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Traumedy: Dark Comedic Negotiations of Trauma in Contemporary American Literature

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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This project explores how dark comedy negotiates between varying and paradoxically conflicting reactions to traumatic experience. These reactions unfold in two ways: the specific moments of “punctual trauma” and the “structural traumas,” wherein illusory structures of the ego – including sex, gender, race, ethnicity, and the sense of immortality – are dissembled and deconstructed. Thus, the traumas represented – in novels by Joseph Heller, Gustav Hasford, Gore Vidal, Chuck Palahniuk, Gary Shteyngart, Thomas King, and Robert Coover; films by Mike Nichols, Stanley Kubrick, and David Fincher – concern characters facing a seemingly oppositional choice between “witnessing,” providing “testimony” about the traumatic crimes inflicted on them, and “disavowing,” repressing the loss of psychological cohesion that has resulted from their trauma.

This tension – between witnessing and disavowal – is complicated by the representational question central to both literature and critical theories of trauma: in giving testimony, must a witness present the literal or “veridical” truth of an event, or may he or she instead present the metaphorical or “affective” truth of an event? These texts offer no complete resolutions, but each makes use of Freudian comedy to negotiate between witnessing and disavowing trauma, and between literal and metaphorical representation.

Moving from the visceral traumas of war to the more conceptual traumas of identity, each text turns in unique ways to Freud’s tendentious jokes (from *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*) and specifically his skeptical jokes. Shielding both the author and the audience in a protective envelope of comedy, these are “jokes with a purpose.” They question our epistemological certainties, or “speculative possessions,” chief amongst which are the pillars of our identity. The genre of dark comedy is built on these jokes, which present not the overlap or oscillation but a true ambivalence of the tragic (or traumatic) and the comedic (or disavowing). In this ambivalence, dark comedy partially resolves the tensions revolving around traumatic experience, but does not solve the problems of trauma; these texts all gesture to “analysis interminable,” unresolvable neurosis. However, these texts also represent the dangers of eliminating neurosis, including the loss of a self that is sacred in spite of being illusory.

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother and father, who believed I could write it, and to my wife, who made sure I did.

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[I] Introduction

Beyond Tragedy and Comedy: Identity, Trauma, and Jokes with a Purpose

To recognize untruth as a condition of life – that certainly means resisting accustomed value feelings in a dangerous way; and a philosophy that risks this would by that token alone place itself beyond good and evil.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

Closure is a greasy little word which, moreover, describes a nonexistent condition. The truth...is that nobody gets over anything.

Martin Amis, *House of Meetings*

It is useful to know that *Watt* was written in France during the German occupation of World War II. On the run from the Gestapo, which had broken up the resistance cell in Paris that Beckett had belonged to — and led to the arrest, deportation, and death of his closest friend — Beckett found refuge in a small village in the South, where he spent the last two years of the war working as an agricultural laborer in exchange for food. He worked on the pages of the never-quite-finished *Watt* at night. He said he wrote the book to keep himself from going insane. The novel itself often borders on the insane. But you laugh. Again and again, you laugh.

Paul Auster, “You Begin to Breathe Again”

I. The Unanswered Summoning

If Thomas Pynchon is right, all the world is a tragicomedy. Vast and historically sprawling, Pynchon's work can dizzy – even infuriate – but at the core it can be viewed as a simple if uneven dichotomy, a lopsided Manichean epic where the small comedies of life and love are just islands in the stream of death and decay. Pynchon's small comedies are about the preterite, the self-sabotaging underdogs with the conspicuously allegorical names.¹ While there are those characters, like Herbert Stencil, who try to fathom the design of evil and go mad in the attempt, Pynchon's good guys are dispossessed to the point of innocence. They are ignorant, blameless slackers and stoners who, as McClintic Sphere says in *V.*, “keep cool but care” (Pynchon 369). And Pynchon's bad guys? Sadistic fascists in uniform.² Pynchon paints the history of the Western world as an inverted Calvinist Election where providence favors the evil and shuns the good. And, of course, the real history of brutality and oppression that has brought the modern world of post-industrial capitalism into being seems wretchedly in line with Pynchon's worldview.

But this easy dichotomy is too simple to survive scrutiny forever. In *Vineland's* final ambivalent scenes, Pynchon troubles the division between comedy and tragedy and with it the cold comfort of the dispossessed (i.e., they are powerless, ergo blameless). By the novel's end, he attempts to reveal a more complicated and co-dependent relationship between the evil elect and the powerless preterite. But this revelation is dangerously unsettling and cannot be represented outright; it is traumatic in a properly psychoanalytic way that will be explored throughout this dissertation. But even to lay readers, unversed in academic trauma theory, it seems clear that *Vineland* is about the ways in which the children of the 1960s both feared and

needed fascism. It is also clear that Pynchon seems at once compelled to testify to *and* to obscure this truth, the double bind that – as this dissertation shows – is the defining mark of dark comedy. This paradoxical imperative makes *Vineland* and the other works in this project more than tragicomedies, since they do not just alternate between comedy and tragedy, but must find a way to be comic and tragic at the same time.³

The plot of *Vineland* involves Brock Vond, a federal prosecutor ramping up REX84, a government plan to bypass due process and detain large numbers of citizens who pose national security risks.⁴ In preparing a test exercise of REX84, Vond uses the vast paramilitary power granted to him to ‘rapture’ subversives (i.e., disappear them for Orwellian reprogramming). He also pursues a sadomasochistic relationship with former filmmaker/activist-turned-government informant Frenesi Gates; Pynchon gives a pop-cultural explanation of Gates’ name, but there’s also the ‘frenziéd gates’ (“Frenesi” being Portuguese for *frenzy*) or the gateway to chaos that the 1960s represented for her.⁵ To drive home the idea that Vond is evil – beyond the evil of American fascism, that is – we also learn that Vond has sexual plans for Frenesi’s teenage daughter, Prairie, who may also be Vond’s own child, including lusting after her “[n]ice firm adolescent tits...like juicy apples” (376). By the novel’s climax Vond, magnified and shifted slightly out of our reality by his vampiric attributes, is allowed to serve both metonymically for the conservative reactionaries of the 1970s and 1980s and metaphorically for Pynchon’s quasi-supernatural forces of death.⁶

Thus, in the novel’s climatic scene, when Vond rappels from a paramilitary helicopter towards Prairie, alone in the woods, Pynchon has done more than enough work to give us his now well-formalized dichotomy: hapless kid versus Death’s Head. But the scene Pynchon gives us plays out differently than we might expect:

She lay paralyzed in her childhood sleeping bag with the duck decoys on the lining and saw that even in the shadows his skin glowed unusually white. For a second it seemed he might hold her in some serpent hypnosis. But she came fully awake and yelled in his face, “Get the fuck out of here!”

“Hello, Prairie. You know who I am, don’t you?”

She pretended to find something in the bag. “This is a buck knife. If you don’t –”

“But Prairie, I’m your father. Not Wheeler – me. Your real Dad.”

Nothing that hadn’t occurred to her before – still, for half a second, she began to go hollow, before remembering who she was. “But you can’t be my father, Mr. Vond,” she objected, “my blood is type A. Yours is Preparation H.”

(376)

The climactic confrontation restages – of all things – the iconic scene from *The Empire Strikes Back* where Darth Vader stands over a trembling young Luke Skywalker and reveals that they are father and son. Yet it is not Pynchon’s weakness for pop-cultural reference that makes the scene so strange, it is the comic suddenness with which the menace – which Pynchon has spent a novel developing and underlining – dematerializes. Later, in a scene that is at once honestly haunting and surreally silly, Brock Vond is disappeared by Vato and Blood (two Thanatoids, Pynchon’s hippie pseudo-ghosts) into a mythic underworld. And, without overindulging in an analysis of Pynchon’s borrowing of Yurok mythology, or his supernatural cosmology in general, it suffices to say that metaphorically this scene is cartoonish and comical. Confronted with the figurehead of fascist violence and death, Pynchon’s scrappy kid hollers “get the fuck out of here” and makes a silly joke about Vond having hemorrhoid cream for blood and *tout suite* escapes, seemingly unharmed.

The scene is not pure comedy – not the Whole Sick Crew gorging on beer from a teet-shaped tap in *V.* or the glorious banana breakfast near the beginning of *Gravity’s Rainbow* – and it is certainly not like the spectacular scenes of evil that Pynchon has painted in the past. It is instead a part of Pynchon’s tragicomic world in which the divisions between small comedy and

vast tragedy have collapsed. And this scene, which is both silly and horrifying, leaves us to wonder what – exactly – is at the heart of American fascism, “forever deniable.” Pynchon has already told us, over the course of two novels and a novella, about the cult of death, the daemonic elect that oppose life across time and space. What deeper or darker secret could there be?

It is something both traumatic and necessary for Pynchon to convey, captured in *Vineland*'s closing scene:

[Prairie had] regretfully peeled away to return, terrified but obliged, to the clearing where she'd had her visit with Brock Vond. He had left too suddenly. There should have been more. She lay in her sleeping bag, trembling, face up, with the alder and the Sitka spruce still dancing in the wind, and the stars thickening overhead. “You can come back,” she whispered, waves of cold sweeping over her, trying to gaze steadily into a night that now at any turn could prove unfaceable. “It's OK, rilly. Come on, come in. I don't care. Take me anyplace you want.” But suspecting already he was no longer available, that the midnight summoning would go safely unanswered, even if she couldn't let go. (384)

Pynchon tells us that Prairie's “promises grew more extravagant” and “her flirting more obvious,” but not what “Brock fantasies” she entertains before falling asleep; those fantasies, it seems, are the dark truth of her relationship to Brock and, by extension, the ‘unfaceable’ truth of American history. This truth for Pynchon is, in short, that the post-war generation – Frenesi Gates' generation – panicked in the face of unparalleled freedom and, in a reactionary move, gave its consent, sometimes passively and sometimes outright, to anti-democratic and fascist forces. The economic payoff of this bargain created, in turn, the social space and freedom that allowed Generation X – Prairie's generation – to define itself in a hollow cultural rebellion that opposed the ‘square’ style of conservatives without challenging the free-market capitalism championed by them.⁷ Prairie's unspoken adolescent fantasies represent the conflicting desires to both know and *not* know this truth.⁸

These are the things Pynchon seems compelled to testify to, the horrors he is trying to bear witness to: not the existence of fascism in America but the psychological relationship Americans have to fascism. Or, to put it in Pynchonesque terms, the inextricable relationship between elect and preterite. But these truths, as Pynchon sees them, are too traumatic to internalize. They are too destructive to the worldview of the good guys – the ‘dispossessed’ preterite – who imagine fascism as the enemy, not as wish fulfillment and certainly not as *father*. This is to say they are not *just* hard truths, they are literally destabilizing to the structures of self, to the architecture of subjectivity; troubling them is more than political disillusionment, it is traumatic psychological disillusionment.

And so Pynchon’s novel presents us with the double-bind of dark comedy. On the one hand, its comedy – its absurdities, non-sequiturs, and comedic distractions – disavows the truth about American politics, about what happened in the 1960s and *to* the 1960s. *Vineland* raises the specter of REX84 only to show it canceled; comedy gets to pretend the political truths of Reagan’s plan are “forever deniable.”⁹ On the other hand, the extravagance of the Happy Ending and the references to the real tragedy of American fascism prevent Pynchon’s jokes from ever fully breaking away from reality. As in all the works in this project, the author struggles to tell a story with a traumatizing core without actually traumatizing his readers. He is able to summon the awful truth without having to answer fully for the destructive psychological ramifications. He does so through a particular mode of dark comic writing that accomplishes neither denial nor acceptance but, owing more than a little to Sigmund Freud, a kind of neurotic truce.

It is intersections like these, between comedy and tragedy, realism and absurdity, and disavowal and testimony, to which this project is devoted. In precis, this dissertation concerns contemporary American fiction that extends what is commonly but imprecisely called dark

comedy into a genre. In order to understand this genre – its characteristics, goals, and limits – it is necessary to understand specifically what this project means by trauma, and the opposition between the drive to witness (or testify to) and the drive to disavow trauma. It is also important to understand the strong Freudian influence on both this project’s theoretical conceptions of trauma and of comedy as a reaction to trauma. Indeed, far from holding Freud up as the Truth which dark comedy reveals, each of the authors in this project instead inherits from Freud a literary understanding of trauma and also a set of representation skills for negotiating its toxic material.

II. Traumatic Disillusionment

Since the goal – and limit – of dark comedy is both to represent and conceal (or cushion) certain psychological truths that would be traumatizing if presented directly, then of course understanding trauma is central to understanding the genre. To that end, the works considered in this project typically represent traumas that operate in two registers: a literary narrative concerning the trauma of a fictional (or fictionalized) character, and the metaphorical repercussions of that trauma as it relates to the construction of various facets of identity both in the literary character and in readers themselves. There is also the potential for what we might call the vicarious trauma of readers who, in absorbing the metaphorical impact of Prairie’s experience, have their own illusions destabilized.

In both registers, this particular version of trauma theory presupposes that the ‘self’ is a construct, an illusion built up over time but always vulnerable to deconstruction. And while this conception of subjectivity – that the facets that compose our identity are each illusory – is the

driving theoretical framework of this project, that framework is ultimately less consequential than the way different authors discover this through their novels; in each work, we see a particular trauma followed by a traumatic apocalypse of the self's constructed nature.

Thus, it is important to understand these two registers of trauma, what we might call the punctual trauma of a singular event and the structural trauma of psychological disillusionment. To do so, this project is indebted strongly to contemporary trauma theory, particularly several key texts: Ruth Leys' *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Cathy Caruth's collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* and her following work *Unclaimed Experience*, and E. Ann Kaplan's *Trauma Culture*.¹⁰

Leys herds numerous overlapping and often competing theories into two paradigms, mimetic and anti-mimetic, which are useful for understanding the different facets of traumatic experience. She argues that the mimetic theories of trauma "revolve around the problem of imitation" (9), starting with J.M. Charcot's experiments with victims of trauma under hypnosis who reenacted the actions of aggressors who had harmed them *without* any conscious memory of the traumatic event (the implications of identifying unconsciously with one's attacker or persecutor was clear to Freud, of course).¹¹ Mimetic theories consider a traumatic event to "shatter the victim's cognitive-perceptual" system in such a way as to make "the traumatic scene unavailable for a certain kind of recollection" (ibid). What this often translates into is an emotional memory, distinct from any kind of literal recollection of trauma, that is often experienced symptomatically as anxiety, phobias, physical tics, and/or aggressions. Mimetic traumas have a distinctly early-Freudian style, in that they lend themselves to a kind of interpretive analysis that reveals the unconscious logic of the relationship between the symptoms and the original trauma; mimetic theories also implicitly share early Freud's sanguine optimism for analysis terminable, for revelation and catharsis. Yet, as Leys states, "the effort to cure

patients by getting them, through hypnotic catharsis or by other means, to recollect and narrate the dissociated traumatic origin was destined to fail” (9). Emotional memory is necessary but insufficient to understanding and dealing with trauma.

The anti-mimetic paradigm, by contrast, is rooted in the rejection of the unconscious (a concept which troubled many theorists, as it permitted the mingling of fact and fiction). As Leys writes, “the notion of mimesis tended to call into question the veracity of the victim’s testimony as to the veridical or literal truth of the traumatic origin” (10). In addition to an insistence on the importance of recovering the veridical event (the objective truth of the trauma), the anti-mimetic turn also took offense to the unsavory condition of aggressor-identification and in general the Freudian state of the subject fragmented and besieged, not by external trauma but by frictions in the subject’s own mind. The anti-mimetic theory, Leys argues, is thus rooted in the “therapist’s demand that the patient *be a subject* capable of distancing herself from the traumatic scene” and able to “regard trauma as if it were a purely external event coming to a sovereign if passive victim” (37, 10). Indeed, this is often how trauma is studied in neurology: a patient overthrown, not by internal schism, but by the excessive force of reality.

Caruth, the foremost anti-mimetic theorist according to Leys, presents neurological evidence that the brain processes some sensory information – particularly that which is overwhelming in quantity or emotional quality – through the amygdala and not through the frontal lobe. This more primitive sensory processing route in essence cuts consciousness out of the loop, leaving the traumatic event as a memory that was never consciously experienced. The resulting state, traumatic dissociation, leaves the subject unable to process the memory in language and thus unable to *work through* its threatening content; the victim is both protected from and paralyzed by the memory in this state. Caruth uses this medical explanation as a useful

analog for the un-representability of traumatic experience that she develops by using a deconstructive approach to the failure of language.

Ultimately, both mimetic and anti-mimetic frameworks offer incomplete models of trauma and, as a result, many theorists – including Caruth – have turned instead to literary representations of trauma. This is, in large part, because novels can generate more nuanced, specific, and complex models of trauma than any generalizable theory, which of course must also stake out one position and disregard others. As E. Ann Kaplan rightly points out in *Trauma Culture*, “Caruth overstates the role of dissociation and does not pay attention to unconscious processes,” because the mind rarely works in a such a singular way (38). As Kaplan argues, the mind – like a novel – works in multiple overlapping ways: some traumatic content may bypass consciousness, while other content may be consciously experienced. Further, Kaplan highlights the disturbing but well documented scenario where the “victim partly identifies with the aggressor” and “is implicated in the traumatic situation” (ibid) as only one of many unconscious aspects of trauma that are neither available to consciousness nor capable of being neatly mapped onto a neurological pathway. Kaplan’s broad understanding of trauma, stems – I would argue – from the crucial understanding that literature and film produce better theories of trauma than trauma theorists themselves (who, it seems, so frequently turn to literature and film to find their footing). Caruth admits as much herself, when she writes in the introduction to *Unclaimed Experience*:

If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing, and it is at this specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience and the language of literature meet. (3)

Thus, this project looks to the theories of trauma generated within novels and films. In each case, there is a traumatic revelation, a disillusionment, wherein a facet of identity held to be stable and innate is revealed to be illusory. This revelation is properly traumatic in and of itself, but it is also commonly paired with or tied to an event we more traditionally understand as traumatic, an external sensory event that is overwhelming to the senses and to emotional consciousness. In such a way, the anti-mimetic trauma and mimetic trauma are combined and intermixed, the external event leading to an internal cascade of disillusionment.

While the internal trauma of disillusionment functions in a similar way each time, as a facet of identity that had long ago been constructed is now deconstructed, these novels and films treat each external trauma with contextual specificity; that is, the external trauma of each work is not only a trigger but a historical trauma in its own right, a crime against the protagonists in the work that provides the impetus to witnessing and testimony. The crime may be specific and singular – like the execution of the Rosenbergs in Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning* – or historical and generational – like the oppression and forced assimilation of aboriginal Americans in Thomas King’s *Green Grass Running Water* – or something more nebulous but equally damaging – like the crime of capitalism in Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters*. What unifies these different types of traumas is the imperative to testify to them, since all terrible crimes seek to hide themselves. The act of testimony sits at the intersection of political and psychological responsibility, and while it may fail in its role as emotional catharsis – as Dori Laub writes, it is a “ceaseless struggle” (61), a necessary but interminable analysis – it is often part of serving justice in the socio-political sphere.¹² It is not enough to jail and hang the wrongdoers, not enough to hunt them down in Argentina and Johannesburg, because if the crime is the erasure of human beings, then only the stories of the erased can begin the process of

atonement, as evidenced by the Truth and Reconciliation hearings in South Africa and the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimony.

For the protagonists of the works studied in this project, it is often the impetus to witness and testify that causes the traumas of disillusionment to generate two competing and seemingly irreconcilable imperatives: first, repressing the event to protect retroactively the illusion of stable selfhood and, second, providing testimony about the event to alleviate the deleterious effects of repression and to bring the aggressors' crimes to light. If characters maintain their illusions, they must suffer the effects of trauma, including the seemingly contradictory occurrences of amnesia and intrusive flashbacks and the knowledge that their aggressors have gone unpunished.

For the authors of these works, there is also a different conundrum: the works that testify to traumatic events and situations are fictional – or at the very least fictionalized – and are not literally testifying to the experience of the victim in some legally recognized way, in the way that Elie Wiesel's work intends to or in the way that Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub mean when they refer to Wiesel's work in shaping a theory of testimony, arguing that "testimony cannot be simply relayed, repeated or reported by another without thereby losing its function as testimony" (*Testimony* 3). But as Felman and Laub also concede, despite the power of the literal victim's testimony, there is also "the appointment to bear witness"; these are situations where an author feels possessed by "the appointment to transgress" the solitary burden of victim-as-witness (*ibid*). As they write:

The contemporary writer often dramatizes the predicament (whether chosen or imposed, whether conscious or unconscious) of a voluntary or of an unwitting, inadvertent, and sometimes involuntary witness: witness to a trauma, to a crime or to an outrage; witness to a horror or an illness whose effects explode any capacity for explanation or rationalization. (*ibid* 4)

Thus two sets of tensions arise, between literal and emotional, and between testimony and identity.

The first tension is found between the literal suffering of the victim – the veridical historical trauma – and the emotional truth of his or her condition, between a victim’s (or the victims’) ‘ownership’ of certain traumas and the compulsion to speak *for* victims who perhaps cannot fully process their traumas enough to speak (or who have not survived them). It is also the tension between the unrepresentable literal truth and the emotional metaphors for that truth; in other words, there are some traumatic events that, as Caruth argues, in their absolute horror defeat the capacity of language. A witness must struggle to find a balance between a literal truth too horrible to convey (and potentially traumatizing to others, vicariously) and an ‘emotional truth’ of a traumatic event that must admit to being *not* the veridical truth, not objectively historical, and thus often inadmissible in the courts of law and public opinion.

The second tension is between the impetus to testify and the threat of traumatic disillusionment. As Caruth writes, “[i]n its later usage, especially in the medical and psychiatric usage, the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not on the body but on the mind” (*Unclaimed Experiences* 4). Many narratives of trauma use violent metaphors: trauma “explodes” in Felman, “shatters” in Leys, and the “wound cries out” in Caruth. These metaphors are captivating, and they *feel* right, especially to those readers who know trauma well. But the theatricality of these metaphors papers over the psychological action: what, specifically, in the immaterial anatomy of the mind is exploded, shattered, wounded? I would argue that the damage caused by traumatic events is to the structures of the mind, pillars of understanding about the self and its relationship to the world that have been built up since infancy and upon which rests the illusion of the stable, whole, coherent self. When these structures are damaged, the entire illusion

is threatened; the mind in turn reacts to this threat, denying the damage by disavowing the cause. Thus we see repression and the return of the repressed in the nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety attacks, and other symptoms of repressed trauma.

An appropriately violent and primordially Freudian example is the genital wounding of Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*. Jake does not suffer from what would come to be called war neuroses and the novel is devoid of flashbacks to the scene of his injury, or indeed to the wartime setting in general. Nor does Jake suffer from amnesia; his memories neither elude nor haunt him. Jake, facing a mirror, says only, “Of all the ways to be wounded. I suppose it was funny” (25).¹³ Jake’s trauma seems so unlike the neurotic anxiety of ‘shell shock’ because his particular psychological trauma comes not from losing a limb – speaking generously – but from losing the supposedly immutable symbol of masculinity (the phallus). The psychological domino effect, in which illusions built on top of each other crumble, is the real location of Jake’s trauma. Illusions about wholeness, mastery, and masculinity are very close to the core of subjectivity, informing intimately the subject’s sense of self; the loss of these, in traumatic disillusionment, gives us a character like Jake Barnes who disavows the injury, speaks nothing of the traumatic event, but who in his moments of rage against “fairies” (as Hemingway labeled them in his earliest drafts) manifests the trauma of his disillusionment.¹⁴

In this theoretical version, what is traumatic about an event is its effect – disillusionment – and though it remains true that the ferocity of a sensory experience may be one way to overwhelm the mind’s defense, its insistent belief in its own illusory stability, we need not necessarily limit ourselves to the violent metaphors of assault and attack. The structures of the mind can be shattered, as Jake Barnes’ are shattered, but they may also be eroded slowly like aging monuments or strangled as they develop like a tree forced to grow through an iron gate.

The nameless protagonist of Palahniuk's *Fight Club* suffers from a failed sense of masculinity very similar to Jake's but without the signature wound to point to, without any specific event even to disavow. Instead, Palahniuk reads masculinity as faulty from its inception, clung to out of desperation, apathy, and fear of change and risk. *Fight Club* is able to point to the moment where this traumatic realization becomes clear in the narrator's mind, and when the neurotic defense to this trauma becomes chronic, but it also shows that the trauma itself need not be – and in many cases cannot be – localized to the flashbulb 'iconic' moments on which Caruth focuses. In this dissertation, there are traumas that occur in an instant and some that occur over decades, or over and across generations.

To say the least, the tension between testimony and disavowal is complicated by contextual specifics, by the social and political aspects of any particular facet of identity; for that reason it is best demonstrated in close readings of specific works. However, this brief explanation does serve to connect, again, the tensions of writing about trauma to dark comedy. As with the tension between emotional and veridical accounts of traumatic events, the tension between testimony and disavowal cannot be cured, and so a novel dealing with these tensions can only at best be neurotic, a compromise between psychic collapse and complete repression. Likewise, there is no easy truce to be had between the imperatives of activism and those of theory. The works in this dissertation employ a particular kind of compromise – dark comedy – that enables a negotiation between these tensions, between the duty to the world and the duty to the self, between truth and peace, between horror and silence.

III. Dark Comedy

The working definition of dark comedy in this project is in some ways unchanged since I first wrote on the subject in Maurice Charney's collection *Comedy: A Geographical and Historical Guide* (2005):

Generally speaking, dark comedy represents a natural ambivalence of tragedy and comedy as opposed to the sick and absurd humor that are not ambivalent, naturally or at all. The audience is not just sickened by tragedy or amused by comedy, but forced to experience the paradoxical emotions simultaneously . . . There are tragedies that have comic moments and comedies that have tragic moments, but the valence of tragic and comic is separated scene to scene. The ambivalence of dark comedy lies in ambiguity. (Schachtman 169)

In that original work, as in the present project, the distinction between dark comedy and the related idea of sick comedy was important. Sick comedy is the use of tragic material for comedic pleasure that can only function in a vacuum of empathy. Where Hegel would argue that the comic intrinsically involves the earnest deconstruction of men or institutions, and Hobbes admits that sadism brings with it the pleasurable 'sudden glory' of feeling greater in proportion to something or someone that is diminished by comedy, sick comedians turn the knife of sadism on themselves when they are done with the world.¹⁵ Several of the works in this project veer towards and sometimes risk sick comedy, but each pulls back from this mode in its own way, remaining demonstrably in the genre of dark comedy.

Dark comedies present not an oscillation or occasional overlap, but a sustained ambivalence between diametrically opposed readings. To translate from the simpler terms of comedy and tragedy to more complex psychological terms, we can say that a comic reading is pure disavowal and a tragic reading is pure melancholia. Both readings have broken from reality and cannot engage with it. Comedy makes a cartoon of trauma, suggesting the complete

resilience of the subject; tragedy turns it into a black hole, inescapable, and suggests the complete collapse of the subject. The paradoxical tensions enumerated above – the tensions between testimony and self-preservation, between historical veracity and emotional truth – render both of these readings, comic or tragic, highly problematic (or literally unacceptable). Dark comedy makes a negotiation between these tensions possible by elevating the ambivalence of a dark comedic joke into a mode that dictates the ironic posture of an entire text.

The driving force of this irony is the structure of a particular kind of comedy that Freud calls the tendentious joke (from the German ‘with a purpose’). In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud distinguished these jokes from ‘innocent’ or ‘abstract’ jokes not with respect to ‘innocence’ in technique or style but with respect to psychological dynamic:

In the one case [innocent jokes] the joke is an end in itself and serves no particular aim, in the other case it does serve such an aim – it becomes tendentious. Only jokes that have a purpose run the risk of meeting with people who do not want to listen to them. (106-07)

These jokes are actually transgressions cloaked in a “joking envelope” as Freud calls them (109). In a basic social sense, the joking envelope allows jokers to lash out verbally at social prohibitions while retaining the plausible deniability of the comedian. For authors attempting to deconstruct or disassemble facets of identity held to be stable – even sacred – by their potential readers, this social sense of a joking envelope is crucial. By and large subject to the crude laws of the marketplace, authors cannot survive long if they alienate their customers. Freud’s social sense of a joke’s cushioning effect means that authors’ chances of survival are better if, when pushing their critiques too far for public tastes, they can say ‘I was only kidding.’

Freud then moves on to the more sophisticated sense, in which the joke – which is really only the joking envelope – is a technique for surreptitiously achieving an unconscious purpose

(the joke's 'aim'); in this sense the transgression is against the defenses of the ego and the joker is partially or completely unaware of the joke's true aim. As Freud writes:

And we may also once more repeat that with tendentious jokes we are not in a position to distinguish by our feeling what part of the pleasure arises from the sources of their technique [the joke] and what part from those of their purpose [the transgression]. *Thus, strictly speaking, we do not know what we are laughing at.* (121, italics in pre-1925 editions, reproduced for emphasis here)

Writing in 1905, Freud unsurprisingly locates thwarted libidinal pleasure as the drive behind many of the tendentious joke he analyzes, beginning – somewhat obviously – with “exposing or obscene jokes,” which thwart social conventions and their internalized analogs in the Super-Ego by bringing sexual content into a public space (119). He also addresses aggressive or hostile jokes, in their Hobbesian cruelty, by way of analogy to sexuality: “hostile impulses against our fellow men have been subject to the same restrictions, the same progressive repression, as our sexual urges” (121). As it does throughout the Joke book, Freud's language mixes the conventional sense – in which we knowingly take pleasure in racist or sexist jokes, and then knowingly take shelter in the defense of comedy – with the psychological sense – where our repressed sadism erupts without us quite knowing how or why. Fifteen years before the death drive of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, it is clear that Freud runs into some trouble linking aggressive jokes to libidinal pleasure, and moves on to cynical (“critical or blasphemous”) jokes that strike out, not at people, but at the institutions of church, state, and – in particular – marriage, which Freud, returning to familiar landscape, describes as the “severe suppression” of “sexual freedom” (132).¹⁶

But then Freud ventures out in describing the final type of tendentious joke, a kind of Nietzschean cynicism turned inwards against ontology, on “the problem of what determines the truth” in the mind of the joker: “What [these jokes] are attacking is not a person or an institution

but the certainty of our knowledge itself, one of our speculative possessions. The appropriate name for these would therefore be ‘sceptical’ [sic] jokes” (138). Freud gives only one example of a skeptical joke:

Two Jews met in a railway carriage at a station in Galicia. “Where are you going?” asked one. “To Cracow”, was the answer. “What a liar you are!” broke out the other. “If you say you’re going to Cracow, you want me to believe you’re going to Lemberg. But I know that in fact you’re going to Cracow. So why are you lying to me?” (137-138)

The joke, absurd and foolish in its exteriority, has disturbing ramifications. The first Jew’s hostility towards the second Jew borders on psychosis; the two seem unable to communicate, despite being of the same tribe (as Freud might put it) and even from the same region (where Freud’s parents were from).¹⁷ The failure of language – in a situation where it should function near-seamlessly – reduces the first Jew to paranoid hysteria. The joke violates expectations, which makes it funny in its absurd way, but those expectations are social normative codes crucial to personal interaction. I would argue that these expectations transcend the social level and exist as mental structures, as images of our selves that we project onto others in order to make language and empathy possible. A failure of language and empathy represents a failure of this structure, a psychic schism that – when projected outwards – generates the kind of ontological panic and the resulting defensive aggression that this joke demonstrates.

Freud’s argument that absurdity is a “powerful technical method” (ibid) for cloaking profound deconstructive arguments would sit well with careful readers of Beckett, Ionesco, or Pinter. It is also instructive with respect to the potentially confusing relationship between absurd humor and dark comedy. Absurdity can theoretically exist for its own pleasure in thwarting expectations of meaning and structure; however, it seems unlikely that we will find very many innocent absurdities in our Freudian climate (to paraphrase Auden). In dark comedy, as for

example in *Vineland*'s meeting of Prairie and Vond, the absurd is often the cartoonish side-stepping of the laws of physics and the literary rules of realism as a way to provide a joking envelope for dark material. The absurd also frequently serves as a metaphor for the Real, in Žižek's sense of the real conditions of existence that confound representation and contemplation.¹⁸

Freud holds this particular kind of joke-work in high regard, placing it last in his taxonomy of tendentious jokes. They are the rarest, Freud says, and seemingly also the most powerful and perhaps most dangerous. But Freud is curiously unwilling – or unable – to link skeptical jokes, whose purpose is to destabilize our ontology, to any libidinal system. Indeed, Freud makes no efforts to explain how skeptical jokes fit into this theory of jokes, how they generate pleasure, what obstacles they surmount in order to do so, or what unconscious drive is to be found at their root. Even enlisting the death drive, which provided a much needed dynamic to Freud's theoretical framework, would little help to explain why unconscious forces would use skeptical jokes to get around the Ego's defenses, or why the death drive would attack core beliefs of the self, essentially to unseat the Ego as the arbiter of truth and reality. Succeeding in such a purpose would mean only psychic chaos, far from the non-being sought by the death drive. In short, neither of the two drives most commonly associated with the unconscious has any real use for skeptical humor.

But the mind's reaction to trauma has precisely this need for skeptical humor. If we conceptualize trauma as the destruction of mental structures upon which the Ego constructs the idea of the self, then we understand why traumatic events that damage or destroy these structures would be repressed. And, as I have argued above, there are times when the psychological and sociopolitical need to testify to traumatic events outweighs the importance of protecting the

stability of the self. In order to escape the neurotic effects of repressing trauma, or in the name of social and historical justice, sometimes subjects must undermine their own illusions – and skeptical jokes can do just that.

For Freud, the skeptical joke is about the existential horror of misrecognition between father and son and the deferred trauma that occurs when a subject – in this case Freud himself – realizes retroactively his true feelings for his parents. To understand the specific context of the joke, its tragic purpose and comic – almost absurd – envelope, we have to go back to 1896, when Freud’s father, Jakob, died. In the wake of his father’s death, Freud initially tried to censor his childhood resentment. Peter Gay describes the attempt and its repercussions: “no time for sober appraisals; the man who picked his hat out of the gutter [after it was knocked off his head by a Christian anti-Semite] and failed to make a good living in Vienna was affectionately forgotten. For a time Freud was only proud of his father. But the inevitable reaction set in” (88). This reaction was Freud’s neurasthenia, which Freud self-diagnosed and self-treated, in large part through the interpretation of his own dreams.

What, exactly, Freud learned about his relationship to his father is obscured.¹⁹ But we know from Freud’s letters that he built, almost exclusively from his self-analysis of these dreams, the Oedipal complex into the theoretical architecture of the psyche. Jakob’s failures – to live up to Freud’s hero Hannibal, to succeed financially, and to stand up to Christian persecution²⁰ – were undoubtedly a part of that analysis; Freud would have been forced to face the disavowal of his true feelings. When Freud wrote *Fleiss* of his new Oedipal paradigm, he described watching the very play from which the complex inherited its name performed on stage: “everyone in the audience was once a budding Oedipus in fantasy and each recoils in horror from the dream fulfillment here transplanted into reality, with the full quantity of repression which

separates his infantile state from his present one” (Letter 71, 222). In this “horror” we have a hint of what Freud experienced in those revelatory moments, trying to decipher and untangle his feelings for his own father.

The “horror” for Freud was not *just* the momentary apprehension of the Oedipal arrangement, of the patricidal fantasia that is usually repressed to the unconscious, it was a deeper, darker realization: how little these two men knew about each other’s inner lives. Such a revelation about the abyss between two people so intimately related as father and son has the power to shatter the mind’s internal structures, the self’s map of the world within and without. By Freud’s own logic, it was not the death of his father – an event we understand to be traumatic in a traditional way – but the revelation of the abyss between them that traumatized Freud. Their mutual alienation was an idea too toxic for consciousness because of its threat to the self’s worldview and was thus repressed to the unconscious, making itself known in the ways we became accustomed to seeing in the wartime traumas of combat: physical symptoms, depressive moods, strange dreams. And of course jokes, like this skeptical one: two Jews from Galicia – as Jakob and, by extension, Sigmund were two Jews from Galicia – talking to each other but unable to communicate. It is beyond the pale of coincidence that Freud chose only this sole example to demonstrate the most powerful of tendentious jokes.

Of course, both devout Freudians and his critics may find putting Freud on his own couch distasteful or unproductive, but I do it here to show how skeptical jokes represented for Freud a way in which the mind could subtly attack its own “speculative possessions” (*Jokes* 138). I will return to this passage several times in this dissertation, but for now I will ask: what better synonym for the mental structures of the Ego, which are both illusory and necessary, defended both because they *feel* proprietary and because they are unconsciously known to be imaginary?

The aspects of subjectivity that make up the chapters in this dissertation, those facets of the self that we construct and protect at dear cost, are all speculative possessions. The dark comedic novels examined in the following chapters are all, in their own demonstrable ways, skeptical jokes. Their techniques may vary – they may be at times cartoonish and absurd, verbally inventive, joyously obscene and profane, or swollen with the sudden glory of mockery – but their aim is always the same: deconstructing those speculative possessions that we hold most sacred. As Tad Delay argues, giving jokes their full psychological value: “The Freudian joke, like the Christian parable or the Jewish midrash, short-circuits the defense mechanisms that resist, triggering a truth that lurks just beyond the conscious grasp” (xxiv). In each case, these skeptical jokes are a direct response to a trauma, and in each case that trauma has destroyed some facet of identity. By facing the true core of traumatic experience, by owning up to the illusory nature of some fundamental part of the self while at the same time protecting the self behind the envelop of skeptical jokes, these novels attempt the act of working through. The act of working through is less concerned with terminating analysis – less concerned with catharsis and cure – than it is with integrating the experience of trauma back into the psyche. Working through accepts imperfect solutions to the problem of trauma, often accepting neurosis over the psychosis of denial or the paralysis of melancholia.

The first chapter locates the central trauma in the state of war. Starting with Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, the chapter investigates both the early theories of ‘war neuroses’ and Heller’s own particular take on the trauma caused by the violence of war. Heller, I will show, uses the absurd as his joking envelope for a much darker skeptical aim: dissembling the illusion of immortality. This is captured in Heller’s joke that Captain Yossarian, his protagonist and occasional avatar, desires devoutly to “live forever or die trying” (*Catch-22* 37). As Heller’s

novel progresses, it grows increasingly absurd and increasingly violent – thus, it does not shift from comic to tragic, but in building to its conclusion magnifies both valences. The ultimate goal of the novel is the revelation of man’s mortality. While this is hardly an original theme, Heller is revolutionary in his particular use of post-traumatic symptoms – literalized in Mike Nichols’ 1970 film version – to represent the destruction of Yossarian’s (and Heller’s own) illusions as the real core of his traumatic experience in combat. Following this analysis, I examine Gustav Hasford’s *The Short-Timers* and Stanley Kubrick’s 1987 film adaptation *Full Metal Jacket* to explore the ideas of mimetic and anti-mimetic trauma theory, and the varying strategies of dark comedies used to work through different conception of trauma. This is crucial for subsequent chapters, which require an understanding of traumas that – while divorced in varying degrees from the brutal immediacy of war’s violence – recreate on a structural level the same kind of psychological events and reactions.

Echoing the previous brief discussion of Jake Barnes, the second chapter focuses on two authors who use traumatic violence to examine what happens when the structures of gender and sexual identity are damaged or destroyed. In Gore Vidal’s *Myra Breckenridge* and *Myron*, the eponymous character undergoes a sex change (changing Myron to Myra) and, after a violent car accident, reverts back to Myron. Vidal details the changing subjectivity of Myra and Myron, and also the abyssal space between them, as a way to suggest that both genders are constructed. In a controversial subplot, Vidal also features the rape of Rusty, a hyper-masculine young man, by Myra; the traumatic rape radically changes Rusty’s apparent personality in such a way that suggests the constructedness of his particular masculinity. The potential horror of Vidal’s subject matter is contained, protectively enveloped, in Myra’s bombastic first-person narration; her

constant and comic commentary shields readers – and perhaps Vidal himself – from the most skeptical content of the novel’s jokes.

In contrast to Vidal’s work, which makes his characters the unwitting victims of their genders, the second half of the chapter focuses on Chuck Palahniuk’s *Invisible Monsters* and *Fight Club*, which concern subjects who are to a much greater degree cognizant of their own construction. *Invisible Monsters*’ protagonist, a former model, is painfully aware of the extent to which the external appraisal of her beauty has constructed her subjectivity. Realizing that normative beauty standards have trapped her in an untenable mode of subjectivity, she inflicts a traumatic gunshot to her own face; in destroying her beauty, she is freed to reconstruct herself. The men of *Fight Club*, as I demonstrate, are not as precisely aware of the trap of identity and not as radically courageous in their attempts to escape. The unnamed protagonist of *Fight Club* only comes to understand the relationship between masculine beauty and subjectivity after moving through progressively more violent levels of purging: first commodities and belongings, then employment and pride. Only finally – in a series of violent and, again, self-inflicted wounds – does he confront his illusions of self, destroy them, and open up a space for a possible reconstruction. Again, the first-person narrations of the protagonists help to envelope the radical critique of the books, while Palahniuk edging his way out of realism and towards a comic absurdity helps to cushion the blow of the underlying message.

The third chapter marks a distinctive shift to the kind of generational trauma experienced by those whose parents – and more distant ancestors – were the victims of world-historical violence, specifically the Holocaust and Stalin’s purges in the case of Gary Shteyngart and the occupation, forced assimilation, and attempted genocide of Native Americans in the case of Thomas King. Here readers will be challenged, not only to adapt to a less literal and more

structural understanding of trauma, but also to reconcile the need to testify to historical crimes perpetrated against ethnic groups and races with the conflicting idea that ethnicity and race are illusory structures of the mind. In Shteyngart's *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, this tension revolves around Vladimir Girshkin's attempt to escape history, specifically the historical traumas of exile in the Pale and the looming presence of the Holocaust that threaten to position him as a particular kind of comic Jew (i.e., "the beta-immigrant" who cannot help but fail to live up to American standards of masculinity and capitalist success [179]). The picaresque narrative finally brings Girshkin to confront the specter of history by having him visit the Auschwitz death camp where Shteyngart does the difficult but necessary work of telling jokes about the Holocaust. Afterwards, in a melancholic dénouement, we are told of Girshkin's eventual assimilation into Midwestern American life. Here we see Shteyngart's (and also Freud's) mixed feelings about neuroses: they both plague us and make us who we are; sometimes curing them brings us peace at the cost of our selves.

Unlike Shteyngart, who seems to be 'inside' the critique of identity (that is, in on the jokes he is making), King works to disassemble Western identity (particularly patriarchy) while paradoxically re-inscribing native identity; the move is understandable and even laudable from a socio-political point of view, but the jokes in King's *Green Grass, Running Water* are too strong to be applied to only half of the equation. As I demonstrate, King's jokes eventually demonstrate the abyss of self beneath the idea of native subjectivity that King tries to set as authentic against the fiction of Western superiority. My critique of King's work comes with the uncomfortable task of participating – for vastly disparate reasons but unavoidably just the same – with the imperialist project of destroying native identity. It is only some consolation to turn to Freud's later years, where in *Moses and Monotheism* he struggled with a similarly tangled nexus of

issues: the illusions of the Jewish people, the traumas they had suffered, his own suffering as a member of the tribe (in spite of himself), and his desire both to belong to and be apart from history.

Finally, the last chapter turns to Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* and the illusions and traumas that surround national identity. In Coover's novel, we again see the progression from realism to surrealism as the trial and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg is reimagined as a spectacular public execution in Manhattan's Time Square. Despite its origins as a play about Ethel and Julius, the novel changed over time as Coover made the decision to narrate half of the work through a fictionalized Richard Nixon. It is in Nixon's character that we see most clearly the trauma of national identity. Nixon's jokes and Freudian slips reveal both the ways in which national identity has circumscribed and repressed aspects of his self – most notably Nixon's masculinity and his sexuality – and also the way that national identity has made him an accomplice to the historical crimes of the American government and the American people. Set against Nixon is the the fantastic character of Uncle Sam, who represents the illogical but psychologically captivating idea that nations are more than the sum of their parts, usurping the role of deities in organizing a people. Uncle Sam is indeed godlike and in the closing revelation of what the process of becoming the next president (the next "incarnation" of Uncle Sam) entails, Coover's offers a dark inversion on the idea of patriotism, and the suggestion that nationality is not something we feel or do but something that happens to us, violently.

The purpose of the joke is to reveal that this is an illusion; we invent nationality to buttress the other aspects of our personality which might otherwise be destabilized by self-analysis or a sudden shock brought on by contact with the Other. In the end, Coover can at best manage a negotiation between his two imperatives, historical testimony about the Rosenberg

execution and psychological honesty about the construct of nation identity; his novel is a neurotic compromise that might only be possible through dark comedy.

Throughout these novels, it becomes increasingly apparent that dark comedy is a proper continuation of the Modernist literary project which, at the risk of being reductive, could no longer fully accept the Enlightenment's holistic narratives about subjectivity (as well as epistemology, ontology, etc.) but at the same time resisted the move to deconstruct radically those narratives. The nihilism of sick comedy may be more intellectually honest, it may testify to the Real with more courage and less illusion than most other literary or philosophical modes, and it may sit more easily with post-structuralist theories of failure and fracture. These things we must grant. And meanwhile dark comedy, in acting with empathy towards the same subject it deconstructs, may open itself to critiques of selective blindness, hypocrisy, and bad faith; it may fail to witness completely the crimes it seeks to recount; and it may in fact reconstruct those illusions – those tropes, those hierarchies, those apparatuses – that post-war philosophy has worked so hard to deconstruct. And yet for the authors in this project there was no other choice. The resiliency, the 'yes, but' acknowledgement of horror and failure, the untheorized and untheorizable – why don't we just say it – *faith*, in humanity if nothing else; these things we must also grant. Martin Amis, in the coldness and clarity of his particular praxis, is fond of demonstrating that subjects never escape their own traumas. And yet people carry on, bloodied but unbowed. To paraphrase Beckett, who saw the abyss and went through it: They must go on. They can't go on. They'll go on.

[2] Immortality

Die Laughing: Working Through and Its Limits in Heller's Dark Comedy

... one might almost imagine that before the War there had never been such calamities as wrecks, earthquakes, and railway accidents, and that men had never been tried to the limit of their endurance with privation, fatigue, and danger, while familiar symptoms like hysterical blindness and paralysis are thought worthy of detailed description and are treated almost as novelties in psychological medicine.

Ernest Jones, "War Shock and Freud's Theory of Neuroses"

Meanwhile, as tragedy is lightened up as if it were comedy, comedy is left to fill in the gap to bear witness to the dark side of life, including war.

Melvin Maddocks, "Comedy and War"

...that which belongs to the body and is concrete, physical and material, this death is hidden with such great care that it borders on a frenzy... just listen to how people who have been involuntary witnesses to fatal accidents or murders tend to express themselves. They always say the same, it was absolutely unreal, even though they mean the opposite.

Karl Knausgaard, *My Struggle*

I. Reading Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*...Again.

Catch-22?

Again?

Catch-22 – the idea that became Heller's novel – begins as the military injunction that prohibits doctors from grounding 'crazy' airmen. Since doctors cannot ground the men, the 'crazy' must themselves ask to be grounded. However, asking to be grounded shows a clear and sane sense of self-preservation and negates any diagnosis of insanity. By the novel's end catch-22 has metastasized into the kind of totalitarian war-powers act that both obfuscates and extends government power: when *they* raid a Roman brothel, kidnapping and murdering, catch-22 both authorizes the raid and the accompanying denial of accountability (e.g., catch-22 means that *they* don't have to reveal catch-22 to *us*). In the end, catch-22's monstrous meaning is that "catch-22 says they have a right to do anything we can't stop them from doing" (Heller 375).

In the half-century since its publication, *Catch-22* has been the object of hundreds of studies. After several generations of increasingly sophisticated critical attention, something of a consensus – perhaps surprisingly, in our age of ambiguity and irony – has been reached. Critics largely agree about the novel's originating strands in Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Š Schweik*,²¹ in Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night*. There is also a good deal of agreement about the novel's fundamental structure of repetition and about Heller's deliberately anachronistic use of a fantastical (some would say cartoonish) World War II to figure the bureaucratic reality of Cold War America.²² And, although the novel contains a dizzying constellation of characters, most readers parse the novel along Manichean lines of existential battle: the plucky, underdog *us* versus the amorphous evil *them*, a counterculture dualism that also helped make sense of the 'mega-novels' of Robert Coover and Thomas Pynchon. Thus, the

novel's driving force – Captain John Yossarian's struggle against catch-22 – is both a literal testament to the horrors of wartime bureaucracy and an elegant metaphor for unwinnable scenarios of modernity.

So with Heller so squarely under our academic thumb, why return to his exhaustive, and occasionally exhausting, masterpiece? Some, like Christopher Buckley, argue that the decade of misadventure in Afghanistan, the geopolitical absurdity in which the United States returned to fight the guerilla forces it once backed in a proxy war against the Soviets, has given *Catch-22* new relevance. Buckley suggests that we might “imagine a brave but frustrated American marine huddled in his Afghan foxhole, drawing sustenance and companionship from these pages in the midst of fighting an unwinnable war against stone-age fanatics” (n. pag.).

Buckley's tableau is a tempting, almost touching one. But the goal of this chapter is not to resuscitate Heller in the name of political relevancy, in part because Heller does not *need* fresh apostles and, in part, because, as I will discuss, Heller's parable, though capacious, is limited in certain key ways as a cognitive map of modern warfare, or of modern life in general.

Reflecting on his first two novels in an interview for *Playboy*, Heller gave some rationale for these limits, explaining: “I put everything I knew about the external world into *Catch-22* and everything I knew about the internal world into *Something Happened*” (Merrill, S. 73). *Catch-22*'s reticence on the inner layers of identity – on interiority in general – precludes its use to take on fully the absurdity of the postmodern world. *Something Happened* is closer to the sadism of sick comedy (or, if we acknowledge the parallels between Bob Slocum and his creator, masochistic comedy); in its willingness to dig through the constructed façade of conspicuously White Male Protestant identity, the novel is a more skillful work of deconstruction than *Catch-*

22. Still, this project begins with Heller's first novel, not because it is a better interrogation of our age, but because it is funnier.

In *Catch-22*, we find the two fundamental themes of this project in a particularly effective balance: the negotiation of traumatic experience and dark comedy. The novel also demonstrates the difference between the mode and the genre of dark comedy. As a *mode*, dark comedy presents moments that, through ambivalence or juxtaposition, are both comic and tragic (or horrifying). As a *genre*, dark comedy presents a larger ambivalence about those things which provoke the most anxiety: mortality, sexuality and identity. In *Catch-22*, the primal anxiety is death and – while this is certainly not a new anxiety – Heller's approach is distinguished from previous works by its particular Modernist approach: struggling both to acknowledge and disavow mortality.

Moreover, *Catch-22*, because it is born from Heller's own traumatic experience, helps us think through the issues of trauma, from Freud to Judith Herman to Cathy Caruth's recent work. As a poet of both the personal vicissitudes of combat experience and the broader concept of war, Heller is uniquely positioned between the Victorian poetics of psychological 'cure,' of terminable analyses, and the postmodern poetics of psychological 'construction,' of interminable analyses. Heller can be thought of as conveying a late-modernist poetics of trauma, between the early thinking of Freud, for whom war-trauma led back to the primal and domestic scene and the Oedipal crisis, and Cathy Caruth, for whom trauma leads back to the abyss concealed by the façade of consciousness and identity. Heller's faith in the psychological depth of jokes – particularly his brand of absurdist Jewish jokes – overlaps considerably with Freud's own thinking in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. But it is Heller and not Freud who makes the critical connection: that the psychological mechanics of comedy – displacement,

projection, and, above all, fetishism – operate on the ‘toxic’ material of traumatic experience, the sensory overloads of violence, mutilation, and death, just as they operate on the ‘toxic’ material of domestic life, the sensory overloads of excess sexuality, conflicting sexual desire, and the frustrations of the Oedipal situation.

Freud, an early analyst of dark comedy, sensed the relationship between comedy and trauma (though his faith in his own system, however peculiar and contingent, prevented him from seizing it completely). Heller, moving forward from Freud’s early thoughts, lays the groundwork for *modern* dark comedy, that it is – as the epigraph to this chapter eloquently states – comedy that bears witness to the traumas of modern life when tragedy cannot. It is not, as Ernest Jones empathetically decried in his 1918 paper, that there were no traumas before war – that “men had never been tried to the limit of their endurance” (23) – but, instead, that war marked a key turning point between the Victorian poetics of self and those of postmodernism, a turn that was negotiated during the Modernist movement.

The move is from the poetics of the self ‘in general’ (the pathology, we might say, of everyday life) to the poetics of the self ‘in extremis.’ A natural disaster or a train accident puts extreme stress on the self – on the mechanics of the psyche – but only briefly, and almost exclusively in a way that reveals itself only to retrospection. War produces a sustained impact on the human mind – Jones and Freud often referred to the resultant altered state as the ‘war psyche’ – and because of this duration, victims can record their experiences *during* the event. As Heller moves from the ‘hot war’ in the Mediterranean to the Cold War of McCarthy’s America, he approaches the state we might call War All The Time. This is the move to postmodernism, from ‘event’ to ‘environment,’²³ taking the extreme or radical example – the psyche when fractured by extreme circumstances – and reinstalling it as the central example. Heller doesn’t complete this

move in *Catch-22*, although he ventures a massive attempt in *Something Happened*. He is, like many Modernist writers, still hoping for cures and answers, pavement strips over the abyss, for an end to the analysis. Mike Nichols, in his adaptation with Buck Henry, literalizes his argument “that *Catch-22* is about a character blocking out a traumatic event, coming in contact with it, and finally collapsing as a result – just like a classical analysis of a hysterical, psychoanalytical situation – and coming out of it able to make a decision” (Nichols qtd. in Thegze 12). Heller’s world is occasionally psychotic, broken from reality and presented as disconnected and fragmentary experience, and in that aspect resembles the ‘schizophrenic’ postmodernism of Fredric Jameson (minus, we might add, the ‘joyousness’ of Jameson’s description). But Heller ultimately seems to believe that these psychotic breaks can be mended, that the dark surrealism of his novel is the product of human actions, not the innate character of the universe, and that a *real* world exists underneath, one that can be negotiated with lucid moral logic. As Charles Harris argues, Heller specifically “refuses to accept absurdity as an ontological fact. Rather, he views it as a by-product of the bureaucracies in control of modern mass society” (35). The absurdity of *Catch-22* is more than a by-product, though; it is a traumatic symptom and Heller’s comedy constitutes a working through, a particular kind of testimony that allows a way past the trauma and its symptoms of paralysis, paranoia, and schizophrenia. Thus, Heller’s absurd is not as gleefully polymorphous as in Ionesco or as nihilistic as in Camus; his paranoia is not as totalized as in Pynchon or as phantasmagoric as in DeLillo.

All dark comedy retains *some* grim optimism. In fact, without the juxtaposition of hope and despair, dark comedy loses its ambiguity and becomes sadistic or sick comedy. Heller at least *believes* in an ‘end’ to the analysis, to the ‘coming out of it,’ at least for his protagonist, Yossarian. It is more difficult to offer such a prognosis for Heller himself.

But before any analysis of Heller, we first have to begin with poetics, with the mechanics of Heller's fiction at the micro level, which we might call the 'mode' of dark comedy. Next I want to show how Heller and Freud share a poetics – an interest in the psychodynamics of jokes – when it comes to the traumatic experience of death and mortality. Here, we shift from the 'mode' of dark comedy to the 'genre' of dark comedy, with its larger aspirations and ontological claims. Then I want to follow up on Freud's thinking on both trauma and jokes with some modern theories – including those of Judith Herman and Cathy Caruth – to see how Heller's work relates to them. I also want to compare Heller's particular modernist project – the dark comedy of *Catch-22* – with several other texts, completing my analysis of Yossarian by looking at Nichols' adaptation of *Catch-22*. Finally, I want to turn to a cluster of works informing Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. This final section will focus largely on one scene in Kubrick's film – considering its genesis and possible variations – as a way of mapping the spaces between sick and dark comedy.

II. The Poetics of Heller's Dark Comedy

It makes sense to start with the jokes.

Heller's novel is uncommonly fractal; that is, its overall structure at the macroscopic level is the same as its fundamental units at the microscopic level. The fundamental units, of course, are Heller's jokes, or as Freud would call them, his 'techniques'. One could open *Catch-22* to nearly any page and find examples of this, but I'd like to use the first appearance of the 'Soldier in White', a dark comic sketch that Heller uses three times.²⁴ This is, in large part, what gives some sense of order to Heller's loosely organized narrative. Take, for example, this throwaway joke, which comes after the more thematically (and narratively) relevant opening scene in which Yossarian, Heller's protagonist, censors letters:

Across the aisle from Yossarian ... was the captain with whom Yossarian had stopped playing chess. The captain was a good chess player and the games were always interesting. Yossarian had stopped playing chess with him because the games were so interesting they were foolish. (9)

Initially, there is some comic effect generated by the staccato of Heller's semantic overlap, in which each sentence seems to retreat and retread some semantic ground covered by the previous sentence before moving the micro-narrative forward. The strangely formal, almost syllogistic, quality of this language, especially when applied to the mundane (or the profane) strikes us as an incongruous match between form and content. Perhaps more important is the formal sequencing of Heller's joke, in which the first sentence offers unsubstantiated or unexplained claims, followed by a delay, and then an answer – itself often an absurdist or surrealist punch-line. Thus: “why did Yossarian stop playing chess with the captain?” remains unanswered; the interim sentence only makes the situation worse, providing us ‘information’ but not ‘answers’, until the final sentence provides a nominal answer but not a logical one. Heller gives us an answer but it is nonsensical; we are not told why ‘interesting’ eventually spills over into ‘foolish.’

Heller's novel is replete with ‘macro’ level plot developments that follow the mode of this ‘micro’ joke, ranging from the comic – as when we learn that Yossarian's friend Orr is practicing to crash his plane so as to escape to Sweden in a life-raft, which has a certain triumphant feel to it, despite its surrealist implausibility – to the horrifying, as when we learn the fate of Snowden, after increasingly revealing flashbacks. Indeed, Snowden's death is the darkest punch-line of the entire novel. It is the answer to Yossarian's riff on Villon, “[w]here are the Snowdens of yesteryear?” (35), as well as our own questions about Yossarian. But it is existentially meaningless: Snowden is killed by flak, a perfect metaphor for random and impersonal death, and there is nothing Yossarian can do for him.

Returning to the ‘micro’ level, let us consider another feature: Heller’s tendency to attach adjectival phrases to characters. These range from the compact and ambiguous - “Nurse Duckett, one of the ward nurses who didn’t like Yossarian” (7) – to the extravagant and recursive:

...the solemn middle-aged colonel who was visited every day by a gentle, sweet-faced woman with curly ash-blond hair who was not a nurse and not a Wac and not a Red Cross girl but who nevertheless appeared faithfully at the hospital in Pianosa each afternoon wearing pretty pastel summer dresses that were very smart and with heels half high at the base of nylons seams that were inevitably straight. (14)

It is not difficult to see where hostile reviewers, of whom there were no shortage,²⁵ might complain that the text could be, as Norman Mailer once said, ‘cut anywhere’ without the reader, or even Heller, noticing. It is also clear why Heller’s semantic inexactness, if taken as the result of undisciplined writing, frustrated reviewers. Take, for example, Heller’s use of ‘inevitably,’ implying the physical impossibility of crooked nylons, in place of ‘invariably,’ implying the woman’s unwavering attention to detail.

Using what is often called the ‘incongruity model,’ favored by cognitive psychologists but also mentioned in Freud’s *Jokes*, we can read the adjectival clauses attached to the colonel as comically obtuse: comic in the basic, logical sense that a joke subverts expectations, in this case the literary expectations that adjectival clauses enhance our knowledge of a character. As Laura Hidalgo Downing argues:

The approach to humour as incongruity is grounded on the assumption that humour arises from the defeat of an expectation, in such a way that one part of the joke, humorous anecdote or word play in some way involves a reversal of the meaning expressed in another part (see Freud 1966, 1976, Raskin 1985, Norrick 1986). This means that humour as incongruity to a great extent relies on the negation or contradiction of a part of the utterance. (111)

At the simple level, we see this in ostensibly paradoxical statements, as in Heller's précis of the "educated Texan from Texas" who, despite being a racist Malthusian, "turned out to be good-natured, generous and likeable. In three days no one could stand him" (9). At the more complex level, we get contradiction of *intent*; in short, Heller's prose defeats the realist conventions readers may be expecting. In Downing's terms, 'meaning' is mimetic realism and 'another part' is the earlier works of literature which set up our expectations. Thus, we expect to learn about characters, about their appearances, and, at the minimum, their outwardly observable habits. Instead, we're given only their relationship to Yossarian. This is itself a bit of a joke, if a very grim one, that the worth of other human beings is being measured, narcissistically, in terms of their ability to distract Yossarian from existential threats. Nurse Duckett is unavailable as a sexual diversion; the captain, in another joke, is useless to Yossarian because he is *too good* at distracting him, the games become 'too interesting.' This is not explained and so it takes on the character of semantic paradox, one of Heller's favorite linguistic tools.

Beyond the comic potential of the paradox, it is clearly possible to read higher-order logic into these often-elaborate phrases. The comically elaborate clause which describes the colonel, a parody of the lengthy adjectival digressions of Henry James, ironically *teaches us nothing about the colonel*. The joke, beyond the stylistic parody, is also that the description belies a particular fetishistic movement away from the unpleasant image of the colonel – who is dying under mysterious and thus irreversible circumstances, and who collects about him a nexus of medical and bureaucratic ineptitude (including a Harvard zoologist who is "shanghaied ruthlessly into the Medical Corps by a faulty anode in an IBM machine" [14], itself an anachronistic joke linking the violence of World War II with the computerized bureaucracy of the late 1950s).²⁶ This fetishistic movement, distinct from classical Freudian fetish but related to

Freudian thinking, moves away from the colonel and fixates on the legs of an attractive woman. The ‘inevitably’ straight nylons, the inevitable, or unavoidable, perfections of the woman, come as a sign of the woman’s fantastic nature: she is unreal, phantasmagoric, a reminder that she is unobtainable to Yossarian, Dunbar, and the other men in the hospital. The fetish fails and the narration spirals down towards the colonel’s frail and conspicuously mortal state.

The Texan (from Texas) provides another example: he is educated and also an ignorant racist. We could argue that the contradiction indicts the moral or ethical assumption that education is a good thing or that, even if it is a good thing, it can undo or counteract bigotry. On the same page the Texan turns out to be likeable, the subtle implication being that ‘in spite of’ his racism (or Texan provenance, or education) the Texan is morally decent. But it does not *matter*. Heller presents this information so he can twist it into linguistic paradox, not so he can mine the possibility of social paradox. Heller is not, even in the short run, interested in examining the social milieu of the armed forces (the Texan returns only briefly after this quick sketch). He is setting up a joke: the Texan is likeable and so everybody hates him. The joke works to indict language by performing a *reduction ad absurdum* to show that intelligible (though complicated) social situations boil down to linguistic paradoxes.

This ‘micro’ joke is recapitulated, in an inverted form, at the ‘macro’ level, in the relationship between Milo Minderbinder and Yossarian. In his increasingly rapacious and corporate greed, Minderbinder becomes insensitive to human life and is responsible for the suffering of Snowden – the gunner whose death traumatizes Yossarian – and eventually the bombing of the air base when he contracts with the Nazis. Minderbidner is a monster. And, of course, Yossarian is very fond of him.

Downing works to explain this sort of resolution to Heller's paradoxes by citing semiotician Neal Norrick:

Norrick further argues that this phenomenon can be adequately accounted for by means of frame semantics, since each of the two frames of reference can be interpreted as conceptualisations which contain schematic knowledge (Norrick 1986: 229). Furthermore, he argues that schema theory is particularly adequate to explain humour because the schema conflict that creates incongruity at a lower level can be interpreted as meaningful at a higher processing level, an approach to understanding that is based on the notion of a hierarchy of schemata. Norrick (1986: 230) further specifies: This leads to a hypothesis associating funniness with schema congruence revealed at higher level. The idea of higher-level schema fits, in combination with lower-level schema conflict, lends substance to the traitorial definition of humour as "sense in nonsense" or "method in madness." (Downing 117)

Norrick's theory, and the way in which Downing employs it, is convincing as a general theory of humor, and as a specific reading of parts of *Catch-22*, it works well. But this theory is incomplete because Heller also introduces the Texan as a foil for the Soldier in White, that is, as the next joke. The next joke is important; we learn something critical about Heller's world from it, but it is also important that the next joke is the anima of the previous joke. After all, the most striking part, the most frequently lauded and decried passage, of the chapter entitled "The Texan" is about the Soldier in White. Like many of Heller's chapter titles, "The Texan" might be considered the title of the joke, and the Soldier in White is the traumatic core for which the joke serves as a fetish, in the same exact manner that the hyperbolic description of the colonel's visitor is a fetish for the colonel's sickness.

Here is Heller's description of the Soldier in White, starting with his segue from the first part of "The Texan" joke:

[The Texan] sent shudders of annoyance scampering up ticklish spines, and everybody fled from him – everybody but the soldier in white, who had no choice. The soldier in white was encased from head to toe in plaster and gauze. He had

two useless legs and two useless arms. He had been smuggled into the ward during the night, and the men had no idea he was among them until they awoke in the morning and saw the two strange legs hoisted from the hips, the two strange arms anchored up perpendicularly, all four limbs pinioned strangely in the air by lead weights suspended darkly above him that never moved. Sewn into the bandages over the insides of both elbows were zippered lips through which he was fed clear liquid from a clear jar. A silent zinc pipe rose from the cement on his groin and was coupled to a slim rubber hose that carried waste from his kidneys and dripped it efficiently into a clear, stoppered jar on the floor. *When the jar on the floor was full, the jar feeding his elbow was empty and the two were simply switched quickly so that the stuff could drip back into him.* All they ever really saw of the soldier in white was a frayed black hole over his mouth. (10, italics mine)

From a strictly New Critical perspective it would be difficult to explain what is happening to the tone in this passage. On the one hand, the overall structure and development of the novel seems to preclude such serious darkness so early in the narrative. We expect to see light comedy in the opening chapters, and only later the novel's gradual darkening in tone, its decreasing number of harmless verbal puns juxtaposed against the increasing number of realistic depictions of violence and corruption, culminating in the Fellini-worthy 'Eternal City' chapter, convincingly delineated in many studies of Heller (especially that of Merrill and Seed, examined later in this chapter). We might, therefore, consider the Soldier in White as a particular kind of dark comedy. We are confronted with dark material – the horrible suffering of the soldier – presented in a comic, almost cartoonish, envelope; this certainly includes the head-to-toe cast, a familiar slapstick image from Looney Tunes (i.e. Wile E. Coyote, Sylvester and Daffy – after their plans to catch the Roadrunner, Tweety Bird, and Bugs Bunny backfire – end up in body casts after sustaining injuries that, were they to occur to *any* living thing, would be fatal). We laugh at the incongruity of the image with reality, but also out of a nervous acknowledgement

that cartoon logic cannot cushion *real* violence (the real laws of physics, the real conditions of mortality that cartoons disavow).

On the other hand, the meticulous detail with which Heller describes physical horror implies the existential suffering of the Soldier in White's condition. The scene is seemingly modeled on Dalton Trumbo's 1931 *Johnny Got His Gun*, in which the mutilated soldier, having lost his arm, legs, and face to an artillery blast, finally manages to communicate, and begs in vain for euthanasia.²⁷ The homage to Trumbo's realism, part of the larger genre of socially conscious Great War fiction, seems to demand that we take the scene as an eruption of the Real through Heller's skein of comedy; it seems like the surfacing of a traumatic event from beneath the defensive play of displacement and fetish that Heller's prose enacts.

However, the Soldier in White is not quite *real*. Swapping a saline drip with a catheter collector would cause, at the very least, malnutrition and dehydration, and at worst sepsis and death. The scenario is incredibly unlikely to happen *once* (in reality, the jars would have looked and been labeled differently), much less routinely. As Heller put it in *The Realist*, "that's a scientific impossibility" (278). Heller's joke is a rather sick metaphor, "a gruesome symbol" (279) that approximates the dearth of medical options for a comatose soldier. The joke's dynamics, which harness the anxiety related to excrement and the Bergsonian mechanization of bodily functions (the way in which the Soldier in White becomes a *thing*, in this case a grotesque thing), hint at the larger and ultimate themes of the novel. In short, the Soldier in White's condition points towards – approaches, but does not quite arrive at – the non-linguistic (and therefore non-comic and immutable) Real of the human body and the death and decay which the 'real' body signifies. In short, only a few pages into his novel, Heller begins nervously joking about and around "Snowden's secret" (440), the traumatic memory which struggles to erupt

throughout the novel, the repression of which paralyzes Yossarian and prevents him, like Hamlet, from taking decisive action.

But it is equally important that the joke – while it is capable, even exuberant in the task of describing decay and death is not a meditation on death. The joke cannot meditate; it cannot stand still. Heller gives us the grotesque horror of the Soldier in White to set up, once again, the next joke, where Yossarian and Dunbar accuse the Texan of killing the Soldier in White because he was an African American. Introducing the Texan and the Soldier and White builds up to this relatively minor cluster of jokes. There is light verbal irony: the Soldier in White is black (Heller, like Pynchon, is certainly not against minor verbal jokes for their own sake). There is also a much darker socio-linguistic irony. When Dunbar accuses the Texan of racially motivated murder – “you killed him because he was a nigger” (11) – the Texan defends himself logically instead of ethically: “They don’t allow niggers in here. They got a special place for niggers” (11). The Texan’s defense conspicuously circumvents the obvious moral defense, which would be ‘despite my ideological views I would never take a human’s life solely *because* of his or her race.’ This logic makes the Texan either a Fool or a sociopath, a nervous ambiguity left unresolved by his ostensible ‘education.’ This joke, which may only be at the expense of the ignorant bigot, quickly metastasizes from the conspicuousness of the Texan’s amoral logic to the conspicuousness with which it goes unnoted by Yossarian and Dunbar. The two take up the Texan’s defense on its own terms by arguing that a Communist officer smuggled an African American soldier into the hospital.

This is the joke’s darkest and most absurd irony: the horrifyingly unreal treatment of the Soldier in White is overlooked in favor of comically harassing the Texan. Again, as throughout the novel, there is a strand of social believability, functioning behind the literal level –

in that the Texan, a bigot whose good cheer is obnoxious in the face of the horrors of war and his own bigotry, deserves to get harassed by the putative ‘good guys,’ Dunbar and Yossarian. But this bickering, born out of ideological conflict, or combat stress or boredom, seems to obscure and replace the dark reality, in spite of its presence in their conversation. In other words: Yossarian should not be accusing the Texan of murder because the Soldier in White should not have died because his horrible circumstances never should have existed in the first place (i.e., the Soldier in White should have received proper medical treatment).

The joke builds on itself, pulling in all the episodes that led up to it, rising to its climax, and then fizzling. Or, rather than fizzling, it slips out of its own knotted syntax and moves to the next thing. We are told that the warrant officer, who has witnessed the entire exchange, is “unimpressed.” Then Heller moves on to introduce the Chaplain, the referent, deferred during the five pages of this shaggy-dog joke, of the novel’s opening lines (“It was love at first sight”), giving the false impression that the novel is back on some kind of linear track after a brief digression. But the novel is *not* back on track, at least not the linear track of traditional fiction. What we see again is a cyclical development, ‘comic riffing’ that builds to crescendos and then starts over in another direction. Heller’s jokes orbit around death and decay, the unrepresentable Real. As the gravity of the Real grows stronger, the jokes grow increasingly surreal. In one sense, the jokes about the Texan approach a Real, more Althusserian than Lacanian, that is, more political than psychological, a Real that is only implied, and can perhaps *only be implied*, at the level of ideology (of racism and political stratification). This is the Real of murder and death, the mutilation and destruction of real bodies. In another sense, the jokes warp the world so severely that actual death (i.e., of the Soldier in White) disappears into linguistic irony.

These are the two qualities of Heller's jokes and his narrative as a whole: momentum and mutation.

The quality of momentum is found in the way Heller's jokes constantly move forward; even when they are aimless, they are relentless. This momentum allows the novel as a satire to 'run and gun,' to string together, in the style of a stand-up comedian, critique and mockery at various levels (the sacred and the profane, the bodily and the political, the ideological and the logical), linking them with nothing more than nervous, associational energy. Heller does not meditate in the traditional sense; he does not tease out analogous causes or structures or directly investigate the implications of his own jokes. This momentum also allows Heller's narrative to move quickly away from any subject (or target) that it runs into. When the narrative runs into decay and death, which reappear for numerous reasons, not the least of which being the wartime setting, Heller's story, or rather the associative stream of jokes, is already moving forward.

Mutation here refers to the minor tricks of linguistic irony (puns, paradoxes, *reductio ad absurdum*, etc.) which initially describe an ostensibly 'real' world. These linguistic tricks increasingly mutate into straightforward descriptions of an 'unreal' world in which people's behavior is consistent with the logic of the jokes but inconsistent with socio-linguistic behavior as we experience it in other fictions. The jokes, at first confined to the register of narration, are allowed to have corrosive effects on the architecture of reality; the jokes mutate the world. Comic narration about a realistic world gives way to something more surreal, where the status of reality is relegated to the needs of the joke. Many of Heller's jokes are funny because of their structural incongruity with realist fiction. However, objective mimesis is not being systematically mocked by the narrative of Yossarian, in the way that Pynchon, for example, mocks objectivity with *V.*'s Herbert Stencil and his narrativized histories. Instead, the

relationship of mimetic fiction is inverted: instead of language serving reality, reality serves language.

Heller's *Closing Time* presents this situation in a different manner, with the realistic (and at times unambivalently tragic) streams of consciousness of Sammy Singer and Lewis Rabinowitz providing a contrast to the darkly comic third-person narration of Yossarian. This is in essence the 'exteriority' of *Catch-22* against the 'interiority' of *Something Happened*. The novel ends in a surrealistic apocalypse, a dark comic mixture of the Revelation of St. John and *Catch-22*, in which reality, once again, gives way to language. I would argue that, in this ending, Heller cements his life-long belief – we might even go so far as to say his faith - in language as its own domain. In one of Heller's final interviews, he demurs from explaining his choices in literary allusion (the Homer and Celine in *Catch-22*; the Dante, Thomas Mann, and Revelations in *Closing Time*), but he ventures that "*Closing Time* is very much about literature, contemporary literature, as expressed in its various literary styles" (Reilly 520). Heller's final novel, and his final literary legacy, often go unexamined because, in the end, Heller found his place with the postmoderns; as Heller admitted, near the millennium, "[r]ight now I am fascinated with John Barth's latest book, *On With the Story*" (Heller 522). Thus, to read *Catch-22* as the origin of dark comedy is to read a young Heller, and an early stage of post-war American fiction; Heller's momentum and mutation have not yet broken completely from reality, for the recursive world of metafiction or the language games of postmodernism.

To appreciate these ideas – the ways in which, as Žižek would say, Heller attempts to reconcile the Symbolic with the Real - they have to be put in concert with the novel's trajectory – the critical tradition of reading *Catch-22* as a novel that grows increasingly dark as it moves towards the 'revelation' of Snowden's death. It is also important to remember that the novel has

a fractal pattern, the fundamental until repeated at larger and larger levels. That fundamental unit is the unstable, fetishistic humor that approaches death and decay and then veers away, seemingly *pushed* away, not so much as to escape death, but enough to ‘orbit’ it. The fetish always latches onto some neighboring theme (like classic fetishes, an image or idea that borders – chronologically or spatially – the traumatic one).

In the case of the Texan, the narrative recoils from the death of the Soldier in White and latches onto the darkly absurd indictment of the Texan. In the case of Kid Sampson, who is accidentally but brutally killed by the pilot McWatt, who then commits suicide by crashing his plane into a mountain, the narrative begins with a comic riff on the absurdist (or, rather, bureaucratic) ‘falling out’ between Nurses Cramer and Duckett and Yossarian’s sexual frustration (also treated comically) and then abruptly turns, for two paragraphs, graphically violent:

There was the briefest, softest *tssst!* ... and then there were two just Kid Sampson’s two pale, skinny legs, still joined by strings somehow at the bloody truncated hips, standing stock-still ... Everyone at the beach was screaming and running ... They scampered for things in panic, stooping hurriedly and looking askance at each gentle, knee-high wave bubbling in as though some ugly, red, grisly organ like a liver or a lung might come washing right up against them...Kid Sampson was raining all over. Those who spied drops of him on their limbs or torsos drew back with terror and revulsion, *as if trying to shrink away from their own odious skin.* (Heller 338, italics mine)

This violence is a dark comedy of mutilation and death, in which the death of Kid Sampson replaces the comic incongruity of Looney Toons with the hyperbolic excess of *Titus Andronicus*. What remains is the logic of cushioning, a different but related kind of cartoon (which found its literal form, first in Matt Groening’s meta-cartoon *Itchy and Scratchy* and later in *South Park* and *Family Guy*) that presents such an excess of purportedly ‘real’ signifiers of death – blood, viscera, mutilated limbs – that our normal reflexive reactions (horror, empathy) are complicated

by humor. Bergson is again instructive: Heller's particular phrasing, "Kid Sampson was raining all over" both retains the person-ness of the dead soldier and accentuates the thing (or rather things) that Kid Sampson has become. Like Lavinia, he is mutilated and suffers a kind of death, but he refuses to disappear from view. Further, the death of Kid Sampson is so violent, so ridiculous, that it is pushed outside the bounds of traditional tragedy and our normal empathetic reactions.

But this rarified ambivalence of horror and comedy does not last. Heller shifts back to his fetishistic mode. Heller moves to Sergeant Knight, who ignores Doctor Daneeka (standing right next to him) and insists instead that the doctor, because his name appears on McWatt's manifest in an attempt to circumvent the bureaucratic requirement that he log flight-time, is on the doomed plane. Yossarian cries out, "Why doesn't [Knight] come down?" but it is left ambiguous whether, like Knight, his perception has been warped out of reality. This warping, which indicts the power of bureaucracy over common sense, is also Heller's privileging of jokes over realism. The chapter ends with the dull thud of this bleak punch-line: "Colonel Cathcart was so upset by the deaths of Kid Sampson and McWatt that he raised the missions to sixty-five" (339). The human tragedy – or, at least, the *horror* of mutilation and death, so powerful and so contagious that those exposed to Sampson's viscera try to 'shrink away from their own odious skin', defensively rejecting their own fleshy reality – disappears, first into ambiguity and then into the cartoonishly counterintuitive reaction of Cathcart.

But Heller is not done riffing. The entire subsequent chapter ignores the deaths of Kid Sampson and McWatt and latches onto the darkly absurd bureaucratic implications of Doc Daneeka's roster-fudging. In this case, as the novel has become progressively darker, we see the fetishistic behavior indulged to far greater effect than in the first case. Instead of a few lines of

absurdist dialog, after which the novel moves on, the second case provides an entire fetishistic chapter on the technical death of Doc Daneeka; Heller details the ironic improvements to the quality of life of Daneeka's wife stateside, as she receives sympathy and military benefits and, thus, ignores her own husband's increasingly frantic letters and moves on with her life. The chapter is a complete dark comedy within Heller's larger novel. To the extent that Doc Daneeka is a character we can empathize with, we also indulge in comic appreciation of the hyperbolically tragic marital and social circumstances. But there is a still darker undercurrent, in that the relatively comic downfall of Doc Daneeka, the result of his hubristic attempt to cheat the system, is the result of the senseless death of two young soldiers; the fixation on the quasi-death of Doc Daneeka, and the entire 'joke' of the "Mrs. Daneeka" chapter, obscures this violence.

One final close reading is necessary to map out the dark comedy of Heller's novel. Critics like Robert Merrill and David Richter present an impressively nuanced case for the passage from comedy to tragedy, one that seems to sit well with Heller's own commentary on *Catch-22*. Merrill's argument, borrowing from Richter's thinking on rhetorical closure, grasps the importance of repetition as a structural element:

Like other critics, Richter notes that Heller's tone darkens radically toward the end of *Catch-22*. Unlike his peers, however, Richter is able to explain the unusual method whereby this darkening is achieved: "Instead of going from incident to new incident, with each successive event darker in tone than the last (the essential technique in, say, Mordecai Richler's *Cocksure*), incidents and situations are repeated, frequently with few factual changes, but with detail added to bring out the grotesque horror that underlies their absurd comedy" (Richter 141). *Catch-22* darkens as it goes along, then, but the later, darker episodes are the same as the earlier, lighter ones! Presumably Heller wants us to reevaluate the repeated episodes and situations. (Merrill 40-41).

We might paraphrase his argument by saying that realism, as both an ontological belief and a stylistic mode, slowly but incrementally counteracts comedy. Laying aside for a moment that, for

example, the Kid Sampson episode is *not* the product of repetition and revelation, and accepting Richter's thesis as a general principle, he does not discuss comic possibilities alongside the 'grotesque horror.' Richter also does not consider comedy as an integral *part* of that horror, in part because his thesis is about rhetorical closure (in this case, of the seemingly 'uncloseable' cyclical nature of Heller's narrative); that said, Richter does not foreclose them. Merrill is more direct, arguing that "[t]he mysterious reappearance of the soldier in white seems to freeze all comic possibilities" (Merrill 41). For Merrill detail is a suggestion of both realism and the Real, and both displace comedy.

But a look at Chapter 34, in which a new soldier in white appears (returns, by Merrill's logic, which he admits is loose), shows Heller still bending away from the horror of the original Soldier in White towards comedy, including the classic paradoxical ironies. As one example of such irony, Yossarian recognizes the soldier in white from the bandages that conceal his identity; Yossarian's inability to recognize the soldier thus becomes the key to the soldier's identity (despite some clear differences in the soldier's underlying form). There is also Dunbar's hysterical and contagious claim that there is "no one inside," that the soldier is "hollow inside, like a chocolate soldier" (365), itself an awkward half-joking echo of the original series of jokes about the Soldier in White being black, which soon reverberates around the hospital ward and finally gets Dunbar "disappeared" (366). Even the haunting possibility that Dunbar, a U.S. soldier, has been disposed of by shadowy Pynchonesque forces, is abandoned for a brief joke about Yossarian's ongoing sexual frustration over Nurse Duckett; this is followed in turn by an absurdist argument over Nurse Duckett's grammatical formulation, "[t]hey're going to disappear [Dunbar]" (366).

Certainly the second Soldier in White scene is darker – and the flight of fancy that follows in the next chapter ends in death, coming very close, in fact, to Heller’s own wartime trauma – but this does not exclude the possibility of comedy. In fact, in contrast to what Merrill argues, the increasing horror presents an opportunity for increasing humor; the increasing grotesquery ups the ante for the dark comedy. *Catch-22* gets darker, but that does not stop it from being funny, or from getting funnier. Heller does eventually close down the comic potential of his scenes, for all but the most sadistic readers when he gets to the ‘Eternal City’ chapter and, following that, the climactic (and, importantly, cathartic) revelation about Snowden. But the process of *Catch-22* is more complicated than a comic novel that turns suddenly serious (or, for a cinematic analog, the way that *Life is Beautiful* is a funny movie that suddenly faces the Real of fascist violence). Heller nervously orbits the real, drawing closer and closer, allowing an anxious period of juxtaposition.

III. Fetish for Death: Heller’s Freudian Jokes

Heller doesn’t abandon the humor of incongruity, the surprise and higher-order resolution described by Downing and Norrick. Instead, he incorporates that humor as the joking envelope of a skeptical jokes. In Freudian psychodynamics, these skeptical jokes acknowledge the ‘construction’ of these beliefs; to put it another way, they acknowledge the Imaginary quality of wholeness and permanence that we construct around knowledge, the body, and life itself. Their power comes from their ability to work around the psychic obstacles – repression and anxiety – associated with these acknowledgements. In Freud’s economic theory, the mind is often a closed system; thus the power of the joke is equal to, is in fact the release of, the psychic energy used to disavow these ideas. The more strenuous the disavowal, the more potent the jokes that manage

acknowledgement, even partial acknowledgement. Thus, for Freud as for Heller: the more intense the tragic material, the more the comic potential.

This disavowal is a minor, but important, distinction from most criticism on Heller. *Catch-22* progresses, not from comic to tragic, but through cycles of dark comedy, increasingly dark *and* increasingly comic. It will become a much more important distinction for subsequent works in this project: comedy and tragedy cannot be mapped with a percentage graph. Comedy and tragedy do not total out to a set amount, the ‘full’ impact of the novel. When the novel is darker, for example, during the third and final iteration of the ‘Soldier in White’ routine, there is not *less* comic energy available. There is in the Freudian sense *more* comic energy available. As Freud writes in *Jokes*, “in laughter, therefore, on our hypothesis, the conditions are present under which a sum of psychological energy which has hitherto been used for a cathexis is allowed free discharge” (181). For Freud, the joke-work, like the dream-work, does many things: expressing denied wishes, manifesting symbols of repressed memories, and representing psychic conflicts that are too overwhelming for conscious thought *and whose repression is occupying a great deal of psychic energy*. And, in Heller as in Freud, these jokes need not necessarily share the literal content of their referents; they have at their disposal all of the Freudian literary techniques, including parataxis, metonymy and metaphor. Thus, Heller’s dark comedy is sometimes the presentation of dark or tragic material in a comic mode, which we might identify by verbal play and comic hyperbole, and sometimes his work is the more psychologically complex presentation of comic material that is, upon closer inspection, the symbolic replacement for the tragic and the horrifying. In either case, Heller’s jokes free up energy from repressing the ideas of death and decay and channel them into jokes.

Freud's theory of humor is problematic for many reasons, but it is helpful in bringing some structure to Heller's seemingly amorphous comedy. Heller, in his humor, combines a number of Freudian tropes: that jokes allow dream-like access to the unconscious, to repressed or traumatic memories and desires; that jokes may allow hostility or aggression towards psychologically protected targets and ideas; and that the fear of death, even the psychological acknowledgement of mortality, a castration more Lacanian than Freudian, may produce obsessions that operate like traditional sexual fetishes. In that manner, Heller's jokes are fetishes for death.

This is a psychical possibility that Freud touched on but never fully grasped in his paper on "Fetishism," where he takes a detour from discussing the traditional psychogenesis of the sexual fetish to discuss the case of two children whose father had died. The children neither accepted their father's death nor properly mourned him; they "oscillated in every aspect of life between two assumptions" (156). In the first assumption the traumatic event had not yet happened (the father was alive); in the second assumption the traumatic event had been skipped over, opting for the less traumatic effect (the child had inherited the father's place). The central event – the properly traumatic event – was circumscribed by a looking away, a psychological mechanism related to screen memories and fetishism. Freud's description, while circumspect, is paralleled at several points with the fetishist. Freud never elaborates the mechanics of the boys' mental processes (the vicissitudes of this oscillation); nor does he suggest if what he has briefly described is an analogy or a homology, or indeed *what* the mental process involved has been. Instead, Freud again utilizes the metaphor of currents of psychical activity, and the mind's ability to sustain ambivalence: trauma is denied and yet – in a way that is psychologically cushioned, more amenable to consciousness – trauma is also acknowledged. What Freud suggests, but does

not explicitly say, is that the fetish can serve the same purpose in managing the psychic idea of death as it can for castration. This managing, which Freud identifies as neurotic as opposed to psychotic, is important. Fetishistic joking, like fetishistic sexuality, is neurotic but not necessarily unhealthy or toxic. Indeed, Freud points out that many people live out their lives essentially unharmed by their fetishes. Freud might have generalized his idea of fetishizing into a theory of psychic management were it not for his insistence that so many psychic phenomena, including war trauma and the morbid anxiety experienced by combatants, stem from domestic sexual crises. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Robert Jay Lifton discusses with Caruth the importance of understanding the psychodynamics of encounters with death (his Freudian way of approaching what overlaps in his theory and Caruth's own as traumatic), and touches on the problem of Freudian dogma explicitly:

Rather consistently, Freud said that the idea or fear of death is a displacement of castration anxiety. Once you say that, with the central role of castration anxiety in the Oedipus Complex for Freud's opus, for psychoanalysis, then you are relegating anxiety about death to a secondary phenomenon. That is, for me, a key aspect of covering over. (131).

Neither Freud nor Jones would have allowed that Yossarian's morbid anxiety, or Heller's morbid and anxious comedy, was simply the reaction to death; psychoanalysis insists that we find in the psychic trauma of war a recapitulation of some earlier, and essentially Oedipal, domestic scenario. Jones, in his 1913 paper on "Morbid Anxiety," put it in a resolutely Freudian way:

The conclusions thus reached can be condensed into the statement that *morbid anxiety means unsatisfied love*. That already the Greeks had an intuition of the close connection between these instincts is indicated by their belief that Phobos and Deimos, the gods of Fear, were born of Aphrodite, the goddess of Love. (181)

The Freudian insistence on the primacy of the Oedipus complex in its mythological inevitably is bound to frustrate many, and his assumption that those traumatized in war had some

underlying Oedipal issues only complicates the issue by ignoring both the plight of the soldiers and the power of trauma itself. In many ways, Freud inaugurated trauma studies, which then had to be rescued from him. And yet, Freud's conception of identity – of the ego, of personality – as a series of constructions, as an architecture in which additions depend for their stability upon foundational ones, lets us think about the shocks of trauma in a sophisticated way. Freud assumed that damage to the adult personality, 'shell shock' as it were, was the result of an underlying structural weakness in the parts of the ego formed during childhood. But certainly it might work the other way: a stable core, *because it is, in the end, only a deeper and earlier level of construction*, might be destabilized by a shock to the personality. At the very least, what we learn from Freud is to consider the facets of our identity as interconnected and, thus, contingent.

Heller does not so much deny as defer this conclusion to *Something Happened*, where Bob Slocum's anxiety is situated firmly in the doubled Oedipal structure of three generations of domestic life. In *Catch-22*, we learn little to nothing of the childhoods of the characters, least of all about Yossarian's. If Heller's jokes, in prevaricating around death, unconsciously prevaricate around some Oedipal frustration, the reader is not to know.²⁸ Thus a Freudian reading of Heller's novel is at least partially foreclosed. That said, in his thinking about trauma and the mechanics of the psyche, Freud repeatedly gestures to the importance of psychic concepts over realities, even biological ones. These gestures mark the shift from early to late Freud, from the Napoleonic Freud of "anatomy is destiny" to the Modernist and even Postmodernist Freud, whose work powers Lacan, and for whom the entire psychic architecture becomes contingent, constructed, and relative. There is an important space between the too-easy psychoanalysis of Heller himself, and the bad-faith conflation of Yossarian with Heller, and the attempt to treat Yossarian's symptoms as if he were the product of a Freudian consciousness. The point here is that Heller's

narrative - as distinct from both Joseph Heller the person and Yossarian the protagonist - inherits from Freud a consciousness that is capable of wild ambivalence and divided loyalties, that moves frantically but intelligibly through association and metaphor, and that is both master – in creating ideas and ideals that trump reality – and also slave to those very ideas and ideals.

Thus, it is important to point out that Freudian castration is not merely the fear that the body is *not necessarily so* (that it can be mutilated), but the loss of the belief that the mother's body has a penis. Castration is, in Freud's own formulation, about the loss of an ideal, a speculative possession. If we unburden Freud of his desire to conflate penis with Lacanian *phallus*, that which marks agency and power, then we are freed from the embarrassingly patriarchal, if not outright misogynistic, assumptions of Freud. What we are left with is the ambivalent psychic mechanism of the fetish; Freud, in his paper on the fetish, calls attention to this ambivalence, as it is "in very subtle cases both the disavowal and the affirmation [asseverating] of castration" (156).

It would be easy enough, in the language of capital-T Theory, to construct an argument aligning the fear of death with castration in gendered terms: the Soldier in White is immobilized and penetrated in multiple orifices (by Nurse Duckett's thermometer, the saline drip, the catheter, etc.); Snowden's gaping wound could be rendered vaginal (and we might even believe, if we read selective reports of the author's real life dealings, that Heller had such a gynophobic attitude). But for the poetics of *Catch-22*, this is something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The novel deals with masculinity as the default; it is concomitant with what is threatened by the Pynchonesque 'them.' The novel's comedy does not joke about ways in which a soldier might lose his masculinity *without* losing his life. There is a brief riff on Freudian dream analysis, during which Major Sanderson suggests that Yossarian's "promiscuous pursuit of women" is an

attempt to disavow his “subconscious fears of sexual impotence” (298), which presents a number of interesting ideas but abandons them without any sort of meditative analysis. Finally, in Heller’s world, there is no *anxiety* around heteronormative masculinity as there is around life and limb. Again, aside from a single joke, an aside about Major Major’s past being so studious that “he was suspected by the homosexuals of being a Communist and suspected by the Communists of being a homosexual” (85), homosexuality is absent from *Catch-22*.²⁹ Despite the capaciousness of *Catch-22* as a metaphor for postmodern life, embraced by those facing the morass of Vietnam, of corporate bureaucracy, of suburban hypocrisy, by those facing the convoluted logic of 21st-century market capitalism, the novel’s reticence on sexuality and gender, not to mention race and ethnicity, ultimately prevents it from being what Tom LeClair might call a systems novel. It falls short of being a complete cognitive map of our modern world. *Catch-22*, like many case studies in the history of trauma studies, uses war as a metaphor for domestic life, war trauma as the blueprint for all traumas, but the default identity where white masculinity is invisible – punctuated only by morbid, joking exceptions like the Soldier in White and Chief Halfoat – is the only one we see under duress. In other words, Heller’s novel does not include race, gender, and sexuality as ‘speculative possessions’ that might be lost, that might be challenged by the corrosive deconstruction of dark comedy; these facets of identity do not constitute layers of the ego for *Catch-22*, and they are not threatened, even in the final collapse into psychosis.

From a historical point of view, we might see this limited view of the Ego as a function of segregation in the United States Armed Forces during World War Two and the military’s longstanding strategic denial of homosexuality in its own ranks. And this is certainly *not* the case, as I have pointed out, in Heller’s *Something Happened*, where Heller mines the very dark

anxiety around the core of identity, or in *God Knows* and *Good as Gold*, where Heller turns to Jewish identity. This invisible functioning of race and gender is also not categorically part of thinking about war; in fact, these functions become unavoidable when we look to the American fiction and cinema about Vietnam. This is in part because of the increasingly aggressive level of deconstruction practiced by those texts and the violent tensions generated by desegregated units fighting a war loaded heavily with racial and imperialistic overtones.

IV. Analysis Terminable and Interminable: Working Through *Catch-22*

In *Jokes*, Freud is at pains to isolate the psychic mechanisms in the very different contexts of someone who tells the joke and someone who hears the joke. In the preceding discussion, I have treated Heller's narrative as a consciousness that seems to operate, in a particularly Freudian way, as the joke teller. The reader *does not know* what has happened to Snowden – not in its full, graphic violence, not in its symbolic place at the dark heart of *Catch-22* – and so the reader's sense of the novel's comic dimension evolves in a quite different way. As Heller described in an interview for *Mademoiselle*, just two years after the novel's publication: "I tried consciously for a comic effect juxtaposed with the catastrophic. I wanted people to laugh and then look back with horror at what they were laughing at" (234). Heller's description aligns with Richter and Merrill's analyses, in which the novel performs within the either/or system of comic/catastrophic. In fact, Merrill describes this retroactive horror as a semiotic trap set by Heller: readers retroactively witness their own insensitive readings, their own inability to recognize the real horror (of war, of capitalism, of patriarchy and the sex trade, of entropy, decay and death) beneath *Catch-22*'s comedy. But even when reread, even after half a century, novels do not function as totalized units. Despite Heller's ontological claims on the

real world and the moral imperatives that follow from it, dark comedy retains its power, just as gothic horror retains power even after its ambiguity has been negated by the gothic explication. Heller underplays his own achievement, in pushing outside of such a binary system of discrete comedy and tragedy; his self-analysis does little to explain the novel's *enduring* power. In re-reading *Catch-22* the reader knows Snowden's secret and yet Heller's jokes are still funny.³⁰

The jokes are, however, funny in a different way. Upon rereading, even a defensive and disavowing reader may come to share Heller's sense of humor. And *this* is *Catch-22*'s enduring legacy: the novel is ultimately not a collapse from comedy into horror; nor is it an unending fetishistic cycle *around* that horror. Heller's narrative works *through* the horror.

Again, Heller's jokes are the fetish for death. His jokes at once deny death (which is the purpose of comedy, even in the simple, classical use of marriage – and the promise of procreation – against death) and in Freud's words represent a memorial or a monument to death. This is not just the real world occurrence of death but the effect of death as the Real, that which destabilizes and deconstructs the *imaginary* beliefs in the inviolability of the body and the immortality of the ego. In other words, death stands in for what is properly traumatic. It is too violent, too threatening to the ego, and above all *too much* to accept, too much to process and integrate into one's cognitive framework of the world. As Herman begins *Trauma and Recovery*:

The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness... Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried. Equally powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work... Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and the healing of individual victims. (1).

Herman's language is strategically ambiguous. When she says "banish from consciousness," it remains initially unclear if she means the redaction of official narratives of political violence, as in Nazi Germany or Apartheid South Africa, or the willful denial of

personal trauma under duress, as in many cases of domestic abuse in which victims consciously lie about their experiences, or the Freudian repression of knowledge, as in those cases of post-traumatic amnesia. Likewise, Herman's emphasis on "remembering and telling" cuts across the socio-political, domestic and psychoanalytic registers.

It is in this broad sense that Heller's jokes work, providing both psychological release and pleasure when they circumvent external obstacles (e.g., social repressions like taboos and conventions) as well as when they circumvent interior obstacles (e.g., Freudian repression and anxiety). However, too many readings of *Catch-22* attempt to unify Yossarian and Heller and miss that the novel contains, beneath the illusory mastery of omniscient narration, two distinct psychological portraits: one fictional and one autobiographical.

The first illustrates the *possibility* of psychological cure, following in the tradition of Freud and Breuer's early and somewhat simplistic theories and anticipating the more complex and therapeutic theories of Herman. This is the happy ending of *Catch-22*, the analysis terminable where Yossarian is freed from his moral paralysis, the scene most frequently oversimplified and then decried by critics as grossly sentimental and labeled with the perjorative epithet 'Hollywood.'

The second illustrates the *difficulty* of psychological cure, following in the tradition of late Freud and approaching the more pessimistic conceptual territory of Cathy Caruth's black hole of trauma. This is the darker current in Heller's writing, the analysis interminable where Yossarian, and Heller himself, are never to be free from trauma.

Working Through: A Genealogy of a Modernist Optimism

The reading of *Catch-22* that has evolved, in which Yossarian comes to face Snowden's secret and is then able to escape *Catch-22*, has its origins in Freud. In the 1893 *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud and Breuer put forth what is still, in many ways, the definitive and animating idea behind dealing with trauma:

...each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared when we had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked and in arousing its accompanying affect, and when the patient had described the event in the greatest possible detail and had put the affect into words. Recollection without affect almost invariably produces no result. The psychological process which originally took place must be repeated as vividly as possible; it must be brought back to its *status nascendi* and then given verbal utterance. (Breuer 3)

Freud's original psychoanalysis was built around a model of binary amnesia (as opposed to the complicated forms of ambivalent traumatic memories dealt with in later theories). In this model the patient experienced trauma – sexual molestation, a violent train accident, the gore and death of combat – and then repressed the traumatic event. The patient *sometimes* suffered from intrusive memories or flashbacks – literal but incomprehensible fragments of memory – but they more frequently experienced symbolic repetition: muscle ticks, verbal spasms, metaphorical dream images and screen memories (*not* fantastic constructs like dreams, but actual memories that, while not directly involving the trauma, referenced the trauma by one of the classical Freudian methods). By largely screening or putting the traumatic memory outside of consciousness, Freud's early theory allowed for cure simply by remembering the repressed memory, a process usually facilitated by the technique (or 'science,' as it was at the time) of hypnosis.

An important critical issue arises out of Freud's early and influential model: treating memory as a simple binary process of conscious and unconscious brackets the question of a memory's emotional charge. Freud's abreaction was the release of repressed emotional energy

attached to a particular memory. He clearly draws attention to the importance of abreaction, an insistence that remains in our cultural conception of cathartic remembering as an emotional event, repeated to the point of parody in melodramas (and becoming a structural staple in soap operas). Since early Freud's traumatic memories are completely buried, and the cure requires them to be completely exhumed, the separate dynamics of cognitive integration and abreaction go unexamined.

But hypnosis could not stand up to the increasingly complicated demands of treating traumatized patients and it fell out of psychoanalytic favor (if not completely out of use). Twenty years later, in "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through," Freud gives this précis of psychoanalytic history:

In its first phase – that of Breuer's catharsis – it consisted in bringing directly into focus the moment at which the symptom was formed, and in persistently endeavoring to reproduce the mental processes involved in that situation, in order to direct their discharge along the path of conscious activity. Remembering and abreacting, with the help of the hypnotic state, were what was at that time aimed at. (147)

Again, here Freud looks back at a moment when trauma was viewed as the neurosis caused by repression and the cure seen to be the reproduction of the original situation so that the original mental processes (a term covering both external sensory input and internal emotional states) could be properly experienced. Freud continues:

Next, where hypnosis had been give up, the task became one of discovering from the patient's free associations what he failed to remember. The resistance was to be circumvented by the work of interpretation and by making its results known to the patient. *The situations which had given rise to the formation of the symptom and the other situations which lay behind the moment at which the illness broke out retained their place as the focus of interest, but the element of abreaction receded into the background and seemed to be replaced by the expenditure of work which the patient had to make in being obliged to overcome his criticism of his free associations, in accordance with the fundamental rule of psycho-analysis.* (ibid, italics in original)

Here Freud describes something like an amnesia model while playing down the role of emotion (i.e., on abreaction). He instead focuses on the cognitive effort of overcoming criticism, the importance of a patient's accepting the causal links between an objective description of the trauma (the situations which had given rise to the symptom) and his or her symptoms (be it hysterical paralysis or morbid anxiety). Freud, who at this point believed in the mastery of the analyst, implies an amnesiac situation in which the analyst knows of the situations even though the patient does not. More complicated situations would come to light in which soldiers were, in one sense, aware of their own traumas and yet disavowed them as the pathological origin of their symptoms. This forced the debate between cognitive integration and abreaction that Freud allowed only as secondary before the war.

Freud finishes by describing a situation where the doctor merely analyzes "whatever is present for the time being on the surface of the patient's mind" and "employs the art of interpretation mainly for the purposes of recognizing the resistances which appear there" (147). Thus, Freud's modern (in 1914) psychoanalytical technique involves a "division of labor," in which the analyst "uncovers the resistances which are unknown to the patient" and the patient "relates the forgotten situation and connections without any difficulty." Freud concludes:

The aim of these different techniques has, of course, remained the same. Descriptively speaking, it is to fill in gaps in memory; dynamically speaking, it is to overcome resistances due to repression. (ibid)

It remains unclear, perhaps because it is irrelevant to Freud, whether psychoanalysis requires a patient to work through the repressed emotional content of a memory or to integrate a memory more properly into the narrative of one's life. Freud makes one suggestion, that forgotten memories exist separately from "the other group of psychological processes – phantasies, processes of reference, emotional impulses, thought-connections – which, as purely internal acts, can be

contrasted with impressions and experiences, must, in their relation to forgetting and remembering, be considered separately” (ibid 150). This ambiguity inspired Ruth Leys to ask the question, “[d]id the affects belong to the scheme of repressed representations apparently posited here? If not, what was the nature and mechanism of ‘working through?’” (105). For Freud, affects are sometimes part of the picture, as when they are collected under the broad category of mental processes, and sometimes not.

For Herman, emphasis on emotional catharsis “attempted to get rid of traumatic memories” (181). Herman is sympathetic to the desire to exorcise traumatic memories, but for her this is ultimately a fantasy, a magic transformation. Herman’s therapy is emphatically *not* the Victorian cure of hypnotherapy and instant catharsis:

Psychotherapy, however, does not get rid of the trauma. The goal of recounting the trauma story is integration, not exorcism. In the process of reconstruction, the trauma does undergo a transformation, but only in the sense of becoming more present and more real. The fundamental premise of the psychotherapeutic work is a belief in the restorative power of truth-telling. (ibid)

Herman also puts more rigorous, and more specific, demands on the extent and kinds of remembering that a traumatized subject needs to go through. She points out explicitly that both emotional and factual memories need to be incorporated in the act of testimony, not perhaps to be cured but to at least avoid psychosis. Finally, Herman goes beyond the vague suggestions of Freud that a patient psychically create the thought-connections, that in integrating a traumatic memory a patient draw the right conclusions. Herman’s traumas explicitly open up the patient to responsibility on the world-historical level:

Reconstructing the trauma story also includes a systematic review of the meaning of the event, both to the patient and to the important people in her life. The traumatic event challenges an ordinary person to become a theologian, a philosopher, and a jurist. The survivor is called upon to articulate the values and beliefs that she once held and that the trauma destroyed... The arbitrary, random

quality of her fate defies the basic human faith in a just or even predictable world order. In order to develop a full understanding of the trauma story, the survivor must examine the moral questions of guilt and responsibility and reconstruct a system of belief that makes sense of her underserved suffering. Finally, the survivor cannot reconstruct a sense of meaning by the exercise of thought alone. The remedy of injustice also requires action. The survivor must decide what is to be done. (177-178)

Yossarian: Analysis Terminable

Heller's portrait of Yossarian follows the path from Freud to Herman. Yossarian does not suffer from total amnesia, even when he is acting out figuratively, as when he sits naked in a tree at Snowden's funeral. When Milo questions Yossarian's motives for not wearing his uniform – Appleby and Captain Black have told Milo that Yossarian has “gone crazy” – Yossarian answers only “I don't want to” (262). It is difficult to determine if Yossarian is practicing disavowal or disingenuousness, but in either case it is not simply a forgetting; Yossarian clearly understands that “[t]hey're burying the kid who got killed in my plane over Avignon the other day. Snowden” (263). Neither Yossarian nor the narrative withholds Snowden's fate, and it is not clear whether or how Yossarian has repressed Snowden's secret. It is arguable, however, that Heller suggests a particular way in which Yossarian knows and yet does not know. We might argue both that Yossarian has not abreacted – that what he is repressing is the emotional memory of horror³¹ – and that, in his harrowing tour of the Eternal City, we see him experiencing these emotions at last. We might also argue that Yossarian *is* experiencing the emotions, fear and horror, but has not integrated the memory; he has not, as Herman and Janet would argue, built it into a narrative memory. The later argument aligns better with a literary approach, in that the flashbacks of Snowden's death literally erupt and break away from the narrative chronology. In fact, the horror of Snowden's death seems the *cause* of the disrupted chronology. This argument is complicated by our desire to conflate the narrative's consciousness with Yossarian's, something radically

prohibited by Heller's dedication to exteriority. We can infer – we are, in fact, invited to share in the process of working through with Yossarian – but we *cannot* know.

Heller, in creating Yossarian, was concerned with two things. The first was representing the psychotic world of morbid anxiety, of paranoia, of hallucination and fugue experienced by Yossarian under the extreme conditions of wartime stress. The second was representing Yossarian's ultimate moral decision, running to his responsibilities, that takes place at the novel's conclusion.

It is Herman's final injunction, in its weightier and more socially directed development from Freud, that is precisely the moral point of Heller's portrait of Yossarian. The narrative – though it frequently diverges from Yossarian's story – echoes Yossarian's own process of working through. Thus, the novel's nervous joking and fetishistic movement, as well as the interruption of the narrative by flashbacks – intrusive, iconic memories – progressively develop into a fuller understanding of Snowden's death. Yossarian is, in the end, able to connect the disparate strands of the novel: meditations on the possibility of spirituality after the apparent death of God, the impersonal horrors of capitalism, and the moral double-bind of a war in which desertion empowers a demonic enemy (Hitler) and participation all but ensures death. Yossarian's argument for defecting is not a pure or radical opting out; its ethical and moral soundness depends completely upon the *a priori* belief that the Nazis are already defeated. Nor is Yossarian's flight the sentimental cartoon described in so many critiques, which frequently misread (or fail to read) the conclusion of the novel (and the film). Yossarian does not follow Orr to Sweden; instead he is inspired by Orr, but only intends to make it as far as the Italian mainland.

Heller brings Yossarian through the hell of meaninglessness and puts him into existential action, but he does not quite bring him – after Kierkegaard – to transcendental faith (which is what we might call sentimentality if we were being generous). Though Yossarian registers something like infinite resignation in the face of Rome’s eternal horrors, he is not taking the impossible leap of faith to Sweden, or, beyond that, to attacking the machinery of capitalist bureaucracy. Heller ends his comic novel with a very real and moral Yossarian, attempting to rescue the sister of the Roman prostitute that his dead friend Nately had fallen in love with. There is still sentimentality here, of course, but it is grounded in plausible and ethical responsibility; it is no more preposterous than the idea of moral behavior in general.

Critically, *Heller’s* point is that even this conditional argument, a reconstructed system of belief that makes sense of Yossarian’s situation, which saves Yossarian’s life, is only possible because he has been freed from the traumatic paralysis caused by Snowden’s death. Only after working through his trauma, by drawing nearer to the most horrific moment, in all the graphic multi-sensory detail that Heller dedicates to Snowden’s fullest and final death scene, can Yossarian decide what is to be done.

It is seductive to return to Buckley’s tableau, and Heller’s canonized conceit that *Catch-22* is a metaphor for the Korean War, for Vietnam, for late capitalism and postmodernity. Heller’s argument is that postmodernity is not, contrary to what many theorists have argued, the true ontological face of the world, but a symptom that can be treated. Heller’s faith that underneath its superficial insanity the universe is something that can be understood and navigated, resonates with the progressive optimism of movements in the 1970s as well as with the more surprising, if more hardened, optimism of soldiers in Afghanistan. Moreover, that Heller was able to turn trauma from a debilitating pathology into a powerful, even necessary,

dialectic has the capacity to organize and empower large groups. *Catch-22* speaks to those who have endured cultural traumas, to those people whose sense of community, identity and self, were destabilized by the traumas, more diffuse, but ultimately equally as representative of death, of the Cold War and, in the 21st century, the modern state of War All The Time.

The power of Yossarian's trauma as a metaphor for such literally incongruous situations (despite Heller's efforts to figuratively 'nudge' his World War Two towards the late 1950s) is a testament to the cultural faith in the idea of abreaction. Put another way, Yossarian's narrative provides a model for working through, whose techniques, the fetishistic humor and the cartoon logic of the absurd, capture the emotional and existential quality of very different traumas.³² Heller offered a way to make the unreal manageable. Thus a novel literally about World War Two and figuratively about the Cold War also served the punk-rock community which, when it transcended self-amused anarchic posturing, registered a real existential trauma under the conditions of neoconservative government.

Catch-22 is a capacious metaphor, but it does not directly address many of the problems of the modern world; it provides few answers. But it provides a testimony, a form of witnessing that, in Herman's move from the personal to the political, provides benefits far beyond the private psychological struggle of the individual, and a way to tell a particular kind of truth about that world and, if we are optimistic, an end of analysis and a beginning to action.

Heller: Analysis Interminable

Yossarian's persistence as a metaphor, as the emotional truth behind any number of modern traumas, does not free us – does not free this project, in any case – from asking questions about the literalness of Yossarian's trauma and behind that Heller's own trauma. An analysis is compelled to answer for another persistence, the iconic image of Snowden:

...Yossarian, who had no wish to talk about the waist gunner from the South who'd been killed over Avignon and the small tail gunner Sam Singer from Coney Island who kept fainting away each time he came to and saw the waist gunner dying and Yossarian throwing up all over himself as he worked to save the dying man. It was sometimes funny to him since in just those gruesome anecdotal aspects. The wounded waist gunner was cold and in pain, and Yossarian could find nothing to do that would warm him up. Every time Singer revived, he opened his eyes on something else Yossarian was busy with that made him faint away again: retching, wrapping up dead flesh, wielding scissors. The dying gunner was freezing to death on the floor in a patch of Mediterranean sunlight, Sam Singer kept fainting, and Yossarian had taken off all of his clothes because the sight of vomit and blood on his uniform made him want to vomit some more ... by the time they landed, the medics were not sure which one of the three to take into the ambulance first. (*Closing Time* 92-93)

This is Heller writing about a contemporary Yossarian in 1994, in *Closing Time*. Fifty years after Snowden's death, the image is still tinged with nervous humor ("it was sometimes funny"). It is still disassociated and fragmented ("just those gruesome anecdotal aspects"), still compulsive (it is narrated despite Yossarian's having "no wish to talk about" it), and still repetitive (the paragraph circles around to Singer's fainting three times). Like Cathy Caruth's iconic traumatic memories, the image is immutable – nearly identical to Heller's description of the same scene in *Catch-22*, which circles back endlessly to the same scene:

...the rear section of the plane where Snowden lay on the floor wounded and freezing to death in a yellow splash of sunlight near the new tail gunner lying stretched out on the floor beside him in a dead faint. (226).

What has changed is that Heller has fleshed out the details of the new tail gunner – Sam Singer – and animated him with something very close to autobiographical details (unlike Yossarian, who is ambiguously Armenian, Singer shares Heller's biography: a Coney Island Jew who enlisted young, returned to the States to teach English before a long stint working for *Time*

Life Magazine and a divorce). It is as if, despite acknowledging the interpretative space between Yossarian and himself, Heller has doubled down, re-witnessing Snowden's death. Heller jokes, nervously, that Yossarian and Singer's trauma is taken by the medics to be equivalent to Snowden's fatal wound. Singer, like Yossarian, is permanently altered by Snowden's death – "I know where I was when the radio gunner Snowden was killed on the second mission to Avignon, and that meant more to me than the Kennedy assassination did later, and still does" (*Closing Time* 211) – and reflects, on several occasions, on Snowden's death as part of his long monologues on death and mortality. The lasting effect of his trauma is the destruction of his belief in immortality – the castration, in our modified usage, of the phallus that stands for the everlasting mastery of the ego – surfacing after a long latency period in which Singer disavowed the lesson of Snowden's death. It is too easy to say Sammy Singer *is* Joseph Heller. *Closing Time*, as one of many metafictional flourishes, already has a Joey Heller (and a Vonnegut, too). But it is too striking to leave it be.

If Yossarian – the cured victim of reminiscences *par excellence* – is still suffering, and Sammy Singer is still suffering, then was Heller still suffering? And, more importantly, what does that mean for the analysis terminable of *Catch-22*?

This line of questioning may seem a bit naïve, or even foolish. Heller himself has disavowed the literalness of *Catch-22*³³ and most critical studies – starting with those assembled in *A Catch-22 Casebook* and continuing through the work of Seed and Merrill – tend to move quickly over the conspicuous similarities between *Catch-22* and Heller's own wartime experiences. Merrill, for example, dismisses *Catch-22*'s autobiographical elements at the very beginning of his study of Heller with an abrupt aside:

Catch-22 seems highly autobiographical. It describes the later war years in the Mediterranean theater, where Heller was a bombardier (though his hero Yossarian

is a lead, not a wing, bombardier). Heller's squadron first lost a plane over Ferrara, the scene of Yossarian's "conversion" to fear; Heller experienced something over Avignon "ninety percent" like the Snowden sequence; and Heller found the "ambience" of wartime Rome one of "pleasure," much as it is in the novel until very near the end. *These autobiographical connections are relatively minor, however.* (emphasis added, 3).

A notable – and insightful – exception to this critical trend is Michael Scoggins' article, which delineates the extensive autobiographical content in *Catch-22*. He shows there is a great deal more of Heller's real world – even including the *real* island of Pinosa – in the novel.

Scoggins, a military historian, is predominately concerned with pointing out how accurate *Catch-22* is concerning the Army's air war in the Mediterranean. This argument is bolstered by Nichols' obsessive restoration of B-25s for his film adaptation (creating in the process the world's twelfth largest air force). Scoggins' article provides a helpful corrective to a tradition that has too easily accepted Heller's post-facto description of *Catch-22* as a book about Korea and Vietnam, but most importantly he puts special emphasis on the origin of Snowden's death scene, which "[a]s Heller was to reveal in later interviews and his autobiography... was a synthesis of several of his own combat experiences" (218). In the first of two missions (as in the novel, over Avignon), one of the planes in Heller's squadron was shot down. Scoggins turns to Heller's own recollection, in his autobiography *Now and Then*:

I was in the leading flight and when I looked back to see how the others were doing, I saw one plane pulling up above and away from the others, a wing on fire beneath a tremendous, soaring plume of orange flame. I saw a parachute billow open, then another, then one more before the plane began spiraling downward, and that was all. (181-2)

This incident – which took the lives of two of Heller's friends – shows up relatively intact in *Catch-22*; in the set-up to one of the novel's darker jokes, Chapter 35 opens with Yossarian's prayer – his first and only appeal to God – that his friend Nately will not fly any additional

missions and ends with a midair collision that takes the lives of Yossarian's friends Nately and Dobbs. The chapter's final line – another dull thud – “And Nately, in the other plane, was killed too” (Heller 376), signals the book's final descent into darkness; it is Nately's death that sends the Chaplain spiraling into his Kafkaesque nightmare (in “The Cellar”) and Yossarian harrowing the hell of Rome (in “The Eternal City”) and, finally, leads to the final revelation of Snowden's secret. To trace the construction of that scene's early versions, in which Snowden appears to be badly – but not mortally – wounded, Scoggins points to Heller's next mission to Avignon, during which:

Heller made his way to the rear of the airplane and found the radio gunner lying on the floor with a large oval wound in his thigh; a piece of flak had punched through the side of the plane and torn open the gunner's leg, just as recounted in *Catch-22*. Fighting down his own nausea at the sight of the wound, Heller poured sulfa powder into the cut, bandaged it and gave the gunner a shot of morphine. When the young man began to complain of feeling cold, Heller reassured him that they would be home soon and that he would be all right. Once the plane landed, the wounded gunner was taken to the base hospital and eventually made a full recovery... this action that netted Heller his Air Medal. (219)

Scoggins then tracks down the real referent for Snowden's true wound, the one that ultimately reveals his secret in the novel's final flashback:

Heller took the rest of the Snowden story, the part about the horrible intestinal wound, from an incident that occurred on an earlier mission over Ferrara, Italy, on 16 July 1944. A radio gunner in Heller's squadron, Sergeant Vandermeulen, had his midsection sliced open by a burst of flak and died in the back of his aircraft, moaning that he was cold. (ibid)

Finally, Scoggins quotes Heller himself again:

For my episodes of Snowden in the novel...I fused the knowledge of that tragedy with the panicked copilot and the thigh wound to the top turret gunner in my own plane on our second mission to Avignon. (220)

Scoggins then moves on to other aspects of the novel drawn from Heller's real life experiences, satisfied in having put the lie to the idea that, as Merrill argues, the autobiographical connections are minor. But Scoggins' research has more profound meaning, because it reveals Snowden as far more complicated than either a purely fictional construct or a purely iconic memory. For Yossarian, working through Snowden's death makes perfect sense; it anticipates Herman's therapeutic theories of trauma and recovery. But what does it mean, for Heller, that he cannot be rid of Snowden's image, though there never was a Snowden?

This forces us to ask about a particular model of trauma, which Leys refers to as anti-mimetic, in which "violence is imagined as coming to the subject entirely from the outside" (37). This is Yossarian's trauma, and working through it – presented as possible in *Catch-22* but then revealed as far more difficult in *Closing Time* – involves integrating traumatic memories into a meaningful narrative. In other words, for most of the novel Yossarian cannot make sense of Snowden's death, a situation rooted in Heller's manipulation of the real events of his World War Two experience. In reality, Heller was able to identify and treat the door gunner's wound, and for his decisive action he was awarded a medal. In the novel, Snowden cannot be helped, and Yossarian is awarded an absurdly meaningless medal (unrelated to Snowden's death), while he is naked at Snowden's funeral. The scene's absurd comedy is yet another fetish for the meaningless horror of death, a meaninglessness that haunts Yossarian until – at the novel's end – Yossarian *creates* meaning, creates a narrative that privileges his own survival and moral priorities. This new narrative martyrs Snowden, making his death the impetus for Yossarian's rebirth, and in doing so retroactively gives meaning to Snowden's death scene. It has become the popular reading of *Catch-22*'s conclusion that Yossarian is cured, that his decisive action is made possible by his cure and that he is no longer haunted by intrusive memories of Snowden.

Once we read *Closing Time*, this sanguine prognosis is more difficult to sustain. One important thing to consider is the impact of aging as traumatic for Heller (who died a few years after publishing the novel). E. Ann Kaplan first theorized the psychic damage of aging in “Trauma, Aging, and Melodrama” as a quiet trauma – ignored in trauma theory’s fixation on violence and violent imagery – and returns to the idea in *Trauma Culture*, to suggest the ways that Freud was traumatized by “losing the power and authority he relied on for his identity” (46).

In Kaplan’s argument about Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud’s anxiety about aging – about the cancer rotting his jaw, about physical powerlessness – combined with his exile from Vienna to England to escape the invading Nazi forces “triggers prior psychic conflicts” (ibid), including Freud’s anxious uncertainty about his childhood identity. As with Freud’s own theory of trauma – in which adult traumas reactivate childhood Oedipal crises – Kaplan theorizes that the trauma of aging is likely to revisit the traumas of adolescence (although not strictly or necessarily within the Oedipal context). For Western culture – and, likely, many other cultures – this means that the trauma of aging is gendered:

For women, identity crises hover around bodily changes in a culture obsessed with normative ideas of feminine beauty. The core of feminine subjectivity is threatened. For men, aging identity-crises involve loss of power and prestige. (Kaplan 46).

For men the core of masculine subjectivity is also threatened, but *Catch-22* is silent on this topic. With the exception of a brief scene in which the Chaplain frets that he is insufficiently virile to satisfy his wife sexually, *Catch-22* avoids the traditional Jody, the phantasmagoric figure of infidelity and masculine insecurity, the ghostly male figure – who descends from the blues archetype ‘Joe the Grinder’ (with ‘grind’ having the same sexual connotations it does in the early 21st century) – who courts and copulates with girlfriends and wives stateside during wartime deployment. It also never touches on the long-standing relationship between combat stress and

masculinity which, in crude but familiar battlefield rhetoric, feminized traumatized soldiers and, in psychological circles, provoked anxious resistance to Freud's introduction of male hysteria as a theory of combat trauma. Thus *Catch-22* never connects Yossarian's traumatic experience with Snowden to any anxiety about his masculinity (in fact, he appears unaffected in his dealings with his Roman prostitute).

In stark contrast, *Closing Time* – in its much freer use of graphic sexuality and profanity³⁴ – repeatedly circles around to Yossarian's near-comical libido, juxtaposed against the declining (or extinct) sexual prowess of Sammy Singer and Lewis Rabinowitz. Yossarian refuses to grow up, both psychologically and literally. In addition to his sexual indefatigability, he is also, despite having been twenty-eight in *Catch-22*'s 1944,³⁵ only in his sixties – instead of his late seventies – in the novel's present tense of 1994. Yossarian appears, in Heller's final novel, like an incarnation of the Id – or of an Ego that has traded mastery for the Id's inexhaustibility – and Heller suggests that in his implausible, even impossible, immortality he will outlive the novel's apocalypse.

In light of Kaplan's argument, it is difficult *not* to consider Heller and Freud as aging poets, desperate to revisit the themes of their earlier works – the same works that once granted them power and prestige. It is also difficult to ignore Heller's elegiac but obsessive meditations on death and mortality in *Closing Time*, and the ways in which the trauma of aging reactivates the earlier traumas – the violence and death of World War Two – that inspired his first work. Thus, it makes perfect sense that Heller would return – despite vowing not to repeat himself – to Yossarian and his traumas, and that he would, through Yossarian, disavow the trauma of aging. *Closing Time* is a thoroughgoing investigation of the trauma of aging; in classic Freudian style, Heller's jokes, darkest in the twilight of his career, nervously poke old wounds.

Thus, the images of Snowden are Joseph Heller's own intrusive memories inflicting themselves, and then many decades later, re-inflicting themselves, still insisting up themselves in their iconic, literal, and literally unchanging quality. Thus, *Catch-22* and *Closing Time* are, at best, a neurotic form of therapy and, at worst, a traumatized compulsion to repeat. But, the problem – an obvious one, but one that seems easy to overlook – is that the iconic image of Snowden, dying in a pool of Mediterranean sunlight, is not a literal or iconic image for Heller.

It never happened.

Or, at least, it never happened the way Heller describes it. It is, instead, the condensation – in the Freudian and literary senses – of the two events Scoggins describes, combined with the absurdist and satirical element of the missing painkillers (which indict Milo, and modern capitalism, in Snowden's suffering). In its fullest representation – in *Closing Time* – Heller imagines not one but *two* dissociated, replacement avatars (Singer and Yossarian) for himself in the situation. It is an unreal – though no less powerful – orchestration of literary techniques, appropriate – even necessary – for experiences that were, as the 1970 *Time* review put it, “too extravagant to be fiction and too real to be borne” (*Casebook* 336).³⁶

These are the techniques – of literature and of the psyche – that operate on traumatic memories in the mimetic theories which Leys contrasts against those of Caruth. Leys calls Caruth's theories “the pathos of the literal,” in that:

[s]uch an analysis tends to produce a conceptualization of the dissociated or traumatic memory as completely literal in nature, as if an account of the traumatic as absolutely true to external reality, uncontaminated by any subjective, unconscious-symbolic or fictive-suggestive dimension is necessary in order to reinforce a rigid polarization between inside and outside that is otherwise threatened by the mimetic dynamic. (Leys 38)

Leys gets at precisely our issue. When it comes to the bulk of Heller's novel, anti-mimetic theory – the theory of iconic memories – ignores Heller's fetishistic jokes as either

symptomatic (i.e., as an unconscious-symbolic form of the trauma) or as a mode of working through. And, when it comes to the iconic image of Snowden, anti-mimetic theory can only treat the scene as absolutely true to the external reality of Heller's experiences. But, perhaps most importantly, anti-mimetic theories treat the violence of trauma as belonging to the traumatic image itself. And while the real referents of Snowden – Heller's door gunner's wounded leg, the neighboring plane in formation bursting into flame, flak bursting near the window – may have, in and of themselves, been traumatizing, Heller was clearly able to recount them and to integrate them into a meaningful, autobiographical narrative in *Then and Now*. But what about Heller's conversion to fear, the fact that Heller was so shaken by his brush with death that he sailed home on a transport rather than set foot on a plane again and then avoided – for the rest of his life³⁷ – flying whenever possible? What about the collapse – the deconstruction – of Heller's speculative possessions, the shattering of his Imaginary sense of immortality, and the repercussions for Heller's deeper psychic structures, his Ego itself? This is a different kind of trauma, the trauma of an internal event, a psychic loss, and it does not make sense to ask for an iconic image of it, or to theorize that reproducing or reclaiming a faithful version of it would be therapeutic. We know what the physical trauma looks like. But what does the collapse of a psychic structure look like? What does it mean to represent accurately – in Herman's language, to tell the truth about – a psychic event? What kind of cure could that possibly bring about?

Here, we find ourselves facing a more postmodern type of trauma. What is properly traumatic – what is shocking and difficult to integrate – about the loss of speculative possession is the revelation of its initial constructed-ness. If the Imaginary functions of self – wholeness, completeness, immortality – are disrupted, they are revealed to *have not been ontological facts*. Reconstructing a sense of self – which should be the culmination of the cure – after such a

trauma will always carry with it an aspect of bad faith or repression. While Yossarian's narrative ends with reconstruction – in apparently good faith – and healing, for Heller it seems foolish to speak of cures. In part, this is because Heller is still ambivalent about the lesson of Snowden: that death is random, meaningless, and inevitable. *Like all Dark Comedy, Heller's novel retains some underlying attachment to that which is threatened by trauma;* in other words, the dark comedy of *Catch-22* is Heller's – and the Ego's – resilient attachment, even in the face of mounting evidence, to its own sense of immortality. Thus Yossarian's dark comic formulation “live forever or die trying” (*Catch-22* 37) captures both the acknowledgement and the disavowal of death.

And so for Heller himself we have analysis interminable, a never-ending working through or, more accurately, a system of neurotic management. In Heller's case, that neurosis is comedy. And, lest this be confused with some prosaic suggestion that laughter is the best medicine, consider that Heller's comedy is a *dark comedy*. We laugh, but because we misunderstand the precarious position Heller occupies, stuck in fetishistic orbit around a psychotic collapse. Or, we laugh because we participate alongside Heller, using his dark comedy as part of our own system of neurotic maintenance. Because if we've read *Catch-22* even once, and read it well, we know that Snowden's secret is ours, too.

And what our shared postmodern predicament means for representation is that the real trauma – not the image of violence but the internal deconstruction that violence triggers, the *recognition* that it prompts – can only be approached metaphorically. Snowden is not the literal truth of what happened to Heller, because that image *cannot* be reproduced. It can only be reproduced figuratively, and it is thus bound to Leys' fictive-suggestive, to the subjective forms that this recognition – of our own constructions, of the abyss beneath them – can take in fictional

works. In Heller's world that figure is a joke: at once touching the Real and bending away from it, capturing the process of the psyche itself, holding the idea of death at bay without ever surrendering it. Heller's reaction, in true Modernist style, tries to reconcile everything; his jokes capture some of the iconic quality of cognitive reintegration and the metaphorical quality of emotional abreaction. On the one hand: the insistence on the literal, on both the necessity of recovering veridical truth and acknowledging the violence of the Real. On the other hand: the insistence of Freudian tropes, on both the importance of recovering emotional truth and recognizing the interior dynamics of trauma.

If Heller is successful, then his testimony – his dark comedy – provokes a response – our dark laughter – that serves as recognition of his trauma. But dark comedy, Heller's testimonial mode – because it struggles to accommodate both a real exterior trauma ('what happened') and a psychological interior trauma ('what it felt like') – is necessarily a compromise. Testimony is therapeutic, but therapy is not the same as cure. Dark comedy, for Heller, represents a Freudian neurosis – a way to manage, but not defeat, the horrors of modernity.

For the reader, the experience is different, and we're forced to ask: what does the novel offer – in its presentation of traumatic material – to its readers? For those readers who share Heller's trauma – not the historical trauma but the psychic blow to the Imaginary sense of immortality and control – the novel offers a blueprint for management. This is, after all, the social aspect, the creation of community, that Judith Herman demands we take heed of. Laughter in this case is recognition – the mutual empathy of trench or gallows humor – of the dark truths just behind Heller's jokes. However, for the majority of readers, who have not faced death as directly as Heller and who retain a greater sense of Imaginary integrity, the novel's dark comedy is a way to threaten the Ego without the destructiveness of a traumatic encounter. As Herman

argues, the testimony of the traumatized may, in turn, traumatize those who receive and process that testimony (the therapist, the documenter, the audience). The potential sadism of this move is, for Heller, balanced by its sociopolitical potential: in traumatizing readers the novel might also inoculate them; by forcing them into neurotic laughter it might prepare them to face more extreme threats to the Ego. In other words, the novel may allow them to respond – however neurotically – without succumbing to psychosis, without accepting the brutal absurdity of catch-22 as an ontological fact.

V. Killing Joke: Sick Comedy in Nichols, Kubrick, and Hasford

Nichols' Nightmare

Mike Nichols undertook the near-impossible when he and Buck Henry started adapting Heller's novel for the screen. Many critics – after the fact – argued that Nichols and Henry had failed and that their failure had been an *a priori* certainty. As Brian Bell put it: “only an insane director could have satisfactorily interpreted the devastating illogicalities of *Catch-22* onto the screen” (22). Leaving aside the rather subjective manner of ‘success,’ we can say that the differences between the film and the novel are many; it is best to leave most of those differences to comparative studies. One important difference, not directly linked to comedy, but that bears mentioning with regards to our discussion of trauma, is the clearer vision of Yossarian as an essentially libidinal character; in his insistent pursuit of sexual gratification – his comic failures with Nurse Duckett, his hyperbolic pursuit of Luciana (to the thundering arpeggios from Richard Strauss's ‘Sunrise’ section of *Also sprach Zarathustra*, the film's only non-diegetic music) – Alan Arkin seems more like the freely and compulsively sexual Yossarian of *Closing Time*.

Heller objected in several interviews to Nichols' treatment of Yossarian's sexuality: about downgrading Nurse Duckett's rejection from tragic loss to "a kind of rape scene on the beach" (Heller in *Casebook* 356), and – more importantly – about the film's fantasy scene, which was Nichols' own invention. Heller's complaint about the fantasy scene – that he "didn't understand it" (*ibid*) – stems both from its ambiguity – did it happen? Is it memory or fantasy? – and its disconnection from Yossarian's emotional life – did he love Duckett? The latter question, given Heller's treatment of women in his work, may strike us as ironic, but the former is in keeping with Heller's comic mode, which presents the clearly absurd as if it were unambiguously real.

In Nichols' sequence, Yossarian is struck in the leg by flak and loses consciousness; his brush with death – in keeping with Heller's logic – triggers a flashback (in both its literal and Freudian sense) of Snowden. Next, however, we see Yossarian – distracted at the moment he is about to discover Snowden's fatal wound and, thus, his 'secret' – passing into a seemingly fantastical space. In it, Yossarian swims towards a floating dock, where Nurse Duckett stands naked, having stripped off and thrown her robe into the water. Though the viewer of course cannot know it yet, this is the same dock that Hungry Joe will be standing on when he is spectacularly bisected. As Yossarian grabs Duckett's robe, he is pulled down into the ocean and the scene cuts to the hospital. Here, Nichols' invented scene – a sexual fantasy, filmed in unreal slow motion – serves to distract or protect Yossarian from the overpowering Real of death. While this protection from Hungry Joe's death – which has not yet happened – is only possible in the film's associative dream logic, I would argue that in Nichols' classically Freudian mode this fantasy scene could function as a real memory – from Yossarian's sexual past with Nurse Duckett – that is being used as a screen memory for Snowden's death. Nichols' implication, thus, is that there is some psychological relationship – some psychical connection – between sex and

death in Yossarian's mind, a connection that links his sexual memories to his traumatic memories. Nichols follows up on this with his third flashback, this time triggered by Yossarian's scene with Luciana, who offers to dance in lieu of sex. Yossarian's sexual frustration serves in the exact same manner as a brush with death, and returns Yossarian to the film's primal scene. To be explicit: for Yossarian, and Nichols, sexual rejection and sexual failure are tantamount to the trauma of death.

In a different film, Nichols might have gone further – into the sexualization of violence, and the traumatic fear that haunts sexual behavior – but he and Henry already had a monumental task. The film's gestures are interesting – brilliantly unnerving, even – but this project will have to wait for a work more fully engaged with gender and sexuality. For this chapter's final section, I want to return to comedy, taking Nichols' film as an intermediate point on the spectrum between dark and sick comedy.

In Nichols' cinematic adaptation, the death of Kid Sampson – which, in the film, becomes the death of Hungry Joe – erupts as a moment of cartoonish violence. It is followed, as in the novel, by the absurdist bureaucratic debate over Doc Daneeka's fate but not by Yossarian's or the Chaplain's humane reaction to it. The violent death is more abrupt and more horrifying on screen, because it cannot be contained – cannot be managed – by Heller's distinctive technique. As Anthony Burgess, a friend of Heller's who shared his dedication to the primacy of language (if not Heller's sense of humor), argues:

Nichols made an unsuccessful film of *Catch-22* – unsuccessful because it had to portray horrors in full bloodinesses, exploiting the visual to the limit and forgetting that Heller offers us a verbal experience. The horror of the book is expressed less through images than through the perversion of thought and language: there is no horror worse than madness. (518)

Burgess, in his fascination with language and linguistics, was routinely frustrated with cinema's ineluctable visual dimension (he was less than complimentary of Kubrick's adaptation of his own work). His admiration of Heller's *Catch-22* came from his recognition of the "special technique of satire which finds in the breakdown of language an analog to the breakdown of reason and ordinary human decency" (517), the way in which Heller's language models both the broken psyche of the traumatized and the broken morality of bureaucracy. And Burgess' faith in human morality does not even amount to Heller's hard-fought sliver of optimism - his *Clockwork Orange* accepts *a priori* the fundamental violence of human nature, and debates only the limits of power of the State.³⁸ Burgess is nonetheless an incisive enough critic to see that, stripped of Heller's language, the scene of Hungry Joe's death is mere horror. Horror, when deprived of its tragic qualities – the audience knows nothing of Hungry Joe and is not shown the grieving that occurs in the novel – and presented as comedy, is sick comedy. The scene is brilliantly realized – as critic Gordon Gow remarked, it is "precise in its fusion of true horror and sick relief-laughter" (*Casebook* 382) – and, though Gow does not define "relief laughter," he points towards a kind of humor concerned largely with provoking laughter as a cathartic release of anxious energy. Burgess himself is not squeamish and his objection is not to this sadism directly, but to sadistic humor's inability to maintain Heller's real critique. In essence, since Heller's associative language connects Sampson's death to Yossarian's revelation, Hungry Joe's death in Nichols' film – since it operates in the visual realm – is dissociated from Heller's redemptive moral argument.

For this reason, Nichols' version of Heller's conclusion seems to come closer to artifice, to pure sentimentality, but it is important not to collapse it entirely into melodrama. Many initially misread the film's closing image – a man desperately rowing his tiny yellow raft against

the surf – as if Yossarian were following Orr to Sweden. Heller himself pokes fun at this image in *Closing Time*; when, deep in a metafictional hell populated by Heller’s influences (a wonderful scene that either confirms or renders irrelevant decades of influence studies), the eponymous good soldier Schweik confronts Yossarian:

“You ran away once to Sweden, didn’t you?”
“I didn’t get far. I couldn’t even get to Rome.”
“You didn’t escape there? In a little yellow raft?”
“That happens only in the movies.”
(346)

However, even Heller understood Nichols’ closing shot as suggesting how *far* Yossarian would have to go, even to get to the Italian mainland: “he [Nichols] organized the scene with a close-up of Arkin paddling the raft and then the camera pulls back and shows him only about ten yards off shore with miles and miles and miles to go” (Heller in *Casebook*, 361). In the end, Nichols’ conclusion gives Yossarian’s decision its appropriate Kierkegaardian weight; Yossarian’s leap of faith and its ontological claim on a real world beneath the skein of bureaucracy’s horror and absurdity is not an easy solution. Yossarian’s climatic revelation is really only the precondition for action, necessary but insufficient.

So, instead of sentimental, it might be more accurate to say that Nichols’ film follows an overly simplistic understanding of Freud. In Heller, violence is always nervously situated between tragic acceptance and comic disavowal, operating through the complicated logic of the fetish. With Buck Henry and Mike Nichols, the film operates on the binary logic of classic traumatic amnesia:

“Everything Yossarian does,” says Nichols, “is because of and about Snowden. The thing that hung Arkin up was he said, ‘I know all of Snowden from the moment the movie starts. How can I act as if I don’t know what happens at the end of Snowden, just because the audience doesn’t know?’ And not until he asked that question did I realize that that isn’t true. For the guy playing Yossarian and

for Yossarian himself, Snowden has to be thought of as an analysis. As in a psychoanalysis, Yossarian keeps getting closer to a memory and then forgetting it and cutting it off. That's what the movie is. He does not remember the end of Snowden, and he's trying to and it gets cut off and when he does fully remember Snowden he breaks down and is reconstituted and makes his decision. It is exactly parallel to psycho-analysis." (Nichols qtd. in Thugze 13).

Built on the Breuer-Freud model, Nichols' version of Yossarian's cure seems as instantaneous and surprising as 19th-century hypnotic catharsis. Nichols' decision to structure his film around the moment Yossarian "breaks down and is reconstituted" also influenced the look and feel of the film, in which Henry and Nichols actively strove to create a visual analog to Heller's neurotic presentation of reality (as opposed to, for example, a realistic film with comic dialog, or a purely fantastical film). In some cases, they were successful, as Chuck Thugze argues:

One example of how the humor slowly fades in the film is the scene where Yossarian stands naked in formation to receive a medal from General Dreedle. As Nichols says, "You're laughing your ass off during that scene, but then Sergeant Towser says, 'He has no clothes because a man got killed in his plane over Avignon and bled all over him'." Thus the audience has come full circle from laughter to deathly silence. (10)

Thugze conflates the slow fade from humor to tragedy with the more complicated idea of coming full circle – the fetishistic orbiting of violence and death – but he points in the right direction. Throughout the movie, Henry and Nichols introduce scenes with shots that, we could argue, operate like Heller's baited opening sentences – those that demand answers and are funny in their incongruity from traditional expository prose, which seeks to explain, not confound. For one example: Cathcart and Korn standing at the base of the flight control tower, framed alongside Milo's disembodied hand, holding an egg. This is not a classic establishing shot, as it provides us with no information about place or time. Instead, it begs the question: why does this

shot visually privilege the egg in such an ostentatious way? As the scene develops – a long dolly shot that tracks Milo, Cathcart, and Korn as they drive along the bombers’ runway in a jeep – Milo delivers his absurdist economic answer – a series of statements that delineate the extent of his trade network without explaining how he will profit from short-selling his supply of eggs. As the shot moves down the runway, a flaming B-25 bomber flails towards the ground and – implied in the off-screen sound of an explosion – wrecks. Milo continues his explanation as ambulances roar down the runway towards the crash. None of the three characters remark upon the crash or the implicit loss of life, and Nichols cuts neatly to the next scene which begins with another series of jokes.

Another sequence begins with a low-angle shot: Yossarian naked in the background, perched in a tree, a funeral formation in the foreground. This is another mysterious shot – it does not clearly designate place or time, and its deep focus allows us to see both Yossarian and the funeral without understanding the connection immediately. Or, more accurately, the scene presents Yossarian’s nudity as absurdist and comic, even though we’ve just previously seen Yossarian refusing to wear his uniform while receiving his medal for failing to bomb Ferrara, and we know that his nudity is because his clothes are literally soaked in Snowden’s blood – and thus is tragedy, not the comedy often associated with male nudity in film. As the scene proceeds, the shot reverses, still in deep focus – we now see Milo in the tree speaking with Yossarian in the foreground, with Snowden’s casket being lowered into the ground in the background. As the casket is lowered, Milo attempts to get Yossarian to eat chocolate-covered cotton; their half-absurdist dialog takes no notice of the funeral until the funereal rifle salute. Milo then takes a partial pratfall out of the tree and finally sees the casket. Once again, Yossarian acknowledges –

despite saying that he does not know why he wishes to remain naked – that the funeral is Snowden’s and that Snowden had been on Yossarian’s plane when he was killed.

But we might better describe these shots as homologous to Heller’s prose in that they operate in a structurally similar way. They move from comic introductions to dark, almost completely tragic punch-lines, but they have quite different mechanics and genealogies. Heller’s prose operates – with the neurotic motivations of a Freudian consciousness – like someone telling an absurdist joke about the real world; part of the humor comes from the willful misrepresentation of reality. And, like all dark comedy, part of the tension – which powers the comedy – comes from the ambivalent attachment to the thing being attacked. In Nichols’ film, the conscious decision to adopt a nightmarish logic presents neither a reality nor a fantasy, and the comedy – a rather bleak comedy – often comes from the incongruous juxtaposition of real violence against absurdist verbal slapstick.

Consider the scene, described by Thugze, in which Doc Daneeka and Yossarian converse while behind them a massive fleet of B-25s rolls across the tarmac. Nichols deliberately removed all other characters and extras from the film to give the scene its unreal quality, reasoning:

If you went too far with the nightmare aspect, with the lack of reality, it would fall apart. If you didn't go far enough, that is, if it was simply natural or ordinary...then it would also fall apart because it would be literally insane... one evening we got to talking about the concept of nightmares, and what nightmares look like, and what makes them look different from real life. Part of it, we thought, was the presence or absence of extraneous people. You select in a nightmare; when you dream about an event you don't think about the numerous faces of extras. And subsequent to that discussion, we reshot the whole scene with no one in it except the two principals, Doc and Yossarian. (qtd. Thugze 9)

They found it so successful that Henry and Nichols applied this technique of selection to the rest of the film, wherever possible.

What this means for the cinematic death scene of Hungry Joe is this: Heller's version gives us a joke, a rather dark joke, about the death of a young soldier. In its deliberate use of comic language – “Kid Sampson was raining all over” – to describe the horrifying, Heller's prose disavows tragedy. It is not impossible to replicate this effect on film, for example through the hyperbolic use of special effects to create an excess of blood and gore so great that the tragic component is short-circuited and the audience is forced to laugh. But this not quite what Nichols does. Nichols' version of Hungry Joe is not so much dark comic but unreal, a deliberate manipulation of things just beyond the threshold of real. Again, some of the tragic component is short-circuited. This is accomplished first by the absence of opportunities the audience has had to identify with Hungry Joe (both in the basic empathetic sense, and the more complicated Metzian sense, in which we are occasionally sutured into Yossarian's point of view and encouraged to identify with him). Second, the audience is alienated by the shot's dissociative framing which suggests no reverse shot, no point of secondary identification (i.e., the character in the film who acts temporarily as the point of view of the viewer, and whose emotions the viewer is thus encouraged to identify with). The framing is also reminiscent of shots of characters marginalized and debased by architecture (sometimes called fascist architecture) in Passolini or Kubrick; the shot subjugates Hungry Joe's tiny frame against the large blocks of water and sky. Third, an empathetic reaction is disrupted by the literalization of Heller's comic description, in which the victim's lower torso stands on the raft for just a beat too long to be physically possible, a cartoonish violation of the laws of physics and a perfectly Bergsonian reduction of Hungry Joe to the status of *thing*. Fourth, the scene is rendered surreal by Nichols' logic of selection, the deliberate underuse of extras and secondary characters that in 'realistic' film build up a realistically populated *mise-en-scene*. Nichols' nightmare removes Heller's crowds, those that

flee in horror – the recognition of Sampson’s, and thus their own, mortality – and generate the impression of an actual real-world catastrophe.

Again, all of this is an impressive attempt to translate Heller’s language – and his core poetic device – into cinematic style. It is a more impressive feat than Buck Henry’s attempt to cherry pick Heller’s one-liners. As Merrill and John L. Simons argue in their aptly titled article, “The Waking Nightmare of Mike Nichols”:

The movie succeeds when it develops visually a basic metaphor from Heller’s book: the nightmarish and omnipresent danger of death in war... Nichols’ film does not so much reprise the novel’s truculent satire on American capitalism as tell a story *about the traumatizing fear of death, a fear that confuses the brain and blunts the conscience.* (italics added, 17)

However, when it comes to Kid Sampson/Hungry Joe – for only one example – there is a crucial difference between the ways Heller and Nichols tell the story; the indexical quality of film – which insists upon the reality of what it presents, the ‘full bloodiness’ of Hungry Joe’s death – combined with Nichols’ directorial decisions to steer the scene away from realism, leaves Hungry Joe’s death in an unreal space. Nichols might have emotionally grounded this scene with a melodramatic score – as, for example, Oliver Stone did with *Adagio for Strings* in *Platoon* – or undercut the violence with an ironic soundtrack – one of Quentin Tarantino’s recurrent dark comic tropes – but, instead, the scene plays out in almost utter silence, except for the sound of McWatt’s prop-plane and the brilliantly realized ‘tssst’ of Hungry Joe’s demise.

The scene plays out as an abstract instance of mutilation and death; in its theatrical starkness, the scene is closer to Beckett’s post-apocalyptic minimalism than the Joycean excesses of Heller’s novel. At one end of the spectrum of responses, we might see this as uncanny, in other words, as both alienated from the traditional representation of death as tragedy and yet somehow evocative of those qualities of death we wish most to disavow: absurdity, randomness,

and inevitability. It is clear how Nichols' uncanny – in its simultaneous disavowing and affirmation of the horror of death – is similar to Heller's fetishes. However, while Heller's narrative takes on the quality of a consciousness in the process of working through, translating really existing violence into the more manageable material of jokes, Nichols' film presents the world as a cruel fantasia which is inflicted on both Yossarian and the viewer.

Nowhere is this strategy clearer than in the appearance of the Soldier in White, early in the film. The camera pans – following roughly Yossarian's sight-line, and thus encouraging us to identify with him – and frames Nurses Duckett and Nurse Cramer whispering inaudibly in the unreal process of swapping the Soldier in White's IV and colostomy jars. The camera then tracks back to Yossarian's face, retroactively confirming that this was in fact, Yossarian's vision (and completing the shot-reverse-shot process of suturing). Alan Arkin then stares directly into the camera, essentially violating the fourth wall, as if to say, 'did you see what I just saw?' Of course, the audience has seen it, but who knows what to make of it? Without Heller's prose to act as a comic prompt, as a protective distancing or neurotic repression of horror, the scene's potential for sadism overflows. Arkin, acting as our representative in the film, can only scream, his mouth open and gaping until Nichols cuts away. The scene is pure uncanny horror.

This is not a moralistic judgment against Nichols, but it is an important critical distinction between sick and dark comedy. Dark comedy is necessarily ambivalent: in its presentation of death's randomness and inevitability, it retains – however outmoded or irrational – a neurotic *belief* in the Imaginary wholeness and immutability of the Ego (in short, in immortality). Sick comedy abandons this ambivalence, and plays – we might even say launches an attack – on the audience's ambivalence. Failing to find a way to manage death, sadistic comedy takes its pleasure in inflicting this failure on others; sadistic humor operates in both modes of Freud's

tendentious jokes, hostile and obscene. In its hostility, sadistic humor finds Hegelian sudden Glory in projecting the trauma of death outward, reducing its targets to mere mortality. In its obscenity, sadistic humor exposes the reality of death – repressed, euphemized, and fetishized in society in ways that clearly parallel the social treatment of sexuality – and draws pleasure from the violation of taboo. Sick comedy masters death; as Pynchon, who more than dabbled in sick comedy, wrote in *Gravity's Rainbow*, its “mission is to promote death” (720).³⁹

At the end, of course, Nichols' *Catch-22* recapitulates Heller's redemptive move. It is possible to argue that this does not retroactively totalize the narrative. It does not *erase* those moments of sick comedy any more that Milton's redemptive closure erases the ruptures of Satanic logic in *Paradise Lost*. Nor should Nichols' closure prevent us from taking his moments of sick comedy as subversive ruptures of something too potent or painful for the overall narrative to sustain, as Milton's epic poem allows tantalizing moments of blasphemy and allegorical intimations of regicide. Nevertheless, for Nichols' film, redemptive moral logic does ultimately shape the overall tone of the film as a dark comedy with moment of sick humor. Watching the film – for a second or third time – the death of Hungry Joe loses some of its black, sadistic thrill, because we *know* – as we know Snowden's secret – that Nichols will ultimately stake his ontological claim on meaning and human decency. Nichols' socio-political goal, which is to get maximum metaphorical leverage out of Heller's novel as testimony of the traumas of the Cold War (Korea, McCarthyism, Vietnam) and bureaucracy, requires this philosophy, because testimony requires action, a rejection of paralyzing absurdist horror.

This explains Nichols' sickest jokes, embedded in his extremely dark comic vision of Rome. What for Heller was near-absolute tragedy – what Heller described, in a talk in 1970, as the point where *Catch-22* “does resolve itself into a novel in which the last eighty to one hundred

pages are very morbid and very frightening and almost hopeless and perhaps hopeless” (*Casebook* 354) – becomes a sick comedy for Nichols. This culminates with a scene in which Nichols gives us a series of darkly lit shots of long alleys, scored only with operatic singing, muted and distant. Yossarian walks through a catalog of horrors – predation, poverty, children being beaten, an aged prostitute breast-feeding a doomed infant (a grotesque *pieta*) – and, at the end, passes a horse being flogged to death. There may be no sicker self-reflexive joke in cinematic history: in its half-hearted foray into the domain of realism – specifically Italian neo-Realism – the film can only beat a dead horse. Sick humor, in its hyperbolic horror, goes *beyond*.

And, of course, Nichols begins this sequence of sadistic jokes with a vaudevillian riff. The exchange is based on his adjustment of Heller’s plot: in Nichols’ version, Milo’s bombing of the Pianosa airfield claims Nately’s life. Later, in Rome, Yossarian accuses Milo of Nately’s murder:

[Arkin/Yossarian] “He’s dead.”

[Voight/Milo] “It’s too bad, he was a nice fellow.”

[A] “But your boys made a nice direct hit on him.”

[V] “But he died a rich man. He had over sixty shares in the Syndicate.”

[A] “What good is that? He’s dead?”

[V] “Then his family will get it.”

[A] “He didn’t have time to have a family.”

[V] “Then his parents will get it.”

[A] “They don’t need it. They’re rich.”

[V] “Then they’ll understand.”

The horrendous menace of this exchange – which Buck Henry and Nichols invented and inserted into Heller’s *Eternal City* – is the violence and murder concealed by the ideology of capitalism. There is no redemptive moral logic at this moment; Nichols’ Milo – in his quasi-fascist regalia and Aryan features – rules Rome as the representative of corporate bureaucracy. His evil is capitalism’s evil. It is the wellspring for all those evils in Heller’s catalog of horrors

and – for the moment – they are allowed to exist as ontological fact. The nightmare is the Real of Capital – it is more real than realism. As Žižek might say, it is what is meant by unreal and uncanny together, shoved in the face of the audience as a sick joke.

Nichols follows this incredibly dark joke – in which Milo blames “certain economic factors” for Nately’s death – with the scene that Heller himself found the most disturbing in the film, telling *The Detroit News*’ Ken Bernard:

Those guys are standing in line and not moving – most of them American soldiers, a few sailors – and the line just winds and turns the corner, and there’s the girl at the desk [Luciana, Yossarian’s former lover] who’s selling them admission to the whorehouse. I got a feeling from it that they’ve been there since the world began and they’ll be there till it ends. (*Casebook* 300).

The sick humor of Nichols’ metaphor – using prostitution as the ultimate feminizing figure for Capital’s effect on human interaction – plays to the horrible reality of the scene, its indexical insistence on *really existing*, against the cartoonish implausibility of Milo’s monolithic control of the situation. It is the one time in the film where Nichols’ casting operates hyperbolically, instead of reductively, and the goal is – again – a nightmarish proximity of real and fantastic. Nichols’ sickest jokes, what Gow calls his “brilliant black climax” (*Casebook* 381), takes the film beyond realism in order to provide testimony; the film translates the horror of capitalism – the real conditions of existence, as Althusser might say – metaphorically. It speaks to the emotional truth of a situation beyond the grasp of veridical or historical representation.

Thus, the film’s ending – in its cautious optimism, its rollicking appropriation of “When the Saints Go Marching In,” its sun-drenched beauty – all but says ‘it was all a bad dream.’ Despite the ways in which Nichols’ film is profoundly darker than Heller’s novel – despite the

ways in which it is, at times, outright sadistic – Nichols is loyal to Heller, who believed that catch-22 was our collective nightmare, but that we could wake from it.

What if Heller was wrong?

What might dark comedy look like without the redemptive moral artifice of Heller's conclusion? It would look like the infamous door-gunner scene from Stanley Kubrick's 1987 *Full Metal Jacket*.

Parable of the Door Gunner

The door gunner scene takes place early in Kubrick's second act, after the film's radical shift in style and tone from the unreal symmetries and fascist architecture of boot camp to the seemingly more fluid jungle (in reality – in classic Kubrick style – a *fake* jungle in England, on the Thames no less, made from imported Spanish palm trees and nearly 100,000 fake plastic trees). The scene begins with a troop helicopter flying over the (purportedly) Vietnamese countryside. Our first close-range shot is 'Rafter Man' – looking almost comically nauseous, with the implication being airsickness – and we hear, off-screen, machinegun fire and someone repeating "get some" in a flat-affect voice. After fifteen seconds or so – a long wait, by cinematic standards – we get the reverse-shot (what Rafter Man has been looking at): Tim Colceri as the door gunner, firing a high-powered machine gun from the helicopter's bay. Next, we get a triangular set of shots: Rafter Man again (still looking nauseous, and now dry-heaving), then Matthew Modine's Joker (his face is inscrutably contorted, from either the wind in the open helicopter or disgust) and then finally back to the door gunner.

Then the scene deploys a dark and possibility sadistic joke: a perspective-shot from the door gunner's perch, complete with gun barrel (the very paradigm of modern first-person shooter video games). We see what appear to be unarmed Vietnamese villagers running – and falling

down, presumably dead or badly wounded – as the gunner continues to chant (with some variation) “get some.” The joke trades on ambiguous incongruity; though we cannot tell, Rafter Man may not be airsick, he may be sickened by this horribly impersonal (and depersonalizing) act of violence. Thus our original reading – Rafter Man cannot hack the turbulence – is subverted by a moral reading. The joke is dark, but the underling attachment – to the idea that indiscriminate violence is morally wrong – powers the comedy.

The next joke, told directly to the camera (thus, implicitly, to Rafter Man and Joker), is the gunner saying: “anyone who runs is a VC. Anyone who stands still... is a well-disciplined VC.” This is the logic of catch-22, turned on the enemy in order to justify wholesale slaughter. In reaction, Rafter Man continues his dry-heaving: a symptom with a darkly ambiguous pathology. The follow-up leads into the sequence’s darkest joke. It’s worth noting that all of the characters are literally shouting to make themselves heard; while this is a realistic depiction (i.e., helicopters are loud) it is also – in its excess, in its hyperbolic nature – somehow an *unreal* way for such a conversation to unfold:

[Door gunner]: You guys should do a story about me sometime.

[Modine/Joker]: Why should we do a story about you?

[D]: Cause I’m so fucking good! That ain’t no shit neither. I done got me one-hundred and fifty-seven dead gooks killed. And fifty water-buffaloes too. Them are all certified.

[J]: Any women or children?

[D]: Sometimes.

[J]: How can you shoot women and children?

[D]: Easy. You just don’t lead them so much. Hahaha. Ain’t war hell?

The door gunner’s speech itself, with his archaic, bible-belt plural “buffaloes” and negative contraction “ain’t,” his misuse of “them” for ‘they’ and his casual profanity and ethnic slurs (to an official Marine reporter), portrays him as an ignorant racist who is the face of death. Nothing quite sums this up like the redundancy of “I got me one-hundred and fifty-seven *dead*

gooks killed,” a formulation which encapsulates ignorance, racism, and state-sponsored violence (“all certified”). In some ways, this looks like a dark comedy, with the horror of death fetishized into the foolishness of the door gunner and the Bergsonian comedy of Rafter Man’s mechanical dry-heaving. But there the scene is more unreal than it is darkly comic. The scene seems to erupt out of a pastoral shot of jungle; it is fragmented visually and narratively from the movie. The door gunner never returns, Joker does not write a story about him. There is something nightmarish about it – not just in its impersonal violence, but in its disconnectedness – but it is not unambiguously sadistic fantasy. The door gunner’s line which draws the curtain down on the scene – “ain’t war hell” – followed by his laughter, plunges the scene deeper into irony. Is this straight commentary on the hell of total war, in the style of *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Naked and the Dead*? Is this dark comedy, at once approaching and backing away from the Real of martial violence? Or is this a sick joke, which reflexively throws our moralizing interpretation (‘war is hell’) back in our faces, leaving us bewildered and – like Rafter Man – physically sickened? Kubrick’s film does not easily give us the tools to stabilize this irony, but it is not completely impossible if we work through the scene’s genesis.

Though Kubrick’s film is based largely on Gustav Hasford’s *The Short-Timers* – a sick comedy, as I will argue – the door gunner scene owes much of its genetic material to Kubrick’s screenwriter, Michael Herr, and Herr’s *Dispatches*, a strange combination of meditative elegy (written years after Herr’s time as a journalist in-country) and front-line reporting (from Khe Sahn and Saigon, for *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone*). In “Breathing In” – the book’s first section, written in New York City in 1975 as an associative, elegiac fugue – Herr constructs a collage of memories, rumors, and shaggy-dog stories; his Vietnam is a collection of myths and jokes:

There was a famous story, some reporters asked a door gunner, “How can you shoot women and children?” and he’d answered, “It’s easy, you just don’t lead

‘em so much.” Well, they said you needed a sense of humor, there you go, even the VC had one. Once after an ambush that killed a lot of Americans, they covered the field with copies of a photograph that showed one more young dead American, with the punch line mimeographed on the back, “Your X-rays have just come back from the lab and we think we know what your problem is.” (35)

Importantly, Herr frequently remains disassociated from his narrative. Like Tim O’Brien – who shares many of Herr’s approaches, although from the other side of the tenuous and occasionally porous soldier/journalist divide – Herr presents Vietnam as a collection of other people’s stories and, in this case, other people’s jokes. At the core of this particular scene is the Real; the horrifying violence, the traumatic image of what military weaponry will do to the human body, threatens to annihilate – to reveal as illusory – the Imaginary functions of bodily integrity and immortality. This Real is at the core of the cultural trauma of modernized and mechanized warfare, the trauma which destroyed the Romantic illusions of patriotism and chivalry. But this castrating violence is – in Herr’s formulation – contained within multiple layers.

First, there are the mechanics of the joke – and in Herr’s version the scene is stripped down almost completely to the bare skeleton of a joke – which present a classic structure of categorical confusion, a type of incongruity. For the first joke, a question about ethics and morality (‘How can you...’) is answered in terms of physics and logistics.⁴⁰ The incongruity of the joke might be – if it appeared in *Catch-22* – of a piece with Heller’s satirical joke about Lieutenant Scheisskopf, who wants “nickel-alloy swivels inserted in the small of every man’s back” (Heller 73) so that they will be able to march in perfect formation; Scheisskopf’s plan is foiled, not by any moral objection to mutilating the soldiers, but by the logistical problems – “obtaining that many nickel-alloy swivels from Quartermaster” and “enlisting the co-operation of the surgeons at the hospital” (ibid). Heller’s jokes are funny because of the incongruity

between plausible statements about an implausible world; to use another example, it is plausible that Doc Daneeka really does die in an implausible world where death is determined by the regulations of bureaucracy. Herr's joke – although it is funny in its categorical confusion – threatens to be a plausible statement about a plausible world, and thus the difference between Heller's World War Two and Herr's Vietnam: in World War Two, Doc Daneeka does not *really* die, in Vietnam, women and children *really do*, all the time. This horrible fact is just barely sheathed in the verbal play of Herr's joke.

The second joke functions in much the same way: at the verbal level, there is clearly a categorical confusion between “know what your problem is” when used in the diagnostician's sense – which is implied by the delivery – and when used, as it is here, in the pathologist's sense (as in an autopsy). But beneath this verbal play is the horror of plausibility: that the enemy is waging a kind of psychological warfare that violates all the illusory – but nonetheless sacred – beliefs in the integrity of life, maintained – in classic fetishistic form – in the respect shown for the bodies of the dead. The joke turns these bodies into ‘things,’ rendering them potentially humorous in the Bergsonian sense.⁴¹ Again, the horror is barely contained, although we might say it is ever-so-slightly deflected.

The second layer of containment or protection is the way in which Herr presents these jokes as overheard; Herr's anecdotes are double-nested, they are stories about stories, jokes about jokes. Herr's fragments function as indexes of the collective mindset in Vietnam – neurotic, sometimes psychotic – but not as objective reporting about historical events. His stories are at once protective – reading Herr we may recoil into plausible deniability, saying ‘surely that was exaggerated, or fabricated’ – and evocative – reading Herr we must still wonder, what kind of person fabricates such a story? What kind of person records it? Perhaps most importantly,

though, is the way that Herr's method separates *Dispatches* from literal truth, something Herr surrenders. In fact, *Dispatches* opens with a powerful metaphor about the empty and thus pliable subjectivity of maps of Vietnam, an apt metaphor for the failure of logic and reason, for the epistemological void of postmodernity. And yet, Herr's fragmented material – for those who take his ambitious gambit as successful – adds up to a certain kind of truth about Vietnam. In this there is something of the late, High Modernists about Herr; to paraphrase Beckett, 'he can't tell you what happened, he'll tell you what happened.'

Herr's deliberate conflation of fact and fiction – along with that of O'Brien – helped establish a critical orthodoxy: reading Vietnam as the challenge postmodernism was waiting for. The Vietnam conflict – in its geopolitical and geographical murkiness, in its moral ambiguity, in its excesses and aporias – thwarted both the objectivity of social realism and the moral artifice of Melodrama. Many critics pointed out – often at the risk of sounding massively insensitive to the loss of life behind the abstract event or blind to the cultural Imperialism that has, to this day, apparently prevented Hollywood from attempting to engage the Vietnamese (the 'Other') – that Vietnam seemed custom-made for a movement in fiction that wanted to address, head on, the failures of representation. Donald Ringnalda presents the issue in his astute study of American fiction on Vietnam:

Most Vietnam War novels continue to try to make America's experience with Nuoc Vietnam behave by smelting it down into the traditional narrative of realism. Refined out of these too-tidy narratives are the disturbing shapeless contingencies – both moral and epistemological – of the actual experiences. Rather than probe dark recesses, they trace surfaces. Implying a sense of controlled continuity and rational ordering, realism is a particularly inappropriate mirage in the context of America's Vietnam War. There are those who argue that realism is an inappropriate way of revealing any war. War is war, and the Vietnam War was not qualitatively different from other wars. Perhaps. But for Americans it was qualitatively different from anything they had experienced in their history. (26)

Ringnalda goes on to enumerate the many issues – from the cultural to the geographical to the literary – that prevented America from *seeing* Vietnam. However, what’s more important for this project is the fact that Vietnam – the obscene referent of Nichols’ film, and the post hoc figure behind *Catch-22* for readers in the 1970s – created traumas of such extraordinary complexity and such overwhelming reality that it thoroughly reinvigorated the debate between veridical and emotional testimony. Herr’s solution – his particular Modernist style – allied him with those, like Kubrick and Nichols, who abandoned the moral clarity of World War Two melodrama (the classic punching-bag referent here being *The Sands of Iwo Jima*) and the realism of World War Two fiction (such as Norman Mailer’s laudable but outmoded *The Naked and the Dead*). It was, in fact, Herr’s script that gives *Full Metal Jacket* its structure, and a formal frame for Kubrick’s particular style, which James Navermore defines as “grotesque”:

...what kind of response is appropriate to Dr. Strangelove when he rises from his wheelchair, takes a twisted step, and shouts “Mein Führer, I can walk” with such resonating theatrical ecstasy? Or to Alex in *A Clockwork Orange* when he smashes the Cat Lady’s head with a huge ceramic penis? Or to the paralytic Sir Charles Lyndon in *Barry Lyndon* when his gleeful laughter turns into a diseased cough and then into a heart attack? Or to Jack in *The Shining*... when he loudly complains about “the old sperm bank” he has married? To be sure, these moments are blackly humorous, but they also provoke other kinds of emotion—shock, disgust, horror, obscene amusement, and perhaps even sadistic pleasure. To understand their effects and their bearing on Kubrick’s so-called coolness, I would argue that we need to examine them in light of what might be called the aesthetics of the grotesque, a term that appears often in literary and art criticism but seldom in film studies. (5)

Navermore goes on to trace a genealogy of the grotesque – from Rabelais to Thomas Mann – but for our purposes it will suffice to say that the grotesque is the parataxis of conflicting or incongruous elements. We can imagine the wide range of possibilities: chimeras (a part man-

part animal), unstable tones (as in Shakespeare's problem plays), mixed styles and genres. In this last possibility, Navermore points to Thomas Mann's definition of Modernism as a grotesque practice. Navermore endeavors to disengage Kubrick from the critical tradition of reading his films as cool or cold – autistic, self-amused, in many ways like Nabakov – in order to argue that Kubrick belongs, not to the nihilistic, anti-Humanist ranks of the postmodernists, but to the Modernists: Nathaniel West, Kafka, Joyce, Djuna Barnes (7). Navermore's argument is that, like the Modernists, Kubrick is ultimately after the *truth*, a solution to the crises of representation:

At his best, like many other practitioners of the grotesque, he aims to show a paradoxical and potentially disturbing truth: at the farthest reaches of our experience, extremes meet and transform themselves. Especially where the human body is concerned, there is always something potentially comic about horror and horrible about comedy. (14)

The kind of Bergsonian comedy – and, by definition, Bergsonian *horror* – that Navermore describes in Kubrick is one and the same with the castration of Heller, the anxious comedy that surrounds the terrifying idea that the body – like each aspect of our self – is *not necessarily so*. Part of the power of the grotesque, as Navermore argues, is that despite its fantastical nature it has in some way a greater purchase on the real nature of the world than the putative objectivity of straight realism. This is the potentially disturbing truth that *Catch-22* orbits around in its fetishistic dark comedy. Consider Navermore's description of Lee Hartman's Drill Instructor:

Is this the way Marine sergeants really behave, or are we in the realm of satiric stylization, as with *Dr. Strangelove*? ...The movie seems to be hovering somewhere between realism and caricature, and throughout the sequence Hartman throws us off balance because he is revolting, scary, and funny at the same time...The chief irony of the sequence is that even though Pyle's reaction to Hartman seems slow-witted, it resembles the reaction most viewers are likely to have: a bewildered mingling of amusement, fear, and disgust that turns suddenly

into outright shock. In contrast with the stony looks on the faces of the other recruits, Pyle's reaction is sensible and sane; only when forced to deny his feelings does he later turn into a murderer and a suicide. His confusion and bewilderment, moreover, are built into the very structure and texture of the film, which is designed to create a world that is both absurd and verisimilar. (12-13)

Here we can see the hybrid nature of the grotesque – in the unreal portrait of Hartman – as a mode that aligns with Heller's fetishistic humor (which mixes tragic material and comic avoidance) and Nichols' juxtapositions (often of verbal slapstick composed visually alongside violence). And, as a mode, the grotesque is not uncommon; what rarefies Kubrick's work – and what relates it to *Catch-22* – is the way a grotesque mode is sustained until it becomes a genre. What Navermore's analysis gets at, in the language of art criticism, is the same thing that Ringnalda suggests, in the language of literary criticism, and Leys describes in the language of psychoanalysis: the struggle between literal and emotional *truths*, and the need – described by Judith Herman – for testimony to communicate both aspects. Thus, Navermore's argument allows us to say that Kubrick's grotesque provides testimony that encapsulates both the emotional disorientation – the absurd – and its real-world causes – the verisimilar.

But to what end does Kubrick testify to the horrors of the modern world? We are – as with Nichols – beyond the world of personal testimony, beyond the veterans struggling to reconstitute their own narratives. Kubrick, like Nichols, is translating the trauma of particular events for the culture at large. *Full Metal Jacket* – like Nichols' allegory and Stone's melodrama – is *about* Vietnam and attempts to convey some of the emotional truth about it. But, while *Platoon*'s metaphorical aspects collapse into quasi-religious Manichaeism (i.e., Elias is Christ, Barnes is Satan, and in Herr's script the two battle for the soul of the hero), and *Catch-22* figures specifically the really-existing conditions of 1960s capitalism, Kubrick's films open up to the world. As Hitchcock's Bates Motel was the world, Kubrick's Overlook Hotel, his war room, his

boot camp and his Hue are all the world. Kubrick's carefully fabricated *mise-en-scenes* – the architectural impossibilities of the Overlook⁴², the preposterousness of his War Room – are designed to let us know: we are at once in the real world and yet not.

Consider the barracks' head in *Full Metal Jacket*, where Leonard murders Sergeant Hartman and then commits suicide – with the film's titular ammunition. Kubrick himself designed the room, while the rest of the boot camp scenes were filmed on actual British military bases. Not surprisingly, Kubrick could appreciate the fascist architecture of Marine barracks, with its massive symmetries and dehumanizing repetitions, and he had R. Lee Ermey make sure that the British version had the same martial feel. Kubrick has said, of his vast white design – reminiscent, of course, of the bathroom from *The Shining*, another unreal space – that “it just seemed funny and grotesque” (LoBrutto 470).

Thus, in the end, we might say that Kubrick is ultimately, like Nabakov or Borges, working away at his own private mystery, struggling only to represent; for in representation, as Joyce testifies, is mastery. And Kubrick's mastery, it often seems, comes at our expense – our laughter at many moments comes from our own ambivalence about mutilation and death; Kubrick seems to have no ambivalence about these things; like Pynchon, he seems to be their promoter. And, when we are not Kubrick's victims – not the impetus for his Hegelian sudden Glory, not the condition for his mastery – we imagine ourselves as in league with Kubrick, complicit in his sadism. In other words, in witnessing the grotesque suffering of his characters – which we often see from Kubrick's dislocated, inhuman perspective (for only one example, the ultra-slow-motion shots of soldiers being shot to death in *Full Metal Jacket*'s penultimate sequence) – we identify not with other characters but with Kubrick's camera. This is to say that, by and large, *Full Metal Jacket* seems like a sick comedy.

And yet Kubrick is not *quite* the nihilistic sadist he was made out to be. As Martha Bayles argues in "Portrait of Mars,"

More obvious are the manipulations in *Full Metal Jacket*, Stanley Kubrick's 1987 film based on *The Short-Timers*, a novel by war correspondent [sic] Gustav Hasford. After a vision of marine boot camp as pure sadism, the movie shifts to Hue, where Cowboy, the buddy of the protagonist, Joker, is killed by a sniper. The unit hunts down the sniper, who turns out to be a girl. Badly wounded, she begs Joker to kill her, which, after some hesitation, he does, thereby earning the label "hard core." Joker is something of a lone wolf, existentially hip to the war's meaninglessness. Yet rather than follow this logic to its conclusion, Kubrick makes Joker into a hero in the buddy-helping-buddy sense. When Cowboy is shot, Joker braves sniper fire to embrace him before he dies. This scene comports with marine tradition, but not with Hasford's novel. Kubrick actually softened the message of *The Short-Timers*. In the book, Joker does not risk his life to reach the wounded Cowboy. On the contrary, he saves himself by blowing out Cowboy's brains. (17)

Further, for those critics – like Patricia Gruben – who took were able to track down Herr and Kubrick's treatment, Kubrick's retreat from the sadism of Hasford's sick comedy is even more apparent.

After dispatching the female sniper, instead of assuming leadership of the squad as they move into jungle fighting. Joker is randomly killed a short time later by another sniper. His death is intercut with "home movie" flashbacks of a childhood game of Cowboys and Indians, ending with a sentimental funeral scene as Joker's father reads from his journal: we learn that behind his tough facade he was a nature-loving poet. The treatment delivers a belated revelation of Joker's inner life, but it seems artificial and didactic; after so much horror, this sentimental epilogue fails to move us. (274-275)

Gruben's penetrating study of *Full Metal Jacket* works through the mechanics of identification: in both Hasford's novel and Kubrick's film, the audience remains largely alienated from Joker. Gruben points to irony as Kubrick's main device, but we might also add the grotesque style and sick comedy. And, like Nichols' film, Kubrick's treatment is destabilized

by sadistic humor; the sick comedy lacks the ambivalence – lacks an undercurrent of sentimental or humanist attachment to the illusions being deconstructed – to sustain a sentimental ending. Kubrick and Herr ultimately seemed to have realized this, and the final version of Kubrick’s film humanizes Matthew Modine’s Joker, although the process is neither simple nor easy.

Kubrick’s version of Joker is densely ironic: it’s difficult to tell whether his jokes are defensive – like Heller’s – or sadistic – like Hasford’s. It is clear that Modine’s character uses comedy to deal with the horror of war, but unclear if it is dark or sick comedy, unclear if he retains any ambivalent attachment to his illusions. This is made all the more difficult by the ambiguity of the film’s first formal section, in which we see the over-efficacy of boot camp in breaking down recruits. In theory, boot camp works like psychoanalysis – or like Nichols’ film – in breaking down illusions and psychic constructs to allow the construction of *new* psychic structures; in the case of boot camps, the recruits are “born again hard” as Marines. In Kubrick’s boot-camp, Leonard achieves a brutal understanding of himself as a void, he rejects bad-faith and repression, he learns too well the lesson of postmodern Freud. There is nothing, after that, but sadism or suicide, and Leonard chooses the latter. But how well does Joker learn the lessons of boot camp? Do his jokes represent surrender to sadism or a precarious defense? Thus, when we identify with Joker, are we participating in sick or dark comedy?

The film’s dynamics of identification are fragmented and unstable, but the formal structure hinges on our continued identification with Joker, for nothing else, in the Metzian sense, allows us to sustain the coherence of the film’s two acts. Without Joker, the film becomes an associative fugue of impenetrable moral irony; it is therefore important that Kubrick inserts Joker into the door gunner scene as the straight man of the joke. The humor of incongruity lies either in the Joker’s misrecognition of the world as a moral place or the door-gunner’s

misrecognition of the world as amoral place. The film does much less than Heller's novel or Nichols' film to stake an ontological claim on morality and reason. Kubrick stripped away the sentimental ending of his original treatment – as well as Herr's original voice-over narration, designed to facilitate the audience's identification with Modine – and in numerous other ways (denying us the suturing of shot-reverse-shots from Modine's perspective; couching his dialog in irony; warping his world into artifice and 'unreality') making it difficult to identify Joker as the protagonist and to identify his moral perspective. It is tempting to say that Kubrick is – deep down – a humanist, like Heller with a darker sense of humor, that he retreated from the bleakness of *The Short-Timers* (and, in fact, from Hasford himself) because he holds the same ambivalent but resilient attachments as Heller's novel. It is, at the same time, tempting to say that Kubrick is an outright sadist – whose grotesqueries represent not defensiveness but self-delighted mastery – whose retreats from sadism are simply a function of the conventions of film. What is grotesque about Kubrick's film is the ambiguity – not between comedy and tragedy – but between dark and sadistic comedy.

If we read the door-gunner scene as dark comedy, then the horrifying kernel of the joke – the destruction of illusions of wholeness and sanctity – is not quite sadistic in the world-historical ontological sense. A dark comic reading – in which Joker's question, "how can you shoot women and children" represents an ontological belief in moral decency – turns *Full Metal Jacket* towards an act of testimony about the particular horrors of Vietnam. The violent and capricious murder of women and children is the emotional truth of Vietnam; to this end, Kubrick's film recapitulates the gendered critique of war which delineates the sublime of masculine combat from the grotesque of total war (the critique that valorizes Normandy and demonizes Dresden and Hiroshima). Joker, acting as Yossarian, sees through the horrifying and

absurd logic of war, implying a counternarrative. Supporting this reading is Rafter Man's reaction. Kubrick's film turns Rafter Man – who in Hasford's novel becomes a cannibalistic psychopath and is then randomly killed – into a sensitive, moral observer, a kind of secondary point of moral identification. During the scene he vomits – literally because he is airsick – as a figurative moral cue: the scene is morally horrible.

If we read the door-gunner scene this way, we are thus encouraged to read the film's penultimate scene – in which Joker hesitates and then shoots a wounded female Viet Cong sniper – as a moral moment. In other words, we are watching Modine's character struggling with the question of euthanasia, a question of empathy and morality. In the end, his choice to kill is an act of kindness and understanding – Kubrick's grotesque vision of meeting the Other. It's worth pointing out that, in Hasford's novel, the female sniper scene occurs in the second of three sections, and Joker – who will eventually devolve into complete, nihilistic sadism – still retains enough humanity to experience a brutal version of the mutual gaze with the sniper: “I look at the sniper. She whimpers. I try to decide what I would want if I were down, half dead, hurting bad, surrounded by my enemies. I look into her eyes, trying to find the answer. She sees me. She recognizes me – I am the one who will end her life. We share a bloody intimacy” (Hasford 120). Although Kubrick thoroughly reworked Hasford's narrative, this moment at the limit of empathy seems to be what Kubrick has in mind; it is hardly prosaic or sentimental – it is hardly a blueprint for cross-cultural understanding – but it does suggest that Vietnam, like Heller's Rome is a not the solipsistic endgame of humanity. It is, we might say, a more horrible nightmare, but one we can *still* awaken from. We might thus read Modine's final voice-over – “I am in a world of shit. But I am not afraid” – as ironically hopeful, a profane gloss on Kierkegaard and Yossarian.

But, of course, it is possible to read the door-gunner scene as Modine's Joker throwing a mocking parody of moral outrage against the blind, amoral violence of the door-gunner (and, thus, the world). There is, after all, something about the way Modine must *scream* his lines twice – in order to be heard over the helicopter's rotors – that gives the scene its grotesque feel. Modine's question – in its hyperbolic delivery – is both plausible and unreal, which seems incompatible with a moral moment. This is further complicated by the pitch-black irony of the door gunner's line – 'ain't war hell' – which seems to mock any moral reading of the film, twisting the de-romanticizing lessons of Remarque and Mailer into a sadistic joke. We cannot tell whether Joker is serious or sadistic, or whether the door gunner's joke is on Joker, or on the viewer. The potential for sadism is high, to say the least. Some may find it surprising that Kubrick manages to maintain any ambiguity at all. We might say he maintains just the barest amount of ambiguity necessary to sustain the identification with Joker.

Thus, though viewers follow Joker into the film's final sequence, it remains difficult to ignore the film's sadistic quality. We are encouraged to read Joker's hesitation to kill the female sniper as a modal difference between sadistic comedy and sadistic violence; Joker must choose between his default mode – sadistic comedy, Death's promoter – and the more aggressive mode of Animal Mother – sadistic violence, Death's agent (as Animal Mother's helmet has it, borrowing from the *Bhagavad Gita*, "I Am Become Death"). This violence reveals the Egotism of sadism, the tiny quanta of defensiveness – the last line of defensiveness, the grimmest possible resolve – that sadistic comedy retains. Sick comedy seems to say: *there is nothing, and this revelation destroys me, but in visiting this revelation on other people, I derive some satisfaction, because in my sadism is the knowledge that 'I' am the one inflicting pain, 'I inflict therefore I am.'* When words are no longer sufficient to provide this satisfaction – in the unreal and

wordless world of combat, for example – the Ego is forced to take up real-world violence; sadism is a dark manifestation – perhaps the darkest version – of existentialism’s solipsistic tendencies. The film’s final lines, “I am in a world of shit, but I am not afraid,” could thus be read as a formal repetition of Leonard’s revelation at the end of the film’s first half. Both Leonard and Joker submit, at last, to the meaninglessness of the world – the abyss that underlies the construction of identity. Whereas Leonard chooses suicide as an authentic acceptance of his non-being, Joker chooses sadism as a form of self-definition.

Conclusion: There It Is

Kubrick’s portrait of humanity refuses to surrender its grotesque ambivalence between unreal and real, between dark comic and sadistic. It is clear how the philosophies of postmodernism – those which treat humanism as a blindness, which arrange the myths of construction against the truth of nihilism (the certainty of uncertainty) – might embrace Kubrick; or, rather, it is clear how they might embrace a particular reading of Kubrick as sadistic comedy. But Kubrick always pulled back slightly in the end, and Hasford does not.

A full study of Hasford would be productive – too little has been said about his work – but, by definition, his work falls outside the view of this project. For the purposes of this conclusion, his novel paints a portrait – how close to Hasford’s own damaged psyche, we may never quite know – of Joker, a Marine much like those characters in Herr and O’Brian – the supernatural, wraithlike Lurps and Green Berets. In some ways, Joker is like those who became part of Vietnam, which is to say – for American fiction – that they became mythic archetypes: incorporate in Death (‘death’s head’, ‘death-dealers’, ‘I am become death’). But, in other ways, Hasford’s Joker is just a grunt. Joker is like any number of soldiers – from Titus Andronicus,

laughing while he chops his hand off, to Buckley's modern soldier, huddled in his Afghan foxhole – that have surrendered, in the monstrous face of human violence, to the solipsistic refuge of sadism. I recall Herr's words with a shiver, because they could apply so broadly – to the American penal colony, to the underworlds of crime and homelessness, to the hopeless grind of wage labor. Like Kubrick, sometimes Herr opens up to the world, and his grunts could be, in a different language, our proletariats, our oppressed, or simply our modern subject: "And the grunts knew: the madness, the horror and doom of it. They were hip to it, and more: they savored it... It was that joke at the deepest part of the blackest kernel of fear, and you could die laughing" (Herr 103).

But Hasford goes even beyond this.

The Short-Timers has its moments of lighter verbal irony, much of it derivative of *Catch-22*. Early on, Joker quips that "Marines are not allowed to die without permission" (13). Leonard's failures mount exponentially – in inverse proportion to his effort – and he is too dumb to be brain washed (7). A street-wise Latino and a wealthy, east-coast surfer-bum "have absolutely nothing in common. They are the best of friends" (55). Joker watches John Wayne's *Green Berets*: "the sun is setting in the South China Sea – in the East – which makes the end of the movie as accurate as the rest of it" (38). But these are brief moments of comedy set against a sadistic backdrop which makes them seem anything but lighthearted; in fact, they seem cold and artificial. Each moment – everything, the entire world – becomes fodder for Joker and his fellow Marines' rapacious, sadistic appetite. Drowning a cultural critique in sick laughter, *The Green Berets* becomes "the funniest movie we have seen in a long time" (ibid). Leonard commits his spectacular murder-suicide and Joker imagines Sergeant Gerheim (a.k.a. Kubrick's Hartmann) smiling and saying "Well done" (31).

The jokes get darker and sicker than anything in *Catch-22* or its film adaptation. When a Marine named Winslow is killed, Joker says: “It took a lot of guts to do what Winslow did. I mean, you can see Winslow’s guts and he sure had a lot of them” (73). As the novel progresses, Joker tells fewer jokes and starts simply narrating horrible events in an ironic vacuum of commentary. A page after Winslow’s death, Joker describes – with disturbingly flat affect – Rafter Man’s rite of passage, after receiving his first incoming.

Mr. Payback grunts. “What’s wrong, New Guy? Did a few rounds make you nervous?”

Rafter Man looks up with a new face. His lips are twisted into a cold, sardonic smirk. His labored breathing is broken by grunts. He growls. His lips are wet with saliva. He’s looking at Mr. Payback. The object in Rafter Man’s hand is a piece of flesh, Winslow’s flesh, ugly yellow, as big as a John Wayne cookie, wet with blood. We all look at it for a long time.

Rafter Man puts the piece of flesh in his mouth, onto his tongue, and we think he’s going to vomit. Instead, he grits his teeth. Then, closing his eyes, he swallows.

I turn off the lights. (74).

It is a miniature, quasi-cinematic performance that Joker presents and then drops the curtain on before we can figure it out. Like *Catch-22*, Hasford’s comedy moves associatively – picking up running jokes (like John Wayne, one of Hasford’s favorite punching bags) and flipping them over and mutating them – and, from time to time, Hasford’s prose moves, like Nichols’ film, into the realm of the unreal. Rafter Man’s cannibalism is one example; the surrealist “mechanical-centaur, half-man, half-tank” (111) that Joker sees early in the novel and returns – as a “a ghost with substance...[a] black mechanical phantom...dark ectoplasm rolling in the sun” (128) – to cut Rafter Man in half towards the novel’s end is another (“Tanks for the memories” [134] is Joker’s sick pun). At one point, Joker even encounters an undead Colonel, who has apparently been feeding on a lance corporal. The Colonel “bares his vampire fangs” at Joker, who restrains him with the threat of a wooden bayonet; the Colonel retreats after ordering

Joker to “get a haircut” (139). Lastly, there is the most surreal – and perhaps most telling – sequence, where Joker’s “dope dream of death” finds his consciousness splintering into Mind, Body and Spirit (103); Joker’s schizoid voices then debate going back to combat, with Mind finally convincing a terrified Body that they must, in fact, return. Spirit refuses to go along, saying only “Tell the man I’m missing in action” (104). The inspired strangeness of this piece – like something out of the more psychedelic-philosophical episodes of *Looney Tunes* or *Ren and Stimpy* – enacts the traumatized splintering of Joker’s mind. We could profitably map Freud’s own structures – Id, Ego, Super-Ego – against Body, Mind, and Spirit to the same end that Hasford achieves: Joker becomes soulless – not completely shattered, not mentally or physically paralyzed – and those psychic facilities that manage the world above or beyond the pragmatism of Mind, or the stimulus-response of Body, are now absent. Joker’s Spirit is AWOL. Before this moment, we see Joker’s moment of empathetic understanding with the female sniper; afterwards, we see Joker become completely sadistic.

Many of these unreal moments were part of Kubrick and Herr’s original treatment, only to be expunged in the final script. One thing that did survive was Hasford’s own door-gunner scene:

...the door gunner smokes marijuana and fires his M-60 machine gun at a farmer in the rice-paddies below...The hamlet below us is in a free-fire zone – anybody can shoot at it at any time and for any reason. We watch the farmer run in the shallow water. The farmer knows only that his family needs some rice to eat. The farmer knows only that the bullets are tearing him apart.

He falls, and the door gunner giggles. (75)

Another miniature Theatre of Cruelty performance. Is this a joke? Is this *pure* sadism – divorced even from the blackest possible comedy? It is difficult to read Hasford’s Joker with any confidence. Still, there is something almost empathetic in Hasford’s prose – something missing

in Kubrick's scene – something almost pitying, but there is no time to parse it. The scene, in its minimalism, is even more ironic than Kubrick's cinematic adaptation or Herr's anecdotal version. Hasford seems to say only that – to those who are dying – death is meaningless. Hasford's death is the anger of an incomprehensible god, or – in our postmodern age – the chaotic action of a random universe. And, of course, in “the door gunner giggles” is the lesson of sadism. This lesson, as Hasford refers to it, is a “funny secret” (148) that the dead know: “the dead people are grinning that hideous, joyless grin of those who have heard the joke” (126). Joker's sadism is all about mastery, it is concerned only with seeing things as clearly as the dead might, free of the illusions harbored by New Guys and those who believe in John Wayne romance. Sadism's clarity is as necessary as any other weapon.

For Hasford, sadism is something more. Discussing a scene where Joker assembles and binds dead civilian bodies – ending with the grim joke, “As a final touch I wire the dog's feet together” (127) – so that he can take stage an incriminating anti-Viet Cong propaganda photographs, Ringnalda argues:

No doubt, Hasford is laying on gallows humor pretty thick, but he's doing more than that. Like Wright, Eastlake, Herr and others, he's saying that if we're going to make something real from the Vietnam war, we're going to do so from the real nothings produced by that war. That, and nothing else, must be our raw material, as displeasing and distasteful as that may be to the reader. (40-41).

Ringnalda suggests that *The Short-Timers* – in its unrelenting sadism, but also in its surreal and absurd passages – is more accurate than those works that attempt to operate under the aegis of straight realism. Hasford makes the same gesture, towards his own work, by quoting William S. Burroughs (another proponent of sadism, of the absurd and surreal): “A psychotic is a guy who's just figured out what's going on” (Hasford 35). Thus, Ringnalda gets to the critical limit of dark comedy, to the crux of the issue between dark comedy and sadistic comedy (or

outright sadism). Dark comedy – in its ambivalence, in its constant cycling between deconstruction and reconstruction – is bound to come under the postmodern critique of humanism. As a mode of therapeutic testimony, we may argue that dark comedy’s ability to manage psychic trauma is more important than the philosophical insistence on absolutely honesty, whether that honesty refers to veridical recall of historical events or the figurative recall of emotional states. However, even Herman acknowledges the moment of trauma when “[the survivor] stands mute before the emptiness of evil, feeling the insufficiency of any known system of explanation... Why? The answer is beyond human understanding” (Herman 178). What Herman recommends – reconstruction of the survivor’s psyche, reconciliation of the survivor with the wider world – attempts to build on top of this abyss without denying it. To invoke Woolf’s beautiful figuration, once more, Herman attempts to build a strip of pavement across the void.

The danger, for works – like Nichols’ and Kubrick’s – that translate cultural traumas like Vietnam for mass culture, is that in rewriting and reconstructing, a fundamental dishonesty will corrupt the narrative. Creating a narrative to answer the why – to fill Herman’s “emptiness of evil” – may blind us with optimism, or may privilege an ideological account, or – in the worst-case scenario – damn us to repeat disasters over and over. In recreating the sacred we may lock ourselves into a kind of melancholia, where we install a psychic structure as a monument to something that has been lost (and, perhaps, that never existed at all). Sick comedy – in its brutal willingness to destroy anything, including myths, faiths and illusions – offers a safeguard against this danger, though one that is far beyond the sense of irony which Ringnalda suggests might be added as a corrective to modern war fiction.

Finally, it should be noted, sadism is certainly not the only mode which might protect against the failures of translation of trauma. E. Ann Kaplan suggests, for one potent example, looking to Marguerite Duras (an ironist, on occasion, but certainly not a comedian): “Duras... prefers to look directly at loss, without blinkers” (Kaplan 57). Kaplan contrasts Duras against Julia Kristeva, whose own work on trauma – specifically melancholia, in *Black Sun* – ultimately depends on a sort of post-secular spirituality, on “recovery or God” (Kristeva 228). This narrative – like Heller’s humanist narrative of a moral universe, or Kubrick’s much more tenuous narrative (where at least empathy and identification are possible) – serves as a scaffold for individual rehabilitation. As Kaplan argues, the brilliance of Duras’ work is her use of writing to both engage and distance herself from her own trauma. This is similar to Heller’s structure of management, if with a radically different tone, and it allows her to maintain “the commitment to justice and human rights” (58). Kristeva laments that Duras’ work offers no catharsis – which, in the high-Freudian tradition would be sublimation into beauty (into ‘art’), and in the low-Freudian tradition (a la Heller) would be release through comedy – “no improvement, no promise of a beyond, not even the enchanting style of irony that might provide a bonus of pleasure in addition to the revealed evil” (Kristeva 228). We can only imagine what Kristeva would make of Hasford, whose sadistic work is not a catharsis – a release of psychic energy – but a cathexis – the fixation of the death drive, the libido’s older and more primal counter-force. Hasford is, as Kristeva says of Duras, seduced by trauma; he follows a sadistic twist on the old mimetic phenomenon of identifying with one’s aggressor. Joker disappears into a communion with death and reports the horror from within. His refrain, his sadistic mantra, is his own truth, told as a brutal tautology: *There it is.*

[3] Gender and Sexuality

Better Faces: Trauma as Deconstruction in Vidal, Trauma as Reconstruction in Palahniuk

A wife is like an umbrella – sooner or later, one takes a cab.

Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*

Is the trauma victim the person most able continually to reinvent the self? Is she the quintessential postmodern figure?

Lynne Layton, “Discourses on Fragmentation”

Rip yourself open. Sew yourself shut.

Chuck Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*

I. The Turn to Structural Traumas

The dark and sick comedies about war discussed in the previous chapter are acutely perceptive about the trauma of death – not simply the death of the subject, but the traumatic collapse of the subject’s belief in its own immortality. This trauma cuts to the very core of the self, as the earliest infantile psyche is defined by a belief in omnipotence. This chapter moves outward, so to speak. As the ego starts to come into being, as the subject becomes a ‘self’ in our everyday sense of the word, the psyche develops the structures of gender and sexuality. These structures are in place and are self-consciously part of a subject’s identity before – in many cases – self-awareness of race and class.

The psychological literature of war deals intimately with gender and the gendered trauma of war (cf. Leys 92).⁴³ After all, during the Great War – for soldiers, doctors, and civilians alike – to fail under combat stress was to fail as a man. Early forms of combat stress were understood in the gendered terms of hysteria – even the refutation of Freudian ideas about what we now call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder were often based around the Victorian idea that men could not be hysterical. Combat stress, thus, amounted to psychological and social castration. Now, modern war threatens masculinity more than ever; the signature wound of American misadventures – in Iraq and particularly in Afghanistan – is a horrifyingly literal castration, the result of the increased use of Improvised Explosive Devices (cf. discussions in Junger’s *War and Men’s Health* “Signature Wound”).⁴⁴ While a few pieces of literature deal with this subject explicitly, it remains a largely repressed topic; like Hemingway’s *The Sun also Rises*, the topic remains opaque. Consider *The Hurt Locker*, directed by Katherine Bigelow, which treats IED wounds as the ‘all or nothing’ – soldiers are seen vaporized or escaping with scratches; or consider *Forest*

Gump, where Gary Sinise's Lieutenant Dan loses his legs, but remains sexually active. Thus, the complex field of gender – the intersections of anatomy, psychology, and culture – often goes without a complete interrogation by works about war.

For this reason I turn to a trio of texts – Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters* – that deals explicitly with physical mutilation and the trauma to masculinity. These texts, in exploring the traumatic destruction of gender identity, reveal – like all the traumas explored in this project – the *constructedness* of our speculative possessions, the facets of our identity we treat as ontological facts while repressing their imaginary or illusory quality.

These explorations involve two different forms of traumatic experience. The first of these traumas – the overwhelming shock to body and mind of a singular event – is more familiar to the popular imagination but the second involves long-term traumas involved with the development of identity. These long-term traumas are – in the work of Greg Forster, Lynne Layton, and others – the very mechanism by which gender (and other aspects of identity) are constructed; the traumatic realization that the plenitude of human sexuality cannot neatly fit into the socially available roles of gendered orientation causes subjects to repress many aspects of their personality. In these structural traumas, gender and sexuality are fused, as heteronormative society makes sexual desire an aspect of gender. Even in relatively progressive society, one that accepts gay and lesbian identity, there are still a limited number of social roles, all of which require a limiting, a cutting-off and repressing of certain behaviors and desires. It is this repressed that will return – as many theorists of trauma, from Freud to Caruth, have argued – when triggered by later traumas.

In Vidal and Palahniuk, violent mutilations unsettle the psyche, allowing facets of identity long repressed – in the service of existential recognition (of the Ego as male or straight) – to return in a way that is both liberating and terrifying. But this highly psychological vision of identity does not exclude the body; on the contrary, the graphic explicitness with which Vidal and Palahniuk represent these mutilations helps us think through the contested but important role of anatomy in the construction of gender.

Complicating the turn from death to gender is the structure of the central disavowal. In Heller's comedy the disavowal of death is both familiar and ridiculous: despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, Western society is in large part defined by a persistent belief in various forms of immortality (through repressive and euphemistic treatments of mortality, through the metaphorical immortalities of progeny and artistic work, and through the very notion of civilization and history, which record and sustain the lives of individuals). Gender identities and the related but distinct structures of sexuality are more complicated beliefs. Theorists like Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick – in what I will call the *constructivist* camp – are happy to deconstruct gender; they present it as fragmentary and fluid, the product of performance, context, and interpretation (and, to a lesser extent, force of will). Meanwhile, theorists like Gayle Rubin and essayists like the *New Yorker's* Alex Ross – those in the *activist* camp – believe and politically rely on *a priori* concepts of stable gender and sexuality. Of course, few theorists are absolutists, and few activists completely refute the cultural relativism of identity. Nevertheless, it is clear how the terrain is more complex: only the most scrupulously sadistic theorist (or comedian) would welcome or valorize the trauma of mortality (perhaps Camus or Zizek, but few others), but in the domain of gender many theorists do exactly such a thing, essentializing and celebrating the traumatic fragmentation of identity.

This is the context in which this chapter's primary texts examine trauma's unsettling effect on gender and sexuality. Not one of these works holds the truths of gender and sexuality to be self-evident, but neither are these works fully committed to the nihilistic abyss that pure performativity depends upon. These works all bring dark comedy (often bordering on sick comedy) to bear on the structures of gender, but to rather different ends. Vidal, beneath his hyperbolic comedy, is didactically eager to deconstruct. Palahniuk, while he recuperates many of Vidal's techniques and singles out many of the same satirical targets, has an end-game beyond deconstruction. We might call Palahniuk's mode *reconstructionist*.⁴⁵

Thus, the chapter will feature two main sections. First, I will examine Vidal's work and the way in which it prefigures both the evolving ideas of *performativity* and *iterability*. I will also demonstrate how Vidal's work falls short of sick comedy, primarily in Vidal's ambivalent hesitation to consummate fully his deconstructive efforts, attacking stable sexual identities but retaining an attachment to ideas of masculinity and male-ness. Finally, I will examine how Palahniuk's work parallels an important counter-movement in gender theory, one that argues for the importance of stable identity while still acknowledging the constructivist principles elaborated comically (but perceptively) by Vidal and theoretically by Freud, Butler, and others. I will also show how Palahniuk's dark comedy balances the intellectual honesty of sick comedy with the humanist (even haltingly sentimental) concern with real people and their psychic survival.

II. Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge*

Myra: A Tale of Two Traumas

Myra Breckinridge is predominantly the voice of its eponymous character, a sustained burlesque of first-person narration. Myra is a highly unreliable narrator and it is difficult (and perhaps foolhardy) to parse whether her accounts are megalomaniacal delusion, defensive invention, or truth. She is, to put it mildly, *unreal*. It is productive to examine the theory of trauma and identity that Vidal puts forward in the novel, but it is also important to remember that Vidal never breaks from his half-surreal comic mode. Vidal's dark comedy never completely commits to the implications of *Myra's* thought experiment. With that caveat in place, we can still discuss *Myra* as the story of two traumatic sexual experiences which demonstrate Vidal's theory of sexuality and gender. These case studies are Vidal's attempt to restate and extend the philosophic point of his first so-called gay novel, *The City and the Pillar*, deconstructing the model of inversion (i.e., the understanding of male homosexuality as a kind of gender dysmorphia, as men who see themselves as women and are thus feminine and passive). *Myra* goes beyond Vidal's earlier work in order to deconstruct the idea of sexual identity entirely, the project that Harold Bloom calls "Vidal's most useful insistence as a moralist" (5) and that Vidal defined explicitly in his "Sex is Politics" essay in *Playboy*, the year before *Myra* was published:

Actually, there is no such thing as a homosexual person, any more than there is such a thing as a heterosexual person. The words are adjectives describing sexual acts, not people. The sexual acts are entirely normal; if they were not, no one would perform them. (102)

The first of these case studies concerns Myron Breckinridge, who – before the novel begins – has a sexual reassignment operation and becomes Myra. Myron was a man with a complicated sexuality: a bottom (a stereotypical passive recipient of anal sex) whose desire to be penetrated *appears* masochistic but is at the psychological level a form of sadism. To be fully satisfied, Myron needed to force heterosexual males – often under financial duress – to penetrate him against their will; their disgust was his arousal. Active sexuality – in the Freudian sense of

the phrase – could not satisfy Myron, and yet he remained powerful, and at times intensely masculine; as Myra says of Myron, “his sexual integrity required him to withhold that splendid penis from those who most needed it, thus exerting power over them” (*Myra Breckinridge* 77).

Myron’s story is as tragic as anything in Jean Genet; he’s doomed to unhappiness by the vicissitudes of his sexuality. And yet Myron is rendered ridiculous in Myra’s ironic and comical account. This is not quite sadistic, though; Myra is, whether she realizes it or not, relating her own sexual etiology and, of course, doing it in high-comic style. Myron is described as “the female bird preparing to lay her egg” (*ibid*) while fussing over his conquests; Myra portrays him as a particular kind of Bergsonian Fool – the powerless instrument of instinct – a comic *thing* instead of a person. In part, this allows Myra to summon up the trope of the tragic gay male and then mock that trope, joking that Myron “was a tormented creature, similar to Hart Crane, except that while it was Crane’s kick to blow those sailors he encountered along those squalid waterfronts of that vivid never-to-be-recaptured world, Myron invariably took it from behind” (77-78). Myra’s comic tone also works to obscure Myron’s tragedy, which is also her own. Myra claims that Myron took his own life – the logical extension of the tragic gay role – but, in the novel’s reality, Myron becomes Myra.

Vidal gets a lot of dark comic mileage by articulating the horrifying and tragic in a comic style – the basic juxtaposition that, when sustained, underwrites the tragicomic genre. Myra’s pronouncements – from her racist nicknames for coworkers at her Uncle Buck’s Talent School (‘Heart of Darkness’ and ‘Darkness at Noon’ for an African American colleague) to her fascist plan to remake the world in her image – are toxic material, enveloped in comic hyperbole. Myra’s racist attitudes (revisited in her attitude towards Native Americans in *Myron*) are enveloped by literary punning on Conrad and Koestler, and the violent fascist potential of

Myra's master plan – to destroy and reengineer modern sexuality – is enveloped in arias of megalomania.

As the novel progresses, we learn that Myron, consulted by his “neo-Freudian” analyst Dr. Montag (86), traveled to Copenhagen for a sex-change operation. The surgery was a “traumatic experience” that essentially destroyed Myron's identity and created Myra (87), whose personality is very different than Myron's; both seek to exert power over others, but this desire manifests itself passively and masochistically in Myron, actively and sadistically in Myra. Post-op, Myra moves from New York to Los Angeles (where Hollywood culture makes self-invention more plausible and thus a better target for satire). She visits Myron's Uncle Buck Loner, laying claim to Myron's inheritance of half of Buck's acting school – their legal struggle provides the novel's superficial plot structure – by presenting herself as Myron's widow (although it is unclear if this is malingering or disavowal). In one sense, Myra's story can be understood as the defensive reaction known as confabulation, the mind's neurotic invention to cover the aporias of traumatic amnesia. Thus we could read Myra's revelation – exposing her surgical scars to her Uncle Buck – as cathartic.

At the novel's conclusion, Myra suffers another sexual trauma – a car accident that destroys her artificial breasts – and her personality is deconstructed yet again, resulting in a *new* version of Myron. The new identity is another reaction-formation. Catherine Stimpson, one of *Myra*'s most astute readers, calls this new personality “Myron the Second” – a domesticated suburban conservative – and, in a bit of ludic close reading, teases out Ronald Reagan (already the governor of California while Vidal wrote *Myra*) from “my Ron” (Stimpson 102).

Myra's story allows Vidal to demonstrate a subtle understanding of trauma and gender. Read superficially, *Myra* seems to recuperate early Freud: anatomy – however mutable – is

destiny (a penis makes Myron a man; breasts make Myra a woman).⁴⁶ But, as Marcie Frank suggests, Vidal's "vested interest in countering genetic determinism is readily available to the viewer who has read his masterpiece of transsexuality, *Myra Breckinridge*" (13). The profound differences between Myron the First and Myron the Second reveal a theory of identity that privileges psychology over biology; physical trauma is merely the catalyst for the psychic trauma – the collapsing ontology of gender – and Vidal shows how widely different versions of male or female might be formed as a defensive reaction to this trauma.

Vidal reinforces this theory with the case study of Rusty Godowski, whom Myra takes as her starting point in her campaign to reshape the dynamic of gender and sexuality in the western world (in essence, to destroy male heterosexuality, for the ostensibly noble goal of saving the world from overpopulation). Myra deliberately traumatizes Rusty in order to destroy his stereotypical *machismo* identity, the heteronormative type of sexuality and gender that, prior to Myra's interrogation, functioned invisibly. The rape of Rusty Godowski – which provoked more than a little moral outrage among critics – is unreal in the same sense as Myra's sexual reassignment surgery, though it is likewise grounded in plausibility: at the novel's conclusion, Dr. Montag suggests that Rusty, having become Ace Mann, a gay-identifying actor, was a repressed homosexual all along, suggesting some motivation for his passive acceptance of Myra's actions. For her part, Myra is far from the clinical experimenter; she is acting out a fantasy of vengeance on behalf of the oft-sodomized Myron (which is to say, on her own behalf).

Again, if we were to read *Myra* literally – ignoring the numerous cues that we have abandoned mimetic realism (not least of which is Myra's insistence that the "novel is dead" on the novel's second page [*Myra* 4]) – then the rape is tragic, in fact horrifying. Myron, traumatized to a state of schizophrenic delusion, is abusing a position of power in order to violate

a barely-of-age young man, a cycle of sexual violence that continues in Rusty's sadistic assaults on Letitia Van Allen, one of Myra's few friends in Hollywood. Vidal's comedy disavows the horror, as do critics who privilege the symbolic lesson of *Myra* over its messier mechanics. Stimpson admits, "Myra's rape of Rusty is still ugly," but reads *Myra* as a mythological work, granting it an "exemption [...] from secular moral codes and punitive superegos" (110); Susan Baker and Curtis Gibson equivocate that "Myron and Myra live in a world gone mad" and argue, thus, that "it would be unwise to focus on the horror behind the humor" (154, 153). All three are right to avoid moralizing – a disastrous reading strategy for Vidal, in general – but the horror *is* important; as I will discuss, over-privileging Vidal's comedy is a disservice to *Myra's* complexity.

Of course, Vidal himself has no more interest in the morality of the rape than he does in the scientific plausibility of surgical sex change; the scene is a thought experiment, which carries out Vidal's belief, voiced by Myra:

[O]nly through a traumatic shock, through terrifying him and humiliating him, could I hope to change his view of what is proper masculine behavior. To keep him from breeding, and so adding to the world's overpopulation, I was forced to violate everything he has been taught to regard as sacred, including the sanctity of his tiny back door. (*Myra* 178)

Rusty stands in for generic male identity; Myra's point is that because male identity is performative, it is therefore inherently pliable. Myra says as much about the current generation of students, who easily inhabit various identities culled from film (and, increasingly, television): "[i]t is easy for these young people to be anything since they are so plainly nothing, and they know it" (34). What makes Rusty such a tempting subject for Myra's experimentation is that he is unaware of his own performance. What provokes such exuberant sadism in Vidal's graphic prose description of the rape – inspiring Sylvia Brownrigg to admit that Vidal "can write a

transsexual rape-of-a-young-man-with-dildo scene better than almost anybody” (322) – is the comic irony of Myra’s critical self-blindness in critiquing Rusty’s performance of masculinity: “he is sadly superfluous, an anachronism, acting out a masculine charade that has lost all meaning. That is why, to save him (and the world from his sort), *I must change entirely his sense of himself*” (*Myra* 117, italics in the original). Myra cannot see that she, too, has been performing a charade since the first page.

Vidal invests Myra with his own deepest insight, which anticipates both Butler’s original idea of performativity – that gender identity is constructed through performance – and her qualification against utopian readings of performativity-as-freedom, the idea of iterability – that only sustainable and recognized (even ritualized) performances can succeed. Like J.L. Austin’s performative phrases, which inspired Butler’s gender theory, a gender performance can only succeed if it is socially recognized. (For example, ‘I now pronounce you man and wife’ only works if the audience recognizes the general format of the performance and the specific performance of the religious official.) Vidal astutely points to mainstream film as the great repository of recognizable – and thus repeatable, and therefore ‘iterable’ – performances, an idea recapitulated in film theory’s study of subjectivity and its facets (sexuality, gender, race, etc.).

But Vidal also makes Myra a ridiculous Fool and hoists her on her own strap-on. From the first line of her oft-quoted opening monolog, Myra is performing roles:

I am Myra Breckinridge whom no man will ever possess. Clad only in my garter belt and one dress shield, I held off the entire elite of the Trobriand Islanders, a race who possess no words for “why” or “because.” Wielding a stone axe, I broke the arms, the limbs, the balls of their finest warriors, my beauty blinding them, as it does all men, unmanning them in the way that King Kong was reduced to a mere simian whimper by beauteous Fay Wray whom I resemble left three-quarter profile if the key light is no more than five feet high during the close shot. (3)

In her bombastic range from the historical and anthropological to the pop cultural, Myra lays claim to feminine myths, tropes, and roles, but she cannot make good on her promises to transcend them. Even sexual reassignment – an extreme measure by 1968 standards – in its ability to turn anatomy into a performance, in allowing Myra to act out her fantasies, still leaves those fantasies circumscribed by the binary logics of masculine and feminine, what Vidal calls “the American passion for categorizing” (“Sex is Politics” 116). Myra’s performance of femininity is completely convincing, but its tragic success is what prevents Myra from consummating her sexual attraction to Mary-Ann Pringle, Rusty’s girlfriend. Mary-Ann allows Myra to stimulate her breasts and clitoris digitally, but breaks off each encounter without reaching orgasm; she meets her self-evident sexual attraction to Myra with a repressive fantasy, telling Myra, “if only you were a man” (*Myra* 175). Here, Vidal furnishes us with a surprisingly touching irony: Myra is exiled from her own anatomy by a performance, yet the performance cannot free her from social categories.

As Butler has long argued, anatomy is not gender, but anatomy is not irrelevant – it is part of the performance of gender. For example, Myra’s breast implants are highly performative, deliberately modeled, as is often the case in plastic surgery, on the features of iconic film stars; in Myra’s case, her “superbly shaped breasts [are] reminiscent of those sported by Jean Harlow in *Hell’s Angels* and seen at their best four minutes after the start of the second reel” (4-5). Myra’s breasts are a significant part of what allows her to perform femininity and, when they are destroyed – leaving Myra to cry out, in a parody of Ronald Reagan in *King’s Row*, “Where are my breasts? *Where are my breasts?*” (210) – Myra’s personality begins to disintegrate. Likewise, Myra’s surgical scars – which mark her performance of femininity as flawed – prevent her from engaging in the fluid sexuality of the orgy she attends, where she refuses to remove her

underwear. Ironically, Myra's physical castration also serves as her sign of masculinity – as her legal and social identity as Myron – when she exposes her scars to her Uncle Buck. In Vidal's world, anatomy and biology are pliable – through surgical and hormonal manipulation – but identity is still subject to external categorization: male or female, gay or straight. When Myra's performance falls short of the transcendent sublime, she pitches towards the grotesque, painfully suspended between genders and orientations.⁴⁷ Her refusal to acknowledge the failure of her own apotheosis renders her pathetically – even sympathetically – comical. Goddesses don't disavow, but mortals do.

At the high point of her mythic drag act, Myra boasts, “I was the eternal feminine made flesh,” and revels in “dealing with the man as incidental toy, whose blood as well as semen is needed to make me whole” (150). Here Vidal explicitly lets us in on the joke: the essentializing language of feminine empowerment – useful as it may be for tactical attacks on patriarchal domination – is a system of thought that mirrors and ultimately reinforces the idea of *a priori* masculinity. Gender is a joke and Myra, more than Rusty, plays the straight man, so to speak. Finally realizing that her drag act has foreclosed any chance at a sexual relationship with Mary-Ann, Myra mournfully recognizes that she has “smashed the male principle only to be trapped by the female” (196). In conversation with Dr. Montag – who challenges her, “who and what will you be?” (166) – Myra struggles valiantly against the abyss that lies beneath performative identity, but eventually she concedes:

I answered vehemently, at length, but said nothing, for as usual, Randolph, in his blundering way, has touched upon the dilemma's horn: I have no clear idea as to my ultimate identity once every fantasy has been acted out with living flesh. (167)

Here Myra's comic mode is explicated. The phenomenal energy of her rants – which unfold “vehemently, at length” – comes from hysterical disavowal and they have “said nothing.”

What Myra disavows is ultimately *Myra's* point: homosexual and heterosexual, masculine and feminine, are conceptual frameworks that impose from without. While deconstructing them is possible – the “categories keep breaking down,” as Vidal says (“Sex is Politics” 116) – and the essential fluidity of identity makes itself known all the time, the idea of categorical identity is inescapable. Penelope Deutscher makes this point in her excellent study of feminism and post-structuralism, *Yielding Gender*:

Neither Butler nor Sedgwick has argued that gender does not matter, though both have wanted to invalidate the fictions of natural, original, discrete or stable gender categories. Both have insisted that one cannot get ‘outside’ what one deconstructs. To think that gender does not matter is to confuse deconstructibility with the fantasy of being able to get ‘outside’ that which is deconstructible. (13)

If Vidal can imagine a way ‘outside,’ he does not share it with Myra; she is left suffering, with no stable core upon which to develop a sense of self, even while she is locked into an identity. Her fluidity is a curse, not a blessing: Vidal portrays a world where, without stable roles, romantic relationships – gay or straight – are not possible. This is due both to Vidal’s skepticism about sexual identity and his general cynicism towards romantic love. As Ray Lewis White says while discussing *The City and the Pillar*, for Vidal “the difficulties of maintaining homosexual love must reflect a larger, perhaps national inability to achieve the love that is, so it is said, every person’s right” (56).

And yet, despite his lack of sentimentality, Vidal is invested in Myra’s character and we are in some ways encouraged to feel for her losses: the loss of Myron, her romantic failure with Mary-Ann, and especially her loss – at the novel’s conclusion – of the personality that she so joyously celebrates as authentic at the novel’s opening. Myra is sexually traumatized, which for Vidal is less about a physical moment of violation or a surge of overwhelming sensory input than

it is about the revelation of core psychic beliefs as illusory. In Dominic LaCapra's terms, it is the traumatic recognition of an absence and the dangerous reactions to that psychic apocalypse.

Contemporary trauma theory has similar things to say about trauma and gender; as Lynne Layton, a clinical therapist dealing with female victims of sexual abuse, describes: "trauma victims are aware of being socially constructed, but their enactment of a variety of roles is defensive and meant to keep the trauma secret" (107). Likewise, Marijke Baljon demonstrates how, for male victims, "masculinity is at stake by the very nature of the trauma," and describes how the destruction of masculine beliefs often results in "destructive aggression" – a violent reaction against the loss of identity that takes the form of a hyper-performance of aggressive masculinity (153).⁴⁸ Thus, despite Vidal's tone – comic and unreal – he is deeply insightful into the psychic nature of trauma and the ways in which victims rebel against the deconstructive lesson of trauma: Myra's hyper-feminine delusions and Rusty's macho rampage – "ten times as masculine in the classic sense" (*Myra* 174) – are reactionary attempts to hold onto the lost object of gender. This is the price paid for their inability or refusal to see and accept their own constructedness and the absence of stable *a priori* gender or sexual orientation.

Vidal's comic mode works to keep Rusty from being a sympathetic character in a balancing act that suspends the rape scene between surreal and sadistic. But how much does Vidal intend us to sympathize with Myra – with the horror behind the comedy? Is she solely an allegorical exercise? Layton directly addresses this sort of problem, describing the utopian strain of postmodern theory, that – in essentializing and even valorizing the subject's fragmentation – occludes the subject's suffering:

Often, the protagonists of these texts – the lesbian, the transvestite, the sadomasochist, the hermaphrodite – are made emblems of a third space, a space outside of various forms of cultural oppression. In this status, they perform an important cultural service – they challenge heterosexism, reified notions of gender

identity, repressed forms of sexual expression, the hypocrisies of a puritan, yet violent, culture. At the same time, when these figures become postmodern heroes and heroines, the pain of fragmentation, of marginality, of indeterminacy is often overlooked or glossed over. (107)

Critically and popularly, *Myra* was understood as a gay book, as a satire of the invisible, default structures of heterosexual gender identity and the religious moralizing and homophobia that support that identity. In fact, some critics – including Stimpson (110) – give *Myra* credit for making Stonewall and other gay-rights landmarks possible. But this appropriation avoids the suffering of the individual left *without* a stable identity, or else reads Vidal in bad faith, dissolving straight identity while reifying gay identity. Vidal himself seems utterly unconcerned – even disgusted – with plight of the real-world transsexual, as evidenced in a 1986 interview with Rich Grzesiak (around the time of the re-release of *Myra Breckinridge* and *Myron* as a joint volume):

I got a set of photographs from a guy who had been turned into a lady showing the entire operation step-by-step. It was absolutely sickeningI know nothing about transsexualists and I'd never even met one outside of the dread Candy Darling who used to corner me at parties and exclaim, "I was born to play Myra Breckinridge!" (n. pag)

So how are we to take Vidal's nihilistic prognosis, that the modern subject is stuck in a double bind, alienated both from any authentic identity and from agency in identity's construction? It is certainly tempting to read *Myra* as true satire, risking transgression for the sake of social benefit, founded on the argument that – as Chekhov said of his own tragicomic work – "Man will only become better when you make him see what he is like" (116). After all, *Myra* sounds *very* much like Vidal when she says:

Frankly I can think of no pleasure greater than to approach an open face and swiftly say whatever needs to be said to shut it. Myron disapproved of this trait in me but I believed then, as I do now, that if one is right, the unsayable must be said, and the faces that I temporarily shut will, in the long run, be better faces for the exercise. (*Myra* 41-42)

Myra's patronizing megalomania is hardly far from Vidal's – when, for example, he quipped, “I am at heart a propagandist, a tremendous hater, a tiresome nag, complacently positive that there is no human problem which could not be solved if people would simply do as I advise” (“Writing Plays for Television” 30). Reading Myra – and Vidal – as reformers makes *Myra's* moments of sadistic comedy easier to take. But is this reading too sanguine? What of Vidal the “tremendous hater,” who believed, as Myra puts it, that “it is hate alone which inspires us to action and makes for civilization. Look at Juvenal, Pope, Billy Wilder” (*Myra* 27) and swoons over “[d]eath and destruction, hate and rage, these are the most characteristic of human attributes, as Myra Breckinridge knows and personifies” (118). Vidal is too serious to deflate as Camp, and too dark to valorize as satire.⁴⁹ So, to put the question in the terms of this project: is *Myra* a dark comedy or a sick comedy?

Ruthless Cynicism – Vidal's Freudian Jokes

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud returns several times to the shifting emphasis between technique and content. The first is the joke's structural aspect – the way we might categorize it as a play on words, a subversion of expectations, or a demand for what cognitive psychologists call higher order resolution and Freud calls “sense in nonsense” (*Jokes* 8). Some jokes, which Freud calls *abstract jokes*, are *only* their techniques; they are superficial jokes that do not operate against either social or psychological repression. Other jokes, regardless of their particular technique, are notable for their content, or – in the Freudian language that gives the unconscious agency in the joke-telling – for their aim.

Heller's jokes, for example, are unified by their aim; they are skeptical jokes, aimed inwardly at Heller's own ambivalent disavowal of mortality. Vidal's jokes, on the other hand, are

unified by a very different aim; they are what Freud calls *cynical* jokes, aimed outward at the repressive forces of others. Freud's joke – "A wife is like an umbrella – sooner or later, one takes a cab" (*Jokes* 92) – in the epigraph to this chapter is an instructive example. The technique is what Freud calls "bewilderment and enlightenment" (ibid 8). At first, the joke's audience is bewildered by the seemingly absurdist statement, but then the audience is enlightened to the joke's deeper logic: as an umbrella only provides a certain amount of protection from rain, after which one must hire a car in order to stay dry, so marriage only provides a certain amount of protection from the demands of the sexual instincts, after which one must go beyond or outside the bounds of monogamy.

Freud is exceedingly fond of these cynical jokes, in part because the social structures they attack are so sanctified that the jokes must work "in all kinds of roundabout ways" in order to achieve their critical aim (ibid 133). No stranger to aestheticism, Freud happily acknowledges that excellent technique can elevate a mundane content, and can even be enjoyed in its empty, superficial form. But, of course, Freud's deeper appreciation for cynical jokes is that they are – in effect – practitioners of the psychoanalytic critique of civilization, more aggressive than Freud himself will be, until his final years, in *Future of an Illusion* and *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Of the umbrella joke, Freud writes:

Among the institutions which cynical jokes are in the habit of attacking none is more important or more strictly guarded by moral regulations but at the same time more inviting to attack than the institution of marriage, at which accordingly, the majority of cynical jokes are aimed. There is no more personal claim than that for sexual freedom and at no point has civilization tried to exercise severer suppression than in the sphere of sexuality. (ibid 132)

Attacking the institution of marriage – *the* symbolic act of Vidal's agonist, the "heterosexual dictatorship" (*The Second American Revolution* 172) – is, of course, the content of Vidal's jokes, but *Myra's* attack registers at two distinct levels.

At the political level, Myra serves as Vidal's mouthpiece for a critique of marriage as a cultural ritual backed by state law: the puritanical marriage that privileges heteronormative sex for the sole purpose of reproduction (and reproducing religious culture). In some ways, this critique is more theoretical than social, ignoring Americans' pronounced ability for managing cognitive dissonance and our deeply ambivalent national attitudes towards sexuality (we are, to put it another way, the epicenter of both Evangelical Christianity and the modern pornography industry).⁵⁰ Nevertheless, our national sexual hang-ups are the content of Myra's hyperbolic Malthusian obsessions; though we may be initially bewildered by Myra's despotic bombast, eventually we are enlightened to her underlying logic:

I demonstrated that essentially Malthus was right [...] I gave statistics for the current world death rate, showing how it has drastically declined in the last fifty years [...] As a result of miracle drugs and incontinent breeding, the world's food supply can longer support the billions of people alive at present... (*Myra* 120-121).

As long as sexual pleasure is confined to the practice of reproduction, the inexhaustible human drive for sexual gratification will inevitably lead to overpopulation (at least in Vidal's particular moment before the revolution of affordable birth control). And, while Vidal had obvious contempt for the illusory self-assurance of heterosexual identity, even straight-identified men and women stand to benefit from Vidal's critique since – even though their sexual attitudes are the only ones accommodated by marriage – they are still exiled from sexual freedom (as Vidal might say, the unimaginative or repressive sky-god religions allow only missionary sex for the sake of procreation). The key to Vidal's social critique is that straight-identified is a social move, not an *a priori* identity. Being normal is an attempt to conform to an arbitrary and obsolete social structure. As Vidal put it in a 1961 interview for *Mademoiselle*:

...we never think to ask if the institution is at fault; we assume instead there's something wrong with us, with men and women. So we try to alter ourselves at enormous expense – through psychiatry, prayer, popular writing—when the fault isn't in us but in a custom no longer useful. Our appetites are what they are, and as long as they are not destructive of others – physically, even perhaps morally – they are not the concern of the state. (Auchincloss 133)

At one level Vidal's concerns here are political; he voices a principled libertarian objection to state interference with the citizen's private life. But aside from megalomania there's nothing funny – in the Freudian sense – about Vidal's political commentary; nothing about his critique requires the psychic complexity or protection of a joke. In other words, Vidal is able to voice his opinion without battling oppression and many of his readers were able to hear his opinion without struggling psychologically against its content. What accounts for *Myra's* comedy – what accounts for Vidal's decision to choose comedy as his mode to make *Myra's* deeper critique – is the potential for resistance to what Vidal argues at the psychological level. The comedy comes from an anxious reaction to Vidal's nihilistic deconstruction of gender and sexual identity, revealing what Freud means by “sexual freedom” and what Vidal means by the primacy of “appetites” over identities.

This deconstruction is what Myra believes she is performing during her rape of Rusty, when she crows: “Carefully I was reducing his status from man to boy to – ah, the triumph!” (*Myra* 137). Myra imagines excavating layers of Rusty's personality, digging down to the unnamed infantile stage; the non-linguistic gap at the end of this trajectory gestures (“from man to boy to –”) towards the nascent psyche, before it is shaped into pubescent sexual identity and gender and, importantly, before it is structured by language. As Myra says, “it is demonstrably true that desire can take as many shapes as there are containers. Yet what one pours into those containers is always the same inchoate human passion, entirely lacking in definition until what

holds it shapes it” (179). Of course, from this primordial and formless Freudian drive she plans to remake new identities – in *Myron*, for example, Myra strives to remake Stephen Dude into Stephanie Dude – but the point remains that, however constructed, identity covers a void.

Provoking this traumatic revelation is the Freudian aim of Vidal’s comedy and it is the aspect of Vidal’s work most likely to provoke resistance, both socially and from the defensive forces of the Ego itself. As such it is the most powerful driving force of Vidal’s comedy, what elevates it from a farce or an invention to an idea and an argument. This is the force of tendentious jokes, which Freud describes, speaking in both the social and psychological sense:

In the one case the joke is an end in itself and serves no particular aim, in the other case it does serve such an aim – it becomes *tendentious*. Only jokes that have a purpose run the risk of meeting with people who do not want to listen to them. (*Jokes* 107)

To be sure, the nihilism at the core of Vidal’s comedy is – as Layton points out – a tragic source of suffering for many; it constitutes the core of existential despair and defines the identity crisis of the trauma victim. But it is also, in both Freud and Vidal, a potential source of joy, if not *the* source: *jouissance*, unmediated and unrepressed enjoyment. Jokes, the comic force of *Myra*, for example, allow partial access to this joy.

However, there is something post-lapsarian about comic joy because, as Freud argues, “the repressive activity of civilization” has robbed us of our primordial sexual freedom, the “primary possibilities of pleasure” (ibid), what Foucault, in *History of Sexuality*, cites as the “good genius of Freud” (159), and Vidal might call appetites without identities. These are pleasures freed, both from the misguided and destructive cultural need to categorize and from the Ego’s own need to split and repress those desires outside the structures (or strictures) of identity formation. Having lost them – for Vidal and Foucault – means exile from “the garden of earthly delights” (ibid 7), but for Freud this renunciation of pleasure is part of the great Oedipal bargain:

the sacrifice of freedom for order, of unbounded pleasure for a stable self. Still, Freud offers that “tendentious jokes provide a means of undoing the renunciation and retrieving what was lost” (*Jokes* 120-121). This is as optimistic and sanguine as Freud ever gets about the discontents of modern civilization (and it is why Freud is so fond of tendentious jokes), but this reclamation is a fleeting one; the joke is a temporary and tactical measure. It cannot fulfill Myra’s desire to transcend the social categories of male and female, gay and straight, her wish to “break the world’s pots, and allow the stuff of desire to flow and intermingle in one great viscous sea” (*Myra* 180).⁵¹

It is possible, thus, to read Vidal as a cunning and self-conscious comedian; that is, to treat his dark comedy as an attempt to tell his readers something they did not want to hear. It is, at least, certainly clear that the world never really heard Vidal when he tried, in non-comedic terms, to throw off the idea of sexual identity. Friend and enemy, Dennis Altman⁵² and William F. Buckley alike, both considered Vidal queer. But ‘queer,’ as soon as it is defined – whether with the violent charge of ‘faggot’ for Buckley⁵³ or the communal sense of ‘*sputnik*’ for Altman – becomes a Foucaultian prison, trapping a soul inside. And, in part, *Myra Breckinridge* is an exuberantly comic, metaphorical testimony of Vidal’s own trauma – the very process of identity formation itself, the exile from sexual freedom. This trauma is not the shock of a particular event – not like the overwhelming rush of pain and sensation that constitutes an act of violence. It is what what Greg Forter calls a “structural trauma” in opposition to the “punctual traumas” that Cathy Caruth’s school of trauma theory focuses on.⁵⁴ Forter explains:

For my purposes, “structural” traumas are those that purportedly inhere in the human condition; they operate in different registers depending upon a given theorist’s foundational assumptions ... I am speaking here of the trauma induced by patriarchal identity formation rather, say, than the trauma of rape, the violence not of lynching but of everyday racism. (283, 260)

If we take Myra's claims – which are also Vidal's and Freud's as well – seriously, and consider that the self is really “inchoate human passion,” then any identity is necessarily limiting and requires a splitting, a repression of possibility. Even if we reject Myra's Freudian claims or have questions about her vacillation between her theory of ‘passion’ and the seemingly oppositional theory of ‘aggression’ highlighted earlier, we can still turn to clinical trauma theory, which identifies the potential for suffering involved in achieving normal identity. For example, the work of David Lisak deals with the way a young male “suffers – usually with little or no awareness – from the inner and interpersonal alienation that results from his actualizing the masculine-labeled parts of his personality, while repressing those labeled as feminine” (Lisak 245). Freud himself was rhetorically inconsistent about the experience of identity formation and his normal sometimes has the cautious, clinical quality of anthropology – normal as artificial and culturally subjective – and sometimes has the force of ontological morality – normal in the sense of mental health and hygiene, the way his Clark University lectures were interpreted in the United States. However, in both cases, he is clear about the suffering of individuals whose desires are socially proscribed. But since this suffering begins before the psyche is fully formed and carries on in the unconscious mind, it is difficult for Freud to describe. As Forter says of the traumas of identity formation: “[t]he very mechanisms by which our societies reproduce themselves are in this sense caught up in perpetuating injuries that, as I shall argue, are in the strictest sense traumas – but traumas that most work in the field has no way of describing” (260).

What Freud at his most radical and Vidal on any given day suggest is that it is not simply minorities but everyone who suffers, disenfranchised from the primordial pleasures and the bisexual mixture of feminine and masculine traits. The trauma of identity is not *just* about the structures of domination which the Other is subject to, it is also about the traumatic loss of an

original freedom which is difficult – and perhaps impossible – to recover. Vidal faces the same representational difficulties as Freud, before him, and Forter, after him. This is in part because of his desire for personal opacity (his memoir, *Palimpsest*, offers some clues, but also digresses frequently into gossip and slander). More importantly for this project, literal testimony of structural trauma is not quite possible, as the infantile freedom Vidal mourns predates language itself; thus Vidal’s solution is to testify to the emotional truth of his trauma.⁵⁵ Read this way, Vidal is sympathetic but still potentially sadistic; if his testimony is to be successful – if we are to hear it and acknowledge it – then we must be traumatized into recognizing our own construction, the aporias at the core of our own psyches.

In the end, however, Vidal’s *Myra* is a dark comedy, fundamentally ambivalent about the deconstruction of identity. While Vidal is willing to do without identities like homosexual and heterosexual, he retains a strong attachment to the ideal of virile masculinity – put simply, to being a man. As Stimpson argues, Myra’s aggressive and phallic violence “reveals a contradiction in Vidal’s dramas of sex and gender. Yes, Vidal does believe in bisexuality... [but] Vidal masculinizes the aggressive/creative drive and feminizes pliability and tenderness” (107). Vidal does not quite retreat to biological determinism, nor he does embrace Freud’s more constructivist attitudes, exemplified by his 1915 revision of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, which parses out social, biological, and psychological meanings of masculine and feminine, insisting on their relativity:

[a]ctivity and its concomitant phenomena (more powerful muscular development, aggressiveness, greater intensity of libido) are as a rule linked with biological masculinity; but they are not necessarily so. (86)

Vidal, like Freud, reads anthropology and history selectively in order to support his own theory: Myra performs a Foucaultian deconstruction of Rusty and Mary-Ann’s understanding of

normative sexuality, leaving them “horrified by the *unnaturalness* of what was considered natural in other parts of the world” (*Myra* 121, italics in original).⁵⁶ And yet Myra’s recapitulation of matriarchal history becomes farce; Vidal has no real interest in a counter-history to patriarchy, only a counter-history to heteronormativity. In fact, Vidal’s fiction, however queer in sexual terms, is eminently patriarchal: his historical novels repeatedly insist that all power – of self-mastery, social agency, and world-historical force – stems from masculine forms of aggression and libido.

It is no coincidence that Vidal’s central figures are often powerful men – *Julian* and *Lincoln* are both excellent examples of self-possessed masculine drive elevated to historical force. In short, Vidal cannot or will not completely pry apart masculine drive and male identity. In Vidal’s fiction, there can be weak men, but few truly strong women. Even the most notable exception to this – Caroline Sanford, from Vidal’s *Narratives of Empire* series – still consciously images herself as part of the powerful male political lineage of Aaron Burr, her great-grandfather: “Caroline vowed [...] that she would now become Burr’s great-grandson, and live out, on the grandest scale possible, that subtle creature’s dream of a true civilization with himself at its center” (*Empire* 100, italics in original). After all of *Myra*’s deconstruction and dissembling, Myra is still one more self-possessed *man*, poised to reshape the socio-political landscape. Vidal was an elegant – and humorous – critic of Hemingway’s machismo, but he never really escaped Hemingway’s shadow; Vidal’s fictions are always men against the world. Vidal’s homosocial realm is the near-mythic domain of life and death; as Christopher Hitchens put it, the “junction of Eros and Thanatos with male bonding,” which appears throughout Vidal’s work, “had also been strongly present through his thrice-rewritten postwar novel *The City and the Pillar*” (32). Or, as Vidal wrote in that same novel,

[f]or such active men as Jim and Ronald Shaw there could be no ... passive acceptance of the external world's horror; there must be a battle and there must be a victory if they were to survive and be at peace (102)

To be fair, Vidal's personal attachment to autonomy – the self-mastery he encoded as active and masculine – drove his most powerful and useful political critique, which saw the decadence of the United States as the “collapse of the idea of the citizen as someone autonomous whose private life is not subject to orders from above” (“Notes on Our Patriarchal State” 202). But, ultimately, Vidal's struggle was not historical (men against the *Zeitgeist*) or political (citizens against the State) but personal: Gore Vidal against the world. Vidal's narcissism, which made his massive intellectual achievements possible, is what makes *Myra* a dark comedy. The deconstructive force of the novel's thought experiment – its ruthless cynicism – threatens to turn inward as a skeptical attack on Vidal's own male Ego. Not willing to surrender himself or his cynicism, Vidal partially disavows *Myra*, suspending her in the unreal demimonde of comedy before finally silencing her.

Thus, though Vidal resurrected his transsexual heroine for a sequel, *Myra* ends with Myron the Second, foreclosing the more radical endgames of Vidal's thought experiment. In Myron's parting words – quoting from Rousseau – the novel puts forth a half-hearted justification for pulling its most sadistic punches, laying a kind of defeated claim to “the middle ground between the indolence of the primitive state and the questing activity to which we are prompted by our self-esteem” (*Myra* 213).

III. Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters*

Fight Club

Palahniuk is also working from the Rousseau playbook, struggling between deconstruction and self-preservation. Beneath its deliberately juvenile streak of scatological humor, Palahniuk's writing is motivated by the same tensions – between nihilism and belief, illusion and identity – as Vidal's work. One defining difference is that Palahniuk's humor, while it has the same skeptical force as *Myra*, is ultimately dedicated to a recuperative sense of self, the foundation for a kind of communalism that Vidal in his icy individualism would never entertain.

Another conspicuous difference is that Palahniuk has carried on this work without the benefits – and also without the burdens – of a social persona or the role of public intellectual. In the 21st century, the intellectual terrain of the United States has been painfully deracinated; imagining something like the ideological clash of Buckley and Vidal, on prime-time television, is difficult (we have, on the right, the hysterical fear-mongering of Fox News and, on the left, the humorous – but significantly defanged – work of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert). It is fair to say that Chuck Palahniuk hardly has the intellectual clout of Vidal. Nevertheless, his literary career bears a marked similarity to Vidal's. A relentless re-inventor, Palahniuk began with hard-boiled minimalism (*Fight Club*), before moving on to formal experimentation (the backwards chronology of *Survivor*, the oral-biography format of *Rant*, the invented pigeon dialect of *Pygmy*'s narrator) and genre exploration (supernaturalism in *Lullaby*, time travel and dystopia in *Rant*, Kitty-Kelly exposé in *Tell-All*, a hellish parody of Judy Bloom YA in *Damned*). Many of Palahniuk's concerns also overlap with Vidal's – the crisis of the novel, the struggle between media images and self-fashioning, the instability of gender and sexuality and, in nearly all of his novels, the struggle between self-mastery and self-destruction.

Palahniuk's work has been neglected critically, despite his having produced ten innovative and challenging novels and a small but powerful body of New Journalistic

nonfiction.⁵⁷ However, his first published novel, *Fight Club*, along with David Fincher's cinematic adaptation, did generate a moderate amount of scholarship. It is worth dealing with those issues here because *Fight Club* was written, in a concessional mode, after the original version of *Invisible Monsters* was rejected by publishers. After the success of *Fight Club*, Palahniuk reworked *Invisible Monsters* – readdressing the themes of *Fight Club* – and thus the two novels form a thematic diptych.⁵⁸

Much of the criticism and analysis of *Fight Club* shows a tendency to conflate film and novel, a critical move in part justified by screenwriter Jim Uhls and director David Fincher's lovingly bombastic translation of Palahniuk's pulpy, fast-moving style. For this project, however, it is necessary to highlight the ways in which the novel maintains a dark-comic tone throughout and the film, although its first act contains genuinely brilliant comedy, descends into a humorless action-film mode (the film also bleaches out the novel's religious overtones and some – but not all – of the novel's homoeroticism).

A key example of this difference is the soap (featured extensively in the film's promotional materials) produced by *Fight Club*'s two leading men (and ultimately the story's agonists), Tyler Durden and the unnamed narrator. In both narratives, the production of soap evolves into the production of high explosives, paralleling the overall shift in the narrative's tone from humorous pranks to serious violence; however, the production is handled in noticeably different ways.

The film features a wonderful scene, in the slick style of a Michael Mann bank heist, where Tyler (Brad Pitt) and the narrator (Edward Norton) break into a liposuction clinic (a knowing shot shows Tyler neutralizing barbed wire by throwing a cheap piece of carpet over it) and steal human fat, “the fat of the land” which makes the “best soap.” The scene ends with a

comically grotesque shot of Pitt and Norton accidentally ripping a bag of bloody human fat and getting doused with the contents. The payoff of this scene is a bit of guerilla capitalism, turning the fat into an expensive artisanal product; Tyler and the narrator are “selling women their own fat asses back to them.” This is dark-comic material but at once lighter and more plausible than Palahniuk’s version; the darker, more unreal novelistic version has Tyler misleading the mother of Marla Singer (the mutual love interest of Tyler and the narrator) into believing Marla needs her to donate collagen by sending her telegrams reading “HIDEOUSLY WRINKLED (stop) PLEASE HELP ME! (end)” (*Fight Club* 89). In other words, the novel depends upon the cruel and cartoonish manipulation of a real person. Further, whereas the film features Tyler rendering the anonymous fat from the clinic, the novel has Marla reacting violently – screaming, “You boiled my mother!” (93) – to the significantly less abstract source of collagen. This is, in essence, Palahniuk’s style: hyper-realistic details (i.e., accurate recipes for making soap – or high explosives – from human fat) set in a world that prevaricates between hard-boiled realism and surreal caricature. Fincher, in his film version, significantly diminishes this ambiguity by focusing more on the plausible aspects of Palahniuk’s world – thus the invented clinic robbery which replaces Marla’s mother at the source of the fat.

There is much to say about the plot elements both versions share: disaffected middle-class men (largely Caucasian) escaping the ennui of corporate America. For many critics *Fight Club* is – as Kevin Alexander Boon puts it in his précis of the novel – concerned primarily with “the identity crisis of white, heterosexual, American men in the late 20th and early 21st centuries who grew up in a paradoxical cultural environment that makes heroes of aggressive men while debasing aggressive impulses” (269). This crisis represents the structural traumas of identity formation – here explicitly focused on male identity – built up from years of rejection and

repression. The novel, even more than the film, repeatedly overlays the failure of a patriarchal God with the secular failure of fatherhood in modern culture; in both cases the men of *Fight Club* have no religious or paternal model for navigating the traumatic course to adult identity and they are cheated in the Oedipal bargain, sacrificing primordial pleasures without gaining much in the way of agency or cohesion.

The novel's narrator initially finds solace – and human connection – by malingering at support groups for malignant cancers and parasitic diseases. Importantly, his emotional breakthrough comes at “Remaining Men Together” (*Fight Club* 18), a group for survivors of testicular cancer. In part, these men have had their materialist priorities restructured by the trauma of disease. But, more to the point, these are men who – because their trauma is gendered and a literal castration – share acutely the narrator's alienation from an authentic sense of masculinity; the most extreme example is Bob, a former steroid abuser who develops “bitch-tits” and a raised voice (17). Palahniuk's darkly ironic joke here – taken from his real world, gonzo-journalistic experience with steroids (Palahniuk's self-experimentation in “Frontiers,” collected in *Stranger than Fiction*) – is that, in the attempt to *construct* a masculine body, Bob has come face-to-face with the failure, and thus the *constructedness*, of masculinity. This trauma – shared in various ways by the group's members – creates a camaraderie, and allows the narrator to “relax and give up” his pursuit of perfection (18), which in *Fight Club* is the pursuit of an unobtainable masculinity defined by physical beauty and material possession. Beauty and wealth are, in LaCapra's terms, the lost-objects which the narrator had once fixated on in order to turn the absolute *absence* of masculinity into the contingent – and therefore recoverable – *loss* of masculinity.

This measure of comfort is derailed, however, when another “faker” – Marla Singer (Helena Bonham Carter), a self-destructive young woman – shows up at the group (in the novel, the narrator’s peace – “losing all hope was freedom” – lasts two years [22], in the film it is seemingly destroyed almost immediately). It is also an early and glaring sign that Palahniuk has only *one* foot in the world of realism; Marla’s absurd appearance at Remaining Men Together represents Palahniuk’s willingness to veer into unreal metaphor. The film, struggling to deal with Palahniuk’s quasi-realism, attempts to explicate this comic absurdity with a scene in which Helena Bonham Carter taunts Norton, “technically I have more of a right to be there than you, you still have your balls.” The meet-cute banter that follows sums up, rather elegantly, the essential relationship between Palahniuk and his reader:

Norton/Narrator: You’re kidding.

Carter/Singer: I don’t know. Am I?

Following a confrontation with Marla, the narrator discovers a degree of freedom through the physicality of no-holds-barred fighting (the eponymous Fight Club). The fights themselves are presented as quasi-orgasmic – everyday life is contrasted to the club as “watching pornography when you could be having really great sex” (*Fight Club* 50) and quasi-religious – “There’s hysterical shouting in tongues like at church, and when you wake up Sunday afternoon you feel saved” (51). The fights silence the modern Ego’s fixation on material acquisition and allowing the men an active role denied to them by passive consumerism; as Andrew Slade argues, the ongoing physical transformation, a combination of increased physical strength and accumulated injuries and mutilations, is presented as a “a way to create new possibilities for value, identity, in short, an authentic existence in a world which appears to have erased those possibilities” (62).

Often overlooked in criticism⁵⁹ of *Fight Club* that demonizes the exclusively male and implicitly misogynist nature of the boxing club, *losing* in *Fight Club* is at the heart of Palahniuk's work; the fights are not simply an outlet for the impotent rage of postmodern masculinity, they are a workshop in self-mutilation and self-destruction. The novel states this outright, much earlier than the film; the narrator suggests, "maybe self-destruction is the answer" (49) and "maybe we have to break everything to make something better out of ourselves" (52). The film demonstrates this, with one of Fincher's most comical sequences, in which the members of *Fight Club* are required by Tyler – who emerges as the leader of the originally anarchist collective – to lose a fight: "You're going to pick a fight," Pitt intones, after being savagely beaten by the enraged Mafioso owner of the bar they have been illegally using to host *Fight Club*, "you're going to pick a fight, and you're going to lose." Losing a fight means losing the illusion of self-mastery and power – hallmarks of masculinity – and this loss is necessarily traumatic. Few things, in novelistic or cinematic history, are more consistently presented as 'un-manning' than losing a fight and *Fight Club* does not shy away from the traumatic shock of this violence, especially for men who have been trained to avoid aggression.

Importantly, the trauma of physical violence is not the *solution* to the problem of male identity; it only *reveals* the larger trauma of gender formation. In the film, Pitt suggests – before the film's first fight – "I've never been in a fight, how much can you know about yourself if you've never been in a fight?" Later, Norton says of the ritualized violence of *Fight Club*, "Nothing was solved, but nothing mattered." In the novel, the narrator is more explicit about the effect of *Fight Club* on identity: "Who guys are in fight club is not who they are in the real world" (49). Thus, at one level, the trauma of violence is an open-ended act of deconstruction for the modern male identity.

The novel's first phase finds in the visceral experience of violence a sort of non-answer ("Nothing was solved") to the existential quandaries of modern life that remain in the "real world" where men are defined from without by their beauty, employment, and possessions. But the deconstructive release of Fight Club is temporary and localized, in many ways like the protective space of a therapist's office or the catharsis of a dark joke. Palahniuk is clear about the difficulty in taking the lessons – or the camaraderie – of Fight Club out into the real world; the narrator laments, "[e]ven if you told the kid in the copy center that he had a good fight, you wouldn't be talking to the same man" (49). After this phase, the narrator begins to backslide into materialism and vanity, mourning the consumerist acquisitions (e.g., his condominium, which Tyler has, unbeknownst to the narrator, destroyed):

I loved my life. I loved that condo. I loved every stick of furniture. That was my whole life. Everything, the lamps, the chairs, the rugs were me. The dishes in the cabinet were me. The plants were me. The television was me. It was me that blew up. (110-111)

Here the narrator attempts to mourn the lost-object of his consumerist identity, disavowing the traumatic enlightenment of Fight Club. This regression inspires Tyler to escalate from bare-knuckle boxing to violent revolution against society through what he calls "Project Mayhem" – a fascist regime in which unquestioned allegiance and obedience to Tyler are the first and second commandments. In the novel, the revolution targets cultural history (e.g., the national museum), while in the film the target is financial history (e.g., the banking infrastructure that maintains debt records); in both cases the endgame is the pre-industrial utopia of hunter-gathering minimalism imagined by Tyler – who, in one of Palahniuk's signature twist-endings, is revealed to be the narrator's split personality. Only the narrator believes Tyler to be a different person, sometimes hallucinating him and sometimes repressing the memory of things he has done *as* Durden.

While the story grows increasingly ironic – especially in the film’s improbable action-genre theatrics – as it shifts from the realistic milieu of modern ennui to the metaphor of violent revolution, it maintains a hold on psychological plausibility. What Tyler Durden represents, especially in the novel’s more overtly homoerotic formulation, are the facets of the narrator’s personality that were traumatically split off and repressed to construct the modern male. Tyler’s revolution may be inspired by Marxist concerns – and voiced in Marxist language, as when Tyler suggests that the narrator work at the upscale Pressman Hotel because “[the] job will stoke your class hatred” (65) – but the endgame is not a Communist utopia but an elaborate form of self-deconstruction, a stripping away of the social structures that construct and constrain identity. *Fight Club* is deconstruction at the personal level; *Project Mayhem* is deconstruction at the cultural level.

Much of the initial press decried Palahniuk’s celebration of violence; Fincher hardly fared better.⁶⁰ While the novel’s Durden ultimately fails to bring about utopia, Fincher’s film ends with the spectacular demolition of several banking buildings (and the implication that Durden’s systemic anarchist attack on postmodern capital succeeds) – an image that, after 9/11, would become hauntingly complicated. However, when – several years later – Palahniuk’s sexuality became a public issue, critics reevaluated the satirical and homoerotic elements of the story.⁶¹ In the simplistic terms of identity politics, it seemed unlikely that an intelligent gay man would celebrate in an uncomplicated way virile straight masculinity as the answer to postmodernity’s woes. Indeed, the story’s fascistic second phase – *Project Mayhem* – echoes profoundly the satirical concerns of Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*: once the male psyche is deconstructed through physical violence – the same project carried out by Hartmann in boot camp and Tyler Durden in *Fight Club* – it becomes dangerously pliable, vulnerable to the

consolations of submission, especially into the violent power structures of martial fascism. To that end, the film's worshipful treatment of Brad Pitt as Tyler Durden was suddenly conspicuously ironic as arch metafictional comedy. Who else would the novel's unimaginative white-collar narrator dream up to liberate him from his boring existence? Of course: Pitt, an actor whose physical attractiveness had been elevated into a brand.

Following Palahniuk's public discussion of his sexuality, critics began to take serious note of the story's other aspects: its heavily Marxist version of revolution (cf. Burgess [2012]), in which the proletariat rise up against the usurious bourgeoisie; its resurrection of the concerns of existentialism (inspiring the entire Fall/Winter 2005 issue of *Stirring Still, the Journal of Existential Literature*), and – perhaps most importantly – the burgeoning field of Masculinity Studies, which concerns itself with the way men are trapped and defined, from without, by the same structures of culture and language that dictate the identities of women (cf., Tuss and Boon).⁶²

A central aspect of the novel that was frequently ignored – in part because the film conspicuously obscures it – is the narrator's self-mutilation. Soon after the narrator first goes to *Fight Club*, he notices a "hole in my cheek" (*Fight Club* 97) from a vicious blow to the face; soon the wound festers and the narrator describes, with darkly scatological humor, "little butthole-looking edges of the hole in my cheek are the same blue-black as a dog's gum" (98). As the novel progresses, the wound gets worse – the narrator reports "since most of my face never gets a chance to heal, I've got nothing to lose in the looks department" (123) – and during a vicious sequence, late in the novel, the narrator submits himself to a suicidal gauntlet of fights, losing the front half of his tongue. In the penultimate scene, the narrator shoots himself in the mouth, an act correctly identified in much criticism as a symbolic refutation of the attractive but

toxic fascism of his alter ego, Tyler. But the material nature of the wound – “the bullet out of Tyler’s gun, it tore out my other cheek to give me a jagged smile from ear to ear” (207) – is not a mere side effect. Palahniuk is a consummately *physical* writer, and the physical mutilation of the narrator has profound repercussions – removing the narrator from the visual regime of beauty. Thus, the novel’s romantic closure – Marla Singer telling the narrator, “it’s not love or anything...but I think I like you” (205) – explicitly avoids both the sentimentalism of romantic language and the cultural obsession with masculine beauty (alongside its feminine counterpart) as the condition for cinematic love. It suggests that the damaging effects of the structural trauma of masculinity – the repression which has isolated and diminished him – are being worked through, though one must remain skeptical about cure.

In its conclusion, *Fight Club* strives to deal with *human* connection rather than more limited ideas of romantic love or masculine self-assurance: a small but important difference between the novel and the film is that, in Palahniuk’s version, Marla bears “Tyler’s kiss” on her hand – the mark of undergoing his program of self-destruction that, in the film, is exclusively male. Further, in the novel’s penultimate chapter, Marla is accompanied by the self-help groups – “all the bowel cancers, the brain parasites, the melanoma people, the tuberculosis people are walking, limping, wheel-chairing towards me” (204) – who, despite knowing that the narrator has been malingering for years, still reach out to him. Their resilience against the isolating forces of postmodernity is here explicitly rendered as the result of their traumatic brushes with death, as opposed to the more specifically gendered trauma of testicular cancer (the victims of which are conspicuously absent). Unlike the film’s somber action-movie conclusion, the novel maintains a dark-comic tone: the forgiving crowd is painted in slapstick tones (“limping” followed by the deliberate awkwardness of the term “wheel-chairing”) undercut by the tragic reason for their

movements (“bowel cancer,” etc.). The scene itself is also decidedly unreal – set atop the imaginary Parker-Morris building (a comically implausible and highly phallic 191 stories) which is rigged to explode. This dark-comic style allows Palahniuk to retain his cool and ironic posture while asking an essentially humanist question: how does one forge a real human connection in the media-saturated world of late capitalism? Palahniuk’s novel suggests a metaphorical answer that cuts across the personal and the cultural: violent, immediate traumas are necessary to bring into focus the structural traumas of our development, in fact, to *undo* our development and allow us to start over. Freedom is held out as a process or a potential (as opposed to a goal), but the *price* of that freedom is unavoidably and grotesquely high.

Fincher’s film is not willing to make this gesture as radically or as figuratively as Palahniuk’s novel – Norton’s narrator is indeed battered and bruised, but the film presents nothing like the novel’s hyper-violent metaphor. In part this is because – as with Nichols’ adaptation of Heller’s *Catch-22* – the indexical *realness* of Fincher’s film, which does not shy away from the violence of its narrative source, threatens to overwhelm the comedy of Palahniuk’s novel with horror. One cinematic moment in particular – in which Norton beats Jared Leto’s character, Angel Face, until his mouth is a bloodied, toothless chasm – is stripped of any comic potential. Norton’s voice-over – taken directly from the novel – loses its dark-comic mix of comic hyperbole and tragically impotent rage and becomes a demonic incantation, delivered in Norton’s trademark deadpan: “I wanted to put a bullet between the eyes of every panda that wouldn’t screw to save its species.”

The film concludes on a far more sadistic note – the consummation of Tyler’s violent revolution – and is balanced only by the forced romantic closure of Norton and Carter. The film, in fact, concludes with a sick joke. Earlier in the film – as in the novel – we learn that Tyler often

splices hard-core pornography into children's films, subliminally traumatizing the audience with what Žižek might call a glimpse of the Real. Fittingly, Palahniuk describes the genitalia in the language of horror – “lunging red penis” and “yawning wet vagina” (*Fight Club* 30) – which figures phallus as knife and vagina as wound. Fincher's film ends with a splice of male genitalia – cut into the image of buildings exploding – that, ostensibly, presents itself as intentionally traumatizing. The final splice, however, is too long to be subliminal and could be considered a meta joke – one of the film's several acknowledgements of itself as film. Fincher's joke is also a metaphorical indictment of an attempt to read the film's end as happy. As children, who thrive on happy and safe cartoons, are traumatized – shocked into recognition of the world's sexual reality – so are we, in the film's final moments, traumatized out of our complacent and conditioned response to romantic closure as happy.

Palahniuk's humor, on the other hand, remains committed to self-sabotage over outward aggression. In the Freudian terms of this project, we could say the sense of the humor of his novel is to be directed inwards – skeptically – instead of outwardly as cynicism. Palahniuk's humor embodies this, as it is inclusive in two senses. First, Palahniuk's comedy is deliberately shocking, but never – as Vidal's frequently was – condescending to the reader; we are meant to be *in* on the joke. We see a clear representation of this in the novel when the narrator attempts to reconcile his strained relationship with Marla:

To warm her up, to make her laugh, I tell Marla about the woman in Dear Abby who married a handsome successful mortician and on their wedding night, he made her soak in a tub of ice water until her skin was freezing to the touch, and then he made her lie in the bed completely still while he had intercourse with her cold inert body.

The funny thing is this woman had done this as a newlywed, and gone on to do it for the next ten years of marriage and now she was writing to ask if Abby thought it meant something. (106)

The implicit punch-line of the joke – that the mortician’s sexual preference was necrophilia – becomes the social bond between the narrator and Marla; they both get it. The deeper resonance of the joke, beneath the obvious anxiety around sex with the dead (or a simulation of such an act), is that for a decade the joke’s two characters managed to connect, albeit in a deeply troubled way. It is a grotesque but strikingly compassionate metaphor for the makeshift nature of all human relationships and the ways in which they are constructed around deep psychological fault-lines. Further, the grotesque and deliberately transgressive aspect is a key part of Palahniuk’s figurative project. While his humor often skirts moral nihilism, the potentially traumatizing horror of Palahniuk’s jokes serves as a philosophical analogy: the constructedness of other relationships is often traumatizing to us; they represent unimagined alternatives and threaten the naturalness, the illusory *a priori* stability of our own identities. This highly charged juxtaposition of humanist compassion and dark sexual comedy is Palahniuk’s signature – the joker and the reader are mutually imbricated in a world of confusing and sometimes horrifying behavior, but the joke is on all of us. It is solidarity, not sadism.

Thus, the second facet of Palahniuk’s inclusiveness: unlike Myra Breckinridge’s self-blinding criticisms, *Fight Club*’s narrator is, to a certain extent, aware of how his identity has been constructed by materialism – he is both in on the joke and the target of the joke. He includes himself in the Marxist cultural critique, rendering himself – like Myron – a Bergsonian Fool, the puppet of instinct, “a slave to the nesting instinct” (*Fight Club* 43). One of the running jokes of *Fight Club* is that the instinct in question is no longer sexual, it is consumerist: “[t]he people I used to know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA catalog” (43). Palahniuk’s modern predicament resembles, in many

ways, that which Vidal describes throughout his work, but unlike *Myra*, *Fight Club*'s narrator is the one in need of salvation; Tyler Durden is his Myra Breckinridge.

Comparing *Fight Club* to *Myra* as similar works of dark comedy, the question remains: what does Palahniuk disavow? And, as in *Myra*, the answer seems to be masculinity. Both the film and the novel *Fight Club* reject powerfully both materialism and bodily vanities. Both remain superficially committed to masculine male identity; as Matt Jordan argues, they are “a call to the realization of masculine essence” in response to a cultural situation (i.e., capitalism) that is not just emasculating but dehumanizing (374). Even queer readings that downplay the heteronormative closure – of Marla and the narrator’s relationship – cannot ignore the extent to which *Fight Club* takes gender, especially maleness, as an *a priori* structure instead of a psychic construct. However, it is possible to read the narrative as deeply ironic, to take the narrator’s insight – that the culture of late capitalism has perverted an authentic masculine identity into a simulacrum of male models and movie stars – as superficial, grasping the symptom but not the disease. Returning to a central passage in the novel, it is clear that when the narrator says, “maybe we have to break everything to make something better out of ourselves” (*Fight Club* 52), he correctly identifies that modern consumerist identity is constructed – through mass media images – but remains blind to the underlying idea that this alleged perversion is only possible because *all* identity is constructed.

This kind of ironic reading is – fifteen years after the novel’s release – much easier to support than in the late nineties, when Palahniuk’s publisher worked to sustain the image of the author as a hard-boiled writer, heir to the *machismo* of Hemingway and Raymond Chandler (and ignoring both of those writers’ deeply conflicted sexualities). After nine additional novels,⁶³ it is difficult *not* to see the conspicuous excess of masculinity in *Fight Club* – decried by so many

critics at the outset – as directly satirical. *Fight Club* is a comic map of the dangers of masculinity and a disturbingly accurate representation of the dangers of men who, in reacting to the psychic loss of the constructed ideal of masculinity, approach the two poles of the fascist system: the desire for absolute mastery over others or the complete submission to the enfranchising power of a superior. Still, *Fight Club*'s horrifying prognosis for the modern male's identity crisis – that the absence of authentic identity leads to a sadomasochistic system of terror and submission – is pulled back from the brink of nihilism by the comic excess of Palahniuk's metaphorical conceits.

But even Fincher's darker interpretation of *Fight Club* represents a compromise for Palahniuk, a step back from the sharper edge of his original approach to the problems of gender and sexuality. Originally, Palahniuk's approach was – to put things atheoretically – less macho and a great deal bitchier. In fact, Palahniuk's original debut – *Invisible Monsters* – bears such a great similarity to the themes and tone of *Myra* that one almost suspects a case of Nabokovian cryptomnesia. This is, in part, because Palahniuk's influences – Ira Levin, Bret Easton Ellis, Stephen King – were masters, in the Vidalian style, of the monstrous metaphor for social issues. As Palahniuk puts it in his "Open Letter to Mr. Levin," the point of the metaphor and also the need for comedy is overcoming what he calls "narcotization" (*Stranger than Fiction* 186), the complacent disavowal of a subject faced too directly with a traumatic realization. Palahniuk says of Levin, "[i]n big, funny, scary ways, you acknowledge our faults. The problems we're too afraid to recognize" (192). Half-humble is too proud, as the Yiddish saying goes; Palahniuk is talking not just about Levin but all of his dark-comic influences, and – of course – himself.

Invisible Monsters

Invisible Monsters originates and encapsulates much of Palahniuk's overall project, melding minimalist, hyper-factual writing with outlandish social metaphor. Palahniuk's protagonist – Shannon McFarlane – is a fashion model who, like her male counterparts in *Fight Club*, feels the damaging effects of the structural trauma of gender. For Shannon, the existential nightmare of a world in which her essential identity is constructed from without is made painfully acute by her role in the construction of media images of feminine beauty – she is “trapped in a beauty ghetto” (*Invisible Monsters* 286). Unlike the men of *Fight Club*, Shannon does not need to have her vain attachment to her own physical appearance beaten out of her. In a single determined moment she makes a radical move, shooting herself in the face with a high-powered rifle and allowing the shattered remains of her jaw and mouth to be eaten by birds, foreclosing any chance of a convincing reconstruction (that is, of recovering the lost-object of her beauty).

Palahniuk mines this physical mutilation for a great deal of dark humor, rendering Shannon's inability to speak in a form of linguistic slapstick. In an early scene, Shannon works with a speech therapist:

“I'd rather be thishing,” the therapist says.

then go fishing, I write.

“No,” she says, “repeat.”

My throat is always raw and dry even after a million liquids through straws all day. The scar tissue is rippled hard and polished around my unharmed tongue.

“The therapist says, “I'd rather be thishing.”

I say, “Salghrew jfwoiew fjfowi sdkify.”

“No, not that way,” the therapist says. “You're not doing it right.”

I say, “Solfjf gjoie ddd oslidfj?”

She says, “No, that's not right, either.”

She looks at her watch.

“Digri vrrior gmjgi g giel,” I say.

“You’ll need to practice a lot, but on your own time,” she says. “Now, again.”

I say, “Jrogier fi fkgowir mfofeinf fefd.”

She says, “Good! Great! See how easy?”

On my pad with my pencil, I write:

fuck off

(*Invisble Monsters* 52)

Palahniuk’s humor starts with a comic misreading out of the Marx Brothers arsenal – taking the therapist’s example sentence as if it were an actual statement of desire – and then grows darker, reflecting textually Shannon’s inability to make herself understood and thus the extent of her alienation from the social world. The ambiguous dark comedy of the scene allows for two readings of Shannon’s experience: one grimly realistic and the other comically absurd. In the first, realistic reading, the therapist – unconcerned with Shannon’s suffering and eager to end the session – is pretending to understand her. In the second, Palahniuk’s world is absurdly unintelligible to the reader but sensible to Palahniuk’s characters. Shannon’s “fuck off” maintains this ambivalence – it may be in response to either the therapist’s disingenuous concern or the suggestion that rehabilitation is “easy.” This scene is representative of Palahniuk’s dark comic genre as a whole, which displays a sustained ambivalence between tragic realism and comic metaphor. It also demonstrates Shannon’s self-awareness; Palahniuk makes her a perceptive observer, especially of her own structural trauma – and thus her own constructedness – and consistently puts her inside the novel’s irony. Both of these factors keep the novel’s moments of sadistic humor from turning the work into a sick comedy. Palahniuk is ruthless, but he allows his characters an interiority that balances his cynicism. Thus, in *Invisible Monsters* Shannon shares with *Fight Club*’s narrator the role of self-aware joker, as skeptical as she is cynical and willing to be the punch-line of her own jokes.

In a particularly graphic scene, representative of *Invisible Monsters*' style, Shannon recounts a Thanksgiving family dinner spent discussing the family's contribution to the AIDS quilt. Her parents – clearly motivated by their guilt over rejecting their gay son Shane, whom they now believe to be dead from AIDS – have immersed themselves in the symbolism of the queer community, trying to decide what symbol to use to represent their son:

“We just ran into some problems with what to sew on it.”

“Your mother didn't want to step on any toes,” Dad says. He twists a drumstick off and starts scraping the meat onto the plate. “With gay stuff you have to be so careful since everything means something in secret code. I mean, we didn't want to give anyone the wrong idea.” (90)

Shannon's parents work through the symbolic list: “black on a field of blue would mean Shane was excited by leather sex, you know, bondage and discipline”; “I wanted pink triangles but all the panels have pink triangles”; “I wanted a green border, but it turns out that would mean Shane was a male prostitute”; “Brown would mean either scat or rimming, we couldn't figure which” (91). At the end of the scene, her father mentions “felching” and Shannon – embittered that her ostensibly dead brother is still eclipsing her in the family romance – lashes out, attempting to shock her parents with a description of the sexual act:

“Felching is when a man fucks you up the butt without a rubber. He shoots his load, and then plants his mouth on your anus and sucks out his own warm sperm, plus whatever lubricant and feces are present. That's felching. It may or may not,” I add, “include kissing you to pass the sperm and fecal matter into your mouth.” (93)

At its most superficial level Palahniuk's humor is simply an exposure joke which subjects the reader to a shocking, because previously concealed, aspect of human sexuality. But Palahniuk's choice of felching is more complicated than scatological juvenilia; it is calculated to excite the Freudian nervousness around cloacal confusion, the mixing of anal, oral, and genital

centers of arousal that threaten to undo the Oedipal consolidation of adult sexuality by revealing the infantile plenitude that was sacrificed in constructing an identity. The shock value of the joke, for Shannon, is intended to force her parents into repressive revulsion. In other words, Shannon hopes to force her parents to preserve the constructed integrity of their own sexual and gender identity by rejecting the threatening polymorphousness of Shane. But, of course, Shannon's outburst does not unseat her brother as the center of the family's attention. Palahniuk's punch-line is that the parents remain unfazed; her father had mentioned "fletching" – cutting the holiday turkey into thin strips – not "felching."

Shannon's story presents a classic juxtaposition of obscene sexual conversation (i.e., non-traditional sexual acts) and polite bourgeois ritual (i.e., Thanksgiving). A darker comedy comes from the psychological juxtaposition of the comic energy with which the mother and father have thrown themselves into researching the world of sexuality against the dark motivation of guilt and remorse. The darkest comedy comes from the ways in which the parents – in considering the aesthetics of their chosen symbol, in considering how it would reflect on them ("we don't want people thinking things" [91]) – dance around the abyss of identity. Even if they *could* pick the right symbol to represent Shane – even if they could sort out the symbolic vocabulary, even if they knew enough about their son's sexuality – they would still be reenacting the Foucaultian process of constructing an identity from without.

Shannon is no more sexually enlightened than her parents; she does not, like *Myra*, hope to better her parents through the traumatizing exposure to sexual reality. Her needs are as self-centered and tragic – despite the scatological comedy of the scene – as those of her parents, and she is quite aware of it. *This* is the important difference between Palahniuk and Vidal: while Palahniuk is ruthlessly honest – even cynical – about the egotism of his characters, he is not

completely sadistic. Shannon struggles for recognition and love from her parents; her parents struggle for some level of understanding and empathy for their son. Palahniuk deconstructs these struggles – these desires – by skewering them comically, but there is a pervasive darkness in his presentation of characters blind to both the selfishness and the hopelessness of their own endeavors to connect with others. Shannon – who in the present tense of the novel is a mutilated and mute observer – is insightful, painfully aware of the dark comedy of human relationships.

As the novel continues, we meet the brother – Shane McFarland – who is not, in fact, deceased. Shane has, however, experienced the trauma of gender formation more acutely than Shannon. He was ostracized from his family for his homosexuality – a trauma in and of itself – and later took radical measures, electing to have sexual reassignment surgery, provided to her by the Rhea sisters (a trio of unrelated, transvestite men who have all been cast out of their respective families). The Rhea sisters finance the expensive procedures – deconstructing Shane and reconstructing a new person and a new personality – as labor of love, an aesthetic project. In true drag-queen fashion, their goal is not to become female but to *create* femininity, in this case Brandy Alexander – a bombastic and brutally honest transsexual Goddess, the self-proclaimed “long-stemmed latte queen supreme of the top drawer party girls” (12) who is more than eerily reminiscent of Myra Breckinridge. Like Myra, she is in love with Hollywood royalty of the 1940s but dreams of starring in television commercials (the only medium Myra suggests might eclipse cinema’s Golden Age). Brandy is unapologetically bitchy and self-absorbed and much of the novel’s humor comes from the juxtaposition of her comic energy and the tragic nature of her genesis. In the novel’s (chronologically) penultimate scene, Brandy’s gallows humor – shades of Mercutio – is inexhaustible:

Brandy, she opens one of her huge, ring-beaded hands and she touches the hole pouring her blood all over the marble floor.

Brandy, she says, “Shit. There’s no way Bon Marche will take this suit back.” (15)

Brandy, in the course of the novel, takes on her mutilated sister – she is one of the few who can handle the horror of Shannon’s mutilated face – and refashions Shannon as Daisy St. Patience. The two travel the country for the duration of the mandatory one-year waiting period, required by the Benjamin Guidelines, before Brandy can have the final stage of her reassignment surgery.⁶⁴ In a subplot, the two simultaneously undertake to dose Shannon’s hyper-masculine husband – Manus, a repressed homosexual who abused his role as a police officer to molest Shane when Shane was young – with estrogen pills surreptitiously, turning him into a woman.

Beneath the outlandish picaresque, *Invisible Monsters* structurally has the same core concerns as *Fight Club*. Brandy Alexander serves as a transsexual version of Tyler Durden, leading the narrator – Shannon, who takes on the same apostolic role as *Fight Club*’s narrator – through a regime of self-refashioning. As Shannon’s twin brother, Brandy, like Tyler, represents an alter ego for the narrator’s consciousness, although – taking *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters* together – the comparison is something of a joke. Durden is a hallucination, the product of both structural trauma (i.e., he represents the repressed aspects of the narrator’s psyche) and existential desperation (i.e., he possesses the will to power – the will to *self* – that the narrator lacks). Brandy, on the other hand, serves more to assist to Shannon carry out the mission she has already embarked upon. At the opening of *Invisible Monsters*, Shannon has already grasped the radical escape from visual culture that *Fight Club*’s narrator reaches at that novel’s conclusion, a deconstruction of identity achieved through almost identical means (i.e., a gunshot wound to the face). What remains – and what constitutes the central plot and moral substance of *Invisible Monsters* – is for Shannon to reconstruct herself (as Daisy) and find a way

to connect. This reconstruction requires facing the abyss of identity, the void which allows the kind of performativity Brandy espouses when she confronts Shannon with her own mutability:

“When you understand,” Brandy says, “that what you’re telling is just a story. It isn’t happening anymore. When you realize the story you’re telling is just words, when you can just crumble it up and throw your past in the trashcan,” Brandy says, “then we’ll figure out who you’re going to be. (61)

In one sense, this fluidity is liberating – it is the essence of utopian versions of constructivist identity. A recurring joke of sorts in *Invisible Monsters* is that all the beautiful women are actually men in various stages of sartorial or surgical drag. Another gag is when the narrator discovers her macho police-officer husband, Manus, watching ‘short circuit’ pornography – men performing fellatio on themselves – as part of his research on the sex-crimes beat. Manus claims, “this is what guys want” (69), and the joke is that masculine sexuality reaches its ideal apotheosis in an act that excludes the passive female role entirely and at the same time passes over into what is socially considered gay pornography. Like the drag act itself, *Invisible Monsters* has a good deal of fun with the social relativism of gender and sexual identity. But Palahniuk – in his peculiar mix of sadism and empathy – does not present gender fluidity as a superficial joke. It has a dark undercurrent; it is not without bounds or costs.

A distinctive aspect of Palahniuk’s humor – drawing on his hyper-factualism and his inherited New Journalistic fixation on realistic detail – constantly excavates the material history of postmodern life, showing both its limits and its mechanics. Throughout *Invisible Monsters*, Brandy, who has little income of her own, steals hormone supplements from opulent mansions she pretends – in the guise of royalty – to be interested in buying. Of Brandy’s hormone therapy, Daisy jokes about:

...little purple ovals of 2.5 milligram-sized Premarin.

That’s short for Pregnant Mare Urine. That’s short for thousands of miserable horses in North Dakota and Central Canada, forced to stand in cramped

dark stalls with a catheter stuck on them to catch every drop of urine and only getting let outside to get fucked again. (30)

The joke explicates the pharmaceutical euphemism and reveals its excremental source – a sharp piece of Freudian cynicism that takes simple exposure (i.e., the joke is that people are taking pills containing horse urine) and gives it some proletariat edge (i.e., the joke is that aristocrats are taking these pills). But this joke – which is also on Brandy – does something more complex, revealing the machinery concealed by the illusion of pure gender fluidity, an immaterial theory of gender that ignores the profiteering and disingenuousness of pharmaceutical companies, the suffering of test animals, not to mention the financial toll of elective surgery (i.e., the ways in which class dictates who has access to fluidity). Later, Daisy listens to the Rhea sisters complain about the financial cost – which they have borne – of changing Shane McFarlane into Brandy Alexander:

...her conjugated estrogens. And her vaginoplasty. And her labiaplasty. Not to mention her scrotal electrolysis...None of that is cheap...This is how Brandy wanted to look, like her bitch sister. That was two years ago, before she had laser surgery to thin her vocal cords and then her trachea shave. She had her scalp advanced three centimeters to give her the right hairline. We paid for her brow shave to get rid of the bone ridge above her eyes that the Miss Male used to have. We paid for her jaw contouring and her forehead feminization. (177)

Even with this litany of expensive and painful procedures, Brandy is still unable to change her hands, “the one thing a plastic surgeon can’t change. The one thing that will always give away a girl like Brandy Alexander” (293). Like Myra’s surgical scars, Brandy’s hands mark her as male to the careful observer. Her gender is performative but not ahistorical, it cannot shake anteriority; she is, in her own mind, a woman-who-was-a-man. Towards the end of the novel, it is revealed that Brandy has not yet had the vaginoplasty – that she remains, in anatomical terms, male – because she is afraid of the commitment: modern surgery can do

impressive things, and the body's plasticity is amazing, but there are limits to this surgical fluidity, the flesh simply cannot endure endless sex-change reversals.

But Palahniuk's novel – in which nearly everyone is a man masquerading as a woman (except for Daisy's husband, Manus, who is becoming a woman) – is deeply ironic. His most profound joke is that Shane – in becoming Brandy – has not been fulfilling a desire or dealing with gender dysphoria. He has been – like the men of *Fight Club*, and his sister Shannon – deliberately mutilating himself. As Brandy tells Daisy, “[a] sexual reassignment surgery is a miracle for some people, but if you don't want one, it's the ultimate form of self-mutilation” (259). Palahniuk gives Brandy the insight denied to *Fight Club*'s narrator – and withheld from Myra by Vidal – in the understanding of why she needed to mutilate herself:

[B]ecause we're so trapped in our culture, in the being of being human [sic] on this planet with the brains we have, and the same two arms and legs everybody has. We're so trapped that any way we could imagine to escape would be just another part of the trap. Anything we want, we're trained to want. (259)

In other words, Shane recognized long ago that the inauthenticity and discomfort he felt with being male was not the result of a perversion – of late capitalism's effacing of a real and recoverable masculinity – or a mismatch between his psyche and his gender. Transsexualism is not an escape from the trap of cultural identity formation. A transexual would only – like Myra – escape the male identity to be trapped by the female identity. Thus, Brandy, like Tyler Durden, advocates self-destruction – radical measures of self-inflicted trauma – as a way of realizing the constructedness of the self. Palahniuk suggests we not just face the void but inhabit it; as Brandy says, “find what you're afraid of most and go live there” (294). Or, in the harshest formulation of Palahniuk's moral, as Daisy phrases it, “[w]hat I need to do is fuck up so bad I can't save myself” (224). Palahniuk is very clear that physical trauma – rape and physical mutilation – is *not enough* to inspire this kind of revelation. What needs to happen, in his reading, is the psychic

collapse of structures of identity. Punctual traumas reactivate older structural traumas and the chaos of the self – repressed by identity formation – returns.

What Palahniuk offers is a violent deconstruction of the self and – much like Vidal – he suggests that often subjects lack the conviction and courage to undertake this self-destruction on their own. Tyler Durden and Brandy Alexander offer two latter-day versions of Myra Breckinridge, demigods who are willing to injure – insult, humiliate, mutilate – people in order to enlighten them. But whereas Myra remains comically blind to her own construction, Tyler acknowledges that he is, literally, a construct of *Fight Club*'s narrator's mind (as Pitt puts it, "I look like you want to look, I fuck like you want to fuck"), and Brandy reveals that her hyper-feminine performance is the sign of her own dedication to self-deconstruction. Palahniuk valorizes the bravado of the performance – the charismatic, fascistic form of Tyler and the smoldering, bitch-queen act of Brandy – but accepts the void that makes the performance possible.

But Palahniuk is not just a nihilist and he does not *stop* with deconstruction. His potential for sadism – the violent traumas he presents as necessary for his characters – is balanced by his desire for reconstruction, the act of re-building personalities, and a community built on those new selves after the traumatic dissolution of identity (which in his early novels means a sense of gendered self). At the close of *Fight Club* (the novel, not the film), the narrator is saved by the members of therapy groups – which Tyler mocks earlier in the story as ridiculous, New-Agey disavowals of death and alienation – and by Marla, who represents the very romantic cliché *Fight Club* sought to mock in pointing out the fruitless, mechanical nature of the social dictates of marriage and child rearing. Likewise, *Invisible Monsters* ends on a note that might strike us as hypocritical: Daisy surrenders her identity as Shannon and gives it – meaning her birth certificate

and other identification – to Shane/Brandy, who now resembles Shannon more than Shannon does:

You're Shannon fucking McFarlane now...A year from now, I want to turn on the TV and see you drinking a diet cola naked in slow motion...Shane, I'm giving you my life, my driver's license, my old report cards, because you look more like me than I can ever remember looking.. I'm giving you my life to prove to myself I can, I really can some love somebody. (*Invisible Monsters* 294-295)

This, from the same character who – at the novel's outset – has called "I love you" the "three most worn out words you'll find in any script" and lamented "the words make me feel like I've severely fingering myself" (18). The only justification for Palahniuk's about-face, for his retreat from nihilism, is that the extreme deconstruction of trauma affords the opportunity – after the recognition of the abyss – to construct a thin strip of pavement, to make a small, contingent effort against nothingness. As the epigraph to this chapter suggests, Brandy Alexander's philosophy – "Cut yourself open. Sew yourself shut." (86) – stands in for Palahniuk's belief in the dialectic of deconstruction and reconstruction. Palahniuk's Daisy often sounds, in *Invisible Monsters*, like the postmoderns whom Layton critiques for waxing utopian about narratives when she says, "What I need is a new story" (296). But his insistence on the physical and psychological pain of transformation demonstrates that a new story – freedom, of any measure – is hardly easy or free to acquire. This is the precise mixture of trauma and comedy that drives the dynamic of dark comedy; in Palahniuk's work, it holds the promise for progress, if not cure. As Daisy says, her mutilation "isn't the thrill you'd think, but it can be an opportunity for something better" (288).

IV. Conclusion

In the end, Palahniuk's work – like much dark comedy in general – is a modernist genre; Only Connect might be its motto. No small part of his work revolves around using grotesque and

transgressive material to smuggle this essentially sentimental message past the expectations of cool, ironic art. And, to be fair, in embracing this humanistic goal Palahniuk abandons the pursuit of sadistic clarity about the human condition which is so often a trademark of postmodern work, where people lack the desire or the ability to connect or both (in other words, Palahniuk is not Bret Easton Ellis, Fincher is not Michael Hanake). Further, set against the conditions of postmodernity, Palahniuk's work may be destined to fail – to fall short of solving, or even fully grasping, our modern predicaments – but it still attempts to do so, in spite of the monstrosity of the task. As Palahniuk writes in the recent rerelease of *Invisible Monsters*, “Atheists need to understand that even the wrong answer is better than no answer” (*Remix* 106). The attempt *itself* is a place to rally, in a sense of humor that embraces both our modern horrors and our hopes for self-preservation.

As for his own sense of identity, Palahniuk remains fiercely guarded.⁶⁵ Though he did publicly come out of the closet, he has become notorious for turning cold on interviewers when they mention his sexuality or the scandal surrounding how it was first publicized. A great deal of his writing, as he details in *Stranger than Fiction*, grows out of his nonfiction work and the real-life stories of his friends: *Fight Club* grew out of Portland's Cacophony society (Palahniuk's mentor Tom Spanbauer was a member), and much of *Invisible Monsters* grew out of Palahniuk calling sex hotlines and asking the operators to relate their traumatic pasts.⁶⁶ Turning stories – of trauma and struggle – into comedy is his highest gift and it is a calculated effort to reach people and bring them together. But Palahniuk has never been the gleefully evangelical public figure, the “tiresome nag” that Vidal was.

Palahniuk's particular silence about his sexuality – amidst the spectacular obscenity and honesty of his work⁶⁷ – gives a close reader sympathetic pause. It is always part of the question,

when dealing with dark comedy, to ask about the relationship between the joker and the audience. There are some cynical jokes that take their particular form – that, as Freud says, develop their particular envelope – in order to reach an audience that does not want to hear them, in the fullest psychological sense. Our laughter is a compromise between disavowal and acceptance – like *Fight Club*, nothing is solved, but the nervous tension of repression is, for a brief time, released. But there are other jokes, which – while we in the audience might or might not laugh – are not really told *to us* at all. They are merely overheard, the joker joking to himself or herself. These jokes, the overheard murmurs of skepticism at war with itself, are often the sources of our darkest comedies.

Even when writers are confessional, we never have a full understanding of their traumas or their struggles against them. Yet we inherit that lonely struggle and it becomes our own; that is a fitting description of dark comedy. It is the strange gift of a neurosis, passed on; more strategy than solution, it is part trauma, part therapy. As Palahniuk writes at the end of his introduction to *Stranger than Fiction*:

In this way, even the lonely act of writing becomes an excuse to be around people. In turn, the people fuel the storytelling.
Alone. Together. Fact. Fiction. It's a cycle.
Comedy. Tragedy. Light. Dark. They define each other.
It works, but only if you don't get stuck too long in any one place.
(xxii)

[4] Ethnicity

No Jokes After the Holocaust: Ethnic Jokes and Founding Trauma in Shteyngart and King

No reader of this book will find it easy to put himself in the emotional position of an author who is ignorant of holy writ, who is completely estranged from the religion of his fathers – as well as from every other religion – and who cannot take a share in nationalist ideals, but who has yet never repudiated his people, who feels that he is in his essential nature a Jew and who has no desire to alter that nature. If the question were put to him: ‘Since you have abandoned all these common characteristics of your countrymen, what is there left of you that is Jewish?’ he would reply: ‘A very great deal, and probably its very essence.’ He could not now express that essence clearly in words; but some day, no doubt, it will become accessible to the scientific mind.

Sigmund Freud, preface to the Hebrew edition of *Totem and Taboo*

I cannot let post-colonial stand – particularly as a term – for, at its heart, it is an act of imagination and an act of imperialism that demands that I imagine myself as something I did not choose to be, as something I would not choose to become.

Thomas King, “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial”

I. The Wrong Side of History

This chapter concerns the sphere of ethnic identity, a psychological construct no less difficult or contentious than the sexual and gender issues of the previous chapter. The two primary texts discussed – Gary Shteyngart’s *The Russian Debutante’s Handbook* and Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* – are dark comedies that deal, in distinctly Freudian ways, with the construction of ethnic identity. They are also both, in their own manner, jokes about horrifying historical events. As such, they run the risk of being offensive in ways which make the scatological exploits of Vidal and Palahniuk seem much less consequential. But they do not run these risks capriciously; by turning the incisive power of dark comedy on historical tragedies, they offer a way to manage the deeply problematic relationship between ethnic identity and historical trauma.

Ethnic identity, at the risk of speaking too broadly, often develops fully only later in life, long after the infantile solipsism of ‘self’ and the pubescent sense of ‘gender,’ and it shares a different relationship with history than other psychological structures of identity. Whereas history is the constant *enemy* to the Ego (history being the long tally of counterexamples to the belief in immortality), and more often the invisible engine for the construction of gender roles (an adolescent need not know the history of gender dynamics to feel and be shaped by their effects), ethnic identity is most directly formed by our sense of history.

This is a different thing – a more difficult, a more painful thing – than saying ethnic identity is historical, stable, or concrete. Progressive and empowering theories of self-evident ethnicity are, however well meaning, the mirror image of the murderous eugenics of the past century, with the same desperate mythmaking, the same cataracts as to just how much of ethnicity is self-fashioning, politics, and historical redaction. Neither can ethnicity be skin deep:

our biological markers – our genetics and morphology – are often necessary but always insufficient. Ethnicity is something we do more than something we are.

Thus, to return to the key point, it is our ‘sense of history’ that makes ethnic identity. History is required, in part, to give a better answer – a more specific answer – to the internal question of ‘who am I?’ Better, of course, than the illusory omnipotence of the Ego’s ‘I am that I am,’ but also more satisfying than ‘straight male’ or ‘transgendered male-to-female.’ Subjects are all alike in that their gendered identity is a rough fit of instincts and desires into one of a few available socio-political categories. We are all repressing the traumatic reality of our own mortality; we have all suffered the structural trauma of gender and sexual identity. What we seem to need is a story that at once is more personal and also more communal.

As Dominick LaCapra puts it in *Trauma, Absence, Loss*: “Everyone is subject to structural trauma. But, with respect to historical trauma and its representations, the distinction between victims, perpetrators, and bystanders is crucial” (79). LaCapra points here to the partitioning of one group from another by “historical trauma,” by which he means something specific: unique historical moments of tragedy, of suffering and death. LaCapra is clear, though, that historical tragedies often serve to paper over the difficult aporias of ethnic identity. An event like the Holocaust does not *create* a concrete category of person called ‘Jew,’ but it can clearly serve that function psychologically:

...the Holocaust has become part of a civil religion of sorts and has at least a kind of negative sacrality – the way in which it becomes what I’ve recently been calling a ‘founding trauma’ – a trauma that should, and (in the best of all circumstances) does, raise the question of identity as a very difficult question, but that, as a founding trauma, itself becomes the basis of identity...through trauma one finds an identity that is both personal and collective at the same time. Again, this is understandable, but it should also be questioned: the trauma should be seen as raising the question of identity, rather than simply founding an identity. (161)

Historical tragedy, to the analytical mind, should provide the material for a searching examination of identity as process and construct, but very often it provides instead the narrative necessary to carve a tribe out of the bewildering polis. The fact that a traumatic event is necessary, in so many cases, to organize an ethnic community already points to the constructed nature of identity and the absence of some solid *a priori* ethnic self that is coherent and continuous, that is – to use a very loaded word – *authentic*. Founding an identity is a complicated process, but it serves a simple need. It answers the childlike questions of the psyche: who are the Good Guys? Who are the Bad Guys? Who are my people? Where do I belong? The answers, however soothing, often do not hold up to intense scrutiny or historical investigation, and so it is crucial that these historical narratives are *tragedies*, because this aspect – which LaCapra, echoing René Girard, calls “negative sacrality” – protects the identity that is created from all but the most psychotic of enemies. For example: the Catholic Church upheld the blood libel against Jews for the death of Christ until the Second Vatican Council in 1962, but never denied the Holocaust. Likewise, radical right-wing racists in the United States – the Aryan Brotherhood, the KKK, etc. – do not deny the historical reality of the slave trade. These founding traumas generate an aura of muted, distanced respect for both Others and those ‘within’ the ethnicities established by these events. Jokes about these events – oppression, slavery, genocide – are among the most taboo. They are seen as serving a cruel hegemonic purpose: by belittling the founding trauma of identities, they threaten to negate those identities. In the world of political correctness and the progressive politics that embraces all identities, these jokes are on the wrong side of history.

It is for *this* reason the dark comedies of Shteyngart and King run such a risk: they go beyond the potential insensitivity of jokes that touch on the anxious dynamics of race in the modern world – jokes that rely on the ‘shock’ of violating social decorum – and penetrate into

the psychological process of *constructing* ethnicity. Their senses of humor present them as ethnic comedians – Shteyngart as Russian Jew, King as Native American – whose identities allow them, in the socio-political sense, to tell jokes about their respective communities, but this comedy disavows the traumatic reality that there *is* no such thing as concrete, *a priori* ethnicity. To be sure, Shteyngart and King take different approaches. Shteyngart is a consummately Freudian jokester, all *too* aware of Freud’s role in literary history, and King is at pains to distance himself from patriarchal Western culture as a whole (including psychoanalysis). Both authors demonstrate the powerful ability of dark comedy to manage this neurosis of modern identity, wherein the psyche struggles, on the one hand, to understand itself in terms of a world-historical community and, on the other hand, to grasp the painful ways in which that understanding – that ethnicity – has been handed down through the generations. Although their dark comedies have the potential to disrupt entirely the project and process of identity – to pull the rug out from under the idea of ethnic comedy, which is to say, the idea of ethnicity – they also serve to inscribe a different kind of identity, a sense of humor *as* sense of ethnicity. This is the potential reward for comedy that skirts, at its darkest, a sick humor that revels in the prospect of the ultimate ethnic cleansing.

II. To Hell With the 20th Century – Gary Shteyngart’s *The Russian Debutante’s Handbook*

A Holocaust Joke

The Russian Debutante’s Handbook centers on a profound anxiety about ethnic identity. This aspect of the self is often bound up with the Oedipal crisis of identification with and rebellion against parental figures; it is from father to son – or, alternately, from aunt to nephew, grandmother to granddaughter – that an ethnic sense of self is passed along. But for Shteyngart,

history refuses to work through secondary means, and affects – and afflicts – directly; Shteyngart takes his Freud with a healthy dose of Karl Marx (and not a small amount of Groucho). For *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, this brings into sharp focus the need to confront and contain the traumas of history in order to manage the anxieties of ethnic identity.

Vladimir Girshkin, a thinly veiled analog of Shteyngart's own peripatetic younger self, is a Russian Jewish immigrant, with a driven, financially successful, and largely assimilated mother and a weary, resigned father. In America, he is a “beta-immigrant” (179), incapable of assimilating like his mother but also far too Americanized to claim sense of a Russianness⁶⁸ – in the Communist sense that partially subsumed Slavic ethnic pride into a national sense of identity. (One could say that along with farms and businesses, the Communists nationalized ethnic identity, as well.)

Acknowledging, of course, that *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* is fiction – and noting the hazards of reading fiction against a ‘real’ author – it is worth pointing out that this three-way impasse is precisely the one Shteyngart describes in his memoir *Little Failure*:

To my parents and Grandma Polya I am Igor Semyonovich Shteyngart, disobedient son and beloved grandson, respectfully. Very respectfully. To American teachers at SSSQ [Solomon Schechter School – Queens], I am Gary Shteyngart, strange salami-smelling boy with aptitude at math. To the Hebrew teachers at SSSQ I am Yitzhak Ben Shimon or some shit like that. And to the teacher, to my fellow pupils in their Macy's regalia, I am Gary Gnu the Third. (144).

Throughout the memoir, “Gary Gnu the Third” refers to a fourth personality, the young Shteyngart's precocious and deliberately strange authorial self; as an entertainer he succeeds with his classmates, but this success never involves becoming a ‘normal’ American boy (i.e., this personality is performative, but the performative is anything but a mimetic attempt to seem like his native-born American classmates).

In *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, Vladimir is uncomfortably saddled with a Jewish identity that always seems the projections of others. His sexual relationship with Francesca Ruocco is predicated on this identity; she positions him in a way that allows Fran to construct her own identity as educated and worldly but also as natively American.

"Do you know why I like you, Vladimir? Have you figured it out?...I like you because you're a small, embarrassed Jew. I like you because you're a foreigner with an accent. I like you, in other words, because you're my 'signifier.'

"Ah, thank you," Vladimir said. *Bozhe moi!* [My god!] he thought to himself. She knows me down to the very last. Small, embarrassed, Jewish, foreigner, accent. What more was there to him? This was it meant to be Vladimir. He pressed himself to her, thinking he was going to die of happiness. Happiness and the dull pain of being somehow insufficient. Of being half-formed. (80)

All of what it means to “be Vladimir” signifies, across a range of binaries, that Fran is powerful, confident, atheistic, and native to American. Vladimir is aware in this moment that the Americanness he seeks is constructed – Fran is constructing her own using Vladimir as a defining contrast. This awareness also triggers the “dull pain” of being “half-formed,” which we might take as a partial – but incomplete – recognition of the traumatic pain of being unformed, the central trauma that underscores the construction of identity.

In an inverted but similar scenario, Fran’s friend Frank – the Slavophile – attempts to use Vladimir as part of his rejection of American culture; he valorizes Russian culture in an attempt to escape his native American identity. Frank “did love [Vladimir] like crazy” (102), but that love takes on the fetishistic character of disavowal. Frank goes so far as to privilege his reading of Vladimir over Fran’s:

“But don’t forget that Vladimir has an expansive Russian soul. Money is not his concern. Comaraderie and salvation, that’s his game.”

“He’s a Jew,” Fran reminded them.

“But a *Russian* Jew,” Frank said triumphantly, slurping at his free drink. (103)

Obscured only partially by the comic excess of “slurping at his free drink,” the scene essentially concerns a struggle over who can define Vladimir. The near-identical names of Fran and Frank signal that they are female and male counterparts in the same role, defining themselves by opposing or aligning with Vladimir, who for his part acknowledges the process, whispering to himself, “All things to all people” (103).

Vladimir, after all, knows his Russianness is as ironic as his Jewishness. Frank, in a moment of fetishistic rapture for Russian culture, says, “[n]o man, no woman can claim to be *kulturni* without reading *Sportsman’s Sketches*” (71). Frank’s argument is that Russianness – true Russianness – comes from an appreciation of Russian culture, a convenient argument that lets Frank *become* Russian by reading Turgenev, a shorthand for being *kulturi*, or steeped in Russian culture. Neither Vladimir nor the novel rejects this argument outright; instead we get the joke, that Vladimir – who lies, “I have read the *Sketches* many times” – has only skimmed the book once, remembering only that it was “set outdoors” (71). Without foreclosing Frank’s attempt at self-fashioned Russianness, Vladimir again realizes he is being used as a prop for someone else’s identity without being secure in his own.

Vladimir longs to be on the other side of this process, to be able to create his own identity; he sees what Frank and Francesca do as the essential province and power of the assimilated:

Perhaps Vladimir was not so different from his parents. For them becoming American meant appropriating the country's vast floating wealth, a dicey process, to be sure, but not nearly as complex and absolute as this surreptitious body-snatching Vladimir was attempting. For what he really wanted to do, whether he admitted it or not, was to become Manhattanite Francesca Ruocco. That was his tangible ambition. Well-situated Americans like Frannie and denizens of [Vladimir's] Midwestern college had the luxury of being unsure of who they were, of shuffling through an endless catalog of social tendencies and intellectual poses.

But Vladimir couldn't waste any more time. He was twenty-five years old. Assimilate or leave, those were his options. (81)

Vladimir understands the performative nature of American identity deeply: chosen from a catalog of iterable poses, they cover over an essential insecurity about the self. Vladimir even goes as far as to suggest – in saying he wishes to “become Manhattanite Francesca Ruocco” – that Fran’s gender and sexuality are part of this malleable identity. However, the instability of this understanding, the mixture of recognition and disavowal, is captured in “whether he admitted it or not.” This phrase suspends Vladimir’s sense of his own desires and identity formation in an ambiguous space. Further, all of this polymorphous possibility is denied Vladimir; he ultimately fails to escape the projections of the Franks and Francescas of America.

Vladimir instead travels to Prava, Shteyngart’s partially fictionalized version of Prague. In Prava – as in the real Prague of the era – the collapse of Communism gave way to a unique space, wherein the forces of Western capitalism are present but not yet concrete. Vladimir sets up shop with a group of expatriates and attempts to found a corporate scam called PravaInvest. But more important than the financial opportunities of western capital are the ways in which Vladimir tries to escape ethnic identity as he has experienced it his whole life, as the label affixed by others: case in point, Vladimir’s early memory of a Minister of the Interior guard telling him, “You’ll be back, Yid” (*Russian Debutante’s Handbook* 186). In other words, Prava offers the promise of realizing a truly performative identity; it offers to be the vanishing point where self-fashioning simply collapses into self.

But of course things are not that simple. Shteyngart’s Prava is just a touch too strange to be believed. For example, in place of the real remains of the Stalin Monument – the world’s largest, destroyed completely in 1962, and replaced in the early 1990s with a statue of a

metronome – there is “the Foot,” which, in Shteyngart’s telling, is the result of dynamiting the head off of each subsequent Soviet leader, until after the “Gabardine revolution” – Shteyngart’s joking analog for the Velvet Revolution – only the foot remained (*Debutante* 204-205). This tinge of the surreal – taking a cue from Kafka’s *Amerika*, which opens with the sight of the Statue of Liberty, standing over New York harbor, holding aloft a sword – is different in character from the hyperbolic tone of the novel’s New York scenes. Shteyngart’s New York is colorful but – to anyone familiar with the city or the tradition of its realistic depiction – recognizable, down to certain bars in the Village. His Prava is imaginary.

This is the dark comedy of the surreal when set against the real: the latter turns the former from dream to nightmare. When Vladimir runs afoul of Eastern European neo-fascists he is nearly killed, and the surrealistic and playful attitude towards identity, mirthfully sustainable in the cartoonish freedom of Prava, threatens to collapse, as Yossarian’s dream of immortality collapses around Snowden’s death and the depravity of the Eternal City. As Adrian Wanner argues, the satirical impulse does not free Shteyngart’s fiction from the reality of the world:

Reflections on the topic of being Jewish pervade Shteyngart's fiction...he views the Jewish religion from a distance – even satirizing it... [a]t the same time, Shteyngart directly confronts the persecution and victimization of Jews. Girshkin is attacked and almost killed by eastern European skinheads, who taunt him with the German slogan "Auslander raus!" and, in one of the few unironic scenes in the book, he pays a visit to Auschwitz. (676)

Vladimir’s identity crisis – which is also Shteyngart’s – is more than a binary story of immigration. One doubts that any story can be boiled down to binaries, of Old World versus New, and in *Little Failure* Shteyngart is at pains to point out that there are innumerable identities out there. The problem is that none seem fully available to him, even when they are imposed and

fixed upon him by forces beyond his control. These identities seem inflicted upon him, like the disorder to which he compares them:

Dissociative Identity Disorder, evidenced by “The presence of two or more distinct identities or personality states, [with] at least two of these identities or personality states recurrently [taking] control of the person’s behavior” (DSM-5). (144, reference and brackets in original)

Vladimir cannot be American, is no longer Russian, but is also uncomfortable being Jewish, and yet each of these identities seems to be a part of him. For that reason his visit to Auschwitz is so important. It is central to a novel that, as Shteyngart put it, consists of a “long document in which a troubled man talks to himself. It is a series of increasingly desperate jokes” (*Little Failure* 318). The Auschwitz scene of *Debutante* is serious business, but – with respect to Wanner’s analysis – it is not unironic. In true dark comic form, Shteyngart’s best joke is his most desperate, trying at once to accept and deny the truth about ethnic identity.

Who Jokes After the Holocaust?

T.W. Adorno’s famous proscription, “[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” and his eventual softening, “it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems” (362), bring to mind the debate over the quality and humanity of all post-World War Two art, but specifically the survivor’s right to scream, and our society’s need to address the reality of the Holocaust. Adorno’s totalizing was restricted to a more reasonable point: poetry (which had come to mean all of art and philosophy) after Auschwitz (which had come to stand in for the horror of modern violence) would have to be *different*. To paraphrase Adorno, poetry would have to absorb and transcend the shock of history.

It seems unlikely that Adorno would have considered comedy the poetic device of choice to handle the Holocaust. But, then, absorbing and transcending the shock of history – which is to say the traumas that define us, culturally and ethnically – sounds suspiciously like an old-fashioned Freudian cure, like a Greek catharsis; that is emphatically not the job of dark comedy, which is neurotic at best. When it can manage to avoid the full collapse into sick and sadistic comedy, and when it can retain some tether on reality and avoid slipping into surreal denialism, it can *manage* the shock of history.

Still, a joke about the Holocaust? For a first-generation survivor, such humor might be considered the result of traumatic shock: in the disassociated state we often associate with traumatic events on the scale of the Holocaust, it might be possible to tell such a joke and be forgiven, although in the work of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub, the idea of a survivor telling jokes about his or her experience never seems to come up, in part because it seems so antithetical to the desire to be ‘faithful’ to the events. As Elie Wiesel explains in his essay “Why I Write,”

This is why I write some things rather than others: to remain faithful... I would like to shout, and shout loudly: ‘Listen, and listen well! I too am capable of victory, do you hear? I too am open to laughter and joy! I want to stride, head high, face unguarded, without having to point to the ashes there on the horizon, without having to tamper with facts to hide their ugliness. (908)

In Wiesel’s long shadow, facts are cast against joy and laughter, against ‘victory’ even, in the sense that to negate the sorrow of the Holocaust is to be unfaithful, to complete the Nazi project of historical erasure, and to unmake the modern Jewish people. Still, the theories assembled by Caruth et. al. offer a possible explanation, in particular Kevin Newmark’s interesting and difficult essay – in Caruth’s edited collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* – on Baudelaire’s poetry, teases out the purpose of laughter as the result of great psychic shocks. For

example, Newmark argues that “for Baudelaire it is of the essence of laughter to bring us face to face with a radical discrepancy or disjunction within the very composition of the human self, and such a recognition could be considered a source of merriment only from the point of view of the simplest naiveté or the bleakest cynicism” (242). He then points to Baudelaire’s own essay, “On the Essence of Laughter,” in which Baudelaire claims, “[i]t is by no means the man who falls who laughs at his own fall, unless he is a philosopher, a man who has acquired by force of habit the capacity to split himself rapidly in two, and to look on the phenomena of his own self as a disinterested observer” (247). Newmark thus unlocks in Baudelaire’s artistic concerns an analysis of the kind of psychotic post-traumatic splitting that would make a Holocaust joke possible, albeit a sick – or ‘cynical’ – joke. This is what is at stake in Shteyngart’s humor, which seeks to deconstruct the ethnic identities against which Vladimir struggles. For a family like Vladimir’s, relocated to Russia by his grandmother to escape Hitler’s persecution, the Holocaust was never directly faced. Cut off from the historical reality of the event by the shock-force of its trauma, it is possible to be comically dismissive of the Holocaust – of its foundational role in Jewish identity, even of its historical gravity.

We might also understand a Holocaust joke as ‘gallows humor,’ as Freud describes it in his 1927 article, “Humor,” as the last line of defense, a kind of comedy that moves past neurotic management into the denial of psychosis. As he wrote,

[t]he ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure. (162)

And, of course, in any dark comedy there is *some* refusal – some disavowing of reality or an aspect of reality – on the part of the Ego. As Freud points out repeatedly, this is an “essential part of humour” (ibid), but the denial cannot be complete. And, more to the point, for someone

attempting to deal with historical trauma that is constituent or even partially foundational to his or her sense of ethnic identity, denial is clearly not the right means. Gallows humor cushions the joker from the blow of historical trauma by making it seem irrelevant; sick or sadistic humor has the joker split, pretending—cruelly—that the trauma is happening to someone else. Dark comedy, while finding ways to cushion the brutality of historical trauma, seeks to accept and incorporate the reality of the trauma. It may not be faithful in Wiesel’s sense—or properly poetic in Adorno’s—but it is the best fit out of the comic modes for dealing with the Holocaust’s role in ethnic identity.

For modern Jews, including Shteyngart’s brand of agnostic cultural Jew, this often means dealing with the strange and unsettling trauma of education, at the hands of other Jews, about the Holocaust. The trauma, initially perpetrated by European fascists, is reinflicted and sustained by modern Jews to insure the coherence of their ethnic identity. Consider the following exchange between Jacques Berlinerblau and Gary Shteyngart, during an interview at Georgetown University:

Berlinerblau: Were you subjected to Holocaust movies when you were in Hebrew school? You and your little Jewish mates would be herded into a dark room, the teacher would flip the shades, cast a furtive glance down the hallway. It was almost like pornography.

Shteyngart: (Laughs). Exactly, exactly.

B: The rabbi would shut the door. The lights would go down, and suddenly you’d see mountains of cadavers being moved by an impassive tractor. You got those as well?

S: It was the cantor who would do that.

B: I am not sure this was a great moment in the history of Jewish pedagogy. What were they thinking exposing eight-, nine-, ten-year-old kids to these images? I think it created a whole social class of traumatized secular Jews.

S: Yeah, yeah.

B: Many of us are just digging out of this right now, psychologically.

S: Sure, I'm digging. These books are a way to dig. (Berlinerblau)

The comparison between viewing cinema and photography from the concentration camps (taken by both men to be standard operating procedure in Hebrew schools) and pornography is inflected with a mixture of shame, fascination, and identity formation (as childhood pornography use – at least for boys – is often instrumental in structuring sexual desire). It is a rite of passage, an initiation; it has left both men, in fact, “traumatized” and *yet* Shteyngart’s reaction is laughter.

In a real sense, the contentious relationships of trauma and identity that undergird identity politics is the same violent, unstable nebula that contains the unwritten codes of comedy – who can tell which jokes to whom. What matters about this is that it forces us to pay attention to the whole complex of comedy: the joker, the joke, and the audience.

In this case, Berlinerblau’s joke is a relatively safe one, not so much because its reference to the Holocaust is of the second or third degree, but because the terrain of identity is so even; that is, Berlinerblau and Shteyngart are both secular Jews. It would be a different joke if, say, Günter Grass was telling Susan Sontag the joke. But, of course, it is not difficult or unproductive to complicate the situation as a structural example; that is, every joke can be told as a meta joke, or the joke of someone telling the joke. In this case, Jacques and Gary perform the joke *together* (like an old-school comedy team) and the audience of the interview becomes the audience of the comedy. Here things get much more complicated and we can only speculate on the demographic, but we can imagine the disapproval of the Orthodox, the knowing chuckles of fellow secular Jews, the raised and anxious eyebrows of gentiles, and so on.

Shteyngart’s humor is far more complicated – and far riskier – in that the terrain of identity between novelist and audience is, though not quite infinite, decidedly more

discontinuous than the relative intimacy assumed by Berlinerblau (and confirmed by Shteyngart's response). This is an exponential step beyond the politics of dramatizing trauma – politics which depend upon a certain intimacy between author and event. The logic of dark comedy – which, to define it reductively, takes tragedy as the impetus for comedy – depends upon a certain intimacy between audience and event. And thus Shteyngart laments:

[H]umorous writing is hit or miss with an audience. Drama has a more universal effect. People respond in a predictable way to death or failed romance. But when you do humor, you're uncertain if you succeed or not. (Grinberg)

While Shteyngart's thoughts on comedy, his description of his novel as a series of increasingly desperate jokes – and desperate to accomplish what? – suggests the particular way in which *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* engages the trauma of the Holocaust – not through the direct violence of fascist genocide, and not through the generational traumas that are frequently the structuring agent of ethnic identity, but through historical education, that is, the formative moments in Shteyngart's life when he came to understand his identity in relation to history.

What Shteyngart's thoughts on comedy also suggest – more loosely – is what Shteyngart and Berlinerblau both imagine as a particular mode of engaging history and historical trauma, a secular Jewish humor that seems particularly American. This, in fact, is one of Shteyngart's best jokes in *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, where the father of Vladimir's domineering girlfriend and an esteemed history professor is described as having branched out into “a whole new field...called Humor Studies...[a]nd he has New York's two million Jews at his disposal. The perfect population, you guys are both funny and sad” (84). In an interview in *World Literature*, Shteyngart claims, “American Jewishism isn't religious, and it's really, maybe, a euphemism for feeling out of place” (Brown 30). Thus, if Jewishness is a function of historical

anxiety and alienation, then Jewish comedy is, in a sense, always a historicizing joke. It is also why, *because* Shteyngart is both alienated from and tethered to an identity founded on the Holocaust, an identity that includes his particular comic mode, reckoning with the Holocaust becomes more important than reckoning with his Soviet past or the historical antecedents of his American life. It is why Vladimir has to go to Auschwitz: it is the dark wellspring of Shteyngart's sense of humor.

At the turn of the century, Freud was already discussing Jewish humor as an essentially secular practice – as opposed to Christian humor, which involved skirting the taboos of the Catholic system – designed for self-analysis. Although Freud was reticent about his own Jewishness in his earlier writings, he is clearly fond of these jokes:

A particularly favourable occasion for tendentious jokes is presented when the intended rebellious criticism is directed against the subject himself, or to put it more cautiously, against someone in whom the subject has a share – a collective person, that is (the subject's own nation, for instance). The occurrence of self-criticism as a determinant may explain how it is that a number of the most apt jokes...have grown up on the soil of Jewish popular life...I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character. (*Jokes* 133)

Freud's more cautious phrase "a collective person" is precisely what Vladimir Girshkin represents, a grotesquely comic⁶⁹ projection of Shteyngart, a joke that is funny – for Shteyngart, Berlinerblau, and other secular Jews – because they recognize in it their own failings. First amongst those is the failure to 'dig out' from under the weight of history; it is this history that makes the immigrant Jew into what Henri Bergson calls an automaton, a kind of comic figure that is mechanized – by forces beyond its control, be they ritualistic, industrial, supernatural – to the point of losing its humanity.⁷⁰ The point of Shteyngart's comedy is to attempt to manage – if not absorb and transcend – that history which Vladimir cannot.

For much of the novel, Shteyngart gives himself the advantage of a cartoonish comedy in order to handle this task. Vladimir is repeatedly put in danger by the forces of history – as when his failure to assimilate leads to poverty and ultimately to a near-rape and threatened murder by Catalan drug lord Jordi – but the reader is never made to feel he is in any real danger. He escapes each time, like Falstaff or the Road Runner or, more to the point, Charlie Chaplin. In fact, *Modern Times* serves well as the blueprint for *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*. Early on in the novel, Shteyngart explicitly rewrites the comic physique of the Fool (or, more appropriately, the Tramp) as a product of Jewishness, as Mother Girshkin (as Vladimir refers to his mother) exclaims:

“You walk like a Jew...Look at your feet. Look carefully. Look at how your feet are spread apart. Look at how you walk from side to side. Like an old Jew from the shtetl. Little Rebbe Girshkin.” (45)

This, of course, is the kind of joke that *only* a Jew can tell.⁷¹ And although it is the kind of joke a wide demographic can appreciate – drawing from the rich, multicultural supply of overbearing mother tropes – it conceals, at first, its own deeper logic. What *makes* Vladimir walk like a fool, according to the joke, is what makes Chaplin walk like a Tramp – forces beyond his control. For Chaplin, it was economics (which forced him to wear cheap, pontoon-sized loafers and, therefore, affect his trademark, comic walk); for Vladimir, it is history (which has always ostracized Jews and made them anxious about their Jewishness). In either case, there is a superficial joke – a silly walk, shades of *Monty Python* – which conceals a tragic undercurrent. This is the power of slapstick, in that it allows a pivot between the immediacy of visual humor and the depth of conceptual humor. And though, in general, a novel's humor will always be more conceptual than the visual immediacy of cinematic slapstick,⁷² the decisive metaphor of the first section of Shteyngart's novel echoes the mechanical, physical humor of *Modern Times*:

America, it seemed, was not entirely defenseless against the likes of Vladimir Girshkin. There was a sorting mechanism at work by which the beta immigrant was discovered, branded by an invisible β on his forehead, and eventually rounded up and put on the next plane to some dank Amatevka... (*Debutante's* 179)

The gentler, referential layer of the joke is that Vladimir will get shipped back to the Soviet periphery – to the shtetl from *Fiddler on the Roof*, where Jews acquire their trademark walk, per Mother Girshkin – but it is hard not to read into these lines the real violence of modernity. The “sorting mechanism” recalls both the industrial tools of Nazi genocide and the modern bureaucracy of the Soviet State. Beneath this layer of physical slapstick – in which physical forces puppeteer the Fool – is the conceptual joke in which *history* pulls the strings:

A knowledgeable Russian lazing around... expects that at any minute the forces of history will drop by and discretely kick him in the ass... A knowledgeable Jew... expects history to spare any pretense and kick him directly in the face... a Russian Jew... expects both history and a Russian to kick him in the ass, the face, and every other place... (*Debutante's* 365)

Superficially, it certainly seems that Shteyngart is ‘being funny.’ His exaggeration of the style of staid logical argument for comic effect is fairly clear.⁷³ Add to this verbal slapstick the imagined visual slapstick: an allegory for History traversing the countryside, putting boot to buttock, has a definite absurdist charm. But, of course, there is the dark tragedy which undergirds this joke. How is Shteyngart’s précis of the double tragedy of the Russian Jews (who face both the broad, democratic failure of Soviet socialism and the more specific tyranny of Soviet anti-Semitism) meant to strike the audience? How, in other words, could this joke really be funny?

This is the thing about jokes – they don’t exist in a vacuum. This joke comes at the beginning of Part VII, right after Vladimir is beaten by neo-Nazis – the violence that punctures for the first time the seemingly boundless postmodern freedom of Prava – and resorts to “half-

heartedly” pleading “I am an American” (*Debutante’s* 357). Shteyngart immediately softens the appearance of *real* violence by playing up Vladimir’s Falstaffian excesses: “He felt a swirl in his stomach, the undulation of his daily intake of gulash, potato dumplings, and booze” (ibid. 359). In fact, as Gusev – a Russian criminal Vladimir has been working with – points out, Vladimir has “embarrassed” his compatriots – again shifting the tone from victimization (of real physical violence) to comic degradation (Vladimir is, once again, a Fool).

Thus, like an audience halfway into a stand-up comedy act, when we get to the joke – a few pages later – we are already primed to take the violent machinations of History as, at least potentially, comic material.⁷⁴ But there is another reason why we might find the joke funny and that is the impression of mastery. (The term “impression” conveys the potential for ambivalence between illusion and demonstration of mastery.) Shteyngart’s joke is desperately struggling against history; if the joke triumphs, trauma ceases to be a constituent of identity and, instead, comedy becomes constituent. We cease to be defined by our tragedies and become defined by our comedy. We have good reason to believe in Shteyngart’s comic universe.

The joke is, however, only a temporary victory. History is relentless and this generates the conflict that powers the novel’s forward motion. Every time history manifests itself – as with the *real violence* of the neo-Nazis – there is another setup for a joke. Not for nothing is chapter thirty-one entitled, “Starring Vladimir as Peter the Great.” Vladimir’s attempt to *perform* Slavonity (e.g., like Peter the Great) is really his attempt to *outperform* Jewishness, to outperform the historical forces that, so recently, have tracked him down and made a fool of him again.

Although it is mostly played for laughs, Vladimir’s role as a sexual prop is the clearest example of his inability to perform outside or against his historical positioning as Jew. He

remains, for Fran and for her world, a signifier of Jewishness (80). Shteyngart's America – far from seeming postmodern – seems eminently modern and striated by class structures ordained historically. So Vladimir, in a comic inversion of lighting out for the territory, heads out to the Wild West, which is actually the Wild East. In one of the most ecstatic passages of Shteyngart's novel, Vladimir decides:

Well, fuck America...from this day forward he was Vladimir the Expatriate, a title that signified luxury, choice, decadence, frou-frou colonialism. Or, rather, Vladimir the *Repatriate*, in this case signifying a homecoming, a foreknowledge, *a making amends with history...* (179, emphasis mine)

The ambivalence of this passage can be difficult to parse. Vladimir is, in one sense, returning to the Soviet world in that Prava has only recently emerged from the Soviet empire (which invaded and occupied the city in 1969).⁷⁵ However, in another sense, he is going to an open city with the perks – “luxury, choice, decadence” – created by an American passport and, more importantly, the wild incongruities between Western financial networks and emerging post-Soviet networks (embodied in the absurdly low cost of Cognac in Prava's bars). So, what does “making amends with history” really mean, if history is still likely to kick Vladimir in the ass, on sight, in either New York or St. Petersburg?

Shteyngart's Postmodernity

The answer can be found in Shteyngart's particular take on globalization and postmodernity. For this novel, postmodernism – as the fundamental destabilization of modern structures of power and identity – does not take place ‘inside’ the world of the globalized (the putative First World of global finance capital). Instead it takes place as a result of the ambivalence Vladimir experiences in his relationship on the border of two incongruous networks

of power, Western financial power and Eastern totalitarian power. While each of these networks has left Vladimir suspended in a place of anxious, alienated stasis, in between these networks he is able to perform a more fluid identity.

Nowhere does Shteyngart illustrate Vladimir's new performative ability more perfectly than when Vladimir addresses the henchmen of the Groundhog, whose criminal syndicate Vladimir has been hired to westernize. Vladimir plays *up* his knowledge of American business although he was, by American standards, barely ever above a minimum-wage employee. This, however, is little more than the comic trope of the forged resume (the comic conceit of late 1980s and early 1990s movies like *The Associate*, *Big*, and *Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead*), and is no more postmodern than Chaplin's comedies of mistaken identity. But what is suggestive of the postmodern is Vladimir's ability to perform Slavonity so convincingly, as in the scene where he attempts to rally support from ethnic Slavs to the aid of his quasi-legal startup PravaInvest:

While the Stolovans [Czechs], the very same Stolovans who we ran over in '69, are out there building condominiums and modern factories that work, we're snipping Bulgarian balls like radishes...what did the Bulgarians ever do to deserve this, may I ask? They're Slavs like us...(*Slavs Like Us: The Vladimir Girskin Story*. Thankfully the crowd was too agitated to make light of Vladimir's lack of Slavonity.) (ibid. 373)

And, in case we missed Vladimir's entry into postmodernity, we get Vladimir's friend František's reading of the performance: "Brilliant!...You really are Postmodern Man...clown and ringmaster all at once" (ibid. 375). Set free in the flux on the fringe of globalization, Vladimir is finally – it seems – able to *outperform* history. Vladimir's performances – however much they threaten to conflict and contradict – do not accumulate. He lives from one moment of performance to the next, developing a picaresque identity which is at each moment ecstatic and ahistorical. This performativity is Vladimir's mastery over history, which allows him to joke

about it earlier in the novel. It is as if Vladimir has told the perfect gallows joke, one which literally banishes the gallows.

Triumphant as this may sound, we have to ask ourselves: why, then, is this victory deliberately set in a fantastic space? That is, while Shteyngart's Russia, however dimly recalled, is brutally real and his New York City is vividly evoked (down to the street names and the topography of Central Park), Prague become *Prava*. However *close* Shteyngart's description of Prava is to Prague, we cannot deny a shift takes place. Why do we, in effect, leave the *real* world of New York for the *fictional* world of Prava?⁷⁶

The question, asked another way, is: when Vladimir puts on his masterpiece of performative identity for the PravaInvest Slavs, on whom is the joke? On the Slavs, for being outmaneuvered in postmodern waters? On Vladimir, for thinking he can really take self-invention to a new dimension? Or on us, for failing to notice that Vladimir – seemingly flesh and bone when we met him – has been Rotoscoped into a cartoon and is no longer operating in our world of physics?

Or: what is funny in postmodernity?

When Fredric Jameson considers the end of the relationship between history and subjectivity, he focuses on the temporal aspect of Lacan's schizophrenia to construct an aesthetic model of postmodernism:

[T]he breakdown of temporality suddenly releases this present [i.e., "pure and unrelated" aesthetic moments in time] from all the activities and intentionalities [e.g. history] that might focus it and make it a space of praxis [e.g., political action]...(27)

In other words, the forces of postmodernism – historicism or the irony of history, along with the destabilizing effects of globalization on traditional structures (class, race, religion, etc.) of

identity – set the Subject adrift in a series of aesthetically intense but politically disconnected moments. As Jameson argues,

[W]hat I have been calling schizophrenic disjunction or *écriture*, when it becomes generalized as a cultural style, ceases to entertain a necessary relationship to the morbid content [i.e., madness and death] we associate with terms like schizophrenia and becomes available for more joyous intensities, for precisely that *euphoria which we saw displacing older affects of anxiety and alienation...* (29, emphasis mine)

That euphoria, it seems, would be *most* valuable to those looking to escape history, to escape an identity governed by historical forces. Recalling Fran's précis – "Small, embarrassed, Jewish, foreigner, accent. What more was there to him?" (*Debutante's* 80) – what else defines Vladimir besides "anxiety and alienation"? Throwing off Fran's version of his identity means throwing off history, and it is this very possibility that awaits Vladimir in Prava. But what kind of possibility is this, a literary one or a social one? The question of interpretation is woven into discussions of the postmodern because – as opposed to the directly political and rather dystopian reading of Negri and Hardt – Jameson's moment of utopianism comes from a blurring of the real-world conditions of the postmodern and the aesthetic possibilities of postmodern art. Jameson discusses them inseparably under the broad rubric of cultural style – thus, it is both the experience of "schizophrenic disjuncture" and the capacity of "schizophrenic *écriture*."

The traditional structure of comedy – the incongruity between the comic's performance and the rules of the universe – is rendered profoundly unstable *if we accept the possibility that postmodernism means a new set of rules for the real world*. That is, for the interpretative practices of modernity, the Tramp is funny because of an irony between his comic perseverance and the social reality that tramps starve and die. If postmodernity means that it is now possible for Tramps to actually do the thing Chaplin's character does, to outperform economic

inevitably, then we have an irony of irony. In the case of Vladimir, if we accept the possibility that all identities are experienced aesthetically – that they are performative, rather than historically contingent – then his jokes about Jewish identity become meaningless and/or they become funny in the anxious ambivalence of the readers’ conceptions of their own identities. They go from being skeptical jokes (about one’s own identity) to being aggressive jokes (actively seeking to negate others’ identities).

But because postmodern comedy is finally *not* a mode capable of absorbing and transcending the shock of history, Shteyngart’s jokes keep growing in their desperation. For all the potential utopian strands that can be woven together in his novel, it is ultimately not a book about the joys of the postmodern; nor is it – for Shteyngart – an example of mastery of the sort already discussed, the mastery that rewrites tragedy as comedy. It is, at best, a ‘way for him to dig’ out from under his own history; it is process, not conquest. To see why, we have to look at Shteyngart’s Auschwitz scene, in the full darkness of its irony.

The Joke Itself

Towards the novel’s end, Vladimir leaves Prava (land of fiction, city of self-invention) and goes to the very real Auschwitz II-Birkenau. Yet the camp itself is mired in an ironic state: the first signpost is the “famous tower, a shot of which is requisite in any movie about the camps” (*Debutante*’s 422). Cohen, Vladimir’s friend and guide, has his “well-worn guide to Europe’s concentration camps” (423). Vladimir raises his hand to his face to block the sun and Cohen “misinterpret[s] this gesture for a sign of trauma” (423). Much of the camp has been destroyed and it is “hard to recreate” (424). We can read this, perhaps, as the cultural repression of a real historical event. However, Shteyngart is flirting with something riskier: not a denial of

the Holocaust, but the suggestion that all that is left of traumatic historical events – in the present of postmodernism – is simulacra: movies, tour guides, recreations and (mis)interpretations.

This postmodern irony, of course, has the same potential for anti-Semitism as Vladimir's joyous performative uncoupling from his Jewish identity (which threatens to oppose freedom and joy to Jewishness) and represents the *kind* of thinking that enables Mother Girshkin to assimilate so ruthlessly into postmodern capitalism. But it also has an undeniably liberating power, to allow Vladimir directly to confront and defeat history:

[T]o hell with this twentieth century that was almost at an end, with all its problems still intact and flourishing, and the Girshkins, once again, the brunt of the joke, the epicenter of the storm, the clearinghouse for global confusion and uncertainty. (428)

This, after all, is the ethos of postmodern utopianism: to hell with the twentieth century. This is a serious moment, capacious enough to hold confusion and anger, frustration and sadness. This is not a joke.

This is the setup for a joke.

At the moment of potential victory – or at least escape – when Vladimir attempts to reject history, he is inscribed into it by the very postmodern situation that has turned a Nazi death camp into a tourist attraction. Photographed as some sort of exhibit, he becomes the “Live Jew of Birkenau” (429), commoditized into part of a tourist's experience of history. Worse, the German agents of this inscription retain the post-historical freedom that is denied to Vladimir – “that is to say, they were old enough to have been at Birkenau in a different capacity some half a century ago” (428). The actual Nazi perpetrators, this very dark joke suggests, can escape into the fluidity of the postmodern and re-invent themselves as tourists of their own death camps, but a Jew *cannot*. This moment of defeat is signaled, not un-dramatically, by the final section –

“Girshkin’s End” – which marks the end of Vladimir’s ability to re-invent himself. It is his defeat by history.

If Chaplin’s comedy is the factory worker stuck in the cogs of modernity, Shteyngart’s is Vladimir stuck in the cogs of postmodernity. In other words, postmodernity – though it may not have the mechanized rigor of modernity – is still a system by which new identities are forged. Postmodernity does provide for some measure of fluidity as old hierarchies and binaries are disrupted and Shteyngart’s novel certainly maps many of these disruptions. But postmodernism is *not* the same as chaos, and the last, dark joke – Vladimir’s experience at Birkenau – suggests that the system of power and capital that can break down old identities can also create new ones. Thus, new European wealth can turn Nazis into tourists, but it can also confine Vladimir’s shape-shifter into the historical identity of a Jew.

The other side of the Holocaust joke is that – if Vladimir is unable to escape being Jewish – he is also unable to *fully* inhabit a Jewish identity. Thus, the suggestion in the lines that follow Vladimir’s photo-inscription seems to be that Israelis (several of whom Vladimir sees at the camp and imagines as having a more authentic reaction), if incapable of escaping historically contingent identities, can at least *inhabit them more fully*.⁷⁷ They have been able to process and utilize the Holocaust as founding trauma; as strange as it may sound, the Holocaust represents another covenant to them, a new redefinition of their ethnic identity.⁷⁸ They are, for Shteyngart, being had; his next work, *Absurdistan*, will mercilessly skewer the idea of a founding trauma.⁷⁹ In an overtly Swiftian nod, the chapter entitled “A Modest Proposal” has the protagonist, Misha, propose a plan to set up Holocaust recreation centers for profit, charging exorbitant fees so that American Jews can experience the historical trauma that defines them: “Identity politics are a great boon to our quest for Continuity. Identity is born almost exclusively out of a nation’s

travails. For us – a prosperous, unmolested people safely nuzzled in the arms of the world’s last superpower (as of this writing, anyway) – this means Holocaust, Holocaust, Holocaust”

(*Absurdistan* 268). Shteyngart ultimately has less interest in parodying Israeli nationalism as it informs identity construction than he does disassembling the idea that history creates and secures identities against flux or failure. This is not to say that Shteyngart has not leaned on the founding traumas of Soviet suffering, of Jewish historical anxiety, of immigrant struggle, in order to perform his identity; it is fair to say he does not believe his performance is divinely ordained, or that the material of history acts organically or without manipulation on the tribes of the earth.

Thus, the darkest aspect of the Holocaust joke is that – for the whole novel – Vladimir has been trying to outperform identity, but identity *is* performance, and the performance covers a void. That is what the death camp represents: the murderously hollow logic of the Nazis, who picked a people, invented a mythology about them, created an ethnic identity *for* them, and then slaughtered them as part of the Nazi performance of Aryan superiority. The same troubled logic of ethnic identity underscores all the roles Vladimir pretends to – Slav, Jew, and, perhaps most hollow of all, American. Not for nothing is Vladimir’s American son, in the novel’s downbeat coda, described as “serious and a bit dull, but beset by no illness, free of the fear and madness of Vladimir’s Eastern lands” (*Debutante’s* 476). He is free from history, and inherits nothing of his father’s neuroses. And so there’s nothing to him, barely even a performance.

The joke is dark, almost sadistic. But it does not tumble completely into nihilism, because the ethnic identity that Shteyngart is dissembling here, the ‘illness’ and ‘madness’ of the Eastern lands that encompass both Slavic and Semitic senses of self, is in a real way valorized over the dullness, the emptiness, of American non-ethnicity. The tragedy for Vladimir is the inevitable disconnect from his own son, who will, in his Midwestern enclave of Cleveland, have broken

away from history in all the ways that Vladimir could not. We might say that the tragedy for Shteyngart is the essential humorlessness of this American generation, the inability to appreciate his comedy, to laugh at his stories, told (as Vladimir has lived) “foolishly, imperially, ecstatically” (476). This sense of humor is pathological, like ethnicity, and like so many Freudian ills it is neurotic; it touches the real – of historical trauma and its lasting effects – and recoils, but not fully into the psychosis of denial and solipsism. This sense of humor, self-fashioned by Shteyngart, resembles closely what we call a Jewish sense of humor, though it is certainly a unique type of it. It is a kind of comedy that sustains both belief and disbelief, as it does for Jews who both cannot believe – not after the Holocaust, not after the twentieth century – and still call themselves Jews. Shteyngart’s dark comedy laughs at the absurdity of his own dislocations – from Judaism, from Russian history, from blond-haired American exceptionalism – but also struggles to embrace those things.

In the closing chapter of his memoir, Shteyngart writes candidly of this approach:

On so many occasions in my novels I have approached a certain truth only to turn away from it, only to point my finger and laugh at it and then scurry back to safety. In this book, I promised myself I would not point the finger. My laughter would be intermittent. There would be no safety. (*Little Failure* 318)

Surely this is the very description of dark comedy, orbiting closely to the unsettling truth, telling a dark joke followed by a foolish one, a nervous game of chicken, driving into oncoming oblivion and then swerving. Shteyngart is not precisely forthcoming about what that “truth” is; the structure of his memoir revolves around a childhood trauma that is revealed in the final chapter: as a child, Shteyngart’s father took him to see Chesme Church in what was then Leningrad. Shteyngart was misbehaving and his father punched him in the nose, hard enough to draw blood. Shteyngart writes, earlier in the book, of his father: “I’m here hitting you. I will never leave you, don’t you worry, because I am the Lord, thy father. And just as I was

pummeled, so shall I pummel you, and you shall pummel yours forever, *ve imru Amen*. Let us say Amen” (127, italics in original).

Shteyngart, despite his promise, is evasive about truth. Certainly allegations of child abuse is not the truth Shteyngart has been running from, but the abuse is important, it is the trauma that he uses to try and understand his inheritance, the passing on of a father’s pathological anger and confusion to the son. On the final page of the memoir, as Shteyngart and his elderly father visit the grave of Shteyngart’s grandfather, killed in siege of Leningrad, is something closer to the truth.

I can read the prayer, but I cannot understand it. The words coming out of my mouth are gibberish to me. And they can only be gibberish to my father’s ear as well.

I chant the words and he says, “Amen” after each stanza.

I chant the gibberish backwards and forwards, tripping over the words, mangling them, making them sound more Russian, more American, more holy. (349)

There are saner uses of self-fashioning and self-mythologizing than genocide, of course; there are saner and better ends for performance than fascist pomp and circumstance. There is psychological self-defense and self-preservation, there is a strip of paper over the abyss; that we might grant. Here is another historical trauma, which Shteyngart explicitly describes in the parental role: “Twenty-six million died on the Russian side in World War II, nearly 15 percent of the population. It is not an exaggeration to say the ground trod by my sneakers was once steeped in blood. It is not an exaggeration to say that those of us who are Russian, or Russian American, or Russian anything, are the offspring of these battles” (346). And here is Shteyngart with another dark joke. Here he is with his father, from whom he has inherited beatings, and confusion, and a sense of loss. Here he is, trying to make something out of that. What Shteyngart’s dark comedy allows is a nervous acceptance of the dangers of tribalism, the dangers and uses of those

fantasies, and, most of all, the fact that ethnic identity is itself a fantasy. His comedy allows these things and still reaches out, still enacts the performance, that doubting sense of humor that Freud was so fond of. His comedy says the words with a smirk, with a laugh, but it says them still.

III. No Truth, Only Stories – Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*

Identity Politics

Shteyngart’s work struggles to accept the historical and personal horrors that position ethnic identity while at the same time holding at a protective distance the traumatic realization that those horrors are the screen for an absence of an absolute or ‘authentic’ identity. Thomas King, in his own way, struggles to do the same thing. *Green Grass, Running Water* tries to reckon with both the historical horrors of colonialism and the historical erasure of aboriginal culture. For King, however, these horrors make their way down through the generations along family lines; in *Green Grass, Running Water*, the male characters draw their sense of ethnic self – or the lack of it – from their fathers. In drawing this paternal map of historical trauma, King’s novel also draws anxiously near to the abyss beneath constructed identity. To quote LaCapra again, King’s dark comedy tries to handle “the absence of an absolute that should not itself be absolutized” (702). Like Shteyngart, King deals both with what seems like realistic fiction and something beyond it. One major strand of the novel concerns a largely traditional narrative about Blackfoot men and women living in and around the fictional but otherwise quotidian town of Blossom, Alberta. The other major strand features an omniscient narrator, accompanied by a Coyote trickster (suggested at times to be *the* archetypal Coyote), who together enter into and

rewrite classic scenes from the western canon, including the Book of Genesis, The New Testament, *Moby Dick*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. Pitching between the real and the surreal, comic bombast and tragic history, and intimately concerned with the difficulties of ethnic identity, *Green Grass, Running River* seems the perfect counterpart to *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*.

King was raised inside the white, male, North American identity that is the systemic antagonist in *Green Grass, Running Water* and was already in his forties when he began to construct or re-construct a sense of native identity. Without denigrating King's own claims to aboriginal culture, it is difficult to say King is writing from an 'authentic' position. As he explains:

I don't remember knowing another Indian until I got to college. My father was Cherokee out of Oklahoma, but he took off when I was about five, and we never saw him again. My mother is Greek and part German, and she raised us by herself...actually, the ten years I spent at the University of Lethbridge working with Blackfoot and Cree people provided me with the basis for much of my fiction. (qtd. in Vizenor 174)

That his identity has been, throughout his work, increasingly pan-Native American (drawing on disparate myths and beliefs of the Cree, Blackfoot, Cherokee, and others) also complicates the idea of an 'authentic' identity rooted in a particular place and time. King sees himself as a Native writing for all Natives:

I really don't care about the white audiences. They don't have an understanding of the intricacies of Native life, and I don't think they're much interested in it, quite frankly. (ibid)

King's use of the broad categories of "white" and "Native" highlights the problem: the novel rests on uneven ground. King dismisses non-native readers and, at several points, uses the Cherokee syllabary and phonetic rendering of the Cherokee language, without translation, to

distance non-fluent readers. Overall, the novel seeks to disassemble the apparatus of western belief while actively recreating and valorizing the cultural beliefs of the First Nations.

The difficulty lies in demanding a sense of equality in a book about a world that is not equal. On the one hand, deconstructing the institutions of the West is to be on the right side of history, to hold Western culture responsible for its crimes. On the other hand, deconstructing the ontological and historical beliefs of First Nations (or any aboriginal people) is to reenact the vile process of colonization. And one can imagine the difficulty of deconstructing Nazi Aryan mythology while also stating categorically that the Jewish faith is imaginary; for example, in deconstructing the religious belief of Elie Wiesel, one colludes with the Nazi erasure of Jewish culture. Many aboriginal artists and academics, King included, would likely take grave offense at any suggestion that all identity is constructed, and that the solid assurances of self – of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity – dissolve into air unto scrutiny.

Beyond the trap of political insensitivity in deconstructing aboriginal belief systems, there is a problem in bringing the tools of trauma theory to bear on a somewhat different cultural environment than the one in which it was developed. There is fairly consistent psychiatric evidence, beyond the general sociological soundness of the idea, that, as George Rhoades argues, “what is considered healthy in one society may be viewed unhealthy in another. Although psychiatric disorders appear in all cultures, their form and expression may vary often in a way that is linked to cultural belief systems” (22). It seems a fair compromise to say that traumatic events leave no one unscathed, and it is not a question of measure, but modality: how traumatic symptoms are experienced and how they are recognized.

Still, despite the radical incongruities between First Nations' culture in modern Alberta and bourgeois Vienna of the 1920s and 1930s, Freud is an appropriate match for King, not least because Freud also rewrote the story of a biblical patriarch as a thought experiment in the construction of religious and ethnic identity. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud makes a curiously halting series of attempts to work through a specious historical argument about the real identity of Moses. He argues that Moses must have been an Egyptian, who only later invented his descent from the Levi family line, and that this Egyptian Moses was brought up in the Egyptian sun-worship of Akhenaton. When Egyptian monotheism collapsed, Moses took advantage of the social chaos to lead the Jews to freedom, converting them to a rigorously ethical and fairly ascetic monotheism. The Jews rebelled, murdered Moses, and later took up the volcano-god Jahweh. But, eventually, guilt over the communal murder of Moses returned to haunt the Jews, and slowly his ethical prescriptions – religion, as it were – crept back into their culture, bearing the physical mark of Moses' signature ritual of male genital mutilation, circumcision (which Freud attributes to Moses, not the covenant with Abraham).

In this retelling, Freud manages to smooth out the discontinuities of the Jewish god – who in some places in the Torah demands horrendous sacrifices and in others abhors violence – but, as E. Ann Kaplan argues, he had more personal motives:

The text reveals exile as a situation par excellence of loss of identity – without all the usual familiar surroundings with their strong affect, and without the discursive supports, including language, that reminded Freud of who was, he may have lost his sense of himself . . . Traumatic markers dog the book throughout, not only in the many false starts, but in the repetitions, the constant return to past arguments, and the weaving in and out of positions vis-à-vis Moses. These reveal Freud's anxiety and his already threatened sense of identity, so it is not surprising that at the end of the volume he rehearses the trauma theories developed over the course of his career, and takes them further into the cultural realm. (44-45)

In making Judaism both a choice and a psychological state of mind, Freud's retelling in *Moses and Monotheism* paints Jewish ethnicity as a neurotic pathology. Jewishness, in Freud's new understanding, is not linguistic or hereditary or even historical – as the Jews have repressed the cultural memory of their covenant with and murder of Moses. Kaplan makes it clear that Freud was trying to escape an essentialist understanding of Jewish ethnicity even as the Nazis were assigning one to him (and forcing him to flee his home). In his precarious situation, both inside and outside of identity, he laid the groundwork for LaCapra's understanding of ethnic identity built on foundational traumas: they are not purely a choice, not Jewish blackface, but they are not unconscious. Ethnic identities require a lucid incorporation of historical tragedy – however interpreted – to work.

Despite the obvious flaws of his approach – his superficial attempt to incorporate historical and anthropological evidence, the ragged inconsistency of his arguments – Freud is one of the first modern thinkers to reflect on his own alterity. At the end of his life, Freud considers his own fragile status, both as Other to the forces of fascism and in own sense of self. And *Moses* tries hard to rethink ethnicity outside of biology. The ideas he approaches – about the constructedness of identity and the way those constructs are handed down through cultural rituals – are, as Moshe Gresser argues, “really the culmination of a long process of thinking on Freud's part about religion and his own cultural and psychological Jewishness” (223). Freud builds on his earlier insight that everything about everyday life – including all the facets of identity – is not stable and permanent but fluid and determined by pathological structures. The sacrifice was, for Freud, facing up to the absence of a stable position from which to defend against Nazi fascism, even as he fled with his family, fearing rightly for his life. Gresser argues that what Freud's self-analysis cost him was his “authenticity,” a word with a dangerous gravity:

Declaring its own independence from inherited Jewish tradition, Freud's own 'creation-romance' 'discovers' a new and improved Jewish people to reflect Freud's sense of what a Jew – a psychological Jew – is. In doing so, he may cut himself off from the resources of the rabbinic tradition that Jews need to formulate an authentic response to modernity. (ibid 221)

But this sacrifice, forsaking the comforts of traditional culture and religion that allow "authentic" response, is a testament to Freud's commitment to his own understanding of the mind. It also suggests that Freud did not see pathology as negating identity, since he saw them as essentially self-same. Freud still believed a psychological sense of community was a legitimate place to stage resistance, if only at the personal level of shoring up the coherence of the self. This is the difficult intersection of trauma theory and identity politics, and Freud's thinking offers a mode of both attack and resistance: first, in deconstructing the self-asserting integrity of identities that sought to dominate; and, second, in suggesting ways of constructing a community of resistance without recourse to the eugenics of race. This approach is also King's, and his dark comedy in *Green Grass, Running Water*, risks the darkest sadism – the undoing of aboriginal identity – in order to bring that identity out of a toxic relationship with colonialism.

Coyote

As is well documented in the critical literature on *Green Grass, Running Water*, King proceeds in two distinct modes, one which seeks to reproduce some aspects of the aesthetic of oral literature, and one which hews more closely to the modern Western traditional realistic novel. While this project is concerned with the novel's realistic threads – its characters that appear to exist in the quotidian world – it is important to deal with King's more fantastic strands, because the critical tradition of over-privileging them treats *Green Grass, Running Water* as a comedy about victory over colonialism, instead of a dark comedy about managing the effects of colonialism.

Green Gras, Running Water is separated into four sections – each labeled in Cherokee syllabary, representing a cardinal directional, and also a color, representing a cyclical season of life.⁸⁰ However, the novel’s opening, outside of the space and time of these sections, begins with an invocation of a First Nations creation myth, of Genesis, and the same orational “so” – alone on its own line of text – that Seamus Heaney chose for his translation of *Beowulf*. The novel begins:

So.

In the beginning, there was nothing. Just the water.

Coyote was there, but Coyote was asleep. That Coyote was asleep and that Coyote was dreaming. When that Coyote dreams, anything can happen. (*GGRW* 1)

The incantatory repetition is designed to replicate the affect – and effect – of aboriginal oral literature, to contrast with the ‘realistic’ scenes that immediately follow in the first section. But, more importantly, King makes his larger goal clear in this opening sequence, when Coyote’s dream “gets loose and runs around” (*ibid*) and decides it wants to “be Coyote,” ultimately settling for being a dog; the dog “gets everything backwards” and promptly declares “I am god.” In the first of many meta-textual commentaries (e.g., on King’s authorial failure to capitalize the word ‘god’ in the Western fashion that implies the definite article ‘the God’ over the looser, pagan ‘a god’), “that god” shouts, “But why am I a little god?” Finally, Coyote makes “that god” into “that GOD” (2-3).

Many of King’s literary tricks are on display here, first and foremost, the hijacking of foundational Western literature in a style that is, superficially, lightly parodic. King gently mocks the Western canon, but his language never rises to the temperature of Shteyngart’s; aside from a half-dozen uses of the word “shit” in dialog, King employs little profanity. He comes nowhere near Vladimir’s “Fuck America.” Second, King demonstrates his fondness for wordplay. For

example, GOD's origin as a "backwards" dog is a verbal pun about the backwards spelling of God that is allowed to take hold of the reality of the narrative; in fact, King locates this joke as the singularity that spawns the Western world. (In this manner, King is far more committed to the primacy of joke over reality than Heller ever got, even in the wildest moments of *Closing Time*.) Third, King is explicitly willing to let his text understand itself as text – as when, later in the novel, some of King's mythic characters realize they are repeating themselves, and remark: "We've done that already...see, page twelve...top of page twelve" (258). Crucially, these subversions of Western religious beliefs, literary canons, and narrative rules are only superficially playful. King's underlying point, which unfolds throughout the novel, is that these Western stories – both their content, their tropes of white male supremacy and entitlement, and their unspoken codes of sealed, linear teleology – have made possible the genocidal act of colonization and the subsequent dilution and erasure of aboriginal culture.

As the novel progresses, Coyote enters into and rewrites a series of these patriarchal stories. King begins with GOD and then works down through the biblical line – Adam, Noah, and Jesus – while also shifting into the realm of literary (and filmic) patriarchs (the move from biblical to literary sources is natural for King; though he clearly identifies the Old Testament as the wellspring of toxic Western tropes, he grants it no special distinction from other stories). King frames Coyote's trajectory through these stories as the attempt to fix his mistake – that is, creating GOD. The slapstick of Coyote's interventions maps directly on top the darker purpose of King's. Coyote bumbles from scene to scene, creating more trouble than he fixes; King works deliberately through the tropes he sees as responsible for the real world suffering – the privation, slaughter, and cultural erasure – of native peoples.

King starts with GOD, the ur-patriarch, dismissing him quickly but gently by inserting him into a First Nation origin story about the Sky World and the Water World. In King's telling, First Woman predates the Judeo-Christian deity; the frustrated GOD can only protest, "this is all wrong," adding, "Everybody knows there is only one world" (*GGRW* 38). Petty and jealous, but stripped of his King Jamesian grandeur, GOD kicks First Woman out of his garden, saying, "They can't eat my stuff" (40). Adam – or "Ahdamn," as King renders it – hardly fares better. King parodies the Edenic moment when Adam names the animals (e.g., Genesis 2:20), writing Adam as an idiot, mocked by the creatures he tries to (re)name:

You are a microwave oven, Ahdamn tells the Elk.
Nope, says the Elk. Try again.
You are a garage sale, Ahdamn tells the Bear.
We got to get you some glasses, says the Bear.
You are a telephone book, Ahdamn tells the Cedar Tree.
You're getting closer, says the Cedar Tree
You are a cheeseburger, Ahdamn tells Old Coyote.
It must be time for lunch, says Old Coyote. (41)

Early in the novel King's dissembling is mild-mannered, his dark comedy suggests only traces of trauma beneath the verbal play. Adam is a Fool, dependent on First Woman for sustenance and mangling his biblical role as name-giver. But beneath this foolishness, King hints at the renaming enacted by colonization; Adam represents the process of erasing the existing language – and the world of relationships built on it – of native people and forcing them into the world of Western language.

When King turns to Noah, he again makes the patriarch into a Fool but there is more menace in his representation. In King's version of the biblical flood story, Noah is a stowaway on Changing Woman's canoe, which is full of animal excrement (the logical outcome of packing a limited space full of animals, something that is elided in the biblical narrative). Noah is introduced as "a little man with a filthy beard" who "jumps out of the poop at the front of the

canoe” (159). Noah demands of Changing Woman, “Lemme see your breasts,” and remains fixated on the topic, saying, “I like women with big breasts. I hope God remembered that” (160). Noah then chases Changing Woman, shouting “Time for procreating” (161). King’s tone is silly but the undercurrent grows more disturbing:

For the next month, Noah chases Changing Woman around the canoe. Noah tries balancing along the railing, but he falls in the poop. Noah tries jumping across the backs of the animals, but he falls in the poop. (161)

King’s version of Noah, who is revealed to be “that contrary dream from the garden story,” represents the explicit desire of western patriarchy to sexualize and rape native women (161). Beneath the juvenile “poop” joke comedy, King gestures towards the dark history of sexual assault that he sees as part and parcel of the project of colonization.

King repeats the same technique when he shifts from biblical to literary narratives, introducing Herman Melville’s Ahab as “a short little man with a wooden leg” (217). Ahab – who, according to Coyote, “looks like that GOD guy” (219) – is a Fool, like the previous patriarchs, with a cartoonish obsession for whale hunting that parodies the fixation of Melville’s character:

Whaleswhaleswhaleswhaleslesbianswhalesbianswhalesbianswhaleswhales!
shouts Ahab, and everybody grabs their spears and knives and juicers and chain
saws and blenders and axes and they all leap into little wooden boats and chase
whales.

And.
When they catch the whales.
They kill them. (219)

Here King maintains only a diaphanous layer of comedy over the horror. The representation of Ahab’s mania for whale hunting is comically twice punctuated with “lesbians,” echoing – it seems at first – the lust of Noah. King’s sentence runs on to comic effect and includes the absurdist image of 19th-century whalers wielding chainsaws and blenders. But the following

series of three full-stop fragments deliberately forecloses the comic momentum of the previous passage. King forces the reader to slow down and absorb the gravity of “they kill them.” Just barely, the line reads as ‘the crewmen kill the whales.’ Just beneath the surface of that reading is the genocide of the Other, as Ahab says, “This is a Christian world. We only kill things that are useful or things we don’t like.” (219)

The dark joke suggests at first that the Western world slaughtered native people because it was useful (i.e., it served the ends of capitalism). But King complicates this meaning by representing the whale as black and female (she is Moby Jane). The crew chant “black-whaleblackwhaleblackwhalesbiansblackwhalelesbians...” and explicitly point out the whale’s color and gender. King eases back into his comic mode, as Ahab the Fool struggles to regain control of his own narrative, calling for his crewmembers to be thrown overboard. However, while ‘thrown overboard’ lacks the horror of “kill them,” the expanded reading of the Ahab joke is that the Western world will murder any Other it cannot repress or deny.

King continues on this path but eases back from the darkness of the Ahab episode. Jesus – “Young Man Walking On Water” (388) - is gently mocked, as are Robinson Crusoe and Natty Bumppo (a.k.a. Cooper’s Natty Bumppo), the latter being made the mouthpiece for ridiculous *reductio ad absurdum* versions of white/Native binaries. In each patriarchal episode, it remains ambiguous whether Coyote is serving King’s interest – that is, deliberately waging a deconstructive war on the Western canon – or simply amusing himself by causing trouble. In this way, the character of Coyote stands in as an allegory for dark comedy itself, which plays between joking around and something much more serious.

King’s attempt to bring down the literary infrastructure of Western hegemony is rarely overlooked in critical treatments of his novel. However, it is difficult to get a balanced sense of

just what King *accomplishes* in the fantastic passages of *Green Grass, Running Water*. Some scholars take King's inter-cultural – or, as King calls it, interfusional⁸¹ – writing at face value; Meanwhile, James Cox notes that the comic privilegenc given to the narrator and Coyote over the patriarchs of the Western canon is part of King's attempt to make up for real-world murder and marginalization:

King's strategy suggests that any understanding of colonialism in the Americas must involve familiarity with both Native American and European / European North American storytelling traditions. His fiction, in addition, mediates between cultures and belief systems while simultaneously privileging cultures and belief systems historically marginalized by the invading culture's exclusive and dominative discourses. (219-220)

This type of utopian reading of King's fiction suffers both from an inflated understanding of what deconstruction *does* and a limiting view of the fuller structure of King's novel.⁸²

The first problem is in underestimating the task of reconstructing a pan-Native American worldview – if such a totalizing thing even could or should be accomplished; that is, to achieve in the psyches of King's readers a de-installation of the malignant tropes of literature. Critics like Cox underplay the difficulty and impermanence of deconstruction, its nature as a process and not a single liberating act. Critics like Jeanne Smith, for another example, go even further than Cox, as in *Writing Tricksters*' attempt to make the “trickster aesthetic” – that is, Coyote – an all-purpose tool of anti-hegemonic deconstruction.⁸³

The trickster as a mythological character *can* do all the things Smith suggests; like Vladimir Girshkin in *Prava*, the trickster can tell the perfect gallows joke – the one that makes the gallows disappear. Take the novel's most powerful example of Coyote's final narrative intervention, which occurs near the end of the novel's third section. In the scene, Lionel and Charlie, two of King's realistic Blackfoot characters, watch a John Wayne Western – starring Charlie's father, Lionel's uncle, the actor Portland – that Coyote has ‘fixed’ for them:

As Charlie watched, the Indians stopped in the middle of the river. Portland sat on his horse and looked back at the closing cavalry. None of the Indians moved...On the one side of the river, John Wayne and Richard Widmark and the soldiers yelled and cheered and waved their hats...at full charge, hundreds of soldiers in bright blue uniforms with gold buttons and sashes and stripes, blue-eyed and rosy-cheeked, came over the last rise.

And disappeared.

Just like that.

[...]

Portland turned and looked at Wayne and Widmark, who had stopped shouting and waving their hats and were standing around looking confused and dumb...the soldiers ran back to their logs and holes and rocks, shooting as they went. But as Lionel and Charlie and Eli and the Old Indians and Bill and Coyote watched, none of the Indians fell. John Wayne looked at his gun. Richard Widmark was pulling the trigger on empty chambers. The front of his fancy pants was dark and wet...John Wayne looked down and stared stupidly at the arrow in his thing, shaking his head in amazement and disbelief as two bullets ripped through his chest and out the back of his jacket. Richard Widmark collapsed facedown in the sand, his hands clutching at an arrow buried in his throat. (*GGRW* 356-358).

This violence is certainly more than comic privilege and it reveals the anger and pain that underscores King's playful parodies throughout the book. This scene is the only eruption of violence to rival and surpass the "[t]hey kill them" of the Ahab episode, but this time the violence is directed back at the Western world.

The nature of the comedy is wildly unstable: its tone is at once sophomoric (Widmark urinates himself) and cartoonish (Wayne shakes his head at lethal gunshot wounds) and yet level of menace is certainly increased from Coyote's earlier interventions. This violence is something new: Wayne and Widmark do not simply clutch their chests and fall down, in black-and-white John Ford style; they die gruesomely, in full bloody color, Sam Peckinpah style. That the scene ends with a comic misdirection – Eli, a Blackfoot, deadpans, "Thought it was supposed to be in black and white" (359) – only further complicates the tone: the overall scene is in keeping with the dark-comic genre, but from moment to moment the scene shifts uneasily from cartoonish play to surreal violence to solemnity and back. Meanwhile, for a non-native reader, King's jokes

border on the utterly sadistic, a Wes Craven-type of metafictional horror, in which the traditional ‘bad guy’ wins and the real world actor playing the ‘good guy’ can actually die. The novel supports this reading by suggesting that John Wayne *really* dies in the filming of this scene; Lionel is given a jacket, identical to the one Wayne wears in the film, by one of the Old Indians (who share the role of trickster with Coyote). The jacket is described as being “old” and having “two holes in the back” and when Lionel puts it on he is told he looks “a little like John Wayne” (336).

This is the most sincerely that King flirts with *real* violence, the point at which the joking envelope of *Green Grass, Running Water* is stretched thinnest. But what holds together the scene as dark comedy, a step removed from sadism, and also what allows a non-native reader to empathize, is Charlie Looking Bear’s reaction to the scene: “Get ‘em Dad” (358). Watching his father *literally* murder actors *pretending* to perform the acts of colonization is a surreal reversal of the white actors pretending to murder Indians as an act of colonization; it attempts not to deconstruct but to invert the way media, including the biblical fables and literary narratives King parodies throughout the book, re-inscribe the tropes of white supremacy and aboriginal savagery. It is Charlie and Lionel, who exist in King’s quotidian world, who are affected by Coyote’s fantastic act of rewriting a John Wayne film. The reader sees them at the moment a *new* sense of ethnic self is inherited, through their father and uncle, overwriting an internalized sense of Native inferiority. But this is a suggestion of what *might be*, if there were a Coyote to ‘fix’ things, to go into the poisonous archive of Western tropes and change things around. All the things Cox and Smith believe King and Coyote are capable of – the things deconstruction is capable of – are allegories for the psychological effect of having a counternarrative.

Inside the world of the novel, the stories are rewritten, and new personal truths are made possible – *that's* King's point, one that is allegorical fantasy, not an act of real world subversion. Outside of the novel, John Wayne did not die in the filming of *Rio Grande*, and its parody does not deconstruct the demented tropes about aboriginal identity that real world people like Charlie and Lionel have internalized. *Fort Apache* and *Rio Grande* still exist; they are still broadcast today. King's gallows joke does not banish even one real gallows, let alone five centuries of them. This is what makes his novel a dark comedy. It is what makes the non-fantastic aspects of his novel – too often glossed over as a compromise with Western literary style – so important. What follows, then, is a close reading of King's most realistic character, Lionel.

Lionel

Lionel is given a psychological complexity that is absent in King's female and mythical characters and this fullness is derived from his troubled sense of identity. Unlike King's female characters, who have a seemingly organic faith in tradition, King's male characters – Eli, Charlie, and Lionel – all struggle with their ethnic identity. One of the downsides of King's parody is its tendency to collapse into a practice of inverting – rather than overthrowing – binaries: thus, the novel mocks and denounces patriarchy, and instead celebrates the female as a source of power, creation, and authority. While this is the source for genuine comedy – and part of King's impressive attempt to take on the evils of a totalitarian patriarchal mode of Western thought – it leaves even his realistic female characters with one foot in allegory, in a way that makes them patronizing stand-ins for tradition, whereas the men – while they suffer – are given a fuller psychological sense of self-interrogation.

To create this sense of self-interrogation, King relies on the Freudian idea of screen memories to help connect personal history to a darker aboriginal history. Michael Rothberg is

one of the more lucid interpreters of this Freudian idea – dating back to his 1998 article, “Screen Memories” – which has in some cases become extremely convoluted. In Rothberg’s interpretation, screen memory “stands in or substitutes for a more disturbing memory that it displaces from consciousness” (*Multidirectional Memory* 13). Rothberg goes on to isolate two important facets of screen memory. The first is that a screen memory is *not* a fantasy; it is not structured by wish-fulfillment or projection. The second is that the relationship of the screen memory to the trauma it ‘screens’ can be both temporal and figurative. For Freud, screen memory functions both through the associational logic of metaphor and metonym but also through a temporal shift. Thus, the screen memory involves a temporal looking away, either capturing a memory before or after the trauma, and/or a spatial looking away, capturing something from the actual moment but looking elsewhere.⁸⁴ Here the psyche takes advantage of the same dynamic process as the fetish and the dark comedic joke, allowing for the neurotic maintenance – the simultaneous possession and disavowal – of a traumatic image.

Lionel’s memories all revolve around his various dislocations within white North American culture. Early on, King frames Lionel by these “mistakes,” which have structured his life:

Lionel had made only three mistakes in his entire life, the kinds of mistakes that seem small enough at the time, but somehow get out of hand. The kinds that stay with you for a long time. (*GGRW* 25)

The first memory involves a bureaucratic mistake, which nearly results in Lionel undergoing heart surgery instead of the minor tonsillectomy for which he was scheduled. At first glance, this episode seems comic, certainly unrelated to the deeper issues of identity. The potential tragedy is averted and things move along. However, the conspicuous absence of Lionel’s father, Harvey, is – *for Lionel* – what leaves him helpless before the overwhelming indifference of medical

bureaucrats when they accidentally schedule him for heart surgery. In other words, although it is unlikely that Harvey could have navigated the labyrinthine medical system any more effectively than his wife, the *impression* – recorded by young Lionel – is that his absence allowed for the mix-up; psychologically, Harvey’s absence seems to have caused Lionel’s suffering. This traumatic impression creates the condition for Lionel’s screen memory – a looking away from the traumatic absence of his father at a crucial moment. Harvey’s absence creates a void, which is filled by John Wayne.

Later in the novel, John Wayne becomes Lionel’s idol, a father figure that disrupts Lionel’s ethnic identity as Blackfoot. John Wayne, of course, is an impossible model of masculinity and brings with him a host of toxic tropes about aboriginal inferiority. Thus, when Lionel attempts to identify as Blackfoot, he falls victim to the negative stereotypes about Native life that Wayne – and the films he starred in – represent. And, when he attempts with Wayne, he is inevitably feminized by his failure to live up to Wayne’s imaginary masculinity (which is a product of movie magic and marketing, but which acts as real for Lionel). His Oedipal attachment to Wayne strands him between two toxic systems of identification and disadvantages him as a sexual rival against Charlie Looking Bear. To drive home this point, Charlie is actually present in this screen memory. He first mocks Lionel’s powerlessness – he’s being railroaded into a tonsillectomy by the disinterested Dr. Loomis⁸⁵ – with a pointed castration joke: “Charlie...grabbed his crotch and asked in a high voice, ‘does it hurt down there?’” (30). When Lionel is about to make his mistake – that is, giving in and agreeing to the procedure – Charlie asks him, “What would John Wayne do?” and then “pull[s] his head off to one side and made cutting motions across the throat” (31). The implication is either that Lionel should resort to the kind of masculine violence represented by John Wayne or if he does not act decisively he will

end up dead or castrated. Lionel, ignoring this advice, acts passive-aggressively – he “sulked in the front seat and stared out the window” and “shuffled around the house, coughing and complaining” (32) – and this behavior becomes the model for his adult personality and relationships.

This episode, a comic misunderstanding, is presented in the light tone of Jean Shepard’s reminiscences: Lionel schemes to get out of going to school and pretends to need an operation. But it screens a much darker psychic moment, unrepresentable as such, when Lionel’s nascent understanding of paternal authority failed. To sharpen this point, King shifts directly from Lionel’s memory of the hospital misunderstanding to the present tense. There, his Aunt Norma – who has already told him, in the novel’s opening pages, “if you weren’t my sister’s boy, and if I didn’t see you born with my own eyes, I would sometimes think you were white” (7) – again chastises him, because he “didn’t believe in Indian doctors” and “wanted to be a white man” like his Uncle Eli (36).

The joke rolls on, with this painful subtext reinforced, as King explains how the joke – that Lionel went in to have his tonsils out and nearly had heart surgery – has become a bureaucratic reality: “the original error had somehow worked its way into his file” (42). Lionel is turned down for a loan and a job because of his ‘condition.’ The section ends with Norma’s bitter words: “A white man...as if they were something special. As if there weren’t enough of them in the world” (37). The joke is that Lionel’s mistake is not “wanting to have his tonsils out” (28), but in wanting to be white. The failure of Lionel’s father to show up – to provide a counternarrative as a role model – leaves Lionel in a familiar situation: he does not identify as aboriginal but fails as part of white society. He aspires to the mythological prowess of John

Wayne – who is coded as decisive, successful, masculine, all that is mythically capital-W White – but he cannot possibly live up to it.

This memory also screens, at the allegorical level, the historical moment for aboriginal culture in which John Wayne – broadly representing the kind of violent, authoritarian masculinity that King traces back through Ahab, Natty Bumppo, Noah, and God – filled a void left by the perceived failures of aboriginal paternity. This tragedy is compounded by the fact that it is the brutal rigidity of Western patriarchy – as King imagines it – that initially set the conditions for aboriginal failure. Just as Harvey does not fail Lionel, he fails only to be John Wayne; aboriginal fathers did not fail, they failed only to be Western. What King suggests is that centuries of Western stories, as they began to infiltrate and then saturate aboriginal culture, changed the definitions of masculinity and paternity, and made those new definitions the conditions for social success. This is how John Wayne as a cultural trope – “not the actor but the character” (202) – is already there when Lionel ‘looks away’ from the perceived failure of his father. Further, in insisting on its own sealed totality – on claiming to be the *only* set of stories – the Western canon erases the history of this process. Thus, Lionel does not have access to the traumatic moment when he believed his father had failed; it is repressed and replaced by the screen memory of the tonsil incident, a comic misadventure screening a historical trauma. Lionel cannot deal with – in any sense – the trauma, the reason for his identity crisis, and experiences what Judith Butler calls “perhaps most difficult, the loss of loss” (467).

This is a lot of analytical weight to rest on one incident, but King – in overtly structuring Lionel’s psychological development as a series of ‘mistakes’ – continues to employ his lighthearted comic mode to point to serious historical trauma. In the second ‘mistake’ episode, Lionel becomes involved with the American Indian Movement’s protest at Wounded Knee in

1973. He travels to Utah to “give a paper at a conference on Indian education” written by his supervisor at the Department of Indian Affairs (*GGRN* 58). He finds himself in a room full of protestors, eager to join the Wounded Knee movement in South Dakota, and he “had barely gotten through the opening joke” when he pushes away from the microphone, feeling “out of place in his three-piece suit” and left in “a most awkward position...[t]here was no place to sit and no easy path through the door” (58-59). Lionel fails at his job – to be the local avatar of state power, acting on behest of the white government – and thus fails to be white; but he also fails to connect with the Indians in the room. He cannot sit down and he cannot leave.

The scene plays like a comic misadventure – “one very funny mistake” (*GGRW* 49) – as Lionel’s passivity puts him in an increasingly dangerous situation. We know, of course, that nothing fatal will happen to Lionel, and so we are encouraged to laugh at the abrupt turn of events:

Lionel was never quite sure how he wound up in Cecil’s van, sitting on a large pillow in the back, stuffed between canned goods, rifles, and ammunition. (62)

But there is little funny, in the novel’s reality, about the consequences of Lionel’s subsequent arrest. He becomes even further disenfranchised within white society, barred from manual labor by his ‘heart condition’ and from white-collar labor on account of his conviction en route to the Wounded Knee protest. And although Lionel is ushered along by a comic misunderstanding, King suggests that Lionel’s memory screens something: “Lionel must have known that the van and the six cars that were following behind were headed to Wounded Knee, but he could not recall knowing” (62). Even at the point of acknowledging its repression, Lionel can access only the screen memory (the comic misadventure) and not the trauma behind it (the current marginalization and past slaughter of Native people, the trauma represented by the protest at Wounded Knee).

The saddest irony is that this traumatic memory which Lionel cannot recall is a moment of identification with aboriginal resistance, with his ethnic identity as native, not white. This is *why* Lionel gets in the van, to go to the protest, to take part in an activity that directly accepts a historical trauma – the Wounded Knee massacre – as foundational. It is, psychologically, a moment of rebellion against Lionel’s own Oedipal figure, John Wayne. But Lionel does not have access to this traumatic moment, and the rupture is sealed by the memory of what came before and after: the awkward moment at the podium, and afterwards. Even though Lionel is beaten and locked up by the police – “it took eleven stitches to close the wound...a day in the hospital, four days until jail...another five days in jail for disturbing the peace” – he experiences “the whole thing [as] one very funny mistake” (63) that leaves him “shaken and embarrassed” (66). The scene ends with Lionel, staring at a painting of the Battle of Little Bighorn, featuring “George Armstrong Custer,” who “stood at the center of the drama, looking splendid in a fringed leather jacket” (65). This is, of course, John Wayne’s jacket, and eventually Lionel’s, too. Lionel:

...considered the painting for a time, remembering the convoy police cars that had descended on the van. He was still shaken and embarrassed by the whole episode. Maybe that’s how Custer felt when he discovered his mistake. Embarrassed. (66).

It is difficult to say what else Lionel could be embarrassed about, besides his betrayal of his internalized father figure: the actual moment of betrayal – because it upsets Lionel’s already fragile sense of self – is repressed. But here, in the moments after the traumatic memory, Lionel makes amends with his inner John Wayne by commiserating with Custer (who is, in King’s allegorical world, one and the same with all Western patriarchs, including Wayne) and thus re-identifying with the Western paternal model.

Lionel’s final ‘mistake’ involves his employment at Bill Bursum’s electronics store; it is a menial job, working for a white man, that has become Lionel’s only employment option

because of the legalistic ramifications of his first two “mistakes.” The job becomes available after Charlie Looking Bear quits to become a lawyer, and it is the model of success that Lionel latches onto – a less directly castrating model than John Wayne, but one that is still based on success in the Western world (Bursum entices Lionel by telling him how much money Charlie had made as a salesman). Things have not much improved, from King’s point of view; Lionel trades the impossible white hero for the self-negating assimilated native. But Lionel’s attraction to Charlie is given psychological plausibility: Charlie drives a Porsche, has money, and has bested Lionel for the sexual attention of Alberta, their mutual interest. The mistake, in Lionel’s memory, is taking a dead-end job, but the deeper trauma is identifying with Charlie, who is nothing but a second-rate John Wayne – since Charlie has internalized the same toxic Western tropes as Lionel. It is Charlie’s father, Portland, after all, who portrays the aboriginal chief defeated by John Wayne; worst of all, Portland always wears a prosthetic nose to appear *more* ‘Indian.’ Even in the already-inferior role of native, he is inferior.

What is most interesting about the scene – in which Charlie visits Lionel at work and encourages him, thus cementing his place as Lionel’s role model – is its abrupt termination:

Charlie shook his head. “Bill’s an asshole, and the job is shit. You can do better.”

“It’s just temporary until I pay off some bills.”

“Smart move, John Wayne.” Charlie put on his driving gloves and turned on the headlights. “Mind the paint.”

Lionel watched Charlie spin the car around and roar off down the street. Lionel watched him go, watched the taillights flash, disappearing into the dark. The night was alive with stars, and as Lionel looked west, he imagined he could see the outline of the Rockies reflected in the ocean of sky.

Lionel sighed.

Inside, through the plate glass windows, past the video posters and the clearance sale banners, he could see Bill, all smiles in his gold jacket, talking to a young couple and patting the new Panasonic.

Outside, the night air was cold, but standing there, looking back at the store, Lionel felt exhilarated, intoxicated. For a long time, he stood there in the dark, smiling and swaying until the edges of his ears began to burn and he started

to shiver. And as he came back through the darkness into the light, he caught a glimpse of his own reflection in the glass. (89-90).

In one of King's most enigmatic passages, the narration cuts off before we are told what Lionel sees of his own reflection, and without explicating what has both "exhilarated" and "intoxicated" him. When the novel returns to Lionel, in the novel's present tense, he reflects on his three mistakes: "He wondered if Dr. Loomis was still alive. Maybe Cecil made it to Wounded Knee after all. And he remembered that night in the parking lot, standing there, watching himself in the window" (103). It is at this moment that the Old Indians – who are the companions of Coyote and themselves trickster figures – show up, beginning the process that culminates when Coyote shows Charlie and Lionel the 'fixed' John Wayne film. Clearly King intends these three mistakes to add up to something: the process, repressed by Lionel and replaced by these three screen memories, of incorporating John Wayne – Western masculinity and paternity writ large – as his model of ethnic self. Coyote's intervention, which carries out the comic trajectory of the novel, occurs to reverse this process. But, and here is perhaps the darkest moment in the novel, what of the third screen memory? What trauma is Lionel's memory – of "watching himself in the window" – a screen for?

The novel looks away, to the moment before, in a passage that shows Lionel gazing west, possibly an intimation of manifest destiny, of the success he is entitled to if he follows Charlie's lead – rejecting an aboriginal sense of self and attempting to succeed in the white world – and then at Bill Bursum, who is providing Lionel access to the system of financial success. Even if "the money wasn't as good as Bill had said," it will nonetheless "allow Lionel to get some new clothes and a couple of credit cards" (87). The job provides Lionel with access to the credit-debt system, which is financial citizenship in the western world of capitalism, the kind of citizenship denied to him because of his first two mistakes. And it will afford him new clothes, so he can

dress the part. It is not the unbridled power of John Wayne – Lionel has abandoned that dream – but it is the potential to succeed as Charlie has. That is why he lingers, watching Charlie’s Porsche disappear into the dark. That is what both “exhilarates” him and “intoxicates” him. King’s word choice is subtle but deliberate, the dream of capitalist success is thrilling, and also a toxin. So what does Lionel see, when he looks in the mirror of storefront glass, at this crucial moment between role models? He sees nothing. He sees the abyss. King writes that Lionel comes “back through the darkness and into the light” and at that moment sees himself; that darkness is the abyss, the absence of an absolute or authentic identity, and the light is Lionel’s new *constructed* identity, modeled on Charlie. In fact, it is this absence that makes possible Lionel’s construction of identity. The narrative represents this absence the only way possible, with the gap – the abrupt end to the narrative passage – at the moment of this traumatic recognition. As Butler has it: “loss cannot be represented; loss fractures representation” (467).

King’s fetishistic method of both acknowledging and disavowing the absence at the heart of self is what makes Lionel a dark comic figure, almost a sadistic one, and what provides the tragic counterpoint to the celebratory narrative of Coyote who, in the end, appears to ‘fix’ Lionel (or set him on the right path). This screen memory – appropriately, a mirror screen – both acknowledges and denies the traumatic realization that Lionel has no true identity, only stories he tells himself.

IV. “Fuck America” – Conclusions and Openings

In *Fathers and Sons*, Turgenev wrote of the nihilists, “now they have but to say: ‘Everything in the world is rubbish,’ and, behold! the trick is done” (53). There is in the project of deconstruction more than a little of the nihilist – and in that, the difficulty in putting the tools

of deconstruction to real world political use – and little room for the kind of writing I consider reconstructionist. As with Palahniuk’s method of building new identities and communities – rendered aphoristically in his “Rip yourself open. Sew yourself shut” – there is always something anticlimactic to whatever comes after deconstruction. Deconstruction is more universal in its appeal, the impulse to tear down comes naturally to many, but the void that results is chilling, and the answers that fill that void more contentious, less democratic by far. Deconstruction might be a process without end, but reconstruction seems impossible even to begin. Deconstruction is the easier task by an order of magnitude. Cynicism is easy, sick comedy is easy. Belief is hard, dark comedy is harder.

At the end of *The Russian Debutante’s Handbook*, Shteyngart gives us a melancholic Vladimir, nostalgic for the madness of his identity crisis, seeing it as preferable to the absence of identity in his son. For Shteyngart himself, we see something a bit more encouraging, still using his books – fiction, memoir, all the same – to dig out from the weight of the past. It will never be over for Shteyngart, he will have to keep telling jokes, all his tremendous literary energy put to use to suspend in neurotic orbit that chilling absence at the core of our selves. There is no authentic self for him to find, only one to construct, to perform through his particular literary sense of humor. That may seem a poor excuse for a conclusion: the act of working through, never finished, offers no coda. It is not as exciting, as demonstrative and final, as that singing “Fuck America” which is as much as to say ‘to hell with a century full of identity crises.’ Because after that moment, after the tearing down, however cathartic, there is no cure, only neurosis, which is more the self than any authentic personality might be.

Green Grass, Running Water also leaves its protagonists with a child on the way – like a classical but not totally convincing ploy: new life is supposed to signify a new chance. But it is

new life being born into the same old world. Still, the novel tries to present an optimistic picture for Lionel. Charlie Looking Bear loses his job working for the white firm that had hired him, and thus – in financial and sexual terms – appears to fall from his heroic place as Lionel’s idol. Lionel’s uncle – Eli, the Blackfoot to whom Lionel is frequently compared in his desire to ‘be white’ – is killed in a flood caused by Coyote. Eli refuses to vacate his house to block a dam construction project engineered by a white business firm. Coyote, in causing the flood, gives Eli the opportunity to martyr himself back into the community. Further, Eli’s death serves as a replenishing founding trauma for Lionel; we see him last helping to rebuild Eli’s cabin. Lionel volunteers to live there, to carry on Eli’s act of resistance against the white firm, and, by extension, Western culture. Lionel is told, in time, that it will be his turn. Meanwhile, Coyote and the narrator start another story cycle. This is the ending of the novel as a dark comedy: cyclical renewal, death and rebirth, destruction and recreation. It seems too easy, a bit condescending, to take this as a happy ending. After all, in the end, *Green Grass, Running Water* offers no fantasies of undoing the holocaust of aboriginal genocide, and it cannot undo the poisonous history of Western literature – its treatment of aboriginal people and culture as the inferior and doomed Other – or even manage to match it with counternarratives. That project would be beyond any one text, beyond any one author. It does not even claim to rescue an authentic identity to hold against the Western tropes King parodies. King offers an anxious acknowledgement that there are no truths to rescue, only stories to tell. That is what makes them funny; that is what makes them sad.

Ethnic identity is intrinsically about stories, far more about narratives than a gendered or sexual sense of self. There is nothing wrong, as Freud discovered, in this discovery. A constructed self – and by extension – a constructed sense of community is no more or less stable

or coherent for being created rather than rooted in some authentic truth. It is no less effective a place from which to stage resistance against the forces of oppression and marginalization, no less effective a place to organize a response to the traumas of modernity. But it also is no more real than any other story, and the same tools that erode the myths of the conquistadors and colonizers will also erode the beliefs of the native and the exile. Dark comedy is a way to deal with this erosion, to tell stories – to tell horrific stories – that threaten to traumatize us almost as much as the absence of any story at all.

In the end, dark comedy does not ‘fix’ things, it lacks such magical powers. We put the book down, and the world is still there, the abyss is still there. It is not a cure for the twentieth century or a tonic against the western world. It is just a way to tell stories, without paralysis or psychosis. It is just a way to say, ‘everything in the world is rubbish,’ and take a breath, and continue, ‘and yet...’

The Future of an Illusion: The Trauma of Guilt and National Identity

Can't we have substantial political analyses that criticize the actions of the United States, in the past and present, and yet welcome public discussion about trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, vicarious traumatization, and ways to help those suffering these disorders?

E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*

Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for nationality.

Indeed, historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations, even of those whose consequences have been altogether beneficial. Unity is always effected by means of brutality...

Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?"

Where others see the sanely ordered world, he sees the dreadful joke.

Robert Coover, "Tears of a Clown"

I. The Tell-Tale Heart

This sphere of national identity seems the most self-evidently artificial construct and yet in many ways it is a deep and organizing force in the psyche. While much fine work has been done on the nature of nationalism – including that of Benedict Anderson and Fredric Jameson – this chapter seeks to root out two aspects of what Robert Coover means by a “dreadful joke.” First, there is the historical brutality that Ernest Renan long ago discussed, those historical crimes whose repression is necessary to create a nation – surely a Freudian formulation, ahead of even Freud – but whose return is inevitable. Second, there is the abyss beneath all further disavowals: that nationality, and all the mental peace and structure nationality provides, all the ways in which nationality orders what it means to have a self, is an illusion. Coover’s *The Public Burning*, a fantastic reimagining of the historical events surrounding the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for conspiracy to commit treason, is a novel fixated on both of these things, to a nearly self-negating end. Coover’s lifelong literary fascination with metafiction – the way our chaotic lives are self-reflexively given order by stories we *know* to be fiction – struggles mightily with his political desire to bring back to light the ‘forgotten’ story of the Rosenbergs. Coover’s dark comedy is examined as the battleground between the need to deflect traumatic threats to identity and the deeper knowledge that all identity is illusory.

E. Ann Kaplan, in her work on cultural trauma, puts the question of national trauma this way:

It would be reductive to apply to the collective or nation trauma phenomena common in individuals, such as post-traumatic stress syndrome with the “splitting” or dissociation it may involve. Yet history seems to provide examples of national “forgetting” or displacement that require explanation...[B]ut even here there are problems. Does an entire nation forget? Or only the perpetrators? (66)

Kaplan latches onto a crucial point, left dangling since Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, which is *how* we talk about national consciousness. It is easy – and quite common – to discuss nations as if the State were *literally* a sentient being, and not the aggregate result of millions of individual psyches. Freud himself opens *Group Psychology* by immediately blurring the line between the two, stating, “[t]he contrast between Individual Psychology and Social or Group Psychology, which at a first glance may seem to be full of significance, loses a great deal of its sharpness when it is examined more closely” (1). Freud extrapolates from his earliest work on the sexual instincts to describe a ‘primal horde’; Freud’s crowds – nations, armies, religions – attempt to recreate their earliest historical form in ways analogous to the psyche’s attempts to relive its earliest memories of unbounded pleasure. Freud’s crowds, as with Kaplan’s and Renan’s nations, must ‘forget’ a crime. For Freud this was the betrayal and subjugation of the primal mother that led to the installation and deification of the primal father. Freud here plays loosely with anthropological history – the shift from matriarchal clan to patriarchal city-state – in a way he would return to in his theory of the Jewish religion in *Moses and Monotheism* (with its murdered hero-chief, the repression of that murder, and the haunting return of guilt). In his writing, it becomes increasingly unclear if Freud means that each individual ‘forgets’ these historical crimes in a similar way or whether there is some higher consciousness – a crowd-psyche – that also thinks and feels, represses and remembers. Coover’s particular comedic style addresses this problem in its own way; as we will see, its unreal quality addresses our negative-capacity for thinking about nations: we both acknowledge them to be constructs, at best no more than the sum of their parts, while at the same time believing them (even wishing them) to be more, to be living world spirits.

Kaplan also touches on a second issue: the trauma experienced not by the victim, but by the aggressor, an idea underdeveloped in trauma theory in general, although for understandable reasons. In terms of national trauma, Kaplan points to forgetting and splitting as psychological defenses deployed against trauma by either a ‘national consciousness’ or the constituents of that nation. But the underlying idea here is more complicated and potentially toxic. Trauma theory originated, as Kaplan points out, “in the context of research about the Holocaust” and developed to include all those “suffering terror,” from the victims of violent crimes and the “quiet trauma” of domestic repression to the inheritors of historical trauma (i.e., the generational trauma of the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors) (1). It must now develop further to deal with the trauma of guilt – not the false shame of survivor’s guilt, but the true shame of having committed atrocities.

It is obviously tempting to foreclose the idea of aggressor trauma; in much work in the field, the very study of trauma is presented as an attempt to vindicate and bring justice to the victims of all manner of violence. Even in studies of Vietnam veterans, it is common to see those suffering aggressor trauma – soldiers who committed violent acts and suffered psychologically from repressing the psyche-splintering horror of their own conduct – repositioned as victims. In such studies soldiers are re-presented as the victims of horrors greater than their own actions: the terror of war, or the corporate indifference of capitalism, or the indifferent gyre of history. This is to say nothing of criminals with no socio-political alibi. Little academic credence is given to, for example, the dissociation and splitting suffered by the pedophile who attempts to repress his desire and forget his crimes, or to the police officer who harms or kills an innocent victim at the nexus of racial and economic anxiety.

That is to say: little, but not none. The German psychotherapist and scholar Beate West-Leuer, in an article on the cinema depicting Spanish imperialism, puts forth an admirably blunt thesis: “Colonialism and imperialism have not only left their mark on the ethnonational group identities of their victims, but also on the group identity of the aggressors” (1157). West-Leuer reaches back to Freud, and Freud’s method of extrapolating the drives of the individual psyche into a theory of crowd behavior, to sketch out a useful theory of *aggressor trauma*:

I understand ‘aggressor traumata’ to be the personal and collective ‘precipitates’ which result when individual acts of aggression progress into a national destructive drive. Freud saw the destructive drive as having the goal of destroying life. As a variant of the death drive it protects the collective from self-aggressive behaviour by destroying what is foreign (see Freud, 1933). The external enemy unifies the group internally. The leaders and their followers, who annihilate the external enemy, act in the name of the collective. By collectively taking advantage of the absence or only partial presence of a superego, the temporary disempowerment or even the complete destruction of a conscience, traumatic changes in the psyches of the aggressors are set in motion. If these psychic alterations in the aggressors are a taboo, they become ‘intrapsychic encapsulations’, which can occasionally erupt into action. What is essential here, along with the acceptance of personal responsibility, is the collective acceptance of guilt for the injustices committed. (1157)

West-Leuer brings to light the importance of thinking about aggressor trauma. While it might be tempting to consider the deleterious effects of trauma as a fitting punishment to the perpetrators of violence, what do we do when the idea of nation – which binds the many to the crimes of the few, across the generations – makes us all responsible for the crimes of our country and, pushing even further, responsible for what Fredric Jameson calls the “primordial crime of capitalism” (“Third World Literature” 84)? In other words, in the passage of time the specific crimes of certain groups – Supreme Court Justices, Directors of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Chairmen of the House Un-American Activities Committee, Vice Presidents – if left unaccounted for, if not expiated in some way, are absorbed into the collective idea of nation and thus into the collective consciousness (or, if repressed, unconsciousness) of a nation. Though

they remain part of the public record, they are forgotten in the Freudian sense, and if repressed from the specific individual to the collective unconscious, they menace the nation as a whole with their return. The act of forgetting makes accomplices of us all. Here Coover seems to agree to some extent with West-Leuer, since his explicit goal in writing *The Public Burning* was to force a public acceptance of guilt for the injustice of the Rosenberg executions.

But this is only half the issue, since – as this dissertation has been arguing all along – all identity, including nationality, is an illusion. To be sure, it is a powerful illusion: witness the attempts, particularly in social media, to rebrand the so-called ‘Confederate Flag’ (not the official ‘Stars and Bars’ of the southern Confederate states, but rather the Battle Flag of Northern Virginia). Ignoring both historical origin (i.e., the flag’s initial specificity to Virginia, and the condition of its more widespread continued use, namely the increasingly central role of the plantation-slave system in the politics of the American Civil War) and subsequent political use (e.g., added to the Georgia State Flag in 1956, with the specific intent of intimidating minority-rights groups), the Confederate flag’s history and meaning has been forgotten, but not easily; a constant counterfactual insistence on a benign cultural meaning of ‘Southern-ness’ seems necessary to keep the repressed from returning. This would not be the case if the illusion of national identity (in this case, perhaps a subordinate nation we might well call the White South of America) were not both very powerful in stabilizing other aspects of identity – for example, there is a specific flavor of white male southern masculinity, known locally as the ‘Good Old Boy’ – and in some part unconscious. The cruelty of the flag’s meaning and incredulousness of the Good Old Boy to the historical truth, and in general his historical dissembling, all betrays a deep and Freudian desperation, a need to forget nearly as powerful as the need to deny death itself.

Nationality is, again to put it bluntly, powered by forgetting. Like Freud's primordial drama – the betrayal of the primal mother, the murder and subsequent deification of the primal father – this forgetting forges a unity stronger than the simple outward projection of the death drive, in which xenophobia binds like together against unlike. But nationality is also illusory, a defense against the chaotic *unlikeness* that prevails within even the smallest group. Beneath – for example – the idea of capital-W Whiteness that has congealed, only recently and only barely, is the unconscious knowledge that White doesn't exist (cf. Dyer's *White*, 1997). This knowledge lingers in our Irish and Polish jokes: the Irishman is a crass but loveable drunk, the Pole a sweet-hearted idiot. The casualness of the racism – white culture does not often take offense to Irish caricature because the Irish have been admitted to the ranks of White – covers over the blood-soaked history of Celts and Saxons, Slavs and Norsemen. And it covers over the deeper abyss, that even in the primal clan – say a dozen Celts on some verdant, rock-shored island – there was an existential void. You cannot *know* a person, know the truth about his or her identity, because it is illusory, and that illusion reflects your own illusory self: a traumatic realization tantamount to death.

Thus we return to Coover's double-bind, the death of the Rosenbergs: a murder committed, in essence, by the people and for the people. Coover argues rightly that the Rosenbergs' execution – like Freud's reimagined murder of Moses – was a unifying ritual that has been repressed into the narrative of American exceptionalism. As such, Coover's retelling bears the marks of distortion, like the work of dreams upon repressed memories, while at the same time clinging to veridical and historical truth. But Coover's attempts to work through the aggressor trauma – now the repressed trauma of all Americans – of American history runs up

against Coover's countervailing belief in the primacy of *story*. As Coover put it in conversation with Frank Gado:

[B]ecause each single instant of the world is so impossibly complex, we cannot accumulate all the data needed for a complete, objective statement . . . And so we fabricate; we invent constellations that permit an illusions of order to enable us to get from here to there. And we devise short cuts – ways of thinking without thinking through: code words that are in themselves a form of mythopoeia. (qtd. in Gado 152)

Coover elegantly connects psychology (including a need for order that is often Freudian in its dynamics) to linguistics, and his insight here is the most well-encapsulated version of postmodern metafiction. But Coover is too wise to the game of language – which makes, rather than reveals, order – to believe fully in the possibility of a historical critique of the Rosenberg execution. As such, Coover's dark comedy cannot expiate the guilt of the past; it can only negotiate a neurotic peace with history.

II. The Public, Burning

Coover's *The Public Burning* is frequently identified as what Edward Mendelson called an *encyclopedic narrative*, and it is fair to say that Coover certainly attempts the things Mendelson expects it to achieve, including “attending to the whole social style and linguistic range” and “make[ing] use of all the literary styles and conventions known to his countrymen” (Mendelson 1268). But it is important to note how easily Mendelson slips into the problematic language of national consciousness and sentience: “Each major national culture in the west, as it becomes aware of itself as a separate entity, produces an *encyclopedic author*” (ibid.). Mendelson is likely being incautiously metaphorical in suggesting a literal national consciousness that can be or become self-aware on a meta-human level, but it directs us to a

crucial issue: in the realm of scholarly rhetoric, we expect a claim of national or cultural consciousness, a national spirit, to be defended and explained; in the world of fiction, and in the psychic reality of our everyday lives, such an idea coexists with our more rational, sociological understanding of nations and cultures. Coover's novel embraces this negative capacity using dark comedy to negotiate the obvious dissonance between two ideas: a realist approach that conceives of a nation as the sum of its constituents, a nation's actions as reducible and accountable to the acts of individuals, and a more surreal approach that conceives of a nation as a zeitgeist of sorts, in a mythic mode approaching secular religion. As *The Public Burning's* Uncle Sam says, in his inimitable style, "A nation, like a person, has got somethin' deeper, something' more permanent and pestiferous, something larger than the scum of its parts, and what this nation's got is ME!" (496).

Mendelson also brings us to the critical question: why a surreal and often cartoonish dark comedy about very real human tragedy, two people killed in the name of Cold War national security after a series of potentially corrupt proceedings? Why, exactly, must an encyclopedic author exhaust all the national literary forms in order to make an accounting of a cultural moment? Why not, like Kurt Vonnegut in *Jailbird*, put aside the literary experimentation long enough to produce the historical facts, undiluted and to the point?⁸⁶ Or like E. L. Doctorow in *The Book of Daniel*, pushing momentarily past history, politics, and other contexts to put on the page in sparse and harrowing detail the primal scene of the murder? Brian Evenson addresses this question, within the broader issue of veridical and emotional truth, when he writes:

Is Coover's treatment a distortion of history? Does the novel have a different sort of truth than history does? Is history, in a sense, fictional narrative? How do (or do not) the fantastic elements that Coover introduces into the historical era help disclose aspects of the Cold War that a straight-forward historical account would not reveal? (106)

Rephrasing these legitimate questions for the purposes of this chapter returns us to the guiding question of this dissertation: why tell jokes about horrible things? And, again, we get two answers. First, jokes allow a negotiation between the veridical material of an event and its emotional or psychic reality; second, jokes allow a deeper, more necessary negotiation between acknowledging the Real and preserving the illusions of self. For Coover, this means – first – that his surreal comic style is meant to balance the historical reality of the Rosenberg case with that “different sort of truth,” the emotional realities of citizenship, patriotism, and the fear of the Communist Other in 1950s America. Second, it allows Coover to balance his political motive – bringing about a remembering (or, like Toni Morrison, a “re-memory”) of the Rosenberg case – with his philosophical motive – deconstructing the illusions of order that assemble and sediment in the form of fictions. The central disavowal, for Coover as well as for his imagined reader, is that the nation is a supreme fiction, ordering and structuring other fictions – of gender, sexuality, existential meaning – and Coover’s own attempts, to bring about a national reckoning, to recover the memory of a national crime and expiate it, are ultimately doomed to be self-annihilated. In spite of this, Coover manages a precarious truce between his own motives, his own beliefs, using two jokes.

The Fool and the Joker

Initially *The Public Burning* was essentially one joke: a carnivalesque theatre piece lampooning the excesses of the figure of Uncle Sam, who would preside over the public burning of the Rosenbergs in Times Square. From Uncle Sam’s mouth would come obscene jokes, the unreconstructed folk humor of America. As David Estes discusses, concerning the final version of Uncle Sam in *The Public Burning*, “the folk humor on which Coover relies [for Uncle Sam’s

dialog] does not evoke nostalgia for an idealized, folksy wit ... because he refuses to sentimentalize or trivialize it. Coover focuses on those items and motifs prevalent in American folk laughter that illustrate its power to dominate and degrade ... in order to develop his character of Uncle Sam as a representation of the frightening maliciousness of frontier individualism and self-reliance” (240). Uncle Sam’s role in the work was so prominent that Coover at various points considered titling his work *Sam Slick*, *Sam Slick’s Circus Days*, and *The Sam Slick Show* (“One Hot Book”).

But when Coover went to the Bard College library to research the historical trial and execution of the Rosenbergs for this embryotic “street theatre/commedia dell’arte” (as he then dubbed it in his “Public Burning Log, 1966-1977”), he discovered he was “the first to ever do so” (84), a fact that clearly struck something in him and began to edge Sam Slick from center stage. As Coover put it, with noticeable Freudian undertones:

Although only a little over a decade has passed since this watershed event in twentieth-century American history, my colleagues have largely forgotten the Rosenbergs and my students have never heard of them, though this short-term communal memory loss is probably common to events that become, once recovered from seeming erasure, the iconic or mythic touchstones of a tribe’s shared stories. (“Log” 84-85)

The return of the repressed, of course, is not the pure recovery of historical truth in its full sense. Coover’s gesture to the anti-mimetic school of thought – what we have previously associated with Caruth’s ‘iconic’ images, preserved in their literalness but not cognitively processed – suggests those Americans who ‘remembered’ the traumatizing execution of the Rosenbergs but had not put the event in any socio-political context; one cannot help but think of the painful honesty in the opening of *The Bell Jar*, where Sylvia Plath writes, “[i]t had nothing to do with me, but I couldn’t help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive with all your

nerves...It was like the first time I saw a cadaver ... pretty soon I felt like I was carrying that cadaver's head around on a string, like some black, noseless balloon stinking of vinegar" (1).

The most primal traumatic aspect of the event – death and decay, the most basic threat to identity and self, the threat posed to the illusion of immortality, like the death of Snowden in *Catch-22* – surely haunted Americans in the summer of 1953, as in Plath's beautifully macabre image of the cadaverous balloon. However, the more complicated traumata – the murder of citizens by the State, that one or both of the Rosenbergs might have been innocent, or that, in spite of their guilt, their blood was still on the hands of *all* Americans, in whose name the murders at Sing Sing were committed – are for those people repressed (e.g., Plath's "[i]t had nothing to do with me") or sublimated into a loose, nearly unconscious, narrative of nationality. This sublimation leads to Coover's second gesture, to the mythic level of understanding about the emotional truth of the executions for American citizens. In other words, the veridical event is not erased (it is only a "seeming erasure") but displaced by the emotional one. That emotional event – in its emotionality divorced from logic and fact – was, for Coover, the subject of his play and ultimately of his novel, wherein the Rosenbergs' execution is but one of many battles between Uncle Sam and the Phantom, the avatar of world Communism, the Other by which America and Americanness are defined.

Coover's initial play – we might imagine – likely had little trouble parodying the image of Uncle Sam, a carnival barker who talked a smooth line over the traumatic events that built the American nation. But to get inside the joke, so to speak, Coover needed an interlocutor, a test subject to examine the ways in which the 'forgetting' of history made the idea of a nation possible and – of equal importance – how the idea of nation helped secure the individual self. Here Coover became obsessed with his metaphorical approach to the Rosenberg execution,

writing in 1975 that “the book could have been written in 71-72 and published. But the metaphor was still developing then, and it was demanding more, and I, far from its manipulator, was slowly sucked into its power” (“Log” 92). What had begun as a comparatively shallow spoof on the self-evidently silly idea of Uncle Sam had become about something else: not just the public burning of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg but the sense of unease and anxiety that had crept into the public consciousness, a symptom of mass repression. Coover’s book became about the public, burning, as he said when the book’s title was fittingly shortened from *The Public Burning of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg: An Historical Romance* to simply *The Public Burning*, “I can appreciate the double entendre, depending on which word one takes to be the noun, which the modifier” (“Log” 110).

Coover’s novel is divided into two distinct modes. The first mode takes the form of omniscient newsreel-style narration, like Dos Passos’ stylized method intercut with headlines, slogans, songs lyrics, and snippets of overheard conversation. The star of the newsreel sections is a bragadocious and larger-than-life Uncle Sam, the reified vessel of the public’s irrational but powerful belief in a supernatural national spirit. These sections represent the fantastic *idea* of nation, but to get psychological access to the *process* of nation, and all those burning symptoms of the repression it takes to conceive oneself as part of a nation, Coover needed a Fool. Richard Millhouse Nixon, Coover’s choice, narrates the mock-philosophical sections in Coover’s second mode; these sections are a literary counterpoint to the blustering newsreels and – more importantly – show how important Uncle Sam is to an American’s sense of self. This is, essentially, Coover second joke: Dick Nixon, Philosopher Fool.

The Farting Quaker

Coover's Nixon repeatedly goes on self-reflective tangents, questioning himself and the world around him, but he does so as a clown; his verbal pratfalls are cruel mockery. Coover's favorite joke technique is to have Nixon delve into a sacred philosophical issue only to be distracted by the profane punch-line – Falstaffian hunger, a folksy bit of bigotry, a desperate need to assert his own magnificence, or a fart – the last being Coover's favorite; his Nixon is amongst literature's most flatulent characters, "the farting Quaker" (50). This portrayal of Nixon first mocks by contrast – Coover's Nixon is at least somewhat thoughtful and meditative, not the reactionary schemer of the public Nixon (the automaton of Coover's *Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears*). The portrayal mocks again by making this clearly fictional – because *better* – Nixon clownishly blind:

Ask the man in the street and he'll tell you that God is a "Supreme Being," But
"being" is only the common side of God – his transcendent side is *motion*. Monks
on hilltops know nothing about contemplation, all that's just idle daydreaming...
If I'd had more time for theology, I might have revolutionized the goddamn field.
(*Public Burning* 366)

This Nixon, who is constantly humble-bragging – and then outright bragging – on his own imaginary accomplishments (if he had played football, à la *Gloomy Gus*), remarks "[i]t's amazing how little some people can understand about the world we live in, even on the simplest level" (ibid. 231); it is the perfect line to encapsulate the Fool's hubris.

But unlike Nixon's meditative reflections on philosophy and his uncomfortably obtuse thoughts on gender dynamics, his thoughts on acting strike a slightly different tone because, in part, Coover has cast him in an extravagantly layered play about himself and these lines seem less ridiculous:

And then I'd realized what it was that had been bothering me: that sense that everything happening was somehow inevitable, as though it had all been scripted out in advance. But bullshit! There were no scripts, no necessary patterns, no final scenes, there was just action, and then *more* action... This, then, was my crisis: to

accept what I already knew. That there was no author, no director, and the audience had no memories – they got reinvented every day. (363)

And, while this is certainly Coover speaking through Nixon, it is the impetus for the critical tradition of marveling at how human Coover's Nixon feels to the reader. Evenson repeatedly points to how sympathetic he is, and Molly Hite goes one better, calling him "disconcertingly sympathetic" (715). As Naomi Jacobs points out, "many readers of *The Public Burning* commented, often with surprise, on the sympathy they felt for Coover's Nixon. Skeptic and idealist as well as clown, this character does evoke fellow feeling, to the extent that some readers who detested Nixon the politician winced at Coover's more satirical jabs at the fictional Nixon" (190). But this sympathetic quality – which Jacobs rightly identifies with the unresolvable clash of skeptic and idealist, the dynamo for dark humor – is also what makes Nixon so *unreal*, as Hite herself points out: "Nixon's entrapment in this script of individual agency points to one of the key themes of the novel ... the actor creates 'character' only in the limited sense that he invents ways to inhabit a given persona and speak given lines" (96).

Timothy Melley pushes this line of thinking to its theoretical conclusion, repositioning Coover's Nixon from a sympathetic character to a caricature of Coover's own philosophical concerns to a full-on postmodern cypher:

This theatrical model of identity suggests Nixon's careful self-making through willful deception, but it also belies a deeper anxiety about theatricality itself, a fear that there is nothing deeper than acting (89)...[h]ere Nixon seems to be channeling not only [Judith] Butler but also [Slavoj] Zizek's view ... acting is not fakery but rather a general condition of society ... [this] postmodern view recurs in Nixon's worries about the sources of his own identity, and is a recurring theme in Coover's other writing. (90)

It is hard to ignore the metafictional commentary on Coover's own use of Nixon here: Nixon as the Fool, some of his lines written by Coover, and others transcribed from the life of the historical Nixon. Coover's Nixon *is* both sympathetic and real, but – to paraphrase Swift – what

is real is not sympathetic, what is sympathetic is not real. As Nixon himself says: “If I was going to do this thing, I had to do it as Richard Nixon – and not even as Richard Nixon, which was already in my own mind something other than myself” (367). Nixon imagines himself as an actor, playing himself, in a theatre of his own heroics, and that conceit suggests that void of identity beneath; in other words, if Nixon is merely an actor *playing* Nixon, there is no real person there at all.

Coover aspires to more than the use of Nixon as a mouthpiece for postmodern doubts about the stability – or reality – of the self. Notably, each time Nixon begins to turn down the path of existential doubt, Uncle Sam and his adversary, the Phantom, are quickly in his thoughts. Early on, Nixon – while reviewing the facts of the Rosenberg case – turns philosophical (and sounding very much like Coover):

What was fact, what intent, what was framework, what was essence? Strange, the impact of History, the grip it had on us, yet it was nothing but words. Accidental accretions, leaving most of the story out. We have not yet begun to explore the true power of the Word, I thought. What if we broke all the rules, played games with the evidence, manipulated language itself, made History a partisan ally? Of course the Phantom was already onto this. (137)

Here, when Nixon’s debate-club tendencies to feel out the facets of an issue accidentally lead him to “a spooky no-man’s land, between logical alternatives” (ibid), he is immediately chastened by realizing he has been thinking *like* the Phantom, the Other that represents all that is *not* American. Coover follows this up with another folksy punch-line to finish the joke: “I loved to debate both sides of any issue, but thinking about that strange space in between made me sweat. Paradox was one thing I hated more than psychiatrists and lady journalists” (ibid). Just the fear of offending Uncle Sam – by thinking like the Phantom – restores Nixon to his sense of order, helps him avoid the clear anxiety of any answer besides ‘with us or against us,’ and – once restored to his American sense of self – he can comfortably pronounce against un-American

things like psychiatry (because to be American is to be of good mental health, the very reason Freud pitched his theories in those terms when he lectured at Clark University) and ‘lady journalists’ (because gender roles are well defined in the workplace of Nixon’s America).

When Nixon’s old debating spirit again leads him to become self-reflective, during the ‘actors and scripts’ scene, his self-examination reveals – like the title of the chapter – “something truly dangerous.” Nixon begins:

I had won both sides of a debating question to many too often not to know what emptiness lay behind the so-called issues. It all served to confirm an old belief of mine: that all men contain all views; right and left, theistic and atheistic, legalistic and anarchical, monadic and pluralistic; and only an artificial – call it political – commitment to consistency makes them hold steadfast to singular positions. (363)

Here, Coover takes a break to crack one of his favorite jokes – making sure we know this is still

Nixon the Fool talking:

I’d let go of the armrest and, farting liberally, had begun to feel a lot better – though troubled at the same time with the uneasy feeling of having learned something truly dangerous, like the secret of the atom bomb – which was not a physical diagram or a chemical formula, but something like a hole in the spirit. The motive vacuum. And I’d understood at least the real meaning of the struggle against the Phantom: *it was a war against the lie of purpose.* (ibid)

Again, the sacred/profane joke formula stays tight – Nixon’s meditation is interrupted by a congressional “PANTY RAID!” – but Coover also reinforces here the idea that *his* Nixon is a born skeptic, and that skepticism churns relentlessly, undauntedly, towards a radical critique of Western life, the notion of individual character, the unifying “Christian service” of Americans (346), and the manifest destiny of capitalism. And yet Nixon pulls back from this critique, to address “the larger issues involved...the nation was falling on its ass ... my own career was atrophying” (349). By “career” Nixon clearly means his drive to become President, to be the Incarnation (though Nixon has yet to discover the meaning of the word) of Uncle Sam. And,

quickly, Nixon's thoughts turn away from this dangerous epiphany to the stabilizing words of Uncle Sam: "if a single man plant himself indomitably on his instincts and there abide, the huge world will come round to him" (ibid). Nixon – in a dramatic irony misinterpreting these words – reads "instincts" as 'political instincts' and quickly resolves to go to Sing Sing, to attempt to wring a confession from Ethel Rosenberg in an attempt to further his own career; from admittedly 'sympathetic' philosopher to conniving Fool, Coover's joke plays out again, and again demonstrates how nationality – at least Nixon's own aspirational sort – short-circuits the polyphony of psychological voices and allows, as Nixon himself says, for "singular positions." National identity – or, at least, the strong illusion of it – buttresses all those more vulnerable and unstable illusions of self.

Coover plays this joke out at least once more, as the novel takes its most noticeably absurd turn. After an abortive attempt to have sex with Ethel Rosenberg while questioning her in prison, Nixon stumbles through a door in the Sing Sing "Death House" and tumbles "unexpectedly onstage in the middle of Times Square" with his pants around his ankles (470). This alerts us that we have abandoned the stability of realism (the Rosenbergs will not die in Sing Sing as they did historically) but that we may be approaching the Real (the traumatic realizations encapsulated, emotionally, in the event of their death). The energy of the dark comedy is ramped up here as magnified slapstick – Nixon goes from flatulence to pantlessness, Supreme Court Justices slip in elephant shit, and an actual pie fight ensues – but so is the frenzied crescendo of death. The electric chair is powered up and, however translated into fantasy, there seems no way for Coover to avoid the moment where literal and figurative converge: in the murder of the Rosenbergs.

In this moment, darkly comic in the extreme, things become unreal – because shearing away from realism but also towards the Real – and Nixon exclaims, “I thought in a moment of numbing terror: *I can’t even remember my name*. I fought to recover that name, that self, even as I grappled with my trousers, hobbling about in a tight miserable circle, fought to drag myself back to myself, my old safe self, which was – who knows? – maybe not even a self at all, my frazzled mind reaching for the out catchwords, the functional code words for the profession, but drawing a blank” (471). Nixon here uses Coover’s own phrase – ‘code words’ – to describe how language, the screen on which the illusion of order is projected, is failing him. In this moment Coover’s prose approaches the self-annihilating ecstasy of Beckett, as Nixon finds himself shorn of layer upon layer of identity: his Irish-Quaker ethnicity, his buttoned-up masculinity, his silent-majority American nationality, all stripped away. With the final traces of the illusory self slipping from his hands, Nixon is once again saved by Uncle Sam’s words, coming unevenly at first but then in a stream of consciousness that replaces Nixon’s own disintegrating self:

What this country needs is ... eh ... no more pussyfooting! a new departure!
ragged individualism – rugged, I mean (“Tell the truth, son” I could just hear
Uncle Sam saying, “or trump – but get the trick!”) – yes, it was time to piss or cut
bait, time to basically hunker down, hold the line, take off the gloves and bind up
the nation’s wounds... (ibid)

Coover here represents in the print – the fractured sentences, the missing capitalization, the ellipses and dashes – the splintering of Nixon’s mind, and for good measure gives us the pun “ragged individualism,” as befitting Nixon’s schizoid mind. In the same passage, we see Uncle Sam’s brash, folksy style (“piss or cut bait” and “take off the gloves”), the great country-doctor-turned-Incarnation metaphor of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural (“bind up the nation’s wounds”), and Nixon’s far meeker Quaker style (“time to basically hunker down, hold the line”) intertwined in

a way that serves as a linguistic metaphor for Nixon's internalizing the mythic figure of Uncle Sam to *perform* the role of a sane and stable American self.

What Coover locates in American exceptionalism is the psychological process of bringing nationality – what we might call the feeling or sense of national identity – from the periphery of psychological construction to the center of self. What might be considered, for Freud, a late-stage addition, lacking the primacy and power of the sense of self-preservation (the original instinct) or gender (structured early on by the power of libido) or even the Oedipally-powered sense of ethnicity, nationality becomes for Coover the guiding sense of the individual's role in the world. Nationality – American identity, in short – becomes the part of identity that provides virtuousness against evil, order against chaos, light against darkness. Just the same, for Coover as for Freud, this identity is solely an illusion, an 'artifice' supported by outside force, and the illusion covers over a terrible void. This is, essentially, the joke of the Nixon chapters, the petty and foolish foil to the newsreel sections, whose joke is much darker. The star of those sections – Uncle Sam – is Coover's darkest joke of all.

The Joker

In the opening pages of *The Public Burning*, Coover's Uncle Sam is introduced with stinging irony, which despite the newsreel's overall tone of the fundamentalist patriot, still borders on outright sarcasm: "Not that Americans are superstitious, of course. How could they be, citizens of this, the most rational national (under God) on earth?" (6). Coover risks giving the game away too early – i.e., that the newsreel voice is one extended sarcasm, tearing apart the patriotic fervor of the 1950s as if by dogs – but it is important for him to establish the central issue: Uncle Sam, the metaphor *ne plus ultra* for national spirit, collapses both the emotional

reality and the literal absurdity of the illusion of national identity. This collapse crystallizes Coover's metaphor in a brutally dark comic manner, revealing in the novel's epilogue ("Beauty and the Beast") that each American President has been possessed by the national spirit through being sodomized by a literal Uncle Sam. A dark parody of the 'love of god,' Coover's Uncle Sam borders on being a sick joke, if not for the metaphorical import of what he represents: Americans are not just superstitious, they do not just believe in a god, they are the victims of that god.⁸⁷

Before analyzing Coover's darkest – and potentially sickest – joke, it is well worth asking what it means that Coover literalizes Uncle Sam in the first place, and why the belief in Uncle Sam – in America, and Americanness – is repeatedly put in tandem with religious belief. In many ways, it has to do with the way critics like Lance Olsen have read (and to some extent over-read) the Phantom as representing a broad variety of postmodern symptoms of chaos. Olsen, for instructive example, goes too far – falling prey to the same kinds of cross-cultural misreading seen in readings of King's Coyote in the previous chapter⁸⁸ – in claiming the Phantom is "the Native American trickster writ large" (55), but he is much closer to grasping Nixon's view – and by extension middle-America's view – of the Phantom in writing that,

[o]nce loose in the world, the Phantom's presence, which is a kind of black-hole absence ... begins to commingle in our minds with words we have come to associate with the post-modern vision: disjunction, chance, dispersal, polymorphism, indeterminacy ... [T]he Phantom represents not so much the personification of Communism and the Red Scare, but the reification of destructive energy in a culture, the dark radical skepticism that throws everything about language and experience into question. (ibid)

Olsen's version of the Phantom as postmodernity incarnate helps explain the religious aura of Uncle Sam: if the Phantom represents postmodernity, the breakdown of the perceived order and structure in our so-called ordinary lives, then – by Manichean opposition – Uncle Sam represents

that order and structure; if the Phantom is radical skepticism, then Uncle Sam is radical belief. In short, he is faith. And faith, for Coover, is the same as superstition, the taking of a fiction for a truth, even when at some level one knows it to be a fiction.

Not surprisingly, for Coover being American is such a superstition. Nationality is a story a certain group of people tell themselves in a way directly parallel to the development of all religions; nationality is made up of stories and superstitions codified and sedimented over time. From the novel's opening, Coover frames the impending execution of the Rosenbergs in religious terms, by offering a translation from the Damascus Document: "any man who is dominated by demonic spirits to the extent that he gives voice to apostasy is to be subject to the judgement upon sorcerers and wizards" (3).⁸⁹ In *The Public Burning* that "demonic spirit" – Belial, in the original – is the Phantom; it is worth noting that Belial is also the "angel of darkness" in the Dead Sea Scroll fragment, "The War of the Sons of Light Against the Sons of Darkness," that Coover interpolates to dramatize the Cold War vision of Dwight D. Eisenhower. This vision is the Manichean world of good versus evil – light versus dark, Sam Slick versus the Phantom – in which the Rosenbergs' crime must be punished by death. But how close to the bleeding edge of metaphor do we take Eisenhower's worldview, how real his angels, how literal the hands of the Christian God and Devil in the affairs of men and women across the world? As with the myths of religion that make so many ethnic identities possible, the myths of Nation that make national identity possible exist in a world of quasi-belief: they exist often in a state of unexamined flux, neither concretely true or false. In fact, they can paradoxically be both at once. We may in frustration call religions dogmatic, but the lived experience of both religion and nationality are far more abstract than the rigors of ideology; it is for this reason Benedict Anderson suggests in *Imagined Communities* that "one tends unconsciously to hypostatize the

existence of Nationalism-with-a-big-N...and then classify ‘it’ as an ideology ... It would, I think, make things easier if one treated it as if it belonged with ‘kinship’ and ‘religion,’ rather than with ‘liberalism’ or ‘fascism’” (4). The relationships between members of a religion or nation – and certainly the relationship between worshipper and god, citizen and nation – are as Anderson points out so candidly, *imagined*. This is both in the practical everyday sense of ‘imagined’ and also the deeper psychological sense of ‘imaginary,’ of being part of the construction of a stable illusory self.

Coover’s opening aligns the belief in national identity – including the idea of American exceptionalism – with the same imaginary sphere of belief as American Christianity. Thus, when Uncle Sam readily appears in the quotidian world we are prone to be surprised that, unlike the Christian God, long absent and allegedly speaking – if at all – in veiled signs and gestures, Uncle Sam is the American language incarnate:

“Who-Whoo-Whoop! Who’ll come gouge with me? Who’ll come bite with me?... In the name of the great Jehovah and the Continental Congress, I have passed the Rubicon – swim or sink, live or die, survive or perish, I’m in fer a fight, I’ll go to my death on a fight, and with a firm reliance on the pertection of divine protestants, a fight I must have, or else I’ll have to be salted down to save me from spilin’! You hear me over thar, you washed-up varmints? This is the hope of the world talkin’ to you! I am Sam Slick the Yankee Peddler – I can ride on a flash of lightnin’, catch a thunderbolt in my fist, swaller niggers whole, raw or cooked...For we hold these truths to be self-evident: that God helps them what helps themselves, it’s a mere matter of marchin’; that idleness is emptiness and he who lives on hope will die with his foot in his mouth; that no nation was ever ruint by trade; and that nothing is sartin but death, taxes, God’s glowin’ Covenant, enlightened self-interest, certain unalienated rights, and woods, woods, woods, as far as the world extends!” (6-7)

Uncle Sam’s bombastic entry raises two questions, one moral and one ontological. Morally, we are certainly not meant to be made comfortable by the suggestion of Uncle Sam – America, incarnate – being able to “swaller niggers whole,” in a litany of feats outlandish (e.g. making a Grizzly Bear “sing ‘Jesus, Lover of My Soul’ in a painful duet with his own asshole”),

boyish (“slip without a scratch down a honey locust”), and imperialistic (“if you wish to avoid foreign collision you had better abandon the ocean”). Coover takes the braggart’s competition of the antebellum south – David Estes identifies some near-exact borrowings from Mark Twain – and uses its superficially playful spirit, rife with grammatical errors and comic inversions, but also overflowing with neological wit and energy, to weave a translucent veil over the dark past and present of American ideology, including racism, imperialism, and even ecological abuse (implied by “woods, woods, woods,” soon to be felled by the hectare). On the simplest level, the folksy wit of Uncle Sam is a comedy of juxtaposition, the comedy of the inventive wordplay of the American language, which is able to call upon the sacred (i.e., the canonized histories of antiquity, the great poets of Europe, and the thunderous proclamations of the Old Testament God) and in equal measure the profane (i.e., the inventive idioms of the rural south, the Wild West, the urban street). It is at once admirable – in its sheer ferocity and voraciousness of reference, if nothing else – and despicable in its socio-political context. In the novel’s epilog, as we will discuss shortly, the former is revealed to be a screen for the latter.

What is more important – and more disturbing – is that Uncle Sam’s relentless energy papers over the traumatic events of the past (i.e., the horrors of slavery that swallowed whole millions of African Americans, the industrial destruction of billions of acres of “woods, woods, woods,” the imperialist effort to colonize the ocean nations of Hawaii, the Philippines, and the Caribbean). They are part of the national consciousness, because part of Uncle Sam’s lexicon, but also in a way ‘forgotten,’ unprocessed and divorced from socio-political meaning and repercussion. In short, to enjoy the song and verve of Uncle Sam’s speech is to take part in this willed forgetting, a moral problem complicated by Uncle Sam’s refusal of polyphony. It is, after all, the *Sam Slick Show*; he is ringmaster and head barker, getting the first, last, and nearly all

other intermediate words. Coover's rendition of Uncle Sam almost immediately slips away from parody into something else and, while it is clear we are meant to be unnerved by Sam Slick, we are also meant to be in awe. The language of Uncle Sam is the first indication of Coover's deep ambivalence about America as a nation, and the idea of nationality; as Coover writes – in the voice of the newsreel, surveying Times Square, “the ritual center of the Western World” and “where Peter Minuit invented the American Way of Life” (166) – “In Saint Augustine's words, *et inhorresco, et inardesco!*” (ibid). Attempting to bring that horror and attraction into some kind of accounting took Coover over five hundred pages and ten years.

To return to the second question prompted by Uncle Sam's arrival, we must consider the deeper dark comedy of Uncle Sam which is a joke at the ontological level. In one respect, Uncle Sam's bluster – from the first word – is lifted nearly wholesale from elsewhere; a good portion of his opening tirade comes from Alfred Henry Lewis's 1893 *Wolfville Days*, including the near-verbatim opening lines: “Who'll come gouge with me? Who'll come bite with me?” (273). Coover also lifted Lewis' line about “hugging a Cinnamon Bear to death” and extrapolated perversely on “making a Grizzly beg for mercy.” Uncle Sam's speech also includes Defoe's (and/or Twain's) “death and taxes,” Alexis de Tocqueville's “enlightened self-interest” (from *Democracy in America*), and Benjamin Franklin's assertion that “no nation was ever ruined by trade,” amongst other various and (comically) mangled quotations. The question becomes: is Uncle Sam simply the aggregate of the American men – there seems to be no women quoted, though Sam is compared to Athena – and the catalog of their words and deeds? To put it another way, is Uncle Sam simply a metaphor run amok, like so much incautious language put to use when discussing the nature and behavior of nations? Or, to return to Uncle Sam's critical claim,

is it possible that “a nation, like a person, has got somethin’ deeper,” something more than the sum of its parts?

There is no simple answer to this question, because Coover’s absurd comic style is intended to represent the negative capacity of the human mind to deal with paradoxical belief. Uncle Sam is clearly cartoonish but plays an increasingly real role in the development of the novel’s plot. At the same time, his appearances to Nixon become increasingly corporeal – we are no longer just hearing him, but seeing and, ultimately, in a grotesque finale, *feeling* him. As the novel grows increasingly surreal, as it deviates from the historical story of the Rosenbergs, as the boundaries of time and space fluctuate and are violated, Uncle Sam grows increasing more present; like Heller’s *Catch-22*, as the specter of death looms larger, the novel grows increasingly absurd, and *both* funnier and darker. Though Coover’s Uncle Sam is an absurd idea, and clearly not *real*, as the primal moment of trauma approaches, the moment most unsettling to the illusion of the national self, he becomes most powerful in the minds of the characters, overwhelming and unreal (because closer to an unspoken, and perhaps unspeakable, truth). He becomes God-like.

But if Uncle Sam is the soul of America, the incarnation itself, what *is* he? To put it a different way: if Uncle Sam is the truth about America, what then is that truth? What Uncle Sam represents, for Coover, is pure phallic will; it is a Freudian joke with juvenile beginnings but a serious endgame. It is also an American joke, as the newsreel narration tells us that “America laughs” at

much the same things as everybody laughs at everywhere: sex, death, danger, the enemy, the inevitable, all the things that hurt about growing up, something that Americans especially, suddenly caught with the whole world in their hands, are loath to do. What makes them laugh hardest, though, are jokes about sexual inadequacy – a failure of power – and the cruder the better, for crudity recalls their childhood for them. (450)

It is for this reason that the Rosenbergs' crime – “they have sought nothing less than the ultimate impotency of Uncle Sam!” (352) – is so extreme; laughter is exposure, and exposing the impotency of Uncle Sam would be tantamount to deicide. Thus Uncle Sam is out to flex his phallic powers; early on, after a rash of attacks by the Phantom, Uncle Sam counterattacks, retaking Times Square, and the newsreel voice tells us “[t]he sun is rising, sending its prophylactic shafts deep into the city canyons, dispersing not only the Phantom and all his legions, but all thought of them as well” (159). This silly phallic metaphor is carried over into a strange scene where Eisenhower is seen “in a state of oddly disturbing excitement” and “most of Congress, the Supreme Court, lesser courts and commissions, the Fourth Estate, Cecil B. De Mille and Cardinal Spellman, the Holy Six, the Vice President sacked out on his living room couch, and the entire Cabinet ... have all awakened this morning from the foment of strange gamy dreams with prodigious erections” (163). The episode concludes, cryptically, by telling us that, though all aroused, not one of the political figures has “used his or her aroused sexuality on a mate, it’s as though, somehow, that’s not what it was all about” (164).

Uncle Sam himself, comically misquoting John Brown, shouts out “this *is* a beautiful country! *Ubi libido ibi patria!*” (402). From *ubi libertas ibi patria*, Coover replaces liberty with the libido, and – indeed – that seems to be Uncle Sam’s organizing power: libido, *not* liberty. What “it was all about,” it turns out, is libidinal energy directed towards the ends of the State. In fact, during the surreal execution scene in Times Square, Nixon – having dropped his pants and failed to refasten them – tries to talk his way out of embarrassment by shouting, “I am asking everyone to step forward – right now! – and drop his pants for America!” (482). Ironically, ‘drop your pants for America,’ means quite the opposite of the fascist linking of individual libido to State power; it is instead Nixon’s egotistical attempt to talk his way out of an embarrassing

situation, and – in some way – to maintain his sense of self, to resist the overmastering of Uncle Sam. Preposterously, the crowd full of political and cultural icons drop their pants, all except Uncle Sam, who remarks that this is a “mad project of national sooeey-cide” (ibid), a doubled joke. First, Uncle Sam means that the repercussions for stealing the show from him will be dire; second, he means that by following Nixon’s lead and ignoring Uncle Sam they have broken the cathexis of the people on the State. Doing so means the nation itself, Uncle Sam himself, will be destroyed. Sure enough, after telling Nixon, “Experience keeps a dear school, but fools as they say’ll learn in no other” (485), Uncle Sam vanishes. Nixon describes “a blinding flash of light, a simultaneous crack of ear-splitting thunder, and then –,” at which point Nixon’s words are interrupted with the word “BLACKOUT!!” (ibid).

In the ensuing panic – crowds are screaming “UNCLE SAM IS DEAD!” (486) – that comes from Uncle Sam’s sudden absence, two important things happen. First, the crowd is besieged by a grotesque flood of images from America’s national past:

What is truth? What is perversity? In the nighttime of people it’s all one! Terrible the grim phantasms of terrorists and traitors, more terrible yet – because beloved, or thought to be – those of founding fathers, trustbusters, first ladies, and village blacksmiths! ... Klansmen, foxhole atheists, Two-Seed-in-Spirit Predestinarians hanging judges and traveling salesman. There’s Ethan Allen! Black Bart! Tom Swift! Bird and Duke and Sitting Bull! Sergeant York! Punjab! Sojourner Truth and Bet-a-Million Gates! And all as big as skyscrapers and scary as hell! Lynched Negroes, still dangling hugely from their ropes like strange bloated fruit, entwine with the gigantic ghosts of radiated Japs and bushwhacked settlers...the restless shades of Joe Hill and Glenn Miller wind and weave grotesquely through those of Sacco and Valetino, Dillinger, Slovik, and Stonewall Jackson! (491)

Without Uncle Sam’s speech – with its power to forget, to smooth over, and to organize into narrative – the raw material of American history comes flooding back into the public imagination. The ugly history of racism (“Klansmen,” “Lynched Negroes,” and Confederate General “Stonewall Jackson”),⁹⁰ the insidious dichotomy of the ‘elect’ versus the ‘damned’

(“Two-Seed-in-Spirit Predestinarian” Baptists, who preached an extremist version of Calvinist predestination) that underscores American Christianity and its relationship with private capital, and the horrors of war crimes committed by Americans (the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the execution of Eddie Slovik for desertion in World War Two). These are traumatic events, not because they happened *to* Americans – although in many cases Americans were amongst the victims – but because they were committed *by* Americans. To be an American, to enjoy the privileges both material and psychological granted by that identity, to have in one’s mind what Anderson calls the “image of their communion” with all other Americans (6), is to be subject to the aggressor traumata, the forgotten brutality that is American history. The first effect of this traumata, the return of the repressed, is to destabilize the existing narrative – Uncle Sam’s narrative – about the “beloved” of American history (e.g., the Founding Fathers and industrial giants) whose crimes are now coming into view in grotesque and gargantuan form.

This destabilization of political identity leads to a second, more profound destabilizing of sexual and gendered identity, one that disrupts psyches down to the core:

And inevitably, in all this hysterical jangling around, flesh is finding flesh, mouths mouths, heat heat, and the juices, as Satchel Paige would say, is flowin’, The people are no less beset with confusion and panic, horrendous anguish and pain, like to the throes of travail, but they are also suddenly hot as firecrackers – or maybe not so suddenly, maybe it’s just the culmination of that strange unease they’ve been feeling all day, ever since waking this morning in their several states of suspended excitement. Now, plunged into a nighttime far deeper than that from which this morning they awoke (or thought they did), the people seek – with distraught hearts and agitated loins – a final connection, a kind of ultimate ingathering, a tribal implosion, that will either release them from this infinite darkness and doleful sorrow or obliterate them once and for all and end their misery It is astounding to consider how many orifices, large and small, and how many complementary protuberances, soft and rigid, the human body possesses, all the more so when that number is raised to the *n*th power by jamming thousands of such bodies several layers deep and letting everything hang out. Nor in such a wet and wretched nighttime are the people – deprived virtually of every sense but one, frantically giving and receiving with all their gaps and appurtenances, and their minds frozen with delirium, booze, terror, and the

seizure of imminent orgasm – limited to other people: no, it’s an all-out strategic exchange, and any animal, vegetable, artifact, or other surface irregularity will do!
(492)

In this long passage, Coover shows the “confusion and panic” that follows the disruption of normative historical narratives; it is an eruption of erotic energy that, no longer channeled into Uncle Sam, breaks loose in every direction. Coover imagines the public burning – the libidinous energy of the crowd, of the nation – that in a fascist nation is channeled into the engine of government, into its leader. In this scene the boiler has burst and the fire runs rampant. Libido refuses to be constrained into politics, or by ‘adult’ genital sexuality, indeed by any socio-cultural boundaries of propriety or decorum because Coover’s orgiastic crowd has been shattered out of their selves – here there is no ethnicity, no gender, no sexual identity – and reduced to erotic amoebas seeking only the tactile sensation of ‘mouths,’ ‘heat,’ and ultimately ‘any surface.’

Even further, Coover suggests that even the most primitive organization of the self, the separation of the libido and the death drive, collapses in this mass sexual panic (the “tribal implosion” will either provide either the release of orgasm – the goal of libido – or the obliteration into nonbeing – the goal of the death drive; the two goals are here collapsed in this “wet and wretched nightmare”). The unity of these forces – like the collapses of all waves and particles in the birth and death of universe – highlights the artifice of their perceived separateness, the *construction* of the layers and facets of identity.

All of this is meant to make two points, both critical to Coover’s work, but far from complementary. The first point is that Uncle Sam, acting as the cathexis of body libido and the death drive, has provided the stabilizing power behind the structure of the American psyche; in other words, national identity is the keystone that holds identity as a whole together. The second

point is that, in evaporating so quickly, these other facets of identity are revealed as illusory. It is the illusion of Uncle Sam that has made possible the ordering of both American history and identity because Uncle Sam makes possible a forgetting of other ‘truly dangerous’ possibilities.

These two points – the simultaneous importance and illusory quality of national identity – find their anxious union in the final scene, where Richard Nixon narrates his rape by Uncle Sam, discovering at last what the true method of “Incarnation” is (and giving the long-delayed punch-line to a number of earlier jokes about the previous Presidents). When figured in relation to the execution scene – of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg – it becomes clear just how possessed Coover became by the metaphor of Uncle Sam, and how it ultimately undoes the novel’s political goals.

III. Always Leave Them Laughing

The Public Burning of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg: An Historical Romance might have been a different book had Coover, as a writer, not fallen into his sado-masochistic obsession with the metaphor of Uncle Sam. Indeed, it might have been more like Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel*, “also based, more conventionally, on the Rosenberg case,” which Coover recalls deliberately avoiding for over a year after its release, “not wanting it to leak into mine” before finally meeting Doctorow and reading his book in late 1973 (“Log” 89). It will suffice to say that if Doctorow’s more conventional account leaked into Coover’s it was in minor ways; although they both contain execution scenes, Doctorow’s is muted and grim while Coover’s is surreal and bombastic.

In *The Book of Daniel*, the executions are recalled succinctly, first that of Julius:

The executioner threw the switch. My father smashed into his straps as if hit by a train. He snapped back and forth, cracking like a whip. The leather straps groaned and creaked. Smoke rose from my father’s head. A hideous smell compounded of burning flesh, excrement and urine filled the death chamber. Most of the

witnesses had turned away. A pool of urine collected on the cement floor under the chair. (297-298)

And then Ethel's:

When the switch was thrown she went into the same buzzing sputtering arc dance. The current was turned off...the execution went back behind the wall, and again received a signal, and again turned on the current. (298-299)

The moral outrage – at the courts, the Justice Department, the betrayal of the American Left from within and from without – that Doctorow establishes throughout the novel, all that is contained within the book's Greek Chorus of "They're still fucking us," is implicit in these dark scenes; Daniel's – and Doctorow's – venom is tightly packed into the terse irony of the closing line: "Later [the executioner] said the first 'dose' had not been enough to kill my mother Rochelle Isaacson" (299).

Coover's version of the event, of what occurs after the first dose of electricity fails to kill Ethel Rosenberg, inverts the quiet finality of Doctorow's version:

[T]hey all rush forward, led by young Dick Nixon, followed by Joe McCarthy, Herb Brown, Bill Knowland, Lyndon Johnson, Foster Dulles and Allen, Engine Charlie, and Estes Kefauver, virtually the entire VIP section, scrambling up over the side of the stage, fighting for position as though their very future depended on it, racing for the switch – it's hard to tell who gets his hands on it first, maybe the Vice President with his head start, maybe Francel himself, or young Senator Kennedy, more athletic than most, or perhaps all of them at once, but whoever or how many, they throw themselves on it with such force they snap the thing clean off! (*Public Burning* 517)

Here is the dark comedy of *The Public Burning*'s penultimate chapter, its second best dark joke: the "entire VIP section" of American politics scrambling like so many Stooges to pull the execution switch (which then breaks off, in true Looney Tunes style). And the chapter's final image transcends – or tries mightily – the limits of surrealism:

[Ethel's] body, sizzling and popping like firecrackers, lights up with the force of the current, casting a flickering radiance on all those around her, and so she burns

– and burns – and burns – as though held aloft by her own incandescent will and haloed by all the gleaming great of the nation – (ibid.)

The chapter ends there, not full stop but in an open-ended moment of *grand guignol*, shock and awe. In one very meaningful sense, this is Coover's political moment, literalizing the emotional reality of the historical moment – Doctorow's quiet tragedy in Ossining, the original 'up the river,' out of sight – by reimagining it in spectacular and cartoonish horror. Ethel is not killed by a mute executioner, but by the nation's "gleaming great"; she is murdered by the Right and the Left alike, very nearly by "the nation" itself. By comparison, Doctorow's attempt at a veridical account is almost iconic, more like Plath's cadaverous balloon than a processed and emotional memory. Doctorow's focus on the Rosenberg children (reimagined as the Isaacsons' son and daughter) makes the story more real, more human, and more relatable; in some ways it allows the trauma to remain in a more primal state, minimally processed (Daniel's titular book, his graduate thesis, is the *beginning* of such a processing, one imagines). Coover's version attempts to process the emotional reality of a traumatized nation and citizens who cannot lay claim to the trauma of loss, who have blood on their hands, who themselves *are* the abject 'they' of Plath and Doctorow (e.g., Plath contemplates no guilt when she says 'they executed the Rosenbergs,' and in fact imagines herself the victim of the electrocution; Doctorow is clearly delineating sides when he writes 'they're still fucking us'). Both Coover and Doctorow, however, would likely reject Jameson's claim in *Postmodernism* that history itself is "forever out of reach," but for different reasons (25). Doctorow seems confident in the ability to recover archeologically its veridical truth; Coover seems confident in the ability to reimagine its emotional essence.

Doctorow is, as Jameson said, "the epic poet of the disappearance of the American radical past" (*Postmodernism* 24). In *The Book of Daniel*, Daniel blames a "grand fusion of

associational guilt” for his parents death, believing that “the Isaacsons [were] confirmed in their guilt because of who campaigned for their freedom, and their supporters discredited because they campaigned for the Isaacsons. The truth was beyond reclamation” (296). It seems unlikely that Daniel has a whole share in this epistemological pessimism, certainly Doctorow does not. The unrecoverable truth – like Caruth’s black hole of traumatic memory – is not a postmodern precondition for Doctorow; truth for him is not lost but claimed by whoever controls the narrative. Doctorow has his own version of the truth and writes as if confident that history is on his side; he furnishes it – the people’s history, the beastly realities of famous peoples and events – to clobber the Left with its own dissolution (one imagines neoconservatives do not read Doctorow, and do not need to; they already know how to out-narrativize the Old Left). Coover is more concerned with the disappearance of the American past in general than of its once-promising leftist potential, and more than that, he is concerned with how the ‘past’ we have now came to be at all, which is – of course – through story.

For Coover, more than the Rosenbergs, more than their children or their movement, more than Dick Nixon or the moral majority, that story is about Uncle Sam. Coover’s novel does achieve some measure of its original goal – to bring a measure of collective shame to America. It does demonstrate how, to return to West-Leuer’s aggressor trauma, the Rosenbergs served as the “external enemy” that unified America, and in the character of Nixon demonstrates the “temporary disempowerment or even the complete destruction of a conscience” necessary to carry out such a brutal ritual (1157). But Coover is not content to retread the terrain of René Girard any more than that of Doctorow. Coover understands the ritual, but the novel cannot end there; the final chapter concerns the forgetting that follows the ritual. Because, as Renan’s epigraph to this chapter suggests, it is the forgetting that makes a nation.

To investigate this, the forgetting at the heart of national identity, Coover finally reveals the ‘secret’ of the Incarnation as an act of brutal sodomy. As the assault on Nixon takes place, he begins to grasp the true meaning of *The Public Burning*: “You didn’t have to kill them! You did it for fun! You’re... a butcher! A beast! *You’re no better than the phantom!*” (531). This line recalls an earlier section in the novel, when Nixon muses:

What did it feel like, I wondered, to be possessed by the Phantom? Some said it was like swallowing a cold wind...others that he used genital organs, that he could fuck like a man, but had no semen, leaving his chosen ones feeling all filled up, as though with an immense belch or fart they couldn’t release. (144)

Initially, this joke is the set-up for another fart joke: “I lifted one cheek,” Nixon tells us, “I was still okay, no difficulties at all. The Farting Quaker. Take that, you villain! Ungh! And that!” (ibid). By the end of the novel this juvenile bit of mockery has metastasized into something more serious, suggesting both that Uncle Sam – which is to say, the American spirit and all Americans – can be found guilty of a cold-blooded murder for sport, and that there is something about Uncle Sam that possesses his citizens, his *victims*, against their will. Further, it no different than the Phantom’s method; it is the process by which all ideologies possess people.

Coover’s Uncle Sam hardly disrupts this reading, but he does add nuance to it somewhat, telling Nixon, “It ain’t easy holdin’ a community together, order ain’t what comes natural, you know that, boy, and a lotta people gotta get killt tryin’ to pretend it is, that’s how the game is played” (531) and, in a strange twist, calling the Rosenbergs “lucky” to have had “a chance to have it happen to ’em onstage in Times Square!” (ibid). Uncle Sam gestures towards Anderson’s explanation of the difference between nation and ideology: an ideology requires no kinship, only mutual belief in and obedience to a guiding philosophy; a nation requires something deeper to ‘hold a community together,’ because it is unnatural, because the communion is only imagined (it is, in Sam’s blunt assessment, “pretend”). In this strange moment, even as he confirms a

Freudian reading of the execution as tribal ritual, Coover calls attention to his manipulation of history – to the fact that this is *fiction* – by highlighting the transposition of the execution from Sing Sing upriver to Times Square; at the same time, Coover also comes to the crux of his book. Uncle Sam – acknowledging Nixon’s moments of skepticism, even radical skepticism, as correct – dispels the myth (his own myth, as it were) of American exceptionalism, of any idea that American democracy is the true, or right, or divinely predestined order of the world, and instead asserts his own decidedly libidinous will to power as the foundation of America: “You wanna make it with me...you gotta love me like I really am: Sam Slick the Yankee Peddler, gun-totin’ hustler and tooth-’n-claw tamer of the heathen wilderness, lusty and in everything a screamin’ meddler, novus ball-bustin’ ordo seclorum” (531-532). This alters considerably the metaphor of nationality, changing Uncle Sam from the projection of a sense of national pride to something exterior and sinister. Nixon, weeping, recounts the process as Coover’s joke turns sick:

“No!” I shrieked, giving way. And in he came, filling me with a ripping all-rupturing force so fierce I thought I’d die! This . . . this is not happening to me alone, I thought desperately, or tried to think, as he pounded deeper and deeper, destroying everything, even my senses, my consciousness – but to the nation as well! (532)

What is sick about this scene is twofold. One, it threatens to become purely a fantasy of pornographic revenge, in which Coover punishes Nixon by imagining him, sadistically, in tremendous pain. The humor in this sick joke is simply the annihilation of the stature and dignity of a public character. But the sickness of this joke is also metaphorical, in suggesting that all citizens – “the nation as well!” – are hopeless victims of their nations: their conscious minds obliterated, free will negated, and consumed by the will of a power overwhelming them. The bleakness of this reading – a surrender of the self to the libidinal (here, literally erotic) power of

fascism, that says, like *The Short-Timer*'s Joker, "there it is" – is tempered only by the scene's absurdity, by the insistence of its un-reality.

Pulled back from the edge of sick humor – from wallowing in watching Nixon suffer the same fate as the American public Coover wishes to rescue – this very dark joke presents Coover's metaphor in its final form: a sadistic Uncle Sam is Coover's very Freudian American chieftain, the runaway metaphor for understanding what Ethel Rosenberg in *The Public Burning* calls "American fascism" (394). But this is not just fascism in the contemporary sense, for the reader learns in the first newsreel section that Uncle Sam was born from the "shattered seed-pole of the very enlightenment" and immediately "lit upon the Western World in all his rugged strength and radiant beauty" (8). This particular combination of brute strength and attractiveness is the hallmark of a fascism that is less political and more religious; the strength and beauty of the chief bind the member to the group through fear and love. Individuals do not seem to perform nationality, instead they seem to adore it – a word which echoes with the troubled and sexualized meaning of 'worship,' from Plath's poem "Daddy." Uncle Sam's incarnations adore him, they are crushed and captivated. The prologue newsreel of *The Public Burning* reaches back to the words of the 1789 Inauguration of George Washington, who was the first Incarnation, the first possession of Uncle Sam: "No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of men more than those of the United States" (ibid). And while the historical Washington was talking about his Deist higher power, Coover's Washington is of course speaking of Uncle Sam. His ceremony, the "gathering of the tribe for the atom-spy burning," is the "communal pageant" the "troubled nation needs right now" (71, 3-4). The ceremony – "something archetypal, tragic, exemplary" – occurs in Times Square because it is a place of "rebirth," and it takes place on the Rosenbergs' fourteenth wedding anniversary because

“fourteen, after all, symbolizes fusion and organization” (4). Coover is telling us from the beginning of the novel – and from the beginning of the United States – that Uncle Sam has actively worked to shape the actions of individuals who must be fused together and organized into a nation; Uncle Sam must do this because there is nothing – nothing, at least, that Uncle Sam or Coover can point to – that innately makes America a tribe. As Freud says of the Church and the Army (and what is Nixon’s America if not a church and an army?), Uncle Sam’s America is an ‘artificial group,’ and thus:

[a] certain external force is employed to prevent them [the groups] from disintegrating and to check alterations in their structure. As a rule a person is not consulted, or is given no choice, as to whether he wants to enter such a group; any attempt at leaving it is usually met with persecution or with severe punishment...”
(*Group Psychology* 42)

That “external force,” in *The Public Burning* is Uncle Sam, and Freud gives a satisfying portrait of him; the description is so apt that it is hard to believe that while reading Freud in preparation for the novel (“Log” 88) Coover did not land on this passage:

He [the primal father], at the very beginning of the history of mankind, was the *Superman* whom Nietzsche only expected from the future. Even to-day the members of a group stand in need of *the illusion* that they are equally and justly loved by their leader; but the leader himself need love no one else, he may be of masterful nature, absolutely narcissistic, but self-confident and independent.
(*Group Psychology* 93).

If Coover’s joke is to have psychic use, if it is to be dark but not purely simply sick, it helps to have Freud to underline Coover’s point: the power of Uncle Sam – of the primal father – is illusory, or more to the point, *imaginary*. Freud’s analogous use of “the Catholic Church Christ” and “Commander-in-Chief” as stand-ins for the primal father help make the ramifications of this point clear in a way that is particularly fitting for Coover’s novel. While Eisenhower really exists, both in the reality of Coover’s novel and in our own sense of history, and Uncle Sam is a cartoon, occupying an unstable and unreal space in Coover’s work, both of them fulfill the same

purpose. As Freud says, “however different they may be in other respects, the same illusion holds good of there being a head...who loves all the individuals in the group with an equal love. Everything depends upon this illusion” (42).

It is the illusory but consuming love of Uncle Sam that makes him the perfect object for the unstable (because chaotic, because not ordered or structured) libido of the American citizen, from cab driver to Vice President. He cannot – like a flesh and blood leader – fail, deviate, or relent. Nixon’s penultimate epiphany is that it is not only the Elect, the Presidents, but the whole nation that gets possessed by Uncle Sam. Thus Nixon’s final thought in the novel:

His words warmed me and chilled me at the same time Of course, he was an incorrigible huckster, a sweet-talking con artist, you couldn’t trust him, I knew that – but what did it matter? Whatever else he was, he was beautiful (how had I ever thought him ugly?), the most beautiful thing in all the world. I was ready at last to do what I had never done before. “*I ... I love you, Uncle Sam!*” I confessed. (534)

Nixon’s radical skepticism has been replaced with an aestheticism (Uncle Sam is beauty, beauty truth) that supports a kind of neurotic balance: Nixon can accept the crimes of Uncle Sam – liar, rapist, murderer, all packaged tidily into “Whatever else he was” – while at the same time loving him. It sounds very much like a political cop-out, abdicating one’s critical faculties in favor of patriotism – it sounds, in short, very much like neoconservative fascism. But here is the hopeful kernel of the joke: Coover’s dark metaphor for the process of nationality suggests a way, however troubled, both to acknowledge the flaws of America and to love the nation. The figure of the primal father – however self-consciously mythic, however deliberately fictional – provides a metaphor for Coover’s own feelings about America: it is possible, it is in fact necessary, to accept the crimes of America, because one loves and shares the spirit of America.

Of course, Uncle Sam is just the vehicle of the metaphor, the verbally resplendent outer layer of the joke. The tenor of the metaphor, the real target of Coover's dreadful joke, is the dark comedy of national identity itself. This identity seems to come from without – and part of the darkness of the joke is that it seems to come violently, as an assault, sexual in its penetration to the very core of self – from a higher echelon of power. But it only *seems* that way, as all facets of identity – until ruptured traumatically – seem concrete and self-evident. The joke is funny, Uncle Sam is funny, because he is of course ludicrous. But he is also wish-fulfillment. The figure of Uncle Sam makes it possible, as it becomes possible for Nixon, to love America, whatever else it might be. A *really existing* Uncle Sam – like a really existing God of any sort – would actualize, would make real, the illusory structures of self that are built up around fealty to the primal father. The violence suffered in submission to this primal father would be less traumatic than the aggressor trauma involved with being a member of the tribe. The central disavowal of Coover's comedy is that this is a false choice.

To bring it back to the simplest terms, Coover's *The Public Burning* is a dark joke that strikes a neurotic balance between two traumatic revelations: first, that national identity is an illusion; and second, that this illusion brings with it disruptive and painful guilt. One cannot simply refute the feeling of nationality; it is the keystone of other facets of identity (this, again, is what is at stake in the scene where Uncle Sam's disappearance triggers an orgy of unmediated and unstructured libido). Further, refuting nationality dismantles the ethical system by which citizens hold one another accountable. If 'Americanness' is not real, then nothing makes our being contingent on the past, nothing makes us accountable for the past, and thus the past cannot be accounted for. But, on the other hand, one cannot simply embrace nationality without repressing a nation's crimes (or one is to suffer from West-Leurer's 'aggressor trauma'), and this

‘forgetting’ takes considerable psychological energy and is not perpetually sustainable. A neurotic solution – which on the page seems surreal and laughable but which also seems to resonate with the lived experience of many – is the imagination of a primal father figure who can shoulder both guilt and power.

This neurotic compromise is what Coover suggests is at the heart of national identity, but it is also his own compromise; because of this, in many ways, the fever dream of *The Public Burning* both accomplishes and deconstructs its own goal. In bringing back the repressed murder of the Rosenbergs as a surreal drama, it not only points to the crime itself but to the subsequent repression of the crime (i.e., *The Public Burning* simply *cannot* replay the moments of the execution because they have been repressed, the novel can only transmit them as a figurative dream). But if the goal of the novel is to bring to public consciousness the repressed crimes of the group, the novel is self-thwarting in gesturing towards the illusory quality of that same group. Plainly, Coover wants to wring guilt from the American mind, while at the same time deconstructing the idea that a national consciousness can exist. His historical lesson takes place on an *imaginary* stage, which allows him to speak as if History and Nation were psyches to be grappled with, although Coover cannot help but continually point to the construction of that same stage. He shares Doctorow’s moral outrage but, in the end, like Uncle Sam, he cannot help but say “leave ’em laughin’ as you say good-bye” (534).

IV. The Future of an Illusion

None of the preceding is to say that Coover’s work – however doubly-bound, however self-negating it might be – is worthless, or that it is not to my mind amongst the prime candidates for Great American Novel. *The Public Burning*, like Coover’s interrogations of all our stories

(about religion, about reality, even about the idea of stories themselves), is a wise pick for the American novel not because it succeeds, not because it absorbs and records encyclopedically all that is American, but because it demonstrates in its own unfolding the absurdity of that task. Whether you call it national spirit, or culture, or Uncle Sam, or the American way, the *thing itself* does not exist, *and yet it moves*. Thus, any attempt at the American novel must present both: the felt power of the illusion and its self-evident absurdity.

Consider another dark comedy – darker and less comic, both by several orders of magnitude – that tries in its own way to absorb and record the American spirit: Brett Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*. In the novel, Ellis makes Patrick Bateman – a member of the Elect, a wealthy WASP at the cutting edge of both American pop culture (i.e., his bizarrely non-ironic paeans to Whitney Houston and Huey Lewis, etc.) and capitalist power – the avatar and the metaphor for the American zeitgeist. He is Uncle Sam on Wall Street: a devious, murderous, narcissist whose sole defining drive is sheer will itself. As Ellis told *Rolling Stone*, “I saw him very much as a literary idea, a metaphor for my own life, my own pain and an overall criticism of the culture” (qtd. in Grow). Bateman, like Uncle Sam (and like New York City), is intended both to awe and disgust; to that end, Mary Harron’s 2000 film treats star Christian Bale – and his endless parade of luxurious belongings – to an lingering, envious, and highly sexual gaze. In one scene Bale murders a co-worker with what appears to be a Tiffany’s silver axe, in another he is seen running naked and soaked in the blood of a victim, yet the camera treats his body as a sexual object for erotic contemplation, not with the flitting glances of a horrified audience (he is, like Uncle Sam, presented as “beautiful”). Ellis ups the ante from Coover, but the goal is the same: to love Patrick Bateman – to love America – you must love him as he really is.

Through *American Psycho*, Ellis' interrogations of the brutality of the American spirit take the form of Bateman's hallucinatory violence – which, in classic postmodern form, are related unreliably, suspending them in an unreal state that calls attention to their metaphorical status – which connects Jameson's 'primordial crime of capitalism' to the 'primordial violence' of the death drive. The most succinct meeting of the two, and one of Ellis' best and simplest jokes, is the mistaking of Bateman's interest in "murders and executions" for "mergers and acquisitions" (Ellis 206). But when Ellis pushes his critique at the end of the book, we learn that if the truth about Patrick Bateman, about the American spirit, is violence, the death drive and its various cathexes, there is no *meaning* to the truth:

[T]here is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, on an entity, something illusory, and although I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: *I simply am not there*. It is hard for me to make sense on any given level. Myself is fabricated, an aberration. I am a noncontingent human being ... I still, though, hold on to one single bleak truth: no one is safe, nothing is redeemed. Yet I am blameless. ... Is evil something you are? Or is it something you do? My pain is constant and sharp and I do not hope for a better world for anyone. In fact I want my pain to be inflicted on others. I want no one to escape. But even after admitting this – and I have, countless times, in just about every act I've committed – and coming face-to-face with these truths, there is no catharsis. I gain no deeper knowledge about myself, no new understanding can be extracted from my telling. There has been no reason to tell you any of this. This confession has meant *nothing*. (376-377)

Here, like Coover, Ellis abandons morality for a similar dark-Romantic aesthetics, the beauty of knowing the truth, even if that truth is a Nietzschean embrace of the abyss. Only ever so slightly does Ellis pull back from sick humor, from the nihilistic glee in reading Freud through a hard postmodern lens, by refusing to rescue Bateman's narrative from irony; we never discover if his violence has been real or hallucination.⁹¹ There are still jokes – even good ones: "My conscience, my pity, my hopes disappeared a long time ago (probably at Harvard)" (377) – but Ellis' goal is more dark than comic: to deconstruct the self ("there is no real me"), to point out its

construction (“[m]yself is fabricated”), and to push the analysis of the self all the way down to the death drive. In classic Freudian terms, the death drive suffers the agony of *being* (“my pain is constant”) but can be diverted from suicide into sadism (“inflicted on others”) in a violent and neurotic bargain to keep the self alive and functioning. This is Ellis’ analysis of Patrick Bateman; this is Ellis’ concise encyclopedia of America, the history of the death drive turned outwards on others. The difference between Ellis and Coover, between a mostly sick joke and a thoroughly dark comedic one, is that *American Psycho* reveals – and revels in – its own self-abnegation. For anyone looking for political critique, Coover’s *Public Burning* and its dark jokes must seem in the end a dangerous compromise. Ellis is worse, his America is “blameless,” and though his Americans may find their lifestyles are “probably comparable,” in reality each American is unconnected to any other person past or present (they are each “noncontingent”), and thus ethically his joke has “meant nothing.”

And yet they write – Coover, Ellis, others – and try to take on America, to take it in, wrangle it, get it on the page, its beauty and violence, its glories and atrocities. In part, one suspects, this is because this is the grandest challenge to fiction, and only fiction is up to this challenge. To write about America, to write about being American, is to write about one of *the* most daunting – the most powerful, the most schizophrenic, the most complicated – illusions in modern times. It is an illusion that, however unreal, blankets much of the world, far beyond the geopolitical borders we might recognize on the map. The next attempt at the great American novel may come from Iraq or Afghanistan, from Detroit or Kansas City: the same illusion seen from different angles. But, regardless of how and from where it comes, any novel about America will have to deal with its crimes, because all those forgotten brutalities brought the nation into being. And it will have to deal with the paradoxical sense that national identity, beyond the limits

of mere ideology, is lived in as real even as it is understood to be illusory; like Patrick Bateman you can shake its hand and feel its flesh even as you know it is simply not there. Postmodernists have long claimed – in many cases it seems, have *hoped* – that multinational capitalism would devour the nation, as an entity and eventually as a category. But this chapter makes no such claims about the endurance of nations or national identity, about the future of such illusions. It only concerns the difficulties – in our recent history and in our current moment – of attempting to capture in fiction the dynamics of this most complicated, this most intricately constructed sphere of identity. As for the fictions of the future, thereof one must be silent, except to say: if it is comedy, it will not be true; if it is tragedy, it will not be bearable.

[6] Coda

“Why are you lying to me?”: The Trauma, Repression, and Return of the Crisis of Story

Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language.

Paul Antschel, a.k.a Paul Celan, “Bremen Speech”

Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It
was not midnight. It was not raining.

Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*

It is not a cock-up, but a cover-up.

James Wood, “Human, All Too Inhuman”

I. The “Frightful Muting” and the Crisis of Story

Freud’s skeptical joke about the two Jews from Galacia suggests at least one further intersection of dark comedy and trauma not yet fully explored in this dissertation; this time, the joke and the trauma are centered on the speculative possessions of language and story. The joke seeks to trouble – even to destroy – our epistemological certainties, and perhaps the most central of those certainties is the faith in language:

Two Jews met in a railway carriage at a station in Galicia. “Where are you going?” asked one. “To Cracow”, was the answer. “What a liar you are!” broke out the other. “If you say you’re going to Cracow, you want me to believe you’re going to Lemberg. But I know that in fact you’re going to Cracow. So why are you lying to me?” (*Jokes* 137-138).

This is a dark comic narrative in miniature. On the surface of its comic envelope, the joke deploys an absurd conceit: the first Jew’s convoluted logic makes the second Jew into a liar, even though he has told the truth. But at the deeper level, the joke is a tragedy about the solipsistic paranoia – the trauma of semiotic isolation – that is repressed when we use language to communicate. The first Jew’s understanding of language is a dark variation on Epimenides’ paradox.⁹² Ostensibly, he understands language as innately dishonest and yet he still believes it is useful for communicating information. In other words, if language *always* deceives, then in order to tell the truth (i.e., the second Jew is going to Cracow) one must lie (i.e., the second Jew should have said, per the first Jew’s example, that he was going to Lemberg. When the second Jew tells the truth, he violates the semantic logic of language. That this logic is absurd does not matter, because this is a joke, and not an experiment in linguistic philosophy.

What does matter is the first Jew’s angry reaction; in his hostile claim that he *knows* both that the second Jew is lying and where the second Jew is really headed, the first Jew disavows

the failure of language. He also disavows the epistemological abyss that follows on the collapse of language: if we cannot learn from the words of others, vast chasms appear in our knowledge. Further, the open-endedness of the joke – the first Jew’s hysterical “why are you lying to me?” is never answered – suggests that there is no solution to this reflexive paradox. One cannot use a faulty instrument to calibrate itself; describing the failure of language *in that same language* is, in short, the implicit joke of Paul de Man’s irony of irony, the dark comedy of deconstruction.⁹³

Thus, what the joke is *really* about is the absurdity of language – not simply the absurdities of its paradoxes and ruptures, but the absurdity of relying on it as an epistemological tool. Because it is a joke and not a linguistic treatise, it need not respond to all the positive evidence we have for language’s ability to function in spite of its aporias and failures. Instead, the joke short-circuits the ego and targets the secret fear – repressed out of necessity – that each subject is isolated by the failure of language, that no one else will ever truly know what we mean when we speak and write. From the ambiguity of the smallest unit (i.e., whether the ‘orange’ in one’s mind is the same as the ‘orange’ in another’s) to the irony of irony in the largest texts (i.e., whether any two subjective readings of a text can ever be the same) we at once *know* that language cannot work the way we imagine it does and at the same time disavow the failure of language with every word.

Trauma, as this project has demonstrated, represents a moment when this disavowal seems unsustainable. When faced with the overwhelming, the horrific, and the catastrophic, we admit that language fails and this admission is a traumatic experience in and of itself. In a century scarred by genocide and industrialized violence, as well as the more intimate – but no less traumatic – violence of the private and domestic scene, the concern for the function of

language may seem academic, even flippant. And yet for literature to confront the horrors of the modern age, it must also acknowledge in some way the underlying – and often unconscious – fear that even the most finely wrought novel or the most elegantly sculpted poem may fail because language itself may fail. The story of contemporary fiction has been told as the struggle of innovation against both representational challenges and stagnation, the twin agons of an ever-evolving modernity and the titanic inheritance of past writers. However, it seems to me that these challenges have not been viewed through the lens of trauma before. In other words, the properly traumatic experience of semantic solipsism has not been linked to the development of contemporary literature and its struggle with the postmodern condition. Here, I am suggesting only a few theoretical moves in such a direction.

Following on the treatment of “poetry after Auschwitz” in Chapter Three, it seems sensible to take the Second World War, and particularly the Holocaust, as the arch-trauma for poetics. Unlike previous wars – horrific as they were – the industrialized murder and violence of the late 1930s and 1940s seemed to demand poetic silence, full stop. There was an unprecedented challenge, both in terms of representation and trauma: how to capture, in words, the thousands of horrors unfolding at once, and how, before even writing, to *process* such horrors? However, the failure of language – that is, the traumatic realization that language can and does fail – obviously predates the violence of the Second World War; the Modernist movement was already concerned with such failure and the horror of solipsism. The issues obviously concerned James Joyce and, later, Samuel Beckett, but it is Joseph Conrad – particularly sensitive to the fractures of language – who is in his letters most explicit about it: “Life knows us not and we do not know life – we don't even know our own thoughts. Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and the other half each man understands each word

after the fashion of his own folly and conceit” (17). Thus, the traumatic experiences of armed conflict, and the challenge they posed to poetry and prose, only sparked the return of the repressed. Further, this older fear – the failure of language – had to be repressed anew in order for make poetic sense of the atrocities of the mid-century.

This process is evident in the words of Paul Celan:

Reachable, near and not lost, there remained in the midst of the losses this one thing: language. It, the language, remained, not lost, yes in spite of everything. But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through frightful muting, pass through the thousand darknesses of deathbringing speech. It passed through and gave back no words for that which happened; yet it passed through this happening. Passed through and could come to light again, “enriched” by all this. (395).⁹⁴

Celan’s “frightful muting” and the subjectivity that “passed through and gave back no words for that which happened” recall Cathy Caruth’s black hole of trauma. In order to reclaim that trauma, for the sake of political justice and personal sanity, it must be brought back into language and narrative; one must be able to tell the story, or at the very least a story. Yet Celan is slippery – how, one wonders, does language “pass through” something with “no words”? – suggesting without explanation that language is reborn after trauma, ‘enriched’ somehow by its own failure. The traditional artistic sense of Celan’s words is that experimentation and innovation will reinvigorate poetic language to meet the representational challenges of trauma.⁹⁵ But this drive to witness, to testify to historical trauma, is also the need to disavow (once again) the structural trauma of language’s failures. Telling the story means bringing one trauma to light while banishing the other to darkness. We find ourselves asking, like Freud’s Jew: why are you lying to me? Because, the honest artist would answer, in order to tell you a true story, one must lie about the Truth of Story.

II. Exhaustion and Impoverishment

When Modernist literary authors abandoned the illusion of objectivity and the claim to straight narrative realism, it may have been in the name of exploring new artistic ground, but the banished trauma of solipsism haunted their experimentation and innovation. The increasing prevalence of metafiction – from the moment Molly Bloom cries out “O Jamesy let me up out of this pooh” (719) – serves as acknowledgement (often darkly comedic in nature) of this haunting. In other words, metafictional tricks, from winks through the fourth wall to a work’s self-reflexive discussion of its own construction, playfully acknowledge the fictitiousness of fiction but also acknowledge the darker failures of language itself. Some writing – journalism, nonfiction, genre fiction, even academic writing – simply denies or ignores the failures of language. But literary fiction cannot simply deny it and yet it must disavow it. In contemporary criticism, when we treat a work as “literary” we mean it has a poetics, which is to say – in a variation on the absurd logic of the Jew in Freud’s joke – that it attempts to mean something by saying something else. Thus, the attempt to tell a metaphorical story, to use poetic language to represent *more* than simply what the words on the page describe, is also the target of Freud’s joke.

In the previous chapter, it became clear how Robert Coover struggled between his political desire – to bring about a public accounting of the deaths of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg – and his artistic desire – to bring the mechanics of story to light. Coover fails, bravely but decidedly, to tell the story of the Rosenbergs because he is too well aware of just how *story* works, or rather *doesn’t* work. The simple premise, that written language can capture a moment in time or capture the definite article Truth of an event, is for Coover a highly speculative possession; throughout his career, his jokes – sometimes at odds with Coover’s other goals as an

artist – have always made the myth of story their target. That is what has given Coover’s jokes purpose, what has made them tendentious jokes. Coover could have written a historical polemic, or even an academic treatise, but it would have required him to disavow his greatest insight, to repress what he knows about illusions and stories. Dark comedy doesn’t allow Coover to have it perfectly both ways – to be honest with himself and to tell the truth, to honor philosophy and history – but it allows him to negotiate the crisis. And, though Coover is for me the dark comedian most concerned with the function of story (with Donald Barthelme coming in a very close second), he is also a rarity in contemporary fiction, confronting the failures of language and story so directly. What we see more often, it seems, is literatures of exhaustion or impoverishment

Contemporary fiction inherits from Modernism an awareness of the illusory nature of story’s smooth function; this inheritance comes from a fraught moment when fiction was turning from the wild artistic optimism of early Modernism to the skeptical depression of late Modernism. For James Joyce, the problems of story were very real; in spite of his excess and experimentation, Joyce was also concerned with a kind of realism, both social and psychological, with the question of how to get his contemporary Ireland and all its suffering on the page. For Joyce, nothing less than the exhaustion of language could meet this particular crisis of fiction, or of story in general, which is in short the abyss between speaker and listener, author and reader, what is intended and what is understood. If Virginia Woolf only hoped a single metaphor might land, a tiny pavement strip across the gap, Joyce seems intent on building an imposing bridge, like Xerxes’ fleet, lashed together across the Hellespont. The very scale of the task which Joyce attempts openly disavows the crisis of the novel. But while the fetishizing of technique and experimentation may have created powerful art, it papered over the crisis of story. And, when the

fetish of excess began to negate the point of storytelling, something had to give – texts became so desperate to find each and every work-around the central aporia of storytelling that they became in essence unreadable to the general public.

Joyce's work is a kind of neurotic hysteria, a mania that represses the same traumatic disillusion to which it serves as a reaction. Samuel Beckett sensed this desperation and its exhaustion, relating to James Knowlson his now famous revelation:

I realized that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one's material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realized that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding. (qtd. in Knowlson 319)

In Nietzschean terms, Beckett embraced untruth, dedicating himself to epistemological failures – especially those of language – as fervently as Joyce sought to overmaster and defeat such failures; Beckett's middle period, from the end of the Second World War, is defined by what James Olney calls “a radical questioning of how and whether, sunk in the human condition as we are, we can know anything,” or, more succinctly, “epistemological skepticism” (348). But Beckett brought a particular (and particularly Irish) sense of black humor to his skepticism, which made it possible for him to *write* works about the illegibility of the subject. It is telling that, given Beckett's choices of quotidian traumas – the bloody Irish history he shares with Joyce, or the horrors he experienced in World War II, or the alienation from and loss of his mother – he still chose, in essence, a prolonged dark comedy about the inability of the subject to communicate or connect.

Beckett's approach is almost singular, his reductions so extreme that his work becomes almost an archetype. And while Beckett's style did not broadly take root in American literary fiction, his particular reaction to the trauma of solipsism found a place in crime fiction. Crime

fiction and true-crime has, in fact, become something of an underground refuge for epistemological skepticism and Moran's line in *Molloy*, which serves as an epigraph to this conclusion, is the paradigm of unknowing for Beckett's inheritors.⁹⁶ Beckett's noir shares with Raymond Chandler's an acceptance of untruth, though Beckett fully immerses his narration in skepticism while Chandler's novels immerse unknowing characters in a knowable plot. Beckett and Chandler also share a sense of humanity. Their heroes are often doomed to fail – fail to *solve*, let alone understand fully – but they carry on, just the same (of Chandler and Beckett we might say, paraphrasing each a bit, 'down these meaningless streets must a man go who is not himself meaningless').

Increasingly, those heir to Beckett's skepticism have turned towards the sadistic, neo-noir risks becoming a sick epistemological comedy. For example, Brian Singer's *The Usual Suspects* unwrites itself in its final scene, forcing the viewer to acknowledge that the story of Verbal Kent (Kevin Spacey), which has been dramatized in seemingly objective and realistic flashback sequences, has been fabricated; the entire film is thus revealed to be an epistemological joke on the viewer. David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* plays a similar joke on the viewer. The film's first act, the surreal but largely benign story of Naomi Watts' ingénue character, Betty Elms, and her arrival and success in Los Angeles, is rewritten as the psychotic fantasy of Diane Selwyn (also Watts) by the film's darker second half.

But unlike Singer's film, *Mulholland Drive* has powerful moments of dark comedy and – to say the least – does not participate in bad-faith realism. The surrealist absurdity of the film's first half lets us know – as Beckett let us know with his own absurd characters, stranded in limbos, stuffed in vases and ashcans – that Lynch has no interest in the untroubled epistemology of realism. When the film does venture into more easily readable 'realistic' sections, they play

out as dark comedic parables. An exemplary scene features a henchman (Mark Pellegrino) who, when startled while robbing an office, accidentally shoots a cleaning lady and in a classic slapstick move, she is struck in the buttocks. The scene simultaneously plays out like a Three Stooges bit and a gruesome demonstration of the logic of criminality as the henchman is forced to kill the cleaning lady, and two others, in order to cover up his compounding transgressions. Each gunshot is necessitated by the previous one, a kind of mechanical staging that turns the henchman into a Bergsonian automaton, frustrated but compelled to fulfil a logic that is more powerful than his will. Further, since the first gunshot is an accident, the entire scene is both entirely logical and thoroughly random; it is both determinism and entropy, the laws of the universe in miniature.

The dark comedic point of the scene applies to the film as a whole, in that there seems to be an ordering logic to Lynch's phantasmagoric Los Angeles, a kind of impersonal but ubiquitous death drive (what Pynchon calls entropy) that is overmastering and irresistible to those who understand it, inhuman to its victims who do not. Lynch thus balances the horrors of not knowing – characters who are crushed by the system, or stricken with amnesia, or locked in paralyzing fantasies – with the horrors of knowing – like Diane in the conclusion, committing suicide after fully realizing her complicity with the death drive of Lynch's world. Lynch's comedy is much darker – much closer to sick comedy – than that of Beckett or Chandler; whereas the latter might say, 'you know nothing, but...', Lynch seems to say, 'you know nothing, be glad.'⁹⁷ Thus the leitmotif of the film, the breathless fade-to-black voice-over intoning "*silencio*." What could be more indicative of the failure of language than characters being ushered into silence in a language they do not speak?

Even the Coen brothers' humanistic *The Big Lebowski*, equal parts parody of and homage to Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, edges very close to sick comedy. While the film is pulled back to a dark comic balance by Jeff Bridges' sympathetic portrayal of Jeffrey Lebowski, one of the purest preterites outside of Pynchon, it still conceals a sick joke about our inability to fathom the world or each other. This sick joke stays submerged and is only revealed fully in the film's penultimate scene, a botched attempt by Walter (John Goodman) to scatter the ashes of Donny (Steve Buscemi), the protagonists' deceased companion; the scene is rife with interpersonal misreadings, including Walter's absurd attempt to structure the meaning of the event with clichéd narratives of Vietnam and its veterans.⁹⁸ Walter's inability to enunciate a proper eulogy for Donny is a moment of extreme skepticism about the ability to know one another through language; the scene is capped by a sick comedic moment – Donny's ashes blow back into Walter's and Lebowski's faces – that is awkwardly tempered by the transition back to the everyday world (for Walter and Lebowski) of bowling. The comic resolution and Lebowski's humanity – he protests Walter's bad-faith attempt to suture the abyss represented by Donny, attempting to opt for silence – both allow us to read the film as a dark comedy; in acknowledging the abyss between each of us, and yet moving forward, the Coen brothers' film is heir to the dark comedy of Beckett – but just barely.

Literary noir, like Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*, Craig Clevinger's *The Contortionist's Handbook*, and Will Christopher Baer's *Phineas Poe* trilogy, also deliberately set up their readers for epistemological jokes.⁹⁹ The relationship between the tragedy of their ontology and the humor on the pages of the novels would be an intriguing place to consider the further intersection of dark comedy and the traumatic failure of language and story. For the purposes of this brief discussion, it must suffice to say that these novels are like the Jew in Freud's skeptical

joke, assuming *a priori* that language deceives and organized around that logic. One might ask, ‘Why are they lying to me?’ Because, comes the answer of dark comedy, in order to tell the truth about story, one must tell a story that is a lie.

III. Return of the Repressed: Hysteria and the Future of Fiction

While noir has fuzzy boundaries, it is frequently set aside from contemporary literary fiction; Auster is perhaps the strongest exception that demonstrates the general rule. American literary fiction could not be confined to the metaphor of criminal unreliability, nor was it ready to challenge directly the smooth function of story. Still chasing the dream of the ‘great American novel,’ literary fiction had to attempt to absorb and transcend the shock of new developments in culture, politics, and technology; doing so required a belief – however troubled – in the poetics of storytelling, in metonymy, metaphor, and allegory. In short, it needed to do more, not less; it was not headed in Beckett’s direction, but back towards exhaustion. Contemporary American fiction had its stalwarts, Bellow, Updike, and Roth, who wrote beautifully about the sprawling philosophical complexities of modernity, and whose language was poetic in the truest metaphorical sense. And yet, even before James Wood gave the impulse a name at the millennial dawn, the way was paved already for hysterical realism:

This is not magical realism. It is hysterical realism. Storytelling has become a kind of grammar in these novels; it is how they structure and drive themselves on. The conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted, and overworked. Appropriately, then, objections are not made at the level of verisimilitude, but at the level of morality: this style of writing is not to be faulted because it lacks reality – the usual charge against botched realism – but because it seems evasive of reality while borrowing from realism itself. (42)

The point here is not to revisit Wood’s critique (the “classic takedown of faux-Dickensian” writing, as the *Nation* archive re-titled the piece). Instead, it is to put the ‘hysteria’

of hysterical realism into the context of the trauma of solipsism. Working through the litany of indictments that Wood files against the genre, one sees that the vast majority of them come down to the doubled crime of ‘evading reality’ and ‘borrowing from realism.’ It should be clear by now that this is exactly the post-traumatic situation for an author dealing with trauma. On the one hand, such writers *must*, in order to provide testimony, rely on some functional aspects of realism; on the other hand, in order to preserve their illusory but necessary speculative possessions, they must also evade reality.

This author, traumatized in the real world or writing about real-world trauma, must somehow negotiate this paradox – which Wood rightly calls hysterical – and, as this dissertation has demonstrated, dark comedy is one particular way to work through such a negotiation. Wood criticizes Zadie Smith, for example, for being “a frustrating writer, for she has a natural comic gift, and yet is willing to let passages of her book descend into cartoonishness and a kind of itchy, restless extremism” (44). Had this dissertation focused on British instead of American literature, Smith would be an exemplary dark comedian, for exactly the things that provoke Wood’s ire. Her “natural comic gift” allows her to render characters that, as Wood himself writes, “[s]ometimes... seem to provoke her sympathy, at other times they are only externally comic’ (ibid). What Wood reads as inconsistency can also be read as ambivalence, not in the sense of uncertainty, but in the Keatsian sense of negative capability; the “itchy, restless” sense that underlines Smith’s cartoonish sections is the definitive dark comedic mode, the ability both to acknowledge and disavow trauma. Not all dark comedy is hysterical realism, but hysterical realism is clearly a type of dark comedy; it is the necessarily neurotic reaction to the complicated situation of the modern writer.

This situation is reflexively complicated when the trauma is, first and foremost, the crisis of writing. While Pynchon, Smith, and Rushdie – those Wood calls out most emphatically – all testify to quotidian traumas, they are all also motivated by a need to witness a different crisis, the crisis of story and the trauma of its failure. Wood writes that “[s]ince modernism, many of the finest writers have been offering critique and parody of the idea of character, in the absence of convincing ways to return to an innocent mimesis” (43), and he is certainly right. The dream of mimesis was dashed a century ago, or rather, dashed again; it is more likely that we knew all along, or at least since Plato.¹⁰⁰

Considering that Pynchon, Smith, and Rushdie have all published novels in the last year, it seems that the ‘hysterical’ reaction to the crisis of story continues; these authors are not returning, innocently or otherwise, to mimesis.¹⁰¹ And it is Pynchon’s *Bleeding Edge* that serves most perfectly as a coda, a bookend to the issues raised by the anxious and ambiguous conclusion of *Vineland*. The latest Pynchon novel is, appropriately, a detective novel that provides few answers; it marries the exhaustive plotting and populating of Joyce to the epistemological impoverishment of Beckett. But Pynchon is only an extreme example of the general case of a hysterical reaction to the traumatic failure of language. A more thoroughgoing analysis is needed to serve the specific and contextual details of Pynchon, Smith, Rushdie, and others. But it seems quite defensible to say that Wood apprehends only half of hysterical realism when he says it is a cover-up. It *is*, of course, a cover-up; it is a disavowal of the trauma at the core of language. But it is also a concerted, if neurotic, effort to address that trauma. It is the illusion of truth in the service of untruth, as Nietzsche might say.

Above all else, this: no analysis can pronounce ‘in the end’ because no analysis ever truly ends. As soon as they are deconstructed, illusions start to shimmer, coalescing into tropes and

myths, identities and subjectivities, speculative possessions that seem quite real (especially to us, when they are ours). As soon as they are untangled, the knots of neurosis entwine again. But all is not lost, for this is only half madness, the double-consciousness of the postmodern subject who acknowledges and denies in one breath the abyss between us, around us, within us. This is the dark comedy of existence: an armistice, if never peace, between truth and sanity. At times we long for analysis terminable, for cures, answers, and solutions. But neuroses are all we have, all we are. They can't go on, we say. They'll go on, we know.

Endnotes

Chapter One

¹ Benny Profane in *V.*, Tyrone Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Zoyd Wheeler in *Vineland*, etc. Benny Profane, whose name gestures to amphetamines (in the 1950s, the outsider's drug of choice), and the profane world set apart from and against religious and political teleology and order; in Pynchon's world the two are intertwined, and march the world towards destruction. The profane preterite, doomed to be left behind by the rapture, is in luck: the rapture brings only death. But Profane's name comes, Pynchon tells us, from the Italian *Sfacimento*, close enough to *disfacimento* for 'decay, decline, or undo.' So even the good-natured schlemiel's party cannot last; the Whole Sick Crew must disband. Meanwhile, Tyrone Slothrop, a near carbon-copy of Profane, stands for 'Entropy or Sloth.' We find out his life has been predestined by evil forces in the military-industrial complex (his fate is tied to the Nazis' V rocket series), and his name joking questions whether his failures to succeed in life are the result of 'sloth' and apathy, or the 'entropy' that rules Pynchon's world. Zoyd Wheeler, the most cartoonish name of the lot, gets its gist from Pynchon's enjoyment of the 'oid' endings in *Vineland* (his quasi-supernatural Thanatoids are "like ghosts, only different" [170]). Thus Zoyd is Z-ish, like Gary Shteyngart's beta-immigrants but much more dispossessed; he's a Z-list celebrity, 'wheeling' about without direction. This hyperbolic failure rescues him from evil, because power – and drive, direction, a clear worldview – are always signs that you're in the ranks of Death.

² Von Trotha (who wages genocide on the Herero in *V.*), Captain Blicero (a literal Nazi, pederast, and mad scientist in *Gravity's Rainbow*), Agent Brock Vond (a sexual sadist and pedophile, face of Reagan's war on drugs in *Vineland*).

³ In one way, Pynchon hides his revelation in a novel that – to critics – seemed both less complex and more comical, less menacing than *V.* or *Gravity's Rainbow*. As John Leonard put it in *The Nation*, "[it's] easier to read than anything else by Thomas Pynchon except *The Crying of Lot 49*. Like *Crying*, it's a brief for the disinherited and dispossessed, the outlaws and outcasts of an underground America. Also like *Crying*, I suspect it's a breather between biggies" (281). Likewise, Salman Rushdie gently pointed out that it was "not the book we thought Thomas Pynchon was writing," calling it instead "light and funny" and, in doing so, ignoring the dark conflict at the heart of the novel (36). So when Leonard wrote, "Can we count on the usual entropy, paranoia and Manicheism?" (ibid), it sounded like chiding – lovingly – an old friend; critics felt they already had the score on *Vineland*, even before reading it.

⁴ The contingency plan was affiliated with COINTELPRO and other domestic surveillance programs run by the United States government. REX84 involved plans to round up liberals,

protestors, and activists *en masse* in the event of a full-scale invasion of Latin America that might trigger domestic unrest.

⁵ This fear of the entropy that inevitably came with the freedom of the 1960s is why her mother, Sasha, “believed her daughter had ‘gotten’ this uniform fetish from her...a helpless turn toward images of authority” (*Vineland* 83). Frenesi is representative of the “children longing for discipline” (ibid 269), as Vond describes them, the 1960s generation for whom freedom led to a fear of entropy and chaos; it is this fear – in Frenesi, and assumedly others – that Vond exploits and distills into bondage-sex scenarios.

⁶ Even confined to a narrower historical bandwidth than usual, Pynchon is not without historical allegory; Vond’s desire to rape Prairie, explicitly figured in agrarian terms, is obviously meant to link his political evil (raping the spirit of the 1960s) to that of manifest destiny (raping the prairie) and the death-drive of Western civilization which for Pynchon is emblematically anti-life.

⁷ There’s obviously a huge gap between political conservatism and outright fascism, but in Pynchon’s Manichean world they are the same. Pynchon also goes easier on Generation X than he does on the Baby Boomers. The Baby Boomers, for Pynchon, sell out the hippie ethos; they get themselves kicked out of the garden. Generation X is a post-lapsarian cohort, who – in Pynchon’s *Vineland* – are not only born into the hard world beyond the garden but are also lulled into complacency by the ubiquitous ‘tube.’ If anything, Pynchon sizes them up as less intelligent and more innocent.

⁸ This scene represents not only the central problem of *Vineland*, but of tragicomedies in general. *Vineland*’s conclusion – in which a last-second *deus ex machina* castrates Brock Vond’s power, after which Vato and Blood ferry Vond away – so demonstrably disavows reality that Prairie’s wish to have Vond back strikes us twice. First, it is impressed upon us how the disavowal performed by comedy – when set in tandem with tragedy – can become so extreme that it thereby gestures undeniably at the truth. Reagan cancelled REX84 but not domestic surveillance as a practice or the other government programs undermining democracy and civil liberties; Pynchon’s comical use of magical realism, necessary to generate a happy ending for *Vineland*’s characters, serves to remind us that we don’t have Yurok ghosts on our side. We haven’t gotten rid of the fascists. Second, Pynchon is telling us that even if we got rid of the fascists, we’d long for them back (since we willed them into power in the first place).

⁹ One is reminded of Chuck Jones’ *What’s Opera, Doc?* – the blueprint for dark comedy. Jones’ masterpiece parody of Wagnerian excess is one of the few times Fudd gets the jump on Bugs, but it is unique because – after apparently killing Bugs – Fudd sinks into remorseful melancholy. For once, the cartoon disavowal of mortality seems to fail. Not only is death possible, but also a quality of regret and sadness that viscerally punctures the two-dimensional cartoon of Fudd. Only at the last second does the Jones’ short film pull back, showing us the resurrected (or perhaps never dead) Bugs and ‘restoring’ the immortal condition of the cartoon universe. However, it seems possible to consider this an epistemological rupture – a momentary but profound intrusion of the Real – in the structure of the work. It certainly had that effect on me as

a child; it left me laughing – Bugs was playing possum, the whole time, of course – but later it haunted me. Bugs Bunny could die. Anyone could die. I could die. Welcome, mortality.

¹⁰Also of great use, of course, were her seminars which I took at Stony Brook University.

¹¹Freud's early work takes a unique approach to trauma, defined by deferred action. For Freud, who was specifically writing about childhood and infantile sexual thoughts and experiences, a range of events – from incestuous fantasies to actual cases of molestation – that occurred during childhood are not forgotten so much as they are given no disproportionate weight or importance in the memorial archive. Only later, after puberty, when adult sexuality and more, importantly, the cultural taboos that structure what is and is not permissible are understood, do some of these events become, retroactively, traumatizing. During the latent period these memories cannot properly be said to be traumatic. While Freud abandoned the seduction theory, I think the idea of deferred trauma is a valuable one – particularly with respect to the idea of racial and ethnic identity – where childhood memories of persecution do not register as constitutive of identity. My grandmother, a German Jew, recalled in her later years being called a 'kike' by Catholic school boys on her way home from yeshiva in Sheepshead Bay when she was a pre-teen in the 1930s. Her mother (my great-grandmother) told her a compassionate lie, that 'kike' was gentile slang for 'a cute girl,' and my grandmother went on her merry way for several years, blushing happily (one likes to imagine). Years later, when the horrors of Nazi Germany became public knowledge and my grandmother was too old to be protected by white lies, she learned the word's true and full meaning and at that moment found herself weeping. Afterwards, she made a conscious effort to distance herself defensively from her Judaism and Jewishness, affecting a showy – and sometimes unsettling – fondness for all things Teutonic (Wagner, in particular). A unscientific case study if ever there was one, and yet, it feels to me that Freud was quite right about the structure of deferred trauma.

¹² Discussed in the first chapter of this project, writers like Judith Herman often conflate psychological and social necessity when discussing the importance of 'remembering and telling' (cf. Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery*). See in particular her passages on world-historical responsibility (177-178). Herman focuses on the social in a way that presupposes – at least strategically – a coherent subject able to act.

¹³ Another great shame: Hemingway's lack of a sense of humor. But it is interesting, given the jokes Chuck Palahniuk and Gore Vidal both make about castration – literal and figurative – in the novels examined in the third chapter. Jake's aside, "I suppose it was funny," seems to lead in the same direction and then stops. Hemingway's iceberg approach seems like it would have made him a good candidate for the indirect method of dark comedy, but – then again – perhaps he found comedy insufficiently masculine. (Or perhaps his jokes *were* good, but got nipped by the censors.)

¹⁴ Likewise, Hemingway himself cannot get directly to psychological reality. The complicated apparatus of obstacles – editorial censorship from within and without – that prevented Hemingway from simply laying bare the illusion of masculine subjectivity (of a stable male identity) is far more complicated than the character of Jake. But it is not difficult to imagine a

Hemingway who both knows and does not know that the masculinity he champions is an illusion, and who thus both does and does not want to testify – even veiled in fiction – to his own traumatic disillusionment.

¹⁵ Hegel is little known for his discourse on comedy, but he does touch on it both in *Aesthetics* and in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, where in discussing Aristophanes he says: “For what really is comic is to show a man or a thing as they disclose themselves in their extent; and if the thing is not itself in contradiction, the comic element is superficial and groundless” (427-428). Mark Roche, who does a lovely job bringing Hegel’s thoughts on comedy to light, translates this line differently, more to the point of this project: “The comic is to show a person or a thing as it dissolves itself internally” (128). Hobbes, who says far less about comedy than Hegel, is nevertheless quoted quite a bit more; his ‘Sudden Glory’ stays with us because its blunt apperception of the cruelty of comedy is so succinct and rings so true: “Sudden glory is the passion which maketh those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves” (43). Even Hobbes, in his serene bleakness, would have been surprised by sick comedy.

¹⁶ It is difficult for biographers of Freud not to indulge in speculation about Freud’s affairs, in part because Freud’s efforts to keep his private life opaque while using it as the foundation for his own theories begs certain questions. But I think for Freud’s inheritors his particular enmity for marriage – even early in his career – has as much to do with the shifting and expanding focus of psychoanalysis as it does with his private unhappiness. As Freud developed his thinking from the etiology of neuroses to the etiology of civilization – one massive neurotic complex – marriage increasingly appears to sit at the nexus of several powerful forces of repression: the church, the state, and social codes. In other words, for marriage to work, the church must sanction the marriage, the state builds a category of citizen around it (basing certain rights, responsibilities, taxation, etc.), and social codes dictate just how far a married person can bend the ‘rules’ of monogamy. All these forces work contrary to the sexual instincts, which do not know or care about the power structures of the real world. So marriage really sits at the core of the neurotic state of man, who – for Freud – is a lover *and* a killer, but a lover first and foremost.

¹⁸ Žižek shows up quite a bit in this dissertation without quite being part of its theoretical framework. As Freud said of Nietzsche, Žižek often has those words for that which has remained mute in me. And yet, as Freud also said of Nietzsche, I often find myself resisting more than enlisting Žižek’s work – it is at times too easily in love with the language of the Real, a bogeyman which can crop up whenever there’s an aporia that needs explaining.

¹⁹ George Mahl, who conducted an impressive meta-analysis of Freud’s dream writings, points to the difficulty caused by Freud’s willful opacity: “I made no attempt to interpret things about Freud’s unconscious that he himself did not assert,” because “Freud censored his dreams and associations in both the dream book and the Fleiss letters” and “the fact of Freud’s censorship limits even the present study” (41). Nevertheless, Mahl is able to provide quantifiable evidence that a majority of Freud’s dreams were about Jakob. And we know that the analysis of those

dreams was instrumental in finally putting the seduction theory to rest, so it is unlikely the dreams represented evidence of childhood sexual abuse.

²⁰ Gay narrates the iconic story, in which Jakob tells his son of being shoved off the sidewalk by a Christian; the gentile shouts, “Off the sidewalk, Jew!” (12), while Jakob – defeated, seemingly defenseless – can only submissively pick his new fur hat (a serious investment for a man of Jakob’s limited means) out of the gutter. This kind of Althusserian moment, in which Jakob is hailed as a Jew – subhuman, an interloper in Christian society – scarred Freud, even when related secondhand and after the fact. As Gay writes, “[s]tung by the spectacle of a cowardly Jew groveling to a Gentile, Freud developed fantasies of revenge” (12).

Chapter Two

²¹ J.P. Stern argues of Yossarian and Schweik, “at the point at which we first encounter them they are both concerned with one thing and one thing only: the protection of the threatened self against the accidents of war, against violent death” (207). Stern’s point, well taken, is that both protagonists’ comic obsession with self-perseveration is – against the real violence of life – not at all comic.

²² Many of these conclusions – reinforced by later studies (Seed, Merrill, etc.) stem from A ‘*Catch-22*’ *Casebook* (1973, ed. Kiley and McDonald), which assembled several fields of criticism – somewhat uncommonly – with the assistance of Heller himself. See McDonald’s own article on the structure of repetition and Ramsey on Heller and the Absurd (via the various traditions of West, Kafka, and Camus). Heller’s own words, reprinted from a 1962 interview in *The Realist*, cover many of his influences, both those Heller consciously drew upon and those Heller came to see in response to the first wave of criticism and review of *Catch-22*. A later interview, reprinted from *The Detroit News*, contains Heller’s most direct statements on *Catch-22*’s anachronism: “I see *Catch-22* as not about World War II” and “What *Catch-22* is more about than World War II is the Korean War and the Cold War. The elements that inspired the ideas came to me from the civilian situation in this country in the 1950s” (298).

²³ For only one example, the move from the unconstitutional but proscribed emergency powers of Franklin Roosevelt during World War Two – which were tied to discrete events and a concrete time-frame – to the ever-evolving powers of the military-industrial complex of the Cold War and, later, during the so-called War on Terror – which were tied, increasingly loosely, to amorphous and interminable threats, and openly made all legal methods of restraint relative.

²⁴ It is a common critical refrain that Heller ‘doubles’ nearly everything in his text – from doubled pairs of protagonists (Yossarian and the Chaplain) and sadistic antagonists (Aarfy and Captain Black) to the “soldier who saw everything twice.” The third appearance of a soldier in a body cast is, though Yossarian and Dunbar comically deny it, *different* from the original Soldier in White, who – of course – appears twice.

²⁵ For only one representative example, the moral and aesthetic outrage in *Deadelus*'s 1963 review. Or the more canonical jeremiad of "Catch-\$\$" launched by Grover Sales and now anthologized in *A Catch-22 Casebook*.

²⁶ One of several deliberate anachronisms that Heller points to in his 1975 *Playboy* interview with Sam Merrill: "I deliberately seeded the book with anachronisms like loyalty oaths, helicopters, IBM machines and agricultural subsidies to create the feeling of American society from the McCarthy period on" (61).

²⁷ In his anthologized interview with *The Realist*, the interviewer follows up a question about the 'soldier in white' by asking Heller if he had read Trumbo's novel. Heller responds, "Oh, sure" and adds that he enjoys the historical irony that conservatives – outraged by Heller's ambiguously anti-war sentiment in the Cold War moment of *Catch-22*'s publication – endorsed Trumbo's unambiguously anti-war message in the isolationist anti-Roosevelt moment of the early 1930s. However, Heller avoids commenting on influence and the interviewer doesn't press the issue.

²⁸ A notable exception would have been the chapter "Love, Dad" – excised from the manuscript before publication, but appearing later in *Playboy* (December, 1969). The chapter alternates between a psychological sketch of the Nately family history and letters written to airman Nately from his father. The combination of family history, Nately's psycho-sexual motivation in his relationship with a Roman prostitute, and his father's own sexualized missives, all mark a sharp deviation from Heller's otherwise 'opaque' brand of exteriority.

²⁹ Or, I should say, it's absent from the poetics of Heller's humor – for an inventive discussion of homosexual themes in Heller, using this "seemingly superficial joke" (Woodson) as a starting point, see Jon Woodson's *A Study of Joseph Heller's Catch-22: Going Around Twice* (79).

³⁰ Except when they are not: Freud might argue that those *too* repressed or *too* enlightened wouldn't stand to benefit from Heller's comedy. Likewise, Downing might argue that someone with more pliable expectations for fiction and semiotics might find less surprise – less incongruity with expectations – and thus less humor in Heller's verbal slapstick.

³¹ When we, at least, read Heller's full description of Snowden's death, Yossarian screams in horror and then literally silences himself by clamping his hand over his mouth. He then appears numbed, saying only "there there" in a seemingly hypnotic trance.

³² Nick Perry, in his 1984 article "Catch, class and bureaucracy: the meaning of Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*," attempts to map the continuing success of Heller's novel in socio-linguistic terms.

³³ In the *Catch-22 Casebook*, Heller's "On Translating *Catch-22* Into a Movie" details his feelings on the overtly 'allegorical' (Heller's word) nature of his novel. In the *Playboy* interview with Sam Merrill, he is again explicit about the metaphorical nature of the novel.

³⁴ One gets the impression that Heller, like Hemingway before him, might have written rather different novels had they been able to write the words they wanted to. It's easy to valorize profanity, but it's also arguable that the power of Hemingway's iceberg sentences might have been greatly diminished had he had a freer hand to be graphic and profane.

³⁵ Heller acknowledges this mistake in several interviews, repeatedly saying that he simply chose to ignore it.

³⁶ The review, “Some Are More Yossarian Than Others,” begins with the brilliant line. “The chronicle of war is the Bible of irony.” *Time* magazine does not, unfortunately, print prose of this quality anymore.

³⁷ *A Catch-22 Casebook* includes Ken Barnard’s 1970 interview with Heller, where he asks Heller about his vow to avoid air travel; Heller responds, of course, with a joke, point out that he kept his vow until he was forced to spend twenty four hours on a NYC-Miami train, delivering the punch-line, “and that’s when I changed my mind: I decided I’d rather be dead.”

³⁸ Burgess attempted to redress the scores of misreading of his own novel – many inspired by Kubrick’s redaction of his final chapter in adapting *Clockwork Orange* – in an article, recently republished in the *New Yorker*. In Burgess’ novel, Alex – after relapsing, from State induced docility, back into ultraviolence – matures and gives up his violent ways of his own volition. Burgess’ point was that the State could not treat violence but not cure it.

³⁹ This was essentially the Humanist critique of Pynchon, voiced most concertedly in Josephine Hendin in *Harper’s* magazine and expanded in her *Vulnerable People*: “our mission on earth, Pynchon concludes in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, must be to celebrate the Devil” (50).

⁴⁰ Herr’s dark joke always reminds me of a classic Jewish joke: Two observant Jews are eating at a Chinese restaurant. The first Jew asks the second, who is struggling to eat his pork fried rice with chopsticks, ‘how can you eat pork fried rice?’ to which the second responds, ‘I guess I’ll have to use a fork.’

⁴¹ This particular idea – that respect for the bodies of the dead is the result of delusion and repression – is bound to offend; nevertheless, there are countless instances of comedy that exploit this phenomenon, perhaps none more directly than the *Weekend at Bernie’s* series, in which the protagonists marionette the dead body of the eponymous Bernie; their attempts to make his corpse appear alive is the punch-line of nearly every joke in the film.

⁴² One of the most brilliant and thorough analyses of Kubrick’s *mise-en-scène* is Rob Alger’s breakdown of the spatial impossibilities of the Overlook Hotel. See: “Mazes, Mirrors, Deception and Denial” on Alger’s website: <http://www.collativelearning.com>.

Chapter Three

⁴³ As Leys notes, the psychoanalytic tendency was to trace the etiology of combat trauma to Oedipal and other domestic complexes. Leys writes, “[t]he mother...was scapegoated as the source of her son’s ‘feminine’ hysteria and lack of virile courage in actual battle” (92).

⁴⁴ *Men’s Health* editor David Zinczenko says of Bob Drury’s article: “[N]o story comes close to this one. You see, every war has its ‘signature wounds’ caused by frightening new tactics and weapons the military has never used before. Blistering flesh from mustard gas in World War I. Petroleum burns from ignited oil and gas floating on the surface of the Pacific in World War II. Cancer from Agent Orange in Vietnam. And now missing legs, arms, and even genitalia caused

by the IED, or improvised explosive device – a term that is now entrenched in our vocabulary” (n. pag.).

⁴⁵ I first heard this term offered – in this sense – to describe the development of Charlie Kaufman’s career from *Being John Malkovich* to *Adaptation*, the latter of which breaks apart the ideas of narrative and empathy, only to reinstall them at the end.

⁴⁶ Freud, in the “Sexual Objects of Inverts” section of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, discusses the organic determinants of gender, and experimental sex-changes, in small mammals and one human case.

⁴⁷ Stephen Trask’s *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* seems to take this moment of sympathy as a point of departure for its more humanely dark-comic take on gender and orientation.

⁴⁸ We might also consider McGuffey on *gender-reaffirmation*, the ways in which parents and therapists often ignore their own better instincts about identity construction, attempting to reproduce highly stereotypical gender identities – as well as ethnic and class identities – for sexually abused children. In Palahniuk’s work, stereotypical frameworks for male identity inform a desperate attempt out of the identity crisis of late capitalism. In this project’s later chapters – on ethnicity and nationality – we’ll see how stereotypes also become a tragicomic reaction to traumatic identity crisis.

⁴⁹ There is a tendency (perhaps inspired by the terrible film adaptation) to read *Myra* in Susan Sontag’s sense from “Notes on Camp” in 1965:

Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation - not judgment.
Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy. It only seems like malice, cynicism. (Or, if it is cynicism, it's not a ruthless but a sweet cynicism.) (291)

I would argue that Camp is a defensive move, allowing the reader to ‘flatten’ Vidal’s comedy, to ignore philosophically the annihilating core of Vidal’s critique in favor of appreciating aesthetically its bombastic delivery. Camp aesthetics privilege what the joking envelope, the hyper-theatrical drag performance of Myra Breckinridge. The Camp defense is aestheticism, playing down the misogyny of Vidal’s caricatures (“it only seems like malice”) and playing up the comic excess of his delivery. To put things in my own theoretical terms, Camp turns sick comedy into a superficial joke.

⁵⁰ Vidal has a deeper and more philosophical understanding of marriage than many of those he would critique – in other words, Vidal critiques a ‘marriage’ that exists in doctrinal theory but rarely in social practice. In contemporary American society, large parts of the country oppose same-sex marriage while interpreting marriage as a license to enjoy enthusiastically non-procreative sex. Even the most staunchly anti-gay religious groups – Evangelicals, Catholics, and Orthodox Jews – have given a great deal of ground to sexual pleasure, provided it is circumscribed by marriage. Further, the same corporate-state matrix which many queer theorists identify as the agent of oppression also promotes and profits from straight sexuality – products like erectile dysfunction medication and sexual lubricants, explicitly marketed at straight married

couples, still have a progressive attitude to sex that would have been radically unthinkable in the Eisenhower era that Vidal's antagonism grew out of.

⁵¹ A tragic irony here is that Foucault's two insistences – first, that sexuality is a willful and often malicious construction of the powers that be and, second, that sexuality is decidedly not the key to an individual's liberation – are constantly at odds in his followers. Foucault's focus on sexuality made him a key figure in the LGBT movement, although Foucault's work deconstructs the attempt to create an identity out of desire. More broadly speaking, the naturalist tendency – in Foucault and Vidal – to just let sexuality be, to insist that it is a non-issure, or to parody the importance society places upon it, frequently backfired. Kate Feros and Don Fletcher argue this very point – the problem of 'satiric reinscription' – and point out how Vidal ended up reifying normative ideas instead of diminishing them.

⁵² Dennis Altman – who befriended Vidal after Altman's central role in the 1971 Australian obscenity case against *Myra* – gave a particularly Freudian analysis of Vidal in his obituary in the *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review*: "Vidal was never able to recognize, as Christopher Isherwood sensibly remarked, that you know you're homosexual when you fall in love with another man. His public persona, with its mixture of charm and aggression, was in part a product of an inability to fully accept his own sexuality, and he fluctuated between denying he was part of the gay movement and occasionally speaking for it" (10).

⁵³ During the 1968 convention debate, Vidal provoked Buckley – by calling him a "crypto-Nazi" – to threaten him physically, calling him a "queer." Ironically, both terms strike me as theoretically accurate, but both men were simply lashing out, Vidal with cool menace and Buckley with unhinged anger. In the end the exchange – which carried on into the pages of *Esquire* – was tragically fruitless. Vidal's contrarian nature and foolish penchant for baseless slander and libel turned what might have been a landmark essay – exposing the way the establishment's violent xenophobia masqueraded in patronizing clinical language – into a vituperative quarrel. It is hard not to see some self-sabotaging at work – in Vidal's "A Distasteful Encounter with William F. Buckley, Jr." – because, for Vidal, fighting Buckley's homophobia meant stepping into the socially defined role of a homosexual or, at the very least, admitting the existence of such a role.

⁵⁴ This contrast develops from Caruth's later work, pursued in *Unclaimed Experience*, in which she focuses on the immediacy of traumatic events and the inability of the psyche (and, intriguingly, the neurological structures of the brain) to process them. Caruth's early treatment of trauma in "Trauma and the Possibility of History" deals with Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* in which Freud explicitly uses the pathology of *punctual trauma* – those suffered by survivors of train collisions – to explain the long-term, even multi-generational, trauma of ethnic identity. This connection between the most immediately personal and broadly cultural traumas, which is the essence of Freud's thinking in works like *Future of an Illusion* and *Civilization and Its Discontents*, is of course a key part of this project.

⁵⁵ Forter discusses the way in which this kind of trauma is understood in different theoretical frameworks: "For my purposes, 'structural' traumas are those that purportedly inhere in the

human condition; they operate in different registers depending upon a given theorist's foundational assumptions. Thus the founding trauma for Freud is the biogenico-cosmic trauma that inaugurates life from inorganic matter (the birth *into* life and *of* the death drive); for poststructuralists, the basic trauma is that of our alienation into language and the resulting exile from Presence" (283). A poststructuralist understanding of the trauma of identity formation in terms of language makes it particularly clear how veridical representation – literal testimony – might fail to capture the trauma itself. In deconstructive terms, language has no access to its own prehistory. More on this in the coda to this project.

⁵⁶ Vidal's reference to the Trobriands' *sui generis* gender dynamic – remarkably balanced compared to Western patriarchy – is also a reference to the Fordist civilization in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, which explicitly takes the Trobriand Islanders as its template. But in the end Freud trumps Foucault, and Myra discovers – as Freud added in a 1910 footnote to *Three Essays of Sexuality* – that “we have every reason to doubt the reputed sexual freedoms of savages” (271) as their sexual lives are as rigorously circumscribed as those of Victorian bougeoisie or silent majority housewives.

⁵⁷ Cynthia Kuhn and Lance Rubin, in the introduction to their recent collection of Palahniuk criticism, attempt to overturn this trend, but admit: “It is almost certain that Palahniuk's staggering popularity [...] has hurt his standing among literary critics and scholars” (Introduction 2).

⁵⁸ *Invisible Monsters* was Palahniuk's first novel, written before *Fight Club* but rejected by publishers for both its stylistic excesses and graphic sexual violence. The novel's chapters were originally arranged non-sequentially to a to keep most of the graphic material, but had to surrender the formal experimental and non-sequential writing). Nearly a decade later, Palahniuk – now with considerably more clout at his publishing house – was able to get the original version published as *Invisible Monsters Remix*. The re-released novel maintains the striking vision of identity and sheds some light on Palahniuk's philosophy of reconstruction.

⁵⁹ The Twentieth Century-Fox DVD of *Fight Club* is wall-papered in negative criticism – a punk-ish act of appropriation, slights worn as badges of honor – that includes, most notably, Roger Ebert's review for the *Chicago Sun Times* (15 October 1999). Ebert quips: “*Fight Club* is the most frankly and cheerfully fascist big-star movie since *Death Wish*, a celebration of violence in which the heroes write themselves a license to drink, smoke, screw and beat one another up.” Ebert ignores Brad Pitt's telling line, “We're a generation of men raised by women, I'm wondering if another woman is really the answer we need.” In the scene, paralleled in many ways by Tom Ripley and Dickie Greenleaf in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, the two men share a bathroom – Durden naked in the tub, the narrator sitting on the toilet – and was deliberately intended by Fincher to echo the novel's homoeroticism. Still, both *Fight Club* and *Death Wish* – in which Charles Bronson succumbs to the masochistic pleasures of vigilante violence after his wife is murdered – demonstrate hyper-violent forms of masculinity as a replacement for straight sexuality. In other words, these films suggest that if a man cannot prove his masculinity through sex with a woman, he can always do it through violence with other men. Yet – and here Ebert

misses the point – Bronson would never seek a sense of himself by *losing* to the thugs of New York City. (cf. Ebert’s review, collected with many others at his own website:

<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/articleq?AID=/19991015/REVIEWS/910150302>)

⁶⁰ Amongst many, many hostile reviewers, the *LA Times*’s Kenneth Turan stands out, calling Fincher’s film “a witless mishmash of whiny, infantile philosophizing and bone-crunching violence that actually thinks it’s saying something intelligent.” Alexander Walker, of the *London Evening Standard*, compared the film to Nazi propaganda. David Denby – the kinder of the *New Yorker*’s two film critics – seemed to have suspected that Palahniuk and Fincher were up to something and punted, “I would deliver a long tirade against it if it weren’t such a dog – such a laborious and foolish waste of time.”

Stable URL: www.newyorker.com/arts/reviews/film/fight_club_fincher

⁶¹ See also Robert Chalmers’ attempt to interview Palahniuk about his personal life. Chalmers, who is expecting a ‘confrontational’ man, a Tyler Durden, gets only a sweet-natured and reticent Palahniuk.

⁶² Alex Tuss discusses Male Crisis Theory and considers Tyler Durden, though he is in the novel a psychological symptom of trauma, an adaptive invention – comparable to the deliberate, conscious annexation of Dickie Greenleaf’s masculine identity in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Tuss presents Durden as an elective form of masculinity more able to succeed in the modern world. Kevin Alexander Boon, on the other hand, considers Durden a figure of nostalgic mourning, for the era of unreconstructed masculinity, where self-fashioning occurred seamlessly through culturally sanctioned violence and patriarchal domination. Both critiques shed some light on Palahniuk’s work, although neither deals with the novel’s homoeroticism and the way it complicates straight heterosexuality.

⁶³ Including *Snuff*, an obscene satire of masculinity in which hundreds of male pornographic actors spend the day jockeying for position in the hyper-male pecking order, while waiting for their chance to have sex with the same woman.

⁶⁴ Named for Harry Benjamin and his International Gender Dysphoria Association. The current guidelines – the seventh revision as of 2013 – are available on the World Professional Association for Transgender Health’s website (wpath.org). In short, they recommend a series of immersive social and cultural steps to be taken – prior to and following surgery itself – and include the idea of ‘living’ as one’s chosen gender (for as long as twelve months and in some cases longer) before committing to what is an almost completely irreversible surgery (for a combination of financial, psychological, and medical reasons).

⁶⁵ Austin Book’s article for *The Advocate* on Chuck Palahniuk which considers the following question: “Chuck Palahniuk writes stories that fearlessly expose the darkest parts of the human experience. So why is it that when it comes to his sexuality there are still some things he likes to keep hidden?” (42).

⁶⁶ Palahniuk describes a few of the conversations in “Fact and Fiction” in *Stranger than Fiction*.

⁶⁷ Though all authors are entitled to their privacy, and psycho-biography remains a risky endeavor for any critic, it is worth pointing out that Palahniuk has spoken about other private

events in his life, notably the history of violence in his family. Palahniuk's grandfather murdered his grandmother and then committed suicide when his father was four; years later, his father was murdered by a man named Dale Shackelford, the ex-boyfriend of a woman Palahniuk's father had just started dating. Palahniuk has written about how his father's murder came to inform the moral structure of *Lullaby*, in which the narrator must countenance his ability to kill people with a thought. *Lullaby*, Palahniuk admits, was a personal metaphor for Shackelford's murder trial, in which Palahniuk was consulted whether the prosecution should seek the death penalty and ultimately decided in favor of putting Shackelford to death. (He is currently appealing.) More recently, Palahniuk has spoken about his attempts to deal with his mother's death from cancer with his dark comic exploration of notions of the afterlife and judgment in *Damned*.

Chapter Four

⁶⁸ There is, especially in Russian literary circles, much debate over Shteyngart's Russianness. Adrian Wanner's ultimately positive analysis of Shteyngart's use of the immigrant novel mode deals with these critiques head on, quoting the most hostile treatment of Shteyngart's Russian translation. One reviewer repeatedly used a question mark after the word 'Russian' in her review, another gauged Shteyngart closer to American sitcoms than his fellow Russian ex-pat Nabokov. My favorite dismissal centered around Shteyngart's failure to write in Russian on a "Russian Keyboard." In general, Wanner concludes, by many "Shteyngart is seen as an American Jew pretending to be Russian" ("Hybrids" 668). That said, since the underlying point of this chapter is that *all* ethnic identity is performative, then I certainly cannot fault Shteyngart for laying claim to his Russianness.

⁶⁹Wanner discusses the way in which Shteyngart forges his own form of the 'grotesque' that, while indebted to Gogol, is unique. His analysis is specific to Shteyngart's short story "Shylock on the Neva," but it nevertheless interesting for those looking into the genealogy of a certain kind of humor. See, "Gogol's 'Portrait' Repainted."

⁷⁰ Bergson, *On Laughter* (750).

⁷¹ Or possibly someone with an equivalent level of historical oppression, and who is also dating a Jew.

⁷² Pynchon, Heller, and Wolfe, especially, are very fond of slapstick but, even in their funniest passages, we must of course *conceive* of the comedy – we have to do the work that, in its purest forms, animators do for us.

⁷³ In fact, the classic 'wit' of British Comedy takes as its *a priori* a mastery of axiomatic and syllogistic logic – not to mention a philologist's sense of vocabulary – that seems profoundly alien to American comedy. The Brits, eventually, realized this and in many ways absurdism (from Wilde to Beckett to Monty Python) has been a response to this.

⁷⁴ For a classic example, consider Richard Pryor's stand-up routine – his first after nearly killing himself while attempting to separate cocaine from its salt base and igniting the ether – in which, after fifteen minutes of jokes about his libido, he suddenly launches into a narrative of his near

self-immolation. Taken out of context (which, thanks to YouTube, you can now do), the audience seems almost psychotically sadistic, but in context, it is one of the funniest dark comic moments of the 20th century.

⁷⁵ Shteyngart's *Stolovaya* is, he freely admits, a thinly veiled Czech Republic based on his time spent there. Even without this, though, we know *Prava* is a local dialect pronunciation of Prague. Those who have been to the city will recognize Shteyngart's topography – minus “the Foot” – but also his allusions to Kafka (and his eponymous museum), the Soviet-era metro, the Paris-of-the-90s trope and, finally, those unwise enough to have been raving in Eastern Europe in the 90s will remember the ‘ketamine kraze.’

⁷⁶ Of course we can say that all novelistic versions – if only by the process of selection – *fictionalize* the place in which they are set, but here the specific difference is between a fictional version of the real New York City and a fictional version of the fantastic *Prava* (with its wonderfully absurd “Foot”).

⁷⁷ An odd note: the man who used to supply the café where I worked with baklava was an Azerbaijani who had spent nearly ten years in a Siberian prison for taking part in an early gay-rights rally in Moscow (he is literally bear-sized, bearded and – courtesy of prison – heavily tattooed, still he is optimistic about surgically becoming a woman). He grew up with predominantly Muslim and Greek Orthodox neighbors and absorbed a great deal of ‘atmospheric anti-Semitism.’ Despite his personal oppression, he himself was quite anti-Semitic. Nevertheless, in spite of his nearly endless routine of Jew bashing, he was always quick to *praise* Israelis (whom he called “cactuses,” on account of their ostensibly innate toughness and stand-offishness to gentile Soviets). When I pointed out that Israelis are, by and large, Jewish, he replied: “Yes, this is true, but they are *very* Jewish, you know, somehow is more better being *very very Jewish* than being...eh, a little Jewish.”

⁷⁹ Shteyngart is not the first to make this point, and it's safe to say that Philip Roth took a slightly larger risk in 1993, thirteen odd years before *Absurdistan* was published, when he cracked his famous “No business like Shoah business.”

⁸⁰⁸⁰ For a fuller consideration of these ‘non-Western’ or non-linear divisions, consult Mareike Neuhaus's chapter on King in *That's Raven's Talk* (236-255).

⁸¹ In “Godzilla vs. Post-colonial” King identifies a number of different writing strategies, including “tribal” literature – written by native people for their own use – and “polemical” literature – which is written to directly address the clash of cultures. “Interfusional” describes a less antagonistic, more open approach, drawing on both native and Western culture. Whether King's own work is sufficiently enveloped in humor to qualify as interfusional and not polemical is open to debate, although I would clearly call it a polemic, even if one that's directly internally.

⁸² But Cox goes too far in his argument that, in setting his own narrator and the trickster Coyote outside of space and time, “King displaces God's role in creation” (ibid 223) and, in the end, accomplishes: “[A] reconstruction of a pan-Native American worldview and self-represented identity that reviews narratives of domination and conquest to remind colonizers that as long as the grass is green and the waters run, only their stories end in doom” (240)

⁸³Jeanne Smith writes: “Critic and creator, the trickster challenges culture both from within and without, strengthening and renewing it with outrageous laughter” (3). Smith goes on to claim that “trickster energy [can] revise myth, history, and narrative form to simultaneously draw on, challenge and transform” because they are “uninhibited by social constraints, free to dissolve boundaries and break taboos” (5-7). Smith further invests the power of Bahktinian carnival, heteroglossia and dialogism (12-13), as well as Hélène Cixous’s *écriture féminine* (11), Henry Louis Gates’ signifying (15) and, despite the evidence that Coyote and other tricksters are frequently male or androgynous (as King’s Coyote is), Smith concludes with a feminine beatification: “creator of worlds, epic bumbler outrageous joker, expert transformer, consummate artist: the trickster lives in contemporary American literature, in all her myriad guises” (30). The point here is not to denigrate Smith’s scholarship – it is thorough and thoughtful – or to overwork concerns about the dependence on poststructuralist jargon in late 1990s academia, but only to how such enthusiasm for the powers of deconstruction can overwhelm a novel, writing utopian hopes on top of what the novel actually attempts to accomplish.

⁸⁴ A simplistic example: a subject may have a recurring memory of a particular television advertisement from his or her childhood. This memory, seemingly innocuous, may repeatedly intrude – like a traumatic memory – because it is the ‘screen’ for a traumatic event. For example, the commercial may have been playing in the background while the subject, as a child, witnessed an act of domestic violence.

⁸⁵ Jane Flick’s indispensable “Reading Notes” refers to this as a private joke, but I think it’s rather likely King is playing on Dr. Samuel Loomis, the doctor in charge of Michael Myer’s therapy in the *Halloween* horror movies. His self-interest and professional negligence, in many senses, are responsible for Myer’s transformation into a ‘monster.’ Thus the implications for Lionel here are more or less clear: this moment psychologically damages him, turning him from an innocent boy into something monstrous. John Carpenter’s Sam Loomis is, in turn, a homage to the ostensible ‘hero’ of Robert Bloch’s novel *Psycho* (and also Hitchcock’s film version). Whether King intends for us to follow the reference that far down the rabbit hole is a matter of speculation for someone else.

Chapter Five

⁸⁶ Vonnegut also tackles that illusory nature of nation, albeit more directly. In *Cat’s Cradle* he writes of a *granfalloon*, a group whose criteria for membership is arbitrary or meaningless: “examples of the granfalloons are the Community Party, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the General Electric Company, the International Order of Odd Fellows – and any nation, anytime, anywhere” (91-92). Or more directly, and in Vonnegut’s signature style, “If you wish to study a *granfalloon*; Just remove the skin of a toy balloon” (92). But despite Vonnegut’s deep suspicions about ‘truth,’ he is very much a humanist at heart. For Vonnegut, there is *not* an abyss at the center of identity, and so he can more directly – if playfully – disassemble the role

nationality plays in buttressing identity without the risk of pitching into sadism. It is this humanism, it is worth noting, that so kept Vonnegut from being a good candidate for this project.⁸⁷ Despite the fantastic possibilities of Coover's universe, God and Jesus are invoked but act even more ambiguously than the Phantom. There is some suggestion that Uncle Sam's power is godly, or god-given, but this is never made explicit. The ontology and origin of Uncle Sam are left playfully unresolved, but one curious line, midway through the book, continues to interest me. Uncle Sam, addressing the spectacle-hungry crowd in Times Square, quips, "It's the biggest crowd since the hangin' at Mount Holly in Aught-Thirty-three!" (419). It's not immediately clear what this reference is to, but Coover leaves a couple of hints. First, and most telling, is "aught-Thirty-three" which would be 1033AD, 33AD, 33BC, 1033BC, etc. Given the context of a public execution, performed in order to restore civic order, it seems highly possible Uncle Sam is referring to the crucifixion of Jesus in 33AD, using "hangin'" as colloquial slang for any government sanctioned murder, "biggest crowd" in reference to the "great multitude who followed Him [Jesus, to the cross]" (Luke 23:27 NKJV) and "Mount Holly" – and here I'm pushing the interpretive bounds – as Holy Mount, or small mountain – Golgotha, or Calvary – the site of Jesus' death. It would be interesting, in a different forum, to explore the lessons of *The Public Burning* as they reflect back of the 'historical' events of the crucifixion.

⁸⁸ Olsen attempts to align the work of Derrida, Debord, Bakhtin, Baudrillard, and others with the 'radical Skepticism' of the Phantom, and this overenthusiasm for what seems to be Coover's prescient take on the postmodernity to come obscures Coover's ambivalence: on the one hand, his insistence on the primacy of story over and capital-R Reality is consistent and anticipates much theory that argues the same thing; on the other hand, Coover's political frustration and his desire to conjure a reckoning demonstrate something concretely other than skepticism.

⁸⁹ The 'Zadokite' or 'Damascus' document is a piece of Old Testament apocrypha, discovered in Egypt in the late 19th century, and later correlated by parts of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which Coover also references in *The Public Burning*. Interestingly, a more traditional translation of the line goes as follows: "Any man who is ruled by the spirits of Belial and speaks rebellion shall be judged by the judgement of the necromancer and wizard." Coover's more modern interpretation of the line erases the intriguing pagan strands of Jewish mythology – found throughout the Books of Moses but largely absent from the History and Wisdom Books. This is probably a better fit for the Christian tone of his Uncle Sam allegory, but it seems interesting that a translation more faithful to the Old Testament seems appropriate for Coover himself: since *The Public Burning* is not a renunciation so much as it is a rebellion, and that what Coover hopes to accomplish is not the sorcery of fiction, but something more like necromancy, in returning the dead to life.

⁹⁰ Coover notes in his "Public Burning Log" that he was encouraged (i.e., forced) by his publisher to redact a fair amount of material about the Rosenbergs' two sons, whom – unlike Doctrow – Coover had not fictionalized, and who were still living. The line in this nightmare scene – "like strange bloated fruit" – is more than likely a nod to Abel Meeropol, adoptive father

of Michael and Robert Rosenberg (who took Meeropol's last name) and composed Billie Holiday's the tragically beautiful lament for lynching, "Strange Fruit."

⁹¹ Although certainly authors are not to be concretely trusted about their own works, Ellis has been consistent in his attitude towards the 'status' of Patrick's violence vis-à-vis reality or hallucination with the world of the text. When asked in a refreshingly point-blank manner by *Rolling Stone*, Ellis said, "No, I've never made a decision. And when I was writing the book, I couldn't make a decision. That was what was so interesting to me about it. You can read the book either way. He's telling you these things are happening, and yet things are contradicting him throughout the book, so I don't know" (Grow).

Chapter Six

⁹² A favorite of linguists I have known, the paradox comes from Epimenides (6th or 7th century BC), whose statement, "All Cretans are liars," becomes complicated by the fact that Epimenides was himself a Cretan. Thus, if he is telling the truth the sentence is proved false; and if he's telling the truth, then he can't logically utter the sentence.

⁹³ From Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight*, "The Rhetoric of Temporality." De Man writes: "Far from being a return to the world, the irony to the second power or 'irony of irony' that all true irony at once has to engender asserts and maintains its fictional character by stating the continued impossibility of reconciling the world of fiction with the actual world" (218). For de Man, any instance of irony leads to a total collapse of language, and de Man can find irony everywhere. In a seminar I took with Ansel Haverkamp at NYU, we discussed de Man's irony and I asked, rather inelegantly, how de Man could excuse writing – let alone writing as he did – while at the same time critiquing the very possibility of language to form stable meanings. Haverkamp told me, "Paul thought it was very funny. Not many people did. Sometimes Derrida. Martin (Heidegger) thought it was very funny. How else could you go on?" I cannot corroborate whether Haverkamp knew 'Martin' and 'Paul' as well as he claimed to, but he spoke convincingly about their attitudes to the ruptures in their own works. It is, I will say, a shame that the Yale school never wrote more humorously, or – barring that – about the sense of humor necessary to proceed with a language while deconstructing it.

⁹⁴ Rosmarie Waldrop translates Celan's line as "terrifying silence," but I prefer Felstiner's "frightful muting" for this particular discussion and, in general, aesthetically. The difference for me is that Waldrop's translation suggests a silence that intimidates the subject out of speaking whereas Felstiner's version suggests that the subject is muted and that, in fact, it is not some other horror but the muting itself that is frightful. In other words, it isn't that trauma causes language to fail, but that the failure of language is itself traumatizing.

⁹⁵ For example, Celan's "Wolf's Bean," with its repeated fragments, many starting with "Mother," addresses his mother's death at the hands of the Nazis. The broken structure of the poem dramatizes not the collapse of language in the wake of trauma, but its resurgence. The passion of the piece, devoted in equal parts to mourning and moving through, cannot be denied.

And yet Celan's claim that language would 'return' after being silenced by trauma seems to assume a linguistic Eden, a prelapsarian state where language's function was unspoiled and untroubled. When Celan writes, "there is a seven-branched candelabrum in our house," he reaches back, not only to the description of the Old Testament Temple Menorah but its stable symbolic role for the Jewish people and faith.

⁹⁶ True-crime, though very rarely funny, seems a particularly interesting metonym (and metaphor) for epistemological skepticism, since it sets the apparatuses of the Enlightenment – the modern judicial system, forensic science, causal reasoning – against crimes that deflect solutions or even interpretations. It also seems a good barometer for the public's tolerance for hard skepticism. The original *Unsolved Mysteries*, airing first on NBC in 1987 and hosted mainly by Robert Stack, was explicit about the limits of dramatizing theoretical reconstructions of events; it also focused heavily on the 'ongoing-ness' of investigations and made routine efforts to give updates. Thus a sense of balance was negotiated between the radical skepticism of unsolvable cases and the humanistic desire for narrative closure. Investigation Discovery's *Disappeared*, which aired first in 2010 and has since run six seasons, focuses exclusively on disappearances, the majority of which remain unexplained and unsolved; despite the obvious improvements in police technology and the corresponding public expectation for crime-solving ability, twenty years after *Unsolved Mysteries*, the public also seems to have a considerably higher tolerance for the epistemological horror of unknowing.

⁹⁷ Not for nothing is Lynch one of Žižek's most frequent referents, second only to Hitchcock. Lynch's epistemological jokes are, for Žižek, effective gestures at the Real, which we can infer from the failures of Symbolic and Imaginary structures, but never quite know. In other words, if language and narrative collapse, and our illusory sense of identity collapses, we're left with something horrifying that we cannot relate to or describe.

⁹⁸ A popular Mandela-effect misquote is that Lebowsky shouts 'You weren't even in Vietnam!' to Walter. Not unlike the unreal 'Indian burial ground' reference in *Poltergeist*, this misremembering is actually a savvy reading: Walter has already lied – extravagantly, in word and deed – about being Jewish, and one of the film's overall themes is of misrepresenting the self, so it is very possible that Walter is malingering. If so, his character becomes even more traumatized, and – fittingly – relocates his trauma from the visceral experience of war to the structural inability to make meaning. In other words, Walter appropriates the 'stable' narrative (or cliché) of the war vet in order to disavow the trauma of meaninglessness.

⁹⁹ Auster, the most critically acclaimed of the three, is worth examining as a link between the empathetic dark comedy of Beckett and the more sadistic work of Baer and Clevenger. Auster's metafictional tricks seem like a compromise. On the one hand, they destabilize the reader's faith in story, but, on the other hand, they allow the reader access to the process of interrogating story. Baer and Clevenger, like *The Usual Suspects*, pretend to create stable narratives and then yank the rug out from under the reader. I would argue that Paul Auster's metafiction is a kind of epistemological dark comedy, both suggesting the unreality of the story and, in allowing readers in on the joke – which violates the expectation for a closed, fictional narrative, ironized away

from the real world – also moves them forward through the narrative. The sick comedies of the epistemological ‘reveal’ make the joke on the readers, for going along completely with the disavowal. Chuck Palahniuk, of course, flirts with this boundary in *Fight Club*; the ‘reveal’ of Tyler Durden’s unreality is a decidedly noir-ish twist, and it threatens to make the first half of the novel a joke pulled on readers; however, because Palahniuk’s narrator experiences the same twist, and must recover from it and move on, readers experience what Palahniuk wants them to: the sense of an epistemological aporia. Palahniuk ultimately needs his readers to surrender certain ‘speculative possessions,’ not for sick pleasure, but to create a space to rebuild. This move is very much in line with Auster’s repeated representation of failure and alienation as, ultimately, the productive space for new beginning. Beckett was never quite this optimistic, managing on the *hope* for such reconstructions.

¹⁰⁰ In Book X of *The Republic*, Plato references the Socrates parable of the three beds – the one made by the One (the Platonic God), the first copy made by a craftsman, and the second copy made by the artist. As Allan Bloom paraphrases the situation in his translation of Plato, “[the artist] is thus an imitator of an imitator and his products have very little reality” (431). So, at least in Platonic terms, realism was already doomed to be second-degree simulacrum.

¹⁰¹ Or maybe they just like to write this way, perhaps it is simply fun; as Wittgenstein might say, it’s all language games. But I think that, beneath those language games, is an anxious understanding of Wittgenstein’s stark maxim, that where knowledge fails, silence must follow.

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