been just as much a facade as contemporary America. He cites Jack's comments on Albert Speer:

I told Murray that Albert Speer wanted to build structures that would decay, gloriously, impressively, like Roman Ruins. No rusty hulks or gnarled steel slums. He knew that Hitler would be in favor of anything that might astonish posterity. He did a drawing of a Reich structure that was to be built of special materials, allowing it to crumble romantically -- a drawing of fallen walls, half columns furred in wisteria. The ruin is built into the creation, I said, which shows a certain nostalgia behind

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<sup>283</sup>Lentricchia, 'Tales of the Electronic Tribe', p.112.

<sup>284</sup>Paul Cantor, "'Adolf, We Hardly Knew You'", in *New Essays*, pp.39-62.

the power principle, or a tendency to organize the longings of future generations. (*WN*, pp.257-8)

'We see here,' writes Cantor, 'that the Nazis were themselves imitating a model of earlier greatness, namely, ancient Rome (a pattern even clearer in the Italian brand of fascism).'<sup>285</sup> The aesthetic side of Nazism was, he says, 'a *derivative* aesthetic'. Thus it is the inauthenticity of the Hitler figure upon which DeLillo dwells, contrary to Bawer's interpretation. This should not be surprising, as the inclination of fascist movements toward imitation had already been noted by Adorno and Horkheimer:

The carefully thought out symbols (which are proper to every counterrevolutionary movement), the skulls and disguises, the barbaric drum beats, the monotonous repetition of words and gestures, are simply the organized imitation of magic practices, the mimesis of mimesis.<sup>286</sup>

It would also be appropriate to bear in mind at this point John Dos Passos's prescient remark, as early as 1934, that '[William Randolph] Hearst is handsome Adolph's schoolteacher.'

Nevertheless, if DeLillo's text is to offer a proper critique of fascism and the fascist impulse, it must surely note the inauthenticity of the movement while simultaneously insisting on its savagery and barbarism. This *White Noise* is conspicuously unable to do. For all Jack's bluster about the terrifying phenomenon that Hitler represents, the Hitler of *White Noise* remains a curiously domesticated figure, easily assimilated into a university curriculum:

Advanced Nazism, three hours a week, restricted to qualified seniors, a course of study designed to cultivate historical perspective, theoretical rigor and mature insight into the continuing mass appeal of Fascist tyranny, with special emphasis on parades, rallies and uniforms, three credits, written reports. (*WN*, p.25)

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<sup>285</sup>Ibid, p.55.

<sup>286</sup>Adorno & Horkheimer, p.185.

When he introduces the delegates to the Hitler conference, Jack says,

I talked mainly about Hitler's mother, brother and dog . . . I made many references to Wolf, many more to the mother and brother, a few to shoes and socks, a few to jazz, beer and baseball. (WN, p.25)

No one seems to think this strange. Jack and Murray interweave biographical details of Hitler and Elvis as though there are no necessary distinctions to be made between the two; for Jack, the differences are of scale rather than of pathology; he knows that the association of Hitler with Elvis can do nothing but good to the prospects of 'Elvis Studies'.

In one of DeLillo's earlier novels, *Running Dog*, we find another transformation of the Hitler figure. In this novel, a number of different groups are searching for a film reportedly made in Hitler's bunker in Berlin just before the end. There are rumours that the film is pornographic. Eventually it is found:

The camera is trained on the man's face. Again it moves, coming in for a medium close-up.

Eyes blank.

Little or no hair alongside his ears.

Face pale and lined.

Flaccid mouth.

Smoothly curved jaw.

The famous mustache.

Head shaking, he acknowledges the presence of the camera. It pulls back. The man moves forward, walking in a screwy mechanical way. Here the camera pans the audience. As the man enters the room, the adults show outsized delight, clearly meant to prompt the children, who may or may not be familiar with Charlie Chaplin.<sup>287</sup>

Hitler is doing a Chaplin impersonation. Citing this passage, Jack's cinema-influenced musings on Attila the Hun in *White Noise*, and his meeting with the postmodern nuns who hold to a mere simulacrum of faith, Cantor points

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<sup>287</sup>Don DeLillo, *Running Dog* (London: Picador, 1992), p.235.

to DeLillo's inability 'to keep postmodernism delimited.' 'As its name indicates,' he writes,

postmodernism must be defined in contrast to something else, what came before it. But like many others today, DeLillo keeps wanting to extend the range of postmodernism, above all to keep pushing it farther and farther back into the past, until it threatens to lose all meaning as a distinctive term. This process seems to be the logical outcome of the very concept of postmodernism.<sup>288</sup>

Consequently, for Cantor, (in one of the most perceptive comments yet written on DeLillo):

DeLillo himself seems unable to break out of the postmodern circle and offer a convincing alternative to its diminished reality. In short, he can give us a vision of the inauthentic but not, it seems, of the authentic. DeLillo is sufficiently distanced from postmodern existence to want to be able to criticize it, but sufficiently implicated in it to have a hard time finding an Archimedean point from which to do the criticizing.<sup>289</sup>

In a sense, then, DeLillo's position might be compared to that of Jack Gladney once he has finished his monologue on the phenomenon and function of the crowd: 'People gathered round, students and staff, and in the mild din of half heard remarks and orbiting voices I realized we were now a crowd' (*WN*, p.74).

Central, though, to Cantor's argument is an understanding of the postmodern as a historical stage which repudiates the very concept of history and historical specificity itself. The inability of DeLillo 'to keep postmodernism delimited' ought then to be seen as an example of this dismissal of history in much the same way as we might understand the nonchalance with which Jack and Babette discuss their choice of pornographic reading material: 'Pick your century' (*WN*, p29). The crucial factor here again, as it is for most features of DeLillo's writing, is the effect on

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<sup>288</sup>Cantor, p.60.

<sup>289</sup>Ibid, p.61.

the work of art of its transformed relation to the commodity sphere. Adorno, in an essay called 'The Schema of Mass Culture', notes the following:

History is extruded from tales which have become cultural commodities, even and especially there where historical themes are exploited. History as such becomes a costume identified with the individual concealing the frozen modernity of monopoly and state capitalism.<sup>290</sup>

This ahistoricism, which DeLillo's texts both represent and embody, can be traced in the Adornian formulation to the dissipation of that conflict with economic life which art had previously retained in its radical autonomy and its disavowal of social utility. Thus in the same essay, Adorno goes on to write of 'the emergence of that false reconciliation, the absorption of every negative counter-instance by an omnipotent reality, the elimination of dissonance in the bad totality.'<sup>291</sup> Yet while it is only with this surrender to an utter conflictlessness that art 'turn[s] completely into the lie to which it has always contributed its part in the past', to Adorno the preservation of conflict in the work of art would represent an indefensible lie, 'transfigur[ing] the world into one in which conflict is still possible rather than revealing it as one in which the omnipotent power of production is beginning ever more obviously to repress such a possibility.'<sup>292</sup> This argument leads to an impasse; or, at least, so it would appear. It is time to see, in the concluding section of this chapter, which routes or strategies, if any, might provide an escape to something other than passive acceptance or blind delusion.

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<sup>290</sup>Adorno, 'The Schema of Mass Culture', in *The Culture Industry*, p.66.

<sup>291</sup>Ibid.

<sup>292</sup>Ibid, p.67.

### DeLillo: From Modernism to Postmodernism

The evolution of cultural forms and its relation to the historical situation is speculatively sketched out by Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*:

[T]he relationship of the . . . historical situation to the text is not construed as causal (however that might be imagined) but rather as one of a limiting situation; the historical moment is here understood to block off or shut down a certain number of formal possibilities available before, and to open up determinate new ones, which may or may not ever be realized in artistic practice.<sup>293</sup>

Jameson's formulation can be to some degree rebuked, however, by Raymond Williams' notion of 'residual' and 'emergent' forms which are always to be seen in a dynamic relationship with the 'dominant'.<sup>294</sup> As it appears in *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson's conception of the permissibility or otherwise of artistic forms and techniques does not allow adequate scope for such conflicts, apparently denying at least the validity of 'residual' forms unless they are to be seen as nostalgic deception. In *Postmodernism*, however, he insists on the need to picture the postmodern as 'the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses -- what Raymond Williams has usefully termed "residual" and "emergent" forms of cultural production make their way.'<sup>295</sup>

The slight, but nonetheless significant, confusion of these two passages appears, in the light of Jameson's book on Adorno (*Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic*), to be mainly the product of Jameson's reading of the latter's *Aesthetic Theory*. Jameson writes that Adorno's conception of the New is that it originates in the exclusion of older forms or ideas:

<sup>293</sup>Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p.148.

<sup>294</sup>See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), pp.121-127.

<sup>295</sup>Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.6.

. . . what is new about the *Novum* is less the work itself ... than these new prohibitions, about which it would therefore be better to say, not that they tell you what not to do, but rather that they spell out what is *no longer* to be done; what you cannot do any more.<sup>296</sup>

Clearly it is from this model that Jameson takes his own in *The Political Unconscious*. However, Adorno's construction is not, in truth, quite as steel-clad as Jameson's gloss on it (through an interesting omission) would suggest. Having stated precisely what Jameson represents him as doing, Adorno goes on to qualify this:

It would be a mistake . . . to hypostatize historically grown prohibitions as though they were irrevocable. To do so is to provoke a reaction that is prevalent in Cocteau's brand of modernism and which consists of a favourite slight of hand whereby the prohibited quality is all of a sudden magically pulled out of a hat and presented as though it were brand new -- a modernism that gets its kicks from breaking the taboos of modernism. What is valid in this otherwise reactionary modernism is the implicit assumption that taboos are not forever. However, this return of the tabooed should not take the form of a harking back to unproblematic categories and solutions; rather, what may legitimately return are past problems.<sup>297</sup>

The example to which Adorno points is Schönberg's remark that harmony is 'out of the question for the time being'. Denying that this indicates the possibility of a return to triple-chords, Adorno suggests, instead, that it is 'the general question of simultaneity in music' that remains open, making possible a future working out-of this question which might involve the development of a new form of harmony, itself intimately related to a transformed historical situation. As we shall see, this return of 'past problems' is precisely what functions, in a revealing and determinedly historically-specific way, as the utopian feature of the internal dialectic of Don DeLillo's postmodernist

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<sup>296</sup>Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1991), p.192.

<sup>297</sup>Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, pp.53-54.

fiction, thereby producing the potential of that 'alternative or even oppositional relation to the dominant culture' which Raymond Williams associates with certain 'residual' cultural forms.<sup>298</sup>

Before going on to examine how this operates in textual practice, it is worth acknowledging the importance to a proper reading of DeLillo of the subtle distinction between Art in general (particularly as it is grasped abstractly through the construction of a cultural dominant) and the individual text which situates itself in relation to Art and its cultural dominant. Of course, this is my intention throughout this work; in the specific instance of DeLillo, however, it is necessary to go further and to identify that relation, along with Fredric Jameson and Theodor Adorno,<sup>299</sup> as one of dialectical conflict in which the individual work of art 'works on' the guilt (that is, the ideological complicity) of Art while remaining unable ever to disassociate itself from that same guilt of social and class domination.

To demonstrate how this form of critique, whose subject is both the cultural dominant of postmodernism and the individual texts themselves, manifests itself in DeLillo's fiction shall, then, be our chief preoccupation in the brief reminder of this chapter. For Frank Lentricchia the issue is clear cut; he concludes his 'Introduction' to *New Essays on 'White Noise'* with the following judgement:

Impulses aesthetic and critical have -- classically -- stood in starkest opposition, but they go together in the modernist idea of literature, perhaps no more seamlessly than in Don DeLillo, last of the modernists, who takes for his critical object of aesthetic concern the postmodern situation.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>298</sup>Williams, p.122.

<sup>299</sup>See Jameson, *Late Marxism*, p.130. This theme will be discussed more fully, and in more theoretical terms, in the final chapter.

<sup>300</sup>Lentricchia, 'Introduction', in *New Essays*, p.14.

Lentricchia's DeLillo, 'last of the modernists', achieves his critical distance unproblematically, through the subjection of a postmodern historical (and historico-cultural) situation to the rigorous scrutiny of modernist critical aesthetics. The whole tenor of Lentricchia's essay on *Libra* ('*Libra* as Postmodern Critique') also conforms to this assumption. Yet, as we have seen, there are both formal and thematic features of the texts that would contradict this all too comfortable conclusion, situating DeLillo's texts firmly within what for Jameson is the 'force-field' of postmodernism rather than seeking some elevated or external aesthetic space that the unsullied modernist might occupy and from which his/her unflinching stare might be trained on contemporary cultural degradation.

The somewhat mistaken conclusion to which Frank Lentricchia holds does, however, highlight one of the most important aspects of DeLillo's texts: namely, the relationship which they establish between modernist and postmodernist aesthetics. Focusing on this same issue, Noel King, in 'Reading *White Noise*: Floating Remarks', asks the sort of question that seems to underlie Lentricchia's comment:

What exactly is the relation of *White Noise* to the category of the postmodern? Is it to be called a postmodern novel because it talks about postmodern sunsets, semiotics and simulacra? Is it postmodern in the sense that the novels of Pynchon, Gaddis and Coover are termed postmodern?

Or is it, rather, a slyly modernist meditation on postmodern themes?<sup>301</sup>

Although he draws on certain of Fredric Jameson's analyses of the postmodern and alludes once or twice to Walter Benjamin, King's essay is only superficially materialist in approach, evading questions of ideology and seeking to establish a privileged position for what he calls the 'ficto-critical', under whose banner he wishes to situate *White Noise*. As King depicts it,

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<sup>301</sup>Noel King, 'Reading *White Noise*: Floating Remarks', *Critical Quarterly*, 33 (1991), p.69.

*White Noise* offers provisional, hesitant critique, discovering some form of positive worth in a hazy ambivalence of which King himself offers no analysis. While identifying the same dilemma that provokes Lentricchia's remarks, King does not in actual fact ever get around to addressing it in any serious fashion, allowing it instead to float away harmlessly out of sight.

If we are to see a proper engagement of the issue, whose conclusion might be juxtaposed with that of Lentricchia, it is necessary to turn once again to Leonard Wilcox. In 'Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise* and the End of Heroic Narrative', Wilcox identifies Jack Gladney, the narrator of *White Noise*, as 'a modernist displaced in a postmodern world'. Even the flight from a threatening external world to a secure, if besieged, inner-consciousness is no longer an option for Gladney, whose own subjectivity, as we have seen, has itself been thoroughly saturated by the white noise of advertising slogans and commodity brand names. Of crucial significance, however, is the step by which Wilcox extends his argument:

Moreover, for Baudrillard and DeLillo the dissolution of a modernist subjectivity in the mire of contemporary media and technology is integrally connected to another issue: the passing of the great modernist notions of artistic impulse and representation, the demise of notions of a "heroic" search for alternative, creative forms of consciousness, and the idea of art as specially endowed revelation.<sup>302</sup>

It is, then, as we have already noted, precisely that desire, in Ernst Bloch's words, 'to head for the envisioned utopian castle or to that which corresponds to its formation in shape, sound, or word' of which DeLillo, as a postmodernist novelist, no longer has any proper means of expression.

However, moving closer to Lentricchia's position, Wilcox points to a certain ambiguity in DeLillo's work. 'DeLillo's novels,' he writes:

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<sup>302</sup>Wilcox, p.348.

engage historical and political issues; they do not exhibit the ahistoricism and pastiche depthlessness often associated with postmodernism. If his works exhibit the postmodern concern with the unstable nature of subjectivity and textuality, with representation and narrative process, his postmodernism retains the legacy of the modernist impulse to explore consciousness and selfhood and to create an imaginative vision that probes and criticises its subject matter.<sup>303</sup>

Attempting to justify such a claim -- a claim which insists on DeLillo's ability to evade those very features of the postmodern (principally ahistoricism and depthlessness) by which we have seen him so firmly constrained -- Wilcox invokes DeLillo's 'belief that fictional narrative can provide critical distance from and a critical perspective on the processes it depicts.'<sup>304</sup> A detailed reading, however, as Paul Cantor has shown us, reveals that it is precisely the absence of such a critical distance and the inability to escape from a postmodernist ahistoricism that *White Noise* itself represents. As we are about to see, though, there is a hitherto unsuspected sense in which Lentricchia, Wilcox and Cantor are all in fact correct.

During the course of an interview with Tom LeClair, DeLillo was asked about his literary influences:

The books I remember and come back to seem to be the ones that demonstrate the possibilities of fiction. *Pale Fire, Ulysses, The Death of Virgil, Under the Volcano, The Sound and the Fury* - these come to mind. There's a drive and a daring that go beyond technical invention. I think it's right to call it a life-drive even though these books deal at times very directly with death. No optimism, no pessimism. No homesickness for lost values or for the way fiction used to be written. These books open out into some larger mystery. I don't know what to call it. Maybe Hermann Broch would call it "the word beyond speech."<sup>305</sup>

There is, here, that same attachment to art as mystery that Wilcox emphasises, but there is also -- and, for our present purposes, more importantly -- a

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<sup>303</sup>Ibid, p.362.

<sup>304</sup>Ibid, p.363.

<sup>305</sup>LeClair, 'Interview', p.26.

recognition of the power of that which cannot be expressed, that to which at present there is no aesthetic access. In the case of Don DeLillo's fiction, that which can never quite struggle to expression -- and whose non-expression renders the texts complicit with those social forms of which they seek to offer a critique -- is a meaningful sense of history and historical conflict.

To that extent, Paul Cantor is entirely correct: DeLillo's representations of the postmodern remain determined by the ideology of the postmodern itself. However, it is revealing to view this inability of the texts to oppose such determination in the light of their continual -- perhaps, at times, even excessive -- meditations upon the transformed relation, and its implications, of the contemporary cultural realm to the political and economic: namely, upon that corner-stone of postmodern ideology, the loss of cultural (semi)autonomy. In the Adornian formulation, as we have seen, it is that loss of autonomy which perverts any aesthetic representation of history. What actually occurs, then, in DeLillo's excessive preoccupation with the interpenetration of the cultural and the economic is a self-conscious meditation upon the ideological forces of the postmodern -- from which his texts cannot escape -- and the necessary complicity of cultural documents with such forces. This is a form of self-critique. Or, rather, it is not quite so yet. Such a claim remains unjustified until it can be shown that DeLillo's texts, through the self-consciousness of their ideological function and its determining conditions, are able to achieve an internal reflection of the conflicts and contradictions of historical processes; in other words, to achieve a properly historical internal dialectic.

As we saw in chapter one, following the arguments of Adorno and Peter Bürger, the coming to self-consciousness of ideological complicity -- often expressed as artistic guilt -- is essentially a feature of modernist art and

aesthetics. The resurrection of such concerns in DeLillo's fiction is, then, somewhat anachronistic. In fact, though, it is precisely through this anachronism that DeLillo justifies, in a curious sense, Frank Lentricchia's definition of him as a modernist. Unable to employ in a plausible way modernist aesthetic strategies of historical representation, DeLillo instead reinvokes modernism in the return of a 'past problem', that of the problematic and ideological relation of the work of art to dominant social forces. His very inability, then, to find an adequate force of opposition to the ideology of the postmodern, the incapacity to retain an inner-conflict which would not be mere nostalgic delusion, results -- through a process of 'working on' that same guilty incapacity of the aesthetic sphere in general -- in *the reinscription in DeLillo's texts of precisely such a force, this time envisaged as the internal conflicts of modernism to which the postmodern itself, as the ahistoric pastiche of the avant-garde that we witnessed in chapter one, comes as a false resolution.*

Just as in *White Noise* the American culture industry (in the figure of Elvis) is juxtaposed, though necessarily unsuccessfully, with the terrifying manipulation of totalitarian forces (Hitler), the cultural moment of the postmodern is silently brought face to face with its no longer representable origins in the internal contradictions of modernism. Whereas the attempt to establish a critical relationship between Hitler and Elvis must end in failure, through the text's incapacity to represent the former as anything other than a postmodernist cultural construct, the establishment of a paradoxical relationship between modernism and postmodernism is both successful to and to some extent liberating -- expressing, as it does, the dialectical process of historical *transition* in a way that is critical of, because rendered

impermissible by, the cultural dominant of postmodernism and its necessary economic correlative, late capitalism.<sup>306</sup>

There is also, as Frank Lentricchia writes, a similar relationship being evoked in *Libra*:

One of *Libra's* more uncanny effects is anachronistic: DeLillo's wager is that we will read the book out of the political history that Watergate and Iran-Contra has made, as if Watergate and Iran-Contra preceded 22 November 1963, as if the novel's narration of the events of twenty-five years past made that day in November contemporaneous with its retelling.<sup>307</sup>

Thus, Lentricchia continues:

The book's cultural logic encourages us to read JFK as a postmodern figure and Ronald Reagan, the actor who was known to gloss affairs of state with lines from his old movies, as the president we had to have, the chief executive of postmodernism.<sup>308</sup>

The point is made through something of an exaggeration, but is no less valid for that. What DeLillo continually attempts to portray are the dialectical processes of historical development, whereby relations between historical and/or historico-cultural eras might be shown in terms both of their causal progression and of their radical difference, retaining throughout a sense of the inner contradictions of each era which might lead to either or both of these possible forms of relation. In *White Noise* that attempt necessarily fails; there is no narrative recourse to the pre-postmodern. In *Libra* the failure is less palpable, more muted; its representation of history depends, as Lentricchia concedes, on an acknowledgement that cannot be voiced of the text's status as one rooted in the Reagan 1980s. Never fully present, the relationship that the text implicitly establishes between the 1960s (Kennedy) and the 1980's

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<sup>306</sup>For a discussion of historical transition as a 'contradiction which symbolically preoccupies much of modern historiography' see Fredric Jameson, 'The Existence of Italy', in *Signatures of the Visible*, pp.155-229; and, in particular, pp.225-229.

<sup>307</sup>Lentricchia, '*Libra* as Postmodern Critique', pp.200-201.

<sup>308</sup>*Ibid*, pp.206-207.

(Reagan) can never achieve the proper gradations of a historical understanding, implying instead a steel-clad causal relationship that is more justificatory than analytic. In this respect, Lentricchia unwittingly highlights the very problem: 'The book's cultural logic encourages us to reread . . . Ronald Reagan . . . as the president we had to have.'

Yet DeLillo's novels do eventually yield that conflict with the postmodern that is necessary to affirm their inner dialectic. The dilemmas of modernism return in these postmodernist texts both to be absorbed by postmodernist conflictlessness and simultaneously to subject that postmodernist conflictlessness to the historicizing critique of the modernist aesthetic. Historically speaking, the modernist dilemmas through which that critique is expressed became in part, as I suggested in Chapter One, the precondition of the postmodernist aesthetic, which itself in turn ruled such critique impermissible. In a recognisable move, then, it is the impossibility of that critique which becomes in DeLillo's texts its necessary precondition. Thus DeLillo comprehends history in terms of a Benjaminian *Jetztzeit*, 'a past charged with the time of the now which [is] blasted out of the continuum of history,'<sup>309</sup> while recognising that the now can only be understood in terms of its inheritance from the thought and conditions of the past. For as Marx writes:

It will then become plain that our task is not to draw a sharp mental line between past and future but to *complete* the thought of the past. Lastly, it will become plain that mankind will not begin any *new* work, but will consciously bring about the completion of its old work.<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>309</sup>Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), p.261.

<sup>310</sup>Karl Marx, Letter to Arnold Ruge, September 1843, in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone & Gregor Benton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p.209.

DeLillo's texts occupy an uneasy and critical position somewhere between the now that rewrites its past and the past that will become the now, while simultaneously -- and critically -- dramatising the inter-dependence of these two apparently contradictory stances.

## Chapter Four

### Salman Rushdie: No Place Like Home

*'I am getting interested in making religious pictures for people who have no god.'*  
Aurora Zogoiby

'If books and films could be made and consumed in the belly of the whale,' wrote Salman Rushdie in 1984,

it might be possible to consider them merely as entertainment, or even, on occasion, as art. But in our whaleless world, in this world without quiet corners, there can be no easy escapes from history, from hullabaloo, from terrible, unquiet fuss.<sup>311</sup>

The concluding paragraph of *Midnight's Children*, with its image of the individual subject's inescapable and destructive engagement with history -- 'sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes' -- indicates a similar acceptance of the implausibility of social or aesthetic transcendence, though here with a quite different, melancholy inflection. The status of his texts as a form of public discourse would seem then to be implicitly acknowledged by Rushdie, a point made perhaps more readily apparent by those texts' own ideology critique of a European literary tradition, generated (as we shall see) through a pattern of intertextual allusion.

The following chapter traces the analytical self-consciousness in some of Rushdie's texts of their own ideological location(s). It develops from this the argument that Rushdie's fiction enacts certain ideological features of the postmodern while attempting to establish, in a way that neither Amis nor DeLillo ever really do, a sense of utopian release from the condition of postmodernity, the construction of a utopian perspective from which the

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<sup>311</sup>Salman Rushdie, 'Outside the Whale', in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays 1981-1991*, 2nd edn. (London: Granta, 1992), p.101.

postmodern can already be imagined as *past*. As before, this argument proceeds from the standpoint of a Western Marxist understanding of postmodernism. In this particular case, though, it is worth acknowledging that Rushdie's writing has already been the subject of a well-known Marxian confrontation with postmodern aesthetics: Aijaz Ahmad's *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. This chapter will, then, extend the discussion of a Marxian approach to postmodern fiction not only with specific reference to the work of Salman Rushdie, but initially through a brief engagement with Ahmad's own reading of Rushdie, an engagement whose critical points will be developed throughout the course of the entire chapter.

### Aijaz Ahmad on Rushdie and the Postmodern

Ahmad is principally concerned with Rushdie's novel *Shame*, but uses a number of the conclusions to which his analysis leads on which to base a more general critique of Rushdie's fiction. However, in order to follow Ahmad's reading of Rushdie, it is necessary first to acknowledge the literary and political contexts in which he situates the novels' production and reception.

According to Ahmad, the crucial contextual factor for Rushdie's writing is the Three Worlds Theory. As a politico-geographical concept, the Third World is, he argues, hazy and ill-defined at best; at worst, at its most nakedly ideological, it is a recognisably postmodern child of capitalist imperialism. The origins of the Three Worlds Theory are most commonly associated with the Bandung Conference of 1955. Yet, citing the absence of representatives from the Latin American nations, the attendance of representatives from China ('the world's largest communist country') and from Pakistan ('despite their military alliance with the United States'), Ahmad insists on viewing these origins as mythical and mystificatory:

None of the senses in which the term 'Third World' is now used -- non-alignment, a global space other than capitalism and socialism, the tricontinent -- would apply to this event.<sup>312</sup>

What Ahmad wishes to reveal is the ideological force of the Three Worlds Theory. He accuses both Fredric Jameson and Edward Said (in both cases, it seems to me, quite unfairly<sup>313</sup>) of falling prey to the 'false knowledge of imperialism' offered by the Theory and of subsequently seeking to posit

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<sup>312</sup>Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), p.294. Further references to this text are to this edition and will be marked in the main text, using the prefix *IT*.

<sup>313</sup>For a defence of Jameson in light of Ahmad's criticism, see Clint Burnham, *The Jamesonian Unconscious: The Aesthetics of Marxist Theory* (London: Duke UP, 1995), pp.156-160. See also, for Said's acknowledgement of the maintenance of class domination in post-colonial societies, Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p.269.

nationalism as the dialectical opposite of imperialism, a role that he identifies solely with socialism (see *IT*, pp.290-291). The result of the propagation of the Three Worlds Theory is, for Ahmad, the absence of any recognition of the need to promote the social liberation of those oppressed within today's post-colonial states. Thus:

The mystificatory function of this false knowledge resides in concealing the fact that in sovereign post-colonial societies, imperialism functions through the national-bourgeois state itself, and in its claim, instead, that the role of the national-bourgeois state is to resolve the contradiction between imperialism and the masses of the imperialized formation in favour of the latter. (*IT*, p.342)

The principal ideological force of the Theory, for Ahmad, lies in its pretences to radicalism. It is these pretences that have afforded it such prominence in the metropolitan cultural sphere. The irony of this institutional popularity of anti-colonial nationalism does not escape Ahmad:

To the extent that it [the Three Worlds Theory] invoked the ideology of anti-colonial nationalism, its most striking feature was that the invocation came at a historical juncture and from particular countries when, and where, the revolutionary content of that anti-colonial ideology -- namely, decolonization -- had already been achieved. (*IT*, p.292)

The Three Worlds Theory thus offers no concrete social transformation toward which praxis might be directed; yet it tantalisingly seems to promise something else as compensation: the surface glamour of radical chic. It is this promise that Ahmad identifies as the siren call to so many intellectuals: 'This lack of an articulated central doctrine,' he writes,

and the generality of an anti-colonial stance in the post-colonial period gave to the so-called Theory the character of an open-ended ideological interpellation which individual intellectuals were always free to interpret in any way they wished, which in turn made the Theory particularly attractive to those intellectuals who did not wish to identify themselves with determinate projects of social transformation and determinate

communities of political praxis, retaining their individual autonomies yet maintaining a certain attachment to a global radicalism. (*IT*, pp292-293)

This is to be at the heart of Ahmad's criticisms of Rushdie. In the postmodern and post-colonial era, he argues, intellectuals in the capitalist, developed nations of the West have all too readily embraced a pseudo-radicalism, the faded reflection of a past struggle that can now be used to avoid facing the necessity of new struggles.

Ahmad identifies the chief manifestation of this process as the development and growth of the academic study of Third World Literature. He argues that, for example, this development meant that the teaching of Black and African literatures in American universities that had been the achievement of the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s could later be assimilated into the teaching of a new, homogenous 'Third World Literature', 'pushing the focus of thought not into the future but into the past' (*IT*, p.68).

It is as a prominent part of this newly canonised and homogenised 'Third World Literature' that Ahmad insists on situating Rushdie's texts. If the creation of this particular area of study is itself to be seen as a post-colonial, late capitalist ideological manoeuvre, as Ahmad indicates, then it should come as no surprise to find that the ideology critique that he offers of Rushdie's *Shame* should take the form of 'a *symptomatic* reading of an ideological location which makes it possible for Rushdie to partake, equally, of the postmodernist moment and the counter-canon of "Third World Literature"' (*IT*, p.125). For Ahmad, the two are of course inextricably entwined, so that no matter how focused on "Third World" matters and the experience of (de)colonization such newly canonised texts might be, they remain abundantly complicit with the forms of reading currently favoured by what Ahmad calls 'the metropolitan critical avant-garde'. 'Third World

Literature' here takes on the appearance of another form of cultural colonization, though one that is more overtly bourgeois capitalist than nationalist in origin.

Rushdie's prominence within this canon is, for Ahmad, a result of the extent to which his texts are appropriable to a bourgeois, predominantly Western intelligentsia. As Ahmad sees it, this ideological complicity is betrayed through Rushdie's texts' own postmodernist qualities. The emphasis Rushdie places on ideas of cultural eclecticism and the experience of migrancy, in particular, is thus to be interpreted as the celebration of a postmodern cultural condition, a further reflection of the reification of culture into so many consumerist choices. In an essay entitled 'The Location of *Brazil*' Rushdie describes the effect of migrancy on the construction of the individual subject in terms that might, from Ahmad's perspective, be interpreted as a form of escapism from the complexities and political intensities of specific historical and cultural experiences:

The effect of mass migrations has been the creation of radically new types of human being: people who root themselves in ideas rather than places, in memories as much as in material things; people who have been obliged to define themselves -- because they are so defined by others -- by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves. The migrant suspects reality: having experienced several ways of being, he understands their illusory nature. To see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier.<sup>314</sup>

This notion of migrancy and the simultaneous elevation of the status of the migrant himself are central to Rushdie's writing. But in the centrality of these themes and in the wide-ranging cultural eclecticism by which they are given formal expression Ahmad sees echoes, intentional or not, of some of

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<sup>314</sup>Salman Rushdie, 'The Location of *Brazil*', in *Imaginary Homelands*, pp.124-125.

Rushdie's Anglo-American literary predecessors. These echoes incite perhaps his most caustic remarks:

How very enchanting, I have often thought, Rushdie's kind of imagination must be for that whole range of readers who have been brought up on the peculiar 'universalism' of *The Waste Land* (the 'Hindu' tradition appropriated by an Anglo-American consciousness on its way to Anglican conversion, through the agency of Orientalist scholarship) and the 'world culture' of Pound's *Cantos* (the sages of Ancient China jostling with the princely notables of Renaissance Italy, with Homer and Cavalcanti in between, all in the service of a political vision framed by Mussolini's fascism). One did not have to belong, one could simply float, effortlessly, through a supermarket of packaged and commodified cultures, ready to be consumed. (*IT*, p.128)

Market ideology is here explicitly associated with the imperial, colonising mentality. In the era of High Modernism, however, this 'sense of cultural excess' is accompanied by the artist's sense of alienation, itself the result of capitalist reification. 'In none of the major modernists,' writes Ahmad, 'was the idea of a fragmented self, or the accompanying sense of unbelonging, ever a source of great comfort; it came, usually, with a sense of recoiling, even some terror' (*IT*, p.129). For Ahmad, it is this second aspect that is conspicuously absent in postmodernism:

The terrors of High Modernism at the prospect of inner fragmentation and social disconnection have now been stripped, in Derridean strands of post-modernism, of their tragic edge, pushing that experience of loss, instead, in a celebratory direction; the idea of belonging is itself seen now as a bad faith, a mere '*myth* of origins', a truth effect produced by the Enlightenment's 'metaphysics of presence'. (*IT*, p.129)

It seems to me that this description of postmodernism cannot realistically be applied to Rushdie's fiction (for reasons to be discussed later). For now, though, we need only note that Ahmad suggests the similarity of this intellectual migrancy to the supposed '*excess* of belongings' of multinational or transnational firms, whose countries of origin, whither the profits are

speedily transported, are depicted as entirely irrelevant. Ahmad is here, of course, employing a rather crude reflectionist model of the relation of literary form to economic forces in order to identify this feature of Rushdie's writing principally as an ideological expression of late capitalism.

It is not only, however, in the celebration of 'migrancy' that Ahmad depicts Rushdie's work as ideologically saturated. Ahmad claims that the social world dramatised in *Shame* is one in which political resistance is impossible; such, he continues, is the prevalent political temper of all Rushdie's writing. Using an argument similar to that which Rushdie himself applies to George Orwell's *1984* in 'Outside the Whale', he insists that the severity of the limitations of Rushdie's political vision in *Shame* is such that it bespeaks of a fundamental flaw in the novelist's understanding and portrayal of social relations, and that this has implications for Rushdie's work way beyond the specific instance of *Shame*.

It is first then to Ahmad's analysis of *Shame* that we turn, in order to picture more fully that 'ideological location' in which he depicts Rushdie writing. Ahmad confronts Rushdie's text with two accusations: firstly, the drama of the ruling classes is accorded an undue and misleading representative function; and secondly, the sole members of an oppressed or socially excluded group to be portrayed in the novel -- the women -- are shown to be incapable of ever effecting a transformation in their social status. As we shall see, these two principal complaints are complemented by a number of additional points -- in particular, the choice of metaphors with which Rushdie represents the effect on the women of their subjugation at the hands of patriarchal society -- but it is on the basis of these two criticisms that Ahmad's case against *Shame* must stand or fall.

Though distinct in themselves, these two points of criticism outlined above are of course intimately related to the earlier critique of 'migrancy'. Ahmad refers to the passages in *Shame* in which Rushdie appears to be directly assuming the narrative voice in order both to describe and to justify his narrative and structural techniques. In one of these passages Rushdie writes:

Although I have known Pakistan for a long time, I have never lived there for longer than six months at a stretch . . . I have learned Pakistan by slices ... however I choose to write about over there, I am forced to reflect that in fragments of broken mirrors . . . I must reconcile myself to the inevitability of the missing bits.<sup>315</sup>

The fact that Rushdie can have only a migrant's eye-view is used to justify the limited scope of the society to be depicted in the novel; it is, as it were, the defining feature of Rushdie's own "geometry", by which he draws, in a Jamesian sense, the enclosed circle of relations that the novel is to include. It is with the nature of the political vision that is to result from Rushdie's "geometry", from his migrant's perspective, that Ahmad takes issue.

The problem for him is really the ease with which the novel's 'missing bits' can be ignored:

If one has 'known Pakistan for a long time' and yet, because of circumstance, 'learned' it only 'by slices', the question naturally arises: *which* slices has one chosen to 'learn'? For, if we do not *choose* our own 'bits' of reality, those 'bits' will then be chosen for us by our class origin, our jobs, the circuits of our friendships and desires, our ways of spending our leisure time, our literary predilections, our political affiliations -- or lack of them. There are no neutral 'bits', not even of not-knowing. (*IT*, p.138)

Rushdie, claims Ahmad, is one whose class origin has allowed him tremendous insight into 'the history of the corruptions and criminalities of Pakistani rulers', but little else. To this limited spectrum of familiarity is

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<sup>315</sup>Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (London: Picador, 1984), p.69; cited in Ahmad, p.133.

added the postmodernist celebration of the migrant's perspective, the untroubled learning 'by slices' that leads to what for Ahmad is an unacceptable and unearned elevation of the experiences of one segment of society to representative status:

The main difficulty does not arise in his portrayal of this structure of power and cruelty at the apex; this he accomplishes, on the whole, superbly. The difficulty arises when this ferocious fable of the state is elided, again and again, in his own recurrent rhetoric throughout the book, with a society which is declared to be coterminous with the state structure, equally deformed and irretrievably marked by its purported civilisation (Islam) and its genetic origin (the Partition), more catastrophically wounded even than Naipaul makes out India to be in *A Wounded Civilisation*. The rulers and the ruled seemed to be joined together, each mirroring the other, in a Satanic compact. (*IT*, pp.140-141)

In his search for some centre of resistance to this enclosed state apparatus, Ahmad turns to Rushdie's representation of female characters. The absence of any male figures who might represent 'the oppressed and oppositional strata' is so complete, he writes, that it is only in the female characters, and quite particularly in the person of Sufiya Zinobia, that one might realistically hope to find 'some determinate energies of an emancipatory project'. Ahmad's quest is, however, a forlorn and ultimately embittering one. It is not that the novel's women are passive victims, quietly accepting their allotted social roles. Rather, Ahmad identifies what is perhaps a more sinister tendency: at no point is such resistance shown to be capable of effecting a productive transformation; instead, it breeds only a savage and destructive violence. Women are depicted as grotesque victims who come to resemble more and more a series of misogynist stereotypes. The sexless Arjumand, known as the 'Virgin Ironpants', is joined in this way to her opposite, Sufiya Zinobia, who has become, for Ahmad,

the oldest of the misogynist myths: the virgin who is really a vampire, the irresistible temptress who seduces men in order to kill them, not an object of male manipulation but a devourer of hapless men. (*IT*, p.148)

This is too much for Ahmad to take; here, he suspects, is to be found a disregard -- indeed, intellectual contempt -- for the basic longing to create a better life. Rushdie's is, he states, an Orwellian vision, complete with all the lovelessness, 'permanence and pervasiveness of betrayal' and conviction that resistance can only exacerbate one's torments that is the hallmark of postmodernist, anti-utopian ideology.

It seems to me that criticisms of the Three Worlds Theory and of the unambivalent celebration of 'migrancy' are both apposite and necessary. Likewise, the way in which Ahmad demonstrates how these features lead logically, in *Shame*, to the abandonment of faith in the very possibility of an 'emancipatory project' offers quite an impressive example of how the hidden ideological threads of a text can be teased out for analysis and critique. However, when Ahmad attempts to broaden the relevance of his critique -- which adopts a fairly consistent Lukácsian perspective -- to all Rushdie's writing, up to and including *The Satanic Verses*, the limitations of his analysis become more and more apparent.

Only two of Rushdie's writings other than *Shame* are discussed at any notable length; these are two of his essays, 'Günter Grass'<sup>316</sup> and 'Outside the Whale'.<sup>317</sup> These essays, claim Ahmad, show Rushdie to be complicit with precisely the same quietist ideology that he explicitly castigates in Orwell. This is not the place for a defence of those essays, though such a defence could, I suspect, do worse than to begin by offering a proper recontextualization of the passages extracted by Ahmad for analysis. Rather,

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<sup>316</sup>Salman Rushdie, 'Günter Grass', in *Imaginary Homelands*, pp.276-281.

<sup>317</sup>Salman Rushdie, 'Outside the Whale', in *Imaginary Homelands*, pp.87-101.

it is my purpose here to note, and to a limited degree to accept, the accusations of ideological complicity that Ahmad levels at Rushdie's writing.

These accusations extend also to the novel with which I am principally concerned, *The Satanic Verses*; for it is clear that the postmodernist features of fragmentation and mutation, whose appearance in *Shame* was so to provoke Ahmad, are thought by him to be no more productive, no more appropriate to a utopian discourse when they reappear in Rushdie's next novel:

What this excludes -- 'the missing bits' to which he must 'reconcile' himself -- is the dailiness of lives lived under oppression, and the human bonding of lives lived under oppression, and the human bonding -- of resistance, of decency, of innumerable heroisms of both ordinary and extraordinary kinds -- which makes it possible for large numbers of people to look each other in the eye, without guilt, with affection and solidarity and humour, and makes life, even under oppression, endurable and frequently joyous. Of that other kind of life his fictions, right up to *The Satanic Verses*, seem to be largely ignorant; what his imagination makes of the subsequent experiences we shall find out only from later work. (*IT*, p.139)

On this point I disagree sharply with Ahmad. In fact, later we shall see that *The Satanic Verses*, though thoroughly steeped in late capitalist ideology, is also profoundly utopian, a searchlight in the long night of Thatcherite Britain, unremittingly seeking the New. The case for the expression of a utopian impulse in Rushdie's fiction will be made below. First, though, I want to look briefly at the self-conscious flirtation in some of his writing with another form of ideological complicity.

### Rushdie and Orientalism

There is one other point to be conceded in terms of the ideological elements of Rushdie's work (and perhaps of *The Satanic Verses* in particular). What must be acknowledged is the extent to which Rushdie's writing seems unable to escape the discourse of Orientalism. Ahmad draws attention to the claim made by the narrator of *Shame* that his novel is to be his 'last words on the East',<sup>318</sup> a claim that assumes, as the Orientalists of the Western Imperialist powers have always done, that there is a homogenous entity called the East (or 'the Orient') about which it might be possible to say a few 'last words'. In Saleem Sinai's introduction of his "grandfather", too, we find something of a flirtation with Orientalist discourses:

One Kashmiri morning in the early spring of 1915, my grandfather Aadam Aziz hit his nose against a frost-hardened tussock of earth while attempting to pray. Three drops of blood plopped out of his left nostril, hardened instantly in the brittle air and lay before his eyes on the prayer-mat, transformed into rubies. Lurching back until he knelt with his head once more upright, he found that the tears which had sprung to his eyes had solidified, too; and at that moment, as he brushed diamonds contemptuously from his lashes, he resolved never again to kiss earth for any god or man. This decision, however, made a hole in him, a vacancy in a vital inner chamber, leaving him vulnerable to women and history. Unaware of this at first, despite his recently completed medical training, he stood up, rolled the prayer-mat into a thick cheroot, and holding it under his right arm surveyed the valley through clear, diamond-free eyes.<sup>319</sup>

It is important to note the way in which this family history -- which is to run parallel to a national history -- begins with a loss of faith. However, the

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<sup>318</sup>Rushdie, *Shame*, p.28; cited in Ahmad, p.133.

<sup>319</sup>Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Picador, 1983), p.10. Further references to the text will be to this edition and will be marked in the main text, prefixed by the abbreviation MC.

expression of this preference for doubt remains itself in some sense ambivalent. The "grandfather" who loses his faith is called Dr Aziz, a name borrowed from E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924). In fact, Rushdie's representations lean quite heavily on the literature of Imperialism, on Western, Imperial representations of India.<sup>320</sup> The religious doubt that Aadam Aziz experiences is, then, also associated with the forces of Empire and European Enlightenment. (For example, much is made of his scientific training, his stay in Europe and his European friends.) The problematic notion of migrancy, noted above, is thus connected to a further problem of ideological representation.

It is precisely the question of the reflection in *The Satanic Verses* of Orientalist attitudes toward Islamic culture and history that Edward Said identifies as the principal objection to the novel in Muslim circles. He puts that objection thus:

Why must a Moslem, who could be defending and sympathetically interpreting us, now represent us so roughly, so expertly and so disrespectfully to an audience already primed to excoriate our traditions, reality, history, religion, language, and origin? Why, in other words, must a member of our culture join the legions of Orientalists in Orientalizing Islam so radically and unfairly?<sup>321</sup>

Probably no one has written as extensively and perceptively on questions of Orientalist ideology as has Said. However, when we look at how he has defined Orientalism, it is apparent how ill-suited to *The Satanic Verses* such descriptions are; it is as though (to borrow a metaphor from *Shame*) *The Satanic Verses* were to exist at a slight angle to Orientalist practice, neither quite fitting-in nor fully divorced. Take, for example, Said's insistence on the

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<sup>320</sup>For a discussion of these elements of Rushdie's fiction see Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp.79-117.

<sup>321</sup>Edward W. Said, in Lisa Appignanesi & Sara Maitland, eds., *The Rushdie File* (London: Fourth Estate, 1989), p.176.

Orientalist's exteriority to 'the Orient'. The Orientalist, he writes, 'is never concerned with the Orient except as the first cause of what he says.' Said continues:

What he says and writes, by virtue of the fact that it is said or written, is meant to indicate that the Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact.<sup>322</sup>

Such exteriority clearly does not apply to Rushdie himself who, as a migrant, can be confidently defined neither as outside nor as within; the basic categories on which Orientalism depends do not somehow seem appropriate to Rushdie's situation. In fact, the relation of *The Satanic Verses* to Orientalist ideology can better be understood in terms of the novel's exploration, through the dramatised predicaments of its characters, of what Said identifies as 'the main intellectual issue raised by orientalism': 'Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly?'<sup>323</sup>

In the context of situating these novels as narrative "explorations", it might also be useful to view Rushdie's fiction (and particularly *Midnight's Children*) in relation to the genre of the "Historical Novel", first fully developed by Sir Walter Scott in the early nineteenth century. Georg Lukács, in his study *The Historical Novel*, argues that this is a form of writing that can only appear when a 'rational' (i.e. historical) understanding of society, society seen as the product of human agency, has displaced the 'irrational' view of society as Divinely ordered. In Lukács's reading, the historians of the mid-to-late eighteenth century laid the ideological groundwork for the French Revolution; and the experience of the French Revolution in turn helped pave

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<sup>322</sup>Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Routledge, 1978; rpr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p.21.

<sup>323</sup>*Ibid*, p.45.

the way for the historical novels of Scott.<sup>324</sup> Rushdie's fiction, though, attempts to absorb that genre, to offer -- simultaneously -- a critique and a reworked expression of it. Thus, *Midnight's Children* might be seen as quite a good example of Hutcheon's genre of 'historiographic metafiction'. These are novels which *are* historical novels and yet make quite overt their differences from the more traditional (and, quite crucially, European) examples of the genre; particularly in terms of their representation of the irrational, the magical. In the same way that the secular rationalism of Aadam Aziz is held slightly suspect, the fantastical elements of Rushdie's fiction allow it both to associate itself with, and maintain a form of critical distance from, the "Historical Novel" of nineteenth-century European, imperial cultures. Thus, it is as critical explorations rather than as mere reflections that both *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses* demand to be read. It is necessary to acknowledge the existence in these novels of elements that are perhaps oppositional to those ideological aspects that we have thus far noted (with reference to both Ahmad and Said).

The sort of oppositional, anti-ideological reading of the novel that I am suggesting is one that involves an acceptance that *The Satanic Verses* offers representations of not only Islamic but also of Western, late capitalist society. Sara Suleri's essay 'Contraband Histories: Salman Rushdie and the embodiment of Blasphemy' is of particular interest in this regard, as it proposes a dialectical reversal of the arguments of those who have attacked the novel as a blasphemous and deeply offensive attack on the Islamic faith launched by the culture industry of a decadent, faithless West. Suleri reads the novel, instead, in terms of its opposition to postmodernist rather than Islamic culture. 'The author well knows that faith is obsolete to its discourse,'

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<sup>324</sup>See Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, pp.19-63.

she writes, 'but must struggle to explain why the betrayal of faith should be so necessary to an unbelieving, postmodern narrative.'<sup>325</sup> Rather than a disavowal or mockery of religious belief, a narrative demonstration of postmodern incredulity toward metanarratives, *The Satanic Verses* is, she claims, 'a deeply Islamic book' about the nature and even possibility of blasphemy in the postmodernist, late capitalist West. Such a reading, of course, turns upside-down the usual assumptions made about the book:

If one of the integral concerns of the text is the question of how blasphemy can be articulated in a secular world, the term *blasphemy* itself must be reread as a gesture of reconciliation toward the idea of belief rather than as the insult that it is commonly deemed to be.<sup>326</sup>

We are here offered *The Satanic Verses* as betrayer of the postmodernist anti-faith, as an act of apostasy from contemporary secularism.

Suleri's interpretation seems to me misleading only in its lack of appreciation of the extent to which Rushdie's text is undoubtedly ideologically complicit. The reading of the novel that she provides is a welcome and necessary rejoinder that posits the text as other or more than mere ideology and yet takes some account of the cultural and historical forces at work in the production of the text. Nevertheless, this is ultimately as limited an understanding of the novel as that implicit in Aijaz Ahmad's more general criticisms of Rushdie's writing. What is needed instead, is an acceptance of both the ideological and the utopian elements of the text, and a historicizing analysis of their dialectical conflict.

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<sup>325</sup>Sara Suleri, 'Contraband Histories: Salman Rushdie and the Embodiment of Blasphemy', *The Yale Review*, 78, 1989, p.607.

<sup>326</sup>*Ibid.*

### **An Incompetent Puppeteer: The Artifice of Authority in Rushdie**

If we are to see how *The Satanic Verses* might accommodate a dialectical reading, by offering a properly utopian opposition to its own formal expression of a condition of postmodernity, it is first necessary to confront Rushdie's depiction and critique of forms of authority. In common with most contemporary authors whose novels might be described as characteristically postmodern in their formal, technical features, Rushdie continually lays bare the artifice of his art. It has also become something of a commonplace for novels to attempt to render problematic the question of textual authority. This functions as a reminder that authoritative forms, both textual and social, are mere constructs, devoid of any "natural" justification. Thus, when Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children* notes of his tendency to narrative digression that 'like an incompetent puppeteer, I reveal the hands holding the strings' (MC, p.65), he implicitly draws our attention to the hands of more accomplished puppeteers.

It is not, of course, with questions of mere textual authority that such moments in Rushdie's novels are exclusively, or even primarily, concerned. The critique of authority that is central to Rushdie's writing is not simply a formalist manifesto decrying all practitioners of non-self-conscious fiction. Rushdie's object of critique extends far beyond the assumptions of realist aesthetics, in opposition to which we have already seen Linda Hutcheon portray such 'historiographic metafiction'. Rather, Rushdie attempts to provoke analysis of all structures of authority, through repeated insistences that such structures, mystificatory as they often are, are nonetheless manufactured with determinate interests in mind -- that is to say, that all

authority is political. The importance of such a project is pertinently stated by Edward Said:

There is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgements it forms, transmits, reproduces. Above all, authority can, indeed must, be analyzed.<sup>327</sup>

Here Said's principal target is quite specific: the historical construction of the authority of Orientalist discourse. In Rushdie's writing, though, the thematic interest in the problematic construction of authoritative forms is intimately connected to his historical subject matter. Rushdie started writing *Midnight's Children* during the Emergency (1975), which was begun as an attempt by Indira Gandhi to evade conviction for electoral fraud. During this time, Gandhi suspended political opposition and pushed through social policies such as enforced sterilisations and the compulsory 'relocation' of minority communities of Muslims, the same communities her father had persuaded to stay in India rather than move to Pakistan after partition. Questions of the validity of political authority are quite clearly raised by this event. The other major tragic event to hit the Indian subcontinent in the 1970s was the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971, which led to the foundation of Bangladesh. In Pakistani elections of 1970 East and West Pakistan voted almost exclusively for different parties. The Awami League (East) won the election but Zulfikar Ali Bhutto refused to accept the result. The civil unrest which this provoked in East Pakistan led to the Pakistani army -- made up almost exclusively of citizens of West Pakistan -- being sent to forcibly quell the population. Here, too, the question of the establishment of political authority is central. The formal preoccupation with questions of authority in Rushdie's fiction is used

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<sup>327</sup>Said, *Orientalism*, pp.19-20.

to suggest issues raised by key events in the history which, in *Midnight's Children*, is Saleem's raw material for his storytelling.

This has been a constant thematic preoccupation throughout Rushdie's writing. The controlling metaphor of *Midnight's Children* -- the perforated sheet -- can be seen to represent a number of different ways of approaching this question. In the first instance, it represents a way of perceiving things piecemeal (of learning by slices, as it were), just as Saleem's grandfather (who isn't his grandfather) comes to know his grandmother (who isn't . . . etc.): 'So gradually Doctor Aziz came to have a picture of Naseem in his mind, a badly-fitting collage of her severally-inspected parts' (*MC*, p.25). This would seem an aversion to the category of totality quite recognisable from modernist writing, the implicit suggestion that fragmentary perception itself illustrates a form of historical truth. The hole in the sheet might also, though, be seen in more mimetic terms as the frame of a movie-camera, capturing only a fragment at a time, denying access to a picture of the whole.

It is also the hole inside. Aadam Aziz develops a god-shaped hole, 'leaving him vulnerable to women and history' (*MC*, p.10). It is not that the centre has fallen apart, but that Rushdie dramatises (in metaphoric form) the inability of any one discourse of authority any longer to occupy that centre; the competing worlds of history or politics and of private sensuous pleasure compete to take its place. The comparison of the hole in the sheet to the frame of a movie camera invites us to consider the identity and intentions of the figure controlling the camera, manipulating the sheet. Of course, that is precisely what Ahmad does with regard to *Shame*; but there Ahmad fails to take into account that the subject of Rushdie's writing -- though, admittedly, this is less overt in *Shame* than in either *Midnight's Children*, *The Satanic Verses* or *The Moor's Last Sigh* -- extends beyond the novels' ostensible narrative

content and the power struggles they describe to the means by which the narrative authority of these accounts is constructed. In other words, the focus of Rushdie's novels is carefully balanced between the hole through which we catch slices of narrative action and the hole -- i.e. the site of ideological struggle and formation -- that poses as the authority behind the novel's construction. It is not simply that the narrative of India's history in *Midnight's Children* is subordinate to Saleem's consciousness, but that that very subordination becomes the subject of the novel: the construction of Saleem's identity is consistently held to be as significant a theme as the construction of post-Independence Indian society. Thus, the list of social aspects that Ahmad says contribute to individual consciousness includes precisely the sort of things in relation to which we see Saleem, the narrator of *Midnight's Children*: class origin, jobs, friends. The way in which all of these things circulate and come into conflict in the 'hole inside' suggests that Rushdie's novels already pre-empt criticisms such as those of Ahmad.

### Narrative Authority in *The Satanic Verses*

The principal site of authority in *The Satanic Verses*, for us readers, is the novel's narrator, the voice that leads us through the tales of devils, angels, prophets and even of ordinary humans. It is this voice on whom we must rely, whose intentions and motives we must take into account; above all, it is this voice whose origin we must first attempt to identify.<sup>328</sup> 'Who am I?' he asks us almost immediately, having recounted only the start of Saladin and Gibreel's miraculous fall. It is a rather presumptive question, indicating a measure of self-importance, but perhaps also hinting that his identity might affect our interpretation of the story to be told. 'Who else is there?' is not the most helpful of answers. The question of with whom we, as readers, are dealing is thus a source of not only initial but also continuing vexation.

This is not, of course, new in Rushdie's writing. Saleem Sinai begins by offering a precise, if rather embarrassed, account of his time and place of birth; yet it is many pages before we discover who his parents are, only to be told later that they were not in fact his parents. The narrator of *Shame*, though certainly less of a riddle than his counterpart in *The Satanic Verses* and less

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<sup>328</sup>See also James Harrison, *Salman Rushdie* (New York: Twayne, 1992), pp.112-116. Harrison argues that the narrative intrusions identify the narrator quite firmly as Shaitan (with frequent shifts 'into and out of first-person interior monologue'). The status of the narrator, for Harrison, is of fairly minor importance; indeed, he brushes off anything that might complicate his claims with a telling dismissiveness:

For the greater part of the book, where the narrator is unidentifiable, the tone of the writing neither is nor readily could become either recognizably or appropriately satanic. At a first reading, indeed, the instances cited above seem to be vestiges of an apparently promising but short-lived bright idea. And that in fact may be the explanation. (p.114)

He later adds, 'The device is less than perfectly worked out and executed, and it is too infrequently used to establish a clear function for itself' (p.115). I shall be arguing, to the contrary, that the indeterminacy of the narrator's status is crucial to the text -- not a flaw of inconsistency in the novel to be tidied up, but a narrative strategy which integrates Rushdie's thematic concern with the construction of forms of authority into the novel's structure itself.

dedicated to obfuscation than Saleem, nonetheless insists that he exists 'at a slight angle to reality'. The identities of Rushdie's narrators have always been difficult to fix firmly in the mind, but the implication is present early in *The Satanic Verses*, as never before, that the inability of the reader to situate the narrative voice might perhaps have crucial consequences. Here, it somehow seems to matter more.

Hints of the narrator's identity are scattered throughout the text. The two questions quoted above appear to indicate the possibility that the words we read are divine words, that the narrator is God. 'Who am I?' might not unreasonably be seen as a Divine pre-emption of the kind of interrogation to which Moses is said to have subjected a burning bush. The accompanying answer, (quoted above), is, in retrospect, no more mystifying or evasive than the reply that the leader of the Israelites reportedly received on that same occasion. The novel's title, though, points toward a less exalted narrative authority: the Father of Lies himself, Satan or Shaitan. It is these two opposed possibilities with which the narrator continually teases us. Once Saladin and Gibreel have finally floated down to England, having fallen from heaven or been reborn of a big bang, the narrator pauses to comment on the event and on himself:

I know the truth, obviously. I watched the whole thing.  
As to omnipresence and -potence, I'm making no claims at  
present, but I can manage this much, I hope. Chamcha willed it  
and Farishta did what was willed.

Which was the miracle worker?

Of what type -- angelic, satanic -- was Farishta's song?

Who am I?

Let's put it this way: who has the best tunes?<sup>329</sup>

A miracle, we are told, has taken place; but it is one that seems to have been produced by a song, unrecognised by its singer, whose 'type' -- angelic or

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<sup>329</sup>Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking, 1988), p.10. Further references to the text are to this edition and will be marked in the main text, prefixed by the abbreviation SV.

satanic -- is uncertain. This miracle itself therefore becomes questionable, not as a narrated fact, but rather in terms of how we ought to react to it -- with reverence? or with horror?

The situation becomes more complicated still when the narrator returns to his initial question about his identity. His answer this time is a clear pointer to his diabolic status, yet falls far short of outright confirmation. If he is Shaitan, as he seems to be hinting, we can presume that his purpose is one of mischief, that he intends to deceive us. Are the doubts that he plants in the reader's mind concerning the miracle and Gibreel's song an example of his mischief making? He may be trying to make us suspicious or doubtful of clear evidence of Divine power and compassion. The possibility that the narrator is the devil raises yet another question in relation to this first scene: is the entire account -- the fall and the miracle, life lost and regain'd -- a complete lie? For, as he reminds us himself, he is our only authority concerning this fantastic event.

If, however, the narrator is not Shaitan, what then? If he is God -- he claims, after all, to be omniscient; and although he does not confirm his 'omnipresence and -potence', nor does he deny them -- then it would appear that, contrary to popular idiom, it is the Almighty whose tunes are best and also that each of his teasing questions are to be seen either as tests of faith or as holy proddings to be wary of the wiles of the Deceitful One. The implications of either of these possible identities are open to analysis only when we presume, for the sake of hypothesis, that one of the two -- first Shaitan, then God -- can definitely be attributed to the narrator. However, outwith the realms of hypothesis these elaborations tell us little, for it is the fate of the reader of *The Satanic Verses* to be never quite certain on the basis of which identity to hypothesise. Were the narrator to shift between the two, the

matter would be infinitely simpler, but unfortunately he remains, with an almost admirable obstinacy, never quite either.

Later in the novel, the narrator deigns to join the action himself. 'Gibreel Farishta saw God,' we are told. The vision is not, as he readily admits, quite as spectacular or awesome as might be supposed. In fact, the Deity is here described in terms not at all ill-suited to an approximation of the physical attributes of Salman Rushdie:

He saw, sitting on the bed, a man of about the same age as himself, of medium height, fairly heavily built, with salt-and-pepper beard cropped close to the line of the jaw. What struck him most was that the apparition was balding, seemed to suffer from dandruff and wore glasses. This was not the Almighty he had expected. 'Who are you?' he asked with interest. (SV, p.318)

Thankfully, Gibreel is not forced to suffer the interminable hints and teases thrown the way of the reader with regard to precisely this same question: "Ooparvala," he is told, "The Fellow Upstairs." At this stage, the reader cannot yet be certain that Gibreel's apparition and the novel's narrator are indeed one and the same -- a further 90 pages must elapse before this is confirmed -- but he/she is rather likely to harbour suspicions. "How do I know you're not the other One," retorts the film star, "Neechayvala, the guy from Underneath?" Gibreel, it seems, has reached the same state of vexation as has the reader.

Or has he? It should be remembered that the story of Gibreel's encounter with the Fellow Upstairs (Who might, he suspects, be the Guy from Underneath) not only reflects the reader's complicated encounter with the narrator, but is itself contained within it. Likewise, the narrator's claim to be the subject of Gibreel's interrogation might also be doubted. There are, then, the initial complications and ambiguities of the meeting with the apparition; added to these is the uncertainty over whether the narrator of the scene (who

could be either God or Shaitan) really is the same figure who claims in that meeting to be God (but whom Gibreel suspects to be Shaitan); and encompassing all of these features of indeterminacy is the reader's abject inability to be confident of the narrator's degree of reliability or nature of intention concerning any point at all in his narration.

Keeping this confusion in mind, it is not then surprising that the book's obvious 'blasphemy' should provoke such divergent reactions as those evinced by its monotheistic critics and by Sara Suleri. Analyses of the novel's treatment of the whole question of blasphemy -- of the denial of, or intellectual challenge to, orthodox notions of an absolute authority -- have focused, for understandable reasons, on the dream sequences in which Gibreel imagines himself as the angelic messenger to a series of prophet-like figures: Mahound, the Imam, and Ayesha. Unfortunately, however, it is rare for these analyses to engage with the complexity of the narrative structure of which these dreams are a part; they deal all too often, therefore, with a text that is not really *The Satanic Verses* but a crude, sensationalised, bastardised version of it, whose author is not Salman Rushdie, but rather the political and ideological interests that the critic him/herself represents.

Gibreel has blasphemed. Like Aadam Aziz before him, he loses his belief in God: 'And to prove to himself the non-existence of God,' writes the narrator, 'he now stood in the dining hall of the city's most famous hotel, with pigs falling out of his face' (*SV*, p.30). The tone of this description is, of course, one of ironic mockery -- Gibreel does, after all, look ridiculous -- but there is also here implicit a more cunning and subversive side to the mockery. Part of the irony to which Gibreel is subjected in this scene relates to the absurdity of his belief that the non-existence of God can be proven by him surviving an unspecified number of ham slices. Behind this irony there might

be detected the faint whisper of blasphemous temptation: "Does Gibreel really think that God cares what he eats?" it seems to ask; "We, my friend, are not so naive," it flatters us. "God most certainly exists. Have another ham sandwich." Is it Gibreel's irreverence and blasphemy that are being ridiculed? Or is it possible that the narrator himself undermines the gravity or validity of those very same religious doctrines and conventions against which Gibreel so crudely transgresses?

The dreams that follow Gibreel's blasphemy have, we are told, a specific function: '. . . after he ate the pigs the retributions began, a nocturnal retribution, a punishment of dreams' (SV, p.32). It is Gibreel Farishta's religious doubts that are to achieve full dramatisation in his dreaming mind and on the page. To be haunted by such dreams is, the narrator implies, the fate of those who turn away from God. Clearly, though, the dreams also serve another purpose: they suggest to the reader, in the manner of Saleem Sinai's account of the Emergency in *Midnight's Children*, certain alternative, unorthodox, iconoclastic reinterpretations of history. Rushdie's own sources for the dramatisation of incidents from the life of Muhammad are not here the issue, though it is worth noting that Malise Ruthven points to the accounts of early Islamic history by Ali Tabari as Rushdie's probable source material.<sup>330</sup> It is simply worth reinforcing the point that the events described in the novel that cast doubt on the absolute authenticity of the *Koran* as the Word of God are not merely the result of postmodernist fabulation, but do have some documented historical basis.<sup>331</sup> Of greater significance, in terms of a meaningful analysis of the novel, is the necessary recognition, that I have been trying to suggest, of the complex, contradictory forces at work in the

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<sup>330</sup>Malise Ruthven, *A Satanic Affair: Salman Rushdie and the Rage of Islam* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), p.35.

<sup>331</sup>See also W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1974).

reader's response to these dream sequences, which emerge as a result of his/her confusion with regard to both the narrator's reliability and intentions and to the dreams' status as, simultaneously, 'nocturnal retribution' and provocative reimagining of history.

The blasphemous stories recounted in Gibreel's dreams of Jahilia can be seen as, at once, the psychological manifestations of the actor's lack of faith (concerning both religious and amatory attachments) *and*, if we presume for a moment that the narrator is Shaitan, a deceptive misrepresentation of the origins of Islam, intended to mislead the reader and tempt him/her to doubt, like Gibreel, the absolute truth of religious faith. This latter interpretation can also be given a yet more specific, political slant: the irreverence of these scenes might be viewed as part of a Western, Orientalist plot to ridicule and undermine the very foundations of Islamic society; as such, it would be a plot overseen by the Great Satan, as Islamic fundamentalists commonly refer to the United States. That these two functions that the dreams carry out are contradictory should come as no great surprise. In either case, the reader's interpretation of how he/she is to account for the dreams' blasphemy must presuppose a stable, identifiable authority responsible for the dreams (whose motives and interests, moreover, are clearly definable) of precisely the type that is so markedly absent in this novel. In other words, *The Satanic Verses* is supported by a narrative structure that appears to lead the reader to make moral or political evaluations of both narrated acts and those acts' narration that are based on culturally conditioned assumptions about the nature of the authority invoked as their justification, (e.g. if the narrator is God, the dreams are a punishment; if Shaitan, they are a blasphemous temptation), while that same narrative structure simultaneously thwarts the reader's attempt to reach conclusions on the basis of such assumptions by constructing the aporia of

two possible identities of the source of narrative authority that the reader has been conditioned to accept as contradictory. As the exemplar of the migrant, the narrator can have no properly identifiable point of origin.

The fact that the dreams themselves, as well as the main narrative which they punctuate, are explicitly concerned with questions of how cultures or societies establish authoritative conventions of reverence and demonization confronts the reader with yet another challenge to his/her understanding of, and reliance upon, voices of authority. The mental contortions required of any reader who, first struggling with the indeterminate theological status (and, therefore, reliability) of the narrator, must then consider the political construction of the whole notion of the holy and the blasphemous (and, therefore, the very validity of his/her struggles at narratorial identification) are only to be imagined. A demystificatory analysis of the ideological construction of political and social authority thus complements a confusion of narrative identity and authority, leaving in the novel the uncanny resemblance of a god-shaped whole.

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A repeated motif in *The Satanic Verses* is that of the confidence trickster. In "'Being God's Postman Is No Fun, Yaar": Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*' Srinivas Aravamudan describes in some detail Rushdie's use in the novel of the number 420 and explains to the Western reader how Rushdie can confidently expect 'his readership on the Indian Subcontinent' to recognize the number as an indication that a trick is being played.<sup>332</sup> The song sang by Gibreel as he and Saladin tumble through the air at the novel's outset comes from the Hindi film *Shri Charsawbees (Mr. 420)*, (otherwise known as *Shree 420*). Having drawn our attention to this fact, Aravamudan goes on to point

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<sup>332</sup>Srinivas Aravamudan, "'Being God's Postman Is No Fun, Yaar": Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*', *Diacritics*, 19.2, 1989, 3-20.

out that the two men fall from the aeroplane AI-420. To most this might signify little, but Aravamudan insists that those readers with an awareness of Indian history can hardly fail to notice what are consistent (if hardly intrusive) allusions to Section 420 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, originally imposed by British imperialist forces in the form of the Indian Penal Code but later retained by post-colonial Indian governments. Section 420, for which the simple numeral 420 serves as a common abbreviation, deals with the offences of fraud, cheating and confidence trickery. Normally, writes Aravamudan, the Indian press cites Section 420 in relation to cases of petty fraud; 'however, in the popular imagination, the scope of "420" extends to the more significant villainy of politicians and businessmen.'<sup>333</sup>

It is to frauds on this larger scale that *The Satanic Verses* seems at times on the verge of comparing accounts of religious revelation. The question of the Divine authenticity of the messages of Mahound and, later, of Ayesha constitutes one of the novel's major concerns. Rushdie himself identifies it as such and points to its more general thematic function as an enquiry into the nature of revelation:

I set out to explore, through the process of fiction, the nature of revelation and the power of faith. The mystical, revelatory experience is quite clearly a genuine one. This statement poses a problem to the non-believer: if we accept that the mystic, the prophet, is sincerely undergoing some sort of transcendent experience, but we cannot believe in a supernatural world, then *what is going on?*<sup>334</sup>

The application of the term "confidence trick" to either of the prophets' revelations would, as a result of the ambivalent critical stance that is to be found in the novel and that Rushdie explains above, effectively redefine not only the notion of revelation but also that of fraud, of trickery: the former is in

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<sup>333</sup>Ibid, p.7.

<sup>334</sup>Salman Rushdie, 'In Good Faith', in *Imaginary Homelands*, p.408.

some sense sullied, tarnished with the ideological dirt of political interests and manipulation; the latter, however, can be seen to have been elevated, to have been conceded the hitherto denied possibility of sincere (and perhaps utopian) intentions. In fact, both are identified with, and made to occupy the same site of ideological and utopian dialectical struggle as, the degraded yet still potentially luminous literary text.

The confidence trickster himself has a long and distinguished literary pedigree. From the wily heroes and villains of the *Thousand and One Nights* to Gogol's Chichikov (*Dead Souls*); from the predatory passengers of Melville's steamboat, the *Fidèle*, (*The Confidence-Man*) to Thomas Mann's Felix Krull and Angela Carter's robustuous Fevvers (*Nights at the Circus*) the con-(wo)man has undergone countless reincarnations. The narrator of *The Satanic Verses* may well be another trickster to add to that long and illustrious list. But, as we have seen, it may well be that he is not and that the real con-man is the author who makes us doubt a thoroughly reliable narrator. Of all the literary con-men of the past, the one that he most resembles is the Cosmopolitan who dominates the second half of Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man*. The Cosmopolitan, whose name would have obvious appeal to Rushdie, initially appears to be the novel's eponymous fraud in the latest of his many guises. He is, though, a more fully rounded character than the others, significantly less mercenary and apparently more interested in the degree to which others will place their confidence in him than in the extent to which he might then profit from that confidence. He seems at times, as Stephen Matterson suggests, more Christ-like than diabolic: 'It is possible,' writes Matterson, 'that Goodman is actually Christ, come down to test the survival of Christian values in the world, making the novel's theme the gulf between Christian

idealism and worldly action.<sup>335</sup> Reflecting on this same feature of Melville's novel, John Bryant concludes: 'The confidence man may be God, Devil, or Man, or any two, or all three. Eventually the reader's mind short circuits.'<sup>336</sup> This is also, it seems to me, precisely what happens to the reader of *The Satanic Verses*.

The impossibility of deciding conclusively whether the narrator is a confidence man (Shaitan) or whether he is actually God, or even anything in between, forces the reader of *The Satanic Verses* to discard the whole idea of making moral and political evaluations on the basis of his/her culturally determined response to an identifiably responsible authority -- an idea that the novel itself provokes. The excessive complexity of the construction of narrative authority in the novel leads to the impotence and irrelevance of that authority, from whose shackles the reader is consequently liberated. On the one hand, this offers a narrative demonstration of postmodern anti-foundationalism; on the other, though, it may be the formal analogue to a novelistic plot-line that begins with a fall and ends with an affirmation of the utopian longing.

If the reader of *The Satanic Verses* is set free to respond to the stories that make up the novel, unencumbered by the need constantly to redefine his/her response by subjecting it to cultural assumptions concerning the origin of those stories, he/she is nonetheless still confronted with the ideological nature of the stories themselves. The criticisms of Aijaz Ahmad and the charges of Orientalism summarised by Edward Said have still to be properly confronted. What we have seen, however, is that, in its narrative structure at least, *The Satanic Verses* develops a subtle and ultimately

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<sup>335</sup>Stephen Matterson, 'Introduction', in Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, ed. Stephen Matterson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p.23.

<sup>336</sup>John Bryant, 'Allegory and Breakdown in *The Confidence-Man*: Melville's Comedy of Doubt', *Philological Quarterly*, 65, 1986, p.116.

oppositional analysis of the ideological entrapment that Ahmad argues is so sinisterly reflected in our reliance on narratorial authority in *Shame*. It is possible, though, that this might be a false utopian moment, a pseudo-liberation that serves only to offer the novel's author a mechanism with which to erase in the text itself any trace of its ideological origins and function. What remains, then, is the need to demonstrate how the novel's stories themselves, now experienced without continual cross-reference to the status of the narrator, might depict a longing for, and insist on the possibility of, a properly utopian transformation. It is with such a goal in mind that I propose to interpret *The Satanic Verses* as a novel about the entrance into the world of the New.

### *The Satanic Verses and The New*

In an essay entitled 'Is Nothing Sacred?' Rushdie describes the role of literature in terms which identify it with some form of religious longing:

What appears plain is that it will be a very long time before the peoples of Europe will accept any ideology that claims to have a complete, totalized explanation of the world. Religious faith, profound as it is, must surely remain a private matter. This rejection of totalized explanations is the modern condition. And this is where the novel, the form created to discuss the fragmentation of truth, comes in. . . . The elevation of the quest for the Grail over the Grail itself, the acceptance that all that is solid *has* melted into air, that reality and morality are not givens but imperfect human constructs, is the point from which fiction begins. This is what J.-F. Lyotard called, in 1979, *La Condition Postmoderne*. The challenge of literature is to start from this point, and still find a way of fulfilling our unaltered spiritual requirements.<sup>337</sup>

The desire to represent imaginatively something which might challenge a postmodern incredulity toward grand narratives seems to be one of the prime features of Rushdie's writing. We have just seen how, in *The Satanic Verses*, a narrative technique can be made to mimic the anti-foundationalist stance of the postmodern condition, short-circuiting the application of more conventional assumptions of narrative (un)reliability. We will now look at some of the ways in which Rushdie's novel attempts to compensate for this by the depiction of characters coming to terms with a residual faith in utopian grand narratives, a desire to reconstruct some notion of the New.

The New, in *The Satanic Verses*, is asked two specific questions: 'What kind of idea are you?' and 'What kind of idea are you at the moment of triumph?' For the most part, the critical focus on Rushdie's interrogation of the New has been principally directed at his depiction of the origins of

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<sup>337</sup>Salman Rushdie, 'Is Nothing Sacred?', in *Imaginary Homelands*, p.422.

'Submission', the fictional shadow of Islam. There are, though, at least two other exemplars of the New included in *The Satanic Verses*: Thatcherism and Marxism (though the latter is present not in its East European or Chinese variants -- what Rushdie calls 'Actually Existing Socialism' -- but in the form of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) which, as Aijaz Ahmad reminds us, was the first Communist Party to come to power through democratic elections). 'Islam is, after all, one of the greatest ideas that ever came into the world,' says Rushdie. 'I suppose that the next idea of that size would have been Marxism.'<sup>338</sup> The claims of Thatcherism to the status of the New are made not by Rushdie in interview, as with the other two, but by one of the characters of *The Satanic Verses*: Hal Valance, the 'personification of philistine triumphalism'. 'What she wants,' he tells Saladin Chamcha,

What she thinks she can fucking *achieve* - is literally to invent a whole goddamn new middle class in this country. . . . It's a bloody revolution. Newness coming into this country that's stuffed full of fucking old *corpses*. (SV, p.270)

The novel, though, is more concerned with the violence that Thatcherism brings -- in particular, the racially-motivated violence of the security forces. Valance is right: Thatcher's is 'a bloody revolution'; and if the death of Dr. Uhuru Simba is anything but the 'million-to-one shot' that the police insist (and let's face it ...), the prison cells at least, if not the country itself, may well be 'stuffed full of fuckiung old *corpses*.' The terms of Valance's description of Thatcherism provide, rather unwittingly, a hint of the carnage that its neo-imperialist delusions eventually unleash.

But if Thatcherism, with its repressiveness and its violence, is an example of the New, what does this say of the novel's social and political vision? It might be tempting to see this as a continuation into *The Satanic Verses* of the postmodern despair, the ideological insistence on the

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<sup>338</sup>Salman Rushdie, in *The Rushdie File*, p.28.

inescapability of violence and repression, that Ahmad points to in *Shame*. However, to do so would be wrong. Just as Saladin's manipulation of Gibreel is only 'the echo of tragedy', a pale and distorted imitation of Iago's manipulation of Othello, Thatcherism is a version of the New that is perfectly attuned to 'our degraded, imitative times' (SV, p.424). In fact, it is only a pseudo-Novum, an appropriation by conservative and reactionary forces of the rhetoric of the New for ideological purposes. What *The Satanic Verses* offers in response to this is the embodiment of a vision of the possibility of the New in the novel itself.

Rushdie writes:

*The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. *Melange*, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world*, and I have tried to embrace it. *The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love-song to our mongrel selves.<sup>339</sup>

Of course, this vision of transformation remains open to the charge made by Aijaz Ahmad that such faith in cultural mutation and hybridization is merely a symptom of the assimilation into late capitalist culture of the post-colonial bourgeoisie, in which he squarely situates Rushdie. Yet there is surely something here beyond the purely ideological. Edward Said writes that

there is no pure, unsullied essence to which some of us can return, whether that essence is pure Islam, pure Christianity, pure Judaism or Easternism, Americanism, Westernism. Rushdie's work is not just *about* the mixture, it *is* that mixture itself.<sup>340</sup>

Said, too, can be identified as part of that bourgeoisie for which Ahmad demonstrates such distaste, but the point that he and Rushdie are making

<sup>339</sup>Rushdie, 'In Good Faith', p.394.

<sup>340</sup>Said, in *The Rushdie File*, p.177.

here cannot be so easily dismissed. It would be ridiculous to pretend that the mass migrations to which Rushdie refers above did not take place. Moreover, this is not a phenomenon that exclusively affected the upper-middle class; the young people who, in *The Satanic Verses*, visit the Hot Wax nightclub represent a generation of young British blacks and Asians who actually exist. But the novel's celebration of mutation refers also to Indian society, at least insofar as it is expressed through the views of Zeeny Vakil: '... for was not the entire national culture based on the principle of borrowing whatever clothes seemed to fit, Aryan, Mughal, British, take-the-best-and-leave-the-rest?' (SV, p.52). Here, too, it would seem that a valid point is being made, which does not seek to elevate to representative status the experiences of a privileged, cosmopolitan intelligentsia.

The New, though, cannot be portrayed in terms of its actual, concrete realization. Instead, as Adorno explains, it can only be properly depicted as a longing for that which is absent:

... the new is the longing for the new, not the new itself. This is the curse of everything new. Being a negative of the old, the new is subservient to the old while considering itself to be Utopian. One of the crucial antinomies of art today is that it wants to be and must be squarely Utopian, as social reality increasingly impedes Utopia, while at the same time it should not be Utopian so as not to be found guilty of administering comfort and illusion.<sup>341</sup>

Thus the aesthetic of the New consists not in the New itself but in its anticipation. For that reason, *The Satanic Verses* must unmask its utopian or transcendent moments as illusory, while simultaneously insisting on the urge to which such illusions are a response. The emphasis in the novel is not, then, so much on the achievements and rewards of the New as on the struggle that 'the longing for the new' entails. More specifically, *The Satanic Verses*

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<sup>341</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.47.

investigates and, as Said notes, itself embodies the struggle even to envisage or to anticipate a New, a utopian possibility, that is not merely a late capitalist ideological appropriation of a utopian discourse.

As a number of critics have noted, and as Rushdie himself has repeatedly insisted, *The Satanic Verses* is a novel preoccupied by questions of race and gender.<sup>342</sup> The treatment of Saladin Chamcha at the hands of the police and immigration authorities is only one of the novel's more overt examples of the racist abuse which, it suggests, is a common feature of the experiences of Britain's non-white population. Rushdie's novel concentrates perhaps less on the physical and verbal abuse to which the characters are intermittently subjected than on the psychological effect of such abuse, a point to which we shall later return. It suffices, for the moment, however, merely to acknowledge the fact that *The Satanic Verses* attempts to offer some indication of the sense of continual conflict, both psychological and physical, that Rushdie identifies with the predicament or situation of Asians and blacks in Britain.

The treatment of questions of gender in the novel is rather more unusual. Much of the novel's engagement with these issues has hitherto been obscured by attacks on two of the chapters in which they are explored most persistently -- 'Mahound' and 'Return to Jahilia' -- as either Orientalist or "blasphemous". The reimagining of early Islamic history through the dreams of Gibreel Farishta deliberately foregrounds the position allocated to women in Islamic culture. Rushdie is well aware of the constructedness of authority, and it is the conspicuousness of that awareness which makes some scenes appear so shocking. Stripped of the glow of a natural, God-given authority,

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<sup>342</sup>See, for example, Brennan, pp.143-166.

some of the actions of the most esteemed figures in religious history appear rather less admirable:

In ancient time the patriarch Ibrahim came into this valley with Hagar and Ismail, their son. Here, in this waterless wilderness, he abandoned her. She asked him, can this be God's will? He replied, it is. And left, the bastard. From the beginning men used God to justify the unjustifiable. (SV, p.95)

Likewise, Mahound's eventual retraction of 'the satanic verses' is based, at least in part, on the gender of the deities in question: "'Shall He have daughters and you sons?' Mahound recites. 'That would be a fine division!'" (SV, p.124). From this thinking, suggests Rushdie, sprout those Islamic laws which allow a widow to inherit only an eighth of her husband's estate, which give to sons twice as much inheritance as to daughters, and which, in legal matters, allocate to the evidence of female witnesses only half the worth of male witnesses.<sup>343</sup> To deny the validity of such a critique by dismissing those chapters as merely Orientalist is to construct a hierarchy of ideological repression that is interesting in itself.

It is not necessary to chronicle here the further examples of this sort to be found in Gibreel's dreams of Jahilia -- Rushdie's own 'In Good Faith' does this -- but it is worth insisting equally on the critique that *The Satanic Verses* offers of the permeation of British culture by similarly patriarchal values and assumptions. In this respect, both Pamela Lovelace and Allie Cone assume almost representative roles. The name of Chamcha's wife, with its echoes of Richardsonian assumptions of female sexuality, indicates the complicity of the British literary and cultural tradition in the male colonization of female sexuality and the male definition of a woman's "place" in society.<sup>344</sup> The Orientalist mentality that Edward Said identifies in Marx's comment, "They

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<sup>343</sup>See Rushdie, 'In Good Faith', p.400.

<sup>344</sup>Pamela's name, as James Harrison suggests, is also a coded reference to Rushdie's first wife: Clarissa Luard. See Harrison, pp.6-7.

cannot represent themselves; they must be represented', might here be seen in parallel with the cultural structures of sexism that allow women, too, to be represented and defined.

The power of these culturally enforced gender assumptions is demonstrated in the predicament of Allie Cone, who must painfully guard the secret of her fallen arches because such a disclosure would tarnish her 'ice-queen' image. The most difficult and significant part of her ascent of Mount Everest, the fact that she did it while suffering excruciating pain, must therefore remain hidden, while the fact that she did it *as a woman* (and a good-looking one at that!) is the source of her celebrity and fortune. Her gender rather than her achievement remains her most defining feature. Perhaps even more extreme, though, is the case of Baby, Hal Valance's wife. This 'wasted child', we are told, is 'maybe one third' Valance's age; her 'spectral look' is the perfect visual contrast to the body of her husband, which, he confesses, is "in training to be Orson Welles". As she has been stripped of any possible sense of worth or identity, it should come as no surprise that Chamcha 'couldn't remember the infant's name.'

The struggle against dominant social forces is also key to the tale of Mahound and the establishment of *Submission*. In this regard, the wrestling bouts in which Mahound and Gibreel engage on the mountain assume a symbolic significance -- though, as we shall see, this is equally as true for Gibreel as it is for Mahound. It is the intensity of the struggle that the prophet must undergo, the constant mockery and vilification, that tempts him to reach a compromise: "Sometimes I think I must make it easier for the people to believe," he says (*SV*, p.106). The point, though, is that he doesn't. Like the Christ of Dostoevsky's 'The Grand Inquisitor', Mahound ultimately refuses to cut the deals that might make his creed seem more attractive. His revolution

remains one 'of water-carriers, immigrants and slaves' because he is unwilling to reach a business-like compromise with the leader of Jahilia's conservatives, the Grandee. Mahound's project, then, shares certain affinities with that of Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses*: both remain tied to ideological forms (Mahound, after all, is a businessman, and one who is less than attuned to notions of gender equality); but both are also sincerely attempting to offer an alternative vision to the values and conditions of the present, and are therefore potentially utopian.

It should not be forgotten, though, that the struggles of Mahound are framed within, and are part of, the psychological turmoil experienced by Gibreel Farishta. Without necessarily ascribing to the dreams some form of didactic, moral (or immoral) intent, which would have to rely on a clear understanding of the intentions of the narrator, it nonetheless remains important to acknowledge them as Gibreel's unconscious attempt to discover a reconstituted religious or transcendent sense, to fill up the god-shaped void. As such, the struggle of Gibreel's that is manifested in these dreams is, even more than is the struggle of Mahound, a reflection of Rushdie's own wrestlings with ideological entrapment and the utopian urge. What Gibreel's dreams demonstrate, perhaps above all else, is the difficulty of grasping a vision of the transcendent that is unsullied by predominant social forces.

The tales of the two prophets, Mahound and Ayesha, of whom Gibreel dreams are clearly inspired by a combination of social forces and more private experiences and traumas. Early in the novel, we are told that

[f]rom his mother Naima Najmuddin he [Gibreel] heard a great many stories of the Prophet, and if inaccuracies had crept into her version he wasn't interested in knowing what they were.  
(SV, p.22)

At the start of his career, before fame had chosen to alight upon him, Gibreel would sit in his room and study tales of metamorphosis, the alleged incident

of the satanic verses, 'and the surrealism of the newspapers, in which butterflies could fly into young girls' mouths, asking to be consumed' (SV, p24). All of these experiences are to play their part in the dreamy torment that the novel describes. Gibreel's amatory anxieties regarding the fidelity of Allie also have a formative influence. Malise Ruthven, in *A Satanic Affair*, points to the significance of the name of the mountain on which Mahound receives his revelations: Mount Cone, he writes:

The place of revelation bears the name of the beloved. The collapse of religious certainty symbolised by the affair of the Satanic Verses mirrors the betrayal experiences by Gibreel in his waking life, as he becomes increasingly, obsessively jealous.<sup>345</sup>

Perhaps most of all, though, Gibreel's religious dreams are shaped by the movies. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai tells of Mary Pereira's account to a young priest of the violent exploits of Joe D'Costa. He begins to speculate on the priest's reactions:

Will he, in fact, ask Mary for Joseph's address, and then reveal ... In short, would this bishop-ridden, stomach-churned young father have behaved like, or unlike, Montgomery Clift in *I Confess*? (Watching it some years ago at the New Empire Cinema, I couldn't decide.) (MC, p.105)

Gibreel, the film star, has reached a significantly more advanced state than Saleem; he even *dreams* cinematically. It is perhaps strange that the films into which the dreams are later developed turn out to be so unsuccessful, considering that they were essentially films to begin with. The experience of dreaming is described as akin to that of watching or making a film. Sometimes, we are told, Gibreel's point of view is 'that of the camera and at other moments, spectator':

. . . mostly he sits up on Mount Cone like a paying customer in the dress circle, and Jahilia is his silver screen. He watches and weighs up the action like any movie fan, enjoys the fights

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<sup>345</sup>Ruthven, p.25.

infidelities moral crises, but there aren't enough girls for a real hit, man, and where are the goddamn songs? (SV, p.108)

The manifestations of Gibreel's crisis of faith take on their very form from the culture industry that has contributed to that crisis. It is not particularly surprising that Gibreel's religious visions are so degraded, even trashy or that he should be taken over so completely by delusions of grandeur, given the nature of the environment in which his religious sense and his sense of self have been shaped: Greta Garbo and Grace Kelly ('Gracekali') are described as goddesses; Gibreel's own fame gains him the social status of the mock-divine; he wins that fame by impersonating gods in 'the theological movies'.

What Rushdie expresses through the plight of Gibreel is the tragic struggle to discover a vision of the New that is not entirely formed by the predominant social forces of the present -- in the case of Gibreel, this being the pervasiveness in his immediate environment of 'Bollywood' kitsch. Here, as I have said, is a reflection of Rushdie's own artistic struggle in *The Satanic Verses*. Gore Vidal's novel *Live from Golgotha* replays the scene of Christ's crucifixion as though it were a television "event".<sup>346</sup> This, suggests Vidal, is what TV evangelists have done to the Christian myths; taken over and repackaged by the culture industry, this is what those myths have become. The dream sequences of *The Satanic Verses* tell us something similar with regard to the Indian movie industry and the origins of Islam.

Were Aijaz Ahmad rather more consistent, he might well have acknowledged precisely this point. Defending Dante from the onslaughts of Edward Said, he insists on the need to interpret the *Inferno* with an awareness of the historical conditions at work in the production of the text. 'The literary-critical point I am making,' he writes, 'is that one cannot read the passage about Muhammad outside this whole range of enormous complexity' (IT,

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<sup>346</sup>Gore Vidal *Live from Golgotha* (London: Abacus, 1993).

p.189). Yet, referring to *The Satanic Verses*, Ahmad writes of 'the book's heresy and its direct representation of the Prophet of Islam and his family in the most vulgar fashion possible' (*IT*, p.214) while almost completely ignoring those literary and historical complexities on which he has previously placed such emphasis. Rushdie's novel is pictured in relation to its historical moment only to the extent that it can be shown to collude with the Orientalizing tendency in the British cultural sphere. This is inadequate. The ideological location from which Rushdie is forced to write, and the extent to which it forms and limits imaginative possibilities, gradually becomes the subject of his writing. It is the recognition of this fact that is so singularly lacking in Ahmad's analysis.

Earlier, I suggested that *The Satanic Verses* offered a critique as well as a reflection of Orientalism. It is now time to pursue this thought a little further. According to Said, Orientalism raises the following question: 'Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly?' Rushdie's novel explores this question through its portrayal of social and cultural demonization, the establishment of a feared and demonized other. This is achieved most overtly through the metamorphoses of Gibreel and Saladin into respectively, an angel and a devil. Despite their appearances, neither turn out to be wholly good nor wholly evil; even so, the reactions of others are, for the most part, determined by Saladin's hooves and Gibreel's halo. The novel insists that the creation of an other, who is to be feared and hated, remains one of the most significant and powerful mechanisms at work in the construction of cultures and societies.

The process of demonization, of the transformation of men and women into terrifying, inhuman creatures, is really one of description -- or so the

manticore explains to Chamcha: "They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct" (SV, p.168). The way to combat this is to wrest back the power of self-definition, and that is exactly what *The Satanic Verses* tries to do. Rushdie's essay 'In Good Faith' includes an obviously wearied and frustrated attempt to explain how important this act of reclamation is to the novel:

The very title, *The Satanic Verses*, is an aspect of this attempt at reclamation. You call us devils? it seems to ask. Very well, then, here is the devil's version of the world, of 'your' world, the version written *from the experience* of those who have been demonized by virtue of their otherness. Just as the Asian kids in the novel wear toy devil-horns proudly, as an assertion of pride in identity, so the novel proudly wears its demonic title. The purpose is not to suggest that the Qur'an is written by the devil; it is to attempt the sort of act of affirmation that, in the United States, transformed the word *black* from the standard term of racist abuse into a 'beautiful' expression of cultural pride.<sup>347</sup>

The naming of Mahound, too, is an example of the transformation of a term of abuse into a sign of pride and a symbol of the possibility of overcoming that abuse. The novel's rewriting of Islamic history in terms that highlight the oppression of women, and the later story of the female prophet who conquers even the last unbeliever are both utopian attempts to reclaim Islamic narratives from a feminist perspective. Not even Enoch Powell's "river of blood" speech remains sacrosanct: "In our very bodies, does the river of blood not flow?' . . . Reclaim the metaphor, Jumpy Joshi had told himself. Turn it; make it a thing we can use' (SV, p.186).

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<sup>347</sup>Rushdie, 'In Good Faith', p.403.

### Imagining Utopia: The Land of Oz

Ernst Bloch, pursuing the subject of art's utopian function in 'Art and Utopia',<sup>348</sup> writes of art and literature as the 'not-yet-conscious', by which he means that art is able to embody a 'productive presentiment' that is 'openly aware of itself, particularly as something not-yet-conscious.'<sup>349</sup> As Bloch continues his explication of art as the not-yet-conscious, his terms of description come more and more to resemble the terms that we have been using to analyse the coming to self-consciousness of the longing for the New in *The Satanic Verses*:

The look forward becomes even more powerful the brighter it becomes aware of itself. . . . The not-yet-conscious itself has to become *conscious* of its own doings; it must come to *know* its contents as restraint and revelation. And thus the point is reached where hope, in particular, the true effect of expectation in the dream forward, not only occurs as an emotion that merely exists by itself, but is *conscious and known* as the *utopian function*.<sup>350</sup>

The 'not-yet-conscious' becomes conscious of itself, then, not as that which can presently be realized, but as what Bloch calls the 'anticipatory illumination' [*Vor-Schein* ], the imaginative force that might reform consciousness in such a way that the existing facts of the present can be carried 'toward their future potentiality of the otherness, of their better condition in an anticipatory way.'<sup>351</sup>

This 'anticipatory illumination', offered by art, that might foreshadow a form of political praxis and eventual, utopian liberation is at the very heart of what Rushdie attempts to achieve as an artist. In a sense, the god-shaped hole that permeates Rushdie's fiction, both thematically and structurally, can be

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<sup>348</sup>Ernst Bloch, 'Art and Utopia', in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, pp.78-155.

<sup>349</sup>Ibid, p.104.

<sup>350</sup>Ibid, p.105.

<sup>351</sup>Ibid

properly filled only by those same works of fiction themselves, and then only as the anticipatory illumination of a liberating potentiality. When Rushdie asks,

Can art be the third principle that mediates between the material and spiritual worlds; might it, by 'swallowing' both worlds, offer us something new -- something that might even be called a secular definition of transcendence?<sup>352</sup>

it seems to me that he is groping toward a definition of the possibilities of art that is similar to Bloch's, and that seeks to situate in the place now vacated by faith in an Absolute an imaginative demonstration of the future potentiality of radical, social transformation. That it is the tragic misfortune, yet dialectical necessity, of such a demonstration that it must nonetheless remain tied in some way to the ideological needs of the present is a point that we must also bear in mind.

The creation of an independent India, as accounted for by Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children*, is a result of just such a transformation of reality by the powers of the imagination. India, he tells us, is 'a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will - except in a dream we all agreed to dream (MC, p.112). In this respect, the example of Günter Grass is quite crucial. Earlier, I mentioned the fact that Aijaz Ahmad points to Rushdie's essay on Grass as evidence of his lack of faith in the possibility of a utopian transformation. We can now look again at that essay, to see if we cannot find a dialectically opposite impulse at work there. Here is Rushdie on Grass's novel *The Meeting as Telgte*:

Grass's subject is how German writers responded to ruination; how, after Hitler, German pens re-wrote Genesis to read: After the end was the word. How they tore their language down and rebuilt it anew; how they used words to assault, excoriate,

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<sup>352</sup>Rushdie, 'Is Nothing Sacred?', p.420.

accept, encompass and regenerate; how the pheonix poked its beak out of the fire. <sup>353</sup>

Surely, what this tells us of Rushdie's response to Grass's writing is that it is primarily a response to the regenerative powers of art, to its capacity to make reality anew. When Ahmad writes of the despair that is evident in the phrase 'night is drawing in', he forgets to temper his judgement with the acknowledgement that Rushdie sees Grass's great achievement in somehow transforming that gloomy darkness into something that is luminous and, above all, hopeful. In fact, he forgets the very first sentence of *The Satanic Verses* itself: "'To be born again," sang Gibreel Farishta tumbling from the heavens, "first you have to die"' (SV, p.3).

*The Satanic Verses*, like the novels of Grass, reflects not only its author's desire to see a transformed social realm, but also his belief that the powers of the imagination, as exercised through the novel's creation and through its interaction with its readers, have a necessary and significant part to play in that process of transformation and liberation. Rushdie has acknowledged the influence on the novel of Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, in which, he says, 'the Devil descends upon Moscow and wreaks havoc upon the corrupt, materialist, decadent inhabitants and turns out, by the end, not to be such a bad chap after all.'<sup>354</sup> Bulgakov's novel is also significant, and clearly influential, in another way. As the book draws to an end, the demonic Woland points out to the Master, who is a writer, that Pontius Pilate, a character in the Master's book, is seated forlornly in his garden, hoping to see a path of moonlight that he might climb in order to meet again the prisoner Ha-Nozri, the novel's Christ-figure. The text continues:

Woland turned once more to the Master and said: "Well, now you can finish your novel with a single phrase!"

<sup>353</sup>Rushdie, 'Günter Grass', in *Imaginary Homelands*, p.273.

<sup>354</sup>Rushdie, 'In Good Faith', p.403.

The Master seemed to have waited for this as he stood motionless and looked at the sitting Procurator, He folded his hands at his mouth and shouted so that the echoe leapt up and down the deserted treeless cliffs:

"You are free! You are free! He waits for you!"

The mountains transformed the Master's voice into thunder, and the thunder destroyed the mountains. The accursed rocky walls collapsed, leaving only the mountaintop with the stone chair. On the black abyss that swallowed the walls there gleamed a vast city crowned with glittering idole above a garden grown to wild luxuriance during thousands of moons. The moonlit path so awaited by the Procurator stretched directly into his gardenm, and the first to run out on it was the sharp-eared dog.<sup>355</sup>

It is art that is here depicted as an emancipatory force, a force that is able to make material reality conform to the wishes of men and women (rather than to the fickle whims of market forces). As we shall soon see, Rushdie's digestion of Bulgakov's masterpiece involves both an appropriation of that basic affirmation of art's liberatory potential and a provisional rejection of the relative ease and automatic success with which that potential is seen to be fulfilled.

Instead, Rushdie acknowledges the difficulty of the struggle in which he is engaged. Sara Suleri, whose emphasis on *The Satanic Verses* as 'a deeply Islamic book' is entirely commendable, moves close to the crux of the matter when she remarks of the need to understand the novel in terms of its cultural background that '[h]ere, the crucial context of Islamic secularism requires close attention.'<sup>356</sup> For the attempt to create a new way of understanding that so profoundly problematic relation of the migrant to his/her cultural origins becomes simultaneously, for Rushdie, the attempt to establish a worthwhile and valid notion of Islamic secularism. In an interview published in the German newspaper 'Die Zeit', Rushdie says:

<sup>355</sup>Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*, trans. Mirra Ginsburg (London: Picador, 1989), p.387.

<sup>356</sup>Suleri, p.605.

What I am trying to make a case for is the development of a secular tradition within Islam similar to that which Judaism, for example, has developed. There are a lot of people who would call themselves secular Jews, who would say that Jewish culture, Jewish history and Jewish tradition are very important to them but that they do not accept the theology.<sup>357</sup>

Where Rushdie sees hope for ideas such as his is in the largely ignored heterogeneity of Islam. As early as 1981, Rushdie was chastising V.S. Naipal for the misleading picture he portrays in *Among the Believers* of a unified, homogenous 'Islamic world'.<sup>358</sup> More recently he has pointed to Fouad Zakariya's *Laicite ou Islamisme* as an example of the modern and modernizing currents of contemporary Islamic thought in which he has tried to play a part.<sup>359</sup> The fact that Islamic groups in Saudi Arabia took the opportunity, in the wake of the political furore over *The Satanic Verses*, to announce a *jihad* or holy war on literary and philosophical modernism is only one of the more overt signs that what has happened to Rushdie since the publication of *The Satanic Verses* may have had little, in fact, to do with the specific case of that one novel and, rather, been the manifestation of a political conflict that is taking place within Islamic culture itself.

When Fadia A. Faqir writes that '[m]ost of the sixty-six Arab intellectuals blacklisted recently by a Saudi Islamic group who announced the holy jihad on Modernism live either in London or Paris,' and ends by asking, 'Is exile the only answer to the resurgence of Islam?'<sup>360</sup> he is, I think, illuminating the issue without quite grasping it fully, Rushdie and other migrants with Islamic cultural origins have attempted, and are attempting, to discover a new form of discourse, a new set of self-descriptive terms, that

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<sup>357</sup>Salman Rushdie, Interview in *Die Zeit*, 11-16 March 1992, p.69. Translation by Andrea Heilmann.

<sup>358</sup>Salman Rushdie, 'Naipal Among the Believers', in *Imaginary Homelands*, pp.373-375.

<sup>359</sup>Salman Rushdie, 'One Thousand Days in a Balloon', in *Imaginary Homelands*, p.436.

<sup>360</sup>Fadia A. Faqir, in *The Rushdie File*, p.238.

might embody the fusion of an Islamic cultural inheritance with a doubt-ridden, modernist, demystifying consciousness. Exile (or migrancy) may well be as much a cause as an effect of the bitter struggle which the *jihad* against modernism indicates, and in which Rushdie and others have long been engaged. The Anglo-Saxon "Right" has, of course, like the Islamic fundamentalists, been quick to recognise the danger of such a struggle. 'Why do *you* think,' asks Christopher Hitchens, 'that Peregrine Worsthorpe, Paul Johnson and Auberon Waugh are, *pro-tem*, in favour of the mosque against secular, brown activists of the Rushdie type?'<sup>361</sup>

It remains now only to indicate the means by which this particular struggle, which is the sum total of those other struggles that we have already noted, finds expression in *The Satanic Verses* as the longing to envisage the New. There are, essentially, two utopian conclusions to the novel. The first is the moment of religious epiphany, dreamt by Gibreel Farishta, in which the prophetess Ayesha finally converts Mirza Saeed Akhtar:

He was a fortress with clanging gates. -- He was drowning. -- She was drowning, too. He saw the water fill her mouth, heard it begin to gurgle into her lungs. Then something within him refused that, made a different choice, and at the instant that his heart broke, he opened.

His body split apart from his adam's-apple to his groin, so that she could reach deep within him, and now she was open, they all were, and at the moment of their opening the waters parted, and they walked to Mecca across the bed of the Arabian Sea. (*SV*, p.507)

The conversation of Mirza Saeed takes a form similar to that of the torture of Muhammad in Dante's *Inferno*. He is cleft in two like Muhammad in a passage that serves to reaffirm Islamic faith rather than to attack it, thereby transforming, once again, a form of abuse into a symbol of affirmation. The

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<sup>361</sup>Christopher Hitchens, 'Siding with Rushdie', in *For the Sake of Argument: Essays and Minority Reports* (London: Verso, 1993), p.296.

parting of the Arabian Sea and the crossing to Mecca is a return to the pilgrims' spiritual homeland. The racism and sexism that the novel portrays are here dissolved in a singularly Islamic utopian vision to which the faithful have been led by a female prophet. Doubt is overwhelmed by the powers of religious belief; the temptations of secular consumerism are discarded in favour of submission to a God-sent authority. It is a vision, though, that exists only in the form of a dream or a film.

'The Parting of the Arabian Sea' is ultimately too reactionary a vision to be properly utopian. Implicit in *The Satanic Verses* is the suggestion that a true utopian yearning must do more than merely point nostalgically to the past, denying the onward rush of History in the manner of a Khomeini<sup>362</sup> or a Thatcher.<sup>363</sup> Instead, as we have already seen Ernst Bloch insist, it must 'carry on the existing facts toward their future potentiality of their otherness, of their better condition in an anticipatory way.' A renewal of religious piety would hardly offer migrants such as Rushdie a new means of comprehending their cultural formation. At the novel's conclusion, Saladin Chamcha (who is, by then, Salahuddin Chamchwala) sees through the false utopia that such a renewal would offer:

He stood at the window of his childhood and looked out at the Arabian Sea. The moon was almost full; moonlight stretching from the rocks of Scandal Point out to the far horizon, created the illusion of a silver pathway, like a parting of the water's shining hair, like a road to miraculous lands. He shook his head; could no longer believe in fairy-tales. Childhood was over, and the view from this window was no more than an old and sentimental echo. To the devil with it! Let the bulldozers come. If the old refused to die, the new could not be born. (SV, pp.546-547)

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<sup>362</sup>See Rushdie, 'In God We Trust', in *Imaginary Homelands*, pp.383-384.

<sup>363</sup>See Rushdie, 'Outside the Whale', p.92.

The echoes of Bulgakov's novel seem deliberate. The path of moonlight, however, must be rejected; easy answers that fail to take into account the complexities and contradictions of the present can no longer be trusted.

*The Satanic Verses* ends with the homecoming of Saladin Chamcha and his discovery that he is really Salahuddin Chamchawala. This is the novel's true utopian conclusion and its true spiritual homecoming. In his conclusion to *The Principle of Hope*, Ernst Bloch offers a description of the New in terms which would seem to validate the authenticity of the utopian longing in Rushdie's novel:

*True genesis is not at the beginning but at the end, and it starts to begin only when society and existence become radical, i.e. grasp their roots. But the root of history is the working, creating human being who reshapes and overhauls the given facts. Once he has grasped himself and established what is his, without expropriation and alienation, in real democracy, there arises in the world something which shines into the childhood of all and in which no one has yet been: Heimat.*<sup>364</sup>

Bloch's reappropriation of the Nazi term "Heimat" (homeland), with which to represent the basic utopian goal, is clearly comparable to the strategy of narrative reclamation that is at the heart of Rushdie's novel.<sup>365</sup> But it is the longing for that homeland itself -- the homeland that is new; in which the distinction between self and other has begun to lose its sharpness, its capacity to govern thought -- that *The Satanic Verses* so thoughtfully, so movingly expresses.

In an essay on the film *The Wizard of Oz*, Rushdie turns finally to the series of sequels that Frank L. Baum wrote to the children's book from which the film was adapted. He notes that in the sixth book Auntie Em, Uncle Henry and Dorothy all eventually move to the Land of Oz:

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<sup>364</sup>Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 3, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp.1375-1376.

<sup>365</sup>For Rushdie's own comments on the literary reappropriation of "Heimat", see Salman Rushdie, 'Siegfried Lenz', in *Imaginary Homelands*, pp.285-287.

So Oz finally *became* home; the imagined world became the actual world, as it does for us all, because the truth is that once we have left our childhood places and started out to make up our lives, armed only with what we have and are, we understand that the real secret of the ruby slippers is not that 'there's no place like home', but rather that there is no longer any such place *as* home: except, of course for the home we make, or the homes that are made for us, in Oz: which is anywhere, and everywhere, except the place from which we began.<sup>366</sup>

Home (or "Heimat") is that which we make anew; and that is why, at the end of *The Satanic Verses*, though Salahuddin has come home, he is not yet *home*. Rushdie's novel depicts no realization of the New. Instead it remains faithful to Adorno's dictum that it is only 'the longing for the new' that art can plausibly offer.

What is left, and what represents that longing for the New that is the artistic New itself, is the continuing necessity of political struggle. Having returned to Bombay to see his father die, Salahuddin Chamchawala takes part in a demonstration organised by the Communist Party of India (Marxist). 'CPI (M) observers,' we are told,

reported an unbroken chain of men and women linking hands from top to bottom of the city, and Salahuddin, standing between Zeeny and Bhupen on Muhammad Ali Road, could not deny the power of the image. Many people in the chain were in tears. (SV, p.541)

Later, Salahuddin discovers that the demonstration is to be almost completely ignored by the media: "'It's a Communist show,'" Zeeny tells him. "'So officially, it's a non-event'" (SV, p.542). Here, in Bombay, it is the Communist Party that is demonized.

In his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' Walter Benjamin writes, 'Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be

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<sup>366</sup>Salman Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz* (London: BFI Publishing, 1992), p.57.

settled cheaply.<sup>367</sup> The fusion of an Islamic cultural heritage and a modern, socialist political vision does not come easily. In Rushdie's depiction there is a home to be found, but it is one for which we must be prepared to struggle, 'to turn insults into strengths', to envisage 'in an anticipatory way' that which we have learned does not exist. With neither a path of moonlight to follow nor a dry sea-bed on which to walk, the trek homeward can be hazardous. That *The Satanic Verses* should nonetheless insist that that journey is worthwhile, that no easier option can be trusted, is a sign of its profoundly utopian political perspective. This is a perspective from which the legacy of a cultural past or the limitations of a postmodern present might seem less immutable. *The Satanic Verses* asks us to accept the transience of the present state of things, suggesting the possibility of a time and place in which existing truths might be swept away -- in which we might accept that "the Orient" and "the Occident" were man-made, not God-given, and that the devil might not be quite so bad after all. 'And we,' as Rilke wrote,

who always think  
                     of happiness *rising*  
 would feel the emotion  
                     that almost startles us  
                     when a happy thing *falls*.<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>367</sup>Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, p.254.

<sup>368</sup>Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Tenth Elegy', in *Duino Elegies*, trans. David Young (London: Norton, 1978), p.94.

### Postscript: You Must Remember This

In 'The Harmony of the Spheres', one of the short stories collected in *East, West*, the narrator Khan describes his memories of Eliot Crane, a friend who has recently killed himself. Eliot, he explains, had been mentally unbalanced for some time, suffering from paranoid delusions provoked by his interest in the occult: 'What human mind could have defended itself against such a Babel, in which Theosophists argued with Confucians, Christian Scientists with Rosicrucians?'<sup>369</sup> Rushdie uses Eliot's paranoia to aim an easy jibe at those "concerned" about immigration:

Eliot had elaborated a conspiracy theory in which most of his friends were revealed to be agents of hostile powers, both Earthly and extra-terrestrial. I was an invader from Mars, one of many such dangerous beings who had sneaked into Britain when certain essential forms of vigilance had been relaxed. (HoS, p.127)

On hearing of Eliot's death, Khan goes to see his widow Lucy; she asks him to read through his dead friend's papers. 'There were,' he comments, 'only ravings.' For the most part, these seem ridiculous occultist tracts or self-pitying, autobiographical speculation. 'Harder still to read,' adds Khan,

were his fantasies about us, his friends. These were of two kinds: hate-filled and pornographic. There were many virulent attacks on me, and pages of steamy sex involving my wife Mala, 'dated', no doubt to maximise their auto-erotic effect, in the days immediately after our marriage. And, of course, at other times. The pages about Lucy were both nasty and lubricious. (HoS, p.144)

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<sup>369</sup>Salman Rushdie, 'The Harmony of the Spheres', in *East, West* (London: Cape, 1994), p.142. Subsequent references to the text will be to this edition and marked in the main text, using the abbreviation, HoS.

At the end of the story Khan tells his wife about Eliot's hurtful sexual fantasies. "'Those weren't fantasies," she said' (HoS, p.146).

'The Harmony of the Spheres' is a rewriting of a passage from 'The Angel Azraeel' section of *The Satanic Verses*. Saladin Chamcha tortures the fanatically jealous Gibreel, in a multitude of different voices, claiming sexual knowledge of his girlfriend Allie Cone:

. . . superb Byronic aristocrats boasting of having 'conquered Everest', sneering guttersnipes, unctuous best-friend voices mingling warning and mock-commiseration, *a word to the wise, how stupid can you, don't you know yet what she's, anything in trousers, you poor moron, take it from a pal.* (SV, p.444)

Here the claims are, of course, false; they are part of Saladin's revenge for Gibreel's earlier abandonment of him. Rushdie, though, integrates quite specific echoes of this episode into his short story. Before he begins his hoax calls, Saladin visits Gibreel and Allie in their Scottish retreat. Allie tells him something of Gibreel's neurosis:

"He can't get very far without transport, but you never know,' she explained grimly. 'Three days ago he stole the car keys and they found him heading the wrong way up an exit road on the M6, shouting about damnation. (SV, p.432)

Khan visits Eliot and Lucy (this time travelling to Wales) in similar circumstances:

'You'd better come,' Lucy had called to say. 'They found him going the wrong way on the motorway, doing ninety, with one of those sleep-mask things over his eyes.' (HoS, p.127)

The story reverses two significant aspects of the passage from the novel: here it is the madman who makes the accusations, and they turn out to be true. What principally interests me, though, is the act of Rushdie's rewriting itself. His fiction often seems predicated on the need continuously to revise and to reassemble narratives, absorbing and reworking an English and European cultural tradition while simultaneously engaging in a process

of *self*-revision. This suggests both the multiplicity of narrative possibilities (the multiplicity of ways of understanding the world) and the fleeting transience of each. Rushdie compensates for the absence of grand narratives (the 'god-shaped hole') by offering, instead, a succession of often inter-related fictions. In the remaining pages of this chapter, we shall be looking at how this aspect of Rushdie's writing informs his portrayal of self and, through that, the construction of social formations. Above all, we shall see how this postmodern emphasis on the contingency of each of these historical narratives is used to suggest the ultimate contingency and historicity of that condition of postmodernity itself.

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'I have been a swallower of lives,' says Saleem Sinai, 'and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well' (*MC*, p.9). The telling of stories, the construction of a multitude of fictions, is tied inextricably in Rushdie's novels to the construction of a self: Saleem Sinai exists almost as the amalgam of the stories he tells of his family's and his country's past. *The Moor's Last Sigh* is the next of Rushdie's novels to make consistent use of a first-person narrator. Moraes Zogoiby, in a manner not dissimilar to that of Saleem, claims: 'On the run, I have turned the world into my own pirate map, complete with clues, leading X-marks-the-spottily to the treasure of myself.'<sup>370</sup> The creation of the fictions, those of Saleem and Moraes (known as 'Moor'), are an act of self-assertion -- or, more properly, of self-discovery. And yet at the same time these characters exist *in* and *through* the telling of their stories: so while the narrators' stories lead 'X-marks-the-spottily' to the treasure of themselves, that treasure -- those selves -- exist only through the act of

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<sup>370</sup>Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (London: Cape, 1995), p.3.

aestheticization. Here art is self-expression, but that self is "itself" shown to be yet another artistic construct.

In fact, in both *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh* it is made clear that the narrators tell these stories as an attempt to keep hold of some unified self, as a method of survival. Early in *Midnight's Children* Saleem compares himself to Sheherazade of *The Thousand and One Nights*, spinning out fictions to stretch out a life expectancy. In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, too, Moor's survival in Vasco Miranda's fortress is to last the precise duration of the time he takes to write the story of his life. At the same time, that self -- which survives only by the construction of successive fictions -- is seen as inextricably and intimately tied to a *national* destiny: 'I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history,' says Saleem, 'my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country' (MC, p.9). Saleem Sinai's physical fragmentation is offered as a reflection of the Indian subcontinent: the initial partition of East and West Pakistan; and the subsequent division of East and West Pakistan, after the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971, into Bangladesh and Pakistan. We find something very similar in *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Moraes Zogoiby is living his life at twice the speed he should; when he ought to be in his prime, he is already old and weakened: like post-Independence Indian democracy, he has aged far too quickly. So Rushdie constructs a triple analogy: the narrator's life reflects that of the state, but the narrator is also constructed by his form of narration. Both Saleem and Moor, in their ever more desperate attempts to make their narratives cohere, raise the question of the coherence or viability of the Indian state as a single political entity. The work of art itself, then, the very construction of these fictional narratives becomes another reflection of social construction. Self exists as an act of aestheticization, and that self is also a figure for the nation.

The series of narratives, through which the construction of both self and nation are invoked, is formed by a mish-mash of influences: some Indian, some European. While the open, free-ranging structure is intended to reflect an Indian oral tradition of epic storytelling, the novel also mimics certain European literary models: the significance of Saleem's nose and birth-date point to *Tristram Shandy*; I've already referred to *A Passage to India*; Günther Grass's *The Tin Drum* is another influence. And while Saleem's pickles recall Oskar Mazerath's drum playing in Grass's novel, they also point to Marcel's madelaine in *A la recherche....* It is in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, though, that the narrative's construction as a tissue of other (principally European) narratives is at its most overt:

I have lost count of the days that have passed since I fled the horrors of Vasco Miranda's mad fortress in the Andalusian mountain-village of Benengeli; ran from death under cover of darkness and left a message nailed to the door. And since then along my hungry, heat-hazed way there have been further bunches of scribbled sheets, swings of the hammer, sharp exclamations of two-inch nails. Long ago when I was green my beloved said to me in fondness, 'Oh, you Moor,' you strange black man, always so full of theses, never a church door to nail them to.' (She, a self-professedly godly un-Christian Indian, joked about Luther's protest at Wittenberg to tease her determinedly ungodly Indian Christian lover: how stories travel, what mouths they end up in!) Unfortunately, my mother overheard; and darted, quick as snakebite: 'So full, you mean, of faeces.' Yes, mother, you had the last word on that subject, too: as about everything.

'Amrika' and 'Moskva', somebody once called them, Aurora my mother and Uma my love, nicknaming them for the two great super-powers; and people said they looked alike but I never saw it, couldn't see it at all. Both of them dead, of unnatural causes, and I in a far off country with death at my heels and their story in my hand, a story I've been crucifying upon a gate, a fence, an olive-tree, spreading it across this landscape of my last journey, the story which points to me. On the run, I have turned the world into my pirate map, complete with clues, leading X-marks-the-spottily to the treasure of myself. When my pursuers have followed the trail they'll find

me waiting, uncomplaining, out of breath, ready. *Here I stand. Couldn't've done it differently.* (MLS, p.3)

References to Vasco da Gama, *The Tempest*, Luther and *Don Quixote* litter the first few paragraphs. This is a playful celebration of cultural hybridity -- which, on the one hand, stresses the textual status of the world of the novel (it is, after all, a book made from other books); and also suggests the plurality of elements in cultural construction: 'was not the entire national culture based on the principle of borrowing whatever clothes seemed to fit, Aryan, Mughal, British, take-the-best-and-leave-the-rest?' asks Zeeny Vakil in *The Satanic Verses*. (Reappearing in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Zeeny characterizes Aurora Zogoiby's painting as the expression of that very hotch-potch.)

This mish-mash of influences, the juxtaposition of the European and the Indian can be said to represent a form of multiculturalism, absorbing the historical and cultural forces of West European literary culture on colonised societies. In this sense it can be interpreted as quite a realistic portrayal of the construction of a post-colonial culture. On the other hand, as was suggested at the very outset of this chapter, it might seem remarkably akin to Jean-François Lyotard's playful account of the eclecticism of contemporary, postmodern culture. But it seems wrong to me to insist, as Aijaz Ahmad does, that Rushdie's writing can also be identified with a postmodern aesthetic through its adoption of a celebratory stance toward 'inner fragmentation and social disconnection'. In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, though, Uma Sarasvati (Moor's beloved) is the exemplar of the protean, postmodern subject. Uma appears to everyone exactly as they would wish her to be - only Moor's mother, Aurora, remains unseduced. And yet it is Uma, the paragon of pluralism, who turns out to be faithless and destructive: 'in the matter of Uma Sarasvati,' says Moor, 'it had been the pluralist Uma, with her multiple selves, her highly inventive commitment to the infinite malleability of the

real, her modernistically provisional sense of truth, who had turned out to be the bad egg' (*MLS*, p.272). Likewise, for all the regenerative possibility suggested by narrative fragmentation in *Midnight's Children*, it remains difficult to witness the gradual destruction of Saleem and of Nehru's vision of a secular Indian state without detecting a deeply felt sense of loss and regret.

The fragmentary structure of Rushdie's novels is, of course, a mimetic device, reflecting (and not necessarily celebrating) other forms of fragmentation. However, Rushdie's historical narratives of the subcontinent also hint at their interconnection; (like his characters, they bleed into one another, 'like flavours'). In *Midnight's Children* Saleem's son, Aadam Sinai, is depicted as a member of a new, hardier generation, perhaps better able than *Midnight's Children* to ensure the survival of a secular, democratic India. He reappears in *The Moor's Last Sigh*; there he is an agent of destruction. Zeeny Vakil also reappears (from *The Satanic Verses*); she, as the voice of a vigilant multiculturalism and keeper of Aurora Zogoiby's paintings, is murdered. Textual coherence is suggested. Rushdie seems to be trying to construct a continuum from *Midnight's Children*, *The Satanic Verses* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*. This hints toward but never quite delivers that goal of *totality* which is the bedrock of Lukácsian ideas of Realism. And yet this ideal of totality, of wholeness (for which both Saleem and Moor yearn), remains illusory, the construct of textual correspondances between works of imaginative literature, and the readiness of the reader to remember what has gone before. What this leads to, it seems to me, throughout Rushdie's writing, is a profound sense of longing, of the desire to make thing anew, but the fear that it might be hopeless. The creation of the fiction becomes then simultaneously lament and wish-fulfillment, both the evocation of that Mother India which to Rushdie is now lost and the recognition that any such evocation is transient and illusory.

In this respect reminiscent of much modernist writing, Rushdie's work also bears a great similarity to that of the young Aurora who paints an entire room as an expression of her loss after her mother's death :

Only God was absent, for no matter how carefully Camoens peered at the walls, and even after he climbed a step-ladder to stare at the ceiling, he was unable to find the figure of Christ, on or off the cross, or indeed any other representation of any other divinity, tree-sprite, water-sprite, angel, devil or saint.

And it was all set in a landscape that made Camoens tremble to see it, for it was Mother India herself, Mother India with her garishness and her inexhaustible motion, Mother India who loved and betrayed and ate and destroyed and again loved her children, and with whom the children's passionate conjoining and eternal quarrel stretched long beyond the grave; who stretched into great mountains like exclamations of the soul and along vast rivers full of mercy and disease, and across harsh drought-ridden plateaux on which men hacked with pickaxes at the dry infertile soil; Mother India with her oceans and coco-palms and rice fields and bullocks at the water-well, her cranes on tree-tops with necks like coat-hangers, and high circling kites and the mimicry of mynahs and the yellow-beaked brutality of crows, a protean Mother India who could turn monstrous, who could be a worm rising from the sea with Epifania's face at the top of a long and scaly neck; who could turn murderous, dancing cross-eyed and Kali-tongued while thousands died; but above all, in the very centre of the ceiling, at the point where all the horn-of-plenty lines converged, Mother India with Belle's face. Queen Isabella was the only mother-goddess here, and she was dead; at the heart of this first immense outpouring of Aurora's art was the simple tragedy of her loss, the unassuaged pain of becoming a motherless child. The room was her act of mourning. (MLS, pp.60-61)

By the end of *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Moor has lost his family and his treacherous beloved. Most of Aurora's paintings have been destroyed, and Moor himself has narrowly escaped from the murderous Vasco Miranda. He leaves Benengeli and travels to the Alhambra, monument to Boabdil, last Moorish ruler of Spain. Benengeli is the name of the fictional author of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, whose work the novel's narrator claims merely to have translated: Cide Hamete Benengeli, a Moor. Like Don Quixote, Moor

turns the land over which he travels into a fictional environment: he nails the pages of his narrative to trees, gates, to whatever he can find. The world that has colluded in his destruction is one he, like Saleem Sinai, transforms into the story of himself; but the literary allusions tell us not to take it too seriously. Rushdie's most recent novel dramatizes the destruction of art, but seems to show art triumphing in the end, transforming the real world around it.<sup>371</sup> It is also, though, reminding us of the fact that the same Christian, Spanish civilisation which gave Europe the novel (in the form of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*) was also that which expelled and slaughtered the Muslims who had made their homes there. For all its textual playfulness, Rushdie's writing retains this sense of didactic purpose, constantly patching up the holes in our historical memory.

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And yet there is also something else. Another of the stories in *East, West* is called 'Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate Their Relationship (*Santa Fé, AD 1492*)'. This provides a further subtext to *The Moor's Last Sigh*: responsible for the Moors' expulsion from Spain, Isabella is also a key figure in Europe's discovery of the New World. The idea of a "new world" -- an imaginary homeland, the Land of Oz -- is a potent one in Rushdie's fiction. The conclusion of *The Moor's Last Sigh* contains an explicit allusion to American literature:

*At the head of this tombstone are three eroded letters; my fingertip reads them for me. R I P. Very well: I will rest, and hope for peace. The world is full of sleepers waiting for their moment of return: Arthur sleeps in Avalon, Barbarossa in his cave. Finn MacCool lies in the Irish hillsides and the Worm Ouroboros on the bed of the Sundering Sea. Australia's ancestors, the Wandjina, take their ease*

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<sup>371</sup>For Rushdie's critical comments on a less ambivalent treatment of this same theme, see Salman Rushdie, 'Christoph Ransmayr', in *Imaginary Homelands*, pp.291-293.

*underground, and somewhere, in a tangle of thorns, a beauty in a glass coffin awaits a prince's kiss. See: here is my flask. I'll drink some wine; and then, like a latter-day Van Winkle, I'll lay me down upon this graven stone, lay my head beneath these letters R I P, and close my eyes, according to our family's old practice of falling asleep in times of trouble, and hope to awaken, renewed and joyful, into a better time. (MLS, pp.433-434)*

Despite this closing reference to American literature, it would be naïve of us to assume for even a moment that the subtext of the New World in *The Moor's Last Sigh* is unproblematically one of celebration. The history of racial exploitation in the United States is of too close a proximity to Rushdie's habitual themes for any such assumption to be credible. In fact, that history of exploitation is subtly integrated into *The Moor's Last Sigh* itself, though Rushdie is clearly interested less in the experience of slavery and subjugation than in its imaginative rendering: Rushdie's latest novel is a coded homage to Black American literature.

'Columbus,' writes Rushdie, 'the invisible man who dreams of entering the invisible world.'<sup>372</sup> *The Moor's Last Sigh* constructs a number of narrative parallels and intertextual allusions to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.<sup>373</sup> 'I've illuminated the blackness of my invisibility,' claims Ellison's narrator, '-- and vice versa.'<sup>374</sup> 'Placed beyond the Pale,' suggests Moor in a near echo, 'would you not seek to make light from the Dark?' (MLS, p.5). Ellison's nameless narrator submerges his identity in the Stalinist 'Brotherhood' just as Moor is coerced into Raman Fielding's neo-Stalinist 'Mumbai's Axis' (MA). The protean Uma Sarasvati echoes Ellison's indefinable Rinehart. 'I yam what I am!' insists the Invisible Man;<sup>375</sup> 'I yam what I yam an' that's what I yam,' says Moor (MLS, p.427). Even Aurora's paintings reinforce the association: 'The

<sup>372</sup>Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate Their Relationship (*Santa Fé, AD 1492*), in *East, West*, p.116.

<sup>373</sup>Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965; rpr. 1989).

<sup>374</sup>Ibid, p.15.

<sup>375</sup>Ibid, p.215.

Moor had entered the invisible world, the world of ghosts, of people who did not exist, and Aurora followed him into it, forcing it into visibility by the strength of her artistic will' (*MLS*, p.303).

The expression in Ellison's work of the Black experience in the United States serves as an example in *The Moor's Last Sigh* of the imagination's capacity for renewal and transformation: Isabella expels the Moors, but sponsors Columbus's discovery of the New World; the New World becomes a slave state, but the slaves' descendents produce Black American literature. Neither the expulsions nor slavery are in any way redeemed, or their horror diminished, by this. But what Rushdie suggests cannot be forgotten is historical contingency and the possibility of change. The historicity of the present moment -- entailing the destruction both of Aurora's art and of Moor himself -- is thrust to the forefront of Rushdie's writing. The possibility that Moor might awaken, 'renewed and joyful, into a better time', remains as a reminder to us too that we need not surrender the imagination to the condition of postmodernity, but that the latter will pass as surely as Isabella's reign. Grasping the postmodern present as history, *The Moor's Last Sigh* accepts the contingency of imaginative expression, while simultaneously implying the need to imagine a time when narratives might be made grand once more. 'A sigh,' says Moor, 'isn't just a sigh. We inhale the world and breathe out meaning. While we can. While we can' (*MLS*, p.54).

## Chapter Five

### The Inadequacy of the Postmodern

This final chapter will re-examine some of the theoretical points first discussed in Chapter One, focusing particularly on the extent to which the theoretical model of postmodernism proposed by Fredric Jameson might be revised in light of the preceding literary analyses of Chapters Two to Four. The logic of Jameson's position, at least in theoretical terms, would seem to suggest the impossibility of a critical postmodern culture; and yet, in contrast to Terry Eagleton, Jameson has nonetheless stressed the necessity for Marxist critique to attempt to identify precisely such a moment in postmodernism. The inconsistencies into which these dual arguments have led Jameson will be sketched out briefly below, while the implications that the persistence of a dialectic of critique and ideological complicity identified in the postmodern fiction thus far discussed might have for his theoretical model is taken as the basis for a reworking of that model. Since the preceding literary-critical analyses have attempted to show at work in postmodern fiction precisely the internal dialectic that Jameson, too, perceives in texts such as E.L. Doctorow's, but can never quite reconcile with his theoretical or conceptual understanding of the postmodern, this chapter will argue that such a reconciliation is unnecessary and that Jameson's continuing vexation with regard to the problem is rather the product of his inconsistent characterization of individual texts' relation to a cultural sphere grasped in theoretical or conceptual terms.

A conceptual understanding of postmodernism is, by the logic of a post-Adorno Western Marxism, inherently inadequate. The critique of

conceptual reason that Adorno develops in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (with Horkheimer) and later in *Negative Dialectics* must also be applied to his own conceptual construction of the culture industry, and to Jameson's lengthy discussions of 'the concept of the postmodern'.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer address the relation of Enlightenment's conceptual rationality to the historical extension of capitalist reification and rationalization.<sup>376</sup> 'Just as the first categories,' they write,

represented the organized tribe and its power over the individual, so the whole logical order, dependency, connection, progression, and union of concepts is grounded in the corresponding conditions of social reality -- that is, of the division of labor.<sup>377</sup>

What is being suggested here, then, is a form of reproduction, whereby conceptual reason cognitively reproduces some of the features of the capitalist mode of production. Adorno and Horkheimer claim of course, quite infamously, that the specific feature of capitalist production to be reproduced by Enlightenment rationality is that of *domination*. They do this by suggesting that instrumental reason, the 'means-ends rationality' of which Peter Bürger depicts the art of the avant-garde as so critical, has been taken as reason *per se*. The development of a concept allows for the absorption of a whole host of particulars into a general definition or category, thereby reenacting, for Adorno and Horkheimer, the domination under monetary, exchange value of objects' intrinsic and heterogenous use values in the process of capitalist commodification.<sup>378</sup>

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<sup>376</sup>We can see, therefore, the continuity of this strand of Western Marxist critique from Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, where he asserts: "Modern critical philosophy springs from the reified structure of consciousness" (pp.110-111).

<sup>377</sup>Adorno & Horkheimer, p.21.

<sup>378</sup>For a lengthier and more thorough discussion of this aspect of Adorno's thought, see Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), pp.22-24.

It is this that Adorno terms 'identity thinking', the suggestion that particulars can be held to be identical by the imposition of a general, abstract concept. In contrast to this, Adorno suggests that dialectical thinking must attempt to grasp the 'non-identical', that which escapes the identity, the homogenizing domination, of the concept. As Fredric Jameson writes in *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic*:

If the concept is grasped as 'the same', as what makes things the same as well as inscribing a sameness -- a return of recognizable entities -- on the psyche, then the struggle of thought (at least at a certain moment of its history) has to undermine that logic of recurrence and of sameness in order to break through to everything sameness excludes: I put it this way in order to be able to describe this last -- the 'non-identical' -- both in terms of otherness and of novelty.<sup>379</sup>

Only, for Adorno, the determinate negation of negative dialectics, through the simultaneous critique and application of conceptual thought, can give expression to that which the concept would dominate. It is necessary, therefore, to bear in mind that whenever Adorno would seem to have defined phenomena conceptually, as he does the culture industry, there is already an implicit acknowledgement of guilty inadequacy. In other words, Adorno's thought is predicated upon its very failure ever to grasp its object wholly, a failure which it both laments and simultaneously acknowledges as a critical force:

If negative dialectics calls for the self-reflection of thinking, the tangible implication is that if thinking is to be true -- if it is to be true today, in any case -- it must also be a thinking against itself. If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims.<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>379</sup>Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism*, p.17.

<sup>380</sup>Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p.365.

Without this attempt to identify the non-identical, that which 'eludes the concept', thought becomes, for Adorno, a mere ideological tool of the marketplace. However, it would be equally inaccurate to suggest that Adorno attempts to evade that fate completely: 'No theory today,' he writes, 'escapes the marketplace.'<sup>381</sup> Adorno is primarily interested, as is apparent from the opening essay of *Prisms*, in the force of immanent critique - a critique which operates, to a large extent, from within the boundaries and limitations of its object. In this way, Adorno hopes to mimic in his thought what he interprets as the historical truthfulness (the 'truth-content') of modernist artworks (see above, Chapter One). As Jürgen Habermas writes, Adorno does not give up entirely on Enlightenment thinking, but rather develops, in the spirit of a performative contradiction, the critique of reason from the critical, rational structures of Enlightenment thought itself. This contradiction then becomes 'the organizational form of indirect communication':

Identity thinking turned against itself becomes pressed into continual self-denial and allows the wounds it inflicts on itself and its objects to be seen.<sup>382</sup>

The attempt to grasp social or cultural phenomena conceptually may also be seen as the attempt to grasp them in their totality. It is here that that strand of postmodern, anti-Enlightenment thought which is most obviously predicated on an aversion to the category of totality -- a position perhaps most easily recognizable in Lyotard's 'war on totality' -- must be distinguished from the more ambivalent structures of Adorno's negative dialectics. For although Adorno is clearly suspicious of the expression of domination which he associates with Enlightenment thinking -- witness, for example, his famous inversion of Hegel: 'The whole is the false' -- he nonetheless refuses to

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<sup>381</sup>Ibid, p.4.

<sup>382</sup>Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, pp.185-186.

abandon the notion of a totality. Thus, Jameson points to the significance of the following passage from *Negative Dialectics*:

What is differentiated will appear divergent, dissonant, negative just as long as consciousness is driven by its own formation towards unity; just as long as it measures what is not identical with itself against its own claim for totality. It is this which dialectics exhibits to consciousness as a contradiction.<sup>383</sup>

Here, argues Jameson, Adorno's dialectical thinking challenges us to retain some necessary sense of totality as an acknowledgement of the desire to grasp and to understand a whole, while also suggesting

that the drive towards totality (Lukács's *Totalitätsintention*) may have something illicit about it, expressing the idealism and the imperialism of the concept, which seeks voraciously to draw everything into its own field of domination and security.<sup>384</sup>

Both concept and totality must therefore be subjected to a rigorous critique, while nonetheless remaining necessary and invaluable analytic tools. Despite, then, exerting a clear influence on the work of postmodern philosophers such as Lyotard,<sup>385</sup> this aspect of Western Marxist thought, as it develops in the writings of Adorno and is reinterpreted in Jameson's work, does not lead to the writing of what the latter has characterized as the 'provisional, fragmentary, self-consuming conceptual performances celebrated by properly postmodern philosophy.'<sup>386</sup> The logic of Adorno's position in *Negative Dialectics* does not sanction philosophical free play. It does, however, suggest the need both to revise what have hitherto been seen as Adorno's definitive critical judgements on the culture industry, and to re-examine some of the inconsistencies of Jameson's analyses of postmodernism.

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<sup>383</sup>This translation, which I found more fluent than the standard one by E.B. Ashton, is Jameson's, to be found in *Late Marxism*, p.26; a less attractive version is in Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, pp.5-6.

<sup>384</sup>Jameson, *Late Marxism*, p.26.

<sup>385</sup>For a discussion of the indebtedness of Lyotard to the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory, see Thomas Docherty, 'Postmodernism: An Introduction', in Thomas Docherty, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1993), pp.5-14.

<sup>386</sup>Jameson, *Late Marxism*, p.27.

Here, then, it is worth returning to one of the questions left open at the conclusion of Chapter One: namely, why does Jameson insist on denying the historicity of the postmodern when he is happy to identify some remnant of historical memory in certain examples of postmodern culture (such as the novels of Doctorow)? In part, of course, this question has already been answered: Jameson is quite explicit that what he intends to delineate is the contours of a postmodernism which is to be understood as a cultural dominant, a cultural situation to which specific texts (or 'cultural commodities') are a response (see above, Chapter One). However, the discrepancies between the features of Jameson's 'concept of the postmodern' and the analyses he offers of various cultural texts have, as he recognizes, interesting implications for the validity and adequacy of that conceptual construction. In 'The Existence of Italy', an essay whose title is an explicit allusion to Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the culture industry, he acknowledges that there is a notable degree of incompatibility between his theoretical description of the postmodern and his interpretations of examples of postmodern culture. This leads him to the following speculations:

Is this then to say that even within the extraordinary eclipse of historicity in the postmodern period some deeper memory of history still deeply stirs? Or does this persistence -- nostalgia for that ultimate moment of historical time in which difference was still present -- rather betoken the incompleteness of the postmodern process, the survival within it of remnants of the past, which have not yet, as in some unimaginable fully realized postmodernism, been dissolved without a trace?<sup>387</sup>

Significantly, Jameson seems here at some pains to reconcile his theoretical understanding of the postmodern with his analyses of specific cultural commodities. It is precisely this need to reconcile the two which seems to me

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<sup>387</sup>Fredric Jameson, 'The Existence of Italy', in *Signatures of the Visible*, p.229.

both unnecessary and responsible for the most glaring inconsistencies of his account.

The difficulty that Jameson has in accepting that postmodern culture might be capable of adopting a critical stance in relation to late capitalism is a product of what he, following Adorno's critique of the culture industry, posits as the dissolution in postmodernism of the critical distance of the aesthetic to the socio-economic. This (as we saw in Chapter One) is among the principal distinctions that Jameson draws between modernism and postmodernism; moreover, it seems to block off completely any possibility of the condition of postmodernity being subject to cultural critique:

No theory of cultural politics current on the Left today has been able to do without one notion or another of a certain minimal aesthetic distance, of the possibility of the positioning of the cultural act outside the massive Being of capital, which then serves as an Archimedean point from which to assault this last. What the burden of our preceding demonstration suggests, however, is that distance in general (including 'critical distance' in particular) has very precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism.<sup>388</sup>

It would appear from this characterization that a critical postmodernism is, by definition, impossible. The loss of art's autonomy, outlined in Chapter One, has also meant the dissolution of its critical distance from the socio-economic. This leaves the aesthetic sphere (and, it would seem, all contemporary cultural production) fully complicit with the economic forces of late capitalism. Yet, still Jameson insists on the critical potential of certain texts. The last three chapters of this thesis, too, have sought to identify elements of critique in the novels of Amis, DeLillo and Rushdie.

Discussing Adorno's denunciation of the culture industry, Andreas Huyssen points to the dangers which might result from the wholesale adoption of Adorno's critical perspective: 'I am not denying,' he writes,

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<sup>388</sup>Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.48.

that the increasing commodification of culture and its effects *in* all cultural products are pervasive. What I would deny is the implied notion that function and use are totally determined by corporate intentions, and that exchange value has totally supplanted use value. The double danger of Adorno's theory is that the specificity of cultural products is wiped out and that the consumer is imagined in a state of passive regression.<sup>389</sup>

Jameson seems continually aware of these problems; his theory, after all, is an explicit response to the Frankfurt School's writings on the culture industry.<sup>390</sup> Nonetheless, he appears, time and again (and despite the frequent, perhaps repetitive, invocations of Doctorow), to hedge his bets, to prefer speculations on 'some as yet unimaginable' new form of political postmodernism to the identification of its present critical potential. As we have already seen, he is even willing to suggest that such a potential might betoken less the persistence of the cultural expression of dialectical conflict than the present incompleteness of the postmodern process itself. What, though, if this process, as Jameson describes it, can never be complete?

Huyssen takes something like this possibility as the basis for his critique of Adorno:

While Adorno recognized that there were limitations to the reification of human subjects through the culture industry which made resistance thinkable at the level of the subject, he never asked himself whether perhaps such limitations could be located in the mass cultural commodities themselves. Such limits do indeed become evident when one begins to analyze in detail the signifying strategies of specific cultural commodities and the mesh of gratification, displacement and production of desires which are invariably put in play in their production and consumption.<sup>391</sup>

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<sup>389</sup>Huyssen, p.22.

<sup>390</sup>Note, in this respect, the continuity of Jameson's thought from the essay 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture' (1979) to the book-length study *Postmodernism* (1991). See also Douglas Kellner, 'Jameson, Marxism, and Postmodernism' in Douglas Kellner, ed., *Postmodernism/Jameson/Critique*, pp.1-42.

<sup>391</sup>Huyssen, p.28.

What I would like to stress here is Huyssen's identification of the need to analyze *specific* cultural commodities. It is the particularity of the individual postmodern text when viewed in relation to the theoretical model of postmodernism that principally interests me. Moreover, it is perhaps here that the critical distance, whose necessity and absence Jameson notes in his discussion of the postmodern, might be situated.

'Ostensibly working on art works,' writes Adorno, 'the artist also works on art -- proof again of the fact that art and works of art are not coterminous.'<sup>392</sup> The 'art' to which Adorno here refers can only be grasped conceptually, as an aesthetic sphere in which works of art are produced. The need to identify the non-identical in conceptual thought, which we have already seen Adorno stress in *Negative Dialectics*, might, then, be seen to suggest a similar requirement to identify those points of conflict between an 'art' or aesthetic sphere thought theoretically and specific works of art -- that is to say, the identification of those features of individual texts which elude the domination of the cultural dominant. It is worth acknowledging that the work of art is itself engaged in a dialectical and thoroughly mediated relationship with the aesthetic or cultural sphere in which it is produced. The critical distance that modernist art had previously retained, but which has been renounced by the culture of postmodernity, might then be relocated in that same conflictual relation of the individual text to the cultural dominant of postmodernism. This would allow the force of Jameson's critique of postmodernism's ideological function to remain undiminished, while accounting for texts' retention of critical potential in a manner consistent with the critical theory of Western Marxism. We need not, therefore, speculate with Jameson on 'some as yet unimaginable new mode' of cultural

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<sup>392</sup>Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.261.

representation; rather, we should analyse the extent to which texts such as *White Noise* or *The Satanic Verses* already offer both representation and critique of the complicity of that cultural realm to which they owe their production with the social exploitation and domination that they take as their subject. This is a complicity in which the individual text of course shares, but with which it cannot wholly be identified.

Again, it is possible to see in Jameson's writings the suggestion of a similar method of recuperation -- for example, in his discussions of what he calls Doctorow's 'homeopathic' treatment of postmodernism. In *Late Marxism* he even goes as far as to address directly the distinction Adorno draws between art and artworks, claiming that what is implicit in Adorno's formulation is the self-consciousness of art's ideological function:

. . . the sheer guilt of Art itself in a class society, art as luxury or class privilege, a ground bass that resonates throughout all of Adorno's aesthetic reflections without a break, even where its vibration has become a virtual second nature in our sensorium, so that from time to time we no longer hear it consciously. This culpability irreparably associated with all artistic activity is, then, the deeper motive for the radical separation, in Adorno, between Art in general and the individual works: for what these last do, what they 'work on' in the artistic process, is to engage this universal sense of guilt, to address it with lacerating acuity, to bring it to consciousness in the form of an unresolvable contradiction. The individual works of art can never resolve that contradiction, but they can recover a certain authenticity by including it as content and raw material, as what the individual work of art must always confront anew, in all its virulence.<sup>393</sup>

If postmodernism, as the cultural logic of late capitalism, cannot be held to maintain a critical distance from the social and economic formations of the latter, a contemporary critical distance of the aesthetic can perhaps only be situated between the individual postmodern text and the cultural dominant that is postmodernism. The interpenetration of the economic and the

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<sup>393</sup>Jameson, *Late Marxism*, p.130.

aesthetic in postmodernity means that when an individual text 'works on' the situation of art, it is working on the situation of late capitalism too.

Jay Bernstein argues that it was by virtue of its mutilation, by its separation from ethics (religion) and truth (science), that the art of modernity was able to express a 'second-order truth' about the alienation both of itself and of those other, newly-autonomous spheres:

Because only art "suffers" its alienation, because art discovers its autonomous vocation to be unstable and incapable of being sustained, because art must continually conceive of its autonomy as a burden it must both embrace and escape from, in all this art comes to speak the truth -- in a "language" that is not that of truth-only cognition -- about the fate of truth and art in modernity. Art's exclusion from first-order cognition and moral judgement is, then, a condition of its ability to register (in a speaking silence) a second-order truth about first-order truth.<sup>394</sup>

For the culture of postmodernity, though, alienation is a thing of the past, perhaps to be invoked nostalgically by images of Parisian cafés and a painting by Edvard Munch. The aesthetic need no longer mourn its historical mutilation, since the wholesome state of its youth has been restored with a little cosmetic surgery. Perhaps, though, those artworks which offer critical reflection on the cultural dominant can express a similar historical truth-content, reflecting a critical self-consciousness grasped only in the nick of time, in the final instance, in willful defiance of the condition of postmodernity -- as if Hansel and Gretel were to insist that, although gingerbread houses are all very well and good, this particular one at this particular time tastes best when eating an escape route.

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<sup>394</sup>Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, p.5.

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