

**Murder! But How Foul? Determinism, Existentialism and
Rationalization in Twentieth-Century American Novels with
Transgressive Protagonists**

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Abstract

Humans tend to blunt the horror of transgressive violence by “containing” it in a potentially explicatory system. This thesis investigates whether a range of transgressive protagonists from canonical twentieth-century American novels are “contained” in this way by reference to philosophical or sociological systems powerful at the time of writing, and further whether the systems involved tracked the roughly mid-century switch of emphasis from determinism to philosophies valorizing individual autonomy (such as existentialism).

These propositions were found to be broadly justified, but there were significant nuances. For example, Humbert Humbert, the protagonist of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, at first rejoices in his autonomy from normative ethical standards, but comes to realize that such autonomy can exist only as long as he confines himself to the world of the imagination. On the other hand, Clyde Griffiths, the socially and economically determined protagonist of Theodore Dreiser’s *American Tragedy*, achieves a kind of proto-existential isolation in his quest for an understanding of his “criminal” responsibility. Richard Wright, from mid-century, created both determinist and existential transgressive protagonists, but his work is most obviously characterized by a third element—a half-unexplained volcanic rage.

In many of the novels examined it was found that horror at the crime of the transgressive protagonist was further derailed by narratological ploys, including the manipulation of the reader’s engagement with, or sympathy for, the protagonist—sometimes by the use of humour. Other cross-currents were apparent; the achievement of self-transcendence in some of the protagonists (e.g. Humbert

Humbert and Clyde Griffiths), and the foregrounding of performativity in others (e.g. Tom Ripley in Patricia Highsmith's *Ripley*).

Most remarkably, all of the novels investigated demonstrate a tacit belief in the need to recuperate the protagonist, who is not only a transgressor, but also a humanist subject who is intrinsically of at least potential value. There is an almost unquestioned impulse to somehow address the protagonist's fall from grace.

It is further clear that this concern disappears from "anti-humanist" novels featuring transgressive protagonists from the end of the century, such as Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In 1924, half-way through his masterly summation in defence of the teenage murderers Leopold and Loeb, Clarence Darrow addressed the judge thus: “They killed him [their young victim, Bobbie Franks] because they were made that way. Because somewhere in the infinite processes that go to the making up of the boy or the man something slipped” (“trial,” *Leopoldandloeb.com*). Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, wealthy and gifted scions of Chicago’s upper class, had deliberately murdered 14-year-old Bobbie Franks—their apparent motivation being the desire to commit a perfect crime, although the quest for motive is complicated by the intensity of their homosexual relationship (Leopold later stated that he had participated in the murder mainly to please Loeb). Their guilt was swiftly discovered (Leopold lost a pair of spectacles with an unusual hinge near the body) and they were arrested. Public anger was predictably intense, and the death penalty was demanded in spite of their youth. Clarence Darrow was retained to defend them and immediately embarked upon a brilliant defence, motivated to some extent by his fierce opposition to capital punishment. He first changed their pleas to guilty, thus ensuring that the outcome of the trial would be decided by a judge rather than a jury. Equally remarkably, however, as illustrated by the quotation above from his summation and those that will follow,¹ Darrow based his entire defence on the repeated deployment of the deterministic proposition that Leopold and Loeb could not be considered guilty because they were at the mercy of hereditary and environmental influences beyond their control.

Darrow's determinism was broad in its allocation of blame for the "slippage" in the characters of the two young murderers. Again and again he cited hereditary influences, which he envisioned as being the result of a deleterious mutation carried forward through the generations of their ancestors. Claiming that "every human being is the product of the endless heredity behind him," he suggested that "the mother of a Nathan Leopold or of a Richard Loeb...has to ask herself the question 'How come my children came to be what they are? From what ancestry did they get this strain? How far removed was the person that destroyed their lives? Was I the bearer of the seed that brings them to death?' "

Equally frequently, however, he visited the issue of malign environmental influences. Darrow claimed that these included mistakes made in Loeb's childhood (he criticized, for example, Loeb's governess for her stern and single-minded emphasis on academics: "This boy needed more of home, more love, more directing...Had these been given him, he would not be here today"), but he also suggested that at least two cultural influences were equally blameworthy. First he targeted Loeb's uncontrollable fascination with detective stories, pointing out that "We have a statute in this state, passed only last year...which forbids minors reading stories of crime. Why? Because the legislature in its wisdom felt that it would produce criminal tendencies in the boys who read them." In Leopold's case, Darrow pointed to the baleful influence of Nietzsche, "who held a contemptuous, scornful attitude to all those things which the young are taught as important in life." He described how Nietzsche's philosophy took possession of Leopold: "Here is a boy at sixteen or seventeen becoming obsessed with these doctrines...It was not a casual bit of philosophy with him; it was his life. He believed in a superman. He and Dickie Loeb were the supermen."

The deterministic basis of Darrow's defence was overt; indeed, he foregrounded it. He repeatedly referred to a world in which "nothing happens without a cause" (the implication being that this would yield to analysis--at least at some point in the future), and he particularly applied this approach to crime: "Crime has its cause...Perhaps all crimes do not have the same cause, but they all have some cause." He emphasized humankind's helplessness in the face of the forces that grip him: "Nature is strong and pitiless. She works in her own mysterious way, and we are her victims. We have not much to do with it ourselves. Nature takes this job in hand, and we play our parts." Sensationally--there was a riot outside the courtroom--Darrow prevailed with the judge, and thus saved his clients from the gallows.

Advancing a half-century to the nineteen-sixties and -seventies, we encounter another criminological and penal controversy, but one that bespeaks an approach to human volition and actions more than somewhat at odds with Darrow's determinism.

In the mid-century, partly as a result of the increased stature of the concept of social engineering in the post-War years, partly as a result of experience with invasive personality-changing procedures such as lobotomy, but mainly because of the increased availability of new psychoactive drugs, the possibility began to be taken seriously that society could, indeed should, intervene *Clockwork Orange*-style to chemically or surgically modify the brains of persistently violent criminals in order to eliminate their aggression. In her comprehensive study *The Search for Criminal Man*, Ysabel Rennie sums up the attraction of these proposals as follows: "Now...at last, the criminal could be changed by acting directly on his brain and central nervous system so that he would no longer will to do wrong" (203). Clearly such an approach bespeaks a belief that the needs

of society take precedence over the rights of the individual. Rennie quotes Professor James V. McConnell of the University of Michigan as being of the opinion that “ ‘Somehow we’ve got to force people to love one another, to force them to want to behave properly’ ” (200) and as believing that “ ‘No-one owns his own personality’ ” (201). In the late nineteen-sixties and -seventies the interventions initiated in prisons and mental institutions (mainly in California and Maryland) included the widespread use of ataraxics (tranquilizers) and aversive behaviour modification therapy involving chemical and non-chemical agents. Rennie cites some particularly disturbing examples. Prisoners in California were injected (without their consent) with anectine, which induces the sensation of suffocation, while being simultaneously upbraided for their aberrant behaviour (182-183, 199). Elsewhere, a transvestite “was placed on an electric grid and, while dressed in women’s clothes, was given 200 shocks in eight days” (200).

However, what is of the greatest importance is that, as knowledge of these experiments spread, a widely-voiced public reaction grew that strongly contested the fundamental philosophical basis of such interventions. The atmosphere of social unrest and the questioning of authority that arose in the United States as a result of its dubious political and military interventions in South-East Asia were by no means conducive to such gross violations of the freedom of individuals, even if the individuals involved were criminals and deviants. Vociferous protest was soon raised, particularly after the publication of Jessica Mitford’s book *Kind and Usual Punishment* (1973), which, among other things, provided details concerning the use of prisoners in California as pharmaceutical guinea pigs. Many U.S. Government bodies (for example, the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare; the Health Sub-committees of the U.S.

Senate; and the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research) moved to limit, and then eliminate, personality reconstruction experiments on violent criminals that employed pharmaceutical and surgical methods or aversive therapies.

The public revulsion that led to these official moves was based on a perception of human volition that was the opposite of Clarence Darrow's concept of the criminal as the helpless pawn of malevolent external forces—the concept which underpinned his successful defense of Leopold and Loeb. It was clear that by the 'sixties there was a significant degree of belief among the public that the *ability* and *prerogative* of an individual to select and direct his or her own fate should be regarded as supreme, and that the right to do so was inviolable. The individual was fully capable of directing his or her actions. Furthermore, his or her choice should be respected, notwithstanding the fact that it might be socially repellent—even in this case the autonomy of the individual could still not be dismissed. Rennie quotes the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research as advising particular caution in the case of practices designed to “enforce conformity with behavioral norms established by prison officials *or even by society*” (my emphasis). Even more significantly, the Commission added “Such conformity cannot be assumed to improve the condition of the individual prisoner” (Rennie 210); the responsibility and right of the individual to direct his or her own fate was considered as pre-eminent among other considerations. Rennie concludes that it was clear that there is one autonomy that could not be violated: “the autonomy of the soul—the freedom to be wise or foolish, generous or mean-spirited,

good or evil. If free will is an illusion of Western society, it nevertheless remains its most cherished illusion” (215).

We have here an evident application in the field of penological ethics of Sartre’s dictum in his essay “Existentialism is a Humanism” reminding man “that there is no legislator but himself, that he himself...must decide for himself” (310).

In fact, the contrast between the basis for Darrow’s defense and the philosophical background to the chorus of objections regarding the enforced personality reconstruction of criminals is a very clear indication of the fact that, by the mid-century, philosophies which privileged the autonomy of the individual had largely replaced the determinism of the earlier part of the century. Existentialism was just such a philosophy, and although its influence was greater in Europe than in the United States, it was certainly known and discussed in the latter. Regarding this last, it is also worth noting that a number of the novelists discussed later who were active in the middle of the century either originated in Europe (Vladimir Nabokov), or took up residence in Europe (Richard Wright and Patricia Highsmith).

The Criminal Protagonist in Literature

This thesis concerns, not the world of real criminals and criminological theory, but its literary representation in novels built around protagonists who are criminals—in other words, transgressive protagonists. Literary works can feature criminal protagonists of all types, but of all those who isolate themselves beyond the limits of what is normally ethically and legally acceptable, it is murderers who especially fascinate us—they have been favoured literary subjects from *Othello* and *Macbeth* to *A Clockwork Orange*.

In *The Political Unconscious*, Frederic Jameson—with reference to writers as diverse as Balzac and Conrad—has argued persuasively that the cultural productions of a society will of necessity be profoundly shaped by, and be reflective of, the dominant ideology in that society, and indeed common sense indicates that it must be so. The topic I wish to consider is to what extent this is true of the figuration of transgressive protagonists (all murderers) in a series of well-known novels from various points in the twentieth century. It might reasonably be expected that, as an approach valorizing the autonomy of the individual replaced determinism as the dominant mode of thought in Western philosophy, this would be reflected in a changing textual positioning of transgressive protagonists in novels. Accordingly, a novelist from the early decades of the century would probably position his transgressive protagonist as the helpless victim of heredity, driven by ungovernable genetic forces to commit violent crimes. To some extent, this is true of Frank Norris's *McTeague*, published in 1899, which traces the forces that drive a dentist to murder his wife; however, as I will show, the characterization of the transgressor is multi-layered even in a novel as heavily influenced by determinism as *McTeague*. Similarly, if we turn to the nineteen-fifties, it might be expected that the dominant cultural environment would nuance literary portraits of murderers such that they are shown unapologetically as individuals, pursuing their unique ends with absolute existential freedom, while ignoring the norms that society seeks to impose on them. Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (published in 1957) definitely involves such celebratory treatment of Humbert Humbert; but, again, full investigation will reveal that the positioning of Humbert as a transgressor is as complex as in the case of *McTeague*.

If *McTeague* and *Lolita* are taken as the two poles in the authorial treatment of transgressive protagonists, influenced respectively by determinism and the concept of individual autonomy, what might be expected of murderers portrayed in novels written in the decades between the publication dates of these two books? My purpose is also to analyze the relative influence of these two approaches on the characterization of murderers in novels from the nineteen-twenties and -thirties (taking Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, and James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* as representative and fruitful examples). By the nineteen-forties, it seems that a "tipping point" may have been reached between the two cultural influences, and I intend to examine how this change of emphasis plays out in two novels of Richard Wright's that feature transgressive protagonists, *Native Son* and *The Outsider*.

However, before turning to this literary examination in detail, it is clearly necessary to briefly review the origins and nature of determinism and existentialism (taking the latter as a prime example of a philosophical approach which valorizes individual autonomy); both in general terms, and in the context of their effects on public perception of the criminal.

Determinism

The Oxford English Reference Dictionary defines determinism as "the philosophical doctrine that all events are determined by causes external to the will." Since the beginning of the philosophical investigation of human volition, the views of determinists (who thus believe that a human being's fate is directed by external forces) have stood in

opposition to those of other thinkers who believe that a man or woman directs his or her own fate through the exercise of free will.

In his *History of Western Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell characterizes the Greek atomists as the first determinists, and indicates that Democritus explicitly denied that anything could happen by chance (66). Russell also describes how Descartes believed that living organisms, like non-living matter, were governed by the laws of physics, although he made an exception for humans, to whom he allowed an element of free will (544-545).

By the late seventeenth century, the concept of the soul, with which Descartes was so much concerned, had been largely replaced by that of the intelligence, and this resulted in a rather different understanding of the relationship between determinism and human motivation. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke proposed that, in the absence of innate ideas, perceptions and behaviour are based purely on past experiences (109) and the sensations of pleasure and pain associated with them (216).

A belief in the importance of determinism also characterized some eighteenth-century thinkers, and Lillian Furst and Peter Skrine describe how the Baron d'Holbach "saw man living solely in a world of perceived phenomena, a kind of cosmic machine which determined his life as it did nature" (Furst and Skrine 2).

It was, however, in the nineteenth century that a deterministic approach to the understanding of human nature achieved its greatest prominence.² Furst and Skrine suggest two reasons for this surge in the status of determinism. First, very rapid industrialization in the early part of the nineteenth century changed the average person's relationship to the work environment in such a way that a widespread impression that the

individual was not in control of his own destiny was engendered among workers (10). Furst and Skrine consider as even more important the role of Darwinism, which, fairly rapidly after the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, resulted in a growing, if erroneous, conviction among the scientific community, and to some extent among the general public, that everything in an individual's anatomy, physiology and behaviour was pre-determined by hereditary influences extending forward from his or her forebears (16).

In fact, many nineteenth-century thinkers were more than willing to attest to the importance of *both* genetic and environmental influences. Furst and Skrine summarize nineteenth-century thinking thus: "man is an animal whose course is determined by his heredity, by the effect of the environment and by the pressures of the moment.

This...conception robs man of all free will, all responsibility for his actions which are merely the inescapable result of physical forces and conditions totally beyond his control" (18).

Nonetheless, it was the considerable power of *hereditary* influences over humans that dominated the imagination of the century and became a concept so pervasive that it is amply reflected in diverse aspects of the writing of the period. For example, Hippolyte Taine described the genetic basis of human behavior as follows: "the primary molecule is inherited and its acquired shape is passed on partially and gradually by heredity" (Furst and Skrine 17). Zola's *Germinal*, like many of his Rougon-Macquart novels, is replete with references to the hereditary determination of behaviour. One example among many is Zola's description of how the mine-girl Catherine submits to her first lover "with the hereditary submissiveness that sent all the girls of her race rolling flat on their backs while they were little more than children" (118).

It needs to be noted, however, that this discourse concerning genetic and evolutionary influences long pre-dates the first hard scientific evidence regarding the *mechanisms* of heredity associated with the re-discovery and confirmation of Gregor Mendel's work by Hugo deVries and Carl Correns in 1900. Indeed, it even pre-dates the appearance of *On the Origin of Species*.

There was also early recognition that the genetic influence of past generations could change over time. The seventeenth-century observations and experiments of such naturalists and philosophers as John Ray, John Baal, Jean Marchant and Joseph Koelreuter confirmed that species can transmutate, and a number of eighteenth-century theorists, including Pierre Maupertuis and Dennis Diderot, also publicly espoused the (then dangerous) belief that, as the eighteenth-century French diplomat and evolutionist Benoit de Maillet put it, "species changed into one another by specialization of their parts over time immeasurably long" (quoted by de Beer 8-13). The form of an organism was thus determined by heredity moulded by evolutionary change.

Acceptance of mutability, combined with the pre-existing concept of the *Scala naturae* or "Great Chain of Being", gave rise in progressive circles in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to the concept of the development over time of an evolutionary series of life-forms of increasing sophistication and "worthiness," starting from the simplest organisms and culminating in Caucasian man (Rennie 60). These ideas were advanced forcefully by Erasmus Darwin in his poems and, more significantly, by Robert Chambers, whose *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* exercised enormous influence on popular public opinion in the 1840s, going through four editions in six months (de Beer 31).

Erasmus Darwin believed that the series of life-forms as a whole was the result of the progressive evolution of more complex, successful, and modern types due to a teleological process in which lower forms actively sought self-improvement; he proposed, for example, that some fish willed themselves to develop into air-breathing terrestrial animals.

However, this view was by no means the most commonly adopted when the Victorians applied the concept of the evolutionary scale (as they enthusiastically did) to the various *human* forms (i.e. existing and fossil races). Virtually all writers were agreed that Caucasian man stood on the highest rung--Robert Chambers maintained in *The Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* that “the leading characters, in short, of the various races of mankind, are simply representations of particular stages in the development of the highest or Caucasian type” (307). However, Chambers *also* believed, in common with many, that the present-day “lower” human races were the result of independent *degenerations* of the Caucasian stock. In the *Vestiges* Chambers specified that “the greater part of the human race must be considered as having lapsed or declined from the original type...The Mongolian, Malay, American and Negro, comprehending perhaps five-sixths of mankind, are degenerate” (309).

Atavisms, or throw-backs of this kind proved of great fascination to the Victorians and they ruminated endlessly concerning the nature of the reversions to apparently more primitive types which were sometimes found amongst living or relatively recently extinct hominids. Loren Eiseley reports that T.H. Huxley thought it possible that Neanderthals were just such an “accidental reversion” (269), while indicating that Carl Vogt believed the skull of an idiot (a microcephalus) showed characteristics intermediately situated

between those of an ape and those of a negro (268-269), the implication being that the idiot was a throwback to an earlier evolutionary stage. However, one significant fact is absolutely clear; the primitiveness of such atavisms among humans was almost always, and unquestioningly, equated with innate savagery. Herbert Spencer (another Victorian thinker who wielded an enormous influence on public thinking), argued in *Social Statics* that aboriginal man “to the end that he may prepare the earth for its future inhabitants—his descendents... must possess a character fitting him to clear it of races endangering his life, and races occupying the space required for mankind. Hence he must have a desire to kill” (18-19). Eiseley quotes a description of an early hominid skeleton by J.W. Dawson (writing in the *Edinburgh New Philosophical Journal* in 1864) as follows:

It is also doubtful whether this skeleton really indicates a race at all. It may have belonged to one of those wild men, half-crazed, half-idiotic, cruel and strong, who are always more or less to be found living on the outskirts of barbarous tribes, and, who now and then appear in civilized communities, to be consigned perhaps to the penitentiary or the gallows, when their murderous propensities manifest themselves. (294)

The last two clauses are noteworthy, and of particular relevance to this study, in that they betray the conclusion (which the Victorians seemed to take as foregone), that primitiveness (and, by that token, modern-day throwbacks to it) was to be equated with a strong tendency to criminality.

Existentialism

As indicated earlier, existentialism is here considered in detail as illustrative of mid-century thought valorizing individual autonomy. In the wake of two World Wars, and despite the efforts of the New Right (see Note 2), by the middle of the twentieth century existentialism had risen to considerable prominence, particularly in Europe. The existentialists specifically rejected the concept that a human's fate was in any way subject to deterministic influences; Jean-Paul Sartre wrote in *Being and Nothingness*: "Human reality cannot receive its ends...either from outside or from a so-called inner 'nature'. It chooses them" (107). In her study of existentialism, Marjorie Greene clarifies this concept as follows: "Geographical, historical, and economic factors far beyond the individual's control do indeed determine the scope and the limits of the choices he can make. Yet, however narrow those limits, it is still the choice within the situation, not the mere situation itself, that makes the man" (46-47). Fundamental to the existentialist position is Sartre's dictum in his essay "Existentialism is a Humanism" that "existence comes before essence" (290). Sartre expanded this somewhat cryptic statement by explaining that man is not created by God according to some divine pattern (because God does not exist), nor is he a version of some archetypical model of human nature (as was believed by Enlightenment thinkers); instead, man "surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards" (290). Existentialism (in Sartre's view) "puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders" (289-290). Sartre emphasizes that man is thus entirely responsible for his behavioural choices: "the existentialist says that the coward makes himself cowardly, the hero makes himself heroic, and that there is always a possibility for

the coward to give up cowardice and for the hero to stop being a hero” (302). Fernando Molina describes how, in *Sein und Zeit*, Martin Heidegger also proposes that the ability to be concerned with (and responsible for) realizing his or her possibilities is key to being human. Molina summarizes Heidegger’s thought thus: “these possibilities are not possessed by the Person in a manner analogous to the way in which an object in the world has its characteristics, for the possibilities of a Person have to be chosen by that Person... The Person projects himself toward his possibilities by means of his understanding” (63).

It is noteworthy that, dating back at least as far as Nietzsche, one can find in the writings of some pre-existentialists and existentialists an underlying theme foregrounding the fact that a certain degree of defiance, indeed irrationality, may well accompany the self-assertiveness with which the individual manages his or her own fate. Nietzsche writes in *The Gay Science* that “the secret of the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment of existence is to live *dangerously!* Build your cities under Vesuvius” (106). Striking a similar note, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus similarly recommends that man show defiance in the face of the irrational absurdity of the world: “[by] that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth” (55).

In his study *Modern French Philosophy: From Existentialism to post-Modernism*, Robert Wicks attributes the beginnings of existentialism to reaction against optimists such as the Marquis de Condorcet and positivists like Auguste Comte—a reaction largely caused by the alienating influence of large-scale capitalism on the individual’s perception of his or her influence on affairs, and also by the truly inhuman chaos of World War 1 “where men fighting on horseback in nineteenth-century style battled alongside armored

units, aircraft, machine guns and poison gas” (5). For Wicks, the Dada movement, with its valorization of the absence of meaning as the essence of perceived reality, is emblematic of the changes engendered by these horrors (10).

Key to the perceptions of many non-Christian existentialists is the proposal that there are no pre-existing moral standards to which a man or a woman should cleave. Sartre declares in “Existentialism is a Humanism”:

The Existentialist... finds it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven. There can no longer be any good *a priori*, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. It is nowhere written that “the good” exists, that one must be honest or must not lie, since we are now upon the plane where there are only men. Dostoevsky once wrote “If God did not exist, everything would be permitted”; and that, for existentialism, is the starting point. Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself...there is no determinism—man is free. (294-295)

This aspect of existentialism is of course of particular interest for this study of transgressive protagonists, since the assertion that, in the context of human behavioural choices, ethical values are entirely relative nuances dramatically attempts to define what actually constitutes a transgressive act, and to decide whether he or she who commits such an act should be automatically condemned.

European existentialist thought has been influential in many fields. In literature it has been thematically central to many works in which departure and alienation from accepted moral and behavioural codes is celebrated, such as Georges Bataille's erotic writings. In the latter, Bataille developed the position that a man can overcome his existential alienation through extreme erotic experiences; he wrote in *Eroticism* that "erotic activity, by dissolving the separate beings that participate in it, reveals their fundamental continuity, like the waves of a stormy sea" (22). Jean Genet claimed that his fantasy *Our Lady of the Flowers* was composed as a response to his need for an excitatory mental environment to accompany the act of masturbation—the deliberately defiant solipsistic existential act of a totally isolated man (65-71). Indeed Sartre, in his "Introduction" to the novel (itself taken from his *Saint Genet, Comedien et Martyr*), congratulated Genet on his existential solipsism: "Genet masturbates: this is an act of defiance, a willful perversion of the sexual act" (10)—"He is telling himself stories in order to please *himself*" (16).

Beyond its literary influence, one can also demonstrate that existential concepts have had an effect on various areas of applied science—particularly in the privileging of the experiences and values of the isolated individual. For example, existentialism profoundly and overtly informed the anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960s. In his early work *The Divided Self*, R.D. Laing, a prominent British exponent of anti-psychiatry, valorized the view that schizophrenia is not an illness, but rather a legitimate and potentially useful world-view for the particular individual who happens to be the patient (particularly if the patient is a woman in a patriarchal society). Addressing Laing's work, Immaculada Fernandez wrote that "Madness, then, can be understandable as a strategy, a form of

communication in response to the contradictory messages and demands that women in a patriarchal society receive within the family” (366). In his Preface to *The Divided Self*, Laing himself even rejected the label “madness”, which he held to be irrelevant in a thermonuclear world of entirely relative moral values, in which the “normal” acted in a mad fashion. Laing implied in classic existentialist style that the schizophrenic, as an individual, simply has an unusual way of approaching life which is as valuable as that of apparently normal people: “I would wish to emphasize that our ‘normal’ ‘adjusted’ state is too often the abdication of ecstasy, the betrayal of our true potentialities” (12). As we know, Sartre indicated that, for the existentialist, there are no standards by which we can determine what is good. Laing extended this by telling us that there are no longer standards by which we can decide what is normal or “appropriate” behaviour.

Laing moved away from anti-psychiatry in the nineteen-seventies, but existentialist concepts continue to resonate in present-day popular wisdom and wellness literature and culture, as evidenced by the following invocatory message to students displayed recently (June 2011) on the school signboard of my neighbourhood elementary school in north-west Waterloo, Ontario: “Be the One who you are, there is no-one else.”³ The meaning may be a little opaque, but the echoes of existentialist isolation and individual responsibility are clear.

Another cultural intersection to which we will return is hinted at in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s pre-existentialist work *Notes from Underground*. Dostoevsky’s Underground Man rejects the “palace of crystal” (which symbolizes a Utopian scenario in which the development of a perfect understanding of the determination of human motives and will has facilitated the engineering of a state of perfect happiness for all) on the

grounds that in it a man could not “put out one’s tongue or make a long nose on the sly” (79). The theme hinted at here relates to the incompatibility of determinism and irony and humour--this issue will be taken up later in this study.

Approaches to the Understanding of Criminal Motivation

As we have seen, determinism and existentialism have both had widespread cultural resonance, and, bearing in mind the subject of this thesis, it is now time to look specifically at how these two world-views have, in their very different ways, affected approaches to the problems of crime and, in particular, attempts to understand the criminal and the motives for his or her transgressions. In a preliminary endeavour to provide a framework through which to view the two alternative approaches, I will summarize the difference between them by pointing out that determinist criminology treats the criminal as an object, while existentialist criminology treats the criminal as a subject.

Isabel Rennie quotes a penal code drafted for the North German Federation (declared in 1866) which demonstrates how deeply-rooted the concept of free will was in classical jurisprudence: “the right of the state...to punish [the criminal] rests upon the general human opinion that the mature and mentally sound man has sufficient will-power to repress impulses to criminal acts” (76). However, Rennie also points out that free will and determinism have see-sawed in their relative importance throughout the history of penal practice: “In the eighteenth century free will was in the ascendant. In the nineteenth the positions were to be reversed and thoughtful men would again ask whether man is

evil because he wills it or because he cannot help himself” (33). I will start by examining the role of determinism in criminology.

Determinism and the criminal

The belief that criminality is determined by something “outside” the criminal has a long history originating in the Biblical concept of mankind’s original sin—the result of Adam’s fall. However, the unprecedented rise of determinism in nineteenth-century criminology was partly a reflection of the growth of positivism (the belief that all phenomena can be explained mechanistically, if enough data are gathered)—be it the sociological positivism of Marx and Engels, which proposed that the human condition could be explained by reference to social and economic factors, or the scientific positivism of Darwin and Rudolf Virchow, which maintained that human phenomena should be primarily understood in the context of biological processes, evolutionary or cellular.

With respect to criminality, Robert Chambers accommodates both these approaches in *The Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* when he describes “the true case of criminals—namely that while one large section are victims of erroneous social conditions, another are brought to error by tendencies which they are only unfortunate in having inherited from nature” (358-359).

Theories regarding both the genetic and the environmental determinants of criminality and crime abound, and some that are of particular relevance to the various examples of transgressive fiction analyzed in later chapters will be considered in detail below.

Hereditary Criminality

An explosion of advocacy for a genetic and evolutionary basis for criminality (the belief, as Ysabel Rennie has it, that criminals were “a special evolutionary type stranded somewhere on the lower rungs of the Ladder of Perfection” [65]) was manifested around 1870 as a result of the work of the Italian Positivists—a group of very early criminologists who combined evolutionary and positivist theory. Particularly significant was the publication in 1876 by Cesare Lombroso of *L’Uomo delinquente*, which emphatically claimed the reality of the “born criminal.”

In *L’Uomo delinquente*, Lombroso combined the existing concepts of the moral imbecile (a human being born without the ability, or desire, to make moral judgments) and the idea of human evolutionary reversion. From the start, Lombroso’s central advocacy was for the fact that the born criminal was an atavistic⁴ expression of an earlier stage in human evolution characterized by particular primitive physical characteristics such as prognathy, square-headedness and jug ears,⁵ and by the savage behaviour commonly attributed to primitive humans. He held that these atavistic characteristics were inherited qualities sometimes traceable to causative behaviours, such as alcoholism, in the born criminal’s forebears. Almost immediately, this concept appeared to receive support from an 1877 study of local criminals in upper New York State by Richard Dugdale, which claimed to demonstrate the inheritance of criminality (including violence and sexual misconduct) over many generations in a family which Dugdale named the Jukes (Rennie 79).

Over the course of many years, Lombroso and his students examined the bodies of thousands of living and dead criminals to provide evidence that would substantiate

Lombroso's most emphatic criminological claim--the inescapable link between abnormal physical characteristics and violent criminality. It is worth noting in passing that, in his numerous publications, Lombroso particularly foregrounded the physical characteristics of the criminal that are clearly suggestive of the savage and the ape, such as low brows and prehensile toes. In a speech to the Sixth Congress of Criminal Anthropology in Turin in 1906, Lombroso explained how the observation of physical cranial abnormalities in an executed Italian bandit originally led him to an understanding of the born criminal: "At the sight of the strange abnormalities, the problem of the nature and the origin of the criminal seemed to be resolved, the characteristics of primitive men and of inferior animals must be reproduced in our times."⁶

Of course, Lombroso shared without question the nineteenth-century presumption (for which, as we have seen, Herbert Spencer advanced a supposedly logical explanation) that primitive man, modern "savages" and born criminals must *de facto* demonstrate behavioural savagery. In his *Crime: Its Causes and Remedies*, he commends his colleague Raffaele Garofalo for summing up "the psychical characteristics of the born criminal as being the absence of the feelings of shame, honour and pity which are those lacking in the savage also. We may add to these the lack of industry and self-control" (366). He further points out that the concept of atavism explains why "convicts so easily adapt savage customs, including cannibalism, as was observed in Australia and Guiana" (369).

Beginning with his earliest publications, Lombroso also laid heavy emphasis on the role of alcohol in the causation of criminal behaviour. In *Crime: Its Causes and Remedies* he drew attention to "the abuse of alcoholic drinks, the consumption of which increases at

just the rate at which crime increases” (91) and continued “Habitual drinkers are not only immoral and beget children who are defective, delinquent or precocious debauchees... as we shall show by the history of the Juke family, but intoxication itself is a direct cause of crime” (95).

While atavism always remained central to his thinking, over the course of many decades and of many editions of *L'Uomo delinquente*, Lombroso expanded the range of his beliefs regarding the causation of crime to include other factors such as degeneracy (a disease condition evidenced by epilepsy) and many environmental factors, including climate and geology. He also defined many different kinds of criminal that constituted additions to, or sub-sets of, the born criminal (the number of categories grew progressively as his career matured). These included the occasional criminal, the pseudocriminal and the criminaloid. Regarding the latter, Maurice Parmelee, translating directly from *L'Homme criminel* (the 1895 French edition of *L'Uomo delinquente*), indicates that the criminaloid can be defined as follows:

A variety of born criminal who has indeed a special organic tendency but one which is less intense, who has therefore only a touch of degeneracy; that is why I will call them *criminaloids*. But, it is natural that in them the importance of the occasion determining the crime should be decisive, while it is not so for the born criminal, for whom it is a circumstance with which he can dispense and with which he often does dispense, as, for example, in cases of brutal mischievousness. (xxvii)

Although always controversial, Lombroso remained a potent influence in the field of criminological theory well into the early part of the twentieth century. *L'Uomo delinquente* was not translated into English until 1911, but Donald Pizer indicates that

Lombroso's ideas were well known in England and America much before that date. In his article "The Genesis of McTeague," Pizer writes that translations of Lombroso's work appeared in journals prior to 1911, and that, in England, Havelock Ellis's *The Criminal* (London, 1892), and in the United States, Macdonald's *Criminology* (New York, 1893), showed considerable Lombrosan influence (300n). Furthermore, he reveals that the chaplain of San Quentin prison, August Drahts, published in 1900 a book entitled *The Criminal* (which contained much Lombrosan thought), and that Lombroso was invited to contribute the Preface for the book (301). It will be seen in chapter two that Lombrosan thought heavily influenced Frank Norris's characterization of the murderer McTeague. Norris was well acquainted with the thrusts of Lombroso's work and he endowed McTeague with many of physical and mental stigmata of "l'uomo delinquent", and with hereditary influences that foreground alcoholism.

The weakest point in Lombroso's theorizing rested in his absolute determination to equate genetic criminality and particular physical characteristics. His fellow Positivist Raffaele Garofalo was already striking an unusually tentative note regarding this issue in his *Criminology* of 1914: "What criminal anthropology really lacks...is convincing proof that a given characteristic of the skull or skeleton is found more often among criminals than among persons presumably honest" (74). However, this aspect of Lombroso's work was finally and definitively discredited in 1913 when Charles Goring published *The English Convict*, a study of the physical characteristics of thousands of English convicts, undergraduates, hospital inmates, and soldiers. In this work Goring conclusively demonstrated that it was impossible to show that convicts had any distinguishing physical

attributes, and he strongly criticized Lombroso's work for the naivety of its statistical approach and inadequate methodology (Rennie 75).

Lombroso may have been discredited in 1913, but belief in genetic determinism as the cause of criminality lived on, succoured particularly by the publication in the 1920s of Johannes Lange's study of criminal activity in mono- and di-zygotic twins, which led him to conclude that "As far as the causes of crime are concerned, innate tendencies play a preponderant part."⁷

Finally, World War Two engendered a sea-change. In the shadow cast by the horror of Hitler's eugenic policies (eugenic theory, of course, largely rests on a belief in the primacy of heredity in determining human behaviour and performance) and the consequent Nazi attempts to achieve eradication of some human ethnicities and cultural categories, science has since the war been more concerned to discredit than to prove attempts to impute genetic causes to human behaviour of any kind, be it criminality or mental illness. For example, Richard Lewontin and his co-authors devote many pages in their study *Not in Our Genes* to probing the false assumptions, faults in data handling and methodological errors that preclude acceptance of any of the twin, kin or adoption studies they review that purport to demonstrate a hereditary basis for schizophrenia (200-231). As Rennie puts it: "Where one generation embraced not only biological determinism but also the most ruthless eugenic measures, evidence of innate biological differences is today met with a disquiet which amounts to disparagement" (92).

The Sociological Determinants of Criminality

Looking back from the perspective of the later twentieth century, Clarence Jeffrey proposed in his essay “The Historical Development of Criminology” that the true value of the efforts of the Positivist school lay in the fact that they “focused attention on motivation and the individual criminal” (471). Such emphasis on an understanding of motivation could, of course, be as reasonably attributed to those investigators who sought a sociological basis for criminality as to those who sought a genetic basis. We will now turn to an examination of studies of the relationship of criminality and social pressures.

Fascinated as the nineteenth century was by human heredity, there were many criminologists who dismissed the idea of innate criminality and who sought the causes of crime in the criminal’s environment, which they defined in a variety of ways. As long ago as the Middle Ages the cause of crime was confidently attributed to economic distress. In England, during the reign of Henry VIII, the breakdown of feudalism, as well as early enclosure measures, led to the production of a Statute quoted by Rennie which recognized that “a marvelous multitude of the people of this realm be not able to provide meat, drink, and clothes necessary for themselves, their wives and children, but be so discouraged with misery and poverty that they fall daily to theft, robbery and other inconveniences” (Rennie 6). Similarly, Marxist thinking, first articulated in the early nineteenth century, proposed that crime was a natural reaction to the inequalities of the social structure.

The “Cup of Tantalus”

Baron d’Holbach was the first to imply that crime might be caused, not by absolute poverty, but rather by *relative* economic status. In his *Systeme Social* he maintained that “when wealth is too unequally divided...there we commonly see a great number of criminals.”⁸ However, it was Raffaele Garofalo who developed to its fullest extent the theory that crime was caused by envy, not absolute lack. In *Criminology*, he attributed significance to the fact that crime undoubtedly occurs among a sub-section of the working class that is by no means destitute, as well as among those haunted by absolute want. He characterized this sub-section as suffering “not from the pangs of hunger, but rather from its inability to procure the pleasures which it sees enjoyed by those more favored by fortune. In the great cities, especially, is the Cup of Tantalus thus perpetually at its lips” (146). Garofalo generalized the concept by pointing out that an individual from *any* stratum of society might be tempted to crime by unconquerable envy of the habits or possessions of those in the stratum above. He considered that fleeting tastes or glimpses of the desired luxuries particularly motivate crime among those so exposed “because of their more frequent opportunities of knowing and appreciating the refinements of luxury and comfort, and of seeing what lacks for their full enjoyment of life” (149). He does, however, add the caveat that the Cup of Tantalus tempts with varying strength according to personality, and, for exposure to it to prompt criminal acts, the person exposed must be of a “psychic condition” that makes him or her particularly vulnerable (147).

As might be expected, we will see that the characterization of transgressive protagonists in novels from the nineteen-twenties and thirties reflects the diminishing

influence of Lombrosan atavism and tends instead to emphasize the determination of criminality by sociological and environmental causes. It will be certainly possible to demonstrate the relevance of Garofalo's Cup of Tantalus to the criminal motivation of Clyde Griffiths in Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*; Clyde is beset at his very core by the temptations arising out of social inequity.

Anomie

In his 1949 study *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Robert K. Merton developed a theory regarding the causation of crime which rested on the concept of thwarted ambition rather than envy, and which was grounded upon Emile Durkheim's theory of anomie.

In *Suicide* and other of his works, Durkheim described anomie as societal state, often typical of societies undergoing rapid change, in which there is a rapid weakening of normative standards of behaviour and morality. Durkheim applied the concept to an entire society, but Robert Merton modified the concept in applying it to *individuals* caught in a particular cultural bind or dilemma, which he investigated at length. Merton claimed that this dilemma develops in a society where there are strongly emphasized cultural goals that are the aim of every member of the society, but where, for many members of society, there is no obvious way to reach these goals. Merton wrote "aberrant behaviour may be regarded sociologically as a symptom of dissociation between culturally-prescribed aspirations and socially structured avenues for realizing those aspirations" (188). This alienation is most apparent in a society like Durkheim's anomic society which is rapidly changing and highly mobile, and in which the social structure—the folkways—are disappearing. In this context, Merton maintained, a cultural

overemphasis on the absolute need for success in achieving the recognized goals can lead an individual whose social position debars him from such achievement to adopt short cuts, which may well be transgressive and criminal. As Merton said, the “most *effective* behaviour, whether culturally legitimate or not, becomes typically preferred to institutionally prescribed conduct” (189). Merton specifically recognized the possibility of this dissociation between culturally-prescribed goals and available avenues of achievement in mid-twentieth century American society, which “places a high premium on economic affluence and social success for all its members” (221), yet, because of the inequality which constitutes a fundamental assumption of its nature, denies opportunity for realizing these goals to many. Merton also points out that lack of success in achieving goals of affluence is often interpreted as personal failing: “This leads actually to the subsidiary theme that success or failure are the result wholly of personal qualities, that he who fails has only himself to blame” (222). We will discover that a Mertonian analysis of the distorting effect of apparently unachievable, but nonetheless apparently overwhelmingly demanding, societal expectations, is very relevant to the analysis of motivation in a novel published just six years after *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

Linked with Mertonian theories of anomie and alienation is the concept that criminal behaviour can be the result of a dissociation from meaningful value systems arising from an individual’s moving to a totally new environment—typically, in nineteenth and early twentieth century America, from a rural to an urban environment. In his *Culture, Conflict and Crime*, Thorsten Sellin proposed the general thesis that such a move leads to the loss of the kinds of control exercised on the individual by such groups as the family. In this

study, Sellin maintained that the effect of the rural-urban shift can be dissociated from, and is as powerful as, the alienation felt by the transnational migrant. He quotes Pauline Young's 1936 article in the "American Sociological Review" to this effect:

The problems of the immigrant...have their origin, for the most part in the change he is making from a primary to a secondary society. It is not simply that a Pole or an Italian has come to America, but rather that a villager has come to the great city...many of the Polish peasant's difficulties appear when he moves to an industrial city in Poland, and conversely he escapes many of the self-same difficulties if he moves to rural America and avoids the corroding urban influences. This observation is borne out by the behavior of rural Americans who go to the great city. (84)

Neighbourhood and Social Context

In 1942, Clifford Shaw and Henry Mackay published work based on three successive studies of juvenile delinquency in Chicago which cover a thirty-year period. This work showed unequivocally that crime rates were a function of particular neighbourhoods, irrespective of the ethnicity of the immigrants occupying them (the dominant ethnicity in the study area changed over the course of the study from German/Irish to Polish/Italian). The significant crimalogenic factors were peer-group pressure and social contagion (delinquent boys committed crimes in gangs and had been previously exposed to the influence of older delinquents), as well as the physical, social and economic circumstances of particular neighbourhoods. Shaw and Mackay also associated high

crime rates with the frustration of self-realization in depressed neighbourhoods, in words which recall Garofalo's Cup of Tantalus and Merton's anomic theories:

Children in poor neighborhoods are exposed to the same luxury values and success patterns as those from more affluent classes. What is different for them is that they have no legitimate means of achieving them. Crime, in this situation, may be regarded as one of the means employed by people to acquire, or to attempt to acquire, the economic and social values generally idealized in our culture, which persons in other circumstances acquire by conventional means. (Rennie 129)

Social conditioning and the influence of neighbourhood (both strongly nuanced by the effect of racial segregation) will prove to be integral to an understanding of Bigger Thomas, in Richard Wright's *Native Son*.

Existentialism and the Criminal

For the existentialist, the way to transgression (and potentially to criminality) is laid open by a core belief in man's isolation and total independence from any given moral framework. As Sartre points out in "Existentialism is a Humanism," just as a painter is absolutely free to choose what to paint, so, on the plane of morality, there is no guidance at all available to man, who "makes himself by the choice of his morality, and he cannot but choose a morality, such is the pressure of circumstances upon him" (306).

Existentialist thought makes it clear that it is open to man to reject the morality of others and to embrace transgression (and thus criminality)--a choice foreshadowed by Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*: "We will sail away right *over* morality" (26).

It is sometimes hard to avoid the conclusion that the adoption of a transgressive stance is sometimes at least partially motivated by a desire to *épater les bourgeois*—thus Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man*: “it is sometimes pleasant...to smash things” (18); and Genet in *Our Lady of the Flowers*: “I have already spoken of my fondness for odors,...above all, the odor of my farts...I bury myself beneath the covers and gather in my cupped hands my crushed farts, which I carry to my nose” (177). More seriously, however, European existentialist writers, and those who recognize their achievement, frequently make the claim that the pre-eminent value of transgression is as a means of access to transcendental vision. Michel Foucault, in “Preface to Transgression,” likens transgression to “a flash of lightning in the night which from the beginning of time, gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies, which lights up the night” (35), while in *Eroticism*, Bataille valorizes de Sade’s depiction of the disgusting and cruel on the grounds that through these writings de Sade achieved “the most singular revelations” (195). With respect to a discipline parallel to literature, the visual arts, Anthony Julius writes “When a boundary is transgressed, one tastes the infinite” (20). Julius further points out that the transgressive visual artist draws on “the Romantic ideology of the artist as genius, a rule-breaker” (19). Nabokov’s *Lolita* explores the way in which the transgressor can be celebrated as an independent agent driven, without reference to societal norms and without apology, to self-realization; although we will also see that, as in the characterization of all the fictional murderers considered here, the portrayal of Humbert Humbert is multipartite.

It is undeniable that we often find the transgressor portrayed in existentialist literature as a hero. In his “Introduction” to the work, Sartre comments thus on the protagonists of

Our Lady of the Flowers: “the rogues and wretches of whom [the novel] speaks all seem to be heroes of the elect” (9). Furthermore, it seems that the aura of heroism readily attaches itself to real-life criminals, whose exploits may, upon close examination, be revealed as utterly unacceptable, and in this too we can detect the influence of the concept of the existentialist hero. Media coverage of the recent arrest, after 16 years on the run, of Boston area gangster James “Whitey” Bulger asserted that, despite being his being complicit in at least nineteen murders, and, even more incredibly, despite his criminal credentials being seriously debased by the revelation that he had been a police informer, Bulger was regarded as a “legend” in South Boston.⁹ Indeed, the boundary between real and fictional criminality is frequently blurred when, as commonly occurs, real criminals achieve heroism in fiction which is only loosely based on their actual lives. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault refers to the medieval broadsheets which glorified executed highwaymen and bandits (68-69) and points out that in later centuries the same popular sentiment that produced a ready market for these broadsheets is responsible for fiction featuring criminals (both fictional and real), a sub-genre that has grown in volume through the eighteenth and, particularly, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The literary and cinematic treatments of Billy the Kid, Jesse James and Bonnie and Clyde provide ready examples.

While it is clear that the general public is ambivalent concerning transgression, fascination certainly constitutes one facet of this ambivalence, and a powerful one at that. Referencing Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, Chris Jenks writes in *Transgression*, “What is forbidden, what is beyond the boundary, what is potentially unclean carries with it a propulsion to desire” (68-69). This public fascination readily extends to the transgressive

criminal as an autonomous hero or outlaw who stands alone (Camus's valorization of Sisyphus seems relevant in this context: "he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock" [121]).

The "Containment" of Transgression.

It will become readily apparent in the chapters that follow that the novelists investigated have chosen to reflect in their portrayals of transgressive protagonists many of the theories discussed above regarding the causation of criminality.

But it seems wise to pause at this point, step back and ask why this should be so; why not simply create an interesting story which involves a tantalizing hint (or more) of transgression, and ignore, or set aside as irrelevant, theorizing regarding the genesis of criminality?

In this context, it is worthwhile to consider seriously *both* sides of our ambivalent reactions to transgression. Criminality and transgression do indeed fascinate us, but they also repel and scare us, particularly in the case of sadistic and brutal transgressions which are beyond the comprehension of most. In their study *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White emphasize that "the low troubles the high" (3) and recognize that "Repugnance and fascination are the twin poles" of our reaction to the transgressive (4-5).

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault traces how penal practice reacted to this fear as bourgeois wealth (and the need for its protection) grew during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The purpose of penal practice changed from punishment to the management and modification of the criminal transgressor (through coercive

psychological means and behaviour management in jail), the aim being that he would cease to be a danger to the well-being of society. Foucault writes of the institution of “mechanisms of legal punishment with a justifiable hold not only on offences, but also on individuals: not only on what they do, but also on what they are, will be, may be,” and which are primarily intended “not to punish, but to supervise the individual” (18). For such supervision to be successful, a framework of understanding of criminal character is necessarily required.

But, beyond considerations of practical penological practice, there is a more fundamental issue at stake here. That which scares us, particularly if much of that fear derives from the feared phenomena being utterly beyond our comprehension, may be “contained,” and its fearfulness reduced, if we explain it by reference to a explicative thought-system or “language” which *is* familiar to us, and this may well lie behind the positioning of some of the fictional transgressors described later within an explanatory framework provided by contemporary criminological thinking.

Of relevance here are the proposals of modern Russian structuralist Jurij Lotman regarding the way in which humans choose to contain the inexpressible in conventionalized “languages” that often render abstract concepts concrete by using terms which are readily accessible to the human imagination. Lotman discusses “artificially created systems [which he calls “languages”] that are used to describe particular groups of phenomena” (7); he cites particularly the way in which chemical formulae and equations are used as a readily accessible shorthand to render some of the invisible phenomena of physical science explicable. In the same way he points to an apparently universal tendency in language to represent in concrete spatial terms those aspects of

human relations which cannot be directly visualized; thus, for example, the adjective “distant” would be used to describe a troubled relationship (218).

In the coming chapters, we will find that, in the same fashion, the novelists examined often seek to “contain” the at times horrifying transgressions they describe, and the transgressors who commit them, by positioning them within a known criminological “language,” or system of explications, which makes an understanding of them more readily available. With understanding, the horror of the transgression is eased.

However, containment within an apparently explicative thought-system (such as the attribution of criminal tendencies to hereditary influences) is not the only tactic that can be deployed by writers who, for whatever reason, seek to avoid a direct confrontation with violent crime. In *Raids on Human Consciousness: Writing, Anarchism, and Violence* Arthur Redding has examined in detail how novelists (particularly those from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) may try to elide or mask the horror of violence by narratological ploys (or, as Redding calls them, “textual maneuvers” [118]), such as the manipulation of the degree of reader engagement with, or sympathy for, particular characters. We will be examining such maneuvers in some of the texts discussed, and also noting that they are completely (and deliberately) omitted from other texts, most notably the novels of Richard Wright.

Chapter 2: Frank Norris's *McTeague*

“A remarkably silly but rather charming book about a dentist who murders his wife”

Vladimir Nabokov's casual assessment of Frank Norris's *McTeague* in a letter to Edmund Wilson¹⁰ echoes the ambivalence with which many readers respond to this novel (published in 1899); the first featuring a transgressive protagonist to be addressed in this thesis. Indeed, widening the focus beyond *McTeague* itself, many critics intent on more serious assessments than Nabokov have been frustrated in their search for a dominant philosophical thesis in Norris's entire oeuvre—the imposition of a pattern seeming almost impossible. Deanna Kreisel refers somewhat ruefully to “the complexity (and occasionally contradictory nature) of [Norris's] literary philosophy” (182). Don Graham¹¹ states that “no-one has defined the essential Frank Norris,” while Barbara Hochman concludes that “it remains supremely difficult to achieve a stable perspective on Norris's philosophical ideas” (3). No better illustration of Hochman's contention could be found than the final fifty pages of *The Octopus* (the second novel of Norris's projected epic trilogy on wheat), wherein the protagonist (Presley) concludes on the one hand that mankind's fate is ruled by a “Colossal indifference...Nature was, then, a gigantic engine, a vast Cyclopean power, huge, terrible, a leviathan with a heart of steel, knowing no compunction, no forgiveness” (396), while, in the very closing words of the novel, giving voice to an optimistic vision almost completely at odds with the earlier judgment, “The Truth...will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good” (448).

In truth, any honest attempt to examine Norris's works must include the admission that he was an essentially protean writer capable, as in the example from *The Octopus*, of the nearly simultaneous articulation of a wide variety of points of view. We will see later that frank recognition of this fact usefully informs an examination of Norris's treatment of McTeague as a criminal.

It is also true that Norris often seems to have been almost carried away on a verbal torrent of his own creation; cleaving closely to his own advice to a correspondent to "Tell your yarn and let your style go to the devil."¹² Charles Walcutt, one of the first of the modern wave of Norris interpreters, understates when he attributes "creative exuberance" (116) to Norris. When approaching a Norris text, it is therefore important to bear in mind the importance the author attributed to the act of story-telling in and of itself; a significance evidenced by his strangely nuanced view of Harriet Beecher Stowe's authorial process: "Her book, her manuscript, the page-to-page progress of the narrative, were more absorbing to her than all the Negroes that were ever whipped or sold."¹³

***McTeague* – an Undeniably Lombrosan Conception**

Above all, *McTeague*, probably the most widely-read of Norris's novels, has been the subject of a truly astonishing variety of interpretations. Barbara Hochman has proposed that it is best seen as an investigation of personal insecurity; all the major characters being "engaged in ineffectual efforts at controlling their environment and controlling inner turmoil" (14) by cleaving to pattern-inducing habits, such as Trina's hoarding and McTeague's repeated playing of the same six tunes on the concertina. In Hochman's view, the function of these habits is to "defend the self from whatever may threaten to

subvert it” (63)--the subversion coming from the repeated removal of the familiar frameworks of life (in Trina’s case, sexual awakening and marriage, immediate loss of family support and then loss of McTeague’s regular income). David McGlynn likewise considers insecurity an important theme in the novel, but re-positions the insecurity at a class level. McGlynn regards McTeague’s caged canary as a key motif, emblemizing the plight of McTeague and Trina, caught between the expectations of lower middle class existence and the precariousness of their means to satisfy them. After the loss of McTeague’s practice, McGlynn envisions them as “trapped inside the city but without the means to spend or possess” (32) and faced with inevitable and catastrophic loss of class status. Walter Benn Michaels takes a historicist approach to the novel, proposing that Trina’s quasi-sexual love of gold is an example of capitalist economic fetishism since it represents the hoarding of a commodity not for its use-value but for its “natural” intrinsic value. David Guest’s historicism, on the other hand, has a judicial flavour. Guest positions *McTeague* as a justification of capital punishment because it demonstrates that some murderers are genetically determined to be killers, and as such are “an enemy in our midst” (25), who must be removed. Guest regards McTeague’s death in the desert as the equivalent of capital punishment, and concludes “Once he stands revealed as a habitual criminal [one assumes that Guest is referring to McTeague’s repeated drinking and violence after he leaves Trina]...the plot shifts towards a restoration of natural justice” (35). Nan Morelli-Whyte draws a parallel between the novel and the mediaeval morality play, describing *McTeague* as a modern version of the latter involving due punishment for the vices of lust and greed. Finally, one of most daring interpretations of *McTeague* is that of Rebecca Nisetich, who, invoking homosexual relationships between McTeague

and Marcus Schouler, and between Trina and Maria Macapa, proposes that the novel is an expose of the perversion introduced into American life by non-Anglo-Saxons. In support of this contention, Nisetich argues, among other things, that Marcus's antagonism to McTeague is a parodic exaggeration aimed at disguising "his sincere jealousy of Trina for stealing Mac" (3).

Any attempt to generalize this multiplicity of approaches to the novel is led to the conclusion that, despite Lars Ahnebrink's early work which painstakingly detailed the very close textual and thematic parallels between *McTeague* and Zola's *L'Assomoir* and *La Bete Humaine*,¹⁴ most critical work since Ahnebrink has underplayed the importance of the novel's determinist affinities and has preferred to mobilize interest in the psychological plight of the protagonists. Don Graham, for example, celebrates "Recent criticism of *McTeague* [as]...impressive because critics have begun to approach the novel from new perspectives...without the tedious repetition of naturalistic shibboleths" (43). Graham characterizes McTeague as a "sympathetic bottom dog" (43) and, as Charles Crow points out (2), scarcely mentions Trina's murder at all. The doyen of Norris commentators, Donald Pizer, in his magisterial study *The Novels of Frank Norris*, assuredly brings into play the image of McTeague as a harried victim, envisioning him as "a human being in distress" (79) and comparing him with Gervaise in *L'Assomoir*, "both creatures who want above all a place to rest and be content" (86). The "psychological approach" undoubtedly has its attractions, since it backgrounds the declamatory authorial intrusions (so uninviting to the modern reader) by means of which Norris announced his determinist theses. It also seems consistent with the fact that, in comparison with the early drafts of the novel which Norris prepared for his Harvard writing class (much the

greater part of which deal with the murder and its aftermath), in the novel as published Norris greatly expanded the first section dealing with the courtship of Trina and McTeague and the early part of their marriage.

However, despite special pleading--Barbara Hochman, for example, urges the provisional setting aside the text's "explicit ideological statements" (4) so that its psychological subtleties can be revealed--the fact cannot be ignored that much of this expanded early section of the novel dealing with the romance and early marriage of the McTeagues is in fact given over to the presentation and validation of McTeague as a Lombrosan born criminal, utterly unable to resist the violent impulses resulting from his atavism. Common sense demands the acknowledgement of this Lombrosan element as a major component in Norris's construction of his protagonist, and to downplay this element must seriously distort any assessment of the novel.

Norris's treatment of McTeague is clearly reflective of the centrality of a belief in the importance of hereditary factors in his world-view. As William Dillingham points out, Norris "differed significantly from other American naturalists in seeing heredity as greater force for good or evil in men's lives than environment" (51).

There is abundant evidence that Norris was familiar with Lombroso's work during the late 1890s, not least the fact that during this period he wrote a number of short stories for the magazine *The Wave* which are based on Lombroso's theories, and which are described in detail in Donald Pizer's *The Novels of Frank Norris* (59). These stories include "A Reversion to Type" in which a respectable and dependable store employee reverts atavistically to the criminality of his father under the influence of alcohol, and "Little Dramas of the Curbstone" in which a child is condemned to atavistic idiocy

because of the alcoholism and genetic deficiencies of his father. One of the stories, which describes the degeneracy (due to “exhausted heredity”) of a Spanish woman (Crescencia Hromada), is actually entitled “A Case for Lombroso” (Kreisel 188). Furthermore, Pizer draws attention to the fact that Norris was friendly with a Dr. Lawlor who was prison doctor (and thus almost certainly familiar with Lombroso’s theories) at San Quentin, where, as has been indicated previously, the chaplain, August Drahms, “was a confirmed Lombrosian, [and] whose book contained a commendatory preface by the master” (58).

In the course of the first half of *McTeague*,² Norris includes in the characterization of his protagonist very many of the elements that Lombroso attributes to the born criminal; many of the specific stigmata of *l’uomo delinquent*, square-headedness, salient jaw, and mental slowness, figure prominently. Furthermore, animal parallels abound, amply demonstrating the accepted nineteenth-century equation of animal, brute and savage. We learn of McTeague’s “bestial fury” (134) and “ape-like agility” (210), see him compared to “a young bull in high summer” (18) and read of him striding out of Frenna’s bar “like a raging elephant” (83). By only the second page of the novel the narrative voice has already informed us of the alcoholic degeneracy McTeague has likely inherited from his father, who “Every other Sunday... became an irresponsible animal, a beast, a brute, crazy with alcohol” (2). Indeed, drawing on the multitude of sub-categories of born criminal defined by Lombroso in his later work it is even possible to identify McTeague as a criminaloid in view of the fact that he is provoked to crime by a specific occasion—frustration at Trina’s irrational avarice.

One subsidiary stream of *McTeague* criticism accepts that the novel’s characterization of the main protagonist is Lombrosian, but nuances this approach to propose that the work

constitutes a nativist attack by Norris on the degeneracy of immigrants, essentially recapitulating the approach of Rebecca Nisetich (summarized earlier), without the homosexual overtones. Daniel Schierenbeck, for example, maintains that, in *McTeague*, Norris “projects immigrant Americans as sites of abnormality and disease” (63), while Gina Rossetti maintains that “McTeague’s...Irish heritage signals his proclivity to crime” (54) and that “Norris clearly shows a link between McTeague’s Irish heritage and his primitivism” (56). Rossetti feels that the failings associated with McTeague’s “Irishness” “underscore the immigrant’s unsuitability” (53).

This approach really hinges on a reading of the description of the motivation of McTeague’s sexual delinquency in kissing the anaesthetized Trina--“The vices and sins of his father and of his father’s father, to the third and fourth and five hundredth generation tainted him. The evil of an entire race flowed in his veins” (19)--as a specific invocation of the sins of the *Irish* race; indeed Rossetti specifically references this passage. In fact, there are many reasons for thinking that the reference is to the ungovernable innate sexual urge that *all* men feel, not least the generalized reference a few lines earlier to the struggle between good and bad in McTeague as “the old battle, old as the world, *wide as the world*” (18) (my italics) and the slightly later description of the pull of desire facing “every child of man” (19). It is thus clear that Norris is invoking what David McGlynn describes as “the capacities for evil shared by all mankind” (38), (according to Joseph Leconte, Norris’s intellectual mentor at Berkeley, the capacity for evil constituted one of the two evolutionary forces at war within every human). While Norris is never behindhand in negatively stereotyping the non-Anglo-Saxon races (in, for example, his descriptions of the Polish Jew Zerkow), I would resist an interpretation of

the novel as a *specific* attack on Irish, and thus immigrant, degeneracy as inconsistent with the text. Any such construction must falter over the fact that McTeague is American-born of parents who are never specifically referred to as Irish, is *himself* never specifically referred to as Irish, has no accent, and does not demonstrate stereotypically Irish characteristics. He is not garrulous (far from it!) or thieving, does not demonstrate Catholic affinities, has no large extended family, initially drinks very moderately, has blue eyes, and blond rather than red hair and is massive rather than thin and wiry.

The positioning of McTeague as determined object is fundamental to the construction of the novel's text at a number of levels.

Of course, classic Lombrosan theory emphasizes the absolute determination of an individual's criminal behaviour by hereditary influences, and indeed it is hard to overstate the extent and influence of determinism in this text. It is so fundamental to Norris's approach that its influence can be detected at the levels of both the "story"--the events of the "fabula" and the characterization as arranged and selectively emphasized by the author—and the "text" (the selection and arrangement of the words and grammatical constructions on the page), to utilize Mieke Bal's dual classification.

As a protagonist totally controlled by forces originating externally to himself, McTeague is consistently presented in the story as a controlled object, never a subject capable of self-control. We are constantly told that McTeague is quite unable to resist his sexual urges: "The male virile in him...aroused itself, strong and brutal. It was resistless, untrained, a thing not to be held in check an instant" (16). This note is again struck at a later stage in the novel when McTeague, in Trina's room, suddenly plunges his face into

her garments, prompted by irresistible lust. Furthermore, McTeague is periodically carried away by the atavistic savagery so near at hand in the born criminal; during the wrestling match with Marcus, after the latter has bitten his ear, “The brute that in McTeague lay so close to the surface leaped instantly to life, monstrous, not to be resisted” (133).

Moreover, the over-riding conception of human beings as passive and determined objects has many ramifications with respect to the way in which Norris positions his characters and to the way in which he shapes his text. All the characters in *McTeague* tend to be presented as passive objects: Robert Sommer comments, “McTeague and Trina are passive figures, organic rather than human in the way they interact with the environment” (40). The use of the passive voice is prominent in the description of events in the novel, particularly in summaries of a large number of sequential events. Thus we read, regarding the Sieppe’s packing prior to Trina’s wedding and their removal to southern California, “All through May the Sieppe household had been turned upside down...The trunks were lettered A, B and C, the packages and smaller bundles numbered” (86). An approach through the passive voice is also evident in the set-piece presentation of Mac and Trina’s wedding: “All at once the portieres were shaken violently” (before the bridegroom enters the room where the marriage is to take place) (93), and “The sitting room was transformed into a dining room. The cloth was laid” (95). There is a frequent focus on objects rather than actors, or, at the very least, a referencing of people through objects. Furthermore, the use of a “filmic” technique in which people move as objects across a field of view is apparent in the early descriptions of Polk Street (3-5), where a panoramic description of the buildings lining the streets is followed by a

listing of the passers-by on the street in the chronological order in which they appear in the morning and afternoon: “following in the path of the day laborers, came the clerks and the shop girls... Their employers followed an hour or so later” (4).

However, it is Norris’s treatment of his main protagonist as an object that is particularly noticeable. Norris very frequently chooses to present McTeague to the reader as lacking in agency—a passive entity either sitting in his dentist’s chair, or looking out at Polk Street through his bay-window (for example, “The bay window was for him a point of vantage from which he watched the world go past” [5]). Typical is the point, shortly after their marriage, when Trina views with disgust Mac (mouth half-open, pipe-ashes spilled in his lap, huge feet in thick grey socks) asleep in his dentist’s chair – “*That* [note use of objectifying pronoun] was her husband in there—she could yet hear his snores—for life, for life. A great despair seized upon her” (105). McTeague’s passivity is also apparent in the fact that he rarely initiates communication (he mainly responds to the speech of others) or action (it is always Marcus who suggests their walks together); “Nothing, nothing” replies McTeague, shaking his head, when asked by Marcus what he is doing that afternoon (29).

McTeague is accorded little reported direct speech, much less than the other characters, and is very frequently represented as puzzled: “McTeague was bewildered by so much simultaneous talk” (137). We notice that much of his speech, when it is directly reported, suggests a hesitant and passive uncertainty: “I don’ know” (e.g. 38, 69) is his constant refrain. His speech is marked by what Paul Simpson describes as epistemic modality, which is “concerned with the speaker’s confidence or lack of confidence in the truth of a proposition expressed” (48). The epistemic modality employed by McTeague is

very typical of a character characterized by uncertainty and who remains passive in the face of the world's demands: "I don't know what to do, Mark" (34) says Mac when overwhelmed by his sudden attraction to Trina. His expressions are likewise rich in words that suggest diffidence and uncertainty, like "maybe" and "perhaps": "Well, well, I guess perhaps that's right" (76) he responds when Trina urges him to thrift notwithstanding their lottery winnings. In contrast, her forthright words reveal her to be certain of the rectitude of her position: "We must go on just the same as before... we must be sensible about it" (76).

Narratological pathways to the objectification of McTeague

Norris's very narratological techniques in this novel are heavily influenced and directed by the main protagonist's status as an essentially determined and passive object. In general it is clear that the attitude of the reader to each of the characters is greatly influenced by the selection of narrative strategies employed by a writer. The writer's approach to focalization is particularly important. The concept of focalization--developed extensively by Mieke Bal (notably in her 1983 *Style* essay), Paul Simpson and Shlomith Rimmon-Kennan--describes how an author controls the reader's empathy with his or her characters by manipulating the point-of-view from which events are seen. The focalizer is the perception and consciousness through which the reader "sees" the actions of the story and that flavours them with his or her view. In twentieth-century novels the focalizer is often internal, typically a character in the novel. This can be the case in first person narratives, like *Lolita*, or in third-person narratives such as Kafka's *The Trial*. In the case of internal focalization, the character who is the focalizer is privileged, because the reader

accrues engagement and empathy with the character as an extensive understanding of his or her internal thought-processes and reactions develops. Alternatively, the focalizing may be external, from a consciousness outside the main character, in which case empathy with the latter is reduced and the narrator and the narrator's views are privileged. External focalization is often employed to objectify, or even diminish, the stature, and certainly the independence, of the characters described.

In the case of *McTeague*, the focalizing is definitively external, with the narrator intruding between us and McTeague, constantly describing and evaluating him. Consequently the narrator's views are privileged and the reader's ability to understand and empathize with McTeague is reduced – he is seen largely as an actor manipulated by the narrator. In the case of *McTeague*, this reaction is flavoured by the fact that the narrator subjects his protagonist to a constant lexicon of criticism; a fairly typical passage describes him as “This poor, crude dentist of Polk Street, stupid, ignorant, vulgar, with his sham education and plebian taste” (17).

Paul Simpson has developed a sophisticated typology respecting the positioning and articulation of narratological point of view that is based on the psychology of interpersonal relations. This is particularly useful in an analysis of *McTeague* because one of the categories Simpson describes conforms very closely to Norris's approach in the novel. It can thus be used as a tool to shed light upon the detailed narratological tactics that result in the objectification of McTeague. This is Simpson's “B(N) positive” mode (62-65). The mode is thus denominated because it is a third person narrative articulated from a position outside the consciousness of the main character by an assertive and forthright narrator whose comments are characterized by an evaluative

modality. In this mode the narrator aggressively foregrounds his or her presence, thus under-privileging the protagonists and limiting the possibility of reader empathy with them. B(N) positive mode typically features aloof, Olympian and apparently authoritative narrative comments; for example, in *McTeague*: “It was impossible to look at Zerkow and not know instantly that greed—inordinate, insatiable greed—was the dominant passion of the man” (25). To be more specific regarding the tone of such comments, B(N) positive mode is marked often by derisory narratorial intrusions taking an overtly judgmental stance. *McTeague* is particularly rich in such comments, comments which serve to belittle McTeague as an object of scorn: “Her [Trina’s] little tooth that he had extracted he kept wrapped in a bit of newspaper in his vest pocket. Often he took it out and held it in the palm of his immense, horny hand, seized with some strange elephantine sentiment, wagging his head at it, heaving tremendous sighs. *What a folly!*” (16) (my italics).

In close correlation with Simpson’s description of the characteristics of the B(N) positive mode, Norris’s narrative style is omniscient, panchronic (McTeague’s entire life and career are summarized in two paragraphs on page two of the novel), panoramic and generalizing, e.g. “he held to it as old people hold to trivial, worthless things that they have had for many years [with reference to Old Grannis and his pitcher]” (21). In particular, a B(N) positive narrator chooses to define character rather than reveal it (for example, with reference to McTeague, “his mind was as his body, slow to act, sluggish” [2]) , and foregrounds his personal ideology--*McTeague* is of course replete with proposals of Norris’s somewhat bizarre views on gender power relationships and on the unshakeable hold of instinct over personality. A relevant example would be the

following, which significantly, and typically, seeks to define “the changeless order of things—the man desiring the woman only for what she withholds; the woman worshipping the man for that which she yields up to him. With each concession gained the man’s desire cools; with every surrender the woman’s adoration increases” (48).

The overt control of his protagonist exercised by Norris as narrator mirrors the control of McTeague by atavistic and sexual forces outside himself and this sheds light on how fundamentally the issue of determinism shaped Norris’s approach to his protagonist. There is one further narratological ramification of this authorial orientation, and that is in Norris’s handling of Free Indirect Discourse (F.I.D.). F.I.D. is widely described as a mode of discourse presentation in which the narratorial voice yields ground to that of the character, thus privileging the latter. However, the balance of privilege between the narrator’s and character’s voices is fundamentally nuanced by the degree to which the F.I.D. reproduces the personal language situation of the character. Secondary characters in *McTeague* (for example Trina and Marcus) have their language patterns quite faithfully produced in the F.I.D. attributed to them, as in the following case of Miss Baker’s reaction to Maria’s plundering of the lodger’s rooms for junk: “What a stupid drab was this Maria! Could anything be more trying than this position” (22). However, in F.I.D. representing McTeague the authorial voice predominates, the lexicon selected being plainly outside Mac’s vocabulary, as in this example that purports to capture his reaction to Trina’s gift of the giant gold molar: ”What would that other dentist, that poser...say when he should see this marvelous molar run out from McTeague’s bay window like a *flag of defiance*? No doubt he would suffer *veritable convulsions of envy*” (85) (italics mine).

Most often McTeague's reactions are described through Pure Narrative, which Michael Toolan characterizes as reports of a character's actions and thoughts that would be externally observable (119). This is a mode in which attempts to give access to the internality of the character are largely abandoned (the narrator reports on behalf of the character), again imposing the role of object rather than subject on McTeague, as in the following example reporting McTeague's reaction to his initial attraction to Trina: "His narrow point of view was at once enlarged and confused, and all at once he saw that there was something else in life besides concertinas and steam beer" (16).

Humour in *McTeague*

There has been much critical interest in the humour deployed in *McTeague*. It is clear that Norris delighted in burlesque elements, as seen in his treatment of the Sieppe family; Mr. Sieppe with his Prussian militarism is particularly pantomimic. However, some critics, for example Louis J. Budd, maintain that the use of the comedic in *McTeague* is complex, and, in particular, that there is a gradation in the humour employed with respect to McTeague himself entailing varying degrees of reader empathy. Satire at McTeague's expense there certainly is, but Budd proposes that McTeague is also subject to a gentler humour. Norris is seen by Budd as sometimes abandoning the stance of "aloof... socially condescending observer" (43), choosing rather to employ a vein of "soft" irony which positions McTeague as an object of compassion, as a "simple-minded, burly and inarticulate man" (51). Budd sees this as part of a general tendency upon the part of some American Naturalist novelists to take "a huge and aggressive stride in compassion toward characters whom ...[earlier] novelists had...cheated out of a squarely respectful hearing,

such as the illiterate, the stupid, the crudely violent, or the unreflective” (43). Budd lays emphasis on the scene in which McTeague, following a demonstration of a trick by Marcus, gets a billiard ball stuck in his mouth. Budd argues that this is an example of a situation where the humorous treatment of the episode causes the reader to warm to McTeague as gentle simple fellow. However, a close textual reading does not lend much support to this contention. In the “billiard ball” passage it is clear that McTeague is subjected to a deliberately choreographed scene of ridicule, full of visual humour and deploying a carefully-crafted build-up of absurdity; Marcus swearing, dogs barking, waiters rushing in:

The dentist rose to his feet, stumbling about among the dogs, his face working, his eyes staring. Try as he would, he could not stretch his jaws wide enough to slip the ball out. Marcus lost his wits, swearing at the top of his voice. McTeague sweated with terror; inarticulate sounds came from his crammed mouth; he waved his arms wildly; all the four dogs caught the excitement and began to bark. A waiter rushed in, the two billiard players returned. (34)

In fact, almost all the humour deployed in the novel is at McTeague’s expense; we always laugh *at* him, never *with* him. Far from being gentle, Norris’s authorial stance is often extremely deprecatory. Consider, for example, the sneering irony explicit in the description of McTeague’s reaction to Marcus’s initial invitation to repeat his trick with the billiard ball—“McTeague fell suddenly grave...The matter was serious. He parted his thick mustaches and opened his enormous jaws like an anaconda” (33). Or the clown-like image drawn of him as he reacts to the discovery that he has no money for entry to the park that is the destination of the Sieppe picnic: “He lost his wits, rolling his eyes

helplessly” (41). Charles Walcutt comments with justice that “Norris treats his characters as if they were exhibits in a side-show, ridiculous monsters” (129).

This constant positioning of Mac as the victim of derision is another strategy that results in his objectification, with a consequent preclusion of reader empathy. As D.C. Muecke says in his study *The Compass of Irony*, “to see men as victims of irony...means seeing them as objects, turning them into objects...see[ing] them not as human” (220).

Because he is above all the object of, rather than a subject originating, humour (James Carron points out that “he never makes a joke...and after he is forbidden to practice dentistry he never laughs” [306]), it is not surprising that McTeague has no sense of humour himself. He neither perceives irony, nor can he generate it. This is a further indication of the extent to which he is controlled by external forces (including, of course, Lombrosan atavism). Because his life and consciousness are externally controlled, MacTeague is incapable of the withdrawal from self, and the consequent self-understanding, that is a pre-requisite for humour. Carron, building on Bergson, points out that the ability to laugh at life, or, in particular at oneself, requires a “second self,” which is described as a durational self, “a kind of ultimate free zone of being” (308), to which the consciousness can withdraw and view the contrast between reality and intention. Fashioned as a totally determined consciousness, McTeague is incapable of such withdrawal. An academic humour theorist, Rod Martin, reaches the same conclusion in his extensive analysis *The Psychology of Humour*. Martin describes how, in order to be able to perceive or generate humour, we need to be able to move back and forth between direct perception of reality and a playful state of mind, observing the incongruities between the two states (6). Martin also points out that the subject who *is* capable of

humour (both self-deprecation and externally-directed irony) automatically engages the admiration and empathy of interlocutors (including readers). Humour is so pleasurable to humans, that a character, or person, who can make us laugh of necessity attracts us and generates positive feelings towards themselves (134). Such engagement with others is denied to McTeague.

However, McTeague is far from a casebook study of the determined subject: Norris has an irreducibly dual approach to his characterization.

It is clear, nonetheless, that in spite of all the many valid and convincing reasons for regarding McTeague as an object whose behavior is subject to deterministic forces, Norris's portrait of the dentist is more than a mere case history from a nineteenth-century textbook of positivist criminology. Those critics, such as Don Graham, who detect a psychological aspect to Norris's treatment of McTeague are not misled, just incorrect in their relative under-emphasis of the Lombrosan aspects of his characterization. As Charles Walcutt wrote, "A work that was perfectly controlled by the theory of materialist determinism would not be a novel but a report" (23), and, as pointed out earlier, Norris was much too interested in story-telling *per se* to produce a mere report. He wrote to the *Book News* in 1899 that his "chief object" in writing *McTeague* was to "produce an interesting story—nothing more."¹⁵ Deanna Kreisel quite rightly points out that *McTeague* is a "compelling, gripping work—a page-turner... whose fascination is undeniable" (181).

Norris's stance in the letter to the *Book News* is, perhaps, rather disingenuously simplifying. In accepting that, in spite of Norris's relentless objectification, McTeague

does succeed in engaging us as a human being, we should recognize that Norris took the novelist's duty to *explain* and investigate human nature very seriously indeed (Schierenbeck 64), and also expressed a deep interest in the secrets of human nature. He frequently foregrounded his desire to see "the man beneath the clothes"¹⁶ and, as he wrote in his *A Plea for Romantic Fiction*, to search out and illuminate "the unplumbed depths of the human heart...and the black, unsearched penetralia of the soul of man."¹⁷

One of the most perceptive commentators on Norris, Don Cook, rightly perceives an irreducible tension in Norris's authorial approach in *McTeague*; a tension between "scientific objectivity and humane sympathy" (2), and indeed it is hard to gainsay the fact that Norris pursues these two apparently irreconcilable approaches, the scientific and the humanistic, in his positioning of McTeague. Referencing Norris's attempt, almost impossible of realization, to treat McTeague *both* as subject and as object, Donald Pizer nonetheless positions Norris in the mainstream of American Naturalist writers, who, as Pizer proposes in his *Twentieth Century American Literary Naturalism*, were almost forced to espouse "a writer's sense that he is not a dispassionate observer of a scientific process, but instead an imaginative presence infusing meaning" (6).

In discussion of this issue it is crucial to recognize that, after the point in the novel at which McTeague loses his dental practice due to Marcus's jealousy, Norris begins to deploy quite deliberate strategies to engage the reader's sympathy with his protagonist, thus making a distinct change from the irreducibly Lombrosan approach of the first part of the work. With her straggling and dirty hair and growing miserliness, Trina becomes physically and spiritually less attractive, while the motivation for McTeague's anger towards her seems ever more understandable as she becomes more and more

unreasonable. We feel aggrieved with McTeague over the sale of his concertina, feel his frustration at Trina's unhelpful and unreasonable question, "Oh, Mac. Why didn't you go to a dental college?" (150) and sympathize with his anger at her refusal to advance him a car-fare to facilitate his search for a job when it is raining hard. We feel that McTeague is indeed being "made small of" when she belittles him by claiming to be the man of the relationship because she provides the money: "Who's got the money, I'd like to know?...Do you know what I'm doing, McTeague? I'm supporting you" (153). This is indeed a hurtful and ill-judged affront to his male pride and self-esteem; McTeague has lost his income through no fault of his own. Indeed, every time McTeague employs the verbal formula so characteristic of him, "You can't make small of me," in the last half of the novel, it seems more justified.

McTeague uses this tag just prior to his murder of Trina, in response to an attempt on her part to lie to him regarding the location of her hoard. Of course, Trina's murder presented particular difficulties to Norris in the context of the deliberate re-allocation of the reader's sympathies away from Trina and towards McTeague, and it is evident that its description is nuanced in such a way as to distance the reader's gaze from the horror of the crime and to minimize the revulsion we feel for the murder and the sympathy we feel for the victim.

Granted McTeague is described as drunk (of course a condition with distinct Lombrosian overtones) when he arrives at the kindergarten, and there is also a single reference to the re-awakened brutality of his nature ("the alcohol had awakened in him an ape-like agility" [210]). Interestingly, however, these characterizations are balanced by a similar attribution of animality to Trina, who "fought for her miserable life with the

exasperation and strength of a harassed cat; and with such energy and wild, unnatural force that even McTeague drew back from her” (210). Furthermore, the adjectives selected by Norris in this crucial passage (“*miserable* life,” “*unnatural* force” [my italics]) have the effect of devaluing the life that Trina is about to lose—the implication clearly being that her degeneration into avarice and squalor (her “shapeless, stunted figure” and “dirty cotton gown” [208] are foregrounded in the passage immediately preceding McTeague’s arrival) have eroded her humanity. Moreover, Norris diverts the reader’s gaze from the act of murder itself using a passage of generalized description and by displacing the narratological viewpoint to the outside of the room while the act occurs:

Then it became abominable.

In the schoolroom, behind the coal scuttle, the cat listened to the sounds of stamping and struggling and the muffled noise of blows...At last the sounds stopped on a sudden; he heard nothing more. Then McTeague came out, closing the door. The cat followed him with distended eyes as he crossed the room and disappeared through the street door. (210)

After the deed, it is almost exclusively McTeague’s actions that are described, and these descriptions are couched in curiously anodyne terms: “The dentist paused for a moment on the sidewalk, looking carefully up and down the street. It was deserted and quiet, He turned sharply to the left...” (210). The moment of Trina’s death is described in two sentences only, the second almost reducing her status to that of a machine: “Towards morning she died with a rapid series of hiccoughs that sounded like a piece of clockwork running down” (211).

In the sections of the novel that follow the murder, Norris continues to manipulate the reader's sympathy quite overtly. McTeague's refusal to leave behind his canary when he flees San Francisco, and his care in shielding it from the cold night air, touch the reader. It is telling that the final showdown in Death Valley is between Mac and Marcus (the latter a character who is intensely unlikeable, his "clamor" even disgusts the sheriff who leads the posse pursuing McTeague [242]), rather than with an anonymous deputy, as it was in the original outline Norris generated for his Harvard writing class. The reader feels limited pleasure in the triumph of justice when justice's agent is Marcus, whose insistence on joining the posse and subsequent solitary penetration of Death Valley is, as we know, driven only by greed and vicious jealousy. As in the case of Trina's death, McTeague's final murder of Marcus is effectively masked from the reader. Norris envelops the "two fighting men" in "clouds of alkali dust" (248) and the moment of murder itself is described briefly and vaguely: "McTeague did not know how he killed his enemy, but all at once Marcus grew still beneath his blows" (248).

After his flight to the mountains, McTeague is never subject to overt moral criticism from the narrator--this being remarkable for a narrative voice that has shown itself in the early part of the novel to be only too ready to censure. Indeed, McTeague seems to become absorbed into a world of vast natural forces ("the still, colossal mountains took him back like a returning prodigal" [217]) to which the routine ethical questions of human life seem irrelevant—an almost transcendental trajectory which is more fully developed in the figure of Vanamee in *The Octopus*. The sixth sense which enables McTeague to evade his pursuers does not strike the reader as sinister, and, as its intervention again and again helps him to flee successfully from his pursuers, we become

more and more engaged with him as a survivor. Collins, the real-life murderer on whom Norris based McTeague, was a repeat violent criminal who was captured immediately after his crime (Guest 24-25). McTeague's long and almost successful retreat to the mountains provides time for the reader's sympathy with the hunted to develop.

Norris's dual approach to the portrayal of criminality

How does this irreducibly dualistic approach—of McTeague as both determined object and putatively sympathetic subject—reflect specifically on the portrayal of McTeague as a criminal? Here too Norris pursues two parallel authorial trajectories. In chapter one I alluded to the urge attributable to writers dealing with transgressive protagonists to “contain” the horrifying by explaining it. In *McTeague*, Norris undeniably seeks on the one hand to “contain” and render explicable the murderer by describing him “scientifically” as a Lombrosan atavist and degenerate. But the horrifying “other” that commits the unthinkable deed of murder can also be contained by resolutely facing the fact that he remains a human being just as the reader is, and by addressing the inevitable questions that have fascinated the reading public since the great surge of interest in the fictional and non-fictional coverage of the murderer in the mid-nineteenth century;¹⁸ questions such as, how can a human be driven to such an act, and, having committed murder, how does the murderer live with the knowledge of his crime? I have outlined above how Norris seeks to answer the question of motivation before, and self-image after, the crime—the first by a growing emphasis on the unacceptability of Trina's miserliness and by a reallocation of the sympathy away from Trina and towards McTeague; the latter by privileging the presentation of McTeague as a survivor and also

by the suggestion that he is representative of some ancient power ill-fitted to the city. These ploys position McTeague as human and potentially empathetic, in spite of the fact that elements of his treatment as a Lombrosan brute persist. The dualistic tension in Norris's authorial attitudes highlighted by Cook is indeed reflected in his approach to McTeague as a criminal.

Chapter 3: Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*

“An Inconsistent Mechanist”

Thus Eliseo Vivas's characterization of Theodore Dreiser (237); and indeed, to interpret Dreiser's finest and most successful novel, *An American Tragedy*, as a straightforwardly determinist depiction of the protagonist as object, hounded and buffeted by ineluctable forces, would be as much of a mistake as we have seen it to be in the case of Norris's *McTeague*. But, whereas in *McTeague* the extra-determinist element simply involves the building of a degree of sympathetic engagement between the reader and a protagonist who is truly limited by heredity and circumstance, Dreiser has provided us, in the character of Clyde Griffiths, with a much more subtle and powerful analysis of a man consciously beating against the bars of a cage put in place partly by external forces, but also partly by his own decisions and perceptions. Clyde engages our attention as a man tortured by the compulsion to understand how far he is responsible for his own fate. Charles Walcutt was indeed close to the mark when he described Clyde as being tragic because he is “At once responsible...and helpless” (273).

However, as in the case of *McTeague*, it is important to acknowledge at the beginning of this investigation that determinism constitutes an important component in Dreiser's rendering of Clyde's story. Dreiser himself described *An American Tragedy* in a letter¹⁹ as “Truly a story of what life does to the individual—and how impotent the individual is against such forces,” and F.O. Matthiessen recognized that “Dreiser shows [Clyde] as always worked upon by his environment and circumstances” (207). It is, thus, appropriate

that the first part of my examination of the novel should involve an analysis of the deterministic forces playing upon Clyde.

Like Clarence Darrow (who was a great enthusiast for *An American Tragedy*, writing to Dreiser “Of course my philosophy is practically the same as yours”²⁰), Dreiser wields a broad brush in the attribution of deterministic influences. However, unlike Norris, Dreiser places little emphasis in this novel on the determining influence of heredity. Almost his only gesture in this direction is Mrs. Samuel Griffiths’s conclusion that “Clyde probably drew his lesser force [than her domineering son Gilbert] from the personal unimportance of his parents” (I, 221)--Clyde’s father being characterized on the first page of the novel as “a most unimportant—looking person” (I, 3). Likewise, beyond a reference to Clyde’s wayward sister Esta’s “chemism of dreams” (I, 16), there is almost no mention of the chemisms which Dreiser foregrounds in *Sister Carrie*. Furthermore, the influence of the physiological tropisms (in particular the sexual tropism) about which Dreiser eagerly learnt from the physiologist Jacques Loeb,²¹ is acknowledged in relatively few places; one of the few examples being the following: “[Clyde’s] was a disposition early and often intensely inflamed by the chemistry of sex” (I, 244). There is only slightly more reference to the inherent weakness of Clyde’s mental constitution, although we are reminded of his “not-too-forceful mind” (II, 28) and of his soul “that was not destined to grow up” (I, 174), as well as of the fact that his temperament “was as fluid and unstable as water” (I, 318).

Dreiser lays far greater emphasis on the forces of cultural and social determinism to which his protagonist is subject. In his study *An American Tragedy: Perils of the Self Seeking “Success,”* Paul Orlov points out that, although Dreiser drew on Chester

Gillette's murder of Grace Brown in 1906 for the factual basis of his novel, he deliberately moved Clyde's story to the period immediately after World War I, which saw a massive rise in American consumerism (fuelled by mass production and easy credit) coupled with a move from a rural to an urban environment. Orlov proposes that Clyde is depicted as being profoundly subverted by these new cultural *mores*, and characterizes the period as one in which "having" and "getting" equated meaningful "being" (13). Dreiser's portrayal of Clyde undoubtedly reflects many of Orlov's contentions. We note, for example, Clyde's equation of wealth and consequence in his reaction to the sight of a group of sophisticated young guests at the Green-Davidson hotel: "This, then, most certainly was what it was to be rich, to be a person of consequence in the world—to have money. It meant you did what you pleased" (I, 45). Likewise, Roberta, the factory-girl with whom Clyde establishes a relationship, equates poverty with an absence of worthwhile existence: "Throughout her infancy and girlhood she was compelled to hear of and share a depriving and toilsome poverty, still, because of her innate imagination, she was always thinking of something better. Maybe, some day, who knew, a larger city like Albany or Utica. A newer and greater life" (I, 250).

Orlov underemphasizes, however, an aspect of Clyde's situation which Robert Merton was to analyze in his study of personal anomie as a trigger for criminal behaviour twenty years after the publication of Dreiser's novel. As we have seen in chapter one, Merton describes a situation in which cultural expectations of a high intensity are rendered almost impossible of achievement (this being a point that Orlov only acknowledges in passing) for the majority who are the target of these expectations, purely because of the structural organization of the society in which they live. F.O Matthiessen considered that

Clyde is “A victim of the contemporary American Dream” (206), a dream which was, as John McAleer points out in his study of Dreiser “possible for some only because it [was] impossible for many” (128).

Significantly, this sense of Mertonian impossibility is imaged by Dreiser in the very first few pages of *An American Tragedy* in the “tall walls” (I, 3) which hem in the evangelical Griffith family at public prayer, and also in his description of how Clyde’s mother’s voice rose “valiantly between the towering walls of the adjacent buildings” (I, 5). This trope of high walls representing impenetrable social barriers re-appears later in Roberta’s observation that “The lines of demarcation and stratification between the rich and the poor in Lycurgus was [sic] as sharp as though cut by a knife or divided by a high wall” (255). However, it is in his characterization of the attitude of the rich of Lycurgus that Dreiser most plainly shows that the barriers to the material and social ascent which Clyde so ardently desires are in fact quite impenetrable, although Clyde cannot bring himself to admit this. We read that Samuel and Gilbert Griffiths could not “tolerate the socialistic theory relative to capitalistic exploitation. As both saw it, there had to be higher and higher social orders to which the lower social classes could aspire. One had to have castes” (I, 180-181). Even more to the point, we learn of their belief that it was necessary to ensure that “lower individuals” became inured to a narrow and abstemious lifestyle because this “strengthened the minds and spirits of those who were destined to rise. And those who were not should be kept right where they were” (I, 181). The phrase “destined to rise” is particularly telling, since it indicates a belief in some ineluctable Calvinism of the businessman’s world, which elevates only the mysteriously pre-elect, while damming all the rest, such as Clyde, to utter hopelessness.

The Importance of Clyde's Interiority

It is, however, crucial to bear in mind when discussing Dreiser's determinism that the vast majority of *An American Tragedy* consists of a finely-crafted and penetrating portrait of Clyde's inner psyche and consciousness. William L. Phillips has written "For all of its apparent concern with the workings of American society and legal machinery, *An American Dream* is ...more an 'interior' novel than anything Dreiser had written up to this time" (580). Moreover, Eliseo Vivas has rightly drawn attention to the fact that the astuteness and penetration of Dreiser's psychological characterizations far outstrip the limitations of any mechanistic pre-occupations he might have had: "There is more to his...concrete dramatic picture of men and society than he finds room for in his mechanistic philosophy." Vivas continues: "His characters are alive and real, moving and acting and brooding with all the urge and hesitation, passion and fear, doubts and contradictions, of fully real human beings. Few contemporary novelists have built up characters as solid, as three dimensional, as fully bodied, as Dreiser" (241). It is worth noting that Dreiser fashions Clyde's consciousness as one with which the reader can engage with some element of compassion; Philip Gerber writes: "loathing Clyde's motives and his methods, we can still understand and sympathize with the boy in his predicament" (139). This potential for empathy points to a significant divergence between Clyde and his model Chester Gillette, who seems to have been brutal and selfish to the point of caricature.

In his study of Dreiser, Donald Pizer has astutely indicated that Clyde "partakes of two worlds—an external world which has an objective reality and an interior world which is the subjective imaginative product of [his] need for beauty and happiness"

(119). Indeed, Dreiser's examination of the social environment that exercises a determining influence on Clyde is articulated from within Clyde's own interior world, and it is, therefore, through Clyde's perceptions that we must examine it.

In *An American Tragedy*, unlike *McTeague*, the protagonist himself is the focalizer. Clyde is an *internal* focalizer; a character within the narrative whose inward reactions, feelings, rationalizations and projections shape the reader's emotions and perceptions. In *Narratology: An Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Mieke Bal describes an internal focalizer as a character who "participates in the fabula as an actor" and further points out that "that character will have a technical advantage over the other characters" (104) since the reader will be exposed to, and thus inclined to engage with, that character's point of view. Clyde's interior being is articulated for us through sensitive and finely-tuned free indirect discourse, which, unlike that employed in *McTeague*, utilizes the character's, not the author's, lexicon. It faithfully reflects Clyde's adolescent linguistic habits and environment and traces the tortuous path of his self-deceived logic. Clyde's thoughts (marked as they so often are by the epistemic modality of uncertainty which is so typical of him) on the possibilities open to him if he fails to procure an abortion for Roberta provide an excellent example: "But in the event that he couldn't [procure an abortion]...well, then—well, then—might it be possible at least—some fellows, if not himself, would—to deny that he had any such relationship with her and so escape. That might possibly be a way out" (I, 384). As Pizer has written: "Dreiser uses the technique of indirect discourse in *An American Tragedy* more fully and with greater subtlety than in any other of his novels" (285). It is thus within Clyde's inner discourse that we must look for the dominant note of Dreiser's social determinism.

What is it, then, that we discover when we study Clyde's inner world? Above all else we find constant evaluative comparison of himself with others, as well as an insistent, if vaguely defined, dissatisfaction; his reaction to his sister Esta's precipitate departure from the family home is "She was probably dissatisfied, just as he was" (I, 22). Early in the novel we learn that seeing groups of happy young people on the streets of Kansas City "troubled him with a sense of something different, better, more beautiful than his...life" (I, 6). Clyde's reaction to his first girl-friend Hortense's early indifference to him is also typical: "perhaps it was that Bert Gettler, previously mentioned, with whom she had gone to the dance, who was making it impossible for him to interest her. So he was always to be a failure this way" (I, 74). Later, in Lycurgus, he feels the Samuel Griffiths family is ignoring him because "he was not good enough" (I, 264). A keynote of these adolescent comparisons is his profound unease regarding his status and appearance in the eyes of others. He is concerned that his parents' evangelism appears "shabby" (I, 10) to others and worries about "how he looked and how other boys looked" (I, 15).

But we find also an insistent and repetitious rhetoric of yearning. While working at the Union League in Chicago, for example, "Clyde's soul had yearned for this [the life of the rich and great]...He wished and wished that he could get into some work where he would rise and be somebody" (I, 175). Lawrence Hussman has declared that, at a fundamental level, *An American Tragedy*, in common with many of Dreiser's novels, reflects a "profound pre-occupation with frustrated desire" (12), and conveys above all a sense of "gnawing unrest"(14).

The “Cup of Tantalus”

This yearning for relative social and material improvement, coupled with a sense of personal deficit, is precisely the trigger for criminal behaviour that the Italian positivist criminologist Raffaele Garofalo outlined in his “Cup of Tantalus” theory. As we have seen earlier, Garofalo posits a weak intellect (such as Clyde’s) constantly tempted by glimpses of a life better than the individual concerned actually possesses. Eventually the temptation to enjoy what those on the social level above enjoy becomes so overwhelming that the one tempted commits a crime in order to achieve it, just as Clyde does. The ultimate motivation is not absolute need (in Clyde’s case, he has a solid job and a girl in Lyncurgus), but envy and a bitter yearning for what is just out of reach—the result of an “ambitious and seeking disposition” (I, 304). Clyde’s interior discourse is indeed signally marked by a bitter envy:

At times, after reading these accounts [newspaper accounts of the summer activities of Sondra and her set], he had pictured to himself, even when somewhere with Roberta at some unheralded resort, Gilbert Griffiths racing in his big car, Bella, Bertine and Sondra dancing, canoeing in the moonlight, playing tennis, riding at some smart resorts where they were reported to be. *The thing had a bite and ache for him that was almost unendurable* [my italics]. (I, 309)

We have noted Clyde’s constantly deprecatative self-evaluation with respect to others, and Miriam Gogol has developed the concept that “Dreiser’s characters are shame-ridden, both in their view of themselves and how they relate to others” (95). Shame is, of course, a very predictable corollary of envy.

It is not known whether Dreiser was familiar with Garofalo's work, but he was certainly aware of the publications of Thorstein Veblen. Clare Eby has pointed out that, in his autobiographical writings, and also in some of specific comments regarding *An American Tragedy*, Dreiser echoes significant phrases from Veblen's key work *The Theory of the Leisure Class*; furthermore Dreiser described the latter work in a letter as "marvelous."²² Eby moreover concludes that "Veblen's influence during Dreiser's lifetime was so pervasive that Dreiser could...have 'read' him without ever opening a single book" (8). Veblen was a Norwegian-American sociologist and economist whose work was indeed very widely discussed during the first quarter of the twentieth century and who re-states Garofalo's analysis of social envy almost intact.

Eby has particularly investigated Veblen's analysis of the human tendency to compare oneself economically with others, something Veblen calls invidious comparison. She quotes Veblen as declaring that "The existing system has not made, nor does it tend to make, the industrious poor poorer as measured *absolutely* in means of livelihood; but it does tend to make them *relatively* poorer in their own eyes, as measured in terms of *comparative* economic importance," and as describing emulation as being "probably the strongest... of the economic motives proper."²³ In the following fragment from his autobiographical writing,²⁴ Dreiser echoes Veblen's propositions virtually intact: "We enjoy or disdain what we have because of contrast with what we do or do not have."

Eby further claims that Dreiser's talents and intellectual emphasis as a novelist were uniquely suited to articulating Veblen's vision, and John Berryman has emphasized that the key motif in Dreiser's characterizations is "the bright, vague longing or aspiration or yearning that every reader will probably recognize as Dreiser's central and characteristic

emotion” (151). Clyde is the example *par excellence* of such characterization. Dreiser has provided a fine and moving portrayal of how Clyde’s sense of envy and frustration (his first glimpse of Sondra is “electric—thrilling—arousing in him a curiously stinging sense of what it was to want and not to have” [I, 225]) sublimates into intense long-term yearning: “But now, as he gloomily thought, he could only hope, hope, hope” (I, 317). Dreiser also captures in his portrait of Clyde a nuance that is implicit in Veblen’s (and Garofalo’s) theories—that yearning upwards is on occasion associated with a form of self-conceit that involves an almost thankful comparing of oneself advantageously with those who *do* happen to be “below” one. Early in *An American Tragedy*, while regretting his actual social and material situation, Clyde is nonetheless pleased to feel “himself above the type of labour which was purely manual” (I, 14). He looks down on most of his fellow bell-hops at the Green-Davidson because of “the rather wretched English that they spoke” (I, 70) and eventually he similarly disparages Roberta, “For after all, who was she? A factory girl! The daughter of parents who lived and worked on a farm and one who was compelled to work for her own living...She was not of his station, really” (I, 309).

Implicit in the common usage of the adjective “tantalizing”, as well as in Veblen’s sociology of economic envy and Garofalo’s use of the Tantalus myth in criminal psychology, is the importance of fact that the yearning individual should be regularly tempted (indeed “tantalized”) by glimpses of the superior life aspired to, these glimpses being all the more powerful when accompanied by hints that the upwards transition might just be achievable. Clyde is indeed constantly subject to just such glimpses and hints. As an adolescent he frequently notices “the fine clothes, the handsome homes, the watches,

rings, pins that some boys sported” (I, 15), and in Lycurgus he sees Sondra, ravishingly dressed as an Indian Maiden, pass close by, but out of reach, on a parade float. He is further tantalized by events and co-incidences that hint that his dreams might be achievable—for example, his chance meeting with his uncle at the Union League with its hopeful, but eventually disappointing, results. With respect to Sondra, his ambitions regarding a relationship are fuelled by his chance meeting with her in the street when she mistakes him for Gilbert and offers him a ride, and by her whim of inviting him to the “Now and Then” party; a whim in fact motivated purely by the passing desire to irritate Gilbert.

These glimpses and coincidences exercise a powerful effect on Clyde, whose psyche provides fertile ground for delusions of remote possibility. He repeatedly walks past the Lycurgus Griffiths’s house, shuttered though it is for the summer, because “He had never quite been able to expel from his mind the thought that his future must in some way be identified with the grandeur that was here laid out before him” (I, 309). In Clyde’s inner discourse, these delusions of remote possibility are frequently associated with a phraseology in which a trailing, yearning interrogative is especially prominent; after his first invitation to the Griffith home on Wykeagy Avenue, he dreams that “They might even take him up after this...who could tell?” (I, 218)

Clyde’s situation correlates qualitatively with the story of Tantalus in other ways. The story of Tantalus is, of course, an allegorical myth (presumption punished), not a real situation capable of realization. We notice that a profound quality of illusion and fantasy constitutes a key motif in Dreiser’s articulation of Clyde’s perceptions and ambitions. Dreiser’s working title for the novel was *Mirage*, and the trope of the mirage appears

several times in *An American Tragedy*; for example Clyde describes the drugstore in which he first is employed as “the true mirage of the lost and thirsting and seeking victim of the desert” (I, 26). The trope also reflects Clyde’s complete inability to map out a realistic and viable pathway towards the achievement of his desires. As Dreiser tells us, “He lacked decidedly that mental clarity and inner directing application that in so many permits them to sort out from the facts and avenues of life the particular thing or things that make for their direct advancement” (I, 174).

William Phillips has drawn attention to the fact that “dreams” is the key word of the novel (Phillips 580-581). Indeed, we find this word used constantly with respect to Clyde’s attitude to Sondra: “he continued to pursue the enticing dream in connection with Sondra” (II, 20), and, after he receives his last letter from her in prison: “His last hope—the last trace of his dream vanished...so this was the end of all that wonderful dream...A vain, impossible dream” (II, 383). Mythological references abound in the novel, further underlining the unreality of Clyde’s ambitions. He regards his uncle Samuel as “a kind of Croesus” (I, 14), and, while counting his tips after his first day at the Green-Davidson, marvels “It seemed fantastic, Aladdinish, really” (I, 51). As has frequently been noted, references to the *Tales of the Arabian Nights*, and to Aladdin in particular, abound in *An American Tragedy*. Similarly prominent are quasi-religious images; for Clyde, seeing a party of young people at the Green-Davidson is like “looking through the Gates of Paradise” (I, 45) and the Griffiths’ house “was the same as a shrine to him nearly” (I, 309). Likewise, Clyde’s approach to Sondra partakes of worship rather than of sensual attraction; he considers her “a goddess in her shrine of gilt and tinsel” (I, 323). We read that for Clyde “The thought of kissing Sondra was without lust, just the desire to

constrain and fondle a perfect object” (I, 375). Later, at his trial, Clyde waxes incredulous and indignant at the suggestion he might have slept with Sondra.

Also implicit in the myth of Tantalus is the motif of mockery—the water and fruit always recede as Tantalus reaches for them, and Clyde’s story is likewise one of cruel mockery. Reflecting in prison, he foregrounds this concept, considering himself as having been “tortured, mocked by the ill-fate of his early life” (II, 392). The events of his brief life do seem to demonstrate a malicious irony. He has a startling resemblance to his cousin Gilbert, and indeed is sometimes mistaken for him. However, this resemblance involves appearance only, and does not, of course, involve similar wealth and status. Ironically, it also tells against Clyde, since it irritates Gilbert and leads him to actively thwart Clyde’s advancement. Paul Orlov has pointed out that Clyde’s wealthy relatives “mock as well as excite his longings” (63). Clyde seems always to be frustratingly caught between two stools; for example, he is forbidden to associate with his female inferiors, but is set working through a warm and languorous summer in the very midst of attractive girls who try to interest him in themselves. While rowing alone at Crum Lake, shortly before he meets Roberta, Clyde “felt so out of it, so lonely and restless and tortured by all that he saw here, for everywhere that he looked he seemed to see love, romance, contentment” (I, 263).

Above all, Sondra plays with him, drawing him on to believe in the possibility of a long-term relationship the feasibility of which she only half believes in, and which is mostly a romantic, adolescent indulgence for her. After she has warned him not to be too intimate with her during their *tete-a-tete* in her kitchen, we read that “There was a provoking smile on her lips and she looked at him as much as to say: ‘But you don’t

really believe that I meant all of that, do you?’” (I, 375). Meanwhile, unlike the dazzled Clyde, the reader knows that Sondra’s parents, like those of other rich Lycurgus society girls:

Were convinced that not only one’s family but one’s wealth was the be-all and end-all of every happy union meant to include social security. And, in consequence, while considering Clyde as one who was unquestionably eligible socially, still, because it had been whispered about that his means were very slender, they weren’t inclined to look upon him as one who might aspire to marriage with any of their daughters. (I, 372)

A Crucial Change of Emphasis in Book Three

All that has been written above concerning the peculiar appropriateness of Garofalo’s “Cup of Tantalus” as an explanation for Clyde’s almost adventitious criminal destiny is best applied to the first two books of the novel, which close with Clyde’s night-time flight from Big Bittern Lake after the “murder” of Roberta.

In book three of the novel, there is a very considerable qualitative change in Dreiser’s psychological analysis of Clyde and also in the emphasis of his characterization—in his study of Dreiser’s novels Donald Pizer perceptively notes that, after book two, Dreiser “drop[s] his hectoring of Clyde” (285). This change is particularly evident in the lengthy sections which concern Clyde’s imprisonment and trial. Strangely, this shift of approach appears to have only attracted passing critical comment. Indeed, some commentators have disparaged book three, citing the increased prominence of Dreiser’s authorial

intrusions—particularly the lengthy passage (352-354) concerning the inhumane plan of the death-house at Auburn prison.

In fact, this last book is the most profound and moving of the novel. In it we meet a more mature Clyde, who, in the wake of the ineluctable and total collapse of his ambitions, begins with steadily growing honesty to quest after the truth, rather than to reach for the opportune. The use of the past perfect tense in the following excerpt from his musings on death-row is indicative of this new focus: “Things—just things—had seemed very important to him” (II, 401). As Donald Pizer has written, “[Clyde’s] self-honesty—never a major characteristic of his nature—now becomes a significant force” (279).

An Emphasis on Entrapment

The dominant imagery in book three reflects entrapment—Clyde is very frequently pictured in confined spaces. For example, when he arrives at Twelfth Lake on the day following Roberta’s drowning, he locks himself in one of the washrooms at the Harriet country house in order to think clearly concerning his possibilities of escape, and at Bridgeport, after his arrest, we see him “in his cell, walking to and fro, or looking out at the dull square through the heavily-barred window” (II, 221).

Moreover, the word “trap” occurs over and over again in the accounts of Clyde’s cross-examination: “There might be some trap here” (II, 322); “Clyde began to sense a trap and grew nervous” (II, 315). During the lengthy, almost verbatim, reportage of the examination (culled largely from the New York *World* accounts of the Gillette trial), the intricate and cunning twists and turns of District Attorney Mason’s incisive questioning

create a steadily growing tension in the reader as we see Clyde becoming enmeshed in his own lies—concerning, for example, the label-less hat he deliberately left at Big Bittern Lake, and the accounting for his expenditures during his final trip with Roberta. The reader shares in real time Clyde’s growing sense of entrapment.

However, our most important task is to address the issue of what it actually is, at the deepest level, which serves to entrap Clyde? What is the source of his entrapment? The answer to this question reveals much regarding one of the most important themes of *An American Tragedy*, and furthermore shed light on the true tragedy of Clyde’s situation.

After his arrival in Lycurgus, Clyde is always very much alone. His fellow-workers in the shrinking room are “inclined to be dubious and suspicious of him” (I, 199), and, typically, at Crum Lake he imagines “other canoes and other dreamers, happily in love...that being to him the sharpest contrast to his own lorn state...He felt so out of it, so lonely and restless...He could not go on alone like this forever. He was too miserable” (I, 263).

Clyde’s nature, characterized as it is by an intense yearning for fulfillment and engagement, is peculiarly ill-suited to sustain this alienation. Always, in his loneliness, he cleaves to the support of his visions and ambitions; but, when, after his arrest, the latter are irretrievably dashed, he becomes desperate to find other supports. His true tragedy is that, in this extremity, “Tortured by the need of some mental...support in the face of his great danger” (II, 379), he turns to the conventional moral and religious frameworks of his society as the bases for the agonized investigation he conducts into the moral and legal dimensions of his past conduct.²⁵ In his search for the truth regarding his own responsibility for his fate, he cannot abstain, as a later existential protagonist such as

Camus's Meursault would have, from judging (and thus lacerating) himself against the legal and moral value-framework of the society surrounding him, although he instinctively feels it to be lacking and inadequate. The following tortured musings provide an excellent example of this: "the thought that, after all, he had not really killed...And yet...Had he? Or had he not? For had he not refused to go to her rescue, and when he might have saved her, and when the fault for casting her in the water, however accidental, was so truly his? And yet—and yet?" (II, 79). The irony inherent in Clyde's driven but circular judgmental reflections is that he cannot hold back from basing his conclusions on the same prejudices and misconceptions as his vindictive and bigoted jurors, who find him guilty in spite of being specifically instructed by the judge that Clyde's failure to rescue Roberta does *not* render him guilty in the eyes of the law. Even earlier, during the trial itself, Clyde is similarly enmeshed in the values of those who surround him. Leonard Cassuto²⁶ has written: "His feelings of guilt prevent him from generating sympathy on the witness stand and make him doubt whether he deserves any" (204). Clyde is thus quite unable to convincingly simulate the "change of heart" scenario crafted for him by his lawyers. In fact, Clyde blunderingly plays along with the concept of the trial as a process of holding him to account. It is remarkable that, when the verdict of guilty is delivered, Clyde really does not protest against its inappropriateness, he merely struggles to escape its ghastly implications.

Clyde is simply incapable of achieving independence from the framework of received values that surround him, however inadequate they may be. Thus, overwhelmed in his terror and loneliness by the forceful spirituality of the Rev. McMillan, he hesitatingly seeks shelter in conventional religion from his existential uncertainties: "He was inclined,

at times, to feel there might be peace and strength—aid, even,—who could say, in appealing to this power” (II, 380). But the attempt is rendered hopeless by the inflexibility of revealed religion and its consequent inability to truly square with the nuances and uncertainties of his perceptions regarding his guilt. When brought hard up against the straightforward judgmental approach of the Christian faith, Clyde is forced to retreat into a flummoxed uncertainty. The Rev. Macmillan asks him: “ ‘But can you say now truly and positively, as your Creator sees you, that you were sorry—or that you wanted to save her then?’ ” Clyde can only reply lamely “It all happened so quick, you see... That I’m not just sure. No. I don’t know that I was so very sorry. No. I really don’t know” (II, 389).

Clyde’s agony derives from the fact that he cannot prevent himself persistently seeking to accommodate himself to the legal, moral and religious constructs of his world. Of course, Dreiser leaves us in no doubt that his efforts are doomed, because these touchstones are so severely flawed. The legal process that condemns Clyde is tainted by the Assistant District Attorney’s evidence-tampering, the bias of the jurors, and by District Attorney Mason’s viciousness, which is partly the result of his political ambitions and partly of his personal prejudices. The reader instinctively recoils from Mason’s biased perceptions because they constitute a totally inaccurate representation of the true complexities of Clyde’s situation: “He [Mason] conceived an enormous personal hate for the man. The wretched rich! The idle rich! The wastrel and evil rich—a scion of which this young Clyde Griffiths was” (II, 108).

Likewise the inadequacy of the moral framework of Clyde’s society is amply demonstrated by Dr. Glenn, who refuses an abortion to Roberta, but who has “helped

daughters of good family” (I, 412) in the same predicament when there was no other way out, and of the Schenectady druggist visited by Clyde who does not stock abortants on principle, because he is “a confirmed religionist of the Methodist group,” but “at the same time...was too good a merchant to wish to alienate a possible future customer” (I, 388). Revealed religion is dismissed early in the novel as “remote and cloudy romance” (I, 5) and is discredited at its end by the consistent refusal of establishment clerics to allow Clyde’s mother to use their facilities for lectures because the unpopularity of her cause might taint them and their establishments.

The fact that Clyde cannot declare independence from the value-framework of his society, notwithstanding its inadequacy, comes as no surprise. Dreiser has fore-shadowed it in earlier analysis of Clyde. For example, when called upon to urgently find an abortant for Roberta, Clyde is instinctively queasy: “Being sensitive to conventional moral standards as he still was, he could not quite achieve a discreditable thing, even where his highest ambitions were involved, without a measure of regret or at least shame” (I, 382). Similarly, his underlying acceptance of conventional morality is apparent in the phraseology he adopts in his musings regarding the probity of attempting a relationship with Sondra while in the midst of one with Roberta: “Was he all wrong? Was it evil to be like this? His mother would say so! And his father too—and perhaps everybody who *thought right about life* [my italics]” (I, 324).

There is great poignancy in Clyde’s efforts. His attempts to find a mental refuge in received values are vitiated from the start by the fact that he also cannot blind himself to an awareness of the essential disconnect between his subjective inner experience and the value-systems of society: “she [his mother] would and did expect him to be terribly sorry

and wholly repentant, when, even now, and for all that he had said to the Reverend MacMillan and to her, he could not feel so, not wholly so” (II, 401); and later: “he had a feeling in his heart that he was not as guilty as they all seemed to think” (II, 392).

Dreiser gives this disconnect a tantalizing partial validity by deliberately crafting the sections leading up to and describing the “murder” itself in such a way that the extent of Clyde’s guilt is genuinely very hard to determine. Not only does Clyde’s courage fail him (“suddenly becoming conscious that his courage...was leaving him” [II,75]), but he appears to lose agency, increasingly surrendering volition to a mysterious independent force. As he enters the tarn where the “accident” eventually occurs we read “this still dark water seemed to grip Clyde...once here he seemed to be fairly pulled or lured along into it” (74). Almost immediately he feels “the grip of some seemingly strong, and yet friendly sympathetic, hands laid firmly on his shoulders” (74). The upshot of this intersection of impulses and forces is that when the time to kill Roberta comes, Clyde undergoes a complete paralysis of volition. Dreiser characterizes his state as “a balanced combat between fear...and a harried and restless and yet self-repressed desire to do...temporarily unbreakable here and now—a static between a powerful compulsion to do and yet not to do.” The upsetting of the boat is an accident, Clyde inadvertently knocks Roberta off balance, and then swamps the boat while attempting to steady her. However, once they are in the water, she drowns while he hesitates about going to her aid. Thus, while her death is in a sense accidental, the extent of his guilt is fundamentally ambiguous; the lunge that sent her off-balance was the result of pent-up stress resulting from his attempts to convince himself to act and murder her, and he lets her drown without attempting to rescue her.

The disconnect between his constantly changing perceptions of the moral implications of his actions and the inflexibility of straightforward societal moral judgments results in his strivings towards inner peace being fatally flawed. It also helps to generate an agonizing uncertainty which poisons his attempts to achieve the calm which would derive from a true understanding of his moral position. His inner doubt in the following passage from the very end of the novel speaks volumes: “Mama, you must believe that I die resigned and content. It won’t be hard. God has heard my prayers. He has given me strength and peace. But to himself adding ‘Had he?’ ” (II, 404).

A Lack of Authenticity

From the point of view of existential thought, Clyde’s inability to achieve independence from his moral environment in the manner of Gide’s Lafcadio or Camus’s Meursault renders him “inauthentic” (in the Sartrean sense), and this lack of authenticity is apparent from the beginning. Clyde can never forge his own decisions and then accept them “without excuse”. In the earlier books of *An American Tragedy*, Dreiser frequently shows us Clyde justifying his self-interest by an inner shifting or avoiding of responsibility. For example, he attempts to avoid the decision to face a physician with Roberta to request an abortion since “it was she and not he who was facing the immediate problem which had to be solved” (I, 397). He inwardly displaces blame for her pregnancy onto Roberta herself: “In spite of all that Roberta had said about blame, was she so entirely lacking in blame herself? To be sure, he had sought to entice or seduce her, as you will, but even so, could she be held entirely blameless? Could she not have refused...She was as much to blame as he was” (II, 53). Dreiser signals this inability of

Clyde's to assume responsibility for his decisions by shifting the source of his tentative murder plans to a quasi-autonomous third voice—Clyde's "dark" spirit, or Effrit.

From the very start of *An American Tragedy* Clyde's inner discourse is inflected by a quality of pleading interrogative appeal to a potentially absolving, but nebulous and undefined, authority or judge. His discourse curiously combines defiance and cravenness. After seeing Roberta while out rowing at Crum Lake, he justifies his planned interception of her thus: "He was out rowing and he knew her and why shouldn't he help her get some lilies if he wanted to? It was almost unavoidable—this present situation, wasn't it?" (I, 269). Most characteristically, Clyde voices internally-directed appeals to some force of fairness which, he plainly hopes, constrains fate. This is the vein in which he justifies his potential abandonment of the pregnant Roberta in favour of Sondra:

And why not? As contrasted with one of Sondra's position and beauty, what had Roberta really to offer him? And would it be fair in one of her station and considering the connection and possibility that Sondra offered, for her to demand or assume that he should continue a deep and individual interest in her as opposed to this other? That would not really be fair, would it? (I, 345).

Without the ability to achieve objectivity through much of his short life, Clyde, like McTeague, is incapable of comedic independence of vision—he is one of the most humourless of all fictional protagonists, although by no means the least engaging. As Sondra once tells him during a longed-for *tete-a-tete*: "You take almost everything too seriously, don't you?" (I, 375).

While Clyde is incapable of independence from his strivings to accommodate to the inadequate cultural value-framework which surrounds him, at the end he does achieve a

clear-eyed, though devastating, realization that no-one can share another's existential pain and that the individual is incontrovertibly alone: "How could they judge him, these people, all or any one of them, even his own mother, when they did not know what his own mental, physical and spiritual suffering had been" (392). He finally brings himself to recognize his essential alienation even from the human being to whom he feels closest, his mother, admitting to himself "She would never understand" (II, 401). Thus does he briefly and tangentially grasp the true meaning and implications of a subject taking responsibility for himself.

At the end, then, Clyde develops understanding, but never independence. As evidenced by his voluminous political, social and philosophical publications, Dreiser was perhaps too pre-occupied with the analysis (and remediation) of society to be comfortable valorizing, or even creating, a protagonist who could totally put aside the organizing framework of society in his own interest. For Dreiser, the attraction of the collective and its issues was simply too strong for this to be possible.

Harold Bloom, in musings regarding whether Clyde can truly be accorded the stature of a tragic hero, has declared that, to be so considered, Clyde would need to be defined by more than his relationship with social institutions (2). Bloom seems to leave open the question of whether this is in fact the case. I would take issue with Bloom's contention, with the all-important proviso that a bi-partite relationship to social institutions is at issue in An American Tragedy; one that comprehends not just struggling *against* societal constraints in order to acquire and enhance status, but also includes *a failed attempt to free oneself from their assumptions*.

Also relevant to this discussion is Strother B. Purdy's valuable comparison between Clyde and Meursault, the protagonist of Camus's *The Stranger*. Meursault is very different from Clyde in that he demonstrates indifference to the normal constraints of society from the very beginning. However, Purdy draws attention to the fact that, at the end of *The Stranger*, after he has vouchsafed a final, definitive rejection of cultural expectations by forcefully repudiating a priest sent to comfort him in his death cell, Meursault develops a "new strength and enlightenment" (261). Such a reprieve is not available to Clyde.

In fact Clyde's tragedy revolves around the fact that he is essentially a determinist hero, but one who has, in contrast to McTeague, a much expanded and sensitive subjectivity. However, he cannot develop the independence of vision (and thus freedom from the moral and legal conventions of the society which surrounds him) that is necessary to sustain that subjectivity under the immense pressures applied to it. This kind of independence is, as we shall see later, available almost by definition to more autonomous criminal protagonists such as Tom Ripley or Humbert Humbert. Dreiser's achievement in *An American Tragedy* is to have poignantly and sensitively explored the terrible consequences for Clyde of this failure.

Chapter 4: James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*

“A Kind of Devil’s Parody of the Movies”

Edmund Wilson’s stricture on James M. Cain’s novels (22) is indicative of the mainly negative critical reaction accorded *The Postman Always Rings Twice* during the nineteen-thirties and -forties. Alfred Kazin, for example, damned Cain and his fellow hard-boiled novelists for their sensationalism (dubbing them “frankly technicians of sensation, opportunists”), their immorality and the “fundamental mindlessness” and “lust for depravity” (388) of their work.

However, even in the year of its publication (1934), there was a contrarian undercurrent of comment that recognized *The Postman Always Rings Twice* as a significant and fresh literary creation. Paul Skenazy²⁷ reports that, in a review of the novel published in the *New York Herald Tribune* on February 18, 1934, Franklin P. Adams described it as “the most engrossing, unlaydownable book that I have any memory of” and, Skenazy adds, “readers have been echoing his words ever since” (21). Furthermore, it is undeniable that *The Postman Always Rings Twice* has gained in popularity over the last part of its seventy-year lifespan, perhaps partly because it resonates with the tastes of both casual and sophisticated readers. In his discussion of the novel, Skenazy claims that it has qualities much beyond sensationalism, and argues that “if Cain is to be dismissed simply as a purveyor of smut, why do we continue to read him at a time when our contemporary culture permits the presentation of far more overt sexuality than a reader will ever find in his work?” (175).

Any attempt to examine the ethical and philosophical positioning of the transgressions described in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, or to analyze Frank, the transgressive protagonist (who, as we will see, is crucial to the impact the novel has upon the reader), would be well advised to take account *of*, and make some attempt to account *for*, the novel's stature, not just in the noir canon, but in any comprehensive canon of twentieth-century American literature. Why is this book so well respected despite its unabashedly grisly content?

The General Appeal of Crime Literature and the Rise of Noir Sensibility

The Postman Always Rings Twice is a classic example of the noir novel, written close to the beginning of the surge in popularity of noir books and films. A number of critics have advanced explanations for the appearance in the late 'twenties and early 'thirties of noir sensibility, the quintessential characteristics of which, as identified by Lee Horsley in *The Noir Thriller*, are "a sceptical attitude towards received opinions and established institutions" (13). In *The American Roman Noir: Hammett, Cain and Chandler*, William Marling notes that the "nation was ripe for new narratives" (10) and indicates that noir resonated with both the bizarre extravagance of the twenties and the uncertainties associated with the onset of the Depression; both periods being, as Lee Horsley proposes in *The Noir Thriller*, periods "of discontent and anxiety, of disillusionment with institutional structures and loss of confidence in the possibility of effective agency" (12-13).

However, such generalized analysis does not explain the longevity and extent of respect for *The Postman Always Rings Twice* in particular, bearing in mind that a

multitude of other noir crime novels have long disappeared from view. Similarly inadequate are the many analyses of the general appeal of crime fiction, both works focused on the criminal and those which concentrate on the detection of crime. As will be seen, however, if a thoughtful attempt is made to apply such general analyses to *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, a central theme emerges—that of the great impact, and dominance over the narrative, of the figure of the main protagonist, Frank Chambers.

The classic justification for the appeal of crime (particularly detective) fiction is that, as William Aydelotte maintains, “it presents a view of life which is...reassuring [and]...persuades the reader that the world it describes is simple and understandable, that it is meaningful, and that it is secure” (78). Aydelotte particularly emphasizes the importance of the ultimate restoration of justice and order in the world depicted in crime fiction, this almost always being marked by the elimination of the criminal at the culmination of the book: “The mess, confusion, and frustration of life have been reduced to a simple issue between good and evil, virtue and wickedness. And virtue triumphs” (78-9). In an essay on Cain, “Man Under Sentence of Death,” Joyce Carol Oates has attempted to impose this formula on *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, maintaining that the reader draws reassurance at the end of the novel from Frank’s impending execution—a final imposition of justice (114). This analysis is not supportable, however. Not only does the novel depict the mechanisms of the law as profoundly flawed, but, more importantly, by the final pages of the novel our sympathies are undeniably engaged with Cora and, particularly, with Frank. The reader is most likely to regard the final execution (which, significantly, takes place off-stage after the end of the text) as a tragic conclusion rather than as a triumph of justice. Douglas Tallack makes a very valid point when he

concludes “at the end of *Postman*...we hardly regard society as a moral victor over the tough-guy” (258).

In the early ‘sixties, William Warshow adopted a unique approach to determining the appeal of crime fiction and gangster movies, claiming that the genre provided needed relief from the hegemonic “politically correct” media presentations of American life. In *The Immediate Experience*, Warshow wrote “Even within the area of mass culture, there always exists a current of opposition, seeking to express by whatever means are available to it that sense of desperation and inevitable failure which optimism itself helps to create” (128-129). Geoffrey O’Brien has elaborated on Warshow’s theme: “These novels...speak of the ignoble corners of life beyond the glow of Jane Powell, *Father Knows Best*, and the healthy, smiling faces in magazines advertising milk or frozen dinners or trips to California” (16). One of the implications of Warshow’s perspective is that often we identify with the criminal protagonist and his ultimately hopeless struggles on the dark side of life. Warshow wrote of gangster movies that their protagonists resonate with “the deeper layers of the modern consciousness” which holds that “*all* means are lawful” (133) in the lonely struggle for success to which there is no alternative, and which is inevitably doomed. Here Warshow touches upon a tendency to empathize with criminal protagonists that again serves to illuminate the reader’s considerable, although superficially puzzling, engagement with Frank Chambers.

Another group of commentators (including Stanley Fish and John Cawelti) have theorized that the popularity of crime fiction reflects the importance of game-playing to human beings. These writers maintain that crime fiction provides readers with a formula by means of which they can participate vicariously (and safely) in the playing of

dangerous roles.²⁸ But again, the on-going popularity of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* inevitably prompts us to question why it is the role of Frank in particular that readers relish playing, and to recognize once again that he is a remarkable fictional creation.

Frank—A Very Dominant Subject

It is, then, the protagonist who dominates this novel and who is key to the development of an understanding thereof. Lee Horsley points out in *The Noir Thriller* that such dominance is typical of the noir genre: “in literary noir it is the creation of the protagonist that is of paramount importance” (8-9).

Everything that the reader learns is filtered through the prism of Frank’s subjectivity, and his dominance is unsurprising in view of the fact that not only is he the sole focalizer from the first to the last word of the novel, but he is also an internal focalizer (a character who participates in the action) of a special and privileged kind—one that appears to know more than the reader. This special kind of focalizer is constructed so as to appear to be privy to prior discussions and decisions of which the reader has been kept ignorant. Indeed, the dependence of the reader on the focalizer for clarification of puzzling passages is often foregrounded in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*; Frank’s narration frequently beginning *in medias res*. Chapter seven, for example, begins puzzlingly with two verses of the popular song *There’s a Long, Long Trail A-Winding*, and only after some equally puzzling dialogue between Cora and an anonymous service station attendant does Frank finally clarify the significance of the passage for the reader in the context of the planned murder of Nick. The overt reliance of the reader for meaning on

the focalizer's exegesis manifestly serves to enhance the latter's authority. Indeed, the reader is astonished and disconcerted when suddenly faced with a fact to which Frank has *not* been previously privy; as, for example, when District Attorney Sackett reveals the existence of the Greek's recently acquired accident insurance. The sudden displacement of consciousness caused by the setting aside of the narrative convention of the focalizer's cool omniscience is considerable. As Thomas Reck points out: "Cain dispenses with any Jamesian psychological analysis of the inner life of his characters" (377). Instead, we are kept to the "outside" of Frank, looking up at him while he leads us by the hand.

When we examine Frank's characterization it becomes obvious that in this novel we have passed the tipping point in the sequence of novels we will examine between a determined protagonist, whose fate is largely dictated by heredity or social pressures, and one who is constructed with existentialist presumptions of individual autonomy in mind. Frank is an almost entirely autonomous figure who totally ignores the ethical constraints and assumptions of society, and who, for the vast majority of the novel, targets the trajectory of his actions towards the exclusive pursuit of self-gratification. Joyce Carol Oates has described Frank's approach to life thus: "It is as if the world extends no farther than the radius of one's desire" (111). It is Frank's ethical autonomy, and the attenuated human relationships he demonstrates for most of the novel, that critics such as Edmund Wilson and W.M. Frohock have found so disturbing. The emphasis on this aspect of his character also renders it unsurprising that Camus claimed to have been profoundly influenced by *The Postman Always Rings Twice* when creating the character of Meursault in *The Stranger*.

The Prominence of Sexual Attraction in the First Part of the Novel

While it is clear that the bulk of the text of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* supports and validates the positioning of Frank as a manifestation of existential autonomy, we must allow that there is an echo of the deterministic approach to characterization in Frank's obsessive attitude towards sexual gratification: "I wanted that woman so bad I couldn't keep anything on my stomach" (9). As Andrew Pepper has pointed out: "For Frank, as for many noir protagonists, sexuality remains something of an abyss, a primeval force that he neither understands nor can control...It is no co-incidence that noir came of age at a time marked by...an extensive popularization of 'Freudian psychoanalysis' in American culture" (65). Although, as will shortly appear, Frank's phallocentrism is significantly nuanced in the closing pages of the novel, the fact remains that sexual attraction is portrayed, at least in the earlier parts of the novel, as a subversive and violent force.

Imagery portraying women as large, dangerous felines and as snakes figures large in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*; likewise descriptions of Cora as a "hell-cat" (e.g. 15, 17). Furthermore, the sexual attraction between Frank and Cora is frequently referenced using the trope of the olfactory sense: "I began to smell her again" (13). The sense of smell is, of course, prominent in many of the "lower" animals like reptiles and it typically entrains suggestions of bestiality. Thus the question must arise whether Cain is suggesting that Frank, and, by implication, males in general, are controlled in a quasi-deterministic fashion by potentially dangerous sexual obsessions.

In his essay "James M. Cain's Tiger Woman" William Marling draws attention to the fact that Cain drew part of his inspiration for *The Postman Always Rings Twice* from the

Ruth Snyder/Henry Judd Gray murder trial of 1927, during which Gray famously described Snyder as a tiger woman in bed. The trial generated much angst regarding the potential dangers supposedly posed by the liberated “new woman” to man and to society. It is possible that, in the characterization of Cora, and the depiction of Frank’s obsession with her, Cain was temporarily capitalizing on the *frissons* and titillations of the relatively recent Snyder case for commercial reasons. In this context, it is potentially significant that, in the novels that follow *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (successively *Double Indemnity*, *Serenade* and *Mildred Pierce*) Cain makes less and less use of bestial imagery and olfactory references; presumably the value of references to the Snyder case would diminish as the public memory of it faded. Having said this, the trope of woman as a dangerous animal does occur repeatedly in Cain’s *oeuvre* over a significant period, and the issue cannot be so easily dismissed on the basis of largely unsubstantiated implications of commercialism.

However, it is really too simplistic to characterize woman simply as a primeval sexual threat to man in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. As will be later discussed, Cora figures not only as a temptress but also, later in the novel, as a powerful redemptive force for Frank—a force that is instrumental in purging him of his sins. In fact, if all of Cain’s major novels are considered, it is clear that women figure as often as a redemptive force as they do as a danger; Lola in *Double Indemnity* (so powerful a force for good that Huff confesses to his crimes to save her) and Juana in *Serenade* provide ready examples.

A more nuanced and revealing interpretation of Frank’s sexual possessiveness regarding Cora is available; this being that it represents but one aspect of a trope which is absolutely central to Cain’s novels--that of a man or woman in the grip of an irresistible

compulsion. Considering Cain's total *oeuvre*, it is clear that, while this compulsion is sometimes sexual, this is by no means always the case. In *Double Indemnity*, Walter Huff tells himself bitterly that "I had killed a man to get a woman" (54), but, in fact, very little text is devoted to the description of the sexual attraction between Walter and Phyllis, there is far more description of Walter's obsession with outsmarting the insurance business of which he is part—his desire to achieve self-realization by using his unique knowledge to finesse a criminal fraud. This is the compulsion he references when he tells us "I ought to quit, while the going was good, I knew that. But that thing was in me, pushing me still closer to the edge" (15). In *Serenade*, John Howard Sharp's sexual attraction to Juana is disposed of in an even more summary fashion, while Sharp's compulsion to recover his professional singing voice dominates the narrative. In *Mildred Pierce* a mother's fatally unquestioning obsession with her child is analyzed; sex has no part at all in this.

But the question lingers; can the fact that Cain's protagonists are victims of compulsions indicate that, at least on some level, they are the victims of deterministic influences? It is true that a compulsion finds its origin inside an individual's psyche, while many other deterministic forces originate outside the individual—commonly either the influence of traits inherited from forebears, or pressures exerted by the social, cultural or economic environment. Nonetheless, it must be admitted that compulsions are as much outside an individual's control as are hereditary and economic influences. However, it will become clear in the paragraphs that follow that the construction of Frank as an autonomous figure exercises a much more profound influence on the reader's perceptions of him than deterministic considerations of sexual obsession.

Of social determinism there is almost no hint in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Although Lee Horsley asserts that in noir fiction there is “a pessimistic conviction that economic and socio-political circumstances will deprive people of control over their lives” (17), in this novel there is no sense that Frank’s life has been shaped by economic and social conditions, as Clyde Griffiths’s has. Such conditions are, in any case, merely hinted at, rather than being fully described. Frank delights in, rather than endures, being a hobo: “ ‘Gypsy? I had rings in my ears when I was born’ ” he tells Madge Allen (96). David Madden quite correctly concludes in *Cain’s Craft* that “Cain is not deliberately interested in depicting the social ills of his time...If there is an attack on conditions that produced a man like Frank, it is only implicit” (9). The same is true of Cora, the character secondary to Frank in the novel. Cora’s deprecation of the debased social position that her failure in the movies has entailed is really nothing more than a generalized objection to everything that is, in her view, second-rate.

Frank and Cora are in the end victims of gratuitous ill-luck. The accident that ends their pre-lapsarian idyll at the conclusion of the novel (and which leads to Frank’s execution) demonstrates nothing more than that, as Ross Macdonald wrote in a review of Cain’s work, “The power or fate that runs through the universe...is catlike in its toying with human beings” (1).

Frank as an Autonomous Existential Protagonist

Determinism being largely dismissed, emphasis in any detailed analysis must perforce fall on the aspects of Frank’s characterization that are foregrounded--its existential dimensions. Indeed, these have been fully recognized by a number of critics. W.M.

Frohock, for example, deliberately draws attention to the existential nature of Cain's heroes (21), and Jopi Nyman affirms that "hard-boiled fiction resembles existentialism in some ways" (30-31). Nyman goes on to point out that, since hard-boiled fiction predates the full flowering of existential philosophy, hard-boiled novels cannot, strictly speaking, be classified as existential literature. However, this seems to verge on over-delicate equivocation. Frank's credentials as an existential protagonist rest on his overt indifference to the normal ethical and emotional expectations of society: "What for?" he replies when Cora asks if he has visited his family (98). Such indifference is typical of both pre-existential protagonists such as Andre Gide's Lafcadio (to whom, as to Frank, murder is incidental and of less importance than self-gratification), and of "true" existential heroes such as Camus's Meursault.

One significant aspect of Frank's existential autonomy is that, for all except the final few pages of the novels, he treats people as objects. In this he is a typical hard-boiled hero; Nyman writes "Hard-boiled masculinity treats other people as objects without human status: they can, if necessary, be governed by violence" (156). Nyman characterizes Nick as "a mere object... which happens to be located between Frank and the fulfillment of his dreams and desires" (231). On the road to Malibu beach, Nick's head becomes an object to be cracked open like a coconut at a fairground stall. Frank's depiction of the murder is laconic: "I braced my feet, and while he still had his chin on the window sill I brought down the wrench. His head cracked" (43). Significantly, this description of the culminating act comes in the middle of a detailed, list-like recounting of the entire process of murder that is so objective that it makes homicide sound like a technical process: "I put the rock under the rear axle... I slipped the 2X4 over the rock

and under the axle. I heaved down on it...I slung [the 2X4] down, right in the roadway. It didn't bother me any... I had left it out all day, and it had tire marks on it, and the edges were all chewed up" (45).

The murder of Nick is by no means the only instance of the objectification of others that is such a prominent feature of Frank's autonomy. Throughout the novel a key feature of Frank's relationships is the way in which he deliberately holds others at a distance and diminishes them by ridicule and belittlement. Even at his funeral, the murdered Nick is still referred to as "the Greek", and, in the course of Frank's description of the inquest, he gratuitously dismisses the witness Wright as "a hick" (51). Frank's account of Nick's scrapbook celebrating the significant features of his life objectifies the Greek as the target of a generalized derision that encompasses all the simple-minded of the earth:

This Greek had had a fracture of the skull, and a thing like that don't happen to a dumb cluck like him every day. He was like a wop that opens a drug store. Soon as he gets that thing that says Pharmacist, with a red seal on it, a wop puts on a grey suit, with black edges on the vest, and is so important he can't even take time to mix the pills, and wouldn't even touch a chocolate ice-cream soda. (36)

During the early part of their relationship, Cora figures very much as a sexual object for Frank. It is only her external features that hold an interest for him; on first acquaintance he coolly notes "Except for *the shape* [my italics—note the use of the impersonal rather than the personal article], she really wasn't any raving beauty" (4). Cora is initially simply something to be possessed: "I had to have her" (46). As we have noted, in the first part of the novel Frank's sexual possession of Cora is almost inevitably

correlated with the exercise of violence: “her lips stuck out in a way that made me want to mash them in for her” (4). Of course, this underlines the fact that he conceives of her as an insentient object. Paul Skenazy notes that verbs of violent action are very frequently used in connection with Frank’s interactions with Cora; he “ ‘busts’ the buttons of [her] blouse, ‘shoves’ his hand inside her clothes and ‘jerks’ them off” (Skenazy 26). During his very first sexual encounter with Cora, Frank sinks his teeth “into her lips so deep [he] can feel the blood spurt into [his] mouth” (11). Curiously, until the death of her mother and the discovery of her pregnancy, Cora actually invites this violent possession, crying “Rip me!” (46); “Bite me!” (11).

Frank’s predominant priority is to pursue the solipsistic trajectory he has selected. As Jopi Nyman has written, hard-boiled characters “instead of co-operating, prefer to deceive and double-cross each other in order to achieve personal profit” (178-9). Not surprisingly, therefore, Frank and Cora betray each other under pressure. Nyman characterizes this attitude as Hobbesian—typical of a world in which each individual is at war with the other. Nyman comments further that “since in this kind of world individuals attempt to survive alone, they resort to violence” (179n). However, Frank’s deployment of violence is of a particular kind. It is not like that which, in *Raids On Human Consciousness*, Arthur Redding indicates is portrayed in Camus’s *The Rebel*. For Camus, a violent act of rebellion “frees its agent from the clutches of a system” (Redding 32) and constitutes a self-defining act necessary to the achievement of real subjectivity. The violence Frank deploys is rather an incidental side-effect of the self-interested autonomy from which he surveys to all comers; Nick, Cora or Kennedy. It is collateral damage only.

Unsurprisingly, in view of his existential characteristics, Frank's unabashed egocentricity is not restricted to inter-personal relations, but also encompasses alienation from the moral and cultural framework of his society. Frank relates to institutions representative of this framework, such as legal institutions, simply as things to be avoided or manipulated ("I had him like I wanted him" [55], Frank thinks—wrongly, as it turns out—during his initial interview with Sackett). He certainly does not view institutions and conventions as things to be valued or respected. David Madden points out that Frank and Cora are "outsiders" (*Cain's Craft* 11), "outside society and its morality" (71)—the mutually adversarial relationship between Frank and society is amply evidenced by the opening sentence of the novel: "They threw me off the hay truck about noon" (3).

Frank conceives of the forces of justice in particular as hostile and alien, and he often objectifies them using pronouns whose vagueness implies menace: "'If he [Nick] dies, *they've* got us'" (21); "The cops never said a word. *They* just sat there and looked at us" [my italics] (22). Furthermore, in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, the implied author appears to be complicit with Frank's alienation. Tom Reck has written "Cain has remarkable detachment—not from characters or incidents necessarily, but from judging them" (377-8).

Frank characteristically trivializes the mechanisms and processes of the legal system, for example when describing the administration of the truth oath at the trial as a meaningless charade: "the cop told them to raise their right hand, and began to mumble...He stopped in the middle of it to look down and see if I had my right hand raised. I didn't. I shoved it up, and he mumbled all over again. We all mumbled back" (68). Frank's cynicism resonates with what appear to be general background assumptions

regarding the processes of justice in the novel. Nyman has noted that lawyer Katz likens the legal process to a card game and he concludes that “By using the image of the card game in connection with issues dealing with the rights of an individual, the novel reveals not only the randomness but also the meaninglessness of institutions supposed to guard them” (234). Indeed, the reader readily aligns himself with Frank’s irony when he comments “That was swell, two guys [Sackett and Katz] betting \$100 on what the hangman would do to me and Cora” (76-7). Nyman also points out that “in the case of Frank and Cora it is the interests of insurance companies which actually define the sentence, not the judge” (253). Cain has portrayed a world characterized by a “sense of universal corruption,” as Joyce Carol Oates terms it (120), and, in this amoral world, no ethical anchors are supplied either by the focalizer, Frank, or the author, Cain.

Frank’s alienation is not just from the legal, but also from the economic organization of his society. It seems possible that Frank’s distrust and dislike of capitalism may reflect that of Cain himself, who made no secret of his disgust at the undiluted commercialism of his trade of screenwriter (McCann 22). Frank’s attitude to the world of business is derisory: “Whole goddam country lives selling hot dogs to each other” (93). Frank contrasts with Nick, who is totally complicit with capital, and is proud to include his license to do business in Los Angeles County in the scrapbook compiled to show highlights of his personal history. Frank advises him to decorate it with “a buzzard...holding a couple of auctioneer’s flags that said Sale Today” (35).

In his alienation from capital, Frank also stands apart from Walter Huff, the protagonist of the second of Cain’s noir novels, *Double Indemnity*. Huff is aware of the unethical nature of commerce, comparing the insurance business to a game of roulette in

which he, as an insurance agent, plays the role of a croupier (23). However, rather than simply choosing to stand apart from this world, as Frank does, Huff instead wishes to go one better and defraud the insurance company itself: “then one night I think up a trick, and get to thinking I could crook the wheel myself if I could only put a plant out there to put down my bet...When I met Phyllis, I met my plant” (24).

Cora’s attitude is subtly different from Frank’s. Her wish to figure large in the restaurant and beer-garden business is an aspect of her desire to achieve status and rise above the second-rate. But she is also repulsed by the crasser aspects of the service economy, vigorously dismissing visions of Frank in “a lousy parking lot job”—“I’d cry if I saw you in a smock, Frank” (16).

Finally, in any discussion of Frank as an autonomous existential figure, the question must inevitably arise of how to align this positioning with the final turn of the novel’s plot--the period after Cora reveals her pregnancy and during which Frank definitively stops holding the entire world at arm’s length. At the end, he abandons his earlier possessive and dominating approach to Cora, and, in a total reversal of attitude, cedes dominance to her: “I was all ready to...*do like she said* [my italics]” (111). At this point Frank and Cora briefly enter into a pre-lapsarian episode of shared, non-selfish love. It is undoubtedly Cora who assumes leadership of the relationship at this point and initiates this change. After becoming aware of her pregnant state, Cora, as Nyman writes, “finds peace” through a conversion which Nyman terms “quasi-religious” (256), although such a description is perhaps debatable, spiritual possibly being a better term. In any case, the dominant feature of the change in her attitude is that it becomes affirmative of life and of a fulfilling future: “Pretty soon my belly is going to get big, and I’ll love that...It’s life. I

can feel it in me. It's a new life for us both, Frank" (111). She promises Frank "there'll be kisses. Lovely ones, Frank. Not drunken kisses. Kisses with dreams in them. Kisses that come from life, not death" (110). Frank's entry into this shared idyll is by means of a kind of baptismal redemption. Cora offers to swim far out to sea with him, specifically to offer him the chance to abandon and kill her if he is still suspicious of her motives and fearful of her betrayal of him to Sackett. Instead of killing her, he floats happily with her in the waves: "we looked at each other. She knew then that the devil was gone" (110). During the swim back to the beach, he dives down and undergoes a profoundly cleansing experience: "with my ears ringing and that weight on my back and chest, it seemed to me that all the devilment, and meanness, and shiftlessness, and no-account stuff in my life had been pressed out and washed off" (111).

The issue to be addressed is whether, by abandoning his autonomy and seeking to merge his life with Cora's, Frank has disqualified himself for the role of classic autonomous existential protagonist. However, when the unusual nature of this final phase of their relationship is considered, it seems there is no compelling reason to so conclude. Although they enter into a brief period of sharing their lives, Frank and Cora, as a couple, retain a profound existentialist alienation and isolation from the rest of the world. David Madden correctly points out that "Outside society and its morality, the lovers respond to a mystique of their own" (*Cain's Craft* 71). Madden emphasizes that Frank and Cora exclude "all others from their world" (76) and Paul Skenazy sees them as "symbolically proclaim[ing] an alternative society, even if only a society of two" (33). The trope of the long lonely swim away from the crowded beach and out to sea underlines their isolation: "She went ahead, and I swam after her. She kept on going, and went a lot further out than

she had before” (110). On the eve of his execution, Frank’s final dream is of a solitude that excludes everyone except him and Cora: “Whenever I can make it, I’m out there with Cora, with the sky above us, and the water around us” (116). So Frank’s existential isolation is replaced by an isolation that encompasses two people.

Of course, after the fortuitous disaster which kills Cora, Frank achieves an existential isolation as overwhelming as any imaginable: that of the prisoner on death row.

The Existential Protagonist as Transgressor.

For this thesis, the dominant interest of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* naturally lies in examining how the existential characterization of the protagonist affects the way in which the text positions and nuances the significance of the transgressive act of murder.

As described in chapter one, Arthur Redding has drawn attention to the horror we feel when confronted with an act of violence: “that which by definition cannot be grasped, it is excessive” (34). Redding points out, however, that violence can be defused by containment within the “sheath of narrative” (14) and, as mentioned before, he draws particular attention to the fact that pre-modernist fictions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries endeavoured to both contain and control violence through “textual maneuvers” (116). He cites as an example the case of Henry James’s *The Princess Cassamassima*, in which the pure violent intent of the protagonist Hyacinth, a putative anarchist, is defused by debasing his motives (Hyacinth yearns after elegance and sees the revolution “less as a leveler... than as an escalator on which he might be lifted to the new aristocracy” [Redding 86]), and by the derailing of his motivation for anarchic violence by a developing love interest (he fails to commit the murder planned for him

because of his love for the Princess). Similarly, in Norris's *The Octopus*, the mystical perspective imposed at the end of the novel "contains" the violence consequent upon the struggles between the ranchers and the railroad, through, in Redding's words, "an appeal to the trans-individual consolations of the great beyond, as well as the consolation that gives shelter to the collapse of a will to knowledge" (107).

I have described at some length in earlier chapters how similar narrative strategies are deployed to elide a direct confrontation with the ultimate horror of the act of murder in *McTeague* and *An American Tragedy*. In the former this is achieved by constructing a psychological plight that manipulates our sympathy towards the dentist and partially explains his murder of Trina. In the latter, a mass of economic and social pressures are described which, at the very least, lead us to understand how a weak-willed youth like Clyde could have been brought to consider murder; furthermore the issue of whether Roberta's death is murder or an accident is profoundly ambiguous.

The ploys we find in *McTeague* and *An American Tragedy* are completely absent from *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. There is no hedging of the descriptions of the violence committed so casually by Frank. Not only are his actions not judged, the violence of them is not defused by narrative explications or elaborations such as those seen in *McTeague* and *An American Tragedy*. As David Madden has written: "Though Frank writes his story on the eve of his execution, Cain does not even suggest the simplest moral: crime does not pay" (66). It is as though the cultural ethical underpinnings that would have indicated the necessity for such excuses have disappeared. Andrew Pepper refers to Frank's world as one "where there are no fixed moral absolutes" (63), while Lee Horsley claims in *The Noir Thriller* that in literary noir there is a

“modernist undermining of conventional values and ‘moral meaning’, unsettling confidence in our ability to interpret and judge the world” (13).

Nonetheless, it is undeniable that that there *is* a dilution or, rather, a bypassing of the impact of violence and murder in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. This is clear from the fact that when the reader lays down the novel, he or she does not think of Frank as a monster, and his or her predominant memory is not of the casual violence depicted in the book. In seeking an explanation for this, we are led once again to the issue of the dominance of the novel’s protagonist—the figure of Frank is absolutely key. For the first time in the novels we have considered, violence is not excused or explained by reference to the conventional expectations of inter-personal relations, or to the inadequacies of the structure of society, it is, rather, obscured by our total engagement with the main protagonist. W.M Frohock, in general a hostile critic of Cain, admits that by the end of the novel “The reader is tricked into taking the position of a potential accomplice” (21) to Frank, and declares further that “everything in the book conspires to excite the reader to hope that somehow Frank will get away with murder, keep Cora and elude the police” (21). In the same vein, David Madden points out that “we want Frank and Cora to escape” (*Cain’s Craft* 67)

Not only does the implied author offer no excuses for Frank, the latter, true to his positioning as an existential hero, offers absolutely none for himself. Guilt, self-justification, self-pity, a yearning after forgiveness; all are noticeable by their absence from Frank’s internal monologue. He takes full responsibility (in the Sartrean sense) for his actions. Madden points out that Frank never “whines about his punishment: on the eve of his execution...[he] refuses to shift responsibility for his action to a hostile

society” (*Cain’s Craft* 73). Moreover, Frank completely rejects the possibility of sub-conscious motivation for criminal acts—the latter being claimed as an excuse by a fratricide in a neighbouring cell—“To hell with the subconscious...It’s just a lot of hooey that this guy thought up so he could fool the judge. You know what you’re doing, and you do it” (116).

So there is a quantum shift in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, with respect to the novels previously considered, from an avoidance of confrontation with violence by explanation and excuse, to an acceptance of violence as part of the valorization of a charismatic existential protagonist--one who pursues his own trajectory entirely on his own terms. From a historicist point of view, it is reasonable to question what this change reveals concerning the perceptions of the audience for whom the novel was written--John Cawelti has written that “popular art is popular because it resonates with the subconscious desires or values in the popular mind” (“Notes toward an Aesthetic of Popular Culture” 258). In this context, Douglas Tallack’s comments provide a clue regarding how the novel may have resonated with that “popular mind”: “the force of society pressing down upon the individual during the Depression was such that social deviance became common...When society is turbulent and violent the tough-guy is invariably cast as the hero, or at least as the central figure” (252).

The unexcused valorization of a character like Frank who, almost without a second thought, bypasses long-standing ethical values and legal expectations, speaks volumes regarding the existence of resentment towards, and loss of faith in, the traditional cultural structures and institutions which had failed to prevent the onset of the atrocious conditions of the early Depression. Indeed, in *The Noir Thriller*, Lee Horsley has

described “a skeptical distrust of the whole of society” (13) as being typical of noir literature.

The Construction of a Dominant Protagonist

As has been demonstrated, Frank is a commanding presence in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, but it remains to define how the linguistic and narratological bases of this command are constituted.

Frank is poised and full of street-knowledge: “I knew what it was all about” (50) he confides to the reader regarding the argument between the hospital staff and the jail physician over a blood-test--and we readily believe him. He is masculine, strong (“you’re hard all over. Big and tall and hard” Cora tells him [16]), self-reliant, capable and practical; all, of course, very impressive characteristics. Jopi Nyman has positioned Frank as a “later link in the chain of fictions of American masculinity” (35), stretching from Natty Bumppo to the heroes of Western novels.

Frank almost always operates from a position of superior knowledge; for example proffering lexical help with Nick’s new sign: “I fixed up the words, so they were spelled right” (10). Because he almost always knows what to do, he is in control and in command most of the time. On the trip home from the hospital after the first attempt on Nick’s life, while he and Cora are being closely followed by the police, Frank discovers that Cora still has the sap he previously put together to slug Nick. Immediately, he reacts assertively: “I gave her my knife, made her cut the string off the bag, and take the bearings out. Then I made her climb back, raise the back seat, and put the bag under it. It would look like a rag, like anyone keeps with the tools” (23).

In contrast to McTeague and Clyde, there is little epistemic modality in Frank's interior monologue, and this betokens his considerable self-confidence. Nyman points out (105) that when Frank is forced to cede control of a situation, it has a physically debilitating effect on him; when Sackett, after springing on Frank the existence of the Nick's accident insurance, suddenly accuses him of murder, Frank almost passes out.

Nyman also indicates (34-37) that much of Frank's exercise of control is effected through his use of language. It is not just that Frank is automatically invested with authority as the first-person narrator of an experience he has lived through. He is also a master at manipulating others through the exercise of language, using it to flatter Nick about his sign design, to fraudulently win money from pool players, and to fool legal investigators—"I figured if I told a bum story first, and then turned around and told another story, it would sound like the second story was really true, where if I had a pat story right from the beginning, it would sound like what it was, pat" (52). Likewise he enforces his will on the potential blackmailer Kennedy through verbal interrogation integrated with physical violence. Frank retains his control over language, but Kennedy is reduced to blubbing and loses the ability to speak at all. Other secondary characters in the novel are distinguished from Frank by their lack of command over language. The immigrant Nick, for example, is grammatically challenged: "Air, is a nice" (4).

But the quality of the hobo's argot which is so central to the reader's experience of Frank is also important. Tom Reck has correctly noted that "Ordinarily realistic novels bring in colloquial vocabulary by way of dialogue, Cain includes it in the narrative proper" (375). Geoffrey O'Brien notes that in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* Cain uses colloquial language as "the fundamental idiom rather than as something added for

‘color’ or humor” (65). It seems this valorization of the speech of the hobo was important to Cain. Sean McCann has claimed that the investment of Frank with the hobo’s argot demonstrates an aspect of Cain’s “cultural nationalism”—part of a quest to “[reclaim]...a primitive national authenticity” (23).

The cynical quality of this argot is undeniably constitutive of the reader’s perception of Frank as a commanding presence. Its knowing quality, and the street-wise wisdom it tersely reveals, pre-positions the reader to suppose that Frank is an authoritative figure, one who has “been around”. At the very least his use of a cynical slang emphasizes his distance from the effete. Furthermore, the fact that Frank is allowed to conduct his narrative in his own argot seems to mark him as privileged subject.

The Co-opting of the Reader

In *The Postman Always Rings Twice* the degree of the reader’s willing alignment with the character of the protagonist is indeed remarkable. A number of critics (for example, David Madden [7] and Paul Skenazy [21]) have drawn attention to the role that the speed and drive of Frank’s internal monologue has in this co-opting of the reader. The latter is hurried along by the narrative with little time for questioning. W.M Frohock points out that “The pace of *The Postman* was properly advertised as ‘terrific’” (17). Frohock also maintains that this rapid pace is mainly achieved by the omission of unnecessary detail (17); we learn surprisingly little about the objects or settings of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*—the cars, or the interior of the Twin Oaks, for example. Geoffrey O’Brien’s attribution of “stripped-down syntax” and “vocabulary reduced to basics” (67) to Dashiell Hammett would apply equally well, if not better, to Cain.

However, the analyses of characterization and style made so far do not totally account for our engagement with Frank, they could equally well apply to a protagonist who, in the end, the reader perceives as an ugly bully. Cain's achievement in this novel is to ensure that, not only are we swept along with Frank, but that we also like and admire him, in spite of his actions. As Paul Skenazy says of Cain's *oeuvre*: "Cain puts you inside the skin of one utterly egocentric heel after another, losers who will stop at nothing---and makes you care about them" (168).

Relevant here is the way in which Frank drags us into his world by summarily assuming our familiarity with it; the use of words like "they", "those", "this" and "them" reinforces this assumption. Note how, in the following examples, Frank assumes that, from the start of the novel, we know his world as well as he does: "That was when I hit this Twin Oaks tavern. It was nothing but a roadside sandwich joint, like a million others in California. There was a lunchroom part, and a house part, where they lived" (3); and, with reference to Cora's dress: "It was one of those white nurse uniforms, like they all wear" (8). We feel a forcible imposition of common knowledge, and because of the power of Frank as a character, we feel almost obliged to live up to his assumptions without question.

Reck also draws attention to the "stair-stepped progression" (375) of Frank's narration, referring to the gaps in the narrative described earlier—the leaps in the story that the reader relies on Frank to explain (for example, the beginning of chapter four, "Got any hot water?" [18]). This technique not only places Frank in a privileged position (as indicated before), but also in a strange way binds us to him: the effect resembles trying to keep up with a friend who is walking much faster than you are.

Frank also utilizes his power as focalizer/narrator by letting slip, every now and then, half-apologetic lapses into self-revelatory frankness or vulnerability. For example, at the inquest into Nick's death, Cora begins to cry when the sheet is lifted off the body and Frank confides "I didn't like it much myself" (51). Similarly, Frank surprises us by "blubbing" as the Greek is lowered into his grave: "Singing those hymns will do it to you every time, and specially when it's about a guy you like as well as I liked the Greek. At the end they sang some song I had heard him sing a hundred times, and that finished me" (84). Frank, of course, has actually participated in the planned murder of Nick; but he is in control of his own narrative, and these occasional revelations, which position him as a man of some sentiment, with a tender heart beneath the tough-guy exterior, serve to enhance still further the reader's engagement with him.

Humour

However, Frank's humour is the most important factor in the bonding process between him and the reader. Among the transgressive protagonists thus far examined, Frank is the first who has a sense of humour and who is capable of sufficient detachment from the impact of immediate experience to be capable of irony at his own expense. Some of the humour is broad ("Next morning, we packed up. Anyway, she packed. I had bought a suit and I put that on, and it seemed to be about all" [29]), but some of it is pointed and shows genuine detachment from himself—"Oh, I was good all right. The only trouble was I wasn't quite good enough" (33) he says, after losing all his money attempting to build a stake by cheating at pool in Glendale.

In his study *The Importance of not Being Earnest*, Wallace Chafe investigates at length the proposal that humour has a fundamental role to play in inter-personal bonding, and this concept seems to go a considerable distance towards explaining our engagement with, and attraction to, Frank Chambers. Moreover, as indicated in chapter two, Rod Martin has described how, because humour is pleasurable, we are instinctively drawn to those capable of amusing us. Of course, Frank's cool irony at the expense of institutions and other characters (a typical comment refers to Nick's trip to Los Angeles: "Los Angeles wasn't but twenty miles away, but he shined himself up like he was going to Paris" [10]) reinforces his authority as well as amuses us. Joyce Carol Oates comments, the reader feels "that this is a man whose opinion can be trusted" (119).

Frank's humour is truly integral to his narrative, and the latter is, since Frank is the focalizer, the only access the reader has to the actual details of the story—which is, of course, actually a grim tale of the murder of an innocent. However, the admixture of wry humour serves to derail our moral judgment, very much to Frank's advantage. For example, at the inquest, from a rational perspective Frank stands doubly guilty—he killed Nick and moreover is trying to defraud the judicial process. However, his dead-pan irony serves to keep the reader's empathies with him:

Then Sackett started up, and told what he was going to prove. It was about the same as he had told me that morning, only he made it seem solemn as hell. When he got through, he began putting on his witnesses. First there was the ambulance doctor, that told when the Greek had died, and where. Then came the jail doctor, that made the autopsy, and then came the coroner's secretary...and then came a couple more guys, but I forget what they said. When they got done, all that the

whole bunch had proved was that the Greek was dead, and as I knew that anyway, I didn't pay much attention. (68-69)

Humour is thus fundamentally important to the building of our engagement with Frank; an engagement that is absolutely key to explaining the strange tolerance with which we regard the transgressions which neither he, nor the author, make the slightest attempt to excuse or hide.

Chapter 5: Richard Wright's *Native Son* and *The Outsider*

In Richard Wright we encounter a writer whose analysis of human volition, in particular of the motivation of criminal acts, spans the tipping point between determinist and existentialist assumptions, the change from the former to the latter being a function of Wright's intellectual development over a protracted period. The novel considered first, *Native Son*, published in 1940, concerns a criminal protagonist whose attitude and actions are largely determined, as Wright makes very clear, by the environment of racial discrimination to which he has been subjected. On the other hand, Wright's 1953 novel, *The Outsider*, intentionally references existential philosophical assumptions; by the time of its publication Wright had been living in Europe (mainly Paris) for some years and had become intimate with many of the French existentialist thinkers, particularly Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. The murders committed by the novel's protagonist, Cross Damon, seem almost to be the collateral damage that occurs in the course of Damon's existential quest to investigate the relationship between a man and the society of which he forms (or chooses not to form) a part.

In both novels, however, we shall find that Wright touches upon aspects of his protagonists' psychology that lie outside that which might be expected in the context of the two philosophical frameworks defined above, thus creating characterizations that perhaps, as he himself hints, go beyond his original intentions.

“ ‘Well, to tell the truth, Mr. Max, it seems sort of natural-like, me being here facing that death-chair...it seems like something like this just had to be’ ” (*Native Son* 358).

Something that sets *Native Son* apart from any of the novels so far considered is the complete absence of any attempt on the author’s part to elide or mask by any narratological ploys the horror of the crimes described. As we have seen, this elision can be achieved by deploying a number of different strategies; by manipulating the balance of sympathy between the criminal protagonist and other characters (as in *McTeague*), or, as in the case of Frank Chambers, by crafting so dominant and engaging a protagonist that the reader turns the focus of his gaze from the criminal nature of his activities. In *Native Son*, on the contrary, the horror of Bigger’s crimes is emphasized, a point stressed by Jerry Bryant: “Wright...[does not] try morally to justify Bigger’s actions. He presents them as reprehensible” (12). Wright’s insistence on rubbing the reader’s nose in horror is particularly evident in his crafting of the long-drawn-out ghastliness of the death of Bessie, Bigger’s girlfriend. After raping Bessie, Bigger smashes her head to a paste with a brick and tosses her down into the airshaft of a deserted building. But Wright is not content to leave it at that; we finally learn that Bessie survived this treatment only to finally die of hypothermia while trying to climb out of the shaft.

It is indicative of Wright’s conception of the significance and purpose of *Native Son* that, against the advice of friends and colleagues, he was absolutely insistent that Bessie’s murder be included in the novel, exclaiming “But I have to get rid of her. She must die!”²⁹ Wright was above all concerned to stress in his characterization of Bigger the true horror of the murderous psyche he predicted would develop in young urban black males as a direct consequence of America’s long history of institutionalized racism. In “How

Bigger Was Born,” his explanatory essay concerning his motivations for writing *Native Son*, he lays emphasis on his decision that *Native Son* should “be so hard and deep that [readers] would have to face it without the consolation of tears” (454).

As we saw in chapter one, sociologists Clifford Shaw and Henry MacKay (who presented the results of their research only two years after *Native Son* was published) described at length the criminalogenic effect of neighbourhood and peer-group, and stressed the importance of the envy which young people confined to a low-quality neighbourhood would feel for the possessions and life-style of the more privileged. Bigger belongs to a gang (although his relationship with the other members is complex), is certainly constrained to live within Chicago’s Black Belt, and feels great envy for those outside it. But the significant term here is, of course, Black. In the case of Wright’s delineation of Bigger Thomas, Shaw and Mackay’s analysis is fundamentally nuanced by the racism that cramps Bigger’s life-style and, at any rate in his perception, is responsible for his inability to realize any of his material or career ambitions: “ ‘We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain’t. They do things and we can’t’ ” (20).

As I shall describe later, some commentators have ascribed the development of a form of proto-existential self-awareness to Bigger in the second and third books of *Native Son*. However, it is overwhelmingly apparent that Wright’s focus in this novel was on social determinism, specifically on the inevitability of the frustrations consequent on racism eventually producing a personality such as Bigger’s. In the Introduction he provided for the HarperPerennial edition of *Native Son*, Arnold Rampersad writes “Wright believed that few Americans, black or white, were prepared to face squarely and

honestly the most profound consequences of more than two centuries of the enslavement and segregation of blacks in North America” (ix). Rampersad further describes how Wright felt impelled to specify the horrendous nature of these consequences, and describes how Wright feared the emergence of a new element among young urban black male youth characterized by a “sometimes unconscious but powerful identification of violence against other human beings as the most appropriate response to the disastrous condition of their lives...increasingly, Wright warned his readers, this violence would be aimed at whites” (x).

Most critics underline the determinist nature of *Native Son*--Robert Butler, for example, claims that “From the very outset of the novel Wright makes it clear...that his central character is forced to inhabit a brutally determinist environment” (1).

Furthermore, in the autobiographical *Black Boy*, Wright himself stressed the great influence determinist novels, such as those of Theodore Dreiser, had on his attitudes and craft at the time he was writing *Native Son*: “All my life had shaped me for the realism, the naturalism of the modern novel, and I could not read enough of them” (274).

Emulating the novels of high American naturalism, Wright crafted *Native Son* in such a way that almost every one of the numerous episodes and events packed into it demonstrates how the psyche and activities of the protagonist are conditioned by environmental pressures; Edward Margolies understates when he acknowledges that “Wright builds up rather extensive documentation to prove that Bigger’s actions, behavior, values, attitudes, and fate have already been determined by his status and place in American life” (104-5).

The physical entrapment suffered by Blacks as a result of being forced to live within the Black Belt is symbolized in the very first scene of *Native Son* in which Bigger first traps and then kills a giant black rat in the kitchenette he shares with his family. The lexicon of entrapment continues to be applied to Bigger throughout the novel (“Bigger felt trapped” [71]; “He felt ensnared in a tangle of deep shadows” [72]). Moreover, Wright deploys plentiful detail in his efforts to ensure that we understand the inadequate amenities of the kitchenette in which the Thomas family is constrained to live (it is, of course, rented to the family by a white landlord): “[Bigger] looked around the room... There was no rug on the floor and the plastering on the walls and ceiling hung loose in many places. There were two worn iron beds, four chairs, an old dresser, and a drop-leaf table on which they ate” (105).

What might be termed the “civic” environment of Chicago is equally unfriendly. We learn that the white police force “never really searched diligently for Negroes who commit crimes against other Negroes” (14), while the poster of Buckley, the present and prospective District Attorney, significantly planted in the heart of the Black Belt and bearing the message “YOU CAN’T WIN!” in tall, red letters “showed one of those faces that looked straight at you when you looked at it and all the while you were walking and turning your head to look at it kept looking unblinkingly back at you” (13).

More subtly, throughout *Native Son* Wright explores the two solitudes of the inhabitants of the Black Belt and the Whites who surround them. He makes clear the hypocrisy of Whites (Mr. Dalton gives millions of dollars to Black charities, but charges excessive rents to his Black tenants) and their blindness (Mrs. Dalton’s blindness is symbolic), both of which characteristics mitigate against meaningful communication

between the two communities. Wright is particularly skilled at demonstrating the unconscious condescension of attempts by Whites to bridge that gap, as exemplified by the following conversational gambit from Mary Dalton as Bigger drives her and her friend Jan through the Black Belt: “ ‘You know, Bigger, I’ve long wanted to go into these houses...and just *see* how your people live...Never in my life have I been inside of a Negro home. Yet they *must* live like we live. They’re *human*’ ” (69-70). In the light of the discussion of Wright’s commitment to narratorial intrusion that follows, it is worth noting that this comment from Mary constitutes one of the few passages in the novel wherein Wright indicates attitude through dialogue rather than through direct authorial comment. Even here, however, the almost unbelievable *gaucherie* of the words Wright puts into Mary’s mouth reveals his absolute determination that the reader should fully plumb the inter-racial ignorance he is describing.

Of course, Wright goes well beyond description of the material conditions of life and also shows the psychological effect on Blacks of their continual disenfranchisement from the lifestyle rewards available to Whites: “ ‘Every time I think of ‘em [Whites], I *feel* ‘em’ ” Bigger says to Gus, who replies “ ‘Yeah; and in your chest and throat.’ ” Bigger responds, “ ‘It’s like fire’ ” (22). The reactions of Blacks go beyond irritation to encompass a profound frustration, manifested by Bigger’s bitter reflections on his limited choices: “Yes, he could take the job at Dalton’s [which the Relief Agency has offered him] and be miserable, or he could refuse it and starve. It maddened him to think that he did not have a wider choice of action” (12). This frustration is symbolized by Bigger and Jack’s masturbation in the darkened Regal cinema (30).

Another effect of long-term discrimination revealed by Wright is the strange sense of shame engendered in Negroes by the simple fact of being black. Bigger is profoundly uncomfortable under Mr. Dalton's gaze because it makes him "conscious of every square inch of skin on his black body" (46), and later, when Jan forces him to shake hands, he is similarly uncomfortable because he is acutely aware of the "badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin" (67). The effect of this sub-consciously apprehended inferiority is that Bigger is completely unable to step out of his accustomed racial role when dealing with Whites, however friendly they may attempt to be: "How on earth could he learn not to say *yessuh* and *yessum* to white people in one night when he had been saying it all his life long?" (73).

However, when considering the effects of the American racial situation foregrounded by Wright, nothing is more deeply disturbing than the profound hatred revealed by Bigger in a conversation with Max:

"Bigger, tell me, when did you start hating Mary?"

"I hated her as soon as she spoke to me, as soon as I saw her, I reckon I hated her before I saw her..."

"But *why*?"

"I told you, What her kind ever let us do?" (352)

In his address to the trial judge, Max is quite specific regarding the violent outcome of such bitterness, one of the effects of discrimination of such long duration being that the violence seems to be generated at an almost intuitive level: " 'Your Honor, remember that men can starve from a lack of self-realization as much as they can from a lack of bread! And they can *murder* for it too' " (399).

An Assertive Narrator

In his zeal to drive home his social determinist premises, Wright, as the following passage demonstrates, imposed an assertive and didactic narratorial persona on the text of *Native Son*; one which is characterized by a tendency to analyze and explain the protagonist's thoughts and motivations in highly abstract terms:

His confused emotions had made him feel instinctively that it would be better to fight Gus and spoil the plan of the robbery than to confront a white man with a gun. But he kept this knowledge of his fear thrust firmly down in him; his courage to live depended upon how successfully his fear was hidden from his consciousness. He had fought Gus because Gus was late; that was the reason his emotions accepted. And he did not try to justify himself in his own eyes. (42)

This assertive didacticism has attracted critical notice; echoing James Baldwin, Yoshinobu Hakutani describes *Native Son* in his comparison of the latter and *An American Tragedy* as “a protest novel with the author's voice dominating the narrative” (222-3). Edward Margolies strikes an even more negative tone, accusing Wright of “hammering home sociological points in didactic expository prose when they could just as clearly be understood in terms of the organic development of the novel” (105).

In *Native Son* we are undoubtedly dealing once again with an external focalizer. Even on the relatively few occasions that Wright utilizes free indirect discourse, he quickly abandons the technique and relapses into a narrative account of the protagonist's thoughts. Bigger's reactions after being shown by the housekeeper into a room at the

Dalton house provide a ready illustration of this: “That old bastard! What’s so damn funny about me? I’m just like she is... He looked around the room; it was lit by dim lights glowing from a hidden source. He tried to find them by roving his eyes, but could not. He had not expected anything like this; he had not thought that this world would be so utterly different from his own that it would intimidate him” (45).

Louis Tremain has described Wright as “a third-person narrator who often conveys his characters’ motivation in the abstract jargon of a social scientist” (40), a charge which can easily be substantiated. Consider the following excerpt from *Native Son*, “[robbing] Blum’s would be a violation of ultimate taboo...it would be a symbolic challenge” (14). The fact that Wright took so little care to confine himself to the lexicon of his characters bears witness to the pressure he felt to make manifest his determinist message, and he confirms this in “How Bigger Was Born”: “I’d find it impossible to say what I wanted to say without stepping in and speaking outright on my own” (458). In light of this forthright statement from Wright, it seems that the multi-page address to the judge by Bigger’s defense attorney Max, which has been approached critically in so many different ways, is best seen as a straightforward exposition of Wright’s own theories on the effects of racial injustice. Indeed, in his study *Richard Wright*, Robert Felgar reveals that Wright regarded book three as a vehicle for his own opinions, virtually admitting that Max was a spokesman for his own views.³⁰ A further, presumably unintended, effect of Wright’s insistence on overlaying Bigger’s voice with his own is to distance Bigger from the reader, and diminish his stature with the latter.

Can Bigger's Transgressions Be Adequately Explained Deterministically?

In this thesis we are interested in transgression, and notwithstanding Wright's evident and massive commitment to determinism in *Native Son*, in the end it is clear that Bigger's transgressive attitudes and acts cannot be adequately explained deterministically—to claim this would be unjustifiably totalizing. Whether or not it was his initial intention, Wright has in fact created a unique individual in Bigger, one who is actually more than simply the product of a particular racial environment. It is perhaps significant that Wright wrote in “How Bigger Was Born” that there were “meanings in my book which I was not aware of until they literally spilled out upon the paper” (434).

Apart from any other consideration, Bigger's murder (of Mary) is an accident, not a planned act of racial vengeance or rage, a fact often underemphasized in critical writing. Moreover, it is abundantly clear that Bigger stands somewhat apart from his social environment. He is no automaton of racial resentment (although he certainly feels this), and his evident isolation from the Blacks who surround him (the other members of his gang, Bessie, and his family members--all of whom have accommodated to the pressures of their existence in different ways from Bigger) must be taken into consideration. Wright's most remarkable achievement, notwithstanding his strenuous attempts to clarify *why* Bigger is as he is, is his delineation of *how* he is.

In the end the well-springs of Bigger's actions remain largely enigmatic, as James Baldwin noted in “Many Thousands Gone,” “It is remarkable that, though we follow him step by step from the tenement room to the death cell, we know as little about him when this journey is ended as we did when it began” (55). Whatever his purposes, in the end

Wright provides no final answer to Vera's tearful query " 'How come Bigger acts that way?' " (8).

A key impression arising from a reading of *Native Son*, and of critical comment thereon, is that the explanations for Bigger's transgressive conduct given by Wright or his commentators seem strangely inadequate, and in some cases misguided. For example, Arnold Rampersad in his "Introduction" to the HarperPerennial edition of the novel claims that Bigger masturbates in the Regal because he "responds sexually to a newsreel that shows Mary and other apparently wealthy, carefree, young women cavorting on a beach in Florida" (xviii). In fact, Jack and Bigger masturbate *before* they have seen anything on-screen (*Native Son* 30-31). Their act is a pure example of adolescent nastiness, ultimately as inexplicable as the vandalism of playgrounds, churches or schools by teenagers.

What then do we find if we closely examine the psyche of Wright's unique creation? First, Bigger has many of the characteristics of the moral imbecile in whom Lombroso was so interested—an individual who is simply *incapable* of moral judgments as opposed to one who chooses not to make them. Bigger's moral perceptions, insofar as they exist, are warped by small-minded self-absorption: "Peggy [the Dalton's housekeeper] seemed kind enough, but maybe she was being kind in order to shove her part of the work on him...If she got nasty, he would talk to Mr. Dalton about her" (54). Furthermore they almost always involve issues of status and power: "He felt that if he were a poor white and did not get his share of the money, then he would deserve to be kicked. Poor white people were stupid. It was the rich white people who were smart and knew how to treat people" (34).

Bigger is also obsessively concerned with the preservation of his own status: “At least the fight [with Gus] made him feel the equal of them. And he felt the equal of Doc, too; had he not slashed his table and dared him to use his gun?” (41). This fixation with maintaining status bespeaks a secret fear of revealing inferiority, and indeed Bigger instinctively rejects anything that might place him in an inferior position, such as a harmless joke at his expense (24) or accepting a humdrum job from the Relief agency: “As he ate he felt that [his family] were thinking of the job he was to get that evening and it made him angry; he felt that they had tricked him into a cheap surrender” (12).

In a way that is entirely congruent with a fear of revealing inferiority, Bigger habitually avoids all commitments and refuses all invitations to engage with others, however urgent and genuine. After his mother attempts to discuss with him his frightening his sister into a faint, Bigger characteristically responds with high-handed belligerence: “ ‘What I do now?’ ” (7).

In a way that also suggests a secret fear of inferiority, he is protective of his private space to the point of paranoia: “He knew that his mother was waiting for him to give an account of himself, and he hated her for that” (100). His self-glorifying delusion at the end of the novel regarding the motivation for his crimes is merely this obsession for privacy writ large. He tells Max “ ‘They was crowding me too close; they wouldn’t give me room’ ” (425); in truth, his first murder was totally accidental, and his second, of his black girlfriend, was motivated simply by the fear she would slow his escape from the law.

Bigger’s frequent relapses into hysteria constitute an on-going motif in *Native Son*: “Bigger took a shoe and pounded the rat’s head, crushing it, cursing hysterically” (6).

Further, while it might be explained as the only way available to him of asserting his reality, Bigger is completely alone among the major characters in *Native Son* in that he almost instinctively responds to threats to his equilibrium with violence, as we see during his extended vicious assault on Gus: “The muscles of his body gave a tightening lunge and he saw his fist come down on the side of Gus’s head; he had struck him really before he was conscious of doing so... ‘I’ll kill ‘im,’ Bigger said...choking him harder” (38). His actual or projected violence is often characterized by a nihilistic negativity: “Suddenly he wanted to seize some heavy object in his hand and grip it with all the strength of his body and in some strange way rise up and stand in naked space above the speeding car and with one final blow blot it out—with himself and them in it” (70).

However, the trait that stands out beyond all else when Bigger’s characteristics are reviewed is his motiveless, ultimately inexplicable, malevolence—a habitual and purposeless sadistic brutality which he clearly enjoys. This is seen in his torture of Gus, and in his treatment of Vera: “Bigger laughed and approached the bed with the dangling rat, swinging it to and fro like a pendulum, enjoying his sister’s fear” (7). In this context we find another instance of Wright’s explanation of Bigger’s actions—that Bigger rejects his family because he feels the inadequacy of his abilities to improve their situation (10)—that seems less than satisfactory, considering the extraordinary malice of his conduct. Similarly, Wright’s convoluted attempt to define the roots of Bigger’s resentment against Gus (“He hated Gus because he knew that Gus was afraid, as even he was; and he feared Gus because he felt that Gus would consent [to the robbery of Blum’s] and then he would be compelled to go through with the robbery” [25]) falls far short of a reasonable explanation for Bigger’s subsequent torture of Gus, in the course of which he

makes Gus lick the knife blade with which he is threatened and pushes the knife into Gus's belly, and during which Bigger smiles and tingles "with elation" (39).

What Wright has in fact achieved magnificently in his portrait of Bigger, at least in book one, which is the most compelling book of the three that comprise the novel, is a depiction of a true bully who derives a savage satisfaction from inflicting pain; a satisfaction never really subject to satisfactory exegesis, deterministic or otherwise. In "How Bigger Was Born," Wright himself reveals that the first model he had for his protagonist was a bully known in childhood, and his description of this creature reveals how many of his characteristics have been faithfully carried forward into the novel, above all including the malicious enjoyment of cruelty: "never was he happier than when he had someone cornered and at his mercy; it seemed the deepest meaning of his squalid life was in him at such times" (435). Later Wright "made the discovery that Bigger Thomas was not black all the time; he was white, too, and there were literally millions of him, everywhere" (441). Bullies are not racially defined.

It is left to the reader, however, to draw the obvious conclusion; that, in his characterization of Bigger, Wright has, whether intentionally or not, gone far beyond the goal of a project limited by racial determinism. Bigger is an unvarnished portrait of one of the most horrifying, and universal, forms of transgression; the inexplicable sadism of the bully.

As indicated previously, by emphasizing certain aspects of Bigger's character development in books 2 and 3, certain critics, most notably Robert Butler, have described Bigger as achieving "psychological distance from and emotional control over" his world (Butler 47), enabling him to become finally an "existential hero" (Butler 57).

In truth, the traits Wright attributes to Bigger in these later books are numerous, and they often seem to be contradictory. Butler's enthusiasm to trace out a trajectory for Bigger from oppressed and fear-ridden object to existential subject leads him to over-interpret certain passages in book one³¹ in a way that lacks adequate textual support. For example, Butler claims that when Bigger torments Vera with the rat's corpse "he is using the display of bravado as a way of deflecting attention from his own considerable fear" (32). In fact, during the rat-killing episode, Bigger displays little fear. He takes charge, telling his brother "Put that box in front of the hole so he can't get out!" (5), and indeed appears satisfied and triumphant when the rat is dead: "'I got'im,' he muttered, his clenched teeth bared in a smile. 'By God, I got 'im'... The two brothers stood over the dead rat and spoke in tones of awed admiration" (6). When he approaches Vera with the corpse he is laughing. Similarly, Butler maintains that "Just as he had earlier tormented his sister with the rat's corpse to hide his own fear, Bigger ... tortures Gus with a knife to cover up his own fear" (41); but, as noted above, Bigger is, in fact, tingling with elation during the episode. There can be no doubt that, at least in book one, Bigger is vividly, and purely, portrayed as a bully, one who derives a visceral satisfaction from inflicting mental or physical pain on those who are weaker than him and in his power.³²

Books Two and Three

In a way that is reflective of, and perhaps engendered by, the tension between Wright's determinist formulation of Bigger and the ultimately enigmatic characterization of the bully that he has in fact achieved, there have been a remarkable number of critical attempts (in addition to Butler's) to impose an organizing rationale on the many clues

regarding the development of Bigger's character set forth in books two and three of *Native Son*.

It has frequently been maintained that in book two, as a direct result of his murder of Mary, Bigger achieves identity and agency. Yoshinobu Hakutani has written in his essay "*Native Son and An American Tragedy: two Different Interpretations of Crime and Guilt*," "We are ...surprised to see him gain identity after the murder. The crime gives him some awareness of himself" (210). It is also claimed that in book three this sense of identity expands into an exploration by Bigger of the relationship between his self and the world; Hakutani attributes to Bigger an "awareness of himself and of the world of which he has never been capable before" (210). Like Butler, Katherine Fishburn identifies a proto-existential dimension to Bigger's development in the later parts of the novel: "By the story's end, however, Bigger has resolved his self-alienation by existentially creating a new identity for himself" (3).

While it is clear that there is some textual support for these contentions in *Native Son* ("He had murdered and had created a new life for himself" [105]; "his life was his...he held his future in his hands" [190]), there are some very significant caveats to be acknowledged before any view of Bigger's development rationalized thus can be accepted.

First, a close reading reveals that Bigger's new perceptions of his identity and role in the world are less than entirely reliable or consistent, being characterized by the self-delusion and self-dramatization noted earlier. For example, after Mary's murder Bigger grandly declares to himself "No, it was no accident, and he would never say that it was"

(106). However, he later tells Max “ ‘really I never wanted to hurt nobody. That’s the truth, Mr. Max...I didn’t mean to do what I did’ ” (425).

Second, close attention similarly reveals that some of the more elaborate critical attempts to categorize Bigger’s development in books two and three are less than satisfactory, and sometimes verge on the procrustean.

Houston Baker, for example, positions Bigger in a tradition of black folk hero/tricksters like Brer Rabbit and revolutionary figures such as Nat Turner. But, unlike the wily Rabbit, Bigger is never in control and his actions are clumsy; for example, he draws attention to the presence of Mary’s bones in the ashes by failing to clear the latter until the furnace smokes. Moreover, to compare Bigger’s accidental killing of Mary (which, at least initially, renders him paralytic with horror) with the “decisive stroke with which Nat Turner took the life of his white mistress” (Baker 11) is scarcely supportable. In any case, in “How Bigger Was Born,” Wright specifies that Bigger was “estranged from the religion and folk-culture of his race” (439).

Joyce Ann Joyce considers Bigger as a tragic hero, attributing to him the dignity that is “The underlying consistency in the characterization of the tragic hero” (21), and contends that Bigger shares another characteristic of the tragic hero—that he is admirable in his downfall. But Bigger is neither admirable nor dignified; he is sullen and vicious and a more accurate view would be that, having blundered into his first crime, he periodically deludes himself into thinking that the murder has served to increase his stature.

Both Edward Margolies and Katherine Fishburn have cast Bigger in the role of “metaphysical rebel,” drawing on the characterization of the latter in Camus’s *The Rebel*.

Margolies has written “it is in the role of the metaphysical revolutionary that Bigger looms most significantly for modern readers” (116), and Fishburn is even more specific in her categorization: “Wright, although he most likely did not know it at the time, had created an existential hero, a metaphysical rebel” (63). However, the justification for some of the parallels drawn remains elusive. Margolies, for example, claims that the metaphysical revolutionary “tries to bring the external world more in accord with his sense of justice” (116); but Bigger is more concerned with the satisfaction of resentment than with justice, and how Bigger’s murder of Bessie, and his attempts to extort a ransom for the already-murdered Mary from the Daltons, contribute to the cause of justice is unclear. Furthermore, these two actions neither show a willingness “to sacrifice himself for the sake of a common good” or motivation “in the name of certain values... which he [the rebel] feels are common to himself and to all men”; both values which Camus implies are characteristic of the metaphysical rebel (*The Rebel* 15,16).

Third, and most significantly, the discovery of identity, and the sense of relationship to the rest of mankind, claimed for Bigger in books two and three are in fact underpinned by precisely the same two thematic emphases (which continue to co-exist uneasily) shown earlier to dominate book one; social determinism due to racial discrimination, and the, perhaps not totally intended, characterization of the enigma of the violent bully.

Looking first at social determinism, we find that Wright makes it clear that Bigger’s self-justificatory reaction to Mary’s accidental murder is predominantly shaped by his racial conditioning. We find that “He felt that his murder of [Mary] was more than amply justified by the fear and shame she had made him feel” and that “It was not Mary he was reacting to when he felt that fear and shame. Mary had served to set off his emotions,

emotions conditioned by many Marys. And now that he had killed Mary... he had shed an invisible burden he had long carried” (114). Similarly, his new sense that he has played, for the first time, a meaningful role in life is clearly informed by racial resentment:

He looked out of the car window and then around at the white faces near him. He wanted suddenly to stand up and shout, telling them that he had killed a rich white girl, a girl whose family was known to all of them...he wished that he could be an idea in their minds; that his black face and the image of his smothering Mary and cutting off her head and burning her could hover before their eyes. (129-130)

Using his usual intrusive narratorial presence, Wright also makes sure we understand that Bigger’s decision to engage in an on-going criminal role is the result of racial consciousness:

Even though Mr. Dalton gave millions of dollars for Negro education, he would rent houses to negroes only in this prescribed area, this corner of the city tumbling down from rot. In a sullen way Bigger was conscious of this. Yes; he would send the ransom note. He would jar them out of their senses. (174).

Wright is so determined that we continue to appreciate in book two the racial implications of Bigger’s story that he very obviously involves issues of racial discrimination on the South Side with the mechanical details of Bigger’s plight as a fugitive:

He passed a bakery and wanted to go in and buy some rolls with the seven cents he

had. But the bakery was empty of customers and he was afraid that the white proprietor would recognize him. He would wait until he came to a Negro business establishment, but he knew that there were not many of them. Almost all businesses in the Black Belt were owned by Jews, Italians and Greeks. Most Negro businesses were funeral parlors; white undertakers refused to bother with dead black bodies. He came to a chain grocery store. Bread sold here for five cents a loaf, but across the 'line' where white folks lived, it sold for four. (249)

The reader wonders how many more details of discriminatory practices could be thrust into a short passage; Wright clearly found his racial resentment, justified as it was, very hard to contain.

Turning to Bigger's newly-discovered sense of the relationship between himself and the world, we find that it too is very much coloured with racial overtones (with a very strong Marxist flavour): for example, he envisions himself "standing in the midst of a vast crowd of men, white men and black men and all men, and the sun's rays melted away the many differences, the colors, the clothes, and drew what was common and good up towards the sun" (362).

But, in books two and three, we also find Wright continuing to evoke in his description of Bigger those ultimately inexplicable character motifs of the violent bully. We see the same sadistic enjoyment of cruelty; after Bigger asks Bessie to help him obtain a ransom from the Daltons, she "looked at him, with round, helpless black eyes. He was still poised, wondering if she would pull him toward her, or let him fall alone. He was enjoying her agony, seeing and feeling the worth of himself in her bewildered desperation" (148). Likewise we continue to find a lust for power in Bigger and an

obsession with repressing a sense of inferiority: “The knowledge that he had killed a white girl they loved and regarded as their symbol of beauty made him feel the equal of them, like a man who had been somehow cheated, but had now evened the score” (164).

Also, a comment made in the course of one of Bigger’s self-justifying monologues makes it apparent that much of his resentment against Mary derives from his perception that she trespassed upon his private space, concerning the integrity of which, as we have seen, he is almost paranoid: “Gee, what a fool she was, he thought, remembering how Mary had acted. Carrying on that way! Hell, she *made* me do it! I couldn’t help it! She should’ve known better! *She should’ve left me alone* [italics mine]” (113).

The final enigma of Bigger’s characterization revolves around his climactic declaration to Max, “ ‘what I killed for, I *am!*’ ” (429)—a statement subject to a multitude of critical interpretations. Max is right to recoil in horror from Bigger when he says this; Mary’s death was accidental and any attempt on Bigger’s part to attribute purposiveness to his action is, as we have already noted, self-delusion. Furthermore, if we remember to include Bessie in Bigger’s “killings”, as we should, we must recognize that Bigger’s statement in fact reveals the ghastly ease with which the bully resorts to the violent act, and the macabre thrill he finds in it—terrifying propensities that are not subject to explanation. In this statement, Bigger finally exposes, wittingly or not, the sordid and repulsive penitralia of his personality. Proletarian novels often feature protagonists who have been tempted to transgression as part of an unavoidable response to social wrongs; for example Tom Joad in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, who, it is strongly implied, kills the strikebreaker thug who slays Casy. The crimes of such protagonists are so

presented as to seem justified, and the protagonists themselves are certainly not criticized, and may even be valorized. Wright definitively denies such a possibility to Bigger.

The Outsider

Richard Lehan has described *The Outsider* as “the most express treatment of the existential theme in American fiction” (192), and the textual indicators that this is intended to be a novel aimed at exploiting an overtly existential philosophical background are numerous and manifest. Within a few pages of the beginning of the novel Wright makes explicit reference to alienation, Cross Damon being positioned by another character as “a man standing *outside* the world” (7), and Cross himself describes his purpose as being to understand his subjectivity and its relation to the world: “his decisive life struggle was a personal fight for the realization of himself” (195).

Not surprisingly, therefore, *The Outsider* is above all a novel of ideas, ideas which Wright clearly felt so much pressure to expound that, as in *Native Son*, he often employs intrusive narratorial exegesis, and, sadly, sometimes relapses into the near-impenetrability evident in the following example: “Imprisoned he was in a state of consciousness that was so infatuated by its own condition that it could not dominate itself; so swamped was he by himself with himself that he could not break forth from behind the bars of that self to claim himself” (149).

Cross’s existential thesis, as revealed in dialogue with District Attorney Houston and in a lengthy monologue addressed to Comrade Blimin, is that, at heart, man is totally characterized by a dark solipsism, but that he cannot face this fact and therefore has erected over the course of cultural evolution a series of myth-systems to hide it and to mask the implications of allowing full rein to his inner nature: “ ‘maybe the whole effort of man on earth to build a civilization is simply man’s frantic and frightened attempt to hide himself from himself’ ” (171). Cross proposes that the protective myths have now

been stripped away by the advance of science and civilization, and “ ‘When they are really gone, those myths, *man* returns. Ancient man... And what’s there to guide him? Nothing at all but his own desires, which would be his only values’ ” (427). Wright seems to imply at the end of the novel that the way out of this dilemma is through an expansion of one of the subtexts in *Native Son*, the establishment and full development of human community—“Only connect,” as E.M. Forster had it. Cross’s final realization as he lies dying is that “ ‘The search [for meaning] can’t be done alone’... ‘Alone a man is nothing,’ ” and his final wish is “to connect”: “ ‘I wish I had some way to give the meaning of my life to others... To make a bridge from man to man’ ” (585).

Over and above this relatively straightforward theorizing, however, Wright has provided us with a unique literary insight into a truly fascinating existential dilemma; that of a man who is really desperate to discover a principle to which to commit himself, but who, in the end, can find nothing he can believe in. Cross evaluates his quest for meaningful action thus: “It was a supreme challenge that went straight to the very heart of life. What was he to do with himself?” (109). In a comparison of *The Outsider* with Camus’s *The Stranger*, Yoshinobu Hakutani points out with justice that “The fundamental difference in attitude between Meursault and Damon is that Meursault seeks neither order, nor a dream of eternity, nor explanation, while Damon is passionate in search of such an essence” (165).

However, Cross eventually tells Eva “ ‘You see, Eva, I don’t *believe* in anything’ ” (532), and the abject failure of his quest for meaning is revealed by his deathbed exchange with Houston: “ ‘I wanted to be free... To feel what I was worth... What living

meant to me...I loved life too...much...' 'And what did you find?' 'Nothing...'" (585). This is a truly bleak conclusion.

Given the clear commitment to existentialist thought in this novel, one would expect determinism, racial or otherwise, to be given short shrift. Cross Damon's own words seem to confirm this: when Sarah Hunter jokingly asks him " 'When did you join the colored race?', " Cross replies " 'I never joined' " (234), and he later reflects that "being a Negro was the least important thing in his life" (385). Strangely, however, Wright has introduced a number of incidents (such as the extended episode in the Chicago diner in which Cross hears Negroes joking about the possibility of Martians being black [33-35]), and comments ("In the minds of whites, what's one Negro more or less?" [124]), which specifically reference discrimination. One can only consider these gratuitous intrusions because they neither have any bearing on the existential themes of the novel³³, nor serve to advance the plot in any way. The conclusion that they betray a deep-seated racial resentment on Wright's part is hard to resist—a resentment so profound that he found it impossible to totally suppress it.

Cross's Transgressions

Cross's existential quest in no way necessarily involves transgression, yet he commits four murders, abandons his children, and indirectly causes the death of his mother and Eva's suicide. How, then, does Wright render these transgressions integral to the thematic development of the novel? As we will see, the disappointing answer is that he does not. This is a weakness; the murders remain curiously peripheral to the existential exegesis of the book, and they bring about no great revelation for Cross--there is no Foucauldian

“flash of lightning.” As we have seen, when Cross is asked by Houston what he discovered in his existential journey, his answer is “ ’Nothing’ ” (585).

Thus Cross’s murders provide no threshold to enlightenment, and this is reflective of the fact that Cross’s motivation to commit them, while clear in one case (Joe’s murder), remains curiously cloudy in the other cases. This is in spite of the fact that, as in *Native Son*, Wright emphasizes, rather than elides, the horror of the crimes committed. Cross himself readily admits that he can make no legal defense against accusations for any of his transgressions “for the good and ample reason that no such defense was possible” (501-502), and, regarding Joe’s murder at least, concludes that “He had done a horrible thing” (139). Hakutani again draws out the contrast between Cross and Meursault: “the reader is deliberately kept from coming to an easy conclusion about Meursault’s guilt. By contrast, the reader is instantly made aware of Damon’s guilt in unambiguous terms” (“Richard Wright’s *The Outsider* and Camus’s *The Stranger*” 171).

The doubt in the reader’s mind over Cross’s motivation to murder does not reflect a lack of psychological musings on the subject by Wright. On the contrary, he attributes to Cross a number of justifications or “stimuli” for his acts. None of them, however, are carried through to the point of providing a satisfying explanation for the murders.

In the spiritual vacuum into which he is abandoned by his concept of human cultural evolution, Cross certainly appears to be attracted to the exercise of naked power: “To hold absolute power over others, to define what they should love or fear, to decide if they were to live or die and thereby to ravage the whole of their beings—that was a sensuality that made sexual passion look pale by comparison” (267). But attempts to draw parallels with Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov, who murdered because he wanted to make himself “a

Napoleon,” (*Crime and Punishment* 397) are unsatisfactory. Cross as often demonstrates revulsion at, as fascination with, the exercise of naked power, as indicated by his choice of vocabulary in the following passage in which he describes the Communists as having “reached far back into history and...dredged up from its black waters the most ancient of all realities: man’s desire to be a god” (267). More significantly, in contrast to Raskolinokov’s exercise in Nietzschean moral autonomy, which is deliberate and the culmination of weeks of thought and philosophical self-questioning, Cross’s murders of Gil and Herndon are the product of a passing impulse, the origin of which is unclear even to Cross himself. He stands “disdainful, detached” (302) watching the two men fighting, and then suddenly “a fullness of knowledge declared itself within Cross and he knew what he wanted to do. He was acting before he knew it” (302-3). He proceeds to batter both men to death.

Wright is most consistent in making Cross claim that he has murdered Gil, Herndon and Hilton because they offend his “sense of life”: “He had stood amidst those red and flickering shadows, tense and consumed with cold rage, and had judged them [Gil and Herndon], and had found them guilty of insulting his sense of life and had carried out a sentence of death upon them” (308). What is problematic here is that the vagueness of the phrase “sense of life” is symptomatic of Wright’s complete failure to include in the novel any definition of the values which it encodes, values which Cross defends with such readiness by transgression. The “Hattie” episode, in which Cross sets out to help his landlady and rescue her from the clutches of fraud artists, and which, against the advice of his editors, Wright was insistent should be retained in the novel,³⁴ gives some grounds for believing that Cross’s “sense of life” involves a belief in the responsibility of the

individual to secure justice for all: “Hers was the kind of personality that bred the desire to cheat...What was happening to her made a mockery of his conception of life, offended him and he wanted to stop it” (186). But Cross swiftly abandons his attempt to help Hattie and violently rejects her: “Cross wanted to kick her. How could anyone be so avariciously dumb?...Had she a right to be alive? Was anyone bound to respect a creature like this?” (187). His further musings preclude the possibility that altruism is central to his “sense of life”: “Of what use was pity? Did not pity only choke up your life and make it into something which others ought to pity?” (192). Even in a moment of calm reflection later in the novel, Cross proves noticeably cool in his assessment of his obligations to others: “his was not the itch to right wrongs done to others, though these wrongs did at times agitate him” (254). Finally, in an agonized exchange with Eva, after having admitted his responsibility for Gil’s death, Cross himself indicates the inadequacy of any attempt to comprehend his transgressions within his existential quest, a failure which appears to render them thematically peripheral. Eva asks him “ ‘Oh, God in Heaven! Why *did* you kill him?’ ” Cross’s response is indicative of the ultimate inconclusiveness of his quest for understanding of life, and of the pointlessness of his murders: “ ‘I don’t know,’ he whispered” (531).

However, Cross’s failure to understand need not preclude an attempt by the reader to piece together clues from Cross’s psyche which may explain his murders. As in the case of Bigger Thomas, who Cross resembles in his over-reaction and self-protectiveness, Wright has nuanced his psychological portrait of the protagonist in some very strange ways in *The Outsider*.

Cross's bizarre and violent over-reaction when Sarah and Bob make mild fun of his innocent looks is indeed reminiscent of Bigger ("He could have waved his hand and blotted them from existence with no more regret for taking human lives than if he had swatted a couple of insects" [232]), as is his extreme resentment of any intrusion on his personal space or attempt to impose obligations on him. When he feels that he is the subject of discussion between his pregnant girlfriend Dot and her doctor, it makes "him feel deprived of his humanity, converted into a condemned object, exposed to the baleful gaze of a million eyes" (47). Furthermore it is in general clear that intimacy, if it involves self-revelation, and thus potentially self-abasement, is anathema to him: "there was not a single man to whom he cared to confess the nightmare that was his life...he knew that if he had an ideal confidant before whom he could lay his entire story, he would have instantly regretted it, would have murdered his confidant after he had confided to him his shame...Cross was proud" (17-18). Late in the novel Cross admits to himself that his existential quest has been as reactive as it was pro-active, and that it was driven by his loathing of any kind of obligation that would infringe upon his independence: "It was the restrictions of marriage, the duties to children, obligations to friends, to sweethearts, and blood kin that he had struck at so blindly, and—gallantly?" (504).

Undoubtedly there is an element of self-protective conceit in all of this, a sense that he must never appear at a disadvantage, which is carried to almost paranoid lengths. When Houston introduces Cross's children to him after his arrest, and they react with confusion and tears because they had thought him dead, Cross steels his will and refuses to react to them or acknowledge them because "he must not let human claims drag him into a position where Houston could crow over him" (520).

But if we examine the textual evidence, we find many hints that this extreme intolerance of intrusion is underlain by a sense of vulnerability (“He was conscious of himself as a frail object which had to protect itself against a pending threat of annihilation” [21-2]) and even by the same lingering fear of inferiority that we have noted in Bigger. This latter is apparent in his feelings when asking his union secretary for a loan: “He did not want to look at Finch; he knew that the man knew his troubles and it made him ashamed” (89).

How then to link Cross’s almost impulsive transgressions and the vulnerable psyche characterized by Wright? It is clear that there is some kind of qualitative link between Cross’s perceptions of himself, and his perceptions of the world: “He shook his head, his body seething with hate against himself and the world” (15). But, as we have seen, Cross finds that the world has no essence, no meaning (“Life was denuded of all meaning when a Hitler could kill millions of men... simply because he did not like the color of their skins or the shape of their nostrils” [197]) and his inability to find meaning seems to resonate to such a great extent with his dissatisfaction with himself that a positive feedback loop of frustration and fury develops that causes him, almost without his conscious volition, to murder and blot reality out. Indeed, he comes very close to admitting this in his final confession to Eva of his guilt in the murders of Gil and Herndon:

“Don’t you *understand*? You’ve been scared, haven’t you? You know what it means to live senselessly? When every day is a foolish day? And when I stood in that room I saw more senselessness and foolishness right before my eyes and I felt a way to stop it! I hated what I saw! And I hated myself

because all my life I was unable to do anything about it...I tell you, I *hated* it.

It insulted me...I wanted to blot it out, wipe it from the face of the earth.” (532-533)

Neither Determinism nor Existentialism Offer Complete Explanations for Transgression in These Two Novels

Thus we see that neither an overtly deterministic program in *Native Son*, nor an overtly existentialist program in *The Outsider*, is adequate to encompass the details of the well-springs of transgression that Richard Wright has provided in the characterizations of Bigger Thomas and Cross Damon. The common factors in both are a very deep anger and a profound sense of insecurity, which, one inevitably feels, may be traceable to Wright's own life-history, particularly his early life in the “Jim Crow” southern states. The degree of violence demonstrated by Bigger and Cross that results from these feelings perhaps surprises us, but this is very consistent with Wright's original project in *Native Son*, to show that the combination of unchecked resentment and isolation can very easily build to a point at which it has truly ghastly consequences, whether in a racial context, or in an individual who rejects those every-day demands resulting from a relationship to the world which most of us would regard as normal.

In “How Bigger Was Born” Wright acknowledges the tension that resulted from the pressure he felt to articulate (sometimes only partially successfully) very deeply felt concepts and emotions: “the author is eager to explain. But the moment he makes the attempt his words falter, for he is confronted and defied by the inexplicable array of his own emotions” (433-434). Sandra Adell has proposed that this very inexplicability

engendered a form of Kierkegaardian dread in Wright: “The word falters because it cannot be the transparent representation or image of the ‘why’ or wherefore of the writing. Writing, accordingly, is full of disappearance and dread” (381). Indeed, much of the admittedly powerful impact of the two novels here discussed derives from the reader’s sense that Wright apprehended, and was trying to describe, things infinitely horrible, but not quite graspable (and all the more horrible for this fact). In *Native Son*, this “thing” is the inexplicable cruelty of the bully; in *The Outsider*, it is the horror that results from the discovery that life’s meaning and significance are not just hard to find, but may well be completely non-existent.

Chapter 6: Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

The Autonomy of Humbert Humbert

Humbert Humbert addresses the reader in a wide variety of voices, ranging from self-incriminating candour to ebullient celebration of his transgressive attitudes and actions. The key to an understanding of the novel, however, is the fact that, whatever his voice, the reader warmly welcomes engagement with him. The magnetic attraction which draws us, willingly, into Humbert's orbit has been widely commented on; Lionel Trilling has written "What is extraordinary about *Lolita* is...the way in which Nabokov enlists us, against our will, on Humbert's side...Humbert has figuratively made the reader his accomplice in both statutory rape and murder" (14). In a similar vein, Leona Toker draws attention to the way in which the author "lulls us into long spans of sympathy for Humbert" (200).

It is the attraction engendered between reader and protagonist which renders palatable the extraordinary *hauteur* of Humbert's existential autonomy. Humbert is the example *par excellence* of the existential subject who, at least initially, isolates himself from, and deprecates, virtually all aspects of the society that surrounds him (nymphets and their charms excepted, of course). There is absolutely no implication that his behavior is determined by heredity (so heavy a burden on McTeague), or, as in the case of Clyde Griffiths, by his social environment; indeed, it is of the essence of Humbert's persona that he holds himself absolutely aloof from the latter.

His fellow humans are consistently subject to a witheringly critical eye; be they intimates (Charlotte's "phocine" [42] physique is commented on several times, and

Humbert tells us that “her autobiography was as devoid of interest as her autopsy would have been” [80]), or casual acquaintances, such as Humbert’s easterly neighbour in Beardsley: an “odious spinster, trying to conceal her morbid inquisitiveness under a mask of dulcet goodwill” (180). In Part One, the fact that Humbert ignores (to say the least of it) all normal societal moral conventions is attested to, not so much by the brutality of his treatment of his two wives and Lolita, as by the tone of joyous celebration with which he outrages conventional ethical expectations. In a typical comment he tells us that, towards the end of his sojourn in the Haze household “The week of scattered showers and shadows which elapsed after our last visit to the motionless sands of Hourglass Lake was one of the gloomiest I can recall. Then came two or three dim rays of hope--before the ultimate sunburst” (90)—the last being, of course, the messy automobile accident which kills Charlotte. Humbert also characteristically elevates his intellectual stature to a point at which he rejoices iconoclastically in the belittlement of conventional wisdom; he is particularly hard on Freudian psychoanalysis: “I discovered there was an endless source of robust enjoyment in trifling with psychiatrists: cunningly leading them on...teasing them with fake ‘primal scenes’; and never allowing them the slightest glimpse of one’s real sexual predicament” (34). By way of art criticism, his references to “cubist trash” (25) are multiple and acid.

As is evidenced by many of the above passages, a piercing, even vicious, irony is integral to Humbert’s imperious dismissal of the rest of the world. Academic research on humour confirms that the latter is a “status-related activity” and indicates further that individuals who consider themselves of high status often exercise control over others through the use of humour and sarcasm (Martin 120-121). Part One of *Lolita* is replete

with examples of irony by means of which Humbert minimizes, or denigrates, the stature of others with a consequent enhancement of his own. Consider, for example, his description of Charlotte Haze after he sees her descending the stairs: “The poor lady was in her middle thirties, she had a shiny forehead, plucked eyebrows and quite simple but not unattractive features of a type that may be defined as a weak solution of Marlene Dietrich” (37)—“damned by faint praise” indeed. He continues to assess her intellect in a similar vein: “She was, obviously, one of those women whose polished words may reflect a book club or bridge club, or any other deadly conventionality, but never her soul” (37). Humbert consigns her to the category of “women utterly indifferent at heart to the dozen or so possible subjects of parlor conversation, but very particular about the rules of such conversations, through the sunny cellophane of which not very appetizing frustrations can be readily distinguished” (37). The tone hovers ambiguously between condescension and criticism, and the whole description is characterized by artfully diluted venom, the understatement of which serves only to reinforce the tone of *hauteur* and dismissal, yet elevates the intellectual status of the subject making the judgment.

In his ability to engender empathy in the reader, Humbert contrasts strongly with the two prototype nympholepts who precede him in Nabokov’s *oeuvre*, Albinus (from *Laughter in the Dark*), and the Enchanter (protagonist of an eponymous novel fragment). Albinus “buckles his whole life” (Toker, 111) and renders himself ridiculous by his pursuit of a vulgar teenaged girl. At the end of the novel, he is a helpless blind man, cruelly tormented by his companions, and yet, as Toker points out, “we are not really sorry for him” (111). Significantly, we are repulsed by Albinus’s snub to his wife—she

has a nervous habit of “asking questions about things that had already been exhaustively discussed in her presence,” and when she does just this at dinner, Albinus snaps at her, ” ‘Just dropped from the moon?’” (12). On the contrary, we revel in Humbert’s gratuitous rudeness: “[the hostess] floated up to me to ask if I was Mr. Braddock, because if so, Miss Beard had been looking for me. ‘What a name for a woman,’ I said and strolled away” (126).

The protagonist of *The Enchanter*, a humourless and repulsive schemer, horrifies us as much as he horrifies himself. After his nymphet wakes just as he ejaculates over her erstwhile sleeping body, “he was deafened by his own horror, kneeling, catching at the folds, snatching at the drawstring, trying to stop it, hide it, snapping with his oblique spasm” (92). As Leona Toker points out, “*The Enchanter* fails to ‘enchant’ us out of our consistent disapproval of the protagonist” (200).

How, then, is Humbert’s existential autonomy in Part One, and, crucially, the readers’ empathy that underpins it, established? One crucial issue is that *Lolita* is a first-person narrative, ostensibly initially prepared to form part of the protagonist’s trial defense, and this yields complete control over the narrative to Humbert. *The Enchanter* and *Laughter in the Dark* are, by contrast, third-person narratives in which the protagonists are distanced by the interposition of an authorial voice that is actively hostile in the case of *Laughter in the Dark*, or coldly neutral, in the case of *The Enchanter*.

Humbert takes full advantage of his position as focalizer and narrator. He addresses the reader in a tone of poised, exhortatory pleading: “Ladies and gentleman of the jury, exhibit number one [Annabel] is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns” (9). As the reference to Poe’s

“Annabel Lee” (one of a number) demonstrates, Humbert frequently foregrounds his erudition with the purpose of increasing his authority with the reader. He also deploys a curious sort of self-denigratory humour combined with a posed archaic formality in an attempt to excuse the inexcusable (in this case bribing Lolita financially to perform bizarre sex acts): “O Reader! Laugh not, as you imagine me, on the very rack of joy noisily emitting dimes and quarters, and great big silver dollars like some sonorous, jingly and wholly demented machine vomiting riches” (184). He enlists a kind of false logic to the same purpose; a logic that slyly ignores the obvious. For example, following a discussion of his initial “infection” with nympholepsy through his infatuation with Annabel, he complains “I was a strong lad and survived; but the poison was in the wound, and the wound remained ever open, and soon I found myself maturing amid a civilization which allows a man of twenty-five to court a girl of sixteen but not a girl of twelve [as if the reason for this was not self-evident]” (18). Further he manipulates emphasis, allocating only brief mentions to his spells of insanity and residence in mental institutions.

None of this, however, really explains the extraordinary degree to which we empathize with Humbert; our readiness, as Trilling implies, to forgive him almost anything. The key to an understanding of this strange surrender on the reader’s part is the quality of pure delight that Nabokov has bestowed on the characterization of Humbert, valorized by John Updike in the following perceptive evaluation: “What matters now is that the least of his [Nabokov’s] writings offered a bygone sort of delight: a sorcerer’s scintillating dignity made of every sentence a potentially magic occasion” (39). Nabokov himself, in his “Afterword” to *Lolita*, identifies this delight as the most important component of the

writer's craft: "For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss" (315). In the same afterword, Nabokov makes reference to the possibility that *Lolita* can be viewed as the culminating outcome of his love affair with the English language, and Updike presciently drew attention in the comment quoted above to the nexus of delight and masterful linguistic artistry. Humbert entrances us with a "rare verbal exuberance" (Jan Stephen Parker 71) that is a unique combination of wit and wordplay. Puns, lyricism, controlled bathos, irony, these are all part of his armoury, and the enchantment that derives therefrom is the platform that truly sustains his extraordinary autonomy.

Alfred Appel describes Humbert's prose style as "colloquial baroque" (136), but although this phrase acknowledges its delightful complexity, it perhaps fails to capture its rich multi-layered variety—baroque is, after all but one style, Humbert touches effortlessly on many. He is, for example, quite capable of evoking an astonishingly lyrical note, as evidenced by his descriptions of pastoral American land- and sky-scapes, and by his evocation of the quality of his remote memory of his deceased mother with its passing echoes of Keats's "To Autumn": "you all know those redolent remnants of day suspended, with the midges, about some hedge in bloom or suddenly entered and traversed by the rambler, at the bottom of a hill, in the summer dusk; a furry warmth, golden midges" (10).

Undoubtedly, however, the unifying thread of Humbert's discourse is his wonderfully cerebral irony and wit. Puns, for example, can be the dullest form of humour, but in Humbert's hands they are fresh and piquant; witness his description of the pre-adolescent Mabel, who wears a "halter with little to halt" (73), and his boast that in the interests of

developing his skills as a father, he “read and reread a book with the unintentionally biblical title *Know Your Own Daughter*” (174). Sparkling word-play often features in sentences which topple from the banal to the outrageous: “I...spent a fantastic night on the train, imagining in all possible detail the enigmatic nymphet I would coach in French and fondle in Humbertish” (35). Humbert’s neologisms are vibrant with meaning; in Champion, Quilty (in swimsuit) ogles Lolita: “his tight wet black bathing trunks bloated and bursting with vigor where his great fat bullybag was pulled up and back like a padded shield over his reversed beasthood” (237). Part of the appeal of Humbert’s prose is indeed his seemingly instinctive deployment of euphony and alliteration; he recalls how “Psychoanalysts wooed me with pseudoliberations of pseudolibidoes” (18), and he plans to “mauvelmail” Charlotte into letting him establish intimacy with Lolita (71).

Humbert’s humour can amuse in a straightforward situational way: “ ‘Our double beds are really triple,’ Potts cozily said tucking me and my kid in. ‘One crowded night we had three ladies and a child like yours sleep together. I believe one of the ladies was a disguised man (*my static*)’ ” (118). Often, however, his wit is based on two very powerful devices. First, the contrasting of sophisticated and erudite phraseology with mundane, or even trivial subject matter; for example: “Another time a red-haired school girl hung over me in the *metro*, and a revelation of axillary russet I obtained remained in my blood for weeks” (20), and “The days of my youth...seem to fly away from me in a flurry of pale repetitive scraps like those morning snow storms of used tissue paper that a train passenger sees whirling in the wake of the observation car” (15).

Peter Quennell has described the second device as the “delicately suggestive choice of detail” (7), and, for reasons to which I shall soon return, I believe the selection of

detail which is both telling and amusing to have been very central to Nabokov's concept of literary delight. For example, we learn everything there is to know about Valeria's inane delight at having *both* a lover *and* a husband from the following: "She was by now preening herself, between him and me, rouging her pursed lips, tripling her chin to pick at her blouse-bosom, and so forth" (28). Similarly, when we read of the "horribly experienced flies zigzagging over the sticky sugar-pour on the ignoble counter" (155), what remains to be learned about the humble eateries of the American road?

To return to the issue of Nabokov's delight, in his afterword "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," Nabokov identified the passages of the novel that afforded him the greatest pleasure—the Mr. Taxovich section, and the class-list from Ramsdale school, for example. These he calls "the nerves of the novel" (316), but it is remarkable that in many cases they are essentially narrative "grace notes," bearing no relationship to the trajectory of Humbert's self-discovery, or even to the simple mechanics of the plot. This speaks to the essential joyousness of Nabokov's art, and thus, of Humbert's narrative. They are not so much inconsequential passages, as passages which are so delightful that it does not matter if they are consequential or not. Their value is to form part of a rich and satisfying unified texture (similar, perhaps, to the illustrations and initial letter ornamentation in mediaeval illuminated manuscripts, which simply by their very presence impart value to the texts which they enhance). We might cite in this category the following completely inconsequential aside from Humbert regarding the book he sets down during Charlotte's attempt to ingratiate herself with him after their argument regarding a visit to England: "it attempted to send forth a rotation of waves, but an inserted pencil stopped the pages" (93), or his bemoaning of the fact that "We are not surrounded in our enlightened era by

little slave flowers that can be casually plucked between business and bath as they used to be in the days of the Romans; and we do not, as dignified Orientals did in still more luxurious times, use tiny entertainers fore and aft between the mutton and the rose sherbet” (124). The entrancing mix of lyricism, eclecticism and sophisticated humour in Humbert’s narrative is, perhaps above all else, the key to understanding the reader’s readiness to suspend judgment and grant our protagonist the existential autonomy in which, at least in Part One, he revels so freely.

***Feux d’Artifices*—The Centrality of Art**

But, in our analysis of the irresistible fireworks of Humbert’s narrative, we have really revealed that all is, after all, artifice—*feux d’artifices* indeed, to ape our protagonist’s frequent francophone interpolations. And this essential artifice speaks to the fact that Humbert is overtly positioning his narrative as a retrospective work of art, over which, as the creative artist, he exercises self-conscious control. *Lolita* shows us not life, but life seen through the prism of art.

Humbert’s frequent overtly narratological comments make it very clear that he considers himself to be crafting a literary work. As David Rampton has written, “the insertion of phrases like ‘diary resumed’ and ‘Oh God’ indicate that Humbert’s ‘Confessions’ are, like Rousseau’s, not a spontaneous outpouring of emotion, but a carefully-crafted, multi-leveled text” (84). Humbert inserts retrospective comments on his own behavior, for example the following concerning Charlotte’s plan to send Lolita to Camp Q, “‘Are you sure,’ I said at last, ‘that she will be happy there?’ (lame, lamentably lame!)” (64). Further he makes his meta-narratological manipulations very obvious,

telling the reader that he has placed clues regarding the identity of Lolita's "liberator" throughout the narrative. After Lolita has revealed Quilty's name, Humbert adds in internal monologue "Quietly the fusion took place, and everything fell into order, into the pattern of branches that I have woven throughout this memoir with the express purpose of having the ripe fruit fall at the right moment" (272).

Peter Quennell considers that Humbert's purpose in producing his text was to re-order his chaotic experience into a meaningful pattern, and points out the parallel with Proust's narrator (elsewhere he draws attention to the fact that Nabokov was a great admirer of Proust): "The personal fulfillment [Humbert] could not achieve on earth may still be reached in a secondary world of recollection and imagination. Like Proust's Narrator, who is also nearing his end, he watches all the chaotic experiences of his previous life fall at last into a comprehensive pattern" (10). Humbert's project seems to constitute an attempt to transcend sequential everyday reality--in his Afterword Nabokov describes reality as "one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes" (312)—and touch, though the exercise of artistic re-creation, the inner core of meaning that lies behind surface reality: "I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita" (309). A number of commentators have drawn attention to the fact that such an endeavor lies very much at the heart of Nabokov's *oeuvre*. Page Stegner, for example, attributes to Nabokov a belief that "the prison of time ... can be escaped only through art" (59), and Laurie Clancy has written that "Each of [Nabokov's] novels in part is devoted to exploring the same belief that the supreme form of reality resides in the imagination" (8).

However, the issue of artistic creation in *Lolita* is complex, since it is not only in retrospect that Humbert seeks to turn his experience into art. Chapter 11 of the novel consists of Humbert's reproduction, virtually verbatim ("by courtesy of a photographic memory" [40]), of a diary he kept from the point he first entered the Haze household—"the little diary which I now propose to reel off (much as a spy delivers by heart the contents of the note he swallowed) covers most of June" (41). From this it emerges that Humbert is being presented as actually living his life in real time as though it were a work of art, considering every event through the distancing lens of erudition and irony. He actually conceptualizes his actions using this prism, as indicated by this entry that traces second-by-second experience and analyzes the sequence of his thoughts:

Sunday. Heat ripple still with us; a most favonian week. This time I took up a strategic position, with obese newspaper and new pipe, in the piazza rocker *before* L. arrived... There my beauty lay down on her stomach, showing me, showing the thousand eyes wide open in my eyed blood, her slightly raised shoulder blades, and the bloom along the incurvature of her spine, and the swelling of her tense narrow nates clothed in black, and the seaside of her schoolgirl thighs. Silently, the seventh-grader enjoyed her green-red-blue comics. She was the loveliest nymphet green-red-blue Priap himself could think up. As I looked on, through prismatic layers of light, dry-lipped, focusing my lust and rocking slightly under my newspaper, I felt my perception of her, if properly concentrated upon, might be sufficient to have me attain a beggar's bliss immediately; but, like some predator that prefers a roving prey to a motionless one, I planned to have this pitiful attainment coincide with one

of the various girlish movements she made now and then as she read, such as trying to scratch the middle of her back and revealing a stippled armpit—but fat Haze suddenly spoiled everything by turning to me and asking me for a light. (42-43)

Critics have commented on this theme of “life lived as art”; Laurie Clancy writes “Initially Humbert sees his ravishing of Lolita as an artistic thing, a natural carrying into operation of his highly superior sensibility” (107), and Toker points out that “Humbert claims to be an artist of the quasi-Oscar Wilde type, one who wishes to turn his life into a work of art” (201).

The Eternally Deferred

As can be seen from the foregoing extensive quotation from *Lolita*, the dominant note in renderings of Humbert’s consciousness, particularly in Part One, is that of internality—he lives above all for the satisfaction of his own sensibility within the confines of his own imagination. Simon Karlinsky has pointed out that, in this, Humbert is very typical of a Nabokov protagonist, who almost always “uses his imagination to devise a reality of his own which he seeks to impose on the surrounding reality” (183). Indeed, Humbert himself draws attention to the way in which he is drawing other characters, and external reality in general, into the internal world of his imagination. During the famous couch scene, for example, which involves his celebratory onanism while he fondles Lolita, as Humbert approaches climax he constructs Lolita entirely within his own sensibility: “With the deep hot sweetness thus established and well on its way to the ultimate convulsion, I felt I could slow down in order to prolong the glow.

Lolita had been safely solipsized” (60). After the fact, he reaches the conclusion that “What I had possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed no life of her own” (62).

There is a significant nexus between this internality and Humbert’s existential autonomy in that the latter can only exist as long as Humbert defers action and lives within his imagination. His ability to act as he wishes depends upon the deferral of action. As soon as he commits to action, and particularly when others begin to impact his existence, he loses control and thus loses an autonomy which, Nabokov appears to be telling us, is only really possible as long as actions are in the imagination, and not real.

Humbert himself frequently underlines his intention to remain on the brink of action, rather than committing to it, since this involves remaining within his own sphere of consciousness without impacting others. Immediately before Lolita ends up by actually seducing *him*, Humbert assures the reader he is “still firmly resolved to pursue my policy of sparing her purity by operating only in the stealth of the night, only upon a completely anesthetized little nude” (124). Much earlier, after the couch scene referenced above, he congratulates himself in these terms: “I had stolen the honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of a minor. Absolutely no harm done. The conjurer had poured milk, molasses, foaming champagne into a young lady’s new white purse; and lo, the purse was still intact. Thus had I delicately constructed my ignoble, ardent, sinful dream; and still Lolita was safe—and I was safe” (62). He expresses his intention “with the most fervent force and foresight, to protect the purity of that twelve-year-old child” (63). Humbert shares this preference for the brink with his predecessor, the Enchanter, who

claims “I’m no ravisher. The limitations I have established for my yearning, the masks I invent for it when, in real life, I conjure up an absolutely invisible method of sating my passion, have a providential sophistry. I am a pickpocket, not a burglar” (22).

The motivations for this preference for infinite deferral are primarily those of maximizing sensuous enjoyment and refining aesthetic gratification to the ultimate. Humbert’s periods of most exquisite bliss, which he describes in his most lyrical passages, are associated with the deferral of joy. During the couch scene with Lolita, his apex of enjoyment occurs when he slows the race to climax, imagining himself “a radiant and robust Turk, deliberately, in the full consciousness of his freedom, postponing the moment of actually enjoying the youngest and frailest of his slaves. Suspended on the brink of that voluptuous abyss” (60). Humbert intuitively recognizes that transcendence can only be fleetingly grasped in the deferred; it can only exist as a promise. He tells us:

There was in the fiery phantasm [he is recollecting glimpses of nymphets in windows] a perfection which made my wild delight also perfect, just because the vision was out of reach, with no possibility of attainment to spoil it by the awareness of a suspended taboo; indeed, it may well be that the very attraction immaturity has for me lies not so much in the limpidity of a pure young forbidden fairy child beauty as in the security of a situation where infinite perfections fill the gap between the little given and the great promised—the great rosegray never-to-be-had. (264)

In this context, it is noteworthy that Diana Butler has claimed that the dictionary definition for nympholepsy is “a state of rapture supposed to be inspired in men by nymphs; hence, an ecstasy or frenzy, esp. that caused by desire of the unattainable” (60).

The Limits to Autonomy

As long as Humbert remains within the limits of deferred action, he can operate within an autonomous bubble of total solipsism in which the needs of the Other and the ethical rules that govern interpersonal reactions can be safely ignored. The ability to sustain non-attention to the latter is, however, totally dependent on the fragile existence of the former. As soon as he commits to actions that have a real impact on others, Humbert’s autonomy disappears in tandem with his control of events. At the Enchanted Hunters, as soon as he moves to initiate real sexual contact with his nymphet (albeit only upon her drugged and unconscious body), he loses control of the action. The sleeping pills do not work, he has to refrain, and then, when she awakes, he is stymied (“I just did not know what to do” [132]), but Lolita takes control of the action and seduces *him*, prompted by the adolescent sexual experience she has acquired at summer camp. From this point on, what Tony Sharpe has described as “the greatest discrepancy of all” almost immediately asserts itself and begins to undermine Humbert’s autonomy; this is the discrepancy between “his vision of Lolita and the girl herself, who begins to destroy his dreams at the very moment she appears most to confirm them” (60).

As they leave Briceland, her mood sours: “I did not like the way my little mistress shrugged her shoulders and distended her nostrils whenever I attempted casual small talk” (139). Humbert has no idea how to combat this change of mood, “I then tried—also

unsuccessfully, no matter how I smacked my lips—to interest her in the road map” (139). He becomes stricken with fear at his loss of control: “cold spiders of panic crawled down my back” (140). Over the succeeding months Lolita’s success in evading Humbert’s control grows and grows. She is sullen and uncooperative, eventually plays truant from her French classes to clandestinely meet with Quilty, and eventually, of course, escapes from Humbert totally. More significantly, Humbert loses control of himself. He has to abandon the peculiar ethic by which he justifies his relations with Lolita—that as long as she remains unaware of them he has nothing with which to reproach himself--and a note of brutality enters his relations with her, one which actually drives him to self-disgust: “From that moment, I stopped restraining my voice, and we continued yelling at each other, and she said unprintable things...It was a strident and hateful scene... I held her quite hard and in fact hurt her rather badly for which I hope my heart may rot” (205). Tony Sharpe has aptly described Humbert and Lolita as living “in a state of mutual torment” (64) during Part Two.

As things spiral further and further out of his control during the teasing pursuit by the enigmatic “Detective Trapp” Humbert even begins to lose control over his own consciousness and feels that it is possible he is “Losing his mind”(229). He begins to doubt the reality of his own experiences; after flinging open the door of his cabin late at night, stark naked, apparently to be confronted with someone in the mask of “Jutting Chin”, he cannot decide if the vision was real or not: “I reeled back into the room, and fell asleep again, and am not sure even to this day that the visit was not a drug-provoked dream” (217). Tony Sharpe has noted that Lolita “is never less like a ‘nymphet’ than when they live together, whether in motel after motel or in their perilous cohabitation at

Beardsley; never is he less the poet, more the pervert” (63). The tone of Humbert’s prose changes as well. Gone is the occasional sensuous lyricism of Part One, replaced by a new note of discomfort and sourness—for example we read that a panic-stricken Humbert runs out of their Beardsley house in pursuit of Lolita into the “damp, black night of a sour New England Spring” (206). Likewise, a vocabulary of sadness and loss becomes prominent; during their first trans-continental trip Humbert notes that “sometimes trains would cry in the monstrously hot and humid night with heartrending power and ominous plangency” (146).

A Shifting Emphasis

The increase in stature of the Other as Humbert’s existential autonomy is eroded is signaled by Nabokov in a number of ways. Nomi Tamir-Ghiz has pointed out that in Part One Lolita is rarely accorded the opportunity to speak directly to the reader: “the way she sees the situation and feels about it, is rarely mentioned” (164). However, as Lolita’s profile as independent actor grows during Part Two, her actual words are increasingly represented, and in detail. Furthermore, her power to torment and manipulate Humbert is made abundantly clear:

“Can you remember,” she said, “what was the name of that hotel, *you* know [nose puckered], come on, you know—with those white columns and the marble swan in the lobby? Oh, you know ...—the hotel where you raped me. Okay, skip it. I mean, was it [almost in a whisper] The Enchanted Hunters? Oh, it was? [musingly] Was it?”—and with a yelp of amorous vernal laughter she slapped the glossy bole and tore uphill. (202)

As the end of their stay in Beardsley nears, Lolita's acquisition of agency, and Humbert's powerlessness in face of it, becomes overt:

“Look,” she said as she rode the bike beside me, one foot scraping the darkly glistening sidewalk, “look, I’ve decided something. I want to leave school. I hate that school. I hate the play, I really do! Never go back. Find another. Leave at once. Go for a long trip again. But *this* time we’ll go wherever *I* want, won’t we?”

I nodded. My Lolita. (207)

Humbert's autonomy disappears more completely in the last third of the novel as the validity of the point of view of the Other, and the qualitative implications for his own persona, begin to dawn upon him. During his final interview with Lolita in Coalmont, he gains a true understanding of her perceptions: “In her washed-out gray eyes...our poor romance was for a moment reflected, pondered upon, and dismissed like a dull party, like a rainy picnic to which only the dullest bores had come, like a humdrum exercise, like a bit of dry mud caking her childhood” (272).

With the recognition of the validity of the perspective of the Other Humbert also acquires an understanding of his responsibilities to others (something which he does not take into account at all during Part One): “Unless it can be proven to me...that in the infinite run it does not matter a jot that a North American girl-child named Dolores Haze has been deprived of her childhood by a maniac, unless this can be proven (*and if it can, then life is a joke* [my italics]), I see nothing for the treatment of my misery but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art” (283). With this understanding comes, too late, the possibility of a true relationship with another: “there she was (my

Lolita!), hopelessly worn at seventeen, with that baby...and I looked and looked at her, and knew as clearly as I know I am to die, that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else” (277). All his “sterile and selfish vice, all *that* I cancelled and cursed” (278).

In his Afterword “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*,” Nabokov tells us that “*Lolita* has no moral in tow” (315), but this, as Alfred Appel maintains (43), simply disowns overt didacticism. It does not preclude the possibilities of moral dimensions to the story, such as are undoubtedly involved in Humbert’s final realization of the reality of responsibilities to the Other and the limits to solipsistic autonomy.

Nabokov references existentialism once in the course of *Lolita*, and the mention is dismissive—Humbert hints to Beadsley school, as an excuse for withdrawing Lolita, and knowing that it will appeal to their meretricious pseudo-intellectualism, that he is to be “chief consultant in the production of a film dealing with ‘existentialism,’ still a hot thing at the time” (208). In fact, Nabokov appears to be telling us that existential autonomy, particularly in moral matters, is impossible in anything other than a world of the imagination, where contact with the reality of the Other is constantly deferred—a world which has its glories, but which cannot last for ever. As David Rampton has written: “Nabokov affords us glimpses across the boundaries of conventional morality, but unlike, say Conrad or Mann, he often stops short of requiring us to question fundamental assumptions about the ethical norms that inform our culture” (3). Rampton appears to be proposing that Nabokov may tantalize us with glimpses of Humbert’s transgressive *joie de vivre*, but, in view of the undoubted sincerity of the latter’s realization of his obligations to the Other in the later parts of the novel, there can be no doubt that the

author firmly returns us to normative ethical terrain. However, the very last part of *Lolita* poses problems that trouble the too ready acceptance of this comfortable assumption.

A Coda which Complicates

Nabokov is nothing if not a writer of texts of great depth and complexity, and *Lolita* cannot be accommodated within the comfortable confines of conventional ethics quite as easily as the above might suggest when we consider, not only Humbert's conduct with respect to Lolita, but also his other major crime—his murder of Quilty.

One of the most prominent themes of *Lolita* prior to the chapters dealing with Quilty's murder is Humbert's final realization of the interpersonal obligations demanded by "kindness"—one of the characteristics of the blissful state to which Nabokov says he aspires in his "Afterword," and to which he obviously attaches great value. As has been pointed out, Humbert belatedly comes to an understanding of the obligations owed to Lolita, and, consequently, of the harm he has caused her by failing to honour them.

However, there is absolutely no equivalent self-reappraisal by Humbert regarding his murder of Quilty. As David Rutledge has remarked: "The single thing we do know about Humbert's attitude towards the 'murder' is that he never for a moment appears repentant" (149). Rather, after the murder, a great peace envelops him and he signals his sense of being beyond obligation to the legal constraints of society by casually driving on the wrong side of the road: "Gently, dreamily, not exceeding twenty miles an hour, I drove on that queer mirror side" (306). After being pursued and forced to halt, he achieves a state of pure unquestioning, passive contentment: "I was soon to be taken out of the car...and was, indeed, looking forward to surrender myself to many hands...while they

moved and carried me, relaxed, comfortable, surrendering myself lazily, like a patient, and deriving an eerie enjoyment from my limpness” (307).

The lengthy description of the events at Pavor Manor is carefully fashioned to minimize our sympathy with the victim. Quilty is made to appear repugnant from the point at which Humbert first glimpses him coming out of the toilet: “Gray-faced, baggy-eyed, fluffily disheveled in a scanty, balding way...he swept by me in a purple bathrobe” (294). He is not only repugnant, but also ridiculous; subsequently he takes cigarettes apart and eats them, crashes out discordant chords on the piano, and when finally shot “rose from his chair higher and higher, like old gray, mad Nijinski” (302). As Humbert continues to shoot him, his face twitches “in an absurd clownish manner, as if he were exaggerating the pain” and he complains stagily in a “phony British accent—all the while dreadfully twitching, shivering, smirking” (303). Furthermore, Nabokov emphasizes the fact that Quilty’s moral stature is as lamentable as his physical appearance is disgusting, and his behavior ridiculous. He tries to bribe his attacker by offering him his extensive collection of erotica and also “gratis, as house pet, a rather exciting little freak, a young lady with three breasts, one a dandy, this is a rare and delightful marvel of nature” (301). Even the hideousness of the act of killing is submerged in quasi-comic grotesqueries: “I see myself following him through the hall, with a kind of double, triple, kangaroo jump, remaining quite straight on straight legs while bouncing up twice in his wake, and then bouncing between him and the front door in a ballet-like stiff bounce” (303). At the end, Quilty “lay back, and a big pink bubble with juvenile connotations formed on his lips, grew to the size of a toy balloon, and vanished” (304). At this point, Humbert becomes aware of a curious hubbub from downstairs; people have arrived and are drinking

Quilty's liquor. Humbert tells one of them he has just killed Quilty, to which the latter replies " 'Good for you,' " " 'Someone ought to have done it long ago' " adds a fat man (305)—Quilty is denied dignity to the very end.

Why is the reader de-sensitized to the murder, to the point at which, as Tony Sharpe has written, we are "inclined to fall in with Humbert's insane suggestion that he had the right to exact revenge" (74)? There is perhaps a clue to this puzzle in the strange word Humbert uses to describe his intentions with respect to Quilty at the end of his final interview with Lolita: "Yes, I was quite sure I had to go. I had to go and find him, and destroy him" (280). "Destroy", not kill—as though the murder was a necessary cleansing of the earth of something so disgusting and evil that it had to be obliterated.

In common with a number of critics, David Rampton has suggested that "the confrontation with Quilty remains to be acted out partly because Nabokov wants to parody the conventional ending of the 'double' story, in which evil is confronted and exorcised" (98). Quilty and Humbert are, of course, both literati, both lust after Lolita and both have purple bathrobes, as well as sharing other characteristics. Alfred Appel affirms that Quilty, as Rampton has suggested, is "a projection of Humbert's guilt" (131) and Simon Karlinsky is more specific, writing that, in killing Quilty, Humbert is indeed purging or cleansing himself of the vicious aspects of his character that led him to mistreat Lolita so badly in pursuit of his own gratification: "Humbert is...killing himself, his sin externalized in the form of Quilty" (213).

However, it remains legitimate to seek to define exactly what aspect of guilty behavior Quilty represents; what admirable quality of life does he lack? Given Humbert's discovery of the obligations of inter-personal conduct described earlier, it is tempting to

select the “kindness” which, as we have seen, Nabokov associates with a state of bliss, as the basis of Quilty’s moral failings. There are, however, difficulties with this assertion, and these render this approach less than satisfactory. For example, Humbert has already decided to kill Lolita’s abductor immediately after she disappears in Elphinstone, well before the epiphany of his moral self re-evaluation and consequent recognition of imperative to show “kindness,” which comes much later, triggered mainly by the receipt of Lolita’s letter and his visit to her in Coalmont. Conversely, by the time he actually does discover Quilty’s identity, and sets out to kill him, as Alfred Appel writes, “ the killing...is gratuitous” (133), Humbert has already achieved a deeper moral understanding and “transcended his obsession” (134).

The murder of Quilty is more than the obliteration through a double of an aspect of himself that Humbert has already subdued. Quilty’s crime is really against another aspect of the blissful life that Nabokov identifies in the Afterword—that of ecstasy. Quilty cannot be forgiven for ruining in the name of banal and squalid bestiality (Humbert frequently describes him using epithets suggestive of animality: for example: “ ‘Where is the hog now?’ ” [306]), an experience that was for Humbert a true portal to transcendence. Furthermore, he has ruined Humbert’s ecstasy pointlessly--“ ‘I made a mistake...I had no fun with your Dolly. I am practically impotent, to tell the melancholy truth’ ” (298). As Julian Moynahan points out “Quilty, whose taste for sexual frolics with children, as with dwarfs, is an ordinary piece of psychopathy lacking transcendental overtones” (33). But for Humbert, from the moment he meets her to the final good-bye, his relationship with Lolita is a glimpse of the ineffable. Alfred Appel has written that “insofar as it has a definable subject, Lolita is not merely about sexual perversion, but

rather about love and the search for ineffable beauty” (111). Humbert hints at the difference between his and Quilty’s visions of Lolita, and the transcendence that was uniquely associated with his vision, in his enigmatic reference to his innocence in the poem he hands Quilty to explain why the latter must die: “Because you took advantage of my inner essential innocence.” An innocence which relates to a motivation that was not bestial (although the actions it entailed were), but was, rather, a transcendent pursuit. At the very end of the novel, in his address to Lolita, Humbert justifies his obliteration of Quilty on the grounds that it facilitated an approach to the only kind of transcendence that now remains to him—that of artistic preservation of his ineffable vision: “And do not pity C. Q. One had to choose between him and H.H., and one wanted H.H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have you live in the minds of later generations” (309).

However, if the ultimate implications of this understanding of the murder of Quilty are pursued, we are left with a dark question, to which the novelist has provided no answer. Is Nabokov saying, in contrast to all that is implied by Humbert’s ultimate recognition of the demands of conventional morality with respect to his love for Lolita, that some autonomy from conventional moral standards is permissible in the special case of the pursuit and cherishing of the ecstasy that comes with a glimpse of the transcendent? Is he, in a quasi-Wildean fashion, valorizing the aesthetic, and granting it covert precedence over the ethical?

Chapter 7: Patricia Highsmith's Ripley Novels

In Humbert Humbert we encountered a protagonist who, although initially characterized by a flamboyant autonomy, is eventually brought to recognize, at least to some extent, the individual's ethical responsibilities to the Other. In the five novels of Patricia Highsmith's Ripleiad, we find a trajectory of character development completely opposite to this. Ripley is initially a frightened victim of his circumstances, but through a transgressive act he develops an autonomy that is strangely satisfying--to himself and to the reader. However, it is an autonomy very different from the absolute moral and social disengagement of French existential protagonists such as Meursault, in that it derives part of its strength from a conditioned and controlled interface with the world.

Tom the Outsider

Our initial impression of Tom is of a man at bay; the opening words of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* characterize a protagonist who is harried and frightened: "Tom glanced behind him and saw the man coming out of the Green Cage, heading his way. Tom walked faster. There was no doubt the man was after him" (3). In the pages that follow, Highsmith attributes to the young Tom every characteristic of the underdog—a subject whose stance towards life is reactive and dominated by worry.

At this early point in the novel, Tom suffers from negative self-image and a near total lack of self-esteem, characteristically dwelling on childhood memories of himself as a "skinny, sniveling wretch with an eternal cold in his nose" (39). His fear of being alone—the initial breakdown of his friendship with Dickie Greenleaf causes a "tingling fear at

the end of his spine, tingling over his buttocks at the thought of being alone” (92)--is exacerbated by his social isolation. When we first meet him, Tom is living with Bob Delauncey, “a young man he hardly knew,” and the inadequacy of his social support network is evident from the fact that “Bob had been the only one of Tom’s friends and acquaintances in New York who had volunteered to put him up when he had been without a place to stay” (11). Family support is also nonexistent. We quickly learn that Tom has lost his parents by drowning at a very early age and has been grudgingly brought up by an Aunt Dottie, who delights in belittling him--characterizing Tom as “a sissy from the ground up. Just like his father” (38). Tom attempts to mask his shame at his circumstances by resorting to extreme secretiveness. Even after Mr. Greenleaf has offered Tom the task of convincing his son Dickie to return from Italy “Tom had not wanted him to see where he lived—in a dingy brownstone between Third and Second...[He] had not asked any of his friends up to Bob’s, and had not even told anybody where he was living” (11).

However, Tom also seems to be haunted by a kind of profound unease not totally explained by the fragility of his circumstances. We learn that “If there was any sensation that he hated, it was that of being followed by *anybody*. And lately he had had it all the time” (12), and he is suddenly seized with extreme anxiety, apparently causelessly, at a genial dinner with the Greenleafs: “Mr. Greenleaf came into the room. His figure seemed to pulsate and grow larger and larger. Tom blinked his eyes, feeling a sudden terror of him, an impulse to attack him before he was attacked” (21).

Anomie

Tom's anguish derives largely from the fact he is strangely unable to achieve the improvements in status and material well-being that seemed almost universally available to young North American males in the post-war boom of the 'fifties and early 'sixties. As Grey Gowrie has put it "Tom Ripley is very much of his own time, the late 1950s, when the post-war economic boom allowed middle-class people at last to enjoy a high standard of living" (xiii). Tom, on the other hand, is "living from week to week," and suffers "long perilous intervals with no job at all and consequent demoralization because of having no money" (18). In fact, he is a classic victim of the personal anomie which sociologist Thomas Merton found typical of societies in which new opportunities are rapidly becoming available, and in which cultural goals defined in terms of status and material possessions are strongly emphasized, but which crucially do not afford a clear path to these goals for some of their members. Thus it might be said that Tom is partially determined by his cultural circumstances, and much depends upon the peculiar desperation caused him by his failure to realize a meaningful and productive role such as many of his peers have achieved. However, this desperation is also a consequence of his unique psyche and the particular qualities of his ambitions, as we will see.

Highsmith is the poet of the mystifyingly missed opportunity, and Tom's frustration with his inability to negotiate the road to success is made very apparent through internal monologue: "What was he...doing at twenty-five...He had a talent for mathematics. Why in hell didn't they pay him for it, somewhere?" (8). Tom clearly feels that, in an environment so replete with opportunity, there is almost an obligation on society to admit

him to the ranks of the successful: he recollects that shortly after being sacked from his first job “he had stolen a loaf of bread from a delicatessen counter and had taken it home and devoured it, feeling that the world owed a loaf of bread to him, and more” (40). He displaces his anger at his inability to enrol himself among the ranks of the successful by maliciously exercising power over the innocent, perpetrating a tax scam by means of which he forces self-employed people to send him cheques for tax they don’t owe. This brings him no financial reward (he can’t cash the cheques), but does seem to bring him a peculiar satisfaction. A further compensation he allows himself is to indulge in fantasies in which he successfully finds meaningful employment, and which he imposes on his friends. For example, he tells his friend Paul that he is employed by a Press Bureau and has been entrusted with an important overseas portfolio.

Positional Integration

The fact that Tom selects the acquisition of *prestigious* employment as the subject of his fantasies is significant--his yearning to integrate is real, but strangely nuanced. In fact, he does not in fact desire the realities of interpersonal relations, or the true satisfaction of work, but rather the significant markers consequent on meaningful establishment in society, and the esteem they bring in their wake. What he really yearns for is a *societal role* worthy of respect.

He rejects a real opportunity to start a career in retail, being “completely discouraged by the slowness of department store promotions” (39). At the very core of his ambitions is a profound desire for the respect he feels would go with reliable mainstream employment. When Mr. Greenleaf tells his wife that “Mr. Ripley’s in the insurance

business” (17), after misremembering the lies Tom told him earlier about working in an advertising agency, Tom accepts the mistake eagerly and adds modestly “ ‘Not a very exciting job’ ” (17), with the unspoken implication that, although not exciting, a job in insurance is mainstream, reliable and carries with it the potential for a climb to an executive position.

With respect to inter-personal integration, the last thing Tom desires is intimacy. He characterizes his friends as “second-rate” (34) and as “the crumbs he knew” (12), and even has difficulty remembering their names: “There was the big man with red hair, whose name he always forgot, sitting at a table with a blonde girl” (3). The problem is partly that the acquaintances in his New York circle are inadequate as markers of worthy integration into society because they are “riff-raff,” “vulgarians,” and “slobs” (30). It is also clear that Tom’s powerful solipsism is simply inconsistent with any true intimacy with another. He likes his friend Cleo “because she makes no demands for intimacy” (27), and when he is *forced* into a position of close interpersonal contact, his reaction is to yearn to be alone. Tiring rapidly of his initial interview with Mr. Greenleaf in Raoul’s, he realizes “that all his muscles had tensed, that the matchcover in his fingers was mashed sideways, nearly flat. He was bored, God damned bloody bored, bored, bored! He wanted to be back at the bar by himself” (8).

His true aim is the respect consequent on being judged worthy--in other words meaningful and meritorious positional integration into society. He wants Mr. Greenleaf, the personification of the respectable and successful businessman, “to approve of him” (23). On his trans-Atlantic journey to retrieve Dickie, it is important to him that “Whatever happened with Dickie, he would acquit himself well, and Mr. Greenleaf

would know that he had, and would respect him for it” (35). To this end he acts the part of a responsible and honest member of society, and on being told in the liner’s second-class library that he (as a first-class passenger) can’t borrow *The Ambassadors*, “He put the book back docilely, though it would have been easy, so easy, to make a pass at the shelf and slip the book under his jacket” (35).

It is swiftly revealed that one of the markers of successful integration into respectable society that is most intensely desired by Tom is the accumulation of physical objects indicative of such success. His happiness to claim a boring but worthy job in insurance is reflected in his immense approbation of the fact that the wristwatch Mr. Greenleaf gives him is expensive, but, equally important, also conservative and unostentatious; he judges the watch “an excellent one and just the style [he] might have chosen for himself—a plain white face with fine black Roman numerals in a simple gold setting with an alligator strap” (28). He is reduced to tears by the Greenleaf’s gift of a fruit basket as a going-away present, and characteristically (as we will come to know as the novel unfolds) dwells on its details: “The basket had a tall handle and it was entirely under yellow cellophane—apples and pears and grapes and a couple of candy bars and several little bottles of liqueurs. Tom had never received a *bon voyage* basket...he put his face in his hands and began to sob” (33). Unsurprisingly, Tom largely negotiates the satisfaction of social and emotional obligations by means of objects. He offers Cleo gifts in place of intimacy, and, when reflecting on Bob Delauncey’s disapproval of his disgust at the surprise going-away party Bob had thrown, he recalls that he had “given [Bob] a good-bye present of a good shirt and tie. What more did Bob want?” (32)

Tom's First Epiphany

When Tom is unexpectedly offered the meaningful and responsible role he so yearns for (an all-expenses-paid trip to Europe to salvage Dickie Greenleaf from a life of indolence), his elevation in social status immediately stabilizes him. It is clear that role-playing has always been important to Tom (he initially came to New York to become an actor), but it is Mr. Greenleaf's proposal that opens the way to the role he desires most—that of a responsible and respected young man, well-integrated into his society, but confident enough to be somewhat independent from it: "Mr. Greenleaf went out of the room... Tom remained standing, his hands at his sides, his head high. In a large mirror on the wall he could see himself: the upright, self-respecting young man" (20).

What Tom is doing is to quite consciously re-invent himself, and the care and craft he employs in so doing is remarkable: "Slowly he took off his jacket and untied his tie, watching every move he made as if it were somebody else's movements he were watching. Astonishing how much straighter he was standing now, what a different look there was on his face" (18). As we will see later, proponents of the Method school of acting believed that when an actor experienced a role so deeply that he merged his own persona with it and literally "became" the role, he acquired a newly-minted authenticity. This is our first glimpse of Tom doing precisely this—he will exercise this ability much more profoundly after his murder of Dickie. It is truly a creative aesthetic act, the aesthetic product being a new persona.

We also get the first hint of the fact that a kind of withdrawn, confident autonomy is key to the persona that Tom fashions for himself: "He began to play a role on the ship, that of a serious young man with a serious job ahead of him. He was courteous, poised,

civilized and pre-occupied”; “His mood was tranquil and benevolent, but not at all sociable” (34).

The successful assumption and performance of his new persona is underpinned by his rich internal fantasy life; he fantasizes profoundly about the course that he wishes events to pursue, and this facilitates an acting out of behaviours aimed at bringing about the eventualities he desires. On his trans-Atlantic voyage we find him “settled down in his deck-chair for bouillon and more thoughts on his own destiny” (35), and later, in his cabin, he starts a simple “thank-you” letter to the Greenleafs for the *bon voyage* basket, but it gradually morphs into an unsendable multi-page fantasy depicting the way he wishes events to unfold in Mongibello. He adds a fantasized postdated paragraph about “finding Dickie and living with him in his Mongibello house, about the slow but steady progress he was making in persuading Dickie to come home, about the swimming, the fishing, the café life...he wrote on about Dickie’s not being romantically interested in Marge” (36).

Tom’s Second Epiphany

Tom’s ability to pursue the trajectory of his solipsistic plans by imposing fantasy upon reality is initially very fragile. When he actually gets to Mongibello and contacts Dickie and his friend Marge, the impact of reality destabilizes him. Not surprisingly, Dickie does not remember someone he scarcely knew in New York and shows no inclination to initiate intimacies with Tom: “Dickie said nothing. He had reseated himself on the big towel beside the girl, and Tom felt that he was waiting for him to say good-bye and move on. Tom stood there feeling pale and naked as the day he was born” (46).

However, after one or two meetings, Dickie's continuing indifference pushes Tom into his first truly autonomous act—a high-risk initiative to engage Dickie by revealing the true nature of his mission and enrolling Dickie in it as a joke:

Dickie held out his hand.

Tom couldn't have made himself take the hand. This was the very edge of failure as far as Mr. Greenleaf was concerned, and failure with Dickie. "I think I ought to tell you something else," Tom said with a smile. "Your father sent me over here especially to ask you to come home."

"What do you mean?" Dickie frowned. "Paid your way?"

"Yes." It was his one last chance to amuse Dickie or to repel him, to make

Dickie burst out laughing or go out and slam the door in disgust. (56)

Surprisingly, this first assay by Tom to manipulate reality to accord with his fantasies succeeds: "But the smile was coming, the long corners of [Dickie's] mouth going up..." (56). Tom, his flaccid, reactive stance towards life forever put behind him, now embarks on building a relationship with his target.

But, as we might expect, the relationship Tom seeks to establish does not aim at true intimacy with another. With respect to Dickie's abilities as a painter, Tom is quite capable of being coolly disparaging: "[painting] gave Dickie something to do, kept him out of trouble, Tom supposed, just as it gave thousands of lousy amateur painters all over America something to do" (60). Rather it is on Dickie's material markers of status that Tom focusses: "He had seen two original Picasso drawings in the hall" (47); "He spent the time examining Dickie's rings. He liked them both" (49).

Tom really wants to merge with Dickie and manage him; Grey Gowrie comments that he “does not wish to sleep with Dickie so much as to become Dickie” (xiv). Thus at a crucial juncture in *Mongibello*, when he fears he cannot counteract Marge’s influence, Tom dresses up as Dickie and acts out a scene in which Dickie repudiates intimacy with Marge, and indeed murders her. Tom wants Dickie as an extension of himself, and Dickie’s main value resting in facilitating Tom’s fantasies of his future:

Tom sat on the broad window-sill in Dickie’s studio and looked out to sea, his brown arms folded on his chest. He loved to look out at the blue Mediterranean and think of himself and Dickie sailing where they pleased. Tangiers, Sofia, Cairo, Sevastopol...By the time his money ran out, Tom thought, Dickie would probably be so fond of him and so used to him that he would take it for granted that they would go on living together. He and Dickie could easily live on Dickie’s five hundred a month income. (74)

As Mark Selzer has commented, “Tom’s desire is less for Dickie *per se* than for what Dickie possesses” (98). While there are unspoken homoerotic undertones in the relationship that Tom tries to build with Dickie, particularly in respect of Tom’s possessiveness, it is well not to overstate these. Tom’s utter rejection of true intimacy perhaps precludes an erotic relationship. In an interview, Highsmith herself commented “Some people have called Tom a homosexual, but there’s really no basis for that whatever [...] Ripley in fact possess no sex life at all.”³⁵ Elsewhere she described Tom as “asexual.”³⁶

Tom's Third Epiphany

Tom's third epiphany, and his most bruising collision with reality, comes when Dickie, inevitably asserting the independence contingent upon existence as a separate individual, avoids being co-opted into Tom's fantasies. Tiring of Tom, he begins to act coldly to him. For Tom, the Other is always inaccessible, and must always prove inadequate because of this inaccessibility.

The moment of truth comes when Dickie mocks a harebrained scheme of Tom's for them to travel together to Paris in coffins, thus bringing Tom to the realization that Dickie is a separate and inaccessible entity with which he can never merge. There is a confrontation between them on the street in Mongibello, with Dickie becoming increasingly hostile:

You were supposed to see the soul through the eyes, to see love through the eyes, the one place you could look at another human being and see what really went on inside, and in Dickie's eyes Tom saw nothing more now than he would have seen if he had looked at the hard, bloodless surface of a mirror. Tom felt a painful wrench in his breast, and he covered his face with his hands. It was as if Dickie had been suddenly snatched away from him. They were not friends. They didn't know each other. It struck Tom like a horrible truth, true for all time, true for the people he had known in the past and for those he would know in the future: each had stood and would stand before him, and he would know time and time again that he would never know them, and the worst was that there would always be the illusion, for a time, that he did know them, and that he and they were completely in harmony and alike. (89)

Of course, Tom's solipsism prevents him from understanding the impossibility of Dickie's being subsumed into his claustrophobic integrative fantasies, and he resolves his pain by finding Dickie unworthy: "He had offered Dickie friendship, companionship, and respect, everything he had to offer, and Dickie had replied with ingratitude and now hostility" (100). With apparent ease Tom decides that he "hated Dickie, because, however he looked at what had happened, his failing had not been his own fault, not due to anything he had done, but due to Dickie's inhuman stubbornness. And his blatant rudeness" (100).

This impasse precipitates Tom's second, and most momentous, act of autonomy; one through which he not only challenges fate, but declares himself independent of the ethical framework of society. He decides to implement the most radical way of merging with Dickie, managing him totally and thus acquiring and enjoying all his markers of status and respect. He decides to murder Dickie and assume his identity: "He wanted to kill Dickie. It was not the first time he had thought of it...He could—He had just thought of something brilliant: he could become Dickie Greenleaf himself" (100). Immediately, and characteristically, Tom's thoughts turn to the priority of acquiring Dickie's markers of status: "He could go back to Mongibello...and collect Dickie's things" (100).

He does just this and steps into the role of Dickie. His attention to detail speaks to the deep satisfaction brought to him by building a new and authentic persona which embodies his dreams of status and respect: "now, from the moment when he got out of bed and went to brush his teeth, he was Dickie, brushing his teeth with his right elbow jutting out, Dickie rotating his eggshell on his spoon for the last bite. Dickie invariably

putting back the first tie he pulled off the rack and selecting a second” (137-138).

Amazingly he even begins to dance and paint in Dickie’s manner.

A Triumphant New Persona

The peculiarly tonic effect of the Ripley stories on the reader derives more than somewhat from Highsmith’s joyful depiction of the invigorating and maturing effect on Tom of his “rebirth as a new person” (127). She co-opts the reader into the relish she clearly feels in her fictional creation, who morphs from being a young man who feels “incompetent” and who “people looked down on” (192), into an independent and autonomous being who manages with effective agency his engagements with destiny and often draws them to a triumphant conclusion. Highsmith herself summed the matter up admirably when she wrote “There is nothing spectacular about the plot of *Ripley*, I think, but it became a popular book because of the insolence and audacity of Ripley himself.”³⁷

Toms metamorphosis (“He was Dickie, good-natured naïve Dickie, with a smile for everyone” [128]), brings him a satisfying sense of equilibrium; at a party in Paris “Tom felt completely comfortable, as he had never felt before at any party that he could remember” (127). His sense of sureness is shot through with moments of sublime and happy anticipation: “Tom had an ecstatic moment when he thought of all the pleasures that lay before him now with Dickie’s money” (111). This joy in a re-invented persona persists even after he is forced by circumstance to revert to his Tom Ripley identity. Although he is briefly cast down by this need, his disappointment is very temporary: “He began to feel happy even in his dreary role as Thomas Ripley. He took a pleasure in it” (217). This is, of course, because the Thomas Ripley persona to which he reverts in fact

undergoes a transformation as a consequence of his experience as Dickie, and becomes as autonomous, sure-footed and daring as the former. In the second half of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* Tom has indeed been reborn “as a new person,” irrespective of his name.

Although Tom is often anxious as he struggles to escape the consequences of his career of murder and fraud (Graham Greene called Highsmith “the poet of apprehension”³⁸), he increasingly refuses to be bowed, and adopts a “take-charge” approach to the conquest of his difficulties. The latter has clearly grown out of his newly-discovered ability to respond to the challenges of his various epiphanies. Tom’s ability to draw back, plan, and then impose his will upon events is evident from the very point at which he murders Dickie. When faced with the immediate necessity of disposing of Dickie’s body “He began to feel cooler, and smooth and methodical” (105); and when the deed is done “He began to plan his return to the hotel, and his story, and his next moves: leaving San Remo before nightfall, getting back to Mongibello. And the story there” (109). From being a man at bay in the early pages of the novel, Tom develops the autonomy consequent upon the possession of real self-control and confidence: “He felt alone, yet not at all lonely...he felt absolutely confident that he would not make a mistake” (137). In Rome, after being frightened by a horrific nightmare that Dickie has survived and returned to confront him, Tom responds thus: “He had let his imagination run away with him. He had been out of control. He drew himself up and calmly took off his tie. He moved as Dickie would have done, undressed himself, bathed, put pyjamas on and lay down in bed” (166-167).

A remarkable aspect of Tom’s new autonomy is the sense of irony that Tom develops and displays in his subsequent adventures after the murder of Dickie. He becomes

capable of viewing even his own fate with a detached humour; he wonders, as he struggles out of a pit in which Bernard Tufts has buried him after a murder attempt, “would Bernard attack him again if he saw him struggling out of the grave? It was a bit amusing. Later, if there was any later, Tom would laugh, he thought” (*Ripley Under Ground* 490). Highsmith certainly intended Tom to be occasionally amusing, saying in an interview “Ripley is funny, I hope.”³⁹

Some of Tom’s humour is broad. In *The Boy Who Followed Ripley* we find him musing in a boulevard café on some of the implications of sex-doll ownership: “Funnier, Tom thought, if a man just took the doll along to a garage with his car, and asked the attendant to blow her up for him. And if the man’s housekeeper found the doll in bed and thought it were a corpse. Or opened the closet door and a doll fell out on her” (90). However, most of it is faintly malicious, rather attractive, and undeniably funny in spite of its poisonous tone: “Marge was already dressed in slacks and a sweater, black corduroy slacks, well-cut and made to order, Tom supposed, because they fitted her gourdlike figure as well as pants possibly could” (*The Talented Mr. Ripley* 236). Some of Tom’s humour even strikes a rather unique note half-way between *noir* and camp. Consider Tom’s outrageous immolation of a pair of annoying French flies: “One fly jumped on the other’s back. In plain view! Quickly Tom struck a match and held it to the bastards. Wings sizzled. *Buzz-buzz*. Legs stuck in the air and flailed their last. Ah, Liebestod, united even in death! If it could happen in Pompeii, why not at Belle Ombre, Tom thought” (*Ripley Under Ground* 386).

An odd complicity between the narrative voice and Tom’s opinions helps to enlist the reader’s appreciation of Tom’s irony. In the following passages it is noteworthy that the

narratorial voice, in the course of apparently straightforward retailing of events, subtly underlines Tom's disparaging of Marge's ample figure: "He ordered a dessert that he hadn't room for, but Marge ate it" (*The Talented Mr. Ripley* 233); "Mr. Greenleaf had finished his *vitello alla parmigiana*. He had not eaten much. 'Tom has a beautiful house,' Marge said, starting in on her seven layer rum cake" (238).

However, what makes Highsmith's creation unique, and strangely winning, is the pride that Tom acquires with his new role, and the note of triumphalism that results from this. A typical moment comes on the *Hellenes*, the steamer Tom is taking from Venice to Greece. Tom has good reason to think that a message ordering his arrest may pursue him at any moment, but the stance he adopts in response bespeaks defiance and pride, very different from the instinct for self-concealment and flight he displayed earlier when he suspected Mr. Greenleaf of targeting him in the Green Cage: "He gripped the prow where it separated in a narrow V and took a deep breath. A defiant courage rose in him. What if the radioman were receiving at this very minute a message to arrest Tom Ripley? He would stand up just as bravely as he was standing now" (*The Talented Mr. Ripley* 282). This note of defiance and self-sufficiency persists throughout the four Ripley novels that follow *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. In *Ripley Under Ground*, the first of these, Tom unwillingly commits a further murder in order to protect an art scam from which he benefits. In the very last sentences of the book, he is telephoned by a Scotland Yard inspector who asks him to go to Salzburg to explain his role in a strange immolation that has occurred there: "Tom's hand stopped in the act of reaching for the telephone—only for a second, but in that second he anticipated defeat and seemed to suffer it. Exposure.

Shame. Carry it off as before, he thought. The show wasn't over yet. Courage! He picked up the telephone" (592).

Tom's Existential Autonomy

All the parts of the Ripleiad that follow the murder of Dickie Greenleaf consist of, above all, the elaboration by Highsmith of Tom's new persona--and of a psychic position facilitated by it from which Tom, the ultimate isolate, can deal successfully with a hostile world. As Grey Gowrie succinctly puts it: "Having re-created himself as a character who gets away with things, he proceeds to do so" (xviii). Tom's autonomy is practical, emotional and intellectual, and in all these areas the centre of gravity influencing conduct and decisions remains firmly with him as subject. The autonomy he achieves after Dickie's murder can thus very reasonably be called existential. Grey Gowrie comments that "Clearly [Highsmith] is an artist of her time, whose prevailing philosophy, in mainland Europe at least, was existentialism" (xi), and also points out Highsmith was "a great admirer of both Camus and [Francis] Bacon" (xvi). Highsmith's biographer Andrew Wilson also claims that "the themes and philosophical arguments that lie at the heart of her fiction reflect the bleak existentialist writings of Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Kafka, Sartre and Camus, all of whom she read" (5), and he refers to Highsmith's "kinship...with the masters of existentialism" (461).

Regarding the construction of a practical interface with the world and its affairs, we have already noted that Tom builds for himself a persona characterized by the utmost independence and confidence. After his move to Venice in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, Tom feels that "There was a sureness in his taste now that he had not felt in Rome, and that his

Rome apartment had not hinted at. He felt surer of himself now in every way” (215). In fact his stature as an independent agent has grown to the extent that, in *Ripley Under Ground*, his co-conspirators in the Derwatt art fraud appeal to him in a crisis because they “need an injection of confidence,” and because they trust in the power of his independent thinking: “You’re always good on ideas, Tom” (299).

Tom’s emotional independence from others is truly remarkable. He maintains, for example, considerable emotional distance between himself and his wife Heloise, his relations with her appear to only hover on the borders of intimacy: “He had grown used to her, and he missed her. Was that loving someone?” (*Ripley Under Ground* 433). In the fourth novel of the Ripleyiad, *The Boy Who Followed Ripley*, Tom comments thus on sexual relations between him and Heloise: “the infrequency of their making love didn’t seem to bother her at all. Curious, since she was only twenty-seven, or was it twenty-eight? But convenient too, for him. He couldn’t have borne a woman who made demands several times a week: that really would have turned him off” (119). Fiona Peters sums up thus: “Highsmith’s achievement, then, is to have produced Ripley as a hero who goes through the motions (marriage, sex with his wife, the urbane social existence), while, quite simply, not being touched by it at all” (187)

Tom’s autonomy extends to ethical matters. He develops, for example, his own independent view-point towards the ethics of forgery, which, granted he has a vested interest since he has encouraged Bernard Tufts to forge some works of the painter Derwatt, he elaborates at an intellectual level independent of self-interest. The American art collector Murchison considers art forgeries to be simply a violation of the principle of truth, but Tom’s view is less simplistic. As Fiona Peters points out: “Tom carries out the

work of deconstruction of notions of truth and origins, exemplified by his typically perverse delight in having [Bernard's] forgery, rather than the original, of the two artworks he owns in pride of place over the fireplace" (158). Tom objects strongly to the unidimensionality of Murchison's approach:

Van Meegeren's forgeries of Vermeer had finally achieved some value of their own. Van Meegeren may have started it in self-defence, in bravado, but aesthetically there was no doubt that Van Meegeren's inventions of "new" Vermeers had given pleasure to the people who had bought them... What the hell was Murchison doing dragging in truth and signatures and possibly even the police, compared to what Bernard was doing in his studio, which was undeniably the work of a fine painter. (361-362)

Peters puts it well: "[Tom's] claim is that the authenticity of the object is based only in the viewer's perception" (158); Murchison, of course, prefers to deal in absolutes. However, Tom does have the honesty to admit to a certain ambivalence, if only to himself: "there was a split in Tom's own reasoning, a split he was well acquainted with. He saw the right and the wrong. Yet both sides of himself were equally sincere" (365).

The same ambivalence is apparent in Tom's attitude to his own transgressive acts. Tom has often been compared, rather too readily, to European existentialist protagonists such as Camus's Meursault (Harrison 4, 60-64). Similar claims of kinship between Tom and proto-existentialist protagonists like Lafcadio from Gide's *Lafcadio's Adventures* have been made by Anthony Hilfer in his *Mid-West Quarterly* article of 1984, and by a 1957 *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer of Highsmith's work. But to Meursault the ethics of society are irrelevant in the context of his totally solipsistic value system: "I'd

been right, I was still right. I was always right. I'd lived in a certain way and I could just as well have lived in a different way" (99). Famously, Meursault refuses to participate in his trial for murdering an Arab, not even realizing his guilt in the eyes of society (the latter opinion largely engendered by the fact Meursault had shown little emotion at his mother's funeral) until late in the trial, and then completely rejecting any moral responsibility: "I couldn't understand how the qualities of an ordinary man could be used as damning evidence of guilt" (82); "the utter pointlessness of what I was doing here took me by the throat and all I wanted was to get it over with and to go back to my cell and sleep" (86). Societal ethical values are similarly opaque to Lafcadio, who murders a total stranger on a whim, simply for the pleasure of committing an unsolvable crime, and who, on reading a report of his crime in a newspaper, responds thus: "The *crime!* This word seemed odd to him, to say the very least; and *criminal* as applied to him totally inappropriate. He preferred *adventurer*" (222).

Tom is quite different. He is not by any means disengaged from societal ethics; as Grey Gowrie comments: "He is not amoral...because he is aware of his own immorality" (xi). As Tom reflects on his narrow avoidance of the murder of Marge in Venice, he feels real anguish:

But what seemed to terrify him was not the dialogue or his hallucinatory belief that he had done it (he knew he hadn't), but the memory of himself standing in front of Marge with the shoe in his hand, imagining all this in a cool methodical way. And the fact that he had done it twice before. Those two other times were *facts*, not imagination. He could say he hadn't wanted to do them, but he had done them. He didn't want to be a murderer. Sometimes

he could absolutely forget that he had murdered, he realized. But sometimes—like now—he couldn't. (*The Talented Mr. Ripley* 253-254)

Tom even feels sympathy for his victims' relatives: "Tom felt sorry for her [Mrs. Murchison]. He felt sorry that he had killed her husband" (*Ripley Under Ground* 538), but, firmly shifting the focus to himself, Tom compensates by foregrounding the necessity of the murders for his own survival: "He hadn't wanted to murder, it had been a necessity" (*The Talented Mr. Ripley* 180). Here we get to the heart of the matter. Tom avoids the destructive abysses of guilt by re-asserting his autonomy and his ability to manage and control his psyche. On the occasion described above when he feels sympathy for Mrs. Murchison, he "reminded himself, he could not afford to reproach himself for that [the murder of Murchison] now" (*Ripley Under Ground* 538). The most extensive discussion of the self-control Tom exercises over his emotions comes in *The Boy Who Followed Ripley*, a novel in which Frank Pierson, an American teenager who has murdered his father, is strangely drawn to Tom, and seeks him out at his house Belle Ombre. Tom's inability to accept the feelings of guilt which torture Frank lead him to review the strategies he employs for "containing" the emotional consequences of his transgressions: "Every mistake in life...had to be met by an attitude, either the right attitude or the wrong one, a constructive or a self-destructive attitude. What was tragedy for one man was not for another, if he could assume the right attitude toward it" (95).

Tom's ability to manage his interface with societal ethics (and any consequent feelings of guilt he may have) are but one aspect of the persona he has crafted for himself, and it is now time to return to the central issue of Tom's re-invention of himself through role-playing.

In *Ripley Under Ground*, the forger Bernard Tufts laments that not only has he failed to enter, through forgery, into the persona of the dead painter Derwatt, but he has also lost touch with his own persona in the process: “There is curiously enough of me to realize that my identity, my self has disintegrated and somehow vanished. I never was Derwatt. But now am I really Bernard Tufts?” (570). Such a question would never trouble Tom Ripley, who, as we have said, confidently re-invents himself twice in the course of the Ripleiad—first as Dickie Greenleaf, and then as a totally re-imagined Tom Ripley. There are two issues at stake here; first, why is Tom so successful in creating new personae, and second, why does he do it with such zest?

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus suggests that one of the best ways to assuage the pain resulting from a realization of the absurdity of life is to be an actor, particularly one who carries the residue of many roles with him, since the actor experiences the immediate pleasure of entering into the excitement of a diversity of lives (77-79). Absurdity can presumably be forgotten in the excitement of multiplicity of roles and a plenitude of experience. Such a justification for role-playing does not fit Tom, who, although he develops an appreciation of the strangeness and irony of life, most certainly does not dismiss life as absurd, and, as we will see, keenly wishes to enjoy to the maximum selected attributes of the life-process.

Michael Trask has made an extensive study of Tom’s role-playing. Trask points out that not only does Sartre disparage, in *Being and Nothingness*, the assumption of a role as “inauthentic”, but also that influential sociologists of the post-war years, such as Erving Goffman and David Riesman, also regarded the requirement to assume a social mask as having negative connotations. Riesman in particular felt that the requirements of

American society in the 'fifties drove its members to "mandatory self-staging," and, as summarized by Trask, concluded that "the affluent society made it compulsory for all its members to treat identity as a continual dress rehearsal" (Trask 588). Trask's major contention, however, is that Ripley is best understood using the approach of the adherents of the Method school of acting, who believed, unlike Riesman and Sartre, that acting a role was a very creative act, and that when an actor had achieved complete identification of himself with the role he was assuming, he achieved a new authenticity. Trask quotes Stanislavski from *An Actor Prepares*, who contended that actors were most successful when they "achieve such a similarity to life that it is easy to believe in what you are doing". Trask proposes that this point is essentially "when, in short, they manage to convince themselves of their authenticity" (597). Certainly such an approach resonates remarkably well with Tom's musings on his own role-playing in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*: "It gave his existence a peculiar, delicious atmosphere of purity, like that, Tom thought, which a fine actor probably feels when he plays an important role on a stage with the conviction that the role he is playing could not be played better by anyone else"; "He was himself and yet not himself" (137). The following comment from Tom is also germane: "his stories were good because he imagined them intensely, so intensely that he came to believe them" (253). Tom's stories, of course, form the very basis of the persona with which he chooses to interface with the world. He prepares himself thus for his re-appearance in San Remo after having murdered Dickie: "now he was playing the role of an athletic young man who had spent the afternoon in and out of the water because it was his peculiar taste, being a good swimmer and impervious to cold, to swim until late afternoon on a chilly day" (*The Talented Mr. Ripley* 110). Trask points out that Tom's

realization that “If you wanted to be cheerful, or melancholic, or wistful, or thoughtful, or courteous, you simply had to *act* those things with every gesture” (*The Talented Mr. Ripley* 197) echoes closely the approach recommended by practitioners of the Method. He quotes a pronouncement from Stella Adler to her students: “Feeling comes from doing” and describes Robert Lewis (a co-founder of Actors Studio) as believing “You must act and feeling will come” (Trask 596). Tom certainly goes to extraordinary lengths to suit every nuance of his existence to the role he adopts: “as he walked slowly back to the house again he imagined that he was reading a letter from Dickie. He imagined the exact words, so that he could quote them to Marge, if he had to, and even made himself feel the slight surprise he would have felt at Dickie’s change of mind” (*The Talented Mr. Ripley* 115). There are suggestions that he does this so well that his identity and the persona he adopts *do* merge as recommended by advocates of the Method: “Tom put the paper down, *unconsciously feigning* so well the astonishment that anybody might feel on reading in a newspaper that he was ‘missing’, that he didn’t notice the waiter trying to hand him the menu until the menu touched his hand” (*The Talented Mr. Ripley* 197—my italics).

The question that remains at issue is *why* Tom goes to such extraordinary lengths to authenticate the roles and personas he adopts. It is certainly true that the act of entering into a persona clearly has a stabilizing affect on Tom; momentarily shaken by questioning from the Italian police, “He felt better, concentrating on being Dickie Greenleaf for a few seconds, pacing the floor once or twice” (*The Talented Mr. Ripley* 172). Further, it is clear that, like Highsmith herself, who wrote in one of her *cahiers* “Give me fantasies any day” (Wilson 210), Tom may well rejoice rather more in the

world of the imagination than in that of actual experience: “Anticipation: It occurred to him that his anticipation was more pleasant to him than his experiencing” (180).

However, it is clear that the main motivation for Tom is the pure joy of constructing a persona that interacts with the world in the way for which he yearns, thus bringing him great delight. The pure pleasure afforded by this self-rewarding intentionality, and Tom’s evident reveling in it, is so persuasive that, as indicated earlier, it constitutes one of the most important and attractive features of this protagonist with whom Highsmith was so pleased, and to whom she returned five times. In Rome “Every moment to Tom was a pleasure, alone in his room, or walking the streets” (122). In Paris, he almost cannot contain himself: “*Wonderful* to sit in a famous café, and to think of tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow being Dickie Greenleaf” (126)—the echo of *Macbeth* does not prove ominous in Tom’s case. The simplest things afford him pleasure. In Munich, he has experienced “the mildest, most spring like shower...when he had been walking in the Englischer Garten, and he had not even tried to get under cover from it, but had simply kept on walking, thrilled as a child at the thought that this was the first German rain that had ever fallen on him” (276). What is very apparent here is that Tom’s is a very private relish, a self-contained gratification that makes him very content to be alone; quite a different Tom from the one we encountered in the early days in New York, who took up “with stupid, silly people in order not to be lonely” (38).

A Special Kind of Autonomy

How then should we characterize this selective interaction with the world that brings Tom such delight?

A significant clue rests in the fact that Tom differs from the protagonists of French existentialist and pre-existentialist writers not only in his lack of immunity to the ethical standards of society, but also in that he does not, like, for example, Meursault, isolate himself from and totally reject all *other* commonly-held community values. Rather Tom *selects* those societal values with which he concerns himself, and with which he strives to integrate. As I have noted previously in *Mid-West Quarterly*, Paul Goodman draws attention in *Growing Up Absurd* to the complete abstinence of French existentialists from participation in the “game of life,” which Goodman compares to a circular “rat-race” in a “closed room”. Goodman comments “The tone of protest is...disdain and self-disdain. They stand aside in the closed room and comment cuttingly” (*Growing Up Absurd* 167). Meursault rejects any expectation that ambition requires one to achieve worldly progress through life, and reacts thus to the suggestion of a promotion to Paris: “one life was as good as another and...I wasn’t at all dissatisfied with mine here...When I was a student I had plenty of that sort of ambition...I very soon realized that none of it really mattered” (*The Outsider* 36). Gide’s Lafcadio is similarly disinterested in pursuing material advantage. When he learns that he has come into a sizeable inheritance, he comments dismissively “It’s time to launch the ship. From whatever quarter the wind blows now, it will be the right one” (99). Indeed Lafcadio refuses to undertake any kind of sensible planning, preferring to “set Fate at defiance” (268). For example, he chooses to return to Rome after his random murder, giving as his reason “it will certainly be a good deal less wise, but perhaps a little more amusing” (221). In Rome he even elects to confess his murder to his horrified brother. Neither Lafcadio nor Meursault demonstrate anything approaching Tom Ripley’s Herculean efforts to conduct his life to advantage by carefully

concealing his crimes and diligently planning his fate such that the benefits of these crimes accrue to him in the ways that he chooses.

In fact, Tom rejoices in integration with selected aspects of life-experience and with selected roles in society:

He wanted to see Australia. And India. He wanted to see Japan. Then there was South America. Merely to look at the art of those countries would be a pleasant, rewarding life's work, he thought. He had learned a lot about painting, even in trying to copy Dickie's mediocre paintings. At the art galleries in Paris and Rome he had discovered an interest in paintings that he had never realized before, or perhaps that had not been in him before.

He did not want to be a painter himself, but if he had money, he thought, his greatest pleasure would be to collect paintings that he liked, and to help young painters with talent who needed money. (*The Talented Mr. Ripley* 284)

It is significant that Tom's desires gravitate towards the acquisition of a respected role in society—that of art collector and patron. This, as we have seen, is a consistent motif in his character.

He undoubtedly does not desire true inter-personal intimacy. Fiona Peters points out that “even though [Tom] acts...there remains an underlying refusal to engage with the other in any inter-subjective sense” (33), and there is abundant evidence of this from all five novels. For example, at the beginning of *Ripley Under Ground* we learn that “Tom spent that evening as he did most evenings, quietly and alone”; later in the novel, when Heloise is absent from the house, Tom registers her photograph as merely “a pleasant and meaningless design ...rather than a face” (311). However, *positional* integration into

societal roles worthy of respect he continues to seek as earnestly as ever, and he puts a great deal of effort into defining and acting out such roles. At a party in Venice he realizes that, because of other pre-occupations, he is acting rudely and decides to exert himself “because behaving courteously even to this handful of second-rate antique dealers and bric-a-brac and ashtray buyers... was part of the business of being a gentleman” (*The Talented Mr. Ripley* 245). Chris Straayer comments that “Tom’s life ambitions exceed those of a working-class thief. He cannot settle for money when the opportunity for upward mobility is facing him. He lusts for the kind of class that comes complete with identity, with being, with family, with blood” (119).

Another feature of Tom’s character that we noted earlier, his love of objects, becomes even more noticeable as he acquires the funds to collect fine things. He has an art collection (including a Van Gogh, Picassos, Magrittes and a Soutine), collects silk dressing-gowns and pyjamas, antique furniture and leather-bound books, and, in *Ripley’s Game*, a harpsichord, whose details he lovingly reviews as follows: a “gem...of beige wood embellished with gold-leaf here and there” which cost “more than ten thousand francs” (744). Russell Harrison correctly emphasizes the fact that Tom is a character “who created himself through, and is defined by objects” (27). Fine objects have a romantic and talismanic appeal for him; in Venice he walks past “windows glittering with jeweled boxes that spilled out necklaces and rings like the boxes Tom had always imagined that treasures spilled out of in fairy tales” (*The Talented Mr. Ripley* 196). It is significant that he relishes physical contact with his possessions, spending satisfying evenings alone “feeling Dickie’s rings between his palms, and running his fingers over the antelope suitcase he had bought at Gucci’s” (249).

The mention of Gucci's, which he considers "the best leather goods store in Rome" (138), is clearly indicative of a link between Tom's love of objects and his desire for esteem and position. He particularly yearns for objects as markers of rank and respect: "He loved possessions, not masses of them, but a select few that he did not part with. They gave a man self-respect" (249). The purchase of his expensive harpsichord in particular gives him "a heady lift," and "made him feel invincible" (*Ripley's Game* 745). Furthermore, he deliberately utilizes his possessions to impress others with his status, using the back door to his palazzo in Venice "except when he wanted to impress his guests by bringing them...in a gondola" to the grand canal-side entrance (*The Talented Mr. Ripley* 214). He so much appreciates a description of himself in the Italian magazine *Oggi* as "one of the young well-to-do American visitors in Italy" (214) that he cuts it out and keeps it.

It is true that objects stabilize and anchor Tom—after Bernard's suicide in Salzburg Tom has a nightmare and remains depressed after awaking, but he finds himself re-orientated after he "put out his hand and touched the thick, polished wood of his night-table" (*Ripley Under Ground* 560). However, there is also a voluptuous, quasi-sexual aspect to his relationship with objects. It is almost as though objects replace people for him. Significantly, relaxing in his Venice palazzo, he feels that "The curve of the sofa corner fitted his shoulders like somebody's arm, or rather fitted it better than somebody's arm" (*The Talented Mr. Ripley* 250). Russell Harrison comments that for many of Highsmith's protagonists "objects are the repository of emotions whose proper object is elsewhere" (x), while Edward Shannon is even more explicit, writing that "Tom suffers from erotic materialism" (24). It is certainly true that Tom uses the vocabulary of sexual

relations to describe his relationship with objects, particularly his fine home--in *Ripley Under Ground* he acknowledges that “He loved the house” (301). It is perhaps relevant that Tom loathes disorder, he dislikes gambling and gamblers, and compulsively re-arranges objects displaced by his housekeeper at Belle Ombre. Objects are, of course, easier to control than people, and Tom harbours a particular dislike of the mutability and unpredictability of the latter. In *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, when events temporarily interfere with his planned trip to Greece, he exclaims in irritation “Would one thing after another come up to thwart him—murder, suspicion, *people?*” (180—italics in text).

Tom as Sinthomme

Highsmith’s identification with Ripley has been much commented upon. She famously commented “No book [*The Talented Mr. Ripley*] was easier for me to write, and I often have the feeling Ripley was writing it and I was merely typing.”⁴⁰ Her biographer, Andrew Wilson, cites her American agent, Patricia Schartle, as believing that Highsmith’s creation of Ripley was largely an unconscious process deeply influenced by the writer’s own personality” (Wilson 219). Andrew Wilson quotes another friend of Highsmith’s, Charles Latimer, who, after her death, said “actually she *was* Ripley, or, I should say, she would have liked to have been him,” and Bettina Berch told Wilson that “she would talk about him like a person who was very close to her...He was very real to her” (Wilson 194).

Highsmith seems to have been profoundly unhappy for most of her life. It appears likely that she suffered from anorexia, a mark of low self-esteem, as a child (Wilson 58) and her close friend Vivien de Bernardi believed that Highsmith “suffered from

depression all her life” (Wilson 418). Wilson cites comment after comment from her friends which indicate a woman positioned very much aslant to life: “She was not at peace with herself” (388); “Someone who felt distinctly ill at ease with the world” (437). Perhaps as a result of her pre-disposition to depression, Highsmith fought throughout her life against the conviction that there was no meaning to life; in 1972 she wrote to a friend that the mid-life crisis of one of her lovers was due to the fact that the latter “cannot realize that life is about nothing” (Wilson 333). Like Ripley, Highsmith preferred to be alone, writing in one of notebooks “I have a definite psychosis in being with people...I cannot bear it very long” (Wilson 100), and a friend, Barbara Roett, told Wilson in 1999 that “Pat was best at friendship at a distance...she could not sustain relationships, she didn’t even try” (Wilson 270). Perhaps unavoidably, this resulted in a loneliness which, according to the British writer Ronald Blythe, “showed in her face—a cloudiness, an ugliness really” (Wilson 255).

Her preference for being solitary also resulted in a tendency for Highsmith, again like Ripley, to live in a fantasy world; Bertina Berch told Wilson that Highsmith “lived in her own, self-created world” (Wilson 404). In this Highsmith may have demonstrated in a pronounced fashion a tendency which some have theorized is common to all of us. Victor Burgin and his co-writers propose in the Preface to their 1986 essay collection *Formations of Fantasy* that human perceptions are shaped, not by objective reality, but by fantasy, and that “Unconscious wishes and the fantasies they engender are as immutable a force in our lives as any material circumstance” (2). Their suggestion is that fantasy is not a conscious wish-fulfillment, but rather an unconscious shaping of our perceptions by our deepest desires and drives.

Fiona Peters contends that “There are clear indications that Highsmith wrote Ripley partly as an attempt to alleviate the intolerable pressure of her own demons” (2). Extrapolating from the thesis of Burgin and his colleagues, Peters indicates that Highsmith’s marked identification with Tom resulted partly from her unconscious satisfaction in the fact that this fictional creation validated the possibility of a triumphant survival that she must have coveted for herself in the face of a hostile world. Ripley is a beacon of persistent existence in the context of the “Chaos, Nothingness” which she asserted in her novel *The Cry of the Owl* lay behind day-to-day existence (8).

Peters sees Ripley as imposing “order on an unstable and threatening reality” (12) and points out that much of the attraction Ripley had for Highsmith lay in his ability to operate independently of the constraints of the every-day world. She considers that Highsmith’s identification with Ripley “procur[ed] her pleasure by allowing her to disregard the niceties of her own moral code” (22) and later adds “he allows her the dizzy freedom of a displaced articulation, without guilt or responsibility” (161). Peters draws heavily on the work of Slavoj Žižek, who also recognizes Ripley’s existential freedom from the Lacanian Symbolic Order. Žižek writes in *The Fright of Real Tears* that Ripley provides an example of a protagonist who is not “caught in the symbolic web,” and who retains “‘freedom’ from the symbolic order” (145).

Once again drawing on the work of Žižek, Peters theorizes her contentions through the lens of the Lacanian concept of the *sinthome*. In *Enjoy Your Symptoms!*, Žižek explains that it is not possible to logically explain the effect of *sinthome*, but that it is a fragment of experience, for writers often a creative act—the delineation of a character, for example—which brings inexplicable pleasure: “in contrast to symptom which is a cipher

of some repressed meaning, *sinthome* has no determinate meaning; it just gives body, in its repetitive pattern to, to some elementary matrix of *jouissance*, of excessive enjoyment” (199). In his essay “The Undergrowth of Enjoyment,” Žizek indicates that *sinthome* may function as a stabilizing influence: “an attempt to heal ourselves, to pull ourselves out of the real ‘illness’, the psychotic breakdown--the ‘end of the world’, the falling apart of the symbolic universe, with the help of a substitute formation” (22)

Peters also asserts that, in this context, “it may function as a ‘glue’ for sustaining an individual’s sanity, or warding off psychosis” (25). Peters further points out that Highsmith’s diaries underline her fear of insanity, and highlight the relief from these fears that the act of creative writing afforded her; she quotes from a 1963 diary of Highsmith’s: “Such unhappiness and loneliness as I felt today must be counteracted by work, or I shall go mad” (Peters 26). Peters is really suggesting that Ripley afforded Highsmith “*jouissance*” as a fantasy creation through which she could realize her own innermost yearnings for resilience in the face of adversity, and for the ability to triumph over the limitations that reality imposes, moral and otherwise, “absolving her of the misery she felt when she did not write and the necessity to shoehorn her hero into a moral universe” (148-149). Peters sums up thus: “because she writes Ripley she is able to withstand her life” (149)

Whether or not one accepts that Ripley functioned as a stabilizing *sinthome* for Highsmith, the satisfaction afforded her by her creation is clear. I would further suggest that, in her delineation of Ripley and his actions, she actually models the immense satisfaction she herself derived from creating him—he is an intimate reflection of that joy. For Ripley, as well as for Highsmith, there exists a triumphant aesthetic delight that

we have noted previously in creating a persona—in Highsmith’s case a fictional character; in Tom’s, a new identity for himself. This delight is admirably illustrated in the following passage in which Tom celebrates the stance of triumphant and expansive pleasure that he will display during his voyage to Greece: “He had decided... to make his voyage to Greece a heroic one. He would see the islands, swimming for the first time into his view, as a living, breathing, courageous individual...standing in the wind at the prow of the ship, crossing the wine-dark sea like Jason or Ulysses” (*The Talented Mr. Ripley* 277). It is this autonomous triumphalism that explains the luminosity and hopefulness of the character for readers; reactions, to a hero who is, after all, a serial murderer, that are otherwise hard to explain, for as Peters correctly points out, Ripley is simultaneously “attractive and repellent” (149).

Chapter 8: Conclusion—and the Abandonment of the “Humanist Murderer”

Determinism and Existentialism

This thesis set out to question whether the general shift in philosophical dominance from determinism to existential autonomy over the first half of the twentieth century was reflected in a change in the positioning of transgressive subjects. To that end, a representative series of works of American fiction covering the same period has been examined.

In broad terms such a change has been demonstrated—determinism looms large in the figuration of transgressors, such as McTeague, from the first thirty years of the century, whilst existential autonomy is a significant note in the positioning of later protagonists such as Frank Chambers, Humbert Humbert and Tom Ripley.

However, as might be expected for the complex works of different individual creators, detailed consideration of the positioning of the transgressor in the majority of the novels considered reveals that it is highly nuanced and multi-layered. Thus, in Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* (from the third decade of the century), we find a protagonist who is clearly highly determined by his social and economic environment, but who has much interiority and who finally arrives at a perception that a human being is essentially an isolate—his or her perceptions and struggles belonging to him or her alone. On the other hand, Humbert Humbert, from the sixth decade of the century, whose existential autonomy is celebrated by Nabokov in a joyous linguistic extravaganza in part one of

Lolita, eventually recognizes in later parts of that novel that his freedom to act is constrained by socially-based ethical considerations towards the Other; except, it seems, in the matter of Quilty's murder. Humbert's autonomy only really exists as long as he defers action and remains within the confines of his ever-fertile imagination. Tom Ripley, a protagonist who, like Humbert Humbert, comes from the nineteen-fifties, while he is the only transgressive protagonist in the novels considered who exploits a position of existential autonomy with on-going success, can nonetheless be said to owe some of the initial motivation for his transgressive acts to Mertonian anomie—a form of social determinism. Richard Wright, whose career covers the years at the mid-point of the six decades considered, occupies a pivotal position in that he has written two novels which exploit two very distinct positions regarding transgression; *Native Son* the determinist, *The Outsider* the existentialist. However, in both novels he has in fact described characters some of whose traits fall outside the presumptions of these two philosophical approaches.

“Excusing” Transgression

It is, however, absolutely clear that there is one characteristic which is undeniably seen in all the texts considered thus far, and that is the tendency (introduced in chapter one) on the part of the writer to turn away from the horror of the act of murder (which seems to intrinsically lie outside the pale of acceptability for humans) by explaining, excusing or otherwise deflecting attention from the protagonist's crime. Thus McTeague's act is explained by hereditary influences that he cannot resist, and the impact of Trina's murder is reduced as she is progressively devalued by her behavioural changes

after McTeague loses his job. Meantime, sympathy is subtly enlisted for McTeague himself. Bigger Thomas, on the other hand, is presented as irredeemably and unavoidably shaped by his personal experience, and his cultural background of, racial intolerance—Wright wants us to believe that he really cannot avoid acting as he does.

In still other texts, attention is essentially disengaged from the homicidal act through the creation of a protagonist who so engages the reader that the latter's focus on the transgression is deflected, as the case in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Lolita*. Often this engagement of the reader is achieved by endowing the transgressive subject with an ability to delight us through the use of humour—be it dry (Frank Chambers), or cerebral (Humbert Humbert). Tom Ripley, on the other hand, is positioned as an underdog to whose existential triumphs the reader is inevitably drawn.

What this common characteristic really amounts to is an apparently unquestioned assumption on the part of the novelists concerned that the intrinsically valuable humanity of the subject must somehow be recuperated through analysis of, or deflecting attention from, his or her transgressive act; the purpose being to somehow make it easier for the reader to accept that the protagonist has committed murder, in spite of the fact that this act conflicts with all the moral assumptions of traditionally framed humanity.

Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*; A Completely Different Figuration of the Transgressor.

It is truly remarkable, however, that at the end of the twentieth century a completely different approach to the positioning of the transgressive protagonist has manifested itself—one which is totally at odds with the humanist assumptions described above. In

novels which demonstrate this approach, such as Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, there is no attempt at all to explain, excuse or obscure the violence and inhumanity of the transgressive subject; rather it is frankly accepted, even foregrounded. This represents a complete abandonment of the concept underlying the treatment of the transgressive subject in the works thus far examined—that a human individual is an independent, and, to some extent self-constructed, entity whose worthiness and value, or at least potential worthiness, is immanent in the fact of his or her existence. Patrick Bateman, the multiple murderer and sadistic torturer who is the protagonist of *American Psycho*, specifically rejects any such assumption. He tells us that “it did not occur to me, *ever*, that people were good or that a man was capable of change... Individuality is no longer an issue” (377).

Bateman is presented as a psychopath, as is Lou Ford, the sadistic protagonist of Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me* (1952), a novel that is in some superficial ways similar to *American Psycho*. As the plot unfolds, however, Ford's transgression is partially explained as the direct result of sexual deviance on the part of his widowed father; hereditary influence and direct experience of deviant adult behavior being both implicated in the creation of Ford's condition. It is precisely the absolute lack of any such attempt at psychological exegesis for Bateman's sadism which confounded many early reviewers of *American Psycho*, and which led to demands that the novel either not be published, or be withdrawn from bookstores. This lack has been the subject of explicit comment by later critics. Casey Moore has pointed out that the reader “expects Bateman's representation to include the standard elements of the symbolic serial killer—including psychological reasons for killing, accentuated differences that separate him

from the reader/viewer—and they do not appear” (237). Carla Freccero sounds a similar note: “What critics reproach Ellis for is that he precisely does not provide a psychological narrative of origins, a comforting etiology for his killer’s illness: we do not hear that he was a sexually abused child or had a domineering mother” (51). Bateman himself draws attention to the complete absence of any possibility of a clarifying analysis for the motivations of his criminal career:

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 for me to tell you any of this. This confession has meant nothing. (377)

This approach, which negates the assumption of the inherent worth, and potential worthiness, of the human subject (and thus the need to explain or excuse deviations from that norm) has been dubbed anti-humanism by Freccero: “*American Psycho* has articulated an unbearable—but lucid, rigidly lucid—anti-humanism as the mundane and mannerly order of the day” (51).

There have been a number of attempts to account for the enduring interest in *American Psycho*, an interest that has undoubtedly outlived the novel’s initial *succes de scandale*. Some critics claim that a dualism exists in the reader’s perception of Patrick Bateman—a simultaneous attraction and repulsion. Casey Moore, for example, feels that Bateman represents the Abject, those grossly self-indulgent and sinister personality traits of which most people rid themselves during the developmental process. Moore maintains

that “As the story progresses...the reader aligns himself more and more with Bateman, simultaneously seduced and disgusted by his acts” (231). Bateman’s magnetism, according to Moore, rests on our recognition that he acts as a proxy through whom we can exercise our suppressed desires. Ruth Helyer sounds a similar note, noting that *American Psycho* presents us with the “unpleasant suggestion that they [the urges to savage behaviour that Bateman demonstrates] are lying dormant in all of us, the only difference between us and Patrick is that he has indulged them” (726). It is, however, hard to reconcile approaches that rely on a proposal of Bateman’s evil magnetism with those numerous scenes in the novel in which Patrick is made to appear a complete buffoon—for example, when he and his secretary Jean are ignominiously turfed from a table at Dorsia that Patrick has obtained by bluff rather than reservation.

Another critical approach (see, for example, Mark Storey) contends that Patrick represents the failure of traditional patriarchal masculinity in a post-modern world. Berthold Schoene-Harwood goes so far as to claim that “the novel pathologizes modern masculinity by identifying its most characteristic traits as symptoms of a variety of psychopathologies, mental disorders and cognitive impairments” (378); Schoene identifies symptoms of Asperger’s syndrome and high-functioning autism in certain elements of Patrick’s behaviour.

However, at the end of the day, there seems little reason to deviate from the view of a large number of commentators (for example Thomas Heise [135, 136]; David Price [322]; Georgina Colby [1]; James Annesley [131], Julian Murphet [53-54]) that *American Psycho* is fundamentally an attack on the tidal wave of consumer capitalism that Ronald Reagan unleashed on America in the nineteen-eighties, and on its social and

cultural consequences—particularly social inequity and a growing individual acquisitiveness that inevitably eroded moral values.

Patrick describes this world thus: “The world of most of us: big ideas, guy stuff, boy meets world, boy gets it” (384). Reagan’s image is evoked a number of times in the course of the novel, most pointedly in Tim Price’s comments in the closing pages: “ ‘How can he pull that *shit*...He presents himself as a harmless old codger, But inside...’ ” (396-7). Patrick’s acquisitiveness, and his obsession with consumerism, is evidenced by his never-ending listing of the high-end products he owns or desires (he wants a car stereo for Christmas in spite of the fact that he owns no car, and has expensive crystal ashtrays from Fortunoff although he does not smoke), and by his equally endless descriptions of the designer clothes worn by himself and the people he meets and observes. In Patrick’s world possessions are acquired for their status value rather than for their utility, and this leads to pointless waste—for example in his office he has sporting magazines from the ‘forties which cost thirty dollars apiece.

Patrick’s world is one of greed (on the first page of the novel his friend Tim Price complains he is not earning enough in spite of the fact that his income is nearly two hundred thousand dollars a year) and decadent excess, in which grotesquely expensive and elaborate meals remain largely uneaten. But the result of all this excess is tedium and dissatisfaction: “not...pleasure but boredom and asphyxia,” as Sonia Baelo-Allue writes. The empty repetitiveness of the yuppie life-style is amply evidenced by the trajectory of the text (there is no climax, just a repetitious story of meetings, dinners and clubs) and by the banality of the chapter headings (“At Another New Restaurant” [330]).

The world Reagan created was one of glaring sexual and social inequity. Women (potential “hardbodies”) are treated as objects (“while the hardbody stands there we check her out” [47]), and the number of derelicts in New York is legion: “Beggars and homeless seemed to have multiplied in August and the ranks of the unfortunate, weak and aged lined the streets everywhere” (278). However, there is also a concomitant deadening of compassion, evidenced in the novel by the repeated juxta-position of passages describing Patrick’s horrendous acts of sexual torture with facile analyses of the “work” of pop groups, and by the descriptions of the mockery of beggars—the “tease the bum with a buck” trick, for example. Georgina Colby has written that Ellis “discloses the damage inflicted by capitalist globalization upon traditional ethical structures” (7), while James Annesley reports that Ellis feared that growing commodification would “erode all traces of humanity and create a culture of emptiness and indifference” (19). *American Psycho* profiles a world in which all sense of social responsibility has disappeared: Patrick’s frequent and explicit admissions of his crimes are ignored by hearers who are so self-absorbed that they dismiss them. Moreover, the taxi-driver who recognizes Patrick as a murderer simply exploits the situation to rob him, and Paul Owen’s apartment (in which ample and grisly evidence persists of the various murders that Patrick has perpetrated there) is simply quietly cleaned up preparatory to resale. Significantly, Patrick finds himself “cursing the earth and everything I have been taught: principles, distinctions, choices, morals, compromises” (345).

The form of *American Psycho* is best understood as a very sophisticated pastiche of parodies—of the language of travel brochures (e.g. Christopher Armstrong’s anodyne but egregiously tedious panegyric on the Bahamas), of the glib pop criticism typical of

Rolling Stone, of the macho banter of businessmen, and, in the violent scenes, of hard-core porn and slasher movies. Also foregrounded is a kind of deliberate knowing political incorrectness; Ellis makes explicit the fact that the Chinese waiter declares “ ‘Voira!’ ” (336) when presenting Evelyn, Patrick’s fiancée, with her “special” desert (in fact a chocolate-coated used urinal cake introduced by Patrick), while a Japanese business man in Smith and Wollensky’s, singing along to Frank Sinatra, intones “ ‘*that sry comehitle stale...that clazy witchclaft’*” (363). The overall effect is of sophisticated, calculated, almost camp, exaggeration and absurdity, the latter manifested in farcical scenes such as Patrick clumsy attempts to highjack Paul Owen’s limo, his dismissing of blood-stains on his sheets as cran-apple or Hershey’s syrup, and his ridiculous first sex scene with Courtney, in which intercourse is repeatedly interrupted and during which Patrick pauses during a frantic search for spermicidal gel to advise Courtney to get her tub marbled. The novel is a black fantasy of a nightmare world driven by consumer capitalism. As Sonia Baelo-Allue has written: “The whole thing is a caricature” (86). This renders almost irrelevant the much-discussed question of whether or not the reader is to understand Patrick as having really committed the crimes described (there has been much critical discussion regarding the latter—Julian Murphet, for example, maintains that “what the text presents as violent acts, are in fact to be considered as the cinematically projected fantasization of a general class violence toward everything that is not white, male and upper-class” [43]).

But, from the point of view of this thesis, the most important thing about *American Psycho* is that it posits a world in which subjectivity has disappeared, everyone is a construct formed from multiple inscriptions of cultural assumptions—as Patrick says:

“Myself is fabricated” (377). The characters have no interiority and are mainly represented by their clothes. They are all similar, and constantly mistake, and are constantly mistaken for, one another. Significantly, Patrick tells us that Paul Owen’s frequent mistaking of him for Marcus Halberstam doesn’t matter because “Marcus works at P&P also, in fact does the same exact thing I do, and he also has a penchant for Valentino suits and clear prescription glasses and we share the same barber at the same place, the Pierre hotel” (89). Patrick experiences reality as though it were distanced through the constructs of a movie. When he is saying goodbye to his secretary Jean after a dinner out, he comments “I am so used to imagining everything happening the way it occurs in movies, visualizing things falling somehow into the shape of events on a screen, that I almost hear the swelling of an orchestra, can almost hallucinate the camera panning low around us, fireworks bursting in slow motion overhead” (265). As Patrick says: “Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in...this was civilization as I saw it” (375).

Patrick gives plentiful witness to his complete lack of subjectivity and essence: he observes Jean having a hard time attempting to analyze him, and comments “she is searching for a rational analysis of who I am, which is, of course, an impossibility: there...is...no...key” (264). Elsewhere he maintains “I was simply imitating reality, a rough semblance of a human being” (282); and, on another occasion tells us “there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory...I am simply not there” (376-7). Mark Storey has pointed out that “The narrative is life through the prism of Patrick Bateman’s psyche, but closer inspection reveals his psyche is non-existent. Instead Ellis gives us a central identity created by external forces” (58). Ellis himself commented in an interview “I was

writing about a society in which the surface became the only thing. Everything was surface—food, clothes—that is what defined people.”⁴¹ It is as though performance is no longer driven by any kind of interiority; the subject has evolved into an “action figure” driven only by cultural promptings.

It is thus not surprising that in *American Psycho*, alone among the works of fiction thus far described, there is no attempt to recuperate an intrinsically potentially worthy Cartesian subject—to excuse, extenuate or deflect attention from his crime—because in *American Psycho* such a subject simply does not exist to be recuperated. Subjectivity in *American Psycho* is a construct of cultural tendencies; if crime there be, it is not the fault of the protagonist, but rather of the society which has formed him—“formed” not in the sense of moulding a pre-existing essence, but in the sense of contributing the total and only essence of the subject.

Is Anti-Humanism Purely a Post-Modern Phenomenon?

Can this concept of the subject as nothing more than a construct from cultural forces be characterized as essentially post-modern? Certainly it is common among the non-transgressive protagonists of works by post-modern writers such as Chuck Palahniuk, fellow-member with Ellis of the group informally named the Brat-Pack by some critics. In Palahniuk’s *Invisible Monsters*, the maimed ex-model protagonist Shannon complains “Give me anything in this whole fucking world that is exactly what it looks like” (269). Shannon routinely reacts to situations by invoking “the [fashion] photographer inside my head” (41) and his customary formulaic calling for the demonstration of fake emotions—“Give me patience...Give me control” (49).

Nobody in *Invisible Monsters* is who they seem to be on the surface; Shannon's formidable female companion, the Princess Brandy Alexander, is, in fact, her brother Shane who has undergone reconstructive therapy in order to become a woman. Shannon also discovers that her erstwhile friend and fellow-model Evie started life as a male. Evie is, for a period, the girl-friend of Shannon's detective ex-boyfriend, who is, as becomes clear, gay. There is an element of fakery to so much in the book; Shannon's father markets sacks of potatoes which consist of a core of rotten vegetables surrounded by a covering of healthy ones; he also markets sugar-fed pigs that look meaty, but in fact aren't. Brandy frequently articulates the concept of the constructed nature of personality in her advice to Shannon: "You're a product" (217); "There isn't any real you in you" (218).

However, Georgina Colby traces a lineage pre-dating the post-modern for works in which the subject is a construct. Colby points to the close relationship between *American Psycho* and the novels of Hubert Selby Jr., particularly *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1957), remarking that both Selby and Ellis "have...a desire to unveil the oppressive cultural forces in America that inflict violence on the individual" (7).

Certainly the characters in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* are largely anonymous. Excepting the Christian names of a few of them, we learn little about them apart from the astonishing propensity to violence and desensitization to suffering of virtually all of them. In the first few lines of the first story, "Another Day, Another Dollar," we are introduced to the stultifying purposelessness of the lives of the nameless protagonists: "They sprawled along the counter and on the chairs. Another night. Another drag of a night in the Greeks" (11). We also learn quickly about their curiously passionless brutality, when they almost

kill a passing soldier. Over the course of the six novellas which make up the book, Selby makes clear that his protagonists are indeed almost entirely defined by their cultural circumstances: by generations of violence (verbal and actual) between parents and between parents and their children, by the lack of nonviolent outlets for their energies, and by life in the crime-ridden, dehumanizing projects, where a “Women’s Chorus” is disappointed that a baby, teetering on a high window-ledge, has been rescued: “the women annoyed that it was all over and that the kid didn’t fall” (282).

In this context it should also be recognized that there is another novel, *Let It Come Down* (1952), by Paul Bowles, which shows some interesting affinities with *American Psycho*, and which considerably pre-dates even Selby’s work. Bowles is considered an existential novelist, but, as such, he is unusual in that he does not, in the same way as Camus, Highsmith and, to some extent, Nabokov, celebrate protagonists whose existential independence (and the autonomous point of view that goes with it) is their predominant characteristic. There is a curious emptiness about Nelson Dyar, the transgressive protagonist of *Let It Come Down*—his acquaintance and sometime lover, Daisy de Valverde, when practicing palmistry on him, comments “ ‘I’ve never seen such an empty hand, No pattern...You have an empty life’ ” (34). While it cannot be claimed that Nelson is a construct of cultural forces, as Patrick Bateman is, he nonetheless functions very obviously as a supremely passive reflector or channel through which his creator articulates the bleak world-view underlying the novel. In the case of *American Psycho*, this world-view partakes of cultural and political criticism; in the case of *Let It come Down*, it is metaphysical.

A dominant theme of *Let It Come Down* is the contrast between Arab and Western cultures. The juxtaposition of the two is constantly kept before the reader: for example, the Beidaoui brothers' parties feature only a very few Moslem guests, who the Europeans assume have been invited to add local colour for their amusement, but "In reality the gatherings were held in order to entertain these few Moslem guests, to whom the unaccountable behavior of Europeans never ceased to be a fascinating spectacle" (113). The two cultures also contrast in the degree to which individuals demonstrate an obligation to others. Most of the Westerners are self-absorbed, but the most important Arab character, Thami, will not allow Dyar to wander off alone into the Arab town with a pimp: "he would have liked more than anything at the moment to go home and sleep...[but] he felt responsible for Dyar and determined not to let him out of his sight until he had got him to his hotel door" (48). Most particularly the contrast between the way Arabs and Westerners choose to direct their lives is underlined. Thami marvels at Europeans, most of whom, he considers "*had* no real desire, apart from that to make money...But once they had the money they seemed never to use it for a specific object or purpose" (44). In contrast "He knew exactly what he wanted, always, and so did his countrymen. Most of them only wanted three rams to slaughter at Aid el Kebir...His own dream was to have a small speedboat" (44). Nonetheless, the Arabs accept that not everything is in their control. They accept that there are necessary limitations on their autonomy and they show deference to fate. Thami's brothers have put him out of the house, but "Being younger than they, he had of course to accept their dictum" (40). Similarly, when Dyar unexpectedly, and for his own reasons, buys him his speedboat, Thami reflects that "Good luck, like bad luck, comes directly from Allah" (198). Later

Thami reflects upon the fact that Dyar, typically for non-Arabs, demonstrates an “outstanding excentricity—his peculiar inability to wait while things take their natural course” (235).

The Westerners, on the other hand, are all determined to wrest power to themselves so that they can exercise control over events to their advantage. Of Daisy Valverde we read “The Marques did not share her enthusiasm for Americans, but that did not prevent her from asking them whenever she pleased, she ran the house to suit herself” (26). The grotesque Eunice Goode is attracted to a young Arab girl: “Her association with Hadija had started her off in a certain direction, which was complete ownership of the girl, and until she had the illusion of having achieved that she would push ahead without looking right or left” (154).

Most of the Westerners, however, like the Arabs, recognize that there are limits to their ability to control events. Eunice, for example, wishes to forbid Hadija’s relationship with Dyar, but “With her sometimes painfully acute objective sense she knew she would be the loser in any such quarrel: she was supremely conscious of being a comic figure” (101). Nelson Dyar, however, seems to recognize no such limits.

As indicated previously, Dyar is a curiously empty character (“even to himself he felt supremely anonymous” [116]). He is, however, obsessed with the feeling that he is a loser, a victim. He sums up his philosophy thus: “If one was not a winner, one was a victim” (147)—and he certainly does not consider himself a winner. Bowles himself writes in his Preface to the novel “The hero is a nonentity, a victim” (8). More than the other Westerners, Dyar is obsessed with the necessity to exercise control over his destiny. He tells Daisy that he wants to control the trajectory of his life and “ ‘feel I’m getting

something out of it' ” (35). After he hires Thami to smuggle him into the Spanish Zone, he derives acute pleasure from his manipulation of others: ”It was already a very pleasant thing to have Thami rushing around out there, intent on helping him” (198). As his plans mature, he characteristically reflects that “he expected now to lead the procession of his life, as the locomotive leads the train, no longer to be a helpless incidental object somewhere in the middle of the line of events” (230).

But, for Dyar, such euphoric moments are few and far between. Most of the time, he is tortured by the feeling that he is unable to get to grips with the problem of self-fulfillment: “But things don’t happen, he told himself. You have to make them happen. That was where he was stuck. It was not in him to make things happen; it never had been” (153). He is particularly tormented by the fact (which, as we will see, derives from his fundamental misconception of the relationship of the individual to destiny) that he cannot even articulate to himself a course of action capable of bringing self-fulfillment: “Everything he took the trouble to look at carefully seemed to be bristling with an intense but undecipherable meaning...Each thing was uttering a wordless but vital message which was a key, a symbol, but which there was no hope of seizing or understanding” (214). In this he resonates curiously with Richard’s Wright’s Cross Damon, who is similarly bedeviled by an inability to articulate an objective worth believing in or acting upon. Dyar’s frustration, coupled with his feeling of victimization, constantly sublimates into suspicion, particularly of the innocent Thami: “All the same, to Dyar [Thami’s inconsequential response to a question] seemed devious and false and he said to himself, ‘The bastard’s planning something or other’ ” (232).

Twice during the course of the novel, Bowles allows Dyar glimpses of the true relationship of the individual to the forces of destiny—once during a sunlit semi-trance on the beach in Tangiers, and later in a kif-induced vision in Agla, the Moorish village in the Spanish zone to which Dyar has fled. Dyar realizes on those occasions that no more can be said than that life simply is as it is at any particular moment; its course is beyond the influence of humans—it is supremely ineluctable. Even to think of life in terms of a temporal flow or development is an audacious misconception; to think of controlling it is absurd:

Life is not a movement toward or away from anything; not even from the past to the future, or from youth to old age, or from birth to death. The whole of life does not equal the sum of its parts; there is no sum. The full-grown man is no more deeply involved in life than the new-born child...Life needs no clarifying, no justification. From whatever direction the approach is made, the result is the same: life for life's sake, the transcending fact of the living individual...Everything he had ever thought or done had been thought or done not by him, but by a member of a great mass of beings who acted as they did only because they were on their way from birth to death. (183)

Particularly during his Agla vision, Dyar feels a great sense of relief: “his life had not been the trial life he had vaguely thought it to be—it had been the only possible, the only conceivable one. And so everything turned out to have been already complete, its form decided and irrevocable. A feeling of profound contentment spread through him” (256). This feeling of peace is reinforced by the experience of watching a Moslem self-mutilation ritual shortly afterwards in Agla: “The mutilation was being done for him...the

man was dancing to purify all who watched” (271). However, in the final few pages of *Let It Come Down*, as he returns, befuddled with kif, to the house in which Thami and he are hiding, his sense of victimization clouds his vision once more (“He would soon see Tangier again, a thousand times more of a victim than ever” [268]). With this re-awakening come his habitual suspicions, which this time centre on a banging door: “It was not sure, it could not be trusted. If it opened when he did not want it to open, by itself, all the horror of existence could crowd in on him” (282). In a hashish-induced haze, he identifies the prostrate Thami with the door, and hammers a nail into Thami’s head, killing him. Dyar’s vision of the truth has faded, and after Thami’s death, his reflections reveal that he has returned to his sterile desire for control and supremacy: “ ‘Thami has stayed behind, I’m the only survivor. That’s the way I wanted it.’ That warm, humid breeding place for ideas had been destroyed” (285). In the poignant final paragraph of the novel, with absolutely no future left to him, Dyar’s only consolation is to believe he has exercised the power to apparently influence the flow of events, an exercise which, as he himself recognized earlier, is impossible because it fails to recognize the true relationship of fate and the individual: “He stood there in the patio a moment, the cold rain wetting him. (A place in the world, a definite status, a precise relationship with the rest of men. Even if it had to be one of open hostility, it was his, created by him)” (292).

Humanism and Anti-Humanism in the Figuration of Transgressors

Thus it is possible to identify, as far back as the early nineteen-fifties, a tradition very different from that represented by the novels considered in chapters two to seven; a

tradition in which the subject either has no real existence, being simply a construct of external forces, or who may exist, but is nothing more than blank slate, a totally helpless pawn lacking any influence whatever on his own destiny.

A question that must be addressed is whether this tradition represents an articulation of a supremely effective form of determinism. It does not. Determinism describes a situation in which identifiable forces (be they hereditary, social or cultural), mould a human essence which must by definition pre-exist in order to bear the imprint of such shaping processes. As presented by Ellis, Patrick Bateman has no such pre-existing essence, he is a total construct and has no existence independent of the forces constructing him. Nelson Dyar comes from a more traditionally constructed novel, but he also is empty of essence; the important point in Dyar's case being that he is not a construct of, but is simply irrelevant to, the forces of human destiny with which he seeks to engage, and which he vainly hopes to direct.

Thus, this investigation into the transgressive protagonist has revealed two traditions differing in the weight they give to the Cartesian vision of the human individual as autonomous and potentially of value. Those works that pre-suppose the justice of such an approach typically try to excuse, or otherwise recoup the value of the transgressive human. Those that lack such a pre-supposition present a bleaker picture of a world in which such excuses would be irrelevant. They exploit an anti-humanist positioning of the transgressor and in so doing they reflect a kind of horrific millennial perception of the total collapse of ethically-based social relations and the complete triumph of greed as motivation.

We can find reflections of this vision of man as a non-Cartesian object, not necessarily granted the potential for moral depth, in attitudes which have become current in the contemporary non-literary environment—for example in the tendency attributed to street-gang members to repudiate, or not even take cognizance of, moral responsibility for the death of innocent bystanders who fall victim to their casually-deployed violence. Also relevant is the contemporary attitude towards psychopathic killers of the real world. Little effort to analyze or explain such mass-murderer's motives is currently displayed in public discourse concerning them. In discussions of the Sandy Hook killings emphasis has fallen not on analysis of the killer's motives, but rather on discussion of more effective means of guarding against such atrocities in the future through solutions as diverse as the stationing of policemen in schools, or alternatively, stricter gun-control. In the case of murders attributed to terrorists (for example, the Boston Marathon killings), the focus is generally on ever more vigilant anti-terrorist surveillance measures. The easy attribution to terrorism in its turn presupposes that the term offers a sufficient explanation for unconscionable and ultimately inexplicable acts of extreme violence.

It is reasonable to ask why such a despairing anti-humanistic view of violence as the ultimately inexplicable act of an individual not necessarily capable of redemption has emerged in the Western world. Relevance might be claimed for two developments in Western culture.

First, over the last half-century, not only has faith been eroded in many of the organizing “grand narratives” of Western corporate thought such as Marxism and Christianity, but this erosion has been coupled with a growing disenchantment for even minor projects of corporate national endeavor. For example, the failure of Western

military enterprises in Afghanistan and Iraq appear to have led the American public to a cynical isolationism, while in Europe a significant decline in enthusiasm for the European project is apparent in many of the states of the European Union, even those that have profited most from it, such as Germany. Such disenchantment necessarily disallows the accruing of stature to individuals as a result of participation in potentially ennobling projects of community action; such participation being previously taken as evidence of human exceptionality. Cynicism regarding the potential for communal endeavours drives the individual back on himself without the ready support of communal values.

Second, it is clear that sixty years of the relentless pressures of consumer capitalism, with its valorization of acquisition, have resulted in a merging of worth with surface—individuals are drawn into a black hole of self-gratification—this is the situation which is explored so definitively in *American Psycho*.

Both of the above developments devalue recognition of culturally-imposed limits and license extreme acts. The implication for literature, particularly for those novels which feature criminal protagonists, is the likely appearance of more works wherein the exploration of connectedness to, and compassion for, the Other figures very small in comparison to the depiction of extreme criminal acts driven by the bizarre impulses of personal gratification, or even by no discernible motive at all.

Indeed we are already seeing a number of such works—not just *American Psycho*, but the novels of Cormac McCarthy, particularly *No Country for Old Men*, which, like *American Psycho*, is imbued with a millennial sense of total societal collapse. In *No Country for Old Men*, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, the representative of humanist social values of duty and compassion (“You care about people. You try and lighten their load for ‘em”

[281]) finds himself appalled by the unthinking violence unleashed in the Texas border country by participants in the drug trade, and by the collapse of social norms which this violence engenders. He sees these violent men as deadly agents of irrevocable change in American culture. He reacts thus to a young killer he has sent to the gas chamber: “Said that if they turned him out he’d do it again. Said he knew he was going to hell...I thought I’d never seen a person like that and it got me to wonder if maybe he was some new kind” (3). Later he engages with Anton Chigurh: “a true and living prophet of destruction” (4). In the end Bell cannot confront these new forces; he resigns his responsibilities and feels “defeat” (306) on his last day as Sheriff.

Bell blames not exactly consumerism, but parallel forces of totally unrestrained self-indulgence—“you can’t have a dope business without dopers” (304). But, in the end, the violence he sees is so far outside accepted norms that he falls back on metaphysical terms: “I know as certain as death that there ain’t nothing short of the second coming of Christ that can slow this train” (159).

As in *American Psycho*, it is the appalling prospect of devastating casual violence, totally unmitigated by considerations of compassion, which points up the picture of cultural collapse. In McCarthy’s novel the agent of violence is Chigurh. Chigurh is devoid of personality and we learn nothing about him as a human being; indeed his immunity to pain and injury make him seem almost an automaton. He is figured as simply the agent of irrevocably violent forces of chance fate; he spins a coin to see who dies and who lives and tells Moss’s wife, just before he kills her: “You can say that things could have turned out differently. That they could have been some other way. But what does that mean? They are not some other way. They are this way” (260). As in *American*

Psycho, and indeed *Let It Come Down*, the often fearful forces governing our lives are considered to be ineluctable, and traditional humanist endeavours and values have no relevance to the situation at all.

Notes

1 All quotations from Darrow's summation are from the unpaginated "trial" section of the leopoldandloeb.com website cited in the Bibliography. This website quotes the entire summation verbatim.

2 The nineteenth century is generally viewed as a period when deterministic thought dominated. That said, Leopold's interest in Nietzsche (who was brought to public attention in the United States by H.L. Mencken in 1908) speaks to the fact that, at least by the early twentieth century, proto-existentialist thought to some extent co-existed with the determinism on which Darrow's defense was grounded.

Nonetheless, it is hard to deny that deterministic thought remained very strong in the early part of the twentieth century. The prominent biologist J.B.S. Haldane, impressed by Lange's studies of twins (which appeared to show that criminality was genetically determined), wrote an article in *Harpers* in the late nineteen-twenties entitled "Scientific Calvinism," which stated unequivocally that "in the course of a century similar data [to Lange's] will have accumulated for thousands of pairs of twins. It will then be possible to say with certainty that at least eighty per cent (or some such figure) of these moral decisions that land us in jail or otherwise are predetermined." He concluded that "every educated person will be substantially a determinist in ethics" (555). In parallel with this interest in determinism in the early twentieth century, much attention was paid to the concepts of eugenics—in particular to the proposal that the human stock could and should be genetically managed. Eugenic theory drew much of its legitimacy from the deterministic belief that human behaviour and physiology was shaped by heredity. In a U.S. Supreme Court case from 1927, as prominent a jurist as Justice Oliver Wendell

Holmes justified the compulsory sterilization of a feeble-minded woman as follows: “It is better for all the world if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kin... Three generations of imbeciles is enough” (quoted by Rennie 87). In their study *Not in Our Genes*, Richard Lewontin and his co-authors indicate that the flag of determinism was carried well into the mid- to late twentieth century by the American New Right. They cite particularly a 1969 article by Arthur Jensen in the *Harvard Educational Review* in which he claims that the difference in IQ test performance between blacks and whites is due to genetic factors and concludes that the former were thus best educated for low-level mechanical jobs (Lewontin *et al.*, 19).

3 Sign, Keatsway Elementary School, Keatsway, Waterloo, Ontario. June 2011 (personal observation).

4 In his article on Lombroso in *Pioneers of Criminology*, Marvin E. Wolfgang explains atavism thus:

The concept of atavism (from Latin *atavus*, ancestor, great-great-grandfather’s father: from *avus*, grandfather) postulated a reversion to a primitive or sub-human type of man, characterized physically by a variety of inferior morphological features reminiscent of apes and lower primates, occurring in the more simian “savages.” It is additionally implied that the mentality of atavistic individuals is that of primitive man, that they are biological “throwbacks” to an earlier stage of evolution and that these “throwbacks” will inevitably be contrary to the rules and expectations of modern civilized society. (247)

5 Lombroso believed that particular classes of criminals had different sub-sets of atavistic physical characteristics. Habitual homicides, for example, have, among other features, cold glassy eyes, large noses and strong jaws (Wolfgang 251).

6 Quoted by Maurice Parmalee in his Preface to the *Modern Criminal Science Series* edition of Lombroso's *magnum opus Crime: Its Causes and Remedies* (xiv). This publication was part of a series commissioned by the 1909 National conference of Criminal Law and Criminology at North-Western University. The inclusion of Lombroso's work in this series indicates the considerable reputation he had garnered in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

7 Quoted by Rennie (91). This study by Lange was the one discussed in J.B.S. Haldane's article "Scientific Calvinism" referenced in note 2. Later studies of twins have provided mixed results, but, surprisingly, a very large study of Danish adoptees published in 1975 led its author to conclude that, taken together with earlier twin studies, the study "support a hypothesis of the existence of genetic influences on the aetiology of criminality." (Rennie 91).

8 Quoted by Rennie (9).

9 Heer, Jet. "What is it about Whitey Bulger that makes people think of Robin Hood." *Globe and Mail* 25 June 2011: F5+. Criminals also appear to sometimes entertain fantasies of themselves as heroes. A feature on Daniel Wolfe (the co-founder of the aboriginal gang "The Indian Posse", who was imprisoned for murder and subsequently died in a jailhouse stabbing, (Friesen, Joe. "The Ballad of Daniel Wolfe." *Globe and Mail* 18 June 2011: F1+), quotes Richard Wolfe (brother of Daniel and co-founder of the gang) as saying, in words eerily reminiscent of Bigger Thomas's to his

lawyer shortly before his execution in Richard Wright's Native Son: "We did feel pride...No matter what, when we pass away...when they bring up the Indian Posse, they're going to remember our names".

10 Quoted by Richard Davison (11).

11 In his *Introduction to Critical Essays on Frank Norris*, quoted by Barbara Hochman (Preface).

12 From an 1899 letter to Isaac F. Marcosson, quoted by William E. Cain (200).

13 From a column entitled "The Novel with a 'Purpose'" in *World's Work* for May 1902. See *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris* (ed. Donald Pizer) (92).

14 Ahnebrink shows that there are particularly close parallels between *L'Assomoir* and *McTeague*, in character, themes and scenarios (for example, both involve opening panoramas of street scenes, and set-piece weddings): see pages 27-34 of his study. Norris was an enthusiastic reader of Zola's fiction and was frequently observed on the Berkeley campus carrying Zola's novels.

15 The entire text of the letter is reproduced in Norton Critical edition of *McTeague* (325)—see Bibliography for publication details.

16 From Norris's *Novelists of the Future: The Training They Will Need*, quoted by Schierenbeck (64).

17 See *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris* (ed. Donald Pizer) (78).

18 Judith Flanders has documented the growth (through the agency of newspapers, novels and theatre) of the Victorians' fascination with criminals, particularly murderers, in her *The Invention of Murder: How the Victorians Reveled in Death and Detection and Created Modern Crime*. In the context of the contrast between the fictional McTeague

and the factual Collins, it is of interest that Flanders has traced many examples of an ameliorating tendency in the literary treatment of real-life murderers. To take one example, Eugene Aram, who brutally murdered a young shoemaker in Yorkshire in 1745, was transformed, in subsequent poetic, novelistic and theatrical treatments during the nineteenth century, into a sensitive, even noble, soul who aspired to the higher things in life and was betrayed into crime by the exigencies of his social circumstances (99-108).

19 Dreiser in a letter to Jack Wilgus (April 20, 1927): quoted in Mookerjee (84).

20 Quoted in Matthiessen (216).

21 See Moers, Part IV, Chapters 3 and 4 for an extensive treatment of Dreiser's interest in, and relationship with, Loeb.

22 In a letter to Donald McCord, dated 10 September, 1935: quoted by Clare Eby (7).

23 Quoted by Clare Eby (109-110) from Veblen's *The Place of Science in Modern Civilization*, and from *The Theory of the Leisure Class* respectively.

24 Quoted by Philip L. Gerber (35).

25 Dreiser himself, it seems, achieved an early freedom from any such inclinations. According to Lawrence Hussman (10), in *A Book About Myself* Dreiser declares his beliefs that morality is relative not absolute, and that moral laws are function of physiological and sociological considerations: the only true laws being those of change and chance.

26 Cassuto considers Clyde to be unfortunately positioned halfway between the "sentimental" male protagonists of the nineteenth century and the "hard-boiled" heroes who succeeded him. He is thus not capable of developing sufficient selfishness to successfully carry through his project of murder and social amelioration. This argument

is flawed in that it fails to recognize that most “hard-boiled” heroes are not totally selfish, but retain a grudging fealty to accepted moral standards – Sam Spade does, after all, in the end, turn Brigid O’Shaughnessy over to the law. In any case, my emphasis is different from Cassuto’s. I consider the important issue to be Clyde’s inability to achieve an existential independence from the cultural values which surround him (which results in his mental agony in the third book), rather than his inability to develop a sufficiently impervious shell of selfishness, and thus carry off a murder.

27 Quoted by Paul Skenazy (20-1).

28 See for example Cawelti’s “The Concept of Formula in the Study of Popular Literature” and “Notes toward an Aesthetic of Popular Culture.”

29 Quoted by Joseph T. Skerrett Jr (115).

30 See Felgar (91).

31 Perhaps the most egregious example of this over-interpretation is Butler’s assertion that Mary “envisions Bigger as a black stud” (59); at best this is merely an unstated hint in the text.

32 Aime J. Ellis takes a different approach to Bigger’s bullying, suggesting that it can be comprehended as part of the homosocial relationships that socially oppositional young black males typically forge and sustain as a means of “sustaining sanity in the midst of chronic disempowerment” (185). Further, Ellis considers Bigger’s violent behavior as an assertion of self and as part of his effort to “restore his self-respect, and assert his humanity” (186). Ellis’s analysis, while finely limned, suffers because it largely ignores the fact that at no point in *Native Son* does Wright even implicitly condone Bigger’s violence as liberating, empowering, or in any other way positive. Indeed, in “How Bigger

was Born” he refers explicitly to the “squalid life” of Bigger’s first real-life model (435). Rather, as discussed at the beginning of Chapter 5, Arnold Rampersad has correctly emphasized that Wright was above all impelled by the urgency of underlining the total horror of the racial violence that would overwhelm Whites unless they changed their approach to Blacks.

33 In her article “The Vanguard of Modernity: Richard Wright’s *The Outsider*” Sarah Relyea has argued for the centrality of Cross’s race to *The Outsider*, writing that “Wright’s philosophical concepts assume their full meaning as the thoughts and actions of characters inhabiting a world demarcated by race” (190) and claiming that, writing during the early ‘fifties, Wright felt impelled to give Cross an “embodied speaking position” (190). Relyea sees Damon as claiming “a finally impossible freedom from the symbols and rituals of race—notably the black body—that are used to police the desires of the men and women who inhabit the modern West” (195). However, Cross’s tragedy is not entrapment in his blackness (indeed there is no support from the text for the contention that Cross wants to escape this aspect of his existence in Chicago more than any other), but rather his failure to turn the existential autonomy he wins so dearly to any kind of meaningful account.

34 See “Notes on the Text,” HarperPerennial edition of *The Outsider* (588-589).

35 Patricia Highsmith in Kenneth R. Timmerman, “An Interview With Patricia Highsmith,” *The Paris Reporter*, April 1980. Bern Archive (of Highsmith’s personal papers). Quoted in Peters (153-154).

36 Patricia Highsmith in unpublished interview with Nicola Thorne, in Diogenes

Papers, Bern Archive. Included with letter sent to Tanja Howard Literary Agency, 28th March 1995, concerning a possible biography of Highsmith, Bern Archive. Quoted in Peters (154).

37 Patricia Highsmith in *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction* (1983). Quoted by Grey Gowrie (xviii).

38 Quoted by Grey Gowrie (xi).

39 Patricia Highsmith in Hugh Herbert, "Maid a' killing," Review of *Ripley's Game*, *Arts Guardian* 18th March 1974. Bern Archive. Quoted in Peters (146).

40 Patricia Highsmith in *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction* (1983). Quoted by Grey Gowrie (xviii).

41 Bret Easton Ellis in interview with Roger Cohen ("Bret Easton Ellis Answers Critics of *American Psycho*," *New York Times*, 6 March 1991, C131); quoted in Freccero (51).

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