

*Routledge Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature*

# ON THE AVENUE OF THE MYSTERY

THE POSTWAR COUNTERCULTURE IN NOVELS  
AND FILM

Gary Hentzi



# On the Avenue of the Mystery

This volume is a study of eight major novels from the postwar period (1945–65) in conjunction with the films made from them during a later period of a little less than three decades straddling the millennium (1985–2012). The comparison of these novels (by Ken Kesey, Paul Bowles, Carson McCullers, Jack Kerouac, James Baldwin, Alexander Trocchi, William Burroughs, and Peter Matthiessen) with their film adaptations offers the opportunity for a historical reassessment not only of the novels themselves but also of the global counterculture of the years 1965–75, which they prefigure in a variety of ways. Appearing more than a decade after the waning of the counterculture and in some cases as much as fifty years after the novels on which they are based, the films display significant revisions and omissions prompted by the historical and cultural changes of the intervening years. Whereas these changes are nowadays often interpreted in purely political terms, this book argues that the experience of mystery and its decline is central to the novels and films and is a key feature of the period of cultural transformation that they bookend. At once a work of literary criticism, film studies, and cultural history, this book has the potential to reach both an academic audience and the broader readership that has long existed for these novels as well as the even broader one interested in reappraising the period of the global counterculture—among the most important of the influences that have shaped the contemporary world.

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# On the Avenue of the Mystery

## The Postwar Counterculture in Novels and Film

Gary Hentzi



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# Preface

The Beats are out of fashion. In the academic world, to be sure, they have never really been *in* fashion, but the condescension that has long been the rule among academics is nowadays widely felt beyond the academy. Books that were once deemed essential reading by those who lived through the most transformative period in living memory—the global counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s—have come to be looked down upon as something outgrown and are cited more often for their distance from twenty-first-century life than for what they may yet have to contribute to it.

Among other things, this development has left us with a skewed picture of the postwar novel in English. In writing the Beats out of literary history, one narrows the view of everyone they've touched, including some of the most distinguished practitioners of literary fiction in the past half-century—figures like Thomas Pynchon, Robert Stone, Denis Johnson, and, in England, Will Self, whose statement of artistic purpose might have come from Alexander Trocchi (“I want to make [people] feel that certain categories with which they are used to perceiving the world are unstable”).<sup>1</sup> One must either ignore these writers' evident debt to their Beat precursors or else deny their accomplishments outright.

This book returns to the work of eight very different novelists, not all of whom can or should be called Beat. Resisting foreshortened perspectives, it suggests that a time of neglect may be just the time to look again at the writers of the postwar counterculture, and it presents readings that aim to set the experience of mystery at the heart of their enterprise. No doubt my focus on this ancient term will strike many as dubious to the extent that the most common associations of the word are sacred: it calls to mind forms of esoteric knowledge and occult practice, a heritage that invites the skepticism of a more tough-minded age and goes a long way toward explaining why these books fell out of fashion to begin with. In an expanded sense, however, it offers a wealth of applications both sacred *and* secular; and my contention is that, more flexibly than any other, it highlights a prevailing strain of the counterculture and even describes some influential tendencies in the intellectual culture of the period. I have in mind thinkers like Thomas Kuhn, Michel Foucault, and other exponents of discontinuous or nonlinear

history, whose work insists on the limits of science and so leaves open the possibility of regions beyond its reach. The sense of impending change, the awareness of accumulating data that can't be adequately explained in existing terms is also a kind of mystery, whether one calls the ensuing transformation a paradigm shift or a revelation; either way, its causes are not fully accessible to reason. As for the affinity between mystery and the counterculture, one need only recall the widespread feeling that the lives assigned us by convention are not necessarily the ones we have to live. There are always other, unseen possibilities.

I don't mean to imply that nothing significant has changed over the past fifty years, of course, nor that everything in these novels remains as vital as it once seemed. On the contrary, there is no dearth of critical judgments in the following pages and no pretense that the novelists are our contemporaries. Moreover, another transformation, one even more momentous than the aforementioned shift in literary opinion, has occurred during the same span of time: prose fiction itself has been displaced as the dominant narrative medium in our culture by film and television. This is a claim too sweeping to be proven in any rigorous sense but undeniable to anyone who has followed the fortunes of the novel over the past half-century; for literature is no longer what it once was, and the assumption that it will continue to command the attention of a broad public is increasingly uncertain. We have few ways to isolate the consequences of such a far-reaching development; however, the attempts by a succession of accomplished filmmakers to bring these books to the screen decades later offer a revealing, if not entirely encouraging indication of the challenges it poses. Considered together with their literary sources, they furnish the material for a series of case studies in which mystery is precisely what is reduced or refused in the translation from one medium to another and the transition from one era to the next.

Still, the evocation of mystery remains possible. But to find a contemporary example with an audience as large as the one that the Beats once enjoyed, one must look not just beyond those bohemian precincts where their heirs might be expected to dwell and not just to film and television but in places seemingly removed from the novels of the postwar counterculture. One must look, I will suggest, to filmmakers like Alfonso Cuarón, who along with so many members of his generation has been shaped by the counterculture that he lived through as a child and has transformed its accents with unprecedented subtlety. In *Roma*, a film set in a neighborhood long enshrined in Beat history, only blocks from the building where William Burroughs once fired a fatal shot (but immeasurably farther from the world of his novels), mystery is reinvented in a narrative that takes up defining themes of the counterculture and, with a quiet force and pointed shifts of emphasis, brings them triumphantly forward into the twenty-first century. Whether this and the other counterexamples enumerated in my concluding chapter will turn out to be isolated triumphs remains to be seen. Nevertheless, they offer convincing testimony to the persistence of mystery

as well as something like a revelation of the metamorphoses that the counterculture has undergone between the postwar era and our own.

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Although writing is a solitary task, thinking is not always so unsociable, and this book has benefitted in ways too numerous to count from conversations with others. Jeffrey Freedman read drafts of every chapter and contributed the insights of a professional historian in many long and pleasant discussions. One of my oldest friends, David Frye, brought his enthusiasm for the Beats to early versions of the chapters on Kerouac and Burroughs. Another old friend, Vernon Shetley, gave me valuable advice after reading an early version of the chapter on Alexander Trocchi, part of which appeared in *Scottish Studies Review*, 9.2 (Autumn 2008): 21–42. Finally, this book could not have been written without the love and support of Argie Collie.

## Note

- 1 See Brian Finney, “Will Self’s Transgressive Fictions,” *Postmodern Culture* 11.3 (May 2001), and compare the epigraph to Chapter 4 of this book. It hardly needs to be added that the influence of the Beats is not limited to white male writers, especially if one widens the focus beyond the novel to take in the many notable examples of first-person prose by women from Diane di Prima to Patti Smith or the homage to Jack Kerouac offered by the Filipino-American writer Alex Tizon in his recent memoir, *Big Little Man: In Search of My Asian Self* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2014), 129–30.

# 1 After the Rebellion: The Postwar Counterculture and Its Legacy

Thus will tomorrow's mysteries be born from the ruins of today's.

Aragon, *Le Paysan de Paris*

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) enjoys as secure a place in the history of American cinema as any film of its era, and its virtues were hardly overlooked at the time. The recipient of all five major Academy Awards, it was the most lavishly honored of what would come to be known as the “New Hollywood,” “American New Wave,” or just “seventies” films—studio productions that, following the decline of the studio system, departed conspicuously from the conventions of Golden Age Hollywood cinema. Not only did it establish the American reputation of its director, Miloš Forman, it also showcased a wealth of memorable supporting turns, unveiled one of the great movie villains in Louise Fletcher’s Nurse Ratched, and provided the defining role of Jack Nicholson’s early career. Rarely has an actor inhabited a part as irresistibly as Nicholson did that of Randle Patrick McMurphy; and with his captivating energy, effortless range of emotion, and inexhaustible supply of smiles, smirks, winks, and stares, he won only the highest praise.

An interesting thing happened when the critics came to sort out their feelings about the film, however—they didn’t entirely like it. The script’s treatment of mental illness was cavalier and unserious, they felt. Patients don’t just cure themselves through high spirits, and although the filmmakers appeared to have aimed for a kind of comedy, there was nothing funny about electroshock treatments, especially administered as punishment. By such means, it seemed that the viewer was being manipulated into an emotional reaction beyond the legitimate parameters of the drama. For example, Roger Ebert, who thought the film was trying to make “larger points than its story really should carry,” observed the response that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* drew from the audience at its premiere and testily noted that the director’s “ultimate failure” was so far from being recognized that McMurphy’s final assault on his stone-faced tormentor was greeted by “sophomoric cheers and applause.”<sup>1</sup> And for his part Vincent Canby

## 2 *After the Rebellion*

sounded a bit like one of the wary psychiatrists onscreen: “I suspect that we are meant to make connections between Randle’s confrontation with the oppressive Nurse Ratched and the political turmoil in this country in the 1960’s.”<sup>2</sup>

It’s tempting to imagine the émigré director, who once described his antiauthoritarian blockbuster as “a Czech movie,” raising an eyebrow over that last comment.<sup>3</sup> By 1975, the counterculture was a global phenomenon, having emerged into the mainstream about a decade earlier, and its politics were so ambiguous that the overbearing routines of a psychiatric hospital could as easily suggest a heavy-handed communist regime as recall the government that was just then wrapping up its involvement in Vietnam. It wouldn’t be long before others would level those criticisms and more against *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, noting that it isn’t a terribly progressive gesture to represent coercive authority as an assertive professional woman backed up by angry minorities or to recommend the health-giving benefits of an alcohol-soaked fraternity bash graced with dimwitted but accommodating female revelers. Yet no one would deny that the film derived a large measure of its success from the facility with which it tapped into the spirit of rebellion that characterized the global counterculture of the preceding decade, however various the battles its audience may have been fighting in the privacy of their own minds. It owed this aspect of its appeal to something that it did *not* share with most other New Hollywood films: its adaptation from a decidedly nonconformist novel of the previous era. For that period, too, had a counterculture, less populous and visible than would later be the case, which, to distinguish it from the global counterculture of the late sixties and early seventies, might be called the postwar counterculture, although its adherents were more likely to be called a host of other names: Beats, bohemians, or hipsters as well as less colorful ones like junkies, delinquents, or bums.

This book is concerned with a group of novels that date from that earlier period, with the films that were made from them much later, and, more distantly, with the direction of narrative filmmaking in the twenty-first century. Some of these novels have been conventionally grouped together from the time of their publication, and their authors either knew one another well or at least moved in the same circles in locations that figure prominently in the novels themselves: New York, San Francisco, Mexico City, Paris, and Tangier. Beyond the superficial social and geographical connections, what they have in common is a deliberate effort to rebel against the mainstream cultural norms of their era and, in at least some cases, to model alternatives. This effort was anything but systematic, and it would be fruitless to search for a unifying program or set of values among them. To an extent, their affinities with each other have been underscored by the ensuing cultural upheaval that they, in their different ways, seem to anticipate. We read these books on the farther shore of a flood that their authors could not have known was coming, a period whose controversies are still being debated

to this day; and our reading is inevitably touched by an awareness of those crucial intervening years, which divide the postwar era from the world that has come into being since the splintering and waning of the global counterculture in the 1970s. Thus, while one issue in the chapters that follow is the complex and interrelated ways that the major themes of the postwar counterculture figure in the novels themselves, I am also concerned with the afterlife of these novels in history—indeed, as the main business of this book is to offer interpretations, it is a part of that afterlife, along with all the other interpretations that have been put forward over the years. Because the novels anticipate a certain strain of the global counterculture, each new reading of them is unavoidably concerned with how the whole of the counterculture in its postwar and global phases is now understood, a question that is still something more than an academic concern. The novels remain with us as unsettled presences because so many emanations of the counterculture continue to haunt the contemporary world.

How to summarize something so large and various? Perhaps it's judicious to admit at the outset that it can't be done and to begin by acknowledging the limits of one's project. For many, the counterculture will immediately call to mind "political turmoil," as it did for Vincent Canby; but the counterculture was much more than politics alone and, as the word suggests, can be better described as an episode of rapid, large-scale *cultural* change, one in which politics was far from irrelevant but also not the whole of the matter. As such, it took many forms, some lasting, some ephemeral; and there is now a visible tendency to identify the entire episode with its more trivial exhibitions, making it easier to rope off and consign to the past. Instead, this book concentrates on the earliest appearances of a deeper strain in novels of the period immediately preceding the rise of the global counterculture. With only one exception, these novels are American because from the end of the Second World War through the era of the global counterculture, the United States was at the forefront of cultural change in what was already well on the way to becoming a globalized world. Unlike Europe, the Soviet bloc, China, and the developing countries, where Marxism remained a major influence or anti-imperialist struggles took precedence, the United States met the future without the example or the burden of an institutionalized radical culture and without the need to throw off a resented foreign presence.

The strain of the counterculture first glimpsed in these novels is religious in the broadest sense of the word (and here the word must be understood broadly enough to accommodate forms of philosophical atheism as well as the continuing influence of ancient religious traditions).<sup>4</sup> In this respect, the counterculture was a response to perhaps the single most distinctive feature of modernity: the desacralization of the world, the decline of organized religion, and the resulting displacement of spiritual life onto other areas of endeavor, like political activism and the making of art. The first of these statements—that the counterculture expressed a religious impulse—will

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strike no one as controversial, but the second takes us a step closer to the concerns of this book; for the abandonment of traditional forms of institutionalized religious worship has continued and even accelerated in the half-century since the apogee of the counterculture, as has the advance of science, technology, and the kind of managerial techniques that so troubled its first proponents.<sup>5</sup> That which can be known with a high degree of certainty has an obvious utility in an uncertain world, despite the uses to which it has sometimes been put, and I have no intention of renewing the assault on science mounted by some of those early advocates. But vast regions of experience lie outside of what can be understood and managed by rational methods, and at this moment in history the unwillingness of some to recognize the authority of science even in its own sphere points to difficulties in areas where science cannot be expected to solve our problems. One may accept that, at any given time, science offers the most reliable knowledge of what *can* be known yet still feel that it is what remains unknown and perhaps unknowable that is most in question.

While the subject of religion inevitably raises questions of belief and faith, the effort to understand the religious dimension of the counterculture as a complex and various phenomenon with its own internal tensions calls for a concept that can stand in a meaningful relationship to the precise knowledge and pragmatic effectiveness of science and technology. Belief and faith are sufficient only to those who have them. What is needed is a term that evokes the large areas of experience currently inaccessible to reason but does so without requiring submission to the irrational. The claim of this book is that *mystery* is just such a master concept—that it is the defining theme of the postwar counterculture and the thread that leads to a key emphasis of the counterculture during its global phase in the years 1965–75. It is, of course, a term that looks backward as well as forward, an ancient idea that predates even the Greek mystery religions and the Judeo-Christian tradition with which it is commonly identified; and that long history lends resonance to its appearance in more recent contexts. For my purposes, however, it is the formal structure of the concept that will be primary: a sense of the unknown, an intimation of something hidden and as-yet unnoticed, a feeling that there may be more to the world than meets the eye. To cite only one distinguished antecedent in American thought, one might recall William James' insistence on the crucial importance of recognizing "an ultimate opacity in things, a dimension of being which escapes our theoretic control."<sup>6</sup> Understood in this nondenominational fashion, the awareness of mystery involves a principled openness and humility, an attitude toward experience that is fundamental to the humanities and calls for responses beyond scientific investigation, one of which is represented by these novels. Faced with the unknown, we tell stories about it.

This perspective is inseparable from the historical issue of the standing that these books enjoyed during the period of the global counterculture and their uncertain fortunes since then. If the counterculture was marked by a

depth of feeling that deserves to be called religious, then for a while at least the novels in this study had the status of something like a body of religious myth, a kind of extra-literary distinction that has not outlasted the period, despite the ongoing reverence accorded them by some readers. The rising and falling arc of the novels in the culture at large accounts in part for an uncommon feature of these chapters: they present readings of the books together with their more recent film adaptations, an approach that acknowledges the mythical component of their popular career by treating them as narratives apart from any one medium, while at the same time recognizing a historical and cultural shift so large that it is often simply ignored. This is the unquantifiable but indisputable effect of technology on the telling of stories, a development so consequential that, since the period of the counterculture, literature has been displaced by film and television as the dominant narrative medium in the modern world.

Many factors come into play here, and I will not pretend that it's possible to account for all of them in detail: the breakdown of the distinction between high art and popular culture, the substitution of a visual and dramatic form for a linguistic one, even the collective nature of the filmmaker's enterprise, a feature of the medium that makes it more akin to architecture than to painting or photography and forces one to use the name of the director as shorthand for a whole stable of talent. In such an art form, the possibility that individual creative decisions by a variety of people may have an outsized effect on the material is incontestable. Nevertheless, it is also surely worth noting that these films are the work of some of the most celebrated figures in the industry, and without discounting the complications involved in drawing comparisons between different media, one is still struck by a general trend in the record of their efforts. It is a record of partial successes at best, a sequence of diminishing achievements that, taken as a whole, feel as if they were executed in the face of accumulating cultural resistance. And this, finally, is the justification for devoting close attention to the details of the relationship between these films and their literary models: they are instances of myth in the latter stages of decline, a visual chronicle of the eclipse of mystery.

Here, too, one can identify various precipitating factors, some of which belong to the heritage of the counterculture itself, like the advent of modern feminism; and I certainly don't mean to imply that the cinema has been without any other viable models than the novels of the postwar counterculture, which show their age in ways that the following chapters duly record. Still, the centrality of mystery to the legacy of these novels makes the limited success of their cinematic adaptations an especially revealing example of a more general problem. The waning influence of organized religion and of literature itself, together with the proliferation of narrative forms made possible by technology, have combined to bring about what is, in effect, a religious vacuum. Narrative is more available than ever, to those who rarely pick up a book no less than to those who have been formed by literary

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culture; and as a result, it has been devalued, reduced to a means of manipulation or distraction rather than a transformative response to contemporary life. The legacy of the postwar counterculture demands another look in part because the question of whether film and television will continue to offer narratives capable of delivering an experience that can be called religious is far from settled.

Much depends, therefore, on how the many strains of the counterculture are received, and this book ends with a few examples that suggest a way forward and a rethinking of mystery in the most vital of contemporary terms. As my language suggests, that effort of critical review will involve encounters with ideas as well as narratives, especially in this introductory chapter, which attempts a kind of intellectual history by reviewing the major conceptual and aesthetic influences on the postwar counterculture in the strong form of their earliest statements. These influences are far from obscure; however, there are at least three reasons for going back over them here. One is to demonstrate that each has at its core a form of mystery and that even those schools of thought that break most decisively with the Judeo-Christian tradition nevertheless preserve and recast this central theme. The second, taken up in the latter part of the chapter, is to propose a framework within which the diverse currents of influence might be understood—the traditional distinction between cataphatic and apophatic theologies—for as often as they have been discussed, the ways in which the counterculture is marked not only by their commonalities but also by the tensions between them have never been given a thorough exposition. Third, there is the obligation to adopt a critical perspective on both the period itself and the influences that touched these writers, a project that must be taken up anew in each subsequent period. Insofar as the counterculture has shaped the contemporary world, this will be a critique from within; and the reader will have no trouble detecting my own sympathies among those influences, including elements of Buddhist tradition and certain late developments in continental philosophy, which are themselves late developments in the central tradition of the West—what Emmanuel Levinas liked to call “the Bible and the Greeks.” The postwar era saw the emergence of the very idea of a counterculture, and this book treats ideas as no less worthy of study than works of art, provided they are studied critically and in the long view of history.

Finally, the chapter concludes by returning to the exemplary novel and film with which I began and demonstrating in detail that they are at once the most and the least typical of the novels and films discussed in this book. The experience of narrative is the reason why books like this are written; and no matter how much attention one devotes to ideas, nothing can take the place of close engagement with the texts, an effort that I hope will be an enhancement of that experience rather than an account of shortcomings handed down from some would-be superior intellectual vantage point. It is perhaps a sign of our current condition that such hopes have

an old-fashioned ring to them. If so, it can't be helped. The sentiment is genuine.

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In later years, reflecting on the youthful experiences of his generation, Allen Ginsberg gave characteristic utterance to a defining feature of the postwar era. It was, he noted, a period marked by awareness of the Bomb, an external cataclysm that had its counterpart in the release of comparably potent internal forces:

The absoluteness of the Bomb . . . invoked an absoluteness of inquiry into the nature of consciousness. Because, after all, that year, '45, was the same year that Dr. Albert Hofmann discovered LSD, an equally important scientific opening up—in fact, maybe more important than the Bomb in terms of—it's the mind bomb, the bomb that opens up the mind.<sup>7</sup>

The neatness of the symmetry is conveniently fudged. Hofmann first synthesized LSD in 1938 and became aware of its effects on human consciousness five years later when he accidentally ingested traces of the drug and found himself involuntarily embarked on the world's first acid trip.<sup>8</sup> Still, one can forgive Ginsberg the minor historical inaccuracy for the sake of a suggestive analogy. The year 1945 saw the appearance of a weapon of overwhelming destructive force, which raised the possibility that modern Western culture, far from tracing an ascending curve of progress, had instead brought into being the vehicle of its own destruction and perhaps the rest of the world's as well. That once unimaginable possibility, a horror that gave new urgency to the feeling that the official culture had somehow gone awry, was met by a correspondingly forceful eruption of mental energies—in this case embodied by a powerful mind-altering substance but by no means limited to pharmaceutical innovations, however important LSD may have been to Ken Kesey's original version of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) or, for that matter, to Ginsberg's own verse. More remarkable than any drug, the underground creative explosion of the postwar period would be both an inspiration to the global counterculture of the subsequent decade and an irresistible challenge to filmmakers of a later era.

Such is the dichotomy that recurs throughout the literature and social commentary of the day: a mainstream culture, described as superficial, mechanical, regimented, morally obtuse, secretly malign, or frankly insane; and an opposing culture, often credited with an extraordinary degree of imaginative power, vitality, honesty, or insight. It was during the postwar era that the word *counterculture* began to appear with some regularity in the sociological literature, and the concept was first formally theorized at that time as well, although in comparison to the heady remarks

of the poets and novelists, that initial formulation was the very model of academic sobriety. In 1960, J. Milton Yinger published a paper entitled "Contraculture and Subculture" (the unfamiliar variant was his preferred coinage, which he later reluctantly relinquished in a concession to widespread use of the more common term). Reviewing the substantial literature on the subject, he distinguished between his proposed concept and the closely related one of subculture, recommending the use of the term *contraculture* "wherever the normative system of a group contains, as a primary element, a theme of conflict with the values of the total society, where personality variables are directly involved in the development and maintenance of the group's values, and wherever its norms can be understood only by reference to the relationships of the group to a surrounding dominant culture."<sup>9</sup>

For those not versed in the language of the social sciences, the part of this definition that needs unpacking is the stipulation that "personality variables" will be "directly involved in the development and maintenance of the group's values." Acknowledging an overlap between the domains of sociology and psychology, the statement implies that this is not the sort of group that shapes the minds of its members to a preexisting ideology but rather that the group's ethos will itself be shaped to some extent by the disparate personalities it attracts. A counterculture is not a tightly organized institution like the military, which inducts new recruits into a well-established set of values and a sharply defined code of behavior. It is, by contrast, a loose-knit affiliation or "near-group," with an informal membership, imprecise roles, and minimally specified norms.<sup>10</sup> General and neutral though this definition may be, few would object to it as a characterization of the relationships that the writers of the postwar counterculture maintained with each other and with the larger society. They were a group whose individual personalities were at least as vivid as their collective identity.

Although Yinger aimed to develop the concept in such a way that it could be applied to the broadest possible range of examples, from seventeenth-century Quakers and Ranters to his own bohemian contemporaries, one case was foremost in the minds of his fellow sociologists, who had had a good deal to say about subcultures and countercultures over the preceding decade. In fact, the latter term had actually appeared in passing as early as 1951 in the pages of one of the dominant figures in the discipline, Talcott Parsons, who spoke of the urban street gang as a "counter-culture"; and the subject of delinquency would become a significant point of reference in discussions of the Beat Generation, if only because some of its most prominent personalities, like Jack Kerouac, so strenuously objected to the association.<sup>11</sup> Disavowing any kinship with "fellows in jeans with snap-knives and sweatshirts and swastikas tattooed under their armpits," Kerouac declared his allegiance to a pacifism that dated from his earliest years, thus anticipating a major emphasis of the global counterculture of the late 1960s: "in my childhood I'd been famous as an eccentric in my block for stopping the

younger kids from throwing rocks at the squirrels . . . I have never had anything to do with violence, hatred, cruelty, and all that horrible nonsense.”<sup>12</sup>

Yet one can't help but feel that Kerouac here protests too much—that a pronounced vein of *nostalgie de la boue* runs through much Beat writing and that the work of Alexander Trocchi and William Burroughs in particular betrays an undisguised fascination with criminality. It's evident, for example, in the high regard accorded to representative figures from the French tradition of the outlaw writer, like Rimbaud, Céline, and Genet; and others were more willing than Kerouac to blur the line between the beatnik and the delinquent, as did Norman Mailer in his much-discussed essay “The White Negro” (1957). This famously off-putting piece is probably best remembered for advancing an analogous comparison between the hipster and a creature of Mailer's imagination called The Negro, who “could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body.”<sup>13</sup> Not surprisingly, many living, breathing African Americans declined to recognize themselves in this portrait, notably Ralph Ellison (“the same old primitivism crap in a new package”) and James Baldwin, whose reaction to the essay is discussed in Chapter 5.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, as Kerouac's example shows, more than one beatnik would be affronted by Mailer's effort to draw a related parallel between their kind and the delinquent—“two strong eighteen-year old hoodlums, let us say,” who “beat in the brains of a candy-store keeper,” thus violating private property, entering into “a new relation with the police,” and introducing “a dangerous element” into their lives (312). One is almost grateful he didn't specify the complexion of his deviant exemplars.

A calculated outrageousness is, of course, a prominent feature of Mailer's style, and it's advisable not to be distracted by his provocations from the substance of his argument, which has at its core an idea—or perhaps an ideal—that appears in various forms in the work of more than one writer of the postwar counterculture. It's hinted at in a phrase from the passage quoted above: “the enormous present.” “The White Negro” opens strongly, assessing the psychological damage wrought by the awareness of concentration camps and atomic weapons, which has led to a supreme irony: the citizens of a civilization that has organized itself with maximum efficiency by mastering time are compelled to live with the apprehension that history itself has ceased to unfold in meaningful fashion now that death has become automated and meaningless. Cringing fearfully before the ominous self-image reflected by these catastrophes, most have opted for a depressing conformity, “at what damage to the mind and the heart and the liver and the nerves no research foundation for cancer will discover in a hurry” (304)—most, but not all. For there has come into being a new species of dissident, the hipster, who has chosen “to explore the domain of experience where security is boredom and therefore sickness, and one exists in the present, in

that enormous present which is without past or future, memory or planned intention" (304). The theme of immersion in the present moment, which is credited with a validity and freedom from neurosis unavailable to the timorous mainstream, is a constant in countercultural writing of the period, having already been taken up by Alexander Trocchi and by Kerouac himself, who was the unnamed recipient of a resonant tribute from Mailer: "on the avenue of the mystery along the road to 'It'" (316).<sup>15</sup> The wealth of the moment is undisclosed, available only to those willing to spend it without reserve.

"The White Negro" pursues a cartwheeling variety of subjects—along with primitivism and deviance, an incomplete list would include jazz, bullfighting, faith, slang, psychoanalysis, miscegenation, and orgasms good and bad—to some of which I will return. For the moment, however, it seems preferable to stick with the central theme as it is developed in the work of a polymathic writer with a keen interest in the challenge of living in the moment. Paul Goodman, whose most widely read book, *Growing Up Absurd* (1960), also yoked together the delinquent and the beatnik as perfectly understandable junior and senior products of the same dismaying social circumstances, was a novelist, a playwright, and a poet as well as a philosopher, a literary and social critic, an urbanist, an economist, a sociologist (though he blasted the discipline as morally comatose), and a practicing analyst, who advocated a brand of Gestalt psychology that offers a notable contrast to Mailer's breathless talk of uninhibited negroes and "philosophical" sociopaths.<sup>16</sup> By turns clear-eyed, eloquent, and hopelessly dated, his impassioned critique of American society remains worth the attention of anyone seeking to understand the intellectual atmosphere of the postwar period.

In his contribution to the theory of the Gestalt school, Goodman offered a view of human experience oriented in romantic fashion toward a behavioral ideal, which he presented as entirely achievable. Although one commonly distinguishes between the individual human organism, the cultural factors that shape its view of its surroundings, and the environment in which it exists, these categories are merely heuristic. Experience itself, when it is adequate to human needs, knows no such distinctions; rather, it is characterized by a sense of wholeness in which there is no awareness of a distance between oneself and the world. In fact, the mark of a satisfying human experience, one that has the potential to lead to growth, is precisely this feeling of harmonious completeness or "good gestalt." Such experiences need not be physical, yet one comes away with the impression that unselfconscious physical activity was always the model that Goodman held in mind, as if he were translating Wordsworth's "glad animal movements" into the language of theoretical psychology; and the feel of these experiences is invoked by a prose that mobilizes whole glossaries of incantatory phrases hung between quotation marks: "final contact," "in touch with," "organism/environment field," etc.<sup>17</sup> Many commentators, including Goodman himself, have noted

the resemblance of his position to Eastern schools of thought like Taoism and its later relative Zen Buddhism; however, for the purpose of the analyst, it matters little how one conceptualizes the process of overcoming alienation, only that one enjoy a fullness of experience sufficient to satisfy the demands of what he was entirely willing to call “human nature.”

About this last item Goodman was canny enough to realize that one can say nothing, that it can't be described apart from the experiences in which it participates. So how do we know it exists? His answer provides the link between his theoretical convictions and the social criticism that won him legions of readers among the young: we know it when it's been thwarted. Under healthy circumstances, the relationship between the organism and its environment is mutually constitutive, creative, and self-regulating; it's a developing process, an ongoing dance between partners so close as to be inseparable. But under unhealthy ones the subject retreats into itself, frustrated, alienated, and self-destructive. If that subject is a young male, it takes to shoplifting, wearing a leather jacket, and carrying brass knuckles; if a slightly older one, it grows a beard, frequents coffee houses, and disdains regular employment. And Goodman regarded pretty much everything about American society as unhealthy—jobs, entertainment, education, politics, sex, religion. Each was roundly excoriated in an exuberant display of the quality that makes large portions of *Growing Up Absurd* a delight to read even today, namely the sheer zest with which he assails the guardians of the official culture (“And *then* these baboons have the effrontery to declare that they give the people what the people demand”).<sup>18</sup> As a freelance voice in the wilderness, no more connected to any established institution than the large part of his readership then poised on the verge of adulthood, he was refreshingly beholden to no one.

Despite the broadly romantic orientation of his thought (and in conspicuous contrast to Mailer), Goodman was not inclined to romanticize deviance. Boys and young men whose desire for experience has been stifled make choices that are “rarely charming, usually stupid, and often disastrous; we cannot expect average kids to deviate with genius” (13). Yet this is not to say that he had no blind spots or eccentricities of his own. The problem the beatniks were facing, he maintained, is simply that “there is in fact no man's work for them to do”—hence their pursuit of hopped-up substitutes (282).<sup>19</sup> The adjectives “man's” and “manly” appear with some regularity in the pages of *Growing Up Absurd*, indicating that the human nature with which Goodman was concerned was masculine, and he informs us at the outset that marriage and children are more or less sufficient for the realization of the feminine variety. The book's utterly traditional view of gender roles pairs oddly with the author's steady allusions to the subject, not only yanking the reader back into the unthinking assumptions of sixty years ago but also raising the question of why Goodman was so sure it was relevant at all. For his most compelling declarations make it apparent that his criteria for the evaluation of society have nothing to do with gender. They are aesthetic

and moral: given the right environment, the human nature that Goodman was concerned to foster becomes capable of “behavior that has force, grace, discrimination, intellect, feeling” (6); and it’s the failure of an affluent society to create such an environment that he cannot abide. If one feels moved to observe that there is nothing inherently masculine about those excellent qualities and that the rest of humanity might very well want to cultivate them too, one is equally inclined to suspect that this observation had never crossed the author’s mind.

For Goodman, then, the project of seeking an unmediated absorption in the moment was a masculine one, and in this respect he is entirely representative of his contemporaries. Among the novelists considered in these chapters, Kerouac and Trocchi combine an interest in the theme of “the enormous present” with unmistakable and sometimes startling flourishes of sexism, and William Burroughs’ distaste for women was so extreme that it hardly needs pointing out (he once suggested that they represent an evolutionary error).<sup>20</sup> Even the suavely sophisticated Paul Bowles acknowledged in retrospect that, in the later chapters of *The Sheltering Sky*, his main female character “is and remains an object.”<sup>21</sup> It’s a larger question than this book can answer why so many men of the mid-twentieth century, including these otherwise unconventional and idiosyncratic representatives of the postwar counterculture, could view self-realization only as the achievement of a traditionally gendered masculine identity and, even more confounding, why that achievement so often involved denigration of the feminine one. The initial glimmerings of a widespread feminist awareness would have to await the global counterculture of the succeeding era, and the ensuing shift in attitudes toward gender roles is among the greatest challenges that filmmakers have had to face in adapting these novels to the screen. During the postwar years, the literary expression of the counterculture was an enterprise conducted by and about men to a degree that can only seem glaring in retrospect.<sup>22</sup> In the work of so many of these writers, there is no oppositional value—not even sanity—that cannot be swept up in the catch-all of a heroic masculinity.

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In his reflections on the shared characteristics of countercultures, Yinger observed that “countercultural movements often use foreign norms and values for their contrast conceptions; and the production and use of goods from another culture can, under some conditions, have a powerful dissolving effect on the established ways of doing things.”<sup>23</sup> For years after the heyday of the global counterculture, one had to look no farther than the nearest secondhand shop to find illustrations of these remarks in the form of discarded Mao suits and Nehru jackets, and I have already noted the passing resemblance of Goodman’s theoretical position to Taoism. There is much more to be said about the attractions of the non-Western world for

writers of the postwar counterculture; however, I would first like to review some of the cultural goods imported from other Western countries, and among these none is more important than France. At various times, Paris was home to the majority of the novelists whose work I will be discussing (the so-called Beat Hotel at 9 Rue Git-le-Cœur in the Latin Quarter has attained a legendary status reached by few other establishments with its flea-bag pedigree); and even one of the non-residents, Jack Kerouac, was steeped in French culture, visited the French capital late in his career, and used that visit as the basis of a novella, *Satori in Paris* (1966), whose title suggests the comparable status of Eastern and French influences on his work. For several others, the Parisian cultural milieu was even more significant, and its presence can be felt in elements drawn from a pair of well-known sources: existentialism and surrealism.

About the first of these it's difficult to say how much was acquired directly from books and how much was simply in the air during the postwar era, resulting in such period curiosities as the lecherous Gallic charlatan in Stanley Donen's *Funny Face* (1957). In the case of an early adopter like Paul Bowles, there is evidence of a comfortable familiarity with the literary models, as he was the first translator of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Huis Clos* (1944) and is responsible for the title, *No Exit*, by which the play is still usually known in this country.<sup>24</sup> The same can be said about Alexander Trocchi, who, in contrast to the truant narrator of *Young Adam*, had completed a master's degree in literature and philosophy, giving him the unlikely honor of being the most formally educated of the Beats.<sup>25</sup> Along with his residence in France during the early 1950s and involvement with Paris-based literary projects like the journal *Merlin*, the obvious influence of Camus and the less obvious one of Céline on *Young Adam* leave little doubt that he was at least broadly conversant with French literature of the period. In other cases, it's less easy to demonstrate a direct acquaintance with the literary and philosophical sources, but there is no question that the major ideas were almost unavoidable in the postwar literary world.

The title of Goodman's best-known book makes allusive reference to the most familiar of these intellectual imports. In contrast to the created universe of the Judeo-Christian mainstream, the hallmark of French existentialism was to regard the human condition as "absurd" in the sense that humanity was understood as having come into being as the product of no intention and with no plan for its subsequent existence (Goodman's point was that postwar society, despite its unprecedented affluence, did nothing to mitigate this aimless state of affairs). In Sartre's writings of the 1940s, the world is described as existing in a state of "facticity," and events are spoken of as "contingent"—that is, determined by no overriding design but simply *there* with an unshakable force that can be called fate as long as the word doesn't imply the interference of some deity. This is the philosophical background against which narrative developments like the typhoid infection in *The Sheltering Sky* or Cathie's unfortunate slip on the dock in *Young*

*Adam* take place. They are hardly without meaning, but such meanings as one might assign them can only be human.

Those human meanings are inseparable from human choices, although for characters in the novels of the postwar counterculture choice is often as much a matter of intuitive drift as of rational decision-making. Nevertheless, whether or not our choices are made in full awareness, they inevitably come to define us, as our actions slip into the finality of the past; and we move, with a consciousness of our own finitude, into a future realized out of nothingness—a future that is, in short, a mystery of a decisively different character than the one presented by providential views of human existence. This crucial feature of existentialist thought, an emphasis intrinsic to the phenomenological tradition that was so important to Sartre, is explicit in the work of Martin Heidegger, who was far and away the most important of Sartre's own influences. Beginning in "What Is Metaphysics?" (1929), Heidegger uses the concept of "the mystery" (*das Geheimnis*) to designate the concealed regions of Being, those hidden dimensions of possible experience that are currently unknown to us and include not only one's own future but also the whole range of alternative cultures that are mysterious as a result of one's having been "thrown into the world" within a particular cultural heritage.<sup>26</sup> If "the enormous present" represented one form of mystery to the writers of the postwar counterculture, the sense of the future as a choice among possible worlds represented another, and the incompletely knowable experiential fields of cultures beyond one's own added a host of further possibilities. The latter, to be sure, were possibilities that held little interest for the culturally chauvinistic Heidegger, but they would prove irresistibly attractive to writers like Paul Bowles and Peter Matthiessen.

Along with these key tenets of existentialist thought, Mailer, who was perhaps the most assertive among American novelists in proclaiming himself an existentialist, alludes in "The White Negro" to two related ideas, both of which he shares with other countercultural writers of the period. First, there is the distinction, also characteristic of the phenomenological tradition, between mathematical or "clock" time and the inward feel of the temporal dimension as it is experienced by human consciousness, dragging heavily through stretches of arid boredom or rushing ahead and even lifting entirely as one becomes absorbed in the moment. Not only does this distinction hover in the background of Mailer's observations on the condition of American society in the postwar era—in absolute command of mathematical time but bereft of anything but unenlivening options for how to occupy one's days—it was also formulated independently and given a memorably influential, if ultimately more traditional treatment in *On the Road*. Second, there is the distinction between authentic and inauthentic experience or what Sartre called "bad faith," which he explained with the help of an example that would become a regular point of reference in discussions of the idea: the waiter who does his job so solicitously that he gives the impression of a man impersonating a waiter. Both a model employee and an

object of contempt, Sartre's annoyingly demonstrative *garçon* carries out his duties with an artificial precision that reveals not how good he is at what he does but how far gone he is in transforming himself into something that he isn't: the social equivalent of an inanimate object.<sup>27</sup>

To countercultural writers, it seemed that America had become a society of obsequiously phony waiters. The figure of "the organization man," which Goodman viewed as the remaining option available to young males after the beatnik and the delinquent, was the homegrown poster boy of postwar inauthenticity, the choice that offered security and material comfort at the cost of having to bend one's desires to the confining shape of a supporting role in the drama of profit and loss.<sup>28</sup> One not only had to play the part, one had to pretend, however half-heartedly, to like it; and in many cases the pretense was sufficiently captivating that multitudes of young men not only accepted the terms of the deal but even convinced themselves that they were getting a bargain. This self-deceived and "other-directed" social world was the subject of a passing reference, tossed off by Mailer in the course of recounting a conversation ("other-direction . . . do you really believe in that?"—315), to David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), the most widely read sociological analysis of the consumer culture that was becoming an increasingly prominent presence in American society during the postwar era. It was a world in which people drew their gratifications from a display of appearances, a parade of materialism in which, as Emerson put it, "Things are in the saddle/And ride mankind."

Those who opted out of this disheartening spectacle chose travel to far-flung places, fast cars, and fast living, refusing security and profit in an effort to intensify the experience of the present and to realize a less inauthentic future. Or they turned inward, exploring the depths of the psyche in search of hitherto unsuspected energies lurking among the mental refuse of an affluent society. For the most senior novelist in the group, Paul Bowles (b. 1910), the formative influence of French surrealism during the interwar period was decisive, and that influence would continue to be felt throughout the postwar era and into the global counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s. One of Frank O'Hara's most widely anthologized poems, "A Step Away from Them" (1956), ends with the lines "My heart is in my/pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy"; a decade later, a signature album of the psychedelic era was entitled *Surrealistic Pillow* (1967). At this point, it may seem that Ginsberg's outlandish analogy between LSD and the Bomb has once again raised its head, as there is an evident continuity between the surrealists' "investigations" and the early literature of psychedelia, like Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* (1954), Henri Michaux's *Misérable Miracle* (1956), and William Burroughs' *The Yage Letters* (1953–63), which in turn constitute what one might call the scholarly background of the role of *yagé* (ayahuasca) in Peter Matthiessen's *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*. The larger point, however, is that the enterprise of opening up the mind had gotten under way long before Dr. Hofmann's laboratory

mishap, and although the heritage of this dimension of the postwar counterculture is predominantly French, it is a multifaceted influence with at least three distinguishable currents, only two of which can be traced to Parisian sources.

The first of these is the most familiar. Adopting Reverdy's definition of the poetic image as the arbitrary juxtaposition of two distant and unrelated realities, the mainstream surrealists of the circle around André Breton aimed to awaken desire into a freedom from the hankering after commodities to which it had been condemned by the bourgeois world.<sup>29</sup> In distinct contrast to the political ambiguities of the postwar counterculture, their project included an avowedly left-wing politics (Breton was a card-carrying Communist until his expulsion from the party in 1935, as was Paul Bowles until he tried to resign on the eve of the Second World War), a politics that resonated sympathetically with German contemporaries like Walter Benjamin, whose 1928 essay on surrealism provides the most visible link to the Frankfurt School and the influential later work of Herbert Marcuse. Although technically a product of the postwar era, Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955), along with its home-grown complement, Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death* (1959), would become something like the theoretical ur-texts of the global counterculture and would find their widest readership in the later period. For his part, Breton sought to tap the energies of the Freudian unconscious through unreflective methods of composition, denouncing "the odious crossing out of words" and thus anticipating Kerouac's hostility to revision.<sup>30</sup> There is, moreover, a strong family resemblance between his collage poems, assembled from the verbal detritus of the advertising world, and William Burroughs' technique of the cut-up, whereby pages of text were scissored into pieces and reassembled in new configurations, the amputated parts reattached like the conjoined halves of one of Hans Bellmer's surrealist *poupées*.<sup>31</sup>

The feverish imagery of Burroughs' novels would be unimaginable without the example of his surrealist precursors, although his strongest affinity is rather with the so-called dissident surrealists—Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, and Antonin Artaud, among others—whose interest in the disruptive power of profanation would eventually exert a direct influence on French post-structuralism (as would Burroughs himself).<sup>32</sup> By contrast, the impact of surrealism on the novel is not so straightforward, as Bataille's narratives were not widely known in the postwar period, and the most enduring mainstream surrealist prose meditations, like Louis Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926), are not so much novels in the traditional sense as evocations of sites within the denatured modern city where the *merveilleux* can still be discovered. For this reason, Paul Bowles' *The Sheltering Sky* is especially noteworthy as the case of a novel that draws together the two major strains of French influence, offering a realistic surface narrative organized around existentialist themes but interpenetrated in dissident surrealist fashion by an unsettling brand of poetic imagery. It is the point at which the most vital

currents in midcentury French culture first touch the nascent counterculture and hence a natural subject for the first of these case studies.

Aragon's *paysan* is also a *païen*, who embodies the search for a myth-making paganism concealed in the heart of the modern metropolis, and a broadly ethnographic orientation is a regular feature not only of French surrealism but also of its New-World equivalents.<sup>33</sup> The "Southern Gothic"—a genre that is neither exclusively southern nor in any meaningful sense gothic—can be understood as a variety of American surrealism, although it is perhaps better described as what the Cuban novelist and erstwhile surrealist Alejo Carpentier called *lo real maravilloso*—not just a literary genre but a more general cultural tendency of the largely rural, premodern, and racially mixed societies that developed in the harsh natural and economic conditions of the Americas. The folk music revival of the 1950s and early 1960s, an effort to reconnect with that bleaker but more honest-seeming world in a period of rapidly increasing suburbanization and corporatization, is most commonly identified with a resurgence of leftist populism in the wake of the McCarthy era; however, it is equally marked by an appetite for songs of disaster and lonely death culled from sources both white and black: murder ballads, tales of floods, train wrecks, and the sinking of the *Titanic*; haunting standards like "Man of Constant Sorrow"; and touchstones of the Delta blues like Robert Johnson's "Hellhound on My Trail" (1937). These were sounds that spoke of another America, unnerving and violent but possessed of a wealth of naked emotion; and while they provide the most obvious link to the music of the global counterculture in the persons of Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, the major figures of west-coast psychedelia, and the many British students of the blues, they also prefigure other cultural artifacts that are instantly recognizable to anyone familiar with the collage aesthetic of the surrealists. Among the most representative is the historian Michael Losey's *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1973), a book composed of turn-of-the-century clippings from a small-town midwestern newspaper detailing incidents of suicide, arson, and marauding tramps, the text interspersed with groups of photographs drawn from the rediscovered life's work of the local photographer: dead babies in their coffins, a grinning woman draped with snakes, a horse so white that in its muddy surroundings it seems like the harbinger of a transfigured world.

That better world may be the one that the characters in Carson McCullers' fiction long to enter, but the sadness of the one they are condemned to inhabit is unmistakably that of the folk songs to which the title of *The Ballad of the Sad Café* alludes. Faulkner is the dominant literary presence in this tradition (much as Hemingway looms behind Mailer's account of "the enormous present"); but it is McCullers' narrator, a quaintly mannered and ambiguous personality offered as native informant and guide, that sets her novella apart from its precursors and identifies it as a kind of ethnography, submitting insights gathered from a backwoods dreamworld, a melancholy

wisdom about gender and love that midcentury America was not entirely ready to receive.

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Though resolutely anticlerical—a photograph in one of the early surrealist publications entitled *Our Collaborator Benjamin Péret Insulting a Priest* immortalizes the poet in the act of doing just that—Breton and company reserved for those privileged moments when desire is released into the light a word straight out of the religious vocabulary: *mystère*.<sup>34</sup> Others were equally willing to adopt religious language but less quick to abandon religion. Arguably, the most far-reaching political development of the postwar era was the civil rights movement, and the complex relationship between that heroic undertaking, the African-American church, and the early work of James Baldwin is perhaps the most influential of the challenges to the mainstream social norms of the period. Yet it would be a serious disservice to describe Baldwin himself or the struggle for racial justice as just another instance of the postwar counterculture. The history of opposition to racism long predates the civil rights era and continues to this day, whereas the counterculture, in its postwar and global phases, had a relatively clear beginning and end, and Baldwin was among its earliest and most eloquent critics. Nevertheless, he has a place in this book for two reasons. The civil rights movement, with which Baldwin maintained intricate and evolving relations, was a model for the many later countercultural political initiatives organized around issues of identity, and the common background of the movement and of Baldwin himself in the African-American church made him an inevitable spokesman for its cause. More to the point, his account of a Pentecostal visitation in his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, is among the richest evocations of visionary experience in the literature of the postwar era, and it suggests a deeper kinship between Baldwin and some of those same contemporaries whom he publicly criticized.

In a less public vein, Kerouac admitted his reluctance to abandon the idea of a personal god, famously glossing the word *beat* as connoting not only “down-and-out” but also “beatific”; and Mailer, true to form, declared his belief in a pugnacious deity who was forever sparring with other gods.<sup>35</sup> Distinguishing his own version of existentialism from Sartre’s, he insisted that, to be a “real” existentialist, “one must be religious”—that “a life which is directed by one’s faith in the necessity of action is a life committed to the notion that the substratum of existence is the search, the end meaningful but mysterious” (306–07)—and strikingly similar sentiments had already been expressed five years earlier by a rather different kind of novelist, the thoughtful John Clellon Holmes, in his widely read *New York Times Magazine* essay, “This is the Beat Generation.”<sup>36</sup> To all these writers, the need to believe was crucial, even if *what* one believed was a work in progress.

Writing only seven years after the end of the war, Holmes could not have predicted just how wide-ranging the search for new creeds would be or how far outside the traditional belief systems of Western culture it would take some members of his generation. Travel in physical space would become a hallmark of the postwar counterculture, and their search would take them into the doctrinal precincts of every major religious group. Among the novelists discussed in this book, Paul Bowles would become identified with his extended residence in the Islamic world, even though his considerable experience of the region didn't include an embrace of the dominant religion; and William Burroughs also spent periods of time in Tangier, absorbing if not actively studying that city's unique mix of Western and Eastern cultures. Other important non-Western cultural and religious influences touched not only those two writers but Jack Kerouac and Peter Matthiessen as well; at different times, all four travelled in Latin America and studied (or at least took in) the indigenous cultures of the region. Of even greater significance for the last two was Zen Buddhism, and these non-Western influences form a complex of interrelated elements that contributes to the distinctive flavor of their writing.

Buddhism was a subject of intensive study for Kerouac, who did much to advance its popular image in *The Dharma Bums* (1958), and even more so for Matthiessen, who would eventually become a Buddhist priest.<sup>37</sup> It holds a position of special importance among the major themes and influences of the postwar counterculture in that it highlights a tension that in various ways runs through all of them. For Buddhism, along with certain early Hindu texts like the *Mukhya Upanishads*, is among the oldest expressions of the *via negativa* in human history, one of the most venerable examples we possess of an apophatic theology—the view that the divine can be described only in terms of what it is not. The doctrine of *anatta*, the non-self, is central to Buddhist soteriology and refers to the condition that is its aim: relief from suffering (*dukkha*, more precisely “unsatisfactoriness”) through a release from misperceptions of *samsāra*, a master concept that designates the cyclical mutability of existence in all the major Indian religions. *Samsāra* includes the related idea of *maya*, meaning “appearance” and referring to the transient or illusory surface of the world; and it is the impression of false permanence created by mistaking appearances for essences that is understood to be the source of suffering, condemning the deceived individual to increasingly desperate episodes of repetition as he or she tries to hold onto something that is necessarily impermanent. The illusoriness of the world has its counterpart in the most basic of illusions, that of a stable executive self, insofar as the habit of attributing essences is an effort of possession, an attempt to endow appearances with fixed and permanent meanings in relation to an ego that is neither fixed nor permanent.

For Buddhism, then, the fundamental mystery is that of experience itself, which becomes a moment-by-moment procession of potentially infinite richness once the illusion of the self and its unsatisfying addictions to

wealth, power, status, and gratifications of one kind or another have been relinquished. Whether the passage into a state of selfless awareness and acceptance occurs as a moment of sudden insight—in Zen Buddhism often identified by the Japanese words *kenshō* and *satori*—or gradually, through the practice of meditation, it is conceived primarily in negative terms as an apophasis. And the advantage of the perspective afforded by this distinction is that it exposes a tension inherent in the very idea of a counterculture, one that in the long view appears as a recurrent feature of modern thought. It is the tension between the apophatic philosophy of Schopenhauer and the affirmative, self-creating, cataphatic philosophy of Nietzsche—or, if an American and less overtly irreligious example is called for, the Emerson of “The Divinity School Address” and “Self-Reliance.” No less than the *Übermensch*, the Emersonian individual opposes a positive alternative to the conformist culture that he or she rejects—in the case of the postwar counterculture, a hipster self to counter an other-directed culture and a deity within to supersede the sky-god whose place has been usurped by the Bomb. At the opposite extreme, the apophatic politics of the civil rights movement, which also drew inspiration from an Eastern source—Gandhi and his brand of Advaitist Hinduism—promoted a kind of action that defined itself by what it was not, meeting police brutality with a strategy of non-violence and negating existing laws seen as unjust in the name of a higher law identified only as *agape* or Christian love (and, of course, the efficacy of those actions had much to do with their having been caught on camera, a historical fact indirectly relevant to the concerns of this book). Similarly, the counterculture would find it less difficult to say what it was not than what it was.

For example, considered in the light of this distinction, the familiar counsel to be “present in the moment,” nowadays reiterated by every species of pop guru, can be seen to harbor a basic ambiguity, which is evident in the contrasting expositions of the idea by Goodman and Mailer. Apart from the talk of human nature, Goodman’s version of Gestalt psychology is indeed close to the apophatic emphasis of Eastern tradition, although the romantic or utopian tendency of his thought becomes apparent when it is set alongside a remark by a practicing Buddhist, Peter Matthiessen, to the effect that, even after much meditation, anyone who manages to be fully present in the moment for just a few minutes a day is doing well. The advice is good, no doubt, but easier given than executed. On the other hand, Mailer’s celebration of “the enormous present” is another sort of animal altogether—not a discovery of the illusoriness of the self and the divinity of passing experience but an assertion of divinity within the self and its advancement to the station of a god, unfettered by morality and possessed of a primitive energy reminiscent of animist religion. The intoxicating, charismatic effects of this experience of the moment are by now all too well known, as are its proximity to narcissism and the violence enacted by Mailer’s youthful hoodlums.

Classical existentialism, too, owed its critical force to the negations it proposed, from the godless universe to the characteristic Heideggerian

imagery of human experience as a sunlit clearing in a forest of unknowing and Sartre's portrait of the human subject confronted with the challenge of realizing its existence in the face of nothingness. But while the forms of failure represented by the irresistible notions of inauthenticity and bad faith received a vivid conceptual elaboration—human beings turned thing-like as a result of their own weak choices—the question of what an authentic existence might be has proven harder to answer. Both Heidegger and Sartre were aware of the problems involved in trying to understand authenticity as the realization of an achieved selfhood out of some pre-established disposition or “true” self concealed *in potentia* within the individual. In fact, Sartre almost entirely avoided the word; in the whole of *Being and Nothingness*, it appears only twice. How could any such idea be admitted by a philosophy that describes human beings as having come into existence without a planned future? Heidegger's solution, which remains a subject of debate among philosophers down to the present day, was to conceive of authenticity as a convergence between a person's choices and proposed destiny: one consciously forms a life project from among the various possibilities offered by one's cultural heritage and then takes care to live up to it, modifying that project as historical circumstances demand. This is not the place to enter into the details of the contemporary debate on the concept of authenticity except to point out that this Heideggerian solution is exactly what is depicted in Matthiessen's *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*—with the important difference that the cultural heritage in question is not single and monumental but multiple and riven by conflict.

Finally, the tension between bold negations and a more problematic positive ideal is also endemic to surrealism and its inheritors. The hypothesis of the unconscious, which throws into question the authenticity of any choice, was integral to the mainstream surrealists' celebration of a liberated desire as well as their understanding of the prisons from which desire was in need of liberation. Capitalism, the common sense logic of the business world no less than logic itself, materialism, not to mention a large part of the material universe—all were anathema to Breton and his group, who reserved much of their scorn for bourgeois values and proprieties. Everyday reality and its conventional satisfactions were negated; instead, they extolled another reality in the depths of the psyche, an alternate world of desire, which, following Freud, they understood as existing in a state of flux below the level of consciousness. Yet, much like the human nature identified by Goodman as the driver of all our social needs, desire cannot be represented in its pure condition, so the surrealist project became one of seeking *figures* of desire: images, objects, and practices that draw together the conscious and unconscious realms in an explosive and, they hoped, revolutionary release of energies.

It should be obvious that these mainstream surrealist doctrines not only stand in direct conflict with the Buddhist objective of freedom *from* enslaving desires but in effect transform desire itself into a substitute divinity, one

whose politics are reassuringly assumed to be left of center. Even the sophisticated postwar versions of the repression hypothesis offered by Marcuse and Norman O. Brown display a measure of naive optimism about the progressive potential of desublimated desire; and it is an irony of modern leftist political thought that Marcuse himself was among the first to raise doubts about whether the matter could be so simply conceived with his concept of “repressive desublimation,” although many preferred to read quickly past that idea while savoring thoughts of a liberated desire. But from the observation that the free expression of desire can be an ally of political repression, it was only a short step to the later arguments of Michel Foucault and others that power does not invariably operate by repression but more often *encourages* the exercise of desire in forms that reinforce existing social relations—an idea that is implicit in William Burroughs’ central metaphor of addiction as a means of control.

Along with its major legacy of a certain kind of uncanny imagery, the surrealist project of elevating desire over reason, *eros* over *logos*, anticipates the distrust or even outright rejection of reason, science, and technology that would characterize some versions of the counterculture. By contrast, Marcuse’s Hegelianism aims for a synthesis of *eros* and *logos*, albeit one that would be achievable only in some as-yet-unrealized non-repressive society; and his effort to reaffirm the ongoing potential of reason to contribute to human freedom by means of what Hegel called “the labor of the negative” represents the other side of a controversy that has never quite gone away. In France, however, it was what Hegel had to say about power and negation that would have a decisive influence, above all on dissident surrealists like Georges Bataille, whose work has suggestive parallels in the novels of the postwar counterculture. Although Hegel’s dialectic of the master and the slave represents an unsatisfactory stage in the unfolding of consciousness, it offers perhaps the single most memorable illustration of the basic principle of his philosophy: that which is negated in the movement from thesis to antithesis is preserved in a subsequent synthesis. This is the so-called ruse of reason by which negation and “sublation” (*Aufhebung*) ensure that the strife-ridden course of human history will be, in the end, progressive. And so, in Hegel’s famous vignette, the slave, who has surrendered freedom and power for the sake of preserving life, acquires a hard-earned expertise in the process of production, while the master, who lives a life of consumption, finds that his mastery depends on the labor of the slave. The master has judged life to be not worth living without power and the freedom to exercise it, so he has gambled his life to obtain mastery; however, he discovers that his mastery is dependent on the recognition of the slave and that his authority is undermined by his dependence. Eventually, the slave will become a master himself but one who retains a memory of the slave he used to be, and history will have taken a step forward on an ultimately positive trajectory, which, despite the brilliance of the analysis, has struck many as also requiring a measure of faith.

Bataille approached this ingeniously optimistic little narrative from an unexpected angle, lingering over a single key moment in Hegel's exposition: the would-be master's understanding of the irony that life must be put at risk for the sake of more life. It's in the nature of a gamble, Hegel had acknowledged, that one may lose—that the expenditure may be profitless—however, he had viewed this possibility as a dead end and given it a suitably uninspiring name: “abstract negation.” For Bataille, however, it became the occasion for a line of thought that was echoed by American writers of the postwar period, one that would later be formulated independently by the English anthropologist Mary Douglas and would emerge as an important influence on French post-structuralism. It amounts to a recognition that the ultimate object of desire is death and the “sovereign” experience that comes with the approach to a condition outside of life, an experience that Bataille accurately described as “the impossible” and, in language inherited from Nietzsche, “assenting to life up to the point of death.”<sup>38</sup> This would indeed be a negation beyond negation, a self-effacement or “emptiness” (to use the preferred Buddhist term) that can't be recovered by the logic of any dialectic, for it would be a point beyond positivity and negativity—which, after all, are logical terms, and logic belongs to life. It is the point at which language fails, though not, for all that, just a hypothetical or an imaginary possibility. It is also the point at which mystery, a sense of the unknown, becomes mysticism, but a mysticism that does not involve access to any positively envisioned divinity.

In the experience of sovereignty (as opposed to the experience of mastery), all dialectical opposites collapse into one another: profanity and holiness, anguish and laughter, or—the pair most relevant to the novels of Paul Bowles and Peter Matthiessen—abjection and purity. All are caught up in an excess that Bataille considered fundamental to earthly life, as evidenced by the boundless energy of the sun and the blind fecundity of nature. Such excess demands expenditure without profit, a disbursement that can go as far as death but is also apparent in eroticism, crime, and ritual sacrifice, wherein the participants figuratively experience their own deaths through the death of an animal, as in Haitian *Vodou* ceremonies. Bataille was even more fascinated by the thought of human sacrifice, which he described as the definitive profitless expenditure, the most vivid illustration of what he called “general” economy as opposed to the “restricted” economy of production and consumption, profit and loss. Here one might imagine that something along the lines of Mailer's “enormous present” is in the offing, although rather than concern himself with garden-variety delinquents, Bataille preferred to concentrate on world-class criminals like Gilles de Rais and the Marquis de Sade. In fact, his interest in ritualized violence is perhaps even a point of contrast with the American *real maravilloso*, as Bataille argued that the regular eruption of violence in our daily lives is attributable to the dogmatic or rational suppression of profitless expenditure, which he considered integral to any functioning economy. Instead of photographs

like those in *Wisconsin Death Trip*, he preferred to contemplate the horrifying photograph of a turn-of-the-century Chinese public execution by gradual dismemberment (the *lingchi* or “death of a thousand cuts”), which he obtained in the 1920s and eventually inflicted on the public in *Les larmes d’Eros* (1961)—a book that might be classified as a sort of Parisian death trip. Bataille, a tormented man who took up yoga in his fifties and even penned a *Method of Meditation* (1947), is among those Western thinkers whose ideas most resemble certain aspects of Eastern thought; however, one searches his pages in vain for anything comparable to the serenity promised by Eastern religions. In response to queries about what might be had in return for the disconcerting images he brought before his readers’ eyes, he almost certainly would have replied that his work offered nothing more than clarity of vision.

The Buddhist alternative is an altogether gentler one. It, too, aims at a point beyond logic (and for this reason the classification of Buddhism as a negative theology must include at least that much qualification), but it holds that selflessness can be sought without violence and that it is a necessary concomitant of the ethical instruction summed up in the “noble eightfold path,” and especially in the emphasis on compassion (a broadly similar ethical turn occurs within Bataille’s own philosophical tradition in the work of his younger contemporary Emmanuel Levinas). This is not a ruse of reason so much as an effort to work out some much-needed guidance for living—much-needed, that is, by anyone who prefers not to opt for an immediate violent death and feels the need for something more than regular doses of its figurative approximations. The goal is not just clarity of vision but the practice of dharma, which is the way of life that one cultivates upon overcoming the illusion of selfhood and accepting the impermanence of appearances, an effort to regulate one’s behavior so as to live in harmony with a fleeting world.

In speaking of Buddhism, of course, one speaks of a 2,500-year-old tradition with a wide variety of emphases in different times and places, and the Zen Buddhism that came to popularity in the postwar United States was itself a various phenomenon, as Alan Watts observed in a well-known essay.<sup>39</sup> The cultural need it satisfied was so far from requiring doctrinal specificity that it extended even to Native-American traditions and the parallels they offer to Eastern religions (see Chapter 8). Nevertheless, in the work of well-informed figures like Gary Snyder and Peter Matthiessen, the ideal of a life lived in harmony with the earth would turn out to be among the most enduring contributions of the postwar counterculture, one whose influence has reached far beyond the scope of its inspiration in non-Western religious traditions. Modern environmental science has since caught up with it; however, as Freud once observed in a different context, the poets got there ahead of the scientists—a fact attested by the opening poem in Snyder’s first published book, “Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout” (1959), in which the speaker, his selfhood dispersed in classically

Buddhist fashion among the sensations of drinking from a cup of melted snow and the Olympian regard of the final lines, contemplates nature as a mutable, interrelated whole. From such insights, Snyder cultivated a respect that is integral to dharma and a way of life that stands decisively apart from the prevailing culture of acquisition, consumption, and display. It is akin to the radical innocence that Kerouac believed he had glimpsed, also on a mountaintop, among the native peoples of Mexico, a culture utterly different from the one that had produced the Bomb. “The phenomenal world experienced at certain pitches is totally living, exciting, mysterious, filling one with trembling awe, leaving one grateful and humble,” Snyder has written: “The wonder of the mystery returns direct to one’s own sense and consciousness: inside and outside, the voice breathes, ‘Ah!’”<sup>40</sup> Or, as a kindred spirit from another era put it in an even more influential meditation on the negative, the best among us are “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.”<sup>41</sup> Whether their inclinations leaned east or west, the writers of the postwar counterculture were entirely at ease before such mysteries.

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Having reviewed the themes and influences that characterize the literature of the postwar counterculture, I want to return to the example with which I began, as it has the merit of pairing a highly successful film with a novel that is entirely representative of its era—so much so that its precocious ticking off of each item on the agenda of the postwar counterculture is as responsible as anything for its current reputation as a period piece, just as it made for the great popularity of Kesey’s book in its own day. In fact, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* is virtually a paradigm: the novel takes up every one of the signature countercultural themes that I have enumerated, and the film effectively translates a host of them to the cinematic medium, most unforgettably in the character of the protagonist, as embodied in Jack Nicholson’s classic performance. On the page and even more so onscreen, McMurphy is the very personification of “the enormous present.” He radiates freedom and self-sufficiency from the moment he steps onto the ward, and the novel evokes his force of personality with the help of a quasi-religious metaphor that the narrator, “Chief” Bromden, introduces at the end of the opening chapter. “I been silent so long it’s gonna roar out of me like floodwaters,” Bromden says of the story he is about to relate; then, when McMurphy arrives on the scene, his initial gesture of defiance is the symbolic one of refusing the mandatory admission shower, perhaps because he himself is a figurative source of floodwaters. Like a cataract, his voice seems to come from fifty yards overhead, and when he laughs, “it’s free and loud and it comes out of his wide grinning mouth and spreads in rings bigger and bigger till it’s lapping against the walls all over the ward.”<sup>42</sup> He commits himself to his performance without letting on that it *is* a performance—Bromden is

reminded of a pitchman or used car salesman—and the film builds on this description when Nicholson follows his effusive cackle with a spontaneous overflow of another kind: he plants a kiss on his flustered, cigar-chomping handler, and the viewer can't be sure whether or not it's an act. This is, one gathers, a man who makes it up as he goes along.

That McMurphy gives an exuberant but ambiguous performance is an expected part of his self-advertised profession. He is, as he says, "a gambling fool" (11), and the reader quickly learns that the improvisational style, the ability to play the other players as much as one plays the game, is at the heart of his approach to life. He is also an apparently incorrigible delinquent, the veteran of numerous brief jail terms, and is therefore in danger of being dismissed as a mere con man, although the amount of money to be won on a psychiatric ward is so small that financial gain is plainly not the only driving force behind his behavior. As Harding says late in the novel, "We've all certainly got our money's worth every time he fleeced us, haven't we?" (229). And Bromden, returning to the imagery of floodwaters from the opening scene, makes the point more eloquently when he tells us that, during the fishing trip, he felt himself gliding overhead, "high above myself," as McMurphy seemed to do at his first appearance, so that Bromden could gaze down on him, "surrounded by his dozen people, and watch them, us, swinging a laughter that rang out on the water in ever-widening circles, farther and farther, until it crashed up on beaches all over the coast, on beaches all over all coasts, in wave after wave after wave" (214–15).

Many have noted the frequent and obvious Christian allusions in the novel, and although the protagonist and "his dozen people" make an unlikely messiah and apostles, it's important to acknowledge what manner of gospel the author is spreading. For this is, just as obviously, a religion of masculinity, and at times it seems as if Kesey were preaching the converse of Emerson's dictum: for him, whosoever would be a nonconformist must be a man.<sup>43</sup> The equation of mental health with a hearty masculine fellowship and mental illness with an infantilizing maternal regime is the most jarringly patriarchal relic to be discovered here, the Kennedy-era equivalent of an unearthed chastity belt, and these identifications are advanced with such unremitting crudeness that one is tempted to use the film's success in at least partially playing them down as a measure of its advance over its literary model. The spirit of Hemingway hangs so heavily over the novel that this alone would seem to place the book firmly in the postwar era rather than in the subsequent period, when the social acceptance of gender roles had begun to loosen (as anyone with memories of the latter period can attest, the bitterest complaint of the older generation was that boys were beginning to look like girls). But there are still other reasons to emphasize the book's representative relationship to the earlier period.

Appearing in 1975, during the waning days of the global counterculture, the film naturally sought to link McMurphy's crusade to the rebellions of the preceding decade, as its censorious early critics immediately recognized, and

the issue of the historical dating of the action is a small but telling example. Kesey's novel was published in 1962 but had been begun two years earlier, when the author was a student in the Stanford creative writing program.<sup>44</sup> It's not surprising, therefore, that internal evidence places the action of the narrative in the fall of 1960, as Kesey knew from his firsthand experience as an orderly that the dreadful conditions in the psychiatric hospital described in the book were all too real at the time. By the period of the film, however, the worst abuses were in the past, so the filmmakers were forced to treat their material as historical (they could hardly have enjoyed the participation of the Oregon State Hospital's chief psychiatrist, who took an onscreen role in the film, if they had done otherwise). Nevertheless, they dispatched their task so unobtrusively that only a minority of viewers ever noticed. As in the book, the detail that fixes the date of the action is the World Series, but in the film that date has been pushed forward by four years to the fall of 1964. Why? One can only speculate, but it's at least an interesting coincidence that 1964 was also the year of Kesey's proto-hippie cross-country bus trip, which would be transformed into legend in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968)—one of those symbolic events, like Bob Dylan's going electric the following year, that is often cited as fixing the real beginning of the sixties around the midpoint of the decade.<sup>45</sup> The date of the film's action and the date of its release thus mark the dawn and dusk of the period in which the counterculture became a worldwide phenomenon.

By contrast, the novel belongs to the previous era in more respects than just its gleefully reactionary gender politics. It is, for example, an anthology of all the existentialist themes that I have reviewed, culminating in McMurphy's fatal choice, on the morning after the party, to pass up an escape opportunity, thus defining himself conclusively as a sacrificial savior rather than a self-interested con man (the film leaves it uncertain whether he has actually chosen his fate—not so the novel).<sup>46</sup> Likewise, the concept of bad faith receives an extended illustration in the personnel of the psychiatric facility, notably in the character of "Public Relations," whose anxious laugh is specifically contrasted with McMurphy's rippling flood (11). He has been, it appears, so thoroughly absorbed by his professional persona that he can no longer help himself, and his laughter comes "high and fast like he wishes he could stop" but can't:

What he sees that's so funny he don't ever let us in on, and the only thing I can see funny is him spinning round and around out there like a rubber toy—if you push him over he's weighted on the bottom and straightaway rocks back upright, goes to spinning again. He never, never looks at the men's faces.

(33–34)

The public servant in bad faith exhibits an automaton-like quality, as Sartre observed, noting the "perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium

which he perpetually re-establishes . . . his gestures and even his voice seem to be mechanisms."<sup>47</sup>

Mechanisms are, of course, a prominent part of the novel's imagery, not least of all in the passages that take up that other major existentialist theme, the phenomenological experience of time. "The Big Nurse is able to set the wall clock at whatever speed she wants just by turning one of those dials in the steel door," Bromden tells us. In his afflicted perception, time on the ward moves either with a hectic forward motion or at a vegetative crawl, so that even the natural world is immobilized, and "not a leaf on a tree or a blade of grass in the pasture shimmers" (68). Although the dominance of this "fake time" eventually begins to recede under McMurphy's influence, the novel's descriptions of the controlling and essentially mechanical power of "the Combine"—the paranoid invention of a madman submitted as an ironic truth about American society—remain among the most evocative passages in the book. These descriptions are a hodge-podge of disparate elements. Some, like the robot workers in Bromden's dream vision, display the marks of Kesey's infatuation with science fiction; others, like the effeminate bosses waving cigarettes in long holders, add a heavy-handed homophobic dimension to the novel's masculinist agenda. But what is most striking about Bromden's evocations of the machinery of the Combine is that they reverse the associations of New Deal-era imagery of heavy industry from sacred to sinister, for the images that Bromden's mind summons up to characterize life on the ward are the very subjects celebrated in the paintings and photographs of Charles Sheeler—the factory, the grain elevator, the turbine, and (most significantly, in view of the book's water imagery) the hydroelectric dam—here offered not as cathedrals of a rational future but as fiendishly elaborate prisons of a dystopian present.<sup>48</sup>

It isn't strange that these images should have suggested themselves to a westerner of Kesey's generation, although their prominent place in the novel indicates the extent to which *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* reaches back to the interwar period for its most arresting imagery (naturally enough, as Bromden's earliest memories also date from that time). When it comes to the elements of surrealism in the book, however, we are almost certainly dealing with a homegrown counterpart rather than a case of direct influence from the earlier period, despite the coincidence that one of the first statements of what would eventually be called anti-psychiatry came from André Breton, who had studied psychiatry and then delivered his verdict on the profession in *Nadja* (he declared that, if he were a madman, he would use one of his intervals of sanity to murder a psychiatrist).<sup>49</sup> Having evolved independently of its French precursors, Kesey's American surrealism is both an original creation and a missed opportunity, which the film, to its credit, succeeded in finding a way to exploit.

In the novel, the strain of native-born surrealism manifests itself through another group of images, which also seem to gesture toward an earlier era. Distinct from the nightmare visions of heavy industry, this imagery belongs

instead to the world of the penny arcade and traveling carnival. “Powerful magnets in the floor maneuver personnel through the ward like arcade puppets” (28), Bromden informs us; later, following a momentary disruption of the machinery, we learn that “[t]he clean, calculated arcade movement is coming back: six-thirty out of bed, seven into the mess hall” (155). Similarly, Harding describes the effects of electroshock treatment as “a wild carnival wheel of images, emotions, memories” (163). In this antiquated and slightly seedy environment, Nurse Ratched is figuratively envisioned as a mechanical tarot card reader (170), an arcade gypsy (276), and, most intriguingly, a porcelain doll: “She nods once to each. Precise, automatic gesture. Her face is smooth, calculated, and precision-made, like an expensive baby doll, skin like flesh-colored enamel, blend of white and cream and baby-blue eyes, small nose, pink little nostrils” (6). The immediate (and plainly intended) effect of this imagery is to depict McMurphy’s adversary as a component part of the inhuman mechanism, identifiable as a woman only by her oversized bosom: “A mistake was made somehow in manufacturing, putting those big, womanly breasts on what would of otherwise been a perfect work” (6). In Kesey’s reductionist conception, the unnatural thing about Nurse Ratched is simply that she has become a machine, whereas the truth about her is indicated by the female body imperfectly concealed beneath her uniform.

What is most interesting about the last of these images, however, is the way that it exceeds the author’s apparent intention. This is a *baby doll*, crafted to evoke maternal fondness and care, exquisite and, in contrast to its surroundings, precious—a commodity, but one whose enchanting features compel attention as an uncanny simulacrum of humanity. It’s just this sort of doll or mannequin, a human presence transformed into a commercial object, touching one’s desire with its impassive blue-eyed gaze, that fascinated the surrealists, whether as an accidental discovery in some run-down quarter of the city, as an unnerving sculpture by Bellmer or Yves Tanguy, or as a literary *tour de force*, like the *sirène* episode in *Le Paysan de Paris*.<sup>30</sup> This complex, haunting sense of a mechanism or manufactured thing that retains the aura of a human being—a quintessentially modern kind of mystery—is precisely what is elided in the author’s insistence on establishing the truth about Nurse Ratched as merely a female body to be exposed and mastered.

Although the film abandoned the machinery of the Combine over Kesey’s objections, sacrificing some of the most potent material in the book for the sake of maintaining a realistic surface, it also wisely dropped the novel’s jejune focus on Nurse Ratched’s breasts (a subject better suited to a Russ Meyer than a Miloš Forman) and instead substituted Louise Fletcher’s remarkable performance, which against all odds managed to reveal the traces of a human being behind the machine. In the film, Nurse Ratched is not just a female body trapped in a uniform but a woman trapped in a role. Whereas the surrealists had conjured up a world of commodities

in which evidence of an imperfectly commodified human presence could still be felt, Kesey imagined a mechanized world of inverted and polarized gender roles—women hardened into artificial rigidity and men reduced to enervated flaccidness, desperately in need of an infusion of virility from the irrepressible McMurphy. It remained for the film to present a comparably rich female character, one who has been warped into a forbidding figure of coercion but is still painfully recognizable as a woman struggling to fulfill her obligations; and perhaps the most striking mystery it has to offer is the actors' ability to realize not just the male hipster immersed in "the enormous present" but also this flawed but identifiably human female caught up in the mechanism that she ostensibly controls.

The final piece of the book's anti-machinery, a theme conspicuously underserved in this and every other film made from a novel of the postwar counterculture, is provided by the third of the major characters, Bromden himself, along with his memories of the world of his childhood. Although these passages lack the ethnographic authority of a Peter Matthiessen (Kesey admitted that he had never met a Native American when he invented the character), they are put forward as an alternative to the mechanical environment of the Combine and evoke the possibility of a renewed capacity for responsiveness to the natural world. Freed from Nurse Ratched's time controls, which either sent the sun racing across the sky or fixed the view from the window in a state of suspended animation, nature once again becomes a *process*, which can be sensed by humble and decidedly non-mechanical means: "I smelled the breeze. It's fall coming, I thought, I can smell that sour-molasses smell of silage, clanging the air like a bell—smell somebody's been burning oak leaves, left them to smolder overnight because they're too green" (141). In this key nocturnal scene, when Bromden discovers that for the first time in years he enjoys an unmolested perception of the outside world, his newly reawakened vision fixes on a dog—the species most renowned for its sense of smell—which recalls the other dogs that his memory has summoned up in Faulknerian fashion over the course of the novel, including one that his father once borrowed for a hunting trip long ago because, unlike the "no-'count mongrels" in their village, "he got *insteek!*" (7). An unlikely avatar of psychic health, this gifted dog becomes an emblem of the instinctual attentiveness, common to dogs but also available to undefeated human beings, that Kesey opposes to the alternative of submission to the machine.

Bromden owes his renewed instincts to McMurphy, who gives off a "smell of dust and dirt from the open fields, and sweat, and work" (90). McMurphy, in turn, recalls Bromden's father in the years before he was broken by the Combine, and the reader is eventually given the materials to piece together the events that led to his father's decline and initiated Bromden's own descent into madness: the government's campaign to commandeer tribal land for a WPA dam on the Columbia River. The traditional culture of this tribe was organized around spearfishing from scaffolding built over

a waterfall, and the dam is the original of the nightmare images with which Bromden describes the Combine and spelled the end of a way of life that now exists only in his memories:

I still hear the sound of the falls on the Columbia, always will—always—  
hear the whoop of Charley Bear Belly stabbed himself a big chinook,  
hear the slap of fish in the water, laughing naked kids on the bank, the  
women at the rack . . . from a long time ago.

(71)

The evocation of the interdependence of the human and natural worlds here is in the spirit of Gary Snyder's poetry, and the same can be said about the water imagery throughout the novel: the illicit party on the ward is recalled by the patients the way people remember "a dam bursting" (268), and when Bromden finally escapes by crashing through the window, he tells us that the broken glass "splashed out in the moon, like a bright cold water baptizing the sleeping earth" (280). Traceable to the central place of the river in the long-lost world of Bromden's childhood, water is the emblem of a reality that is understood to be fluid and uncontrollable, the figurative counterpart to the stifling rigidity of Nurse Ratched's domain.

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* ends on a note of uplifting uncertainty about the future, although the novel offers a handful of additional details that specify the terms of that uncertainty. Bromden, we have already been informed, is not a full-blooded Native American but a half-breed, the son of an Indian father and a white woman; and the marriage of cultures turns out to have been toxic, a microcosm of the destruction of the Native-American way of life by the Combine, here once again predictably represented by a belittling female. The question posed in the concluding pages, however, has to do with the possible future relationship between the mainstream culture and a counterculture composed of both traditional and newly invented elements. What we are offered by way of an answer is a rumor: "I've even heard that some of the tribe have took to building their old ramshackle scaffolding all over that big million-dollar hydroelectric dam, and are spearing salmon in the spillway. I'd give something to see that" (280–81). The image captures the gist of Kesey's ethos: the counterculture takes the form of a retrograde, unruly, but stubbornly creative accretion on the expensive face of American society. It is ultimately more a vehicle for survival with one's psyche intact than anything else, and if one were to mount a defense of Kesey, it would want to emphasize this modest negation of the machine alongside the swaggering, self-assertive figures with whom he is more often identified.

While Kesey's novel sounds every notable theme of the postwar counterculture, the film version stands apart from the other films discussed in this book in at least two ways. Appearing as it did in the latter days of the global counterculture, it is among the very few films of its period to bring the spirit of rebellion to the screen with conviction (the persistent failure

of Hollywood to do justice to the counterculture was as widely recognized then as now) and one of even fewer to do so by using a major novel of the postwar counterculture as its source material. It is also by a considerable measure the most successful film, in terms of artistic accomplishment no less than popular acclaim, ever to have been made from an important countercultural novel and therefore became the default example that later filmmakers would repeatedly try to equal in their own efforts to turn the novels of the postwar counterculture into films over the ensuing decades. The details of their successes and failures are one focus of the chapters that follow; the other is the intricacies of the novels themselves, a subject that rewards careful attention to a greater extent than common opinion is nowadays willing to allow.

More than anything else, therefore, this is a book of readings; and as such it is based on the implicit assumption that, despite their faults, eccentricities, and dated gestures, these novels remain *worth* reading, and not just reading but reading closely, with an eye on history and input from a range of adjacent disciplines. And the continuing interest of the novels means that much the same can be said about the films, whose very existence is proof that others have found the novels worth reading too, whatever their success in translating them to the screen. The quality of our encounters with narrative is the mystery with which this book is finally most concerned, and even in those pages that approach the novels through the lens of film it remains a traditional undertaking, one that foregrounds the central activity of literary criticism: close reading. Its premise is that reading a novel or watching a film is a rich, complex, and subtle experience; that this unique activity has an intrinsic worth capable of being enhanced by reflection, description, and interpretation; and that our experience of both novel and film can be further enriched by comparison and contrast. For some members of the postwar counterculture, it was once possible to expect literature to “change life,” in Rimbaud’s electrifying words, deliberately quoted out of context by a rebellious generation. This book is based on the more modest conviction that, by reading novels, by watching the films that have been made of them, and by thinking hard about both, we can, in however small a way, change a part of ourselves.

## Notes

- 1 *Chicago Sun Times*, January 1, 1975. In later years, Ebert grudgingly moderated his opinion.
- 2 *The New York Times*, November 28, 1975.
- 3 Forman’s remarks are recorded in the documentary *The Making of One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, which is included in the 2002 DVD release of the film.
- 4 This understanding of the counterculture is nothing new. For a recent statement of the position, see Jackson Lears, “Aquarius Rising,” *The New York Review of Books*, LXV.14 (September 27, 2018): 8–14: “‘Religion’ may be too solemn a word for many 1960s radicals, but it helps to capture the depths of

- their motives: above all, their longing for a more direct, authentic experience of the world than the one on offer in midcentury American society.” The adjectives “direct” and “authentic” allude to two of the most important—but only two—of the themes of the postwar counterculture discussed in the following pages.
- 5 On the decline of institutionalized religion, see, for example, the data collected by the Pew Research Center at <https://www.pewresearch.org/topics/religiously-unaffiliated/>.
  - 6 *The Will to Believe* (1897) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 143.
  - 7 Ginsberg offered these ruminations in Maria Beatty’s documentary *Gang of Souls: A Generation of Beat Poets* (1989).
  - 8 See Albert J. Hofmann, “LSD Ganz Persönlich,” a speech delivered to the 1996 Worlds of Consciousness Conference in Heidelberg, Germany.
  - 9 J. Milton Yinger, “Contraculture and Subculture,” *American Sociological Review*, 25.5 (1960): 629. See also Yinger’s later reflections in “Countercultures and Social Change,” *American Sociological Review*, 42.6 (1977): 833–53, as well as his full-length treatment of the subject in *Countercultures: The Promise and the Peril of a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: The Free Press, 1982).
  - 10 On the concept of the “near-group,” see Lewis Yablonsky, “The Delinquent Gang as a Near-Group,” *Social Problems*, 7.2 (1959): 108–17.
  - 11 Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1951), 522. On the culture of street gangs, see Albert K. Cohen, *Delinquent Boys* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1955), which contains a chapter on subcultures that anticipates Yinger’s view of the interplay between personalities and group norms in a counterculture.
  - 12 Jack Kerouac, “The Origins of the Beat Generation,” *Playboy*, June 1959.
  - 13 Norman Mailer, “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster,” in *Advertisements for Myself* (New York: Signet Books, 1959), 306. All further citations appear in the text.
  - 14 Ellison’s reaction comes from a letter to Albert Murray dated September 28, 1958. *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray*, ed. John F. Callahan and Albert Murray (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 193–98.
  - 15 On the cultural politics of the construction of presence in Beat writing, see Erik Mortenson, *Capturing the Beat Moment: Cultural Politics and the Poetics of Presence* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011).
  - 16 The descriptors applicable to Goodman could be multiplied almost indefinitely. On an episode of *Firing Line* from 1966, William F. Buckley, Jr. introduced the pipe-puffing author, sitting enveloped in a cloud of smoke, as “a pacifist, a bisexualist, a poverty cultist, an anarchist, and a few other distracting things.” Goodman hastened to object—he was not a poverty cultist. The clip serves as the introduction to Jonathan Lee’s documentary *Paul Goodman Changed My Life* (2011).
  - 17 Frederick Perls, Ralph F. Hefferline, and Paul Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (1951) (New York: Bantam Books, 1977), 268.
  - 18 Paul Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd: Problems of Youth in the Organized System* (New York: Random House, 1960), 28. All further citations appear in the text.
  - 19 The comment is directed specifically at the main characters of Kerouac’s *On the Road*. He also scolded them for eating too many sugary desserts and, in classically parental fashion, suggested that their overstimulated behavior was the result of their not getting enough “solid food to grow on” (283)!

### 34 *After the Rebellion*

- 20 See William Burroughs, *The Job: Interviews with William Burroughs* (1970) (New York: Penguin, 1989), 116–22; and *The Adding Machine* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1986), 124–26.
- 21 Paul Bowles, Preface to *The Sheltering Sky*, 65th Anniversary Edition (New York: Harper Collins, 2014), xix.
- 22 It is a depressingly difficult task to locate female novelists who can be plausibly described as representatives of the postwar counterculture as well as sources of cinematic material. One possibility is Jane Bowles, but her one novel, *Two Serious Ladies* (1943), predates the period and has never attracted attention from filmmakers (and, in view of the book's reliance on its unique tone, probably never will). For reasons detailed below, I believe that the most viable candidate is Carson McCullers, who belonged to the same circle as Paul and Jane Bowles for a time and produced novels that have served as the basis for several films.
- 23 "Countercultures and Social Change," 847.
- 24 See Paul Bowles, *Without Stopping* (New York: Harper Collins, 1972), 257; and Virginia Spencer Carr, *Paul Bowles: A Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 178–80.
- 25 See Andrew Murray Scott, *Alexander Trocchi: The Making of the Monster*, 2nd revised ed. (Edinburgh: Kennedy & Boyd, 2012), 19–20. Trocchi's academic study of the history of philosophy culminated in an enthusiasm for the positivism of A. J. Ayer, but Scott says that during his Paris years he became familiar with Sartre, Jaspers, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard (31).
- 26 See also Heidegger's later development of the concept of "the mystery" in "On the Essence of Truth" (1943), the "Letter on Humanism" (1946), "The Question Concerning Technology" (1953), and "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" (1954). Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).
- 27 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (1943), trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1969), 59. The chapter in which Sartre introduces this example is notoriously ambiguous. By the end of it, he seems to be saying that *good faith* is all but impossible—that every waiter is necessarily guilty of bad faith—and at least one critic has concluded that the philosopher therefore deserves to be refused service and shown the door. See D. Z. Phillips, "Bad Faith and Sartre's Waiter," *Philosophy*, 56.215 (1981): 23–31. These complications are discussed below.
- 28 See William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Doubleday, 1956).
- 29 See Pierre Reverdy, *Le Gant de crim* (1927) (Paris: Flammarion, 1968), 32.
- 30 André Breton, "The Automatic Message" (1933), in *What Is Surrealism? Selected Writings*, ed. Franklin Rosemont (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1978), 97. The comparison with Kerouac's ideas is, however, so obvious that its importance can be easily overstated. There is no evidence that Kerouac had Breton's example in mind when he elaborated his own jazz-inspired theory of spontaneous prose.
- 31 "The proportion of half one text half the other is important corresponding as it does to the two halves of the human organism." William Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962–67), ed. Oliver Harris (New York: Grove Press, 2014), 65. The differences between Burroughs' practice and that of the surrealists are, however, as notable as the similarities (see Chapter 7).
- 32 The relationship between surrealism and the Beats has been studied in depth by Joanna Pawlik, who emphasizes the importance of Artaud among the influences that shaped Beat writing and notes that, by the postwar era, Breton and the mainstream surrealists were often regarded as sellouts. See "Artaud in Performance: Dissident Surrealism and the Postwar American Avant-Garde," *Papers of Surrealism*, 8 (2010): 1–25; and "Surrealism, Beat Literature and the San Francisco Renaissance," *Literature Compass*, 10.2 (2013): 97–110.

- Artaud and Burroughs are two of the most prominent presiding spirits in the major works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980).
- 33 James Clifford has written interestingly about the affinity between surrealism and ethnography in the France of the interwar years. In a culture whose authority had been thrown into question by the First World War, the surrealist project of seeking another reality in the depths of the human psyche had its counterpart in the ethnographic project of seeking another reality in the geographically and culturally remote. As exemplified by certain key figures like Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, and Roger Caillois, these two projects would overlap. See "On Ethnographic Surrealism," in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 117–52.
  - 34 See, for example, his early collage poem "Le Corset mystère," the final piece in a volume with a similarly loaded title: *Mont de piétié* (1919). The photograph of Péret and his clerical target appeared in *La Révolution surréaliste* 8 (1926).
  - 35 Kerouac, "The Origins of the Beat Generation." Mailer explains his unusual religious views in Joseph Mantegna's documentary *Norman Mailer: The American* (2010).
  - 36 John Clellon Holmes, "This Is the Beat Generation," *The New York Times Magazine*, November 16, 1952.
  - 37 Much of the enthusiasm for Zen Buddhism in the postwar counterculture can be traced to the efforts of four influential figures: D. T. Suzuki, Eugen Herrigel, Edward Conze, and Alan Watts. Their most widely read works are Daisetz Taitaro Suzuki, *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (Kyoto: Eastern Buddhist Society, 1934) and the essays in *Zen Buddhism*, ed. William Barret (New York: Doubleday, 1956); Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (1948) (New York: Vintage Books, 1971); Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* (1959) (New York: Dover, 2003) and his translations of the major *prajnaparamitra* texts; Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Pantheon, 1957) and *This Is It and Other Essays on Zen and Spiritual Experience* (New York: Collier Books, 1960).
  - 38 Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (1957), trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1986), 11.
  - 39 "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen," in *This Is It*, 77–110.
  - 40 Gary Snyder, "Poetry and the Primitive," in *Earth House Hold* (New York: New Directions, 1969), 123.
  - 41 Keats on "negative capability." Letter to George and Thomas Keats, December 21, 27, 1817, *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 43.
  - 42 Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (New York: Penguin Books, 1962), 9–11. All further citations appear in the text.
  - 43 So much has been written about both the Christian allegory and the misogyny in Kesey's novel that it seems unnecessary to offer yet another point-by-point demonstration. For a detailed tallying up of the novel's masculinist gestures, see Daniel J. Vitkus, "Madness and Misogyny in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 14 (1994): 64–90.
  - 44 See the reminiscence of the fall 1960 semester contributed by another distinguished alumnus, Larry McMurtry, in "On the Road," *The New York Review of Books*, December 5, 2002.
  - 45 The bus trip signaled a temporary shift of emphasis in Kesey's creative work from novel writing to filmmaking, as he and his fellow travelers shot hours of footage, which he repeatedly tried to edit into a coherent whole over the subsequent decades but without success (that footage has since been transformed by

Alex Gibney and Alison Ellwood into the 2011 documentary *Magic Trip: Ken Kesey's Search for a Kool Place*). The whole episode speaks to an unresolved tension in Kesey's work between writing and performance. In the reminiscence cited above, Larry McMurtry notes that Kesey's writing, always deft in catching the rhythms of American speech, seemed better than it does on the page when the author himself read it aloud, performing all the voices. Despite his lack of success as a filmmaker and eventual return to writing, the choice to take up film-making testifies to the shrewdness with which Kesey anticipated the cultural shift toward visual media in the period of the global counterculture.

- 46 It is Harding, the character most inclined to forgive McMurphy's "chicanery" in the name of "the dear old capitalistic system of free individual enterprise" (229), who urges him to seize the chance to follow Turkle and Sandy out the window; but McMurphy firmly refuses (269), keeping him present for Billy's Judas-like betrayal and suicide, which precipitates McMurphy's (rather unchristian) attempt to strangle Nurse Ratched. His existential choice to let himself become a Christ-figure apparently does not include an embrace of the earlier messiah's value system.
- 47 *Being and Nothingness*, 59.
- 48 "In a period such as ours when only a comparatively few individuals seem to be given to religion, some form other than the Gothic cathedral must be found. Industry concerns the greatest numbers—it may be true, as has been said, that our factories are our substitute for religious expression." Quoted in Theodore E. Stebbins and Norman Keyes, *Charles Sheeler: The Photographs* (New York: Little, Brown, 1987), 26–27.
- 49 Breton's essay, first published in *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution 2* (1930), is of interest insofar as the anti-psychiatry movement is generally understood to have begun only around the time that Kesey's novel appeared with works such as Erving Goffman's *Asylums* (1961) and Thomas Szasz's *The Myth of Mental Illness* (1961). See André Breton, "Surrealism and the Treatment of Mental Illness," in *What Is Surrealism? Selected Writings*, 62–64.
- 50 One of Tanguy's sculptures, a stern-looking mannequin captured in a photograph by Man Ray (1938), seems to speak to Kesey's brand of male hysteria. Above her own breasts, she sports a pair of alarmingly pointy appendages, which look more than capable of putting out the eye of the male gaze.

## 2 The Sands of Abjection in *The Sheltering Sky*

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,  
Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven  
That has expelled us and our images.

Stevens, *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*

When Bernardo Bertolucci set out to make a film of Paul Bowles' fascinating novel *The Sheltering Sky* (1949), he had an advantage enjoyed by none of the other filmmakers discussed in this book: the onscreen participation of the author, whose dapper seventy-nine-year-old presence graces three scenes at the beginning and end of the film, and whose voice on the soundtrack lends its aura to three recitations from the text. Although Bowles would be unhappy with the result, at least to judge from his subsequent remarks ("the less said about the film now, the better"), he nevertheless gave a willing boost to the director's effort to exploit his image and tacitly countenanced the similar use of his late wife's through the recreation of her distinctive hairstyle atop Debra Winger's head.<sup>1</sup> Whatever Bowles may have hoped for from Bertolucci, it's clear that what Bertolucci wanted from Bowles was the luster of his notoriety, however atypical an iconoclast he may have been.

The association between Bowles and the postwar counterculture was fixed by some widely reprinted photographs from the summer of 1961, in which he appears alongside Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Gregory Corso, and other Beat figures in Tangier. Yet even here the differences are apparent. Bowles stands out from his visitors in a Panama suit and rep tie, looking less like a countercultural icon than like a stock Hollywood character—the dissolute gentleman washed up in a sweltering equatorial capital. Next to him, even Burroughs appears underdressed. A little earlier, Norman Mailer's assessment, first published in *Advertisements for Myself* (1959) and relentlessly quoted in every significant article on Bowles to appear over the next few decades, had done much to establish his countercultural

credentials: “Paul Bowles opened the world of Hip. He let in the murder, the drugs, the incest, the death of the Square (Port Moresby), the call of the orgy, the end of civilization.”<sup>2</sup> Nine out of every ten times that these remarks have appeared, the parenthesis has been replaced by an ellipsis, possibly because Mailer was so obviously wrong on that specific point (in *The Sheltering Sky*, it’s Tunner, not Port Moresby, who’s the square), and the off-base aside makes the larger claim seem indiscriminate. Though unflinching in receiving guests of every conceivable description, Bowles himself was not exactly an enthusiast of the new cultural currents spilling into his remote outpost. In a letter to his mother, he gave free rein to his fastidiousness: “The beats have invaded Tangier at last. Every day one sees more beards and filthy blue jeans, and the girls look like escapees from lunatic asylums.”<sup>3</sup>

These differences in personal style extend to his prose, which delivers its often shocking subject matter with a restraint and elegance markedly removed from the exuberant spontaneity and shameless self-exposure of Ginsberg and the others. In his writing, as in the music that he composed professionally for many years, Bowles strove for maximal effects by minimal means, according to an aesthetic more typically French than American; and it’s unsurprising to learn that his early enthusiasms were focused on Paris or that some of his first publications were even written in French. More than any English-speaking writer, one is reminded of his Parisian contemporaries, the dissident surrealists, who also specialized in rendering startling obscenities in notably refined language.

The perceived affinity between Bowles and the counterculture is no misconception, however, and it may be that his disaffection with the world he was born into was even more thoroughgoing than that of his younger associates. It’s evident above all in his half-century-plus residence in North Africa, where he settled after the war and remained until his death in 1999. In a documentary shot near the end of his life, he placidly suggests that living in a city like Tangier is good practice for the day Western civilization destroys itself, although he allows that he won’t be around to witness that event (advice to the young, one assumes).<sup>4</sup> Together with the author’s personal history, such sentiments call to mind the introduction of this theme, both in the novel and in Bertolucci’s film version of *The Sheltering Sky* (1990), through a distinction between the tourist and the traveler. Early in the novel, with the characters recently arrived in North Africa, we learn that Port Moresby is fond of elaborating his pet comparison in point-by-point fashion, and the film conveys the established quality of the idea by having his wife, Kit, introduce it and Port take it up on cue. The tourist, we are told, “generally hurries back home after a few weeks or months,” whereas the traveler, “belonging to no one place more than the next, moves slowly, over periods of years, from one part of the earth to another” (6). Port considers himself a traveler, of course, and in the film the ensuing dialogue helpfully specifies that Tunner, snapping pictures on the dock, is a tourist and that

Kit, by her own estimate, is “half and half.” The novel takes the comparison a step farther:

another important difference between tourist and traveler is that the former accepts his own civilization without question; not so the traveler, who compares it with the others, and rejects those elements he finds not to his liking. And the war was one facet of the mechanized age he wanted to forget.<sup>5</sup>

(6)

With its explicit link between the countercultural impulse and the disasters of the Second World War, the scene offers a natural point of departure for this study. In the aftermath of a war, Kit observes, mostly to please her husband, “The people of each country get more like the people of every other country. They have no character, no beauty, no ideals, no culture—nothing, nothing.” Port is happy to agree and adds: “Everything’s getting gray, and it’ll be grayer. But some places’ll withstand the malady longer than you think” (8). Bowles was hardly the first to compare the underdeveloped and developed worlds to the disadvantage of the latter, whose depressing reach is evident in the intrusion of the coloratura soprano’s aria—especially irritating to the modernist composer that he was—and in the nondescript European clothes worn by the Arabs on the terrace of the Café d’Eckmühl-Noiseux.<sup>6</sup> But while the very existence of this shabby establishment reminds us that Western culture was steadily overrunning the rest of the world, the lumped-together names alluding to the recent combatants underscore the evidence throughout the scene that Bowles was among those who viewed the war as a defining moment. To him and to others of his mind, it seemed obvious that the forces of “the mechanized age” were collectively advancing toward their own destruction and therefore had to be, if not entirely avoided, then at least kept at a distance for as long as possible. Once only a personal preference, homelessness would be henceforth a necessity, and in that one respect the difference between the author and his alienated protagonist is not great.

\*

Perhaps due to its intercultural erotic encounters and atmosphere of sophisticated despair, *The Sheltering Sky* was an unexpected bestseller in midcentury America, a novel accidentally attuned to its moment; and Bertolucci’s film concentrates on those aspects of the book that, as an early reviewer put it, seemed to have “met the French existentialists on their own ground and held them to a draw.”<sup>7</sup> The key image of the desert sky, like “a solid thing up there, protecting us” from the nothingness beyond, is instantly recognizable as an evocation of the godless universe held temporarily at bay (94). Thanks to Vittorio Storaro’s astonishing cinematography, it becomes

as much a star of the film as either of the lead actors, whose movements are repeatedly framed against its breathtaking expanse. The spatial contrast between the human scale of the characters and the immeasurable regions where much of the action takes place complements a temporal contrast, which is introduced by the ingenious credit sequence, a montage constructed from newsreel footage of 1940s New York. Accompanied by Lionel Hampton's "Midnight Sun"—music immediately evocative of its era—these are images of a precise moment, their temporal specificity made manifest by their status as historical documents showing one thing after another that is either no longer the same or no longer there at all: the midcentury skyline, the Automat, the period vehicles, the fashions of the day. They are densely packed, bustling images, none more so than the storm of confetti over a crowd in Times Square, which every reader of the novel will register as a celebration of the war's end. And though one can only smile at the clever device of bringing the sequence to a close with footage of a departing ocean liner (soon to be glimpsed in the background at anchor in North Africa), the clearest signal that the prologue has ended and the narrative proper begun is the shift to color stock, accompanied by the call of the muezzin at the fade-in of the first color image. Despite its hectic complexity and relentless change, the time-bound civilization that the characters are leaving is drawn with a monochrome pallet—gray and grayer, as Port would say.

At the other extreme, the stunning images in the latter part of the film, after Port has died and Kit been left to fend for herself, offer visions of a timeless world, a culture that has remained little changed for centuries, and the film evokes the feeling of eternity through a visual language reminiscent of the imagery devised by modern painters to suggest ideal realms, free of the clutter of history. One can be sure that these shots were in no way simple to obtain, yet they project an almost naïve, otherworldly simplicity: except for the traces of movement—camels wending their way through the dunes, a falling star—the distant view of a caravan at night under an enormous white moon could be a lost canvass by Henri Rousseau. Even more startling is the momentarily static shot that divides the screen horizontally between tawny ripples of sand across the bottom and cloud-dappled sky across the top, a pared-down composition that approaches the abstraction of color field painting with much the same intent to gesture toward elemental experience. The claim voiced by one of Bowles' contemporaries among the painters could be applied with equal appropriateness to the filmmakers' purpose here: "We are reasserting man's natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions."<sup>8</sup>

The dramatic function of this contrast between time-bound and timeless domains is spelled out in Bowles' voiceovers, which frame the narrative at the beginning and end of the film. The first is part of a passage that comes a little over a third of the way through the book. Removed from its original context, it has been shifted to one of the earliest scenes and thus accorded a degree of prominence that it doesn't enjoy in the novel:

Because neither [Kit] nor Port had ever lived a life of any kind of regularity, they both had made the fatal error of coming hazily to regard time as non-existent. One year was like another year. Eventually everything would happen.

(127)

The last, which accompanies the final scene of the film, is possibly the most haunting and certainly the most frequently quoted passage in Bowles' work:

because we don't know [when we will die], we get to think of life as an inexhaustible well. Yet everything happens only a certain number of times, and a very small number, really. How many more times will you remember a certain afternoon of your childhood, some afternoon that's so deeply a part of your being that you can't even conceive of your life without it? Perhaps four or five times more. Perhaps not even that. How many more times will you watch the full moon rise? Perhaps twenty. And yet it all seems limitless.

(232)

Less a *carpe diem* than a melancholy recognition of the human tendency to be lulled into a false sense of permanence, the voiceover expresses an irony prepared by the many images of spacious vistas that lead up to this final scene: it all *seems* limitless, but it's not; and the assumption that life is without limits raises the threat of a failure to live.

The large theme of the inescapability of human transience is integral to Bertolucci's conception of the narrative. In his view, this is primarily the story of a relationship in crisis, a marriage ten years old and searching for its future, although a certain obliviousness to time, perhaps born of affluence (if we're to judge by the characters' mountains of luggage), has placed that future in doubt. Such is the implication of the remaining extract from the novel, again given the authority of Bowles' voice on the soundtrack and mute presence in the background of the scene, which occurs in a hotel dining room early in the film:

rather than make any effort to ease whatever small tension might arise between them, she determined on the contrary to be intransigent about everything. It could come about now or later, that much-awaited reunion, but it must be all his doing.

(127)

Not to be hurried, Kit thinks she has all the time in the world, but she's actually running out of time more quickly than she knows.

There's no question that, on one level, the novel is about a troubled marriage between two people with symmetrical strengths and weaknesses.

Kit is proud and stubborn but ultimately willing to follow her husband in matters as large as the decision to spend years wandering in the African desert (she would have preferred the Italian countryside); and Port is physically fearless and adventurous when it comes to places and people, as we learn from his hazardous interlude with the prostitute, Marhnia, but somewhat at a loss in trying to figure out how to hold onto his wife, who has become the object of Tunner's erotic ambitions. The novel elaborates on this last point in a passage that is not used as a voiceover in the film but easily could have been:

Everything now depended on him. He could make the right gesture, or the wrong one, but he could not know beforehand which was which. Experience had taught him that reason could not be counted on in such situations. There was always an extra element, mysterious and not quite within reach, that one had not reckoned with. One had to know, not deduce. And he did not have the knowledge.

(124–25)

Offspring of a rational culture, Port and Kit are both forced to acknowledge that reason is of little use to them in the face of mystery. The film notes in passing and the novel explains in detail that Kit suffers from a complex form of self-consciousness: the victim of an ever-present sense of foreboding, she is intermittently aware of “the struggle that raged in her—the war between reason and atavism,” and on bad days the latter gains the upper hand to such an extent that she is at the mercy of superstition. “In intellectual discussions she was always the proponent of scientific method” (36), yet she sees the world as teeming with auguries, which pose such formidable difficulties of interpretation that she can only “eat, sleep, and cringe before her omens” (120). Though a defender of reason, she is predisposed toward madness from the start. Port, too, keeps life at a safe distance. He recognizes that his wife doesn't feel his yearning for the grandeur of the desert, which has driven their lives to this juncture, but against all evidence to the contrary still hopes that she will eventually come to share his tastes. Bowles sums up their impasse as follows: “just as she was unable to shake off the dread that was always with her, he was unable to break out of the cage into which he had shut himself, the cage he had built long ago to save himself from love” (93).

Various episodes chronicle the futile devices to which the uneasy couple resort in their efforts to sustain themselves in their separate worlds. If Port has built himself a protective cage, Kit takes refuge in a fortress. Arriving back at their rooms in a remote Saharan settlement, he is astonished to find that she has laid out all her belongings, including an elegant wardrobe and a full complement of cosmetics, and ordered a Scotch sent up, even though the whiskey is sure to be execrable, and there is no ice or soda for miles. In response, she remarks defiantly that she is “still an American,” is “not even

trying to be anything else,” and felt she would die if she “didn’t see something civilized soon” (155). Recognizing her mood, Port decides to humor her, albeit without any large degree of sympathy: “it amused him to watch her building her pathetic little fortress of Western culture in the middle of the wilderness” (156).

This episode is dramatized cursorily but intelligibly in the film; however, another scene, in which Port shows himself to be no less pathetic than his wife, sharply reveals the limitations of Bertolucci’s treatment of the material. In the novel, Port suddenly feels an overwhelming passion for a blind dancer, then becomes enraged when he misses the chance to arrange a liaison with her, and his Arab companion treats the matter lightly, unable to understand why anyone would be interested in such damaged goods. The episode receives a detailed exposition, the function of which is clearly to elucidate the psychology of the isolated protagonist: “Now that she was gone, he was persuaded, not that a bit of enjoyment had been denied him, but that he had lost love itself” (132). There follows one of those passages, so common in this author’s work, that are no less disturbing than they are convincing, as if Bowles had set out to leave his readers in a state of queasy revulsion before something that they can’t stomach but also can’t quite dismiss:

in bed, without eyes to see beyond the bed, she would have been completely there, a prisoner. He thought of the little games he would have played with her, pretending to have disappeared when he was really still there; he thought of the countless ways he could have made her grateful to him. And always in conjunction with his fantasies he saw the imperturbable, faintly questioning face in its masklike symmetry. He felt a sudden shudder of self pity that was almost pleasurable, it was such a complete expression of his mood. It was a physical shudder; he was alone, abandoned, lost, hopeless, cold. Cold, especially—a deep interior cold nothing could change. Although it was the basis of his unhappiness, this glacial deadness, he would cling to it always, because it was also the core of his being; he had built the being around it.

(134–35)

It’s hard to think of another writer who slips the knife into a compromised character with such exquisite twists. First, Port’s whimsical fantasy of teasing his imagined lover with the advantage of sight is laid out in its full repugnance. Then, although we’ve just been informed that their tryst would have been the consummation of love itself, that noble sentiment is promptly deflated by the information that he envisages basking in her gratitude for his condescension. Finally, as the unrealized dream withers, he descends into self-pity and masochistically savors the coldness at “the core of his being,” which, in a reversal of the earlier metaphor that had him shut up in a cage

of his own making, is itself now a self-built enclosure around a frigid center. The ultimate irony, revealed only later, is that his chill turns out to be no mere emotional numbness but the first sign of a physical affliction considerably worse than blindness: the onset of the typhoid fever that will kill him.

The film presents this scene without commentary as a fever dream that Port experiences when illness is already upon him, and the result is that the spectacle of the blind dancer becomes an indecipherable piece of exoticism, whose effect on the protagonist is unspecified beyond his noticeable fascination. Such is the problem with this gorgeous but tedious film: stupendous images regularly appear before the viewer's eyes, but their dramatic function is negligible, rendering them less than compelling. Moreover, the sense that the richness of the drama doesn't match the extraordinary quality of the visuals is reinforced by the awkwardness of some of the writing. Bertolucci extolled the ability of his actors to inhabit their characters, yet in the early scenes the two principals wear their mildly stilted dialogue like ill-fitting clothes, and the disastrous decision to have John Malkovich commence his meditations on the sky in the middle of an awkward coupling is a blunder that few viewers will forgive (probably more than one has felt that a man who launches into philosophy at such a moment *deserves* death).<sup>9</sup> To be sure, Debra Winger's gift for transparency of feeling comes to the fore when she's called upon to deliver the raw emotions of the deathbed scene, and the supporting players (Campbell Scott as Tunner, Jill Bennett and Timothy Spall as the Lyles) give us their characters very much as one imagines them. Nevertheless, for all its visual brilliance, the film version of *The Sheltering Sky* is ultimately more notable for what is not there than for what is, and the discrepancy between the splendor of the imagery and the rudimentary telegraphing of Kit's psychology in the concluding section of the film makes an instructive contrast with the corresponding part of the novel.

In Bowles' version, Kit ironically becomes just the sort of prisoner that Port imagined making of the blind dancer, right down to the torment of her captor's unpredictable comings and goings; however, Bertolucci softens the emotional content of these scenes, making Kit's ordeal into something much less harrowing than it is in the book. There is evidence that the leftist director wanted to avoid portraying representatives of a non-Western culture in an unflattering light; but one doesn't escape Orientalist stereotypes so easily, and as more than one early reviewer pointed out, what he ended up with was a well-mannered example of a familiar genre narrative: an uptight Western female's sexual awakening at the hands of an exotic paramour.<sup>10</sup> As the film builds to a pitch of visual interest through imagery evocative of the older world into which Kit is drawn, there is no comparably rich development of her emotional experience but rather a simple three-stage process: she is grief-stricken at the loss of her husband; she is shyly delighted with the attentions of her new lover; and, eventually, she is left suspended between cultures when she can find no permanent place in the traditional life of the desert but can't face the thought of Tunner's renewed interest either.

Even though the general circumstances of Kit's removal from Belqassim's house are retained—his wives are no happier about her than Port was about Tunner—this is exactly the sort of starry-eyed idealization of a non-Western culture that the novel avoids.

By contrast, Bowles focuses on the upheaval in Kit's inner life following the death of her husband, and the difference from the film's uninspired rendering of her sequential moods is impossible to miss, even though this part of the book also has a Hollywood genre feel that momentarily points toward a different kind of narrative than the one that eventually develops: "A drum beat in the oasis. There would probably be dancing in the gardens later. The season of feasts had begun" (234).<sup>11</sup> In this theatrically ominous atmosphere, the erstwhile slave to her omens slips away from the disasters of her past life in an unexpectedly liberated frame of mind, stopping in the shadows only to listen to the relentless drums "with an inscrutable smile on her lips" (239). As a depiction of incipient madness, this borders on kitsch; however, once the character's psychology has been further elaborated, it becomes evident that the genre signals were deliberately misleading. No monsters are afoot, nor will Kit become a monster, despite the imaginary power that she assumes for herself. Instead, the danger turns out to be within her, for she will be catastrophically misled by a state of mind that Bowles describes with uncanny foresight, a psychological condition that would become all too familiar when the counterculture emerged into the mainstream a decade and a half later.

It's important to remember that Kit is a trauma victim, as the reader is barely encouraged to be any more aware of her true mental condition than she is. There is nothing here as obvious as Debra Winger's tear-stained face to remind us that she has just nursed her dying husband for days, only to step outside briefly, discover she's been locked out in the desert for the night with Tunner, and then return in the morning to a gruesomely contorted corpse. Horror, guilt, and the pain of bereavement give way to a state of unthinking distraction, which Bowles evokes through yet another of his many metaphors of consciousness sheltered from the unbearable knowledge of absence:

Resolutely she turned her mind away, refusing to examine it, bending all her efforts to putting a sure barrier between herself and it. Like an insect spinning its cocoon thicker and more resistant, her mind would go on strengthening the thin partition, the danger spot of her being.

(261)

Whereas Kit had once built a fortress of Western culture to support herself in her isolation, she now finds herself barred from an actual fortress at the moment of Port's death and then shields herself that much more desperately from the insupportable memory by constructing a mental enclosure of an even less rational and more atavistic type.

Remarkably, though, Kit experiences what would nowadays be called a state of denial as something like a state of grace. Her former debilitating self-consciousness, the paralyzing dread that any action she took might trigger unforeseeable and disastrous consequences, miraculously lifts; and when she climbs into an uninhabited garden and spontaneously decides to immerse herself in the moonlit pool, a sense of dreamlike and slightly suspect harmony comes over her. Faintly astonished “that her actions should go on so far ahead of her consciousness of them,” that all her movements “seemed the perfect expression of lightness and grace,” she is now aware of only a small voice whispering caution: “‘Look out,’ said a part of her. ‘Go carefully.’ But it was the same part of her that sent out the warning when she was drinking too much. At this point it was meaningless” (240). After completing her baptism and leaving her Edenic surroundings, she emerges with all the fervor of a recent convert:

Swiftly she walked along, focusing her mind on that feeling of solid delight that she had recaptured. She had always known it was there, just behind things, but long ago she had accepted not having it as a natural condition of life. Because she had found it again, the joy of being, she said to herself that she would hang on to it no matter what the effort entailed.

(242)

Bowles, an atheist of the most intransigent New England variety, here gives us in almost entirely secular terms a portrait of the damaged soul that fervently believes it has found salvation and clings with newly discovered zeal to that conviction.<sup>12</sup>

The religious overtones of Kit’s transformation, combined with the faint sense that she might be doing something akin to letting her taste for alcohol get the better of her (a factor in her earlier seduction by Tunner), prepare us for the possibility that she is ripe for exploitation by a spiritualist cult or fly-by-night church or maybe just ready for an old-fashioned descent into alcoholism. What she actually does is attach herself to a foreign culture, one as far removed as possible from the genteel Western edifice in which she had previously cowered; and upon doing so, she almost immediately becomes a piece of sexual property.<sup>13</sup> Worse, although she has to endure the repeated assaults of a disagreeable elder, the younger man under whose protection she eventually falls turns out to be a more competent seducer than Tunner, and the result is that in her traumatized state she does in fact succumb to the lure of addiction, though not, as it happens, addiction to alcohol. In these scenes, Bowles once again forces his readers to look straight at something that many would prefer not to see: “when he went away the delicious state of exhaustion and fulfilment persisted for a long time afterward; she lay half awake, bathing in an aura of mindless contentment, a state which she

quickly grew to take for granted, and then, like a drug, to find indispensable" (286). Where Bertolucci discovered the inspiration for a love story, Bowles unveils less heartwarming developments:

Spinning a fantasy as she lay there, she made [Belqassim] come in the door, approach the bed, pull back the curtains—and was astonished to find that it was not Belqassim at all who climbed the four steps to join her, but a young man with a composite, anonymous face. Only then she realized that any creature even remotely resembling Belqassim would please her quite as much as Belqassim himself.

(287–88)

A woman addicted to a man—or perhaps just to a certain male erotic presence—opens a realm of degradation that is the farthest imaginative terrain the novel will explore.

Having traveled through such disquieting territory, the story ends on an ambiguous note, after Kit, who has been airlifted to Oran in a near catatonic state, suddenly comes to life in a panic at the thought that she is about to be reunited with Tunner and disappears again when she is left momentarily unattended. The final sentences trace the progress of a streetcar, which we cannot be sure Kit has boarded, through the Europeanized center of the city, past the crowds in the streets, and up the hill to the Arab quarter, where it comes to a stop at the end of the line. The image of the traveler with which the novel began provides the closing image as well, but the attractive idea that one might pick and choose from among the wealth of the world's cultures and come away with only the best of each is nowhere to be found.

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Until recently, Bowles has been the odd man out in American literature of his era, and even some of the recent interest in his work has had a cautious feel, as if a wild animal were being admitted to the house but on a short leash. He has been given his due, for example, as a pioneer of gay fiction, though mostly on the strength of his appalling short story "Pages from Cold Point" (1949), in which a teenager seduces his own father, possibly with the aim of getting him to finance an apartment (the piece will not figure high on the reading list of those seeking mainstream acceptance for gay families). Others have taken the opposite tack by prosecuting him on charges of unreconstructed Orientalism, and at first glance he might seem to be such a flagrant offender that it's almost embarrassing to say so.<sup>14</sup> He regularly portrays North Africans as spontaneous, animalistic, casual in matters of appetite, and prone to a violence that is barely held in check by an all-but-militaristic religion (though also gentle, thoughtful, creative,

tolerant, and many other things as well). It's no exaggeration to say that few Westerners have known North Africa as intimately as Bowles did, and his attitude toward his chosen place of residence is not disdainful or patronizing (for contrast, he offers more than one version of the conventional colonialist mentality—in *The Sheltering Sky*, Lieutenants d'Armagnac and Broussard represent the libertine and ascetic extremes). Instead, he simply acknowledges the culture's resistance to assimilation by anyone not born into it. For him, it is a subject of constant, indeed lifelong study but one that can never be entirely mastered. Given these views, a strict moralist might conclude that one shouldn't write about North Africa at all, but Bowles is not that kind of moralist. He accepts that his North African characters exist no more independently of his fantasies than do any of his other imagined beings, so he fantasizes about them freely, albeit with considerable first-hand knowledge and complete awareness of what he's doing. Thus, he consciously enacts Edward Said's thesis that Western representations of the East are a mirror held up to the West: his work gives us an uncensored view not of North Africa but of himself.<sup>15</sup>

Critics have often complained that Bowles' characters seem to have no background or history, but there is a reason. Despite its realistic surface, *The Sheltering Sky* is not a realist novel at all, nor is it veiled autobiography, as Bertolucci insinuated when he had his leading lady made up to resemble Jane Bowles. Rather, it is a psychodrama, a projection of its author's truly unusual mind, and it would be misleading to try to place this or any of Bowles' other writings within the major traditions of American fiction.<sup>16</sup> One notes with interest that among the directors who expressed a desire to adapt *The Sheltering Sky* to the screen before Bertolucci took on the project was David Lynch.<sup>17</sup> The surrealist heritage is primary, and Bowles more than once patiently explained that the grotesqueries in his work don't mean that he endorses violence and cruelty but are a way of startling the mind into dropping its defenses and allowing the author to insert his profoundly unsettling imagery. Once the sentences have been read, who can forget the hostile, deformed little "creature" with pincer arms that threatens the protagonist of "By the Water" and is shoved away across the pool deck, "making efforts with its neck to keep from reaching the edge of the platform"?<sup>18</sup> Or the professor of linguistics who, in "A Distant Episode," has his tongue cut out by desert bandits and becomes a performing animal, draped with "a series of curious belts made of the bottoms of tin cans strung together"?<sup>19</sup> The resonant details no less than the unflappable tone in which they're delivered are as telling as the horrors they accompany. They are what stick most stubbornly in the memory, however much one might care to dislodge them.

I have suggested that in *The Sheltering Sky* Bowles employs the occasional kitsch genre motif, which, like the tin cans that adorn the professor-turned-circus bear, is pressed into service in disconcerting apposition to the potent shocks that he inflicts on the reader (much as in a David Lynch film

the conventions of film noir and innocents-in-peril stories call up associations that become part of the collage of surreal juxtapositions). A considerably more prominent narrative technique, the *style indirect libre*, returns us to the question of the author's relationship to his characters; and another of Bowles' stories from the same period, "The Circular Valley," could almost be a commentary on his supremely assured, even ostentatious handling of this familiar device. In the story, an immortal and rather inquisitive spirit called the Atlájala successively inhabits the human beings who venture into the deserted valley of the title and directs their lives without their knowledge but with lethal consequences.<sup>20</sup> The narrative voice of *The Sheltering Sky* is much like that disembodied spirit, with no identity of its own but a will to take over and ventriloquize each of the characters in succession, devoting whole chapters even to those, like Lieutenant d'Armagnac and Tunner, for whom we are meant to feel no great esteem. The result is that the shifting perspectives call attention to the pliability of the voice itself, referring the reader back to the informing sensibility behind the narrative. Eventually, the awareness of a governing authorial presence becomes inescapable when one encounters the least expected plot development in the book—the decision to kill off the ostensible protagonist well before the end. In fact, one could profitably ask a freshman-level question about *The Sheltering Sky*: Who is the protagonist? The answer is not freshman-level, for the novel has a dual protagonist who is also one (Port/Kit). Bertolucci wasn't the only reader to jump to the conclusion that Port can be identified with the composer-author and that Kit is a portrait of his wife; but in the novel Port is neither a composer nor much of an author, and Bowles' initial sketch of Kit points to other possibilities: "Small, with blond hair and an olive complexion, she was saved from prettiness by the intensity of her gaze" (7). The description sounds less like Jane Bowles than like the young Bowles himself, whose photographs are marked by an exaggerated stare.

If on one level *The Sheltering Sky* is about the final days of a troubled marriage and is organized around the existentialist themes of time, self-deception, and the absurd universe, on another level it is something else again—a poem of disruption, degradation, and loss; exit music to accompany the fall of the towering fortress of Western culture. On this level, the narrative is a journey through the interior landscape of its creator, and to map the landmarks of that unnerving region, one must be attuned to an entirely different set of themes and prepared to recognize the characteristic imagery in which they are expressed. A convenient way to enter this dimension of the book is through its most classically surrealist feature: the dream that, at the very beginning of the novel, Port relates to his two companions, the first, Tunner, a willing listener, and the second, Kit, a most *unwilling* one. It is recounted in three segments, each separated by voyeuristically encouraging remarks from Tunner and stronger expressions of protest from Kit, whose fear of the irrational moves her to object to the whole performance:

It was daytime and I was on a train that kept putting on speed. I thought to myself: "We're going to plough into a big bed with the sheets all in mountains." . . . And I was thinking that if I wanted to, I could live over again—start at the beginning and come right on up to the present, having exactly the same life down to the smallest detail. . . . So I said to myself: "No! No!" I couldn't face the thought of all those God-awful fears and pains again, *in detail*. And then for no reason I looked out the window and heard myself say: "Yes!" Because I knew I'd be willing to go through the whole thing again just to smell the spring the way it used to smell when I was a kid. But then I realized it was too late, because while I'd been thinking "No!" I'd reached up and snapped off my incisors as if they'd been made of plaster. The train had stopped and I held my teeth in my hand, and I started to sob. You know those terrible dream sobs that shake you like an earthquake?

(9–10)

Port's dream is, first of all, the answer to a question, but it's the kind of answer that raises a host of further questions. In the opening sentences of the novel, he comes to consciousness alone, following an afternoon nap in a hotel room, and feels "the certitude of an infinite sadness at the core of his consciousness, but the sadness was reassuring because it alone was familiar" (3). The conventional expectation, raised by innumerable realist novels, is that this man's sadness will be explained by something in his past, an event that has haunted him for years and that, when finally disclosed, will provide the key to his nature. The explanation never comes, though, and we learn nothing of substance about the character's history; instead, the reader is treated to a game of interpretation. The dream explains the sadness, but the dream is obviously in need of explanation itself, and many pages later Port comes up with a satisfying one—to him at least, if not necessarily to the reader:

The train that went always faster was merely an epitome of life itself. The unsureness about the no and yes was the inevitable attitude one had if one tried to consider the value of that life, and the hesitation was automatically resolved by one's involuntary decision to refuse participation in it.

(66–67)

This is an interpretation straight out of the less inspiring pages of the existentialist's handbook. The initial affirmation of the Nietzschean eternal return in the dream is rejected in favor of a slightly smug refusal to engage. It's "too late" because the train is unstoppable; there *is* no going back, and as we will be reminded by the later passage about that "certain afternoon of your childhood," even one's richest early memories are destined to be revisited only a limited number of times. Yet the definitiveness of Port's

interpretation is immediately thrown into question by what follows: "He wondered why it had upset him; it was a simple, classic dream. The connections were all clear in his head. Their particular meaning with regard to his own life scarcely mattered" (67). If the reader had any remaining doubts about the distance between the author and his apparent representative in the fiction, these remarks must dispel them. There is a controlling spirit here, articulating the character's thoughts, pointing up their inadequacy, and even ridiculing him a little for his self-satisfied obliviousness ("He was pleased to have solved his little problem").

The author's mockery seems well earned if one takes into account Port's situation at the moment when he comes up with his interpretation. He's in a car trying to distract himself not only from his dreadful fellow motorists, the Lyles, but also from thoughts of his wife, who at that very moment is actually *on* a train in the process of being seduced by Tunner. The image of a train plowing into an enormous pile of bedsheets has connotations that an incipient cuckold might very well prefer not to contemplate. But the inadequacies of Port's interpretation are even more glaring than that, for how can he disregard the decisive detail of his "snapped off" incisors, from which the wellspring of his sorrow seems to flow? The vulgar Freudian reading of this last item as an image of castration is certainly not irrelevant, although it would be wise to keep in mind the pitfalls of resorting to such a blandly generalizing interpretation when dealing with an author who has given us, among other atrocities, an actual castration, presented in sickening detail (see "The Delicate Prey"). In that story too, however, the violence of the unspeakable act is only a preliminary, a way of softening us up for the final image: the head of the perpetrator sticking up out of the desert sand where the rest of him has been buried in retaliation for his offense. Slowly baking in the sun, it's singing.

Port's detachable teeth, held in the palm of his hand and contemplated with inexpressible sadness, are more like that singing head than like the castration that precedes it: a precise image that resonates in a variety of ways. It is indeed an image of the loss of potency (no surprise in the dreamworld of a man worried about losing his wife), but it's also an image associated with old age and physical decay. Death haunts the dream as it does the entire novel. Finally, there are the connotations of the comparison that Port himself introduces in narrating the event: he snaps off his incisors "as if they'd been made of plaster." And with this detail the associations of the dream imagery expand outward to call our attention to the many other images of detached body parts and bodies turned into material objects or machines that permeate the novel. In the latter category, there is the unedifying spectacle of Eric Lyle being chastised and ordered around by his mother, which "Port watched, fascinated as always by the sight of a human being brought down to the importance of an automaton or a caricature" (46). Far more startling is Kit's visit to the third-class carriage on the train, where among the crowd of poor Arabs she discovers a gallery of amputations and

absences, including “a wildfaced man holding a severed sheep’s head, its eyes like agate marbles staring from their sockets,” as well as “the most hideous human face she had ever seen,” that of a man with “a dark triangular abyss” instead of a nose (77–78). Later, in the course of performing his colonial duties, Lieutenant d’Armagnac is confronted with the problem of a dead newborn, which he comes upon in the process of being dismembered by dogs. All these images are preparatory to the climactic one of Port’s own dead body, lying “in a strange position, his legs wound tightly in the bedcovers” (230)—a bedridden train that, like the streetcar in the book’s concluding image, has come to the end of the line.

In contrast to this unnerving family of images is the other detail in Port’s dream that his interpretation ignores: his memory of “the spring the way it used to smell when [he] was a kid.” This reminiscence belongs with a group of images that are distinct from the ones I have just enumerated but are linked to them in dialectical interplay, for these are images of purity and purification. “The sun is a great purifier,” Lieutenant d’Armagnac affirms. “With even a minimum of hygiene, people could be healthy here. But of course there is not that minimum. Unfortunately for us, d’ailleurs” (166). Extending this idea, a remarkable passage implies that purity is an intrinsic property of the desert landscape, which is inevitably sullied by the mere act of being experienced and thus invested with human meaning:

The rocks and the sky were everywhere, ready to absolve him, but as always he carried the obstacle within himself. He would have said that as he looked at them, the rocks and the sky ceased being themselves, that in the act of passing into his consciousness, they became impure.  
(162)

On an entirely different level from the existentialist themes of the surface narrative, this dimension of the novel could be described as a quest for purity and a dramatization of its collapse into its opposite.

The scenes I have been examining offer an indication of the extent to which *The Sheltering Sky* exhibits a poetic counter-logic distinctly removed from the procedures of the conventional realist novel, and anyone who aims to provide a gloss on these subtle networks of connotation must beware of losing their specificity by allowing them to be swallowed up in a controlling set of conceptual categories. The goal in what follows is not to assign meanings that are somehow more definitive than Bowles’ own imagery but merely to broaden the field of associations in the hope of enriching our experience of the novel by identifying additional parallels outside of it. Indeed, one of the two works of speculative thought that may contribute to that goal, Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* (1980), is self-evidently a book with quasi-poetic ambitions of its own.<sup>21</sup> The other is among the most influential books in the canon of modern anthropology, Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger* (1966), and it is this groundbreaking work that offers the clearest initial

parallel. Douglas' book is a meditation on the power of ritual—itsself a parallel to the experience of literature—and at its heart is the question of why “religions often sacralise the very unclean things which have been rejected with abhorrence.”<sup>22</sup> Because all culture is a form of order and pattern, one might very well ask why it is that rituals so regularly involve the very things that spoil the order and break the pattern. Douglas' answer is that the introduction of disorder into a system opens the possibility of creating a new order, which is felt as a release from the devitalized purity of the old. “It is part of our condition,” she writes, “that the purity for which we strive and sacrifice so much turns out to be hard and dead as a stone when we get it” (161). Consequently, impurity “symbolizes both danger and power,” for it not only disrupts the previously cherished order but also has the potential to result in a new and more vital purity (94).

These remarks offer a suggestive commentary on the frequent appearance of dirt, disease, and defilement in *The Sheltering Sky*. Clouds of dust (97) and swarms of flies (104) accompany the travelers; illness is never far away. Mrs. Lyle rather unexpectedly informs Port that her son suffers from “an infection,” possibly contracted from a male prostitute (82), and after Port himself falls ill, he is repeatedly brought into proximity with both human and animal waste. When the bus stops at a desert bordj, he spends a hellish interval in a filthy latrine, where an unseen insect runs across the back of his neck. Then, after he has collapsed entirely on the journey to El Ga'a, he is deposited in a stable with his hand resting on camel dung (183). El Ga'a itself has just endured an epidemic; as a result, the proprietress of the hotel refuses entry to Port and Kit at the first mention of disease (185–86). And when the moment of death arrives, it is evoked from the perspective of the dying man in startlingly visionary terms: “His cry went on through the final image: the spots of raw bright blood on the earth. Blood and excrement. The supreme moment, high above the desert, when the two elements, blood and excrement, long kept apart, merge” (229).

As Douglas observes, the journey of the wanderer outside the boundaries of his or her culture is a voyage both “into the disordered regions of the mind” and “beyond the confines of society. The man who comes back from these inaccessible regions brings with him a power not available to those who have stayed in the control of themselves and of society” (95). That is, *if* he comes back. Some, like Port, do not; and some of those who do are, like Kit, in no condition to remake themselves and their world on the basis of a new and expanded order. Douglas quotes a saying of the Nyakyusa people that could be an epigraph to Kit's state of mind in the latter part of the novel: “The dead, if not separated from the living, bring madness on them” (176). In what is said to be characteristic of societies that place a materialistic emphasis on health and worldly goods, the mythology of this normally fastidious tribe associates madness with death and filth, which the Nyakyusan madman, in the most demonstrative sign of his affliction, strips off his clothes and eats (not surprisingly, Nyakyusan funeral rites involve

symbolically accepting the decay of the corpse by sweeping dirt upon the mourners). This is precisely the danger that Kit has faced, but she has no effective rites at her disposal to bring about the prescribed separation and healing, so she strips off her clothes and proceeds with her own debasement. Even under the best of circumstances, those who undergo trials that lead them “to turn round and confront the categories on which their whole surrounding culture has been built up and to recognize them for the fictive, man-made, arbitrary creations that they are” run the risk of continuing indefinitely in a state of disorder (169–70). *The Sheltering Sky* is sometimes described as a “cult” novel. If so, it is a cult whose rituals have no clear resolution.

Kristeva picks up the description where Douglas leaves off—on the threshold of those same “disordered regions of the mind,” which she depicts in psychoanalytic terms. Instead of purity and order, she substitutes the Freudian superego or law of the father, and instead of impurity and disorder, she elaborates a theory of the abject, accounting for the force of these experiences by locating their origins in the earliest stages of human psychic development. This is potentially a useful approach to a writer like Bowles, for whom convenient labels like “gay” or, even worse, “bisexual”—the verbal equivalent of throwing up one’s hands before something that one doesn’t fully understand—seem inadequate. It may be that the compelling quality of his imagery derives from its genesis in a period of life that predates the formation of any definite sexual identity (although the relevance of such sketchy pieces of biographical information as the story that, in a curious foreshadowing of his protagonist’s chilliness, his father tried to kill him as an infant by leaving his cradle in an open window during a blizzard remains a matter of speculation).<sup>23</sup> Suggestions like these are not provable in any strict sense, but one can at least bring the evidence before the reader’s eyes.

Abjection, according to Kristeva, is a violent spasm of expulsion, an expression of preverbal disgust, which dates from a time of life when there is no clear separation from the mother, and the infant exists in an undifferentiated space that more than one specialist has described as a kind of floating world of body parts, fluids, and other primal matter. On the way to establishing itself as an individual human consciousness with a separate identity of its own, the child must expel its mother’s stifling presence in an anguished effort that occurs prior to the assumption of a place in the paternal realm of language and culture, which may be experienced as objectionable in its own right—distant, forbidding, and stern (or even, in an extreme case like that of Bowles himself, downright threatening). In a suggestive passage, Kristeva notes that the abject individual’s relation to the external domain of society is fundamentally manipulative: “Abjection . . . is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you” (4). This is not

a principled, heroic rejection of the law so much as a conniving perversion of desire and social convention: “The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts, uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them” (15). One thinks not only of the regular appearance of all forms of sexual commerce in *The Sheltering Sky*—the theater marquee announcing a film entitled *Fiancée for Rent*; the prostitute, Marhnia, and her pimp, Smail; the brothel where Port encounters the blind dancer; and Kit’s negative apotheosis as “a piece of property” (271)—but also of Eric Lyle’s disgraceful schemes and apparently incestuous relationship with his mother. The incompetent swindler, a grown man described as shapeless, somehow half-developed, and united in a bond of mutual loathing with a mother from whom he cannot detach himself, is the embodiment of abjection in its social form.

The abject is at its most vivid, however, not in forms of contemptible social behavior but in images of confrontation with non-human, cast-off matter, like Kit’s glimpse of the Arabs on the train who gaze at her with “the absorbed and vacant expression of the man who looks into his handkerchief after blowing his nose” (76).<sup>24</sup> This is most typically an oral imagery, and *The Sheltering Sky* offers numerous accounts of revolting meals, as during that same scene when Kit, in the process of eating a sandwich herself, unwisely happens to look over at a man who is noisily crunching red locusts (77), or when at Ain Krorfa Port, Kit, and Tunner are served bowls of soup swimming with weevils (109). The aim of these images is not simply to disgust but also to establish the limits of modern Western culture. Most astonishingly, in the hallucinatory pages of the death scene (written, according to Bowles, after eating *majoun*), we are presented with an end-of-life imagery that seems to reprise, in a darker key, the characteristic experience of life’s earliest days: “the space was full of things . . . Sometimes he could touch them with his fingers, and at the same time they poured in through his mouth. It was all utterly familiar and wholly horrible—existence unmodifiable, not to be questioned, that must be borne” (217). At the same time, Port’s own body, as perceived by Kit (the dying protagonist’s better half, so to speak), becomes the very epitome of the abject:

For a while she studied the inert body as it lay there beneath the covers, which rose and fell slightly with the rapid respiration. “He’s stopped being human,” she said to herself. Illness reduces man to his basic state: a cloaca in which the chemical processes continue. The meaningless hegemony of the involuntary. It was the ultimate stretched out there beside her, helpless and terrifying beyond all reason. She choked back a wave of nausea that threatened her for an instant.

Kristeva's comments are instructive: "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life" (4). When Port is deprived of his passport earlier in the novel and feels his social and human identity begin to erode, the mishap initiates a process that will end with this climactic event: his transformation into the ultimate unas-similable thing.

The antithesis of this imagery of decay is the class of exalted imagery that is realized so impressively in Bertolucci's film. "The abject," says Kristeva, "is edged with the sublime" (11). Although her main point of reference is Freudian (sublime/sublimation), the sublime is also being understood here according to its elaboration in eighteenth-century aesthetics—that is, as a way of bringing the perception of infinity under control by experiencing it as an uplifting image, tinged, in this account, with the radiance of our earliest memories. One cannot take in the infinity of night, but one can form an impression of it and thus shield oneself from a crippling confrontation with limitless absence by finding refuge under the cover of a protective idea—the idea of the sheltering sky. The sublime image represented by the desert landscape, with its overarching dome of cerulean blue, is at the farthest reach of human consciousness, the very limit of the mystery, as is implied by the passage quoted earlier in which the rocks and sky are accorded a purity that will be tarnished even in being experienced. Beyond it, there is nothing but death. "The time of abjection is double," Kristeva observes: "a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth" (9). Or as Bowles puts it at the climax of the novel: "A black star appears, a point of darkness in the night sky's clarity. Point of darkness and gateway to repose. Reach out, pierce the fine fabric of the sheltering sky, take repose" (229).

There is an episode early in the book that seems to draw together all these motifs in a manner both evocative and elusive. This is the story of "Tea in the Sahara," which Marhnia asks Smail to relate to Port. Three girls from the mountains are consumed with the desire to have tea in the Sahara. They dance in cafés—these are, it is implied, prostitutes like Marhnia herself—but the men are all ugly and don't pay them well enough to finance their Saharan journey. One day a tall, handsome man arrives from the South, makes love to all three, and gives each a piece of silver, so that eventually they're able to pool their money to buy tea things and bus tickets. A caravan takes them deeper into the desert, and they press on even farther alone, unwilling to stop until they've reached the highest dune. When they arrive fatigued at the summit of a towering sandbank, they decide to rest a little before they have tea. Many days later, another caravan finds them lying where they rested, their three glasses filled with sand (29–31).

That final detail is yet another image of unappetizing nourishment, and the story would be nothing without it. Was life so dry and tasteless that these girls willingly brought about their own deaths? Or is this the story of a dangerous desire to step outside one's world and attain the farthest reaches

of an enticing vastness, a cautionary tale of reckless ambition that brought these three seekers only cups of sand? We're not told, and it's possible that both interpretations are relevant. At the beginning of the book, Port's own life is dry and tasteless to a point where the future seems to hold little in store, yet he too is a seeker after something his own world can't give him. That some have found his death moving, even though the author doesn't hesitate to expose his faults, is evidence not only of Bowles' achievement but also of the fascination of a journey beyond the confines of one's own culture in search of another way of life, even at the cost of death. Port's death is not the death of the square, as Mailer thought, but something more like the temporary passing of a dream—the dream of a counterculture—which would be energetically taken up by the other writers considered in this book. And while Bertolucci's film dramatizes only one of its superimposed layers, Bowles' richly disturbing narrative of a catastrophic flight from isolation and decay nevertheless makes a fitting prologue to the various achievements of his contemporaries.

## Notes

- 1 Preface to *The Sheltering Sky*, 65th Anniversary Edition, xviii. All further citations appear in the text.
- 2 *Advertisements for Myself*, 419.
- 3 Paul Bowles to Rena Bowles, December 6, 1961. Quoted in Virginia Spencer Carr, *Paul Bowles: A Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 266.
- 4 *Paul Bowles—An American in Tangier*, dir. Mohamed Ulad-Mohand (1993).
- 5 There is evidence that this distinction was similarly familiar to Paul and Jane Bowles, as a passage from *Two Serious Ladies* suggests: “‘Tourists, generally speaking,’ Mrs. Copperfield had written in her journal, ‘are human beings so impressed with the importance and immutability of their own manner of living that they are capable of traveling through the most fantastic places without experiencing anything more than a visual reaction. The harder tourists often find that one place resembles another.’” Jane Bowles, *Collected Writings* (New York: Library of America, 2017), 39.
- 6 In pre-revolutionary Algeria, Eckmühl was the name of a neighborhood in Oran (now called Muhieddine), in which could be found a Place Noiseux. Bowles was briefly a visitor in the early 1930s. See Paul Bowles, *Without Stopping* (New York: Harper Collins, 1972), 126.
- 7 Florence Codman in *Commonweal*, quoted in Carr, *Paul Bowles: A Life*, 208.
- 8 Barnett Newman, “The Sublime Is Now,” *Tiger’s Eye*, 1.6 (1948): 53.
- 9 The director’s praise for the lead actors is recorded in the “Featurette” that accompanies the 2016 DVD release of the film.
- 10 See Vincent Canby’s review, in which the film is described as “a sort of existential update on Rudolph Valentino’s old chestnut, ‘The Sheik’” (*New York Times*, December 12, 1990). Pauline Kael was less complimentary, especially on the subject of the director’s high-minded restraint: “Bertolucci has lost interest in pace and excitement and verve. He’s up to something moral.” (*The New Yorker*, December 17, 1990). Apparently, Tuareg tribesmen who worked on the film convinced the director of the gentleness of their culture, inspiring him to rewrite the final scenes. Viewers who are also readers can judge for themselves which

is the more egregious fantasy. See Nancy Keefe Rhodes, "A Second Take: *The Sheltering Sky*," [www.stylusmagazine.com/articles/asecondtake/the-sheltering-sky.htm](http://www.stylusmagazine.com/articles/asecondtake/the-sheltering-sky.htm).

- 11 Bowles was almost certainly thinking of the seasonal celebrations of the Moroccan religious confraternities called "brotherhoods," which he first witnessed in Fez in 1932. At that time, he was living shut up in his host's residence for entire days during which no one was allowed in or out, much as Kit is forced to live in Belqassim's house (see *Without Stopping*, 150–51). Yet, however grounded these scenes may be in historical, social, and biographical fact, we're in a 1930s horror film here.
- 12 Bowles' difficult upbringing, which resulted in an undying enmity toward his father, has been the subject of much discussion; however, in the spiritual domain a more relevant influence would seem to have been that of his maternal grandfather, August Winnewisser, a gruff German whose own father had settled in Connecticut in the aftermath of 1848. At family gatherings, the old man was in the habit of calling the children around him and asking who among them believed in God. After the eager-to-please types had raised their hands, he would berate them as fools. See *Without Stopping*, 11–12.
- 13 On the vogue of Westerners seeking salvation in the East during the 1960s and after, see Gita Mehta, *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East* (New York: Vintage International, 1990). In this second edition of her book, Mehta begins with an anecdote about a troubled American woman who went to India in search of enlightenment and within days found herself undergoing an ordeal strikingly similar to Kit's.
- 14 See Colm Tóibín, "Avoid the Orient," *London Review of Books* (January 4, 2007). Tóibín's article, ostensibly a review of Virginia Spencer Carr's biography of Bowles (although the book is never mentioned), is actually a furious attack on Bowles himself, who is said to be thoroughly guilty of "the sin of Orientalism," among other offences. One can only guess at what sins are being expiated in this surprising performance.
- 15 See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
- 16 In this respect, the American writer to whom Bowles is closest is his younger contemporary John Hawkes, whose own first novel, *The Cannibal*, was published the same year as *The Sheltering Sky*. If there is a relevant American tradition here, it's the one that begins with Charles Brockden Brown and Edgar Allan Poe, a tradition that has been at least as important in French as in American literature.
- 17 See Bob Spitz, "Last Tango in Tangier," *New York Times Magazine* (May 20, 1990).
- 18 Paul Bowles, *The Delicate Prey and Other Stories* (New York: The Ecco Press, 1950), 271.
- 19 *The Delicate Prey*, 302.
- 20 *The Delicate Prey*, 122–34.
- 21 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). All further citations appear in the text.
- 22 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1966), 159. All further citations appear in the text.
- 23 See *Without Stopping*, 38–45.
- 24 Norbert Elias reminds us of how recently the feelings of revulsion associated with this habit have arisen in the "civilized" culture that Bowles is deliberately flouting by the use of such imagery: "Once the handkerchief begins to come

into use [in the sixteenth century], there constantly recurs a prohibition on a new form of 'bad manners' that emerges at the same time as the new practice—the prohibition on looking into one's handkerchief when one has used it." See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners* (1939), trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Urizen Books, 1978), 149. My thanks go to Jeffrey Freedman for pointing out the historical significance of this image.

### 3 *The Ballad of the Sad Café* and the Worldhood of the World

This is a mean old world  
Try livin' in it all by yourself

Traditional

At first glance, Carson McCullers might seem like a questionable candidate for inclusion in a book about the postwar counterculture. Though five years younger than Paul Bowles, with whom she once cohabited under the roof of a Brooklyn brownstone (together with Jane Bowles, W. H. Auden, Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears, and the stripper Gypsy Rose Lee), her precocious talent was obvious as early as her first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), and a strong case can be made that her finest writing was done during the war years. The most basic sort of historical overview would appear to raise a simple but undeniable problem of periodization if she is treated as a representative of the postwar era.

From another perspective, however, she may be the most likely figure of all to appear in these pages; for there is hardly another writer of her generation who saw her work so regularly presented to a broad audience in theatrical adaptations, in a succession of notable films, and on television. After Simon Callow's film of *The Ballad of the Sad Café* was released in 1991, all her major novels had been brought to the screen, one of them multiple times, and her two best books had also been given successful stage treatments. It was always McCullers' wish to reach out to "the whole world," as she put it; and this was an undertaking that began in earnest only in 1950 with her own dramatic adaptation of her 1946 novel *The Member of the Wedding* (followed by the much-loved film version of 1952, with two later television versions in 1958 and 1982 and a second film version in 1997), the omnibus publication of her novels and short stories (1951), and her television play *The Sojourner* (1953), adapted from one of her stories. In the following decade, it would be taken up by others, resulting in Edward Albee's stage version of *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1963), John Huston's film of *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1967), and Robert Ellis Miller's film of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1968). Beginning at midcentury, then, and

continuing well beyond her death in 1967, her popular reputation as a leading exponent of the Southern Gothic would be immeasurably enhanced by these efforts, although that was not where things would remain.

Despite a couple of misfires—another Broadway effort, *The Square Root of Wonderful* (1957), closed quickly, and her last novel, *Clock Without Hands* (1960), is universally regarded as inferior—McCullers did reach a wider world in the postwar era, and nowadays one doesn't have to look far to find evidence of a countercultural agenda either. Like Bowles, she began from a position of sympathy with 1930s leftism; the characters of the communist drifter and the bitter "race man" in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* even led early reviewers to describe that book as a social justice novel in the manner of Steinbeck. But only in recent years has a more deeply felt dimension of her writing (and of her own make-up) been acknowledged and celebrated by a host of critics. While earlier commentators seem to have been uncomfortably conscious of this aspect of her work, the fact that it had to wait so long to be openly discussed is a reminder of how much has changed since the middle decades of the last century, as McCullers made a point of underscoring the issue in her frequent direct addresses to the reader. Thus, in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, we are bluntly told that "[b]y nature all people are of both sexes."<sup>1</sup> And in the same vein the unhappy Captain Penderton in *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941) is reported to have "obtained within himself a delicate balance between the male and female elements, with the susceptibilities of both the sexes and the active powers of neither" (314). In *The Member of the Wedding*, the topic is twice broached in a pair of passages discreetly omitted from the stage and screen adaptations. First, the middle-aged cook, Berenice, dispenses the following information to her underage charges:

I have knew boys to take it into their heads to fall in love with other boys. You know Lily Mae Jenkins? . . . He prisses around with a pink satin blouse and one arm akimbo. Now this Lily Mae fell in love with a man name Juney Jones. A man, mind you. And Lily Mae turned into a girl. He changed his nature and his sex and tuned into a girl.

(531–32)

A few pages later, the children propose their own variations on the theme: "[Frankie] planned it so that people could instantly change back and forth from boys to girls, whichever way they felt like and wanted." By contrast, six-year-old John Henry West suggests that "people ought to be half boy and half girl, and when . . . Frankie threatened to take him to the Fair and sell him to the Freak Pavilion, he would only close his eyes and smile" (547).<sup>2</sup>

McCullers' identification with "freaks"—her equivocal usage of the word anticipates the inverted valorization it would receive during the global counterculture—was plain enough to her friends in the heavily gay artistic circles in which she moved, however much mainstream readers preferred

to look away from the hints of gender fluidity and homosexuality in her work. A writer in the Southern Gothic mode could be permitted an interest in oddballs, loners, racial minorities, and the disabled; but other things were off limits and drew backlash when they became too hard to ignore, as was the case with the closeted captain in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. In the post-countercultural world, though, efforts to excavate such once forbidden tendencies have brought about a well-deserved renewal of interest in McCullers' writing; and from this vantage point the most remarkable thing in the early group of films made from her books is undoubtedly Marlon Brando's engrossingly weird performance as Captain Penderton in Huston's adaptation of that narrative, a combination of excruciating stiffness and shockingly unrestrained anguish. The rest of the film is an exercise in high camp, however, and the actor's isolated efforts to evoke a once unmentionable area of experience against this laugh-out-loud background are an indication that the problem of how to do cinematic justice to the countercultural dimension of McCullers' work might not be solvable just by creating a memorable character.

A far more successful film in artistic as well as popular terms, Fred Zinnemann's *The Member of the Wedding*, may help to bring the problem into focus. As one would expect of a production from the early 1950s, it carefully tones down or removes anything that might give offense (as does McCullers' stage version, it must be admitted), although Julie Harris' cropped hair is a reminder that the character of Frankie is, among other things, a product of the author's interest in gender ambiguity. Yet apart from that image and a brief sequence in which her six-year-old companion puts on a pair of high heels, the theme is undeveloped. Instead, Frankie's yearning and discontent are projected within a conventional dramatic structure that plays off the thorniness of the lonely adolescent, stuck in a narrow environment that she has come to disdain, against the much more pressing problems of the African-American characters, Berenice, her consort, and her foster-brother, who eventually receives a lengthy jail term—a consequence, it is faintly implied, of the racism they have to live with in the small southern town where the drama is set. These aggravations large and small are heightened by developments that can confidently be called existential, an association that becomes explicit in McCullers' final novel, where the image of the clock without hands, embellished by a quotation from Kierkegaard, represents the unknowable span of time between the present moment and the hour of death. The preciousness of life is emphasized by the ease with which it can be lost, as with Berenice's late husband and the wholly unanticipated death of John Henry at the end of the film. These arbitrary disasters are endemic to human existence, we are given to understand, as is the passage of time, which is evoked by Frankie in a memorable speech and then borne out in the concluding scene through a variety of signals that the characters are entering a new phase of their lives. Conveniently, the invocation of time also has the effect of neutralizing any anxieties that may have been raised by

the gender ambiguities introduced earlier, as the little boy in high heels has gone to his grave, and the figure of the tomboy is the most easily assimilable image of androgyny that the culture has to offer. Whatever Frankie may say or do, one can assume she will grow out of it.

In all its various incarnations as novel, play, and film, *The Member of the Wedding* brings out a parallel between McCullers' work and the kind of interpenetration of elements that I have described in *The Sheltering Sky*. As in Bowles' novel, there is a realistic surface narrative, which is comfortably able to accommodate a regular, if somewhat conventional set of preoccupations—the painful comedy of adolescence, as enacted by characters like Frankie and Mick Kelly in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, but also various issues of social justice—within a broadly existential frame of reference. Every one of McCullers' novels begins with a description of a place, and the accumulation of realistic detail is noticeably a part of the program. Like the nineteenth-century Russian novelists, whom she saw as working with a rigidly stratified social world resembling the American South, she set out to register the nuances of the society she knew from birth, and very often she succeeded: few white writers have managed to create an African-American character as complex and convincingly rendered as Berenice Sadie Brown.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, her writing habitually violates the tenets of modern realism. In fact, if it is in any way helpful to speak of a realist dimension in McCullers' work, one must hasten to add that this is a realism that bears a stronger resemblance, technically speaking, to the nineteenth-century models she admired than to the kind of strictly disciplined realism that was just then being codified by her contemporaries in line with the example set by Henry James and academic proponents of his methods. Here it is sufficient for the moment to recall her practice, noted earlier, of making direct addresses to the reader to impart all manner of opinions, morsels of wisdom, and observations on human nature. McCullers plainly cared little for Jamesian "authorial depersonalization"; on the contrary, in her work, as in the novels of an earlier era, the omniscient narrator is an insistently chatty character in her own right, and the question of gender is high on her list of favorite topics.

If only by virtue of its suppression, this feature is front and center in Callow's version of *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, the only one of McCullers' major narratives to employ a first-person narrator. In his stage version of the novella, Albee had chosen to retain the narrator, and he was caustic on the subject of the film, which he charged with ignoring insights into the material that he believed he had correctly intuited three decades earlier. Instead, the filmmakers relied on the two strategies that I have noted in McCullers' writing and its earlier cinematic adaptations: the accumulation of realistic detail and the ability of a great actress, Vanessa Redgrave, to create a character. Thus, the setting of the story in a Depression-era southern mill town off the main road is built up with a slightly-too-obvious deliberateness out of details borrowed from the book and supplemented by others of a similar stamp.

Newsboy caps, bib overalls, kerosene lamps, and a 1930s gangster film are put conspicuously on display to establish a location in time and place. For her part, equipped with a haircut reminiscent of Frankie's, Redgrave gamely tackles the job of realizing the most overtly gender-ambiguous character in McCullers' fiction, dispatching various manual tasks, smacking the head of an underage drinker, and bursting into a neighbor's house to confiscate a sewing machine owed in repayment of a debt. For much of the film, the viewer may even be conscious of a kind of subsidiary interest inadvertently created by the realist aesthetic: Will she pull it off or won't she? In the long run, however, the effort comes to grief on the sheer implausibility of the premise that a dangerous ex-con, a man in his prime, would find himself overmatched in a fistfight against a woman visibly more than a decade his senior. For once, contrary to the prevailing narrative wisdom of the mid-twentieth century, the strategy of showing instead of telling feels like a liability.

Yet there is one sequence in which the techniques of cinema complement the resources of the actress to produce what is easily the most effective moment in the film. This is the moonlit evening when the hunchback, at first just a ghostly figure in the distance, arrives in town on foot to the bewilderment of the silent millworkers, anesthetized by Miss Amelia's liquor and parked on her porch like so many zombies in an image of the wasteland as evocative as any in modern culture. A strained colloquy ensues, and the interloper produces his thin evidence of kinship to the formidable proprietress, then breaks down helplessly. And against all expectation, in a series of intercut close-ups, Redgrave's face takes on a luminous and hauntingly opaque expression of tenderness, filling the screen to the exclusion of everything else, as if to wipe away the imagery of sterility and stasis and replace it with the possibility of a world transfigured by love. But what kind of love is it that can be represented by the solicitude of a mannish woman for a diminutive hunchback? It is most assuredly not erotic; and here one becomes conscious of a divergence between the contemporary interest in gender fluidity, which for all that it makes a point of distinguishing sex and gender still treats the former as a piece of the puzzle, and the nearly Victorian evasion of the erotic in McCullers' narratives, whatever the details of her own case may have been (and the question of the author's sexuality remains a controversial topic among her biographers). Unlike Frankie, Miss Amelia will not leave behind her asexual existence, a fact underscored in the book when the townspeople expect that her marriage to Marvin Macy will "put a bit of bride-fat on her, and . . . change her at last into a calculable woman," only to learn that the groom has been knocked senseless and banished from the house when he tried to claim his privileges (421–23). There are certain boundaries that are never crossed in McCullers' work.

In the film, the scene of Miss Amelia's meeting with the hunchback, Cousin Lymon, is given a resonance that aims beyond fourth wall-type

realism and, with its rich ambiguities and multiple echoes, into the realm of myth. This is, first of all, an enactment of the Deuteronomist's injunction to take in the traveler in a strange land, an association that would have come naturally to the Bible-soaked author. A timeless gesture, whose significance is highlighted by one of the director's rare deviations from simple framing shots and the actress' ability to project emotional complexity, brings the viewer in an instant from the barren desert of the preceding scene to the promised land of human concern. That the townspeople will put the worst possible construction on it—they imagine first that Miss Amelia's plan is to murder the traveler for the contents of his suitcase and then that the unlikely pair are living in sin—only brings out the incommensurability of the act. This is an event that will touch not only these two people but the entire town, a break with the past that alters the lives of everyone in the community and, at least for a time, revitalizes a dying world.

But the resonances of the episode do not end with the unprecedentedly expansive sense of possibility that it initiates. It is also the moment when, as Albee insisted, two people are offered the sole opportunity that will come their way to escape the isolation and loneliness in which they have lived; and although the film ignores the playwright's example, it succeeds briefly in finding a way to make the point. For that awareness, too, is surely present in Miss Amelia's expression, and her concern for the grieving hunchback may also be informed by a sense of her own future, which has been revealed to the viewer in the film's initial sequence, a realization of the book's opening paragraphs: "It is a face like the terrible dim faces known in dreams—sexless and white, with two grey crossed eyes which are turned inward so sharply that they seem to be exchanging with each other one long and secret gaze of grief" (397).

This image, the solipsistic reverse of the liberating perspective on gender that McCullers' writing offers to the reader, is a figure for the threat of sterile solitude that hangs over all her characters, the "uncommunicable state" that she described as the price of failure in art as in life.<sup>4</sup> Its opposite may be equally unconcerned with sex; however, it is anything but solitary, as she well understood:

The passionate, individual love—the old Tristan-Isolde love, the Eros love—is inferior to the love of God, to fellowship, to the love of Agape—the Greek god of the feast, the God of brotherly love—and of man. This is what I tried to show in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* in the strange love of Miss Amelia for the little hunchback, Cousin Lymon.<sup>5</sup>

The mythical echo of this one passing moment in Callow's film touches on some of the oldest themes in Western culture while at the same time looking forward to a world in which gender is not so much absent as irrelevant, and it does so in the spirit of McCullers' profoundest wish. Her desire to reach

a wider world through her writing as well as its many incarnations on stage and screen was the expression of a comparably wider love, one that glances back as far as the Bible and the ancient Greek mysteries even as it anticipates the flower children of a time to come.

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The voice that speaks to the reader in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* is what the textbooks call a “liminal” or “first-person-peripheral” narrator, a character who is not one of the principal actors in the story but an unnamed onlooker, one of the townspeople and a representative of the attitudes and assumptions typical of the place. Perhaps significantly, its gender is not specified. A kind of commentator on the proceedings like the chorus in Greek tragedy, it is the technical feature with which anyone who sets out to grasp what has been lost in the filmmakers’ decision to favor the realist dimension of McCullers’ work must begin. The presence of this narrator is announced by suggestions that the speaker knows the townspeople personally, along with the colloquialisms used to describe them. One local, “a man of not much account,” is said to have “the three-day malaria,” meaning that “on two days he is dull and cross, but on the third day he livens up and has an idea or two, most of which are foolish” (406). Another is “a warty-nosed old busybody who is continually moving her sticks of furniture from one part of the front room to another” (417). Minus any hint of the author’s progressive sympathies, the narrator reveals prejudices that are neither endorsed nor condemned. This is “not a town to let white orphans perish in the road before your eyes,” we are told (black ones, presumably, are another story); and the narrator confides that Miss Amelia “seemed to attach little value to [everything Marvin Macy had ever owned], and that spring she cut up his Klansman’s robe to cover her tobacco plants” (419, 424). On the evening of his arrival, Cousin Lymon’s weeping reminds an onlooker of one Morris Finestein, who, the narrator explains, was “a quick, skipping little Jew who cried if you called him Christ-killer” (402—this last bit was too much, apparently, for the filmmakers, whose hunchback is pronounced a “crybaby” instead).

Such ethnographic touches fall well within the boundaries of a realist aesthetic, but other passages offer evidence that realism is not necessarily the perspective of the local culture. Far from the stupefying vice it appears to be in the film, Miss Amelia’s liquor is said to have unusual powers. “Things that have gone unnoticed, thoughts that have been harbored far back in the dark mind” become visible like writing in lemon juice when a flame is brought to the paper:

A spinner who has thought only of the loom, the dinner pail, the bed, and then the loom again—this spinner might drink some on a Sunday and come across a marsh lily. And in his palm he might hold this flower, examining the golden dainty cup, and in him suddenly might come a

sweetness keen as pain. A weaver might look up suddenly and see for the first time the cold, weird radiance of midnight January sky, and a deep fright at his own smallness stop his heart.

(403)

As soon as one recognizes that these two examples foreshadow the opposing prospects of human expansion and diminishment—enchantment and curse—that the narrative will enact, it becomes clear that the sort of magical beliefs characteristic of a folk culture are being employed here for a sophisticated literary purpose. That impression is confirmed when flowers from the swamp (the location of Miss Amelia's still) make regular appearances in the narrative: as a centerpiece on Miss Amelia and Cousin Lymon's table at the height of the café's success (431); in the account of Marvin Macy's courtship of Miss Amelia, when he brings her these tokens of sweetness as an offering (424); and even in the sky, which is said to have been "the color of a blue swamp iris" on the evening when Cousin Lymon arrived in town (399). Floral beauty is a sign that powerful forces are afoot, unseen draughts that draw people together or drive them apart in a world where nature and humanity form an inseparable whole.

Descriptions of nature are incessant in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, as are descriptions of music, most obviously in the novella's enigmatic conclusion, where the singing of the prisoners on the chain gang reprises both the synthesis of the human and natural worlds and the poles of emotive enlargement and vulnerability from the passage on the uncanny effects of Miss Amelia's liquor:

The music will swell until at last it seems that the sound does not come from the twelve men on the gang, but from the earth itself, or the wide sky. It is music that causes the heart to broaden and the listener to grow cold with ecstasy and fright.

(458)

This, the reader comes to understand, is the traditional music referenced in the title of the narrative, which treats the song of the chain gang and the entire cultural world of this remote place much the way ethnographic researchers and folk singers would promote the heritage of American folk music, celebrating it for the connection it preserves to a harder but seemingly more integrated experience while also refashioning it to the taste of a modern audience. It is the kind of world that another student of folk music, the Cuban writer and musicologist Alejo Carpentier, would characterize as *lo real maravilloso* and bring to life in his own fiction, which for all that it makes use of material drawn from the traditional cultures of the Americas is nevertheless among the most sophisticated of the mid-twentieth century. If one strain in McCullers' work can be described as

a slightly archaic brand of realism, there is also another, at once ethnographic and poetic, that exemplifies just this sort of self-consciously “marvelous reality.”

Music of all kinds was important to McCullers, who had trained as a concert pianist, and it is a constant in her novels. Entranced by her thoughts of the wedding, a ceremony that retains something of the ancient sense of mystery as a communal initiation, a passage from one degree of life to another, Frankie makes her way around town accompanied by “the forgotten music that sprang suddenly into her mind—snatches of orchestra minuets, march tunes and waltzes, and the jazz horn of Honey Brown—so that her feet in the patent-leather shoes stepped always according to a tune” (513). The wedding she envisions, a pivotal event that will lift her out of her unhappy existence and make her and the bridal couple “members of the whole world” (566), has a musical structure as she imagines it: “the telling of the wedding had an end and a beginning, a shape like a song” (514). But perhaps the most revealing musical episode in McCullers’ writing, the passage that offers the most suggestive parallel to *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, is the scene from *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* in which Mick Kelly sits alone outside a neighbor’s window while Beethoven’s *Eroica* is broadcast over a radio within. The experience is transformative, encompassing both a vertiginous enlargement and a profound sense of inadequacy: “Wonderful music like this was the worst hurt there could be. The whole world was this symphony, and there was not enough of her to listen” (101).

Music is “the whole world”; and the world speaks through it—indeed, *is* this music—just as the world speaks through the sublimity of nature, which is also present in the song of the chain gang, a song that sounds as if it were sung by “the earth itself, or the wide sky.” The characters in McCullers’ fiction are themselves inseparable from this world, though also in some way subordinate to it. If one senses the inscrutability of a divine plan in such passages, they also suggest a way of conceptualizing the kind of story through which the “marvelous reality” of this world can be told. I have used the word *myth* to describe the dimension of McCullers’ work that seems to exceed its realistic orientation and to introduce a quality of resonance, an echo of some of the oldest themes in Western culture, which is audible in the scene of Miss Amelia’s meeting with Cousin Lymon. A fuller explanation of how the word applies would add that it refers to a kind of story that is told and retold according to the oral traditions of pre-individualistic societies and, in different eras, has included a range of subordinate genres like the folktale, the fairytale, and the romance: narratives in which magical transformations are a regular occurrence and the powers of good and evil are manifested in cryptic ways. In these stories, there is one presence greater than every other, and that presence is the world.

But if a distinguishing feature of the narratives of pre-individualistic cultures is that the world itself becomes the dominant character—the parched wasteland of a kingdom under a curse or the *locus amoenus* of an enchanted

bower—while the human actors seem curiously unstable, turning abruptly into animals or finding themselves imprisoned in trees, one must still ask what happens to such narrative materials when they turn up in the work of a twentieth-century writer living in the highly individualistic milieu of an artists' collective in Brooklyn. Here I will take a hint from Frederic Jameson, who discovers an answer to that question in the phenomenological tradition: the world is experienced by the character as a *mood*, in the strong sense that the word takes on when it is used to translate the Heideggerian concept of *Stimmung*.<sup>6</sup> So, in *The Member of the Wedding*, instead of the enchanted world that one encounters in stories of a fully mythical or pre-individualistic type, we are given a description of Frankie's mood when, having renamed herself "F. Jasmine" in anticipation of the new life she thinks the wedding will initiate, she finds that "the town opened before her and in a new way she belonged":

Because of the wedding, F. Jasmine felt connected with all she saw, and it was as a sudden member that on this Saturday she went around the town. She walked the streets entitled as a queen and mingled everywhere. It was the day when, from the beginning, the world seemed no longer separate from herself and when all at once she felt included. Therefore, many things began to happen—nothing that came about surprised F. Jasmine and, until the last at least, all was natural in a magic way.

(502)

At the opposite pole, in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, existence under the weight of a curse is for Captain Penderton, in the grip of his obsession with Private Williams, a feeling that the world is unreadable, a portentous spectacle that refuses to yield meaning and has become suffused with the quintessential Heideggerian mood of *Angst*:

Although he felt himself isolated from all other persons, the things which he saw on his walks took on an abnormal importance in his eyes. Everything with which he came in contact, even the most commonplace objects, seemed to have some mysterious bearing on his own destiny. If, for instance, he chanced to notice a sparrow in the gutter, he could stand for whole minutes, completely absorbed in this ordinary sight. For the time being he had lost the primitive faculty that instinctively classifies the various sensory impressions according to their relative values.

(387)

Like the analogies from anthropology and psychology that I have adduced in connection with *The Sheltering Sky*, this brief foray into the forbidding thicket of Heidegger's philosophy is intended not as an authoritative explanation, in some inherently superior conceptual language, of ideas toward

which literature can only grope its way but as a potentially enriching parallel in the work of a philosopher whose thought already leans hard in the direction of literature. There is no suggestion that McCullers was influenced by Heidegger or, indeed, that she had ever heard of the man, although the existentialist themes that become increasingly pronounced in *Clock Without Hands* do point to an area of shared interest with the author of *Being and Time*. It is simply that the regular appearance of something called “the world” in McCullers’ work practically demands investigation, and there has been no more suggestive investigator of that term than Heidegger.

The third chapter of *Being and Time* unfolds under the strange title “The Worldhood of the World” (*Die Weltlichkeit der Welt*), and there Heidegger enumerates the different senses that the concept of “the world” may take on. It can designate the sum total of entities that exist in the world, or it can refer to the kind of entities that come to prominence in a given field of study, as when one speaks of “the world” of a mathematician. In a more complex fashion, it can name the environment in which one lives—more complex because that environment is not just a group of objects existing in spatial relationships to a human being but is inseparable from one’s field of experience, inflected by moods, and inclusive of other humans as well. Finally, “the world” can mean “the worldhood of the world,” which is an “ontologico-existential concept” that exceeds all the other senses of the word. “Worldhood,” Heidegger says, “may have as its modes whatever structural wholes any special ‘worlds’ may have at the time; but it embraces in itself the *a priori* character of worldhood in general.”<sup>7</sup> From these remarks an important consequence follows: worldhood is not an object of experience and therefore cannot be known as objects in the world are known. It is an ontological category that encompasses every existential fact.

This is an exposition that scales the heights of obscurity, yet one must take care not to miss the intuition that Heidegger’s slightly frightening terminology brings into relief: the world is always something more than it seems. A given world can be as internally consistent as the world of a mathematician, but even that world, elegantly satisfying though it may be, is not the whole of the world or the last word on human existence. As the ultimate horizon of Being, the worldhood of the world reveals itself only in glimpses and not just in space, as a Cartesian *res extensa*, but also in the narrative dimension of time through a network of “involvements” more complex than any grid of understanding can map. Hence the worldhood of the world is the very type of mystery, a totality felt only indirectly and revealed only through its manifestations in the worlds we habitually inhabit.

The usefulness of this line of thought becomes apparent when one returns to the question of how the materials of premodern narrative figure in McCullers’ writing with Jameson’s insight that the worldhood of the world, its unseen contours, and obscure dynamics, is the main concern of such stories, which fix and pass on as folk wisdom those always partial glimpses of the world that Heidegger set out to describe in the language of philosophy.

For McCullers, the strategy of reaching back to this older kind of narrative is also, paradoxically, a way of looking forward to certain liberating possibilities that become available by thinking in such mythical terms. These will not take the form of transformations into beasts, vegetation, or any of the other natural entities that suggest themselves to the imagination of a pre-individualistic culture. They are, rather, transformations of another sort: male into female, female into male, or either one into some third entity unconfined by the limitations of gender and capable of enlargement to such an extent that it aims to embrace “the whole world.” And the agent of such transformations, a force often characterized in McCullers’ work by some variant of the adjective *mysterious*, is love.

Here one might understandably want to ask why this perspective should not be described as a simple subjectivism. The immediate response is to acknowledge that, in McCullers’ writing, this is often exactly what it is and that many of her signature effects, from the grotesque tragedy of Captain Penderton’s case to the poignant comedy of Frankie’s, derive from the limitations of the character’s prospect on the world in contrast to the reader’s awareness of realities beyond the character’s horizon. In nineteenth-century fashion, the omniscient narrator raises this awareness through privileged information dispensed as necessary, direct addresses to the reader, and above all the tone of the prose. In fact, the relative weakness of *Reflections in a Golden Eye* has more than a little to do with the oddly smug tone of that novel’s narrator, while the engaging qualities of *The Member of the Wedding* are largely traceable to the narrator’s sly indulgence of Frankie’s extravagances. For example, at the height of her unlikely fantasy that her brother and his bride will free her from domestic tedium by inviting her along on their honeymoon, her certainty that the happy trio will be “members of the whole world” is gently undermined by the narrator:

The world had never been so close to her . . . she suddenly saw the three of them—herself, her brother, and the bride—walking beneath a cold Alaska sky, along the sea where green ice waves lay frozen and folded on the shore; they climbed a sunny glacier shot through with pale cold colors and a rope tied the three of them together. . . . She saw them next in Africa, where, with a crowd of sheeted Arabs, they galloped on camels in the sandy wind. Burma was jungle-dark, and she had seen pictures in *Life* magazine.

(523)

The tabloid caliber of the fantasy is obvious enough, but *Life* magazine returns us unmistakably to the circumscribed world of the living room coffee table.

In *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, the issue of subjectivism is crucial to what is certainly the most important passage in the novella, the most extended instance of direct address to the reader in McCullers’ oeuvre, and her most

dramatic deviation from the principles of Jamesian narration (it was also pretty clearly the most troublesome feature for the filmmakers, who maintained their realist aesthetic only through the cumbersome device of putting the whole thing into the mouth of a secondary character as a mercilessly long lecture to his wife). These extended reflections on the lover and the beloved, a brief essay that stops the narrative cold for a page and a half, offer a qualification of the liberating possibilities that McCullers elsewhere assigns to love. The lover and the beloved “come from different countries,” we are told; and in a reminder of the author’s steady effort to exclude conventional assumptions about gender from the discussion, the narrator hastens to add that “this lover about whom we speak need not necessarily be a young man saving for a wedding ring—this lover can be man, woman, child, or indeed any human creature on this earth” (417). The narrator’s presumably unintentional paraphrase of Terrence’s *humani nihil a me alienum* extends to the beloved, who may be “treacherous, greasy-headed, and given to evil habits” (417–18). Indeed, the beloved may not even be the inevitable object of the lover’s love:

Often the beloved is only a stimulus for all the stored-up love which has lain quiet within the lover for a long time hitherto. And somehow every lover knows this. He feels in his soul that his love is a solitary thing. He comes to know a new strange loneliness and it is this knowledge which makes him suffer. So there is only one thing for the lover to do. He must house his love within himself as best he can; he must create for himself a whole new inward world—a world intense and strange, complete in himself.

(417)

Yet this solipsistic “inward world” nevertheless projects outward, for “the lover is forever trying to strip bare his beloved” (418).

What do these two impulses—the one inward-directed and recessive, the other outward-directed and aggressive—have to do with one another? A complete answer to this question will require a close examination of the rest of the narrative; but it is clear enough that they parallel the key opposition of isolation and expansiveness that has already come up more than once, and the suggestion is cemented by the reappearance of the swamp flower, albeit this time identified as “poison” in an association that will be picked up later in the novella: “A most mediocre person can be the object of a love which is wild, extravagant, and beautiful as the poison lilies of the swamp” (418). The assertion that the lover is forever trying to strip bare his beloved has an obviously erotic connotation, of course—one that, in this author’s work, always comes as an unpleasant shock, as when in *The Member of the Wedding* Frankie suddenly realizes what the drunken soldier’s intentions were:

these separate recollections fell together in the darkness of her mind, as shafting searchlights meet in the night sky upon an airplane, so that in a

flash there came in her an understanding. There was a feeling of cold surprise . . . now she admitted she was too scared to go into the world alone.  
(598)

In this novel set during the war years, a plane caught in the searchlights is an image of certain danger: it is about to be shot out of the sky. As Berenice—the voice of folk wisdom and veteran of Jim Crow—tries to warn Frankie, the world has a way of turning a light on sordid realities and shooting down one's plans.

Still, this is hardly all there is to be said about love in McCullers' work, and it is equally significant that Berenice herself was for a short but idyllic time in her earlier life the inhabitant of a world, together with her husband Ludie, in which the two different countries of the lover and the beloved were united as one: "Now I am here to tell you I was happy. There was no human woman in all the world more happy than I was in them days" (550). The seemingly aggressive image of the lover forever trying to strip bare his beloved is also a venerable figure of unveiling or revelation, as in the many variations on the theme of "Truth Unveiled by Time" in Baroque sculpture. What the lover seeks to unveil is the farthest possibilities of the world, an effort that cannot be fully and permanently realized, perhaps, but one that nevertheless carries the potential for creation and revitalization. As McCullers once wrote, "Love is the bridge that leads from the *I* sense to the *We*, and there is a paradox about personal love. Love of another individual opens a new relation between the personality and the world."<sup>8</sup> At the expansive pole of her fiction, love is a rupture with quotidian life, an attempt to discover a wider world in the beloved and to merge with it so that the two form "*the we of me*," as the most frequently quoted phrase in *The Member of the Wedding* (and in McCullers' entire oeuvre) has it (497).

The seamless fusion of realistic representation and mythical motifs in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* is the most satisfying statement of this theme that McCullers would produce. Cousin Lymon is both an ostensibly human character, an afflicted and strangely childlike vagrant, and an imp out of folklore, possessed of uncommon powers. As the object of Miss Amelia's genderless love, he brings about an unprecedented enlargement of her habitually narrow existence:

There is a type of person who has a quality about him that sets him apart from other and more ordinary human beings. Such a person has an instinct which is usually found only in small children, an instinct to establish immediate and vital contact between himself and all things in the world.

(412)

Not only does he establish vital contact with the world, but together he and Miss Amelia transform it to such an extent that the entire town feels

the benefits, as the narrator attests in the account of the café's triumph as a revitalizing center of social life. The café brings a new feeling of pride to the townspeople; the millhands begin to wash before leaving their two-room hovels, wipe their feet upon entering, and mind their manners once inside. And here, more impeccably than anywhere else in McCullers' writing, the author's concern for social justice is woven into the description of this sadly needed refuge as "a place where, for a few hours at least, the deep bitter knowing that you are not worth much in the world could be laid low" (443).

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In *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes how one may catch a momentary glimpse of the world, which usually remains unnoticed as one goes about the business of living, executing tasks directed toward specific ends. It is, he says, when the tool breaks or something goes missing that the larger whole in which the thwarted effort was being carried out is suddenly illuminated. At moments like these, the broken or missing thing

does not vanish simply, but takes its farewell, as it were, in the conspicuousness of the unusable. . . . The context of equipment is lit up, not as something never seen before, but as a totality constantly sighted beforehand in circumspection. With this totality, however, the world announces itself.<sup>9</sup>

Such moments of felt incompleteness are frequent in McCullers' novels and especially in *The Member of the Wedding*. The card game that Berenice, Frankie, and John Henry use to pass the time is discovered to be defective when it turns out that some of the cards are missing. The piano tuner working nearby plays a scale that never reaches its final note. In "a mysterious trick of sight and the imagination," Frankie has a glimpse of two people who for an instant she thinks are the bridal couple, but they are only a pair of strangers (525). When the world obstinately refuses one's wishes, it takes on the unreadable, anxiety-ridden aspect noted earlier. Alone with the soldier whose intentions she cannot divine, Frankie has an uncanny premonition of danger:

The silence in the room was like that silence in the kitchen when, on a drowsy afternoon, the ticking of the clock would stop—and there would steal over her a mysterious uneasiness that lasted until she realized what was wrong. . . . It was the forewarning hush that comes before an unknown trouble.

(582–83)

The year that Ludie died, Berenice reports, "everything I seen come to me as a kind of sign" (551).

As with the truth that is unveiled by time in Baroque artworks, mystery in these episodes is a cloak over the world that will be withdrawn only in the temporal or narrative dimension, and death is the final tug that strips it bare. This Heideggerian aspect of McCullers' writing is never more apparent than in *Clock Without Hands*, where the ailing author's concern with a range of social justice issues—miscegenation, discrimination against minorities and homosexuals—feels more than ever disconnected from her narrowing focus on the “mysterious drama” of the time remaining in each person's life (629). Diagnosed with a terminal illness, one of the characters reflects on passing acquaintances who have died and finds that in death they are “fixed in an inlay of mystery” that lends them an interest they never had when they were alive (734). The need to decipher the world's messages becomes increasingly pressing, yet they remain obscure until the end.

At moments when the loss of the world is impending, the “gothic” aspect of McCullers' work takes the form of a recognizably surrealist imagery, as in the enigmatic image enshrined in the title of her final novel, although this is a surrealism that owes little or nothing to European models (one of her favorite authors, Isak Dinesen, is perhaps the exception). In *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, where this component of her fiction is especially pronounced, the most notoriously shocking images turn up precisely in times of loss: the bereaved mother who cuts off her nipples with a pair of garden shears, the servant who dreams that the object in his lap is not his mistress' deceased child but a boot that he is cleaning, an article of footwear belonging to her unfaithful husband, which is “full of squirming slithery new-born mice” (365). Even in the gentler world of *The Member of the Wedding*, unnerving dreams, surreal imagery, and madness appear when Frankie senses herself falling back into the isolation that she had confidently expected to leave behind. “Like a nightmare pupil in a recital who has to play a duet to a piece she does not know, [Frankie] did her best to catch the tune and follow,” although she cannot make out the subtext of the soldier's conversation; and the wedding itself, when it finally takes place, is “unmanaged as a nightmare” (581, 588). No longer her confidant, John Henry, too, is impenetrable to her and she to him:

Sometimes his mind was like the pictures he drew with crayons on tablet paper. The other day he had drawn such a one and showed it to her. It was a picture of a telephone man on a telephone pole. . . . It was a careful picture, but after she had looked at it uneasiness had lingered in her mind. She looked at the picture again until she realized what was wrong. The telephone man was drawn in side-view profile, yet this profile had two eyes. . . . It was impossible to understand [John Henry's] point of view. And he did not understand her either.”

(584–85)

The person who is cut off from the world seems mad, which is how Frankie undoubtedly appears to the soldier when she escapes his advances by hitting

him over the head with a pitcher; but to Frankie it is the world that is mad, as she breathlessly informs the uncomprehending John Henry: "I just now brained a crazy man" (584).

In *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, all these motifs come together, translated into the folkloric register of the novella. Time passes, as the narrator informs us at regular intervals, and for years the café is a resounding triumph, the worldly statement of Miss Amelia and Cousin Lymon's odd union; however, it eventually materializes that the hunchback is unsatisfied with his comfortable position in the community and longs for something more. The coming trouble is announced in a passage that offers a particularly haunting example of the musical expression of incompleteness, like the unfinished scale that the piano tuner plays over and over in *The Member of the Wedding*:

Somewhere in the darkness a woman sang in a high wild voice and the tune had no start and no finish and was made up of only three notes which went on and on and on. The hunchback stood leaning against the banister of the porch, looking down the empty road as though hoping that someone would come along.

(431)

Someone does come along, of course, and the ambiguities surrounding Cousin Lymon's behavior in the scenes that follow have led many to look back on this passage and speculate about his motivation. Is he mentally unstable or just childish? Was he perhaps biding his time all along, waiting for something even better than the good fortune he has already enjoyed? Or is it that he is secretly wounded and made resentful by his affliction in much the same way that Marvin Macy was wounded by his deprived upbringing? Could it even be that, despite appearances, he and Marvin Macy are not entirely unknown to each other and are carrying out a plot laid long ago?

The complex effect of the book depends on one's asking such questions, yet it is equally true that they assume a kind of individual psychology that is foreign to the pre-individualistic orientation of the narrative. The world turns in McCullers' novels; day-to-day life is unexpectedly touched by magic, transfigured by love, but enchantment gives way to blight and love to violent hatred. These changes may correspond to a plausibly sketched psychology—the reader is free to mull over possibilities like the ones raised above—yet images of nature and music carry the burden of narrative development and identify the characters as emanations of a fundamentally mysterious world. Cousin Lymon, for example, is both an intelligible human being and a birdlike creature out of Max Ernst, one who transforms alarmingly over the course of the book. "His hands were like dirty sparrow's claws," we are told when he arrives in town, a figure

of pathetic fragility (401); and later he expresses his unrequited infatuation with Marvin Macy in a similar fashion: "Sometimes the hunchback would give up, perch himself on the banister of the front porch much as a sick bird huddles on a telephone wire, and grieve publicly" (441). Then, as the mutual loathing between Miss Amelia and Marvin Macy draws inexorably toward violence, a sign from the natural world appears: "A hawk with a bloody breast flew over the town and circled twice around the property of Miss Amelia" (450). Finally, at the decisive moment in their climactic confrontation, "the hunchback sprang forward and sailed through the air as though he had grown hawk wings" (454).

The third character in this unusual yet classic love triangle, Marvin Macy, is developed in much the same way. A seemingly unrelated detail, the peach trees that line the main street of the town display their seasonal changes, but the narrator pointedly extends the natural imagery to the human realm: "The heart of a hurt child can shrink so that forever afterwards it is hard and pitted as the seed of a peach" (420). As with the townspeople, who are generally afflicted by a sense of their own insignificance, Marvin Macy's spite receives a rudimentary psychological explanation: he was the neglected son of parents who were too young and wild to raise him properly. He, too, has his single chance at redemption; but his choice of Miss Amelia as the object of his affections practically guarantees failure, and he quickly reverts to his assigned role as the primary agent of destruction in the narrative, robbing gas stations and getting sent to the penitentiary. When he returns years later bearing an aura of criminality that fascinates Cousin Lymon, the narrator all but takes for granted his quasi-magical influence: "Marvin Macy brought with him bad fortune, right from the first, as could be expected . . . there was about him a secret meanness that clung to him almost like a smell" (440). A musician as well as a personification of evil, he exhibits his sinister talents in a style that "both lured and exasperated," inspiring the narrator to produce a memorably surreal image: "His voice was wet and slimy, as he always had too much spit in his mouth. And the tunes he sang glided slowly from his throat like eels" (449). Local opinion is decided as to the nature of his powers: "Now it seemed to the town that he was more dangerous than he had ever been before, as in the penitentiary in Atlanta he must have learned the method of laying charms. Otherwise how could his effect on Cousin Lymon be explained?" (441).

As Cousin Lymon's metamorphosis from sparrow to hawk is heralded by a circling hawk with a bloody breast, the effect of Marvin Macy's presence is accompanied by a thoroughgoing transformation of the natural world. In early winter, the weather turns unseasonably hot, and the meat from a multitude of pork roasts spoils, sewing death and confusion, an eerie turn of events that the narrator attributes to Marvin Macy. "The cause of all this," he is immune to heat and "never sweated, not even in August, and that surely is a sign worth pondering over" (440). This episode is the first of

a number of passages that take up the theme of poison introduced in the disquisition on love. Miss Amelia tries to poison Marvin Macy, but somehow “the plates were confused”—the passive voice communicates the murkiness of the circumstances—and she gets the poisoned one herself, although she senses the danger after one bite (444). Finally, when the café has closed and Miss Amelia has retreated into her sadly deteriorating house, the narrator reports that now there is “no good liquor to be bought in the town, the nearest still is eight miles away, and the liquor is such that those who drink it grow warts on their livers the size of goobers, and dream themselves into a dangerous inward world” (457). The recurrence of inwardness and solipsism brings the narrative around like the seasons, just as the weather shifts from destructive heat to snow, an unfamiliar phenomenon in this Georgia hamlet, which takes on “a drawn, bleak look” (445). Although the town doesn’t know what to make of it (apart from Marvin Macy, who “laid claim to the snowfall”), the informed reader surely does: the imagery of the wasteland, a countryside under a curse, has once again descended on the community (446).

At this point, one must draw back from the folkloric materials out of which *The Ballad of the Sad Café* is ingeniously fabricated and recall that the novella is the highly self-conscious product of a mid-twentieth-century American writer, not the anonymous artifact of a pre-individualistic culture. It has roughly the same relationship to the narratives of such cultures that a song by Bob Dylan has to a traditional folk ballad, and the author’s choice of ethnographic materials is aimed at achieving poetic effects, not at communicating literal truths about a world governed by magical powers. Here the question of subjectivism, the unavoidable perspective of a radically individualistic culture, comes up again, directing the reader back to the small treatise on love that interrupts the narrative to intrude its gnomic wisdom. For in McCullers’ novels the wasteland is the kingdom of the rejected lover, a solitary, subjective world of loneliness, surreal nightmare, madness, and murderous violence; and it descends when the beloved declines to be stripped bare. “The beloved fears and hates the lover” because to suffer the lover’s advances is to be drawn into that person’s “inward world,” an experience that can feel like death, especially if being stripped bare is a literal description of what it entails—this being, as Miss Amelia discovers, the expectation of the emphatically heterosexual Marvin Macy (418). In such cases, instead of opening up “a new relation between the personality and the world,” love is a closing down of possibility for the beloved, a sense that one’s life is being limited in much the way that the dying man’s days in *Clock Without Hands* are numbered.

Rejected by the beloved, the lover becomes an isolated figure of madness, possessed of a violence directed against the entire world. Each of McCullers’ books displays a version of this figure, including even Mick Kelly’s younger brother, who, while playing with a rifle, suddenly shoots a little girl who was ignoring him in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. The whole narrative of

*Reflections in a Golden Eye* revolves around this fundamentally destructive dynamic, and in *The Member of the Wedding* the imagery by which Frankie's state of mind is characterized in the scenes that follow the collapse of her fantasies of escape echoes the imagery in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. On the way home from the disastrous wedding, after Frankie's desperate pleas to be taken along on the honeymoon have created an embarrassing spectacle, her poisonous mood is projected onto her surroundings: "The sky lowered and turned a purple-gray against which the trees were a poison green" (592–93). In deliberate contrast to her previous desire to embrace the world, Frankie's state of mind now turns murderous: "Her father, who had said that he would attend to her when they got home, she would like to kill. . . . Herself she hated the worst of all, and she wanted the whole world to die" (588).

This violent inward pain, projected outward onto the world as the evocation of a mood in these more conventionally realistic novels, is paradoxically literalized in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* as indigestion and kidney stones, as if the imagination of the narrator could conceive of no more vivid likeness for a pain whose cause cannot be seen. The thematic connection is left for the reader to make when the narrator relates the peculiar story of Miss Amelia's gift of a piece of jewelry made from her own kidney stones to Cousin Lymon: her pain is now in his charge. Just as the hidden suffering of Marvin Macy's unfortunate childhood is conveyed by the image of a heart made small and pitted as a peach stone, the sorrow of Miss Amelia's isolated existence is summed up in this decidedly unromantic image. Something of the proximity of that pain to self-harm is present, moreover, in the narrator's account of Miss Amelia's doctoring, which involves the experimental ingestion of newly invented medications, followed by an entranced study of her internal discomfort. What was once an effort to turn nausea to the advantage of the community becomes a characterization of her misery at the alienation of Cousin Lymon's affections when the narrator comments that she "went about absent-mindedly, her face remote as though she had lapsed into one of her gripe trances" (441). An evidently nightmarish condition, Miss Amelia's inward world is said to be close to madness: "In the opinion of most people she was well on her way in the climb up fools' hill" (442) and "had begun talking with herself" (447).

When Marvin Macy and Miss Amelia finally come to blows—"their eyes like the eyes of dreamers" (452)—it is a confrontation of two rejected lovers in their own private worlds of pain and hatred, and "it seemed to come about mysteriously, by means of some instinct on the part of both of them" (450). The violence latent in the novella's central figure of mystery, the lover who would strip bare the beloved, emerges disconnected from any expansive or creative impulse and tends inexorably toward chaos and renewed isolation. Here the truth that is revealed by time has to do with the inevitability of loss, a kind of living death; and the narrator stresses the obscurity of its temporal unfolding. The fight begins at seven o'clock sharp—seven

being “a number of mingled possibilities, and all who love mystery and charms set store by it” (452)—and Cousin Lymon’s furious intervention at the decisive moment is no more comprehensible to the rational mind: “what took place has been a mystery ever since” (454). The aftermath is nothing but destructive, as the narrator’s itemized account of Marvin Macy’s and Cousin Lymon’s post-fight rampage details, and all the community’s gains are lost. Miss Amelia fades into the “sexless” hermit described on the opening page of the book, the promise of her gender-free love decayed into barrenness and feeble hostility. Marvin Macy has presumably resumed his criminal career, although no one knows for sure. Rumor has it that he sold Cousin Lymon to a freak show.

Is this, then, the fate of love, according to McCullers? In 1942, the year before the initial magazine publication of *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, she produced a story that especially pleased her, a brief vignette that anticipates certain features of the novella. Entitled “A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud,,” it proposes an alternative to the violent reaction to loss depicted in the later work, one that is, in all but the name, Buddhist. It begins with a deliberately off-color violation of gender norms (and, one expects, basic decency): a twelve-year-old urchin walks into a café and is called over by an old man, who declares his love for the boy. As usual in McCullers’ work, however, the seemingly sexual premise is elided. Instead, the man tells the story of how he lost his wife to another man years ago and eventually came to understand that, while she had been everything to him, he had never really learned how to love. By starting with a woman, he had started where he should have ended up. One should start, rather, by learning to love the humblest things first—a tree, a rock, a cloud—and eventually reach the point where literally anything can become the object of one’s affections: “I see a street full of people and a beautiful light comes in me. I watch a bird in the sky. Or I meet a traveler on the road. Everything, Son.”<sup>10</sup> The story concludes on an ambiguous note: the old man is alone, and though he is now able to love the entire world, he judges himself still not quite ready to love another woman.

That’s one alternative, a highly unusual and unexpected one. Another is hinted at in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* itself, this one more typical of the author and her era. During the period of the café’s greatest success, when Miss Amelia’s spirits are at their highest, she takes the seemingly out-of-character step of sitting down at her typewriter one day and writing a story. Nothing more is made of this detail, but it can hardly pass unnoticed in the work of a writer who lived for her writing and the considerable acclaim it brought her (and who, by all reports, hardly ever talked of anything else). From childhood, McCullers had sought the world’s affection with music, with books, and with the plays and films that would be made from them; and it’s no exaggeration to say that this relationship was the most successful of her life. Along with the pain of loneliness that her work records, it is also the testament of an unbounded love that we are still taking stock of today.

## Notes

- 1 Carson McCullers, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, Complete Novels*, ed. Carlos L. Dews (New York: Library of America, 2001), 113. All further references to the novels are to this edition.
- 2 On McCullers and gender ambiguity, see the essays in *Carson McCullers in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Alison Graham-Bertolini and Casey Kayser (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
- 3 “The Russian Realists and Southern Literature,” *Stories, Plays & Other Writings*, ed. Carlos L. Dews (New York: Library of America, 2017), 469–75.
- 4 “The Vision Shared,” *Stories, Plays & Other Writings*, 519.
- 5 “The Flowering Dream: Notes on Writing,” *Stories, Plays & Other Writings*, 517.
- 6 See Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), 121–22.
- 7 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1962), 93.
- 8 “Loneliness . . . An American Malady,” *Stories, Plays, and Other Writings*, 454–55.
- 9 *Being and Time*, 103–105. “Circumspection” here attempts to translate Heidegger’s *Umsicht*: what one “looks around for” or “looks around to do.” It is also a letter away from *unsicht* (“invisible”).
- 10 *Stories, Plays, & Other Writings*, 134–35.

## 4 *On the Road* and the Varieties of Religious Experience

Here is the efflux of the soul,  
The efflux of the soul comes from within through embower'd gates, ever  
provoking questions,  
These yearnings why are they? These thoughts in the darkness why are  
they?  
Why are there men and women that while they are nigh me the sunlight  
expands my blood?  
Why when they leave me do my pennants of joy sink flat and lank?

Whitman, *Song of the Open Road*

From the moment of its initial success, *On the Road* has struck many as prime material for a feature film, beginning with Jack Kerouac himself, who penned a letter to Marlon Brando suggesting that the two of them might team up together onscreen. Brando didn't reply, and after Kerouac's agent refused an initial offer from Warner Brothers (to the dismay of the perpetually insolvent author), the project sank into a state of limbo from which it would not emerge for over half a century.<sup>1</sup> During much of that time, Francis Ford Coppola labored to get a film off the ground, acquiring the rights, soliciting the input of Allen Ginsberg, and even writing a script himself. Originally, he planned to direct it as well and made at least two attempts to do so, one of which would have starred Ethan Hawke, Brad Pitt, and Winona Ryder; but his efforts were checked by financing difficulties. Eventually settling into the role of executive producer, he hired Joel Schumacher to direct a version starring Billy Crudup and Colin Farrell that never materialized, then, after more delays, finally saw the project through to completion for a 2012 release. Directed by Walter Salles, whose earlier film about the young Che Guevara, *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004), qualified him in Coppola's eyes to tackle a road movie, it featured a cast list that read like a roll call of young (and not-so-young) Hollywood: Sam Riley, Garrett Hedlund, Kristen Stewart, Kirsten Dunst, Viggo Mortenson, Amy Adams, Steve Buscemi, Terrence Howard, Alice Braga, and Elizabeth Moss.<sup>2</sup>

The result is lovely to look at, blessed with a wealth of acting talent, and more boring than one would have thought possible given the subject matter. Much the same might be said of the inert and curiously prim (for a film about a *ménage à trois*) 1980 production *Heart Beat*, in which Nick Nolte plays Neal Cassady as a stereotypically cool 1950s hipster struggling with the responsibilities of married life.<sup>3</sup> It should be obvious to anyone who has so much as glanced at *On the Road* that the cool style of laconic understatement and sunglasses worn indoors has nothing to do with Kerouac's account of his volatile friend, who is famously said to burn like a roman candle. As Lowell High School's former star running back might have put it, Hollywood has thus far fumbled on each attempt to bring this elusive material to the screen.

For his part, Salles at least seems to have recognized the challenge and attempted to meet it through elaborate preproduction efforts, which involved personally retracing the characters' steps across the continent, reading over a wide range of documents, and screening period films like Godard's *Breathless* and Cassavetes' *Shadows* with his actors.<sup>4</sup> Yet the most notable effect of all this dutiful scholarship was to court irony by granting Kerouac's formerly iconoclastic novel the dubious distinction of being treated as a classic, with much respect but little sense of purpose. This is a pity, for Salles was right to recognize that we are in a far better position to understand and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of *On the Road* than we were before the early drafts—and above all the legendary 1951 scroll version of the manuscript—were made public. Now it's clearer than ever that, for this novel more than most, the very idea of a finished text is irrelevant. The scroll is a better book than the 1957 published version in every respect aside from polish.<sup>5</sup> It is without several late-added passages that are typically overwritten when not downright laughable (for example, the much-ridiculed scene in which Sal wanders through a Denver slum wishing he were black, like the supposedly happy inhabitants, is absent), and it includes information suppressed for publication but crucial to our understanding of the narrator's emotional life. With its unconcern for changing names and disguising identities, the scroll also underscores the continuity between *On the Road* and the various biographies of Kerouac as well as the many memoirs by other witnesses to the events recorded in this most autobiographical of novels, joining a steadily growing library of materials that review those events from different viewpoints and with different emphases.<sup>6</sup> That library now includes Salles' film as well, and its appearance invites us to ask how it adds to our sense of the book and, more to the point, how it fails to live up to expectations. For the weakness of the film inevitably raises the question of what we value in this narrative but miss in its translation to the screen, and despite the passionate interest that *On the Road* is still able to arouse (judging from the excitement that greeted the news of Salles' version), the answer to that question is not obvious. Evidently, the book remains

important to many, but one has the impression that they may have some trouble explaining why.

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In a general sense, of course, it isn't that hard to say what Kerouac means to his readers. *On the Road* has often been described as a mid-twentieth-century variation on Whitman's *Song of the Open Road*, a hymn to the freedom and expansiveness of "the traveling soul." It is that—a youthful embrace of America, symbolized by the apple pie and ice cream that the protagonist regularly consumes and that only gets better the farther he moves into the heartland. Others have found in it the sadness of leaving youth behind, and that too is there. The title Kerouac gave to one of the early drafts was *Shades of the Prison House*, both a literal reference to the arrests and imprisonments that he and several of his friends had recently suffered and an allusion to some familiar lines from Wordsworth: "Shades of the prison-house begin to close/Upon the growing boy." But there is something else as well. Whitman had cautioned against "keeping fair with the customs" while nursing "a secret silent loathing and despair," and to those nonconformist sentiments *On the Road* adds a distinctly countercultural note when the narrator arrives on the threshold of the West and takes a critical look around him: "All winter I'd been reading of the great wagon parties that held council there [in Council Bluffs, Iowa] before hitting the Oregon and Santa Fe trails; and of course now it was only cute suburban cottages of one damn dumb kind and another, all laid out in the dismal gray dawn" (122).

Kerouac sees the unbounded spaces of the West as threatened by tendencies already much advanced in cities like Detroit, which, we are told, is "actually one of the worst towns possible in America" because even though "the population is way up in the millions," the "downtown section is no bigger than downtown Troy N.Y" (343). Writing just before the postwar explosion of Los Angeles into the most familiar model of the sprawling, centerless city of the automobile, he tends to view suburbia as an eastern contamination creeping inexorably westward to enfold the generous spirit of an earlier America in its stultifying grasp. Anyone inclined to regard him as a natural apologist for the automobile should consider passages like the following excursus from *Maggie Cassidy* (1951), in which he reflects on the changes wrought by private motor transportation in his own hometown of Lowell:

We join the flow of the sidewalks leading downtown—to the Lobster Cot—Merrimack Street—the Strand—the whole dense almost riotous inwards of the city aglow for the Saturday night in that time only fifteen years ago when not everybody had cars and people walked to shop and from buses to shows, not everything was locked-in strange behind tin

walls with anxious eyes looking out to deserted sidewalks of modern American now—Pauline, Pa and I could not have laughed and experienced excitement and jumped so joyously as we did that night if we'd been in some automobile grimly buried three in a front seat haggling over traffics in the window of the television set of Time.<sup>7</sup>

“The television set of Time,” a visionary technology of Kerouac’s own imagining, stands in implicit contrast to the actual television of his era, which serves no such lofty purpose; for his concern is not with externals alone but also with the inner lives of the people who live in these places and are shaped by these machines. The same rueful strain of dissent is apparent in the invitation to the reader of *The Dharma Bums* to

take a walk some night on a suburban street and pass house after house on both sides of the street each with the lamplight of the living room, shining golden, and inside the little blue square of the television, each living family riveting its attention on probably one show; nobody talking; silence in the yards; dogs barking at you because you pass on human feet instead of on wheels. You’ll see what I mean, when it begins to appear like everybody in the world is soon going to be thinking the same way.<sup>8</sup>  
(356)

Both *Heart Beat* and Salles’ film version of *On the Road* give a nod to this dimension of Kerouac’s writing—the latter with a shot of a roadside billboard announcing a new housing development and the former with a glimpse of television screens reflected as in a hall of mirrors through a darkened suburban neighborhood—but neither finds a cinematic equivalent for his characteristic way of placing these negative forces within the larger structure of associations in his narratives. For Kerouac was a man who thought, felt, and experienced the world in terms of religious and metaphysical categories, yet this inescapable feature of his work has been virtually banished from its onscreen adaptations no less than from its image in the popular consciousness. His religion is never orthodox but rather combines large portions of the Catholicism in which he was raised with the Buddhism that he later professed and includes elements of folklore, all of which are stirred together in a highly personal blend. Consider, for example, one of his favorite words, which he uses for a variety of purposes, prominent among them to describe the human attenuation brought about by the forces of isolation and conformity in postwar American society. Under such pressures, people become “ghosts,” as when he speaks of

the pale ghosts of American bus stations wandering around: in fact one woman streamed by like a wisp of smoke, I was definitely certain *she* didn’t exist for sure. On her face the phantasmal belief in what she was doing.

(DB, 392)

The passage recasts a signature epigram from *On the Road*: “This is the story of America. Everybody’s doing what they think they’re supposed to do” (170)—instead of what they really want to do.

Here as elsewhere, Kerouac’s concern is with the spiritual condition of the country, and his verdict is that reality in America displays more than a touch of ghostliness, although his use of the word has different connotations depending on the context. In the broadest sense, it can even be a neutral philosophical characterization of *maya*, the world of appearances, a usage that became more insistent as his interest in Buddhism developed, and he came to regard all the things of this world as “empty arrangements of something that seems solid in the space, they ain’t either big or small, near or far, true or false, they’re ghosts pure and simple” (*DB*, 386). In this view, we’re all ghosts by nature living in a ghostly world, which is forever in danger of fading into nothingness. Thus, it’s not only so-called solid citizens whose shallow experience of life leaves them ironically prone to ghostliness, but the author and his wayward friends have moments of existential unreality too, as when Al Hinkle reports taking a walk one night in Times Square and suddenly realizing he is a ghost (231), or when Kerouac himself wakes up alone in a shabby hotel room with the sense that he is “somebody else, some stranger” and that his is “a haunted life, the life of a ghost” (120). The crucial difference between suburban ghosts and the hipster variety, it seems, is that the unassimilated spirits at least know what they are.

Kerouac was indeed a haunted man, but it’s also apparent that in these examples he has stretched the traditional understanding of ghosts as disembodied souls that can find no rest to include people and places—a rusty old freighter permanently anchored in the bay becomes “the ghost of the San Francisco of Jack London” (175)—that have lost, or are in danger of losing, their animating force or imaginative life. To him, a ghost is not just an unquiet spirit but a worn, emptied out, or “beat” spirit, as is evident in the rich and resonant episode of the Ghost of the Susquehanna, which forms the climax of Part I of *On the Road* and defines one of the antipodes of Kerouac’s Janus-faced view of existence. This forlorn figure, an object of considerable sympathy to the author, who devoted a regretful essay to “The Vanishing American Hobo,” is introduced against a drizzly night landscape of overgrown cliffs “like hairy ghosts,” which hang over the “mournful” river, occasionally illuminated by red locomotive flares (for some reason, none of this eminently cinematic material was considered worthy of inclusion in Salles’ film). Although Kerouac describes the Susquehanna as an eastern representative of the same vast and threatening wilderness that confronted the earliest settlers, the Ghost himself is anything but dangerous; in fact, he is more of a danger to himself, walking briskly in the road as cars whizz by. Hopelessly mistaken about the topography of the region but indignantly persistent in the face of efforts to steer him right, he is last seen disappearing into the darkness, a “poor lost sometime-boy now broken ghost of the penniless wilds” (208–09).

Much is left unsaid about this “shriveled, little old man,” whose age is given as “about sixty years old”—that is, roughly the same age as Kerouac’s father when he died just prior to the events recorded in the book—and who evokes in the author an almost involuntary thought of the distant past: the “poor lost sometime-boy” in Kerouac’s life was surely both his saintly dead brother Gerard and his own lost childhood, for at least that much of the haunting that he suffered can be understood without reference to the supernatural. In any case, it’s apparent that he has fallen off a psychological cliff (“This experience thoroughly shattered me”), and he glosses the event in characteristically religious terms, employing one of the two most important biblical allusions in the book:

Isn’t it true that you start your life a sweet child believing in everything under his father’s roof, then comes the day of the Laodiceans, when you know you are wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked, and with the visage of a gruesome grieving ghost you go shuddering through nightmare life.

(210)

At this point in the narrative, Kerouac *is* poor and miserable, if not also blind and naked; however, the passage from Revelation that he cites (3:17–18) has traditionally been interpreted in figurative and ironic terms. The Laodiceans are a wealthy people but blind to their spiritual bankruptcy, so the kind of wealth they are counseled to acquire is not material. Woes must be healed by blessings; the only cure for the beat spirit is beatitude.

It follows, therefore, that Neal Cassady, the high priest of Kerouac’s vitalist religion, immediately rejects the most sinister of the ghostly figures mentioned in the book, the “Shrouded Stranger,” who has appeared to Kerouac in a dream, and who Cassady instinctively realizes is only a personification of death (225). The dead and dying may torment us with a nostalgic longing for some imagined pre-natal bliss, but ultimately all that these faded beings portend is the end of our own travels. Against such waning and obliteration of the spirit the book opposes a great counterforce, which is identified by a word with a similarly complicated place in the history of religious thought: *enthusiasm*. “I sort of liked him; not that he was a good sort, as he later proved, but he was enthusiastic about things,” Kerouac says of an early hitchhiking partner (122); and one could easily enumerate instances of his approval of the excitement of others, reaching back as far as an engagingly bluff diary entry about Alfred Kazin from his student days: “I like this guy because he is excited.”<sup>9</sup> From the very beginning of the book, his admiration for Cassady is expressed in precisely these terms: “In all, what Neal was, simply, was tremendously excited with life” (112). And lest anyone mistake Cassady’s excitement for a mere secular emotion Kerouac is explicit about its ultimate object:

all this time Neal was tremendously excited about everything he saw, everything he talked about, every detail of every moment that transpired. He was out of his mind with real belief. "And of course now no one can tell us that there is no God. . . . Everything is fine, God exists."  
(221)

In the theology of *On the Road*, excitement with life entails not just a dismissal of death but also an enthusiasm for the Deity Himself, who is worshipped at 110 miles per hour.

This is, of course, a "madness" (215), a "pious frenzy" (349), and Kerouac is aware of its hazards. Derived from a Greek word (*ἐνθουσιασμός*) meaning "possessed by the essence of a God," *enthusiasm* is most familiar from its Enlightenment usage as a term of contempt for an immoderate religious devotion. "In a little time, the inspired person comes to regard himself as a distinguished favourite of the Divinity," David Hume observed; "and when this frenzy once takes place, which is the summit of enthusiasm, every whimsey is consecrated: Human reason, and even morality are rejected as fallacious guides."<sup>10</sup> The wild, trancelike state of the Bacchante is the cautionary example usually offered from the classical world; and we do hear this voice of admonition in *On the Road*, albeit from an unlikely source, when William Burroughs diagnoses Cassady as "headed for his ideal fate, which is compulsive psychosis dashed with a jigger of psychopathic irresponsibility and violence" (248). Whatever the qualifications of a man who would shortly put a bullet in his wife's head to pronounce on irresponsibility and violence, the author is mindful enough of this perspective to temper his own enthusiasm with at least a modicum of critical distance. Driven to ecstasy at a performance by the jazz pianist George Shearing (whom Cassady doesn't hesitate to anoint as God), he is moved to sheepish reflections when the spiritual breakthrough that the music seemed to promise fails to occur:

This madness would lead nowhere. I didn't know what was happening to me, and I suddenly realized it was only the T that we were smoking. . . . It made me think everything was about to arrive—the moment when you know all and everything is decided forever.

But nothing arrives, and Kerouac is left only with "God's empty chair" (229).

For the better part of the narrative, however, he is himself an enthusiastic witness to Neal's transports, and the most striking moments in the book seem to flash by, as the author hits upon language to capture the sense of astonishment and expectation that accompanies such evanescent experiences poised at the edge of the indescribable. On the ferry from New Orleans, an inspired Cassady rushes around the ship, disappearing momentarily only to reappear above in angelic guise: "Suddenly I saw him egering on the flying bridge. I expected him to take off on wings" (242–43). The

same breathless rapidity is present in his evocations of the landscape, where his excitement translates into writing of Hemingwayan economy and precision. There is more than one style on display in *On the Road*, but often its finest effects are achieved by the simplest means:

We came into the dizzying heights of the Sierra Madre Oriental. The banana trees gleamed golden in the haze. Great fogs yawned beyond stonewalls along the precipice. Below the Moctezuma was a thin golden thread in a green jungle mist. Steams rose from down there and mingled with the upper airs and great atmospheres like white heaven propelled among the bushy peaks.

(398)

Inexplicably deleted from the published text, this is Kerouac at his best: a lean, paratactic prose that arrests the details of the moment through rich description bending toward an apocalypse that never arrives. One is forever on the verge of heaven without ever quite getting there.

Because so much of the book is focused on moments of outstanding significance, it's not surprising that considerable attention is given to time, a subject on which Cassady turns out to be an unschooled expert. The product of his meditations is recognizable as a version of one of the oldest conceptual pairs in Western culture, the ancient distinction between *chronos* and *kairos*, which occupies an important place in the work of the Greek philosophers as well as in the Hebraic tradition and Christian theology. Briefly, the distinction is between a measurable, quantifiable continuum and a singular, qualitatively exceptional moment. The two concepts are not independent of one another, as the second presupposes the first; rather, they name two distinct ways of thinking about time: *chronos* is the historical framework within which *kairos*, the extraordinary moment, occurs.<sup>11</sup> Kerouac touches on this interdependence when he reports Ginsberg's account of Neal's crazy schedule-making (145), by means of which he manages both his complicated sex life and his philosophical heart-to-hearts with Allen ("At one sharp he rushes from Louanne to Carolyn . . . and screws her once, giving me time to arrive at one-thirty," etc.). The result is comically dialectical: the effort to cram as many qualitatively superior moments as possible into the day produces a quantitative absurdity. At other times, Cassady's version of these terms invests them with contrasting value judgments. To "know time," in the approving phrase that he uses repeatedly throughout the book, is to be acquainted with *kairos*, to be able to open oneself to the all-important experience of the moment, whereas *chronos* is associated with the debilitating mental habits of those who are consumed by the apprehensions of quotidian life: "They have worries, they're counting the miles . . . and all the time it all flies by them and they know it and that TOO worries them NO End" (306–07). Counting the miles is like counting the minutes: the attention it requires is diverted from living, with

the result that these anxious souls are left with a wistful sense of life passing them by.

Evidence that Kerouac thought about his material in terms very much like these is provided by the other of the two most important biblical allusions in the book, which is also one of the few genuinely enriching revisions to appear in the published text. Having made himself over as an Italian American named Sal Paradise and rechristened Cassady as Dean Moriarty, Kerouac added some further specimens of the latter's uninhibited speech and behavior to the opening chapter, including the following outburst: "I'm *hungry*, I'm *starving*, let's *eat right now!*"—and off we'd rush to *eat*, whereof, as saith Ecclesiastes, 'It is your portion under the sun'" (9–10). The final, imitatively emphatic "*eat*" conveys the narrator's amused indulgence toward his exuberant new associate (in Kerouac, there's always a voice speaking to the reader); but it's the quotation from Ecclesiastes, though introduced with a similarly jokey mock-clerical flourish, that reveals the real significance of the illustration. For Ecclesiastes is the canonical example of *kairos* in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>12</sup> The familiar teaching that "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven" (3:1) conveys just this sense of the right, the appropriate, even the divinely ordained moment for something of importance to happen; and one implication of the passage to which Kerouac refers (9:9, which echoes the conclusion of 3) is that these moments should be fully experienced while one is alive to experience them (there are other implications as well, as we shall see). Expanded to include the collective, this is very near the sense of what Cassady calls "IT" and also explains the prominence in the book of musicians from Beethoven to Slim Gaillard:<sup>13</sup>

I wanted to know what "IT" meant. . . . "Here's a guy and everybody's there, right? Up to him to put down what's on everybody's mind. He starts the first chorus, he lines up his ideas, people yeah, yeah but get it, and then he rises to his fate and has to blow equal to it. All of a sudden somewhere in the middle of the chorus he GETS IT---everybody looks up and knows; they listen; he picks it up and carries. Time stops. He's filling the empty space with the substance of our lives."

(304)

"Time stops" in the sense that "the substance of our lives" has been transformed and externalized as a shared experience with a qualitative intensity that crowds out all awareness of its transience. One need not be a performer to have access to this sought-after quality, however. The driver who handles a car with exhilarating precision at an insane rate of speed may also experience the timeless moment or even two hungry men who lose themselves in a good meal. It's not heaven, but it is our "portion under the sun."

Against the background of these ideas, the measure of success earned by one of the few exceptional scenes in the film version becomes apparent. This

is the wild dance performed by Garrett Hedlund and Kristen Stewart at the New Year's Eve party in New York, which in the book remains comparatively under-imagined: "Neal was having his kicks: he put on a jazz record, grabbed Louanne, held her tight, and bounced against her with the beat of the music. She bounced right back. It was simple as that, a real love dance" (226). As the scene develops, Kerouac's emphasis falls less on collective celebration and more on the jealousies and sexual tensions between the characters, culminating in another of his signature lines ("I had nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion"); and the film acknowledges this aspect of the drama with a brief shot of the Ginsberg character unhappily watching the object of his affections in dynamically heterosexual mode. But it's the dance that commands attention, leaping out from the desultory material that precedes it, and Kristen Stewart—for the scene is hers above all—strikingly evokes the sense of an absorption in the moment so compelling as to become the focus of everyone present. That the spectacle is immediately followed by the countdown to midnight on New Year's Eve, a holiday with no other purpose than to mark the passing of a year and therefore always potentially the saddest of celebrations, adds further resonance in view of the book's loaded opposition between quantitative and qualitative conceptions of time. This is "the substance of our lives" indeed—at least the erotic and bacchanalian part—and the scene effectively illustrates one of the most obvious reasons why *On the Road* has laid so firm a claim to a place in the imagination of its readers.

To be sure, Kerouac wanted to stake an even larger claim than this and was increasingly aware that the tendency of his sensibility was toward mysticism. "I never dreamed Neal would become a mystic" (222), he tells us, after noting the impassioned, if not overly lucid character of Cassady's statements about God; and as the narrative develops, he ventures his own professions of faith. "There was a mystic wraith of fog over the brown waters that night," he says of an entrancing nocturnal moment in New Orleans: "as the river poured down from mid-America by starlight I knew, I knew like mad that everything I had ever known and would ever know was One" (248–49). Yet in each of these instances—including the often-quoted down-and-out episode in San Francisco, when, on "the point of ecstasy," he feels himself about to take "the complete step across chronological time and into timeless shadows" (274)—the moment passes without further transcendental developments, and life simply goes on, whether the intimations of mystical oneness have come upon him in a time of celebration or destitution. As many have observed, the book establishes a cyclical pattern, whereby the characters race eagerly forward to some peak of experience, which promptly crumbles into confusion and depression, usually signaled by a version of the phrase "Everything was collapsing"; then, after a decent interval, the whole process begins again—a formal anticipation of the Buddhist concept of *samsāra*. The parallels between this cycle and the binge-and-collapse pattern of alcoholism are also hard to miss, and one is reminded of an observation

by William James, who phrased the matter in his inimitable fashion: “The sway of alcohol over mankind is unquestionably due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour.”<sup>14</sup>

An antipodal conception of human experience is on display everywhere in the book, even in seemingly minor episodes. The most scabrous curio to emerge from the scroll version of the manuscript comes during an account of a night on the town in San Francisco, when Jack and Neal find themselves in the company of a black man named Walter, whose contribution to the festivities is an anecdote about a Los Angeles brothel featuring a monkey with a dice box (302). The customer places his bet, and the monkey throws the dice. If the customer wins, he enjoys the services of the house for free; if he loses, the monkey enjoys him. For obvious reasons, this tender vignette had to be omitted from the published text, and the story’s kinship with a familiar image from folklore (the losing gambler literally gets a monkey on his back) suggests that its veracity may be doubtful, notwithstanding the claims of the genial anecdotist. As yet another illustration of Kerouac’s bipolar view of existence, however, its inclusion in the book makes perfect sense. It’s the Beat equivalent of the medieval wheel of fortune.

The most representative of the multiple episodes that trace the arc of ascent to the heights and descent to the depths—from the moment when we claim our portion under the sun to the day of the Laodicians—is the excursion to the mountain town of Central City, Colorado (another key sequence that didn’t make it into the film). This once-prosperous mining center, formerly so wealthy that it boasted its own opera house, had declined into a ghost town during the early part of the twentieth century but later was revived and converted into a tourist mecca. Confronted with the contrast between the prospector’s past and the crassly commercial present, the author and his friends make the symbolically weighted choice of an abandoned mining shack as the setting for a “vast” party. Long deserted as a site of productive labor, the interior is covered with a coat of dust and debris; nevertheless, the friends roll up their sleeves and set about breathing new life into the place. Before launching the evening’s entertainment, however, Kerouac attends a performance of *Fidelio* at the opera and is bowled over, not as one might expect by Florestan’s vision of Leonore as an angel or the triumph of a hard-won liberty in the finale but by the gloom of the dungeon scene: “I cried for it. That’s how I see life too” (154). A near relation to the world of ghostly appearances that he takes to be the underlying truth of things, this is the dusky substratum of the festivities to come and also, as he informs us in still another frequently quoted line, the natural element of “the sordid hipsters of America, a new beat generation that I was slowly joining” (156).

Yet the work of the moment, as always, is the infusion of vitality into this insubstantial world of darkness. The party begins promisingly: “great

crowds of young girls” show up, and spirits are so high that there is dancing with “no music, just dancing.” Then, suddenly, the shack is invaded by unruly teenagers, whose boorishness drives the girls away, and the evening rapidly degenerates into “a great big fraternity type party” (156). Fleeing this unwelcome development, Kerouac and two friends head for the bars, but one of his companions is a difficult drunk and promptly knocks out a tourist. Again they escape into the night, and after pausing to evoke the enormous surrounding landscape inhabited by “ghosts of old miners,” he comments: “We were situated on the roof of America and all we could do was yell, I guess---across the night, eastward over the plains where somewhere an old man with white hair was probably walking toward us with the Word and would arrive any minute and make us silent” (157).

That yell is, of course, both the cry of the intoxicated revelers and the book itself, an equivocal descendant of the “barbaric yawp” that Whitman once proudly owned. Is it in any sense equal to the mighty landscape that surrounds him? Or is it merely crude and childish, like the shouts of the frat boys from whom he has just fled in disgust? Kerouac offers himself no reassurances, and the anticipated prophetic figure doesn’t appear, leaving the great slope of the Continental Divide as mute and empty as God’s chair will be at the conclusion of the later episode in the jazz club.<sup>15</sup> Instead, the night declines into further barroom misadventures, ending the next morning with Kerouac coming to groggy consciousness amid the dust of the miner’s shack, the vitality that he represents symbolically reduced to a coughing, sneezing half-life.

As in the episode of the Ghost of the Susquehanna, the final stage of the descent is a nostalgic longing for childhood. Both before and after the literal descent from the mountains to the streets of Denver, things continue to go badly, including even a mishap with gravity itself, when one member of the group slips and falls flat on her face. Back in Denver, Kerouac sleeps with a woman to whom Neal has introduced him; however, there is no satisfying communication between them, either physical or verbal, and this out-of-season attempt at ecstasy similarly falls flat. After walking her home, he stretches out on a church lawn with a bunch of hobos and feels the pull of their itinerant life. The next morning, preparing to go their separate ways, he and his friends convene in a drizzle, and it is as if they have become boys again: “Bill Tomson claimed he could run faster than Neal. . . . ‘I used to role my hoop up this alley,’ Hal Chase had told me.” Kerouac’s response strikes a sentimentally regressive note: “I wanted to see him do it; I wanted to see Denver ten years ago when they were all children and in the sunny cherryblossom morning of Springtime in the Rockies they rolled their hoops up the joyous alleys full of promise” (160). The mawkish interval leads nowhere, however, and quickly passes. There is nothing to do but move on.

A focus on extraordinary moments and a predilection for mysticism offer a significant challenge to the narrative imagination. Historically speaking, the literary genre with which these inclinations have been most often identified is not the novel or any other narrative form but the lyric. Kerouac was a poet as well as a prose writer, of course, and the availability of the early drafts has made it even more apparent than it already was that a number of the most heavily cited passages in *On the Road* are poetic set pieces, which the author could not resist touching up and elaborating, despite his avowed contempt for revision.<sup>16</sup> As we have seen, these lyrical interludes are inserted into a cyclical structure, but their placement at significant points in each cycle does not in itself answer the challenge, as there remains the question of whether any meaningful pattern of development can be discerned across the cycles or whether, for all the frenzied activity that the narrative records, the path it follows is merely one of arrested human growth and deathly repetition.

The film version is helpful here, at least as a way of dragging the question out into the open. In preparing his screen adaptation, Salles drew on the scroll and the published text in addition to the biographical sources, freely combining details from each by a method that produces the occasional incongruity (he gives us a protagonist named Sal who converses with his mother in French-Canadian *joual*). Intermittent voiceovers deliver snatches of Kerouac's prose, but apart from the aforementioned New Year's Eve party scene, there is little effort to translate the fundamentally subjective experiences of rapture and desolation to the cinematic medium. What we have instead is an austere sequence of episodes rolled out in one-damn-thing-after-another fashion, occasionally prefaced by subtitles to establish locations with quasi-historical scrupulousness (inexplicably, these appear even when the location has been changed—Why specify that the scene in which the protagonist does backbreaking work in company with Japanese-American laborers takes place in Campbell, California when Kerouac tells us that it happened in Denver?). The film walks the viewer through incidents ranging from the mundane to the uncommon, but with few exceptions there is so little in the way of character development that non-readers may be forgiven for wondering why Dean looks like such a mess at the end.

Kerouac gives us more to work with than that. In fact, two distinct organizing narrative frames are discernible in both the scroll and the published text, although for publication the author chose to play down both of them. To some extent, the differing emphases correspond to a difference in genre. Kerouac, who liked to protest that he wrote books rather than novels, was clearly putting together a specimen of the latter in the published version, where, aside from the fictional sobriquets and other more or less transparent distancing features (his mother becomes his aunt), one senses a slight effort to give prominence to what is actually the less plausible of the two organizing frames. It is announced right in the opening sentence: whereas

the scroll begins “I first met Neal not long after my father died,” the published version substitutes “I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up,” thus creating a story that begins in the aftermath of a divorce and ends with a new marriage. “I want to marry a girl,” the narrator confesses early in Part II, “so I can rest my soul with her till we both get old” (218). For all the shocks that *On the Road* delivered to 1950s America, this was a wish that could have brought discomfort to no one.

Kerouac’s readers have long been aware that he held a variety of hyper-traditional, even reactionary views on politics and relations between the sexes, an element of his makeup that has always sat uneasily alongside his reputation for untamed living. “This can’t go on all the time,” he continues, “all this franticness and jumping around” (218); and elsewhere the scroll reveals an even greater preoccupation with the question of what a stable mode of life might look like than he was willing to disclose in the published version. It belongs to a project that, again under the influence of Buddhism, Kerouac would eventually come to think of as a search for dharma, a way of living in harmony with the order of the world, and it includes a number of passages that have been ignored or misunderstood. There are, for example, regular expressions of interest in new technologies and inventions. “I bought a polybdenum bottle, with screw top, which could be used (I said to myself) to carry honey up to the mountains,” he reports in *The Dharma Bums* (358). The specification of the unusual material (actually called *molybdenum*) out of which the object is fabricated and the innocent purpose he imagines for it make a poignant contrast with the enabling function it ultimately performs: “I later used it as a canteen for wine more than anything else, and later when I made some money as a canteen for whiskey.” In *On the Road*, he is similarly taken with the makeshift air conditioner that Hal Chase’s father has invented and verges on boastfulness when he describes the new electric refrigerator that he and his mother have bought—“the first one in the family” (211).

This unguarded moment has led some to accuse Kerouac of consumerism, although his boast seems more like an overflow of defiant pride from a man regarded as a ne’er-do-well by his more conventional relatives. He shows no real interest in buying things merely for the sake of status but instead is keen on buying the *right* things—objects and machines that are useful and make for a better life (one wonders how many disapproving critics would be willing to forgo their electric refrigerators in favor of an ice-box). The person who doesn’t care to spend all of every day making money must spend it wisely: this was Thoreau’s opinion, and it is Kerouac’s as well, however difficult he found it to put into practice. One of the larger excursions from the scroll details an embarrassing episode in which he marshals his limited funds to relocate his immediate family to Denver, exercising a degree of frugality that would have impressed the sage of Walden Pond: “I myself travelled to Denver to get the house, taking great pains not to spend over a dollar for food all the way” (280). There he establishes his mother and his

other relatives in suburban comfort, fondly imagining that they will all live happily together. It doesn't work out. No one shares his enthusiasm for the West, and they soon make their way back to the East Coast, his obstinate mother leading the way. Despite his best efforts, the problem of how to live a harmonious life remains unsolved.

There is little doubt that, for Kerouac, women were the most confounding part of that problem, and it may be no accident that the verse from Ecclesiastes that he paraphrases in the opening chapter of the published novel actually reads: "Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest . . . all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labor which thou takest under the sun" (9:9). Kerouac had accepted the wisdom of this piece of advice and was honestly baffled by his repeated failure to put it into effect. Just as one feels his pride swell with the acquisition of a state-of-the-art kitchen appliance, it's impossible to miss the undercurrent of wounded vanity in his stiffly dignified accents following the abortive Denver episode:

Here I made an attempt to settle down those I love in a more or less permanent homestead from which all human operations could be conducted to the satisfaction of all parties concerned. I believed in a good home, in sane and sound living, in good food, good times, work, faith and hope. I have always believed in these things.

(280)

Of course, Kerouac has no wife—or at least not one who is willing to live with him—until the final pages of *On the Road*, and his attempts to address that absence are recorded in two extended episodes, one of which appears in the scroll and, with minor deletions and elaborations, in the published text as well and is duly dramatized in Salles' film. This is the account of his brief affair with a young Mexican-American woman named Bea Franco (called Terry in the published novel), which has often been described as one of the least appealing episodes in the book.<sup>17</sup> Rife with stereotypes, it is marked by an exasperatingly flippant tone, which has made more than one reader want to seize the author by the lapels and tell him to grow up—never more so than at the end of this story of financial and human failure, when he puts the whole thing behind him with the verbal equivalent of a shrug: "Well lackadaddy, I was on the road again" (201). The film manages these difficulties by subjecting the episode to radical compression, reducing it to a bare schema of erotic attraction across a cultural divide, followed by economic hardship. This last factor, which casts the author's taste for essential living in an ironic light, is made apparent by a shot in which Sal shows his disgust with the meager pay doled out to him for picking cotton, followed by a voiceover in which he admits his inability to pass the winter in an unheated farmworker's tent. The filmmaker's point is relatively simple: not only does Sal learn what it feels like to be a Mexican, but he isn't a very impressive

Mexican at that. His lover picks more cotton in a day than he can and so earns more money, although not enough for the two of them and her child to manage more than the grimmest subsistence living. A shot of a sidelong glance from an older man at the dinner table communicates the additional information that, while his employer treats him as a member of a despised minority, the migrant community doesn't fully accept him either. The situation is untenable, and we soon see him being welcomed home by his mother.

It would be unfair to take Salles to task for omitting aspects of this episode that connect it to the theme of the protagonist's regularly stated desire to find someone to marry and settle down with, as every trace of that theme is also banished from the film. In the book, the connection is made explicit by the ending of the previous episode, when Jack stands on a bluff overlooking the Pacific, gazes back east, and (rather histrionically) thinks: "Oh where is the girl I love?" (181). Less than a page later, he is entering the San Joaquin Valley and painting his surroundings with an overwrought romantic rhetoric that anticipates the actual romance to come: "Soon it got dusk, a grapey dusk over tangerine groves and long melon fields; the sun the color of pressed grapes, slashed with burgundy red, the fields the color of love and Spanish mysteries" (182). As he will shortly describe his lover's naked body in similarly vinicultural terms ("brown as grapes"), the continuity between his fantasy of the land and his fantasy of the woman could scarcely be more obvious (186). And apart from the hard realities of destitution that eventually overtake the couple, fantasy is the dominant characteristic of the entire episode, on her side no less than on his. "I thought you were a nice college boy," she tells him: "I saw you in your lovely sweater and I said to myself 'Hmm ain't he nice'" (186). Although their affair begins and ends in farm country, they meet on a bus to Hollywood, and cinematic touches color their early days together virtually from the moment of their arrival in "the gray dirty dawn, like the dawn Joel McCrea met Veronica Lake in the picture Sullivan's Travels" (186). A couple of weeks later, they have a meal at a cafeteria, which in the published text Kerouac describes as "decorated to look like a grotto, with metal tits spurting everywhere and great impersonal stone buttocks belonging to deities and soapy Neptunes" (78). From these erotically charged but ersatz beginnings in the capital of American fantasy, the distance is short to a self-consciously imagined version of the settled life that he has declared he wants for himself, as he relaxes in his tent at the end of a day of work in the fields: "Bea sat mending clothes. I was a man of the earth precisely as I had dreamed I would be in Ozone Park" (198). It's like a homespun movie calculated to warm the hearts of an audience back in Queens.

The point is not that a love affair should be managed without the intrusion of fantasy (as if such a thing were possible), but rather that this particular affair is conducted so largely in the realm of imagination that one senses the narrator's distance from anything like a state of mind in which marriage might be realistically contemplated. For there is an unspoken but unshakable

fact beneath the fantasy: though more broad-minded than most men of his generation, Kerouac was not prepared to bring an impoverished Mexican-American woman and her child by another man home to his much-adored mother, whose overbearing possessiveness and racist opinions are familiar to anyone conversant with his biography. This crucial piece of information is nowhere mentioned in either version of the text, except that it is to his mother that he turns for the fifty-dollar loan that makes it possible for him to extricate himself from the affair and come home to the relative comforts of Ozone Park: “The money had come in, my mother had saved my lazy ass again” (202)—an odd piece of self-deprecation from a man who has been picking cotton until his fingers bleed. No doubt he felt that he deserved to be chastised but not for laziness.

Though unwilling to spell out the motivation for the evasively glib tone in which this episode is narrated, Kerouac does record moments when his overly active imagination is itself a threat to the relationship, as when he is gripped by a fear that his paramour might be a prostitute setting him up to be robbed by her pimp. Fueled by alcohol, his tendency to jump to hostile conclusions about his lovers is all too well known to readers of his later and less superficial narrative of a failed relationship, *The Subterraneans* (1953), where Kerouac is more willing to hold himself accountable for his emotional difficulties than he was two years earlier when he composed the scroll (although even in the later novel, when at the climax he sits in a railroad yard and the extent of his responsibility for the failure of the relationship sinks in, his tearful self-accusations give way to a vision of his mother as an angel). From the unsparing perspective of that book, his suspicions about Bea Franco appear to be less a passing psychological curiosity than a symptom of a self-destructive defense mechanism employed to maintain the inviolability of the primary commitment in his life: his relationship with his mother.

The Bea Franco episode comes early in the book, raising the possibility that this unsatisfactory interlude might represent the initial stage in a process of development that will unfold over the remainder of the narrative. In theory, then, one should expect to find evidence of growth in the second of the narrator’s two major attempts to enter into a settled mode of life with a woman: his visit to his former wife in Detroit, which is another episode that appears only in the scroll, having been omitted from the published novel, probably out of fear of a libel suit. But if Kerouac wanted a mate who would share his taste for frugal living, Edie Parker was an unlikely choice, and newfound levels of maturity are not conspicuous in their initial exchange:

“What you come back to Detroit for Kerouac?” “I don’t know, I wanted to see you.” “Well if we’re gonna get married and all that stuff again I want a maid this time.” That clinched it. “I don’t want to wash dirty dishes, let somebody else do it.” “Ain’t you got a pretty soul?”

“Souls don’t mean nothing to me Kerouac, cut that juvenile talk and talk facts.” “You can stuff your facts up.” “Ah-ha, same old fool.” This was our lovey-dovey talk.

(342–43)

The daughter of a socially prominent family from Grosse Pointe, Edie is depicted in the scroll as a species of Motor City valkyrie, whose entertainment preferences lean toward hard drinking in the company of teenage delinquents. Arrested for running a red light with a case of beer in the car, she directs such a ferocious volley of backtalk at the police that they are intimidated into letting everyone go, even though at any minute Jack expects to find himself “getting the hose in the back room” (348). When they park by the lake and she rebuffs his advances, he slams the door in a huff and goes off to “brood” by the water: “This had always worked before. But now she simply shifted to reverse, backed out and drove home to go to sleep, leaving me with seven miles of Detroit night to walk in because there wasn’t a bus running anywhere” (344). She instructs Jack and Neal to wait for her in a bar around the corner and is then spotted climbing into a car with somebody else even before they’re out of sight. Observing these proceedings and consulting his extensive knowledge of women, Neal offers a deep insight: “She’s forgotten you, man” (345).

It would be callous not to recognize that the pain Kerouac suffers at this turn of events is real and of a different order from the earlier low points in the book: “This was an era in my life all washed up” (345). Moreover, when one recalls that the published version of the novel places his original break-up with Edie at the head of the narrative, it becomes clear how much was lost by the necessary omission of this failed attempt at a reunion, which occurs at a crucial juncture. The desolate conclusion of Part III, recounting the night that Jack and Neal spend in a run-down movie house along with a gruesome exercise in self-abasement from seven years earlier, doesn’t entirely make sense without it. Readers with access only to the published text may find an unseemly level of drama in the narrator’s fantasy of being swept up with the trash by the theater attendants, but the imagery doesn’t seem so excessively tragic when one understands that he is enduring something worse than fatigue and lack of money. This is the previously withheld nadir of the story, and he emerges from it divested of an emotional burden that we now realize he has been carrying throughout the book. Though reduced to skid-row squalor, he will at least be free to begin again.

At the same time, one searches in vain for evidence that Kerouac is no longer the “same old fool” that Edie says he is. “People change, man, that’s what you gotta know,” Neal tells him, and Jack makes the revealing reply: “I hope you and I’ll never change” (345). After which, following an interval of recovery in New York and despite his cautionary vision of Neal as the shrouded figure of death that has haunted his dreams (360), they’re off again on the most prodigious course of debauchery in the book, involving

“the biggest bomber anybody ever saw” (383), an equivalent amount of drink, and the entire staff of a Mexican bordello (the trough of this final cycle is equally dire—Kerouac is left bedridden and delirious with fever). It is consequently with a certain skepticism that one receives the news in the final pages that he has finally met “a girl with the pure and innocent dear eyes that I had always searched for” and proposed to her the very same night (405). Although the scroll is missing its ending (which was apparently eaten by a dog), the other early drafts make it clear that this “sweet wife,” his “poor little Joan,” was in fact the independent-minded Joan Haverty, later the author of a memoir entitled *Nobody’s Wife* (1990), whom Kerouac married on impulse in November of 1950.<sup>18</sup> His biographers further inform us that he and his belongings were ejected from her apartment in the spring of 1951 after little more than six months of marriage and a litany of complaints on her part (sexism, alcoholism, cruel and unusual exposure to his mother). Without stooping to the naïve tactic of measuring the honesty of a fiction against the historical record, one can nevertheless say that the biographical facts reinforce what many readers have instinctively felt—that the gesture of closing the narrative by bringing the lovelorn protagonist off the road and into a new marriage is no more than that: a purely formal (and entirely unconvincing) gesture.<sup>19</sup>

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The first of the narrative’s two organizing frames thus reveals an unsuspected degree of emotional depth in the protagonist but offers no other indication of growth or change. It traces his course from unspoken captivity in the lingering effects of a dead relationship to a wounded freedom; however, it gives little assurance that anything will be different next time and closes with a notably unpersuasive denouement. If the book is to be defended against the charge of terminal immaturity, therefore, one must look to the other story it tells, to the set of themes and human concerns that the opening sentence of the scroll indicates was always the real heart of the matter. For *On the Road* is above all a book about men. Specifically, it is a book about the attraction between an emotionally troubled, newly fatherless man, who is at loose ends after a divorce, and a younger man, who is both wildly charismatic and just plain wild. In Max Weber’s classic description, charisma (from the Greek *χάρισμα*, literally a “gift of grace”) is a primal mystery and inspires “a devotion born of distress and enthusiasm.”<sup>20</sup> The charismatic individual stands “outside the ties of this world, outside of routine occupations as well as outside the routine obligations of family life” (248). As if to illustrate these remarks, Kerouac makes a point of offering no rational explanation for dropping everything and abandoning a homey Christmas gathering at his sister’s house: “It was a completely meaningless set of circumstances that made Neal come and similarly I went off with him for no reason” (218). The point could not be clearer: Neal’s

enthraling presence, marked by an overwhelming energy and a narcissistic self-containment, is its own justification. As the published text explains, he's irresistible because he is "so amazingly himself" (147).

Here one might recall an inevitable association of Cassady's own term "IT," which is suggested by the familiar slang usage of the word in Kerouac's era. With origins in turn-of-the-century British upper-class circles, this colloquialism made its way, via the novels of Elinor Glyn and the 1927 Clara Bow film *It* (based on a Glyn novella), into the mainstream of American popular culture during the second quarter of the twentieth century. The idea was to put a name to a kind of magnetism that is notable for all the things "it" isn't: for example, it isn't mere beauty or sexual desirability, nor is it good breeding—in fact, the "it" girl in the film comes from the lower classes, like Cassady himself, whose origins as the son of a notorious bum could hardly be less distinguished. In *On the Road*, the ability to live in "the enormous present" produces just this sort of attraction, which Neal himself recognizes when he waxes enthusiastic about another accomplished hipster:

"I want to be like him. He's never hung-up, he goes in every direction, he lets it all out, he knows time, he has nothing to do but rock back and forth, Man, he's the end! You see, if you go like him all the time you'll finally get it." "Get what?" "IT! IT!"

(228)

Struck by the spectacle of Cassady's marvelous energy and style, Kerouac comes under the influence of this hard-to-specify allure, which operates without respect to gender and in so doing produces some of the funniest nonsequiturs in the book: "I was the only guy without a girl. I asked everybody 'Where's Neal?'" (144). And then a few pages later: "A whole bunch of girls showed up. I used the phone to call Allen and find out what Neal was doing now" (149).

The force of Neal's charisma, his extraordinary power to attract both men and women equally, is one of the book's most familiar themes, as is the nominal organizing device of the search for his absent father, whom the two main characters seek among the derelicts in bars and back alleys across the country. The publication of the scroll has only increased awareness of the extent to which relationships with fathers and father figures govern the emotional makeup of both main characters as well as a couple of lesser ones and thus serve to bring out the differences between them. At one extreme, I have already noted the author's approval of Hal Chase's father, whose creativeness and originality as an inventor win Jack's admiration during his first visit to Denver. In this category too, incongruously enough, is William Burroughs: despite his morphine addiction, bizarre hobbies, and love of fire-arms, he is nonetheless "a father who would certainly never bore his son when it came to finding things to do and talk about" (252). Whatever their shortcomings, these are American originals, resourceful, unconventional,

and unique. At the other extreme are the bad fathers who appear regularly throughout the book. This figure is typically a cop or some other uniformed representative of coercive authority, as is Louanne's father, "a cop in L.A. who had made many an incestuous hint. She showed me a picture; a little mustache, slick hair, cruel eyes, polished belt and gun" (233).<sup>21</sup> Kerouac's verbal sketch recalls his depiction of a sinister coworker during his farcical stint as a security guard: "He wore a revolver down low, with ammunition belt, and carried a small quirt of some kind and pieces of leather hanging everywhere like if he were a walking torture chamber" (169).

Between these extremes lies the question of how the two main characters negotiate their relationships with their own fathers, one missing and the other dead, in the course of their interactions with each other. And nowhere does this question present itself more insistently (if inconveniently) than in the book's most memorably risqué episode, in which Jack and Neal end up in bed together, albeit with Louanne between them. The threesome is initiated by Neal as a test of his own tolerance, but it is not a success. Stricken with doubts, Jack can do nothing and eventually has to retire to the couch, where his misery is compounded by the sound of the bed energetically rocking. As narrator, his principal aim, especially in the published text, is to offer a rhapsodic explanation of Neal's uninhibited virility, which has something to do not only with the time he spent in jail "evaluating the hardness of the steel halls and the softness of the woman who is not there" but also with the father whose influence—or lack thereof—shaped his early years (233). Louanne, too, becomes fathomable if one takes into account her unsavory father and the information, definitively revealed only later, that she has no real interest in Jack but is only using him to try to hold on to Neal by making him jealous. Both are enviably free, and both are hustlers who expect nothing for nothing in life.

Neal passes his own test, but no one else gets much out of the experience, especially not Jack, whose contrasting state of mind is once again illuminated by the scroll to an extent beyond anything in either the published text or the realization of this episode in the film version. Only in the scroll is it explained that the action takes place in the very bed where Jack's father died, relocated just the week before to the apartment where the scene occurs: "My father had been a big man and the bed sagged in the middle. Louanne lay there, with Neal and I on both sides of her poised on the upjutting mattress-ends, not knowing what to say" (232). Clearly, the bed is more crowded than anyone had previously suspected, containing not just the three of them but the heavy ghost of the senior Kerouac as well, accompanied by "all the weight of past centuries ballooning in the dark" (232). Given the author's Catholic upbringing, one may safely assume that yet another father, God Himself, is squeezed in too. With such an audience, it's no wonder Jack can't perform.

The episode is an early indication that the two main characters will give different answers to the question that every father implicitly asks his son: What kind of man will you be? Late in the book, despite heroic exertions,

they are beaten handily at basketball by teenagers, and the incident seems to foretell the passing of youth. As they prepare to go their separate ways, unsure when or even whether they'll reunite, Neal catches Jack off guard with a surprising assumption:

“You see man, you get older and trouble piles up. Someday you and me'll be coming down an alley together at sundown and looking in the cans to see.” “You mean we'll end up old bums?” “Why not man? Of course we will if we want to, and all that. There's no harm ending that way. You spend a whole life of non-interference with the wishes of others including politicians and the rich and nobody bothers you and you cut along and make it your own way.”

(352)

Jack's response is equally surprising, although much depends on how it's interpreted: “I agreed with him. He was reaching his mature decision in the simplest direct way” (352). There is no doubt that Jack approves of Neal's inclination to steer clear of the powers that be and live life in his own way, and he respects Neal's “mature decision” to become a bum like his father. It's not at all clear that Jack accepts that fate for himself, however, and only two pages later we find him suggesting an alternative: “All I hope, Neal, is someday we'll be able to live on the same street with our families and get to be a couple of oldtimers together” (354). The settled life that has been his expressed desire throughout the book remains his preferred vision of the future, and although we may doubt his ability to achieve it, our understanding of both his character and the emotional arc of the narrative depends on our accepting the sincerity of his desire. He is not Neal; he is a different kind of man; and as he pauses before making his way back to his mother's apartment, the close of the scene gently underscores that difference: “‘Goodbye, goodbye.’ Neal walked off in the long red dusk. Locomotive smokes reeled above him” (355). The final image recalls the Ghost of the Susquehanna and the favored transportation choice of old hobos everywhere—including, presumably, the one that Neal will become.

Jack is less free, less spontaneous, less able to live in the moment than his friend; but as Neal declines and is shunned by one former intimate after another, Jack shows himself more capable of the novelist's one indispensable attribute: imaginative sympathy. The turning point comes when Neal's own half-hearted attempt to settle down with Carolyn falls apart, and out on the street he begins to seem seriously unhinged:

‘Now let's talk about windows. I have seen some really crazy windows that made faces at me and some of them had shades drawn and so they winked.’ . . . He forgot about that in an instant and looked around blankly. I was glad I had come, he needed me now.

(287)

The conversation that follows is the first of two key incidents that reveal Jack's emergence as a distinctly different kind of man from his friend.<sup>22</sup> Casting about for something that will bring Neal back to himself, he proposes a new and exceptionally extravagant journey to New York and then on to "Rome, Paris, all those places." At first Neal is suspicious, "for I'd never committed myself before with regard to his burdensome existence, and that look was the look of a man weighing his chances at the last moment before the bet" (288). Kerouac repeats his proposal and offers to finance the trip with the remaining money in his pocket:

I looked at him; my eyes were watering with embarrassment and tears. Still he stared at me. Now his eyes were blank and looking through me. It was probably the pivotal point of our friendship when he realized I had actually spent some hours thinking about him and he was trying to place that in his tremendously involved and tormented mental categories. Something clicked in both our souls. In mine it was suddenly concern for a man who was years younger than I, five years, & whose fate was wound with mine across the passage of the shrouded years. (289)

What goes on in Neal's soul is not specified, although external signs of happiness reappear. Is it the happiness of a man who thought he was alone in the world and now realizes that he has at least one friend or is it the euphoria of a gambler who has experienced an unexpected windfall? The question remains unanswered, and it's possible that in Neal's case the two emotions can't be entirely disentangled. The significant thing is that Jack has taken responsibility for him at a moment when, as Weber puts it, "the charismatically qualified person appears to be devoid of his magical power or forsaken by his god" (296).

From this moment on, all the fathers in the book withdraw, including God, who has stubbornly refused to appear all along and so has left Kerouac with no alternative but to step forward himself, a step that forces him to confront some of his own emotional handicaps. "My interest in Neal is the interest I might have had in my brother that died when I was five years old to be utterly straight about it," he tells Justin W. Brierly, still another ambiguous father figure, who has dismissed Neal as incorrigible and is curious why Jack hasn't done so as well (317). Kerouac's lost brother Gerard goes almost unmentioned in the published version of the novel, but the scroll makes it apparent that on this point the author thoroughly understood himself. The important episode that immediately precedes his blurted-out piece of self-analysis acquires an added richness from this information when the texts of the scroll and the published version are placed side by side. It begins with a trivial incident in a restaurant: "In the john I was taking a leak in a urinal and stepped out before I was finished and aimed to the other urinal, momentarily halting the flow and saying to Neal 'Dig this trick.'" In response,

Neal warns that, because Jack is “getting a little older now,” such behavior risks “awful kidney miseries for the days when you sit in parks” (310). Some readers have taken Kerouac’s subsequent outrage as a sign that he is refusing to grow up, but that misses the point: Neal is teasing Jack in a way that generations of young men have teased their fathers, and Jack is learning that it’s no easy thing to have an irreverent son.<sup>23</sup> When in the face of Jack’s tirade Neal grows sorrowful, abandons his meal, and walks out of the restaurant, Jack suddenly discovers that “the sight of his uneaten food made me sadder than anything in years” (311)—a doleful glance back at the celebratory bond implied by the allusion to Ecclesiastes in the opening chapter of the published novel. Anger struggles with affection, but he is not quite through, even after the errant child returns and declares that he has been outside crying. Though inwardly hating himself for it, Kerouac throws out one more accusation: “You don’t die enough to cry” (311).

The strangeness of this remark is lost on Neal, who is focused on his bid for sympathy, but this time it’s the published text that supplies the necessary information, even as it omits the direct statement of the parallel between Neal and Gerard quoted above (along with most of the other material involving the well-connected Brierly, again out of libel concerns). Whereas the scroll gives “Everything I had secretly held against Neal was coming out” (311), the published version was revised to read “Everything I had secretly held against my brother was coming out” (192). In the light of Kerouac’s later statement to Brierly, his retort to Neal apparently means something like “You don’t have a good enough reason to cry because you haven’t had a brother die on you”; perhaps the unusual phrasing also implies that, when one suffers such a loss, a part of oneself dies as well. In any case, like every father dealing with an impertinent son, Kerouac faces the task of mastering emotions from the past as he manages the challenges of the present. He must put childhood in its place, and for this reason his apology is all the more meaningful, as is the even fuller one he offers the next day after Neal has suffered more rejections: “Remember that I believe in you. I’m infinitely sorry for the foolish grievance I held against you yesterday afternoon” (315).

Does Neal deserve such devotion? To the extent that the question involves a moral calculus irrelevant to love, the author considers it beside the point, however difficult it may be for the reader to ignore. Neal is helpless to correct his flaws, and Jack never asks him to do so; however, a close reading of the scene reveals ambiguities in line with those recorded throughout the book. Kerouac says that Neal is telling the truth when he claims to have been in tears, but that his own anger wouldn’t let him admit it at first; nevertheless, after he apologizes and they resume their meal, he continues: “The holy con man began to eat” (311). As with the episode in which he vows friendship to Neal, the question of his friend’s sincerity is left open—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that with Neal there are always elements of sincerity *and* self-interest. In the opening pages of the book,

Kerouac writes: “He was conning me, so-called, and I knew it, and he knew I knew (this has been the basis of our relation)”; but “he was only conning because he wanted so much to live and also to get involved with people that would otherwise pay no attention to him” (112). From the outset, Kerouac has recognized Neal for what he is, and he commits himself to the friendship in full awareness that he can’t expect the same commitment in return. He does so for reasons of his own, even though Neal has already abandoned him once in San Francisco and will eventually abandon him again under even more grievous circumstances in Mexico. This is a point that no telling of the story in any medium can afford not to make.

Yet it’s beyond Jack’s power to arrest Neal’s decline, and the remainder of the book turns on the sad recognition that his devotion must fail. Even with Jack’s vote of confidence, Neal regresses wildly after the snubs he receives from his old Denver acquaintances, and he acts out his torment in a half-crazed fit of auto theft from which Kerouac barely manages to rescue him before the law catches up. Having accompanied the characters through this alarming episode, followed by the excesses of the Mexican journey and its culmination in illness and abandonment, the reader is prepared for Neal’s final appearance, disheveled and semi-coherent, when even Jack comes to realize that he can’t be rescued from himself. Instead, Jack can only contemplate the moving chaos of his friend’s inner life, as glimpsed in his stammered explanation for turning up inopportunely in New York: “I wanted to see your sweet wife and you . . . love you as ever” (406). In this case, it’s useless to refer to the historical record and try to make something of the fact that the two men had many years of on-and-off friendship ahead of them after the events recorded in *On the Road* or that Kerouac was so far from being through with Cassidy that the 400 pages of *Visions of Cody* still lay in their future. The more significant fact is that the ending of the book feels imaginatively right: it *has* to end this way or else fall back into the stasis of a repetition that could end only in death.

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What does the film version make of these crucial episodes? The first of them—the scene in which Jack commits himself to his friendship with Neal—is all but absent. The two characters are thrown out on the street; they cast rueful glances back; and then they hit the road again. Sal’s voiceover adds: “I realized, as we wracked our brains for where to go and what to do, that it was up to me.” Beyond this pale trace of the source material, one assumes that the viewer is being asked to supply each character’s unvoiced emotions, but the exercise is rote and unrewarding. In an interview, Kerouac once improvised a brutal little parody of the kind of writing he disliked: “James entered the room, and lit a cigarette. He thought Jane might have thought this too vague a gesture.”<sup>24</sup> A style of representation in which the characters and the reader both must intuit the subtle flickers of consciousness passing

beneath the mundane surface of the narrative was anathema to a writer who had no patience with “dreary analysis” and staked everything on enthusiasm and emotional honesty. Yet Salles’ restrained aesthetic results in a cinematic style of precisely this type. From such a coolly pared-down presentation of the material, no one would ever guess that this scene is “the pivotal point” of the friendship between these two men or that anything important has “clicked” in their souls. They merely appear less than thrilled with their predicament.

The episode in the restaurant suffers from a different kind of problem, which is tied to the casting. An affable cowboy, Garrett Hedlund is an easygoing presence without the slightest hint of madness in his eye; it’s difficult to imagine him doing anything crazier than chasing down an uncooperative horse. And despite the manifest skill of Sam Riley’s performance, his boyish features would be so hard put to assume a fatherly cast toward his deep-voiced co-star that the filmmakers don’t even try to take up this dimension of the relationship between the two main characters. Instead, the restaurant scene is reimagined as something oddly different from what it is in the book. No one sets foot in the men’s room, and there is no teasing, arguing, or weeping. Rather, the precipitating event is a dramatization of the passage from the scroll that has raised the most eyebrows since it was first made public: Neal’s twenty-dollar hustle of the middle-aged owner of the Plymouth in which he and Jack share a ride to Denver. Although the text is full of derogatory references to “the fag,” Kerouac does not seem especially disgusted with Neal for what he does. On the contrary, he narrates the episode in the same tone of non-judgmental astonishment that he uses for other examples of surprising human behavior:

Warning him first that he had once been a hustler in his youth, Neal proceeded to handle the fag like a woman, tipping him over legs in the air and all and gave him a monstrous huge banging. I was so non-plussed all I could do was sit and stare from my corner.

(307)

In the film, this incident is made the cause of Sal’s lingering displeasure with Dean, who leaves the restaurant without eating when he can’t get a word out of his scandalized friend. No apology is ever offered, but the tension dissolves when, having watched Dean unsuccessfully inquire after his father in various locations, Sal puts an arm around his shoulders and assures him that the old man will turn up someday. The episode reveals little that we didn’t already know about the characters, and one can only wonder why the filmmakers thought the protagonist should be more squeamish in 2012 than he was in 1951.

Allowing for differences in style and the inevitable changes in perspective that arise with historical hindsight, one nevertheless comes away from the

film version of *On the Road* with a sense that the filmmakers didn't entirely understand the material even after their intensive course of study. Along with the mystical orientation of Kerouac's sensibility, the two scenes that I have reviewed above complete the list of what the film fails to provide: a view of the world through religious lenses that have, among other inflections, a pronounced Catholic tint; a man who, though troubled and torn himself, feels an unshakable obligation to devote himself to the charge of a dangerously unmoored friend; and a younger man whose makeup is such that he cannot be saved from his fate. And after we have enumerated those absences, it may occur to us that we have already seen this film, although apart from the features listed above it bears no other resemblance to *On the Road*. Like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, it is a touchstone of seventies cinema, Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973), which also displays a tumultuous energy and improvisational creativity utterly lacking in Salles' film but very much in the spirit of Kerouac's writing. Instead of Godard, Cassavetes, or any other cinematic figure from Kerouac's era, the next director to attempt a film of his most popular book—and one can only hope there will be another—would do well to follow that example.

## Notes

- 1 See Scott Martelle, "On the Road Again," *The Age*, June 4, 2005. After the big studios had lost interest, Kerouac did receive a \$2,500 advance for another *On the Road* project, but it was never realized for lack of funding. See Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 573.
- 2 The complicated tale of the various attempts to bring *On the Road* to the screen is told in James Mottram, "The Long and Grinding Story of *On the Road*," *The Independent*, September 12, 2008.
- 3 Other recent Kerouac-related films include *Kill Your Darlings* (2013), which fictionalizes events that occurred during Kerouac's early New York years, and *Big Sur* (2013), which does the same for a period in his life subsequent to the publication of *On the Road*.
- 4 See Scott James, "Trepidations Aside, *On the Road* Becomes a Movie at Last," *The New York Times*, April 14, 2011; and Stephen Galloway, "How *On the Road* Slashed Kristen Stewart's \$20 Million Dollar Paycheck and Finally Made it to the Screen," *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 9, 2012.
- 5 In keeping with this judgment, the scroll is used as the main primary text in this chapter, and the published novel is cited only for specific passages. Except where noted, therefore, all page references are to *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, ed. Howard Cunnell (New York: Penguin Books, 2008). References to the published novel and to *The Dharma Bums (DB)* are to Jack Kerouac, *Road Novels 1957–1960* (New York: Library of America, 2007).
- 6 Along with Nicosia's *Memory Babe*, the many Kerouac biographies include Barry Miles, *Jack Kerouac: King of the Beats* (London: Virgin Books, 2002); Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Tom Clark, *Jack Kerouac: A Biography* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984); Dennis McNally, *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America* (New York: Random House, 1979); Barry Gifford and Lawrence

- Lee, *Jack's Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978); and Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (San Francisco, CA: Straight Arrow Press, 1973). Two of the most interesting memoirs are by women who played significant roles in Kerouac's life: Carolyn Cassady, *Off the Road* (New York: William Morrow, 1990); and Joyce Johnson, *Minor Characters* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1983).
- 7 Jack Kerouac, *Maggie Cassidy* (New York: Penguin Books, 1959), 112.
  - 8 On Kerouac's work as a response to the emerging social world of post-World War II America, see Ann Douglas, "'Telepathic Shock and Meaning Excitement': Kerouac's Poetics of Intimacy," *College Literature*, 27.1 (2000): 8–21.
  - 9 Quoted in Edward Mendelson, "The Hidden Life of Alfred Kazin," *The New York Review of Books*, August 18, 2011.
  - 10 David Hume, "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm" (1742), in *Essays Political, Moral, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1987), 75. The standard work on enthusiasm is Ronald A. Knox, *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion* (1950) (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994). Although enthusiasm has been most commonly a form of dissenting Protestantism, Knox includes certain schools of Catholicism like Jansenism in his survey. With a phenomenon of this sort, denominational lines easily become fuzzy.
  - 11 On the history and intellectual background of these terms, see John E. Smith, "Time, Times, and the 'Right Time': 'Chronos' and 'Kairos,'" *The Monist*, 53.1 (1969): 1–13.
  - 12 Ecclesiastes (or Qohelet, to use its Hebrew name) is also, of course, the closest to Buddhism of any book of the Hebrew Bible.
  - 13 On "IT," see Benedict F. Giamo, *Kerouac, the Word and the Way: Prose Artist as Spiritual Quester* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 19–43.
  - 14 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 307.
  - 15 Of course, some would point out that this prophetic figure does eventually arrive in the final pages of the novel, when Kerouac encounters "a tall old man with flowing white hair" who advises him to "*Go moan for man*" (405). Yet the Word that this figure brings is not in any sense a revelation but is rather the confirmation of a conviction that Kerouac has expressed at intervals throughout the novel, as, for example, in his response to the dungeon scene in *Fidelio*. We are back in the day of the Laodicians, and the moan that this white-haired elder prescribes is only the Beat antithesis of his exuberant yell in the mountains. "Did this mean that I should at last go on my pilgrimage on foot around the dark roads of America?" he asks, and his question may lead the reader to wonder: Why "at last"? Isn't that what he's been doing all along? The suspicion that this episode is not a definitive break with the cyclical pattern established over the course of the novel but merely the prologue to a new round of yearning and collapse (left unnarrated at the end of the book) is fanned by the ensuing hasty movement of the narrative toward the hasty marriage discussed below.
  - 16 Just how detachable these passages could be is made apparent by one of the earliest drafts, where a version of the novel's final paragraph, a much-admired purple effusion so close to Kerouac's heart that he chose it to read aloud on *The Steve Allen Show* in 1959, appears as the *first* paragraph of the draft. See Howard Cunnell's introductory essay in his edition of the scroll (20).
  - 17 For an especially merciless example of such disapproval, see Carole Gottlieb Vopat, "Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*: A Re-evaluation," *The Midwest Quarterly*, 14.4 (1973): 385–407.

- 18 On the fate of the scroll's ending, see the Appendix to Howard Cunnell's edition and Nicosia, *Memory Babe*, 343. For a contrasting perspective on these events, see Joan Haverty Kerouac, *Nobody's Wife: The Smart Aleck and the King of the Beats* (Berkeley, CA: Creative Arts Book Company, 1990).
- 19 That some readers are willing to take the ending of the novel at face value is a little surprising. For those who respond to his work, Kerouac is such an endearing writer that there is a temptation to grant him more authority as a conscious artist than *On the Road* can substantiate. Thus, an otherwise insightful book, John Leland's *Why Kerouac Matters* (New York: Penguin, 2007), upholds the dubious assumption that the author succeeded entirely in turning his autobiographical material into a consistently realized fiction and advances the even more doubtful claim that the novel should be read for the "life lessons" it imparts. But the deletions performed between the scroll and the published version are often losses rather than gains, and the idea that the protagonist has found the woman of his dreams at the end of the road was thin stuff to begin with. As for the contention that the novel is valuable as a manual of wisdom, it would be an odd claim to make about a writer who was such a conspicuously slow learner even if he exhibited more control over his material than he does. Kerouac's heartfelt slowness is part of his charm, of course; but there are many lessons, especially those involving women, that he never could get straight. My own view is that the book is better read simply as the record of one man's experience—at times painfully self-deceiving but often touchingly honest and occasionally admirable. A wiser man would not have allowed himself to become deeply involved with a Neal Cassidy, but that wiser man would not necessarily have been a better one.
- 20 *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans., ed., and intro. by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 249. All further references appear in the text.
- 21 Recent research suggests that Kerouac was, perhaps intentionally, confused about the details of Lu Anne Henderson's complicated upbringing: the incestuous hints came from her stepfather, not from her biological father, who was indeed a member of the L.A.P.D. and appears in a photograph like the one described in *On the Road*. It may be that Kerouac found the combination of a uniform and contemptible behavior too natural a fit to pass up. See Gerald Nicosia and Anne Marie Santos, *One and Only: The Untold Story of On the Road* (Berkeley, CA: Viva Editions, 2012), 69, 195.
- 22 On this dimension of the book, see George Dardess, "The Delicate Dynamics of a Friendship: A Reconsideration of Kerouac's *On the Road*," *American Literature*, 46.2 (1974): 200–206.
- 23 See Vopat, "Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*: A Re-evaluation." Admittedly, the nuances of this scene were difficult to unravel before the publication of the scroll; however, Vopat is on obviously shaky ground when she describes the two men's relationship as an immature marriage destined to be replaced by a mature one at the end of the novel. The protagonist never behaves more maturely than he does at the end of this episode, certainly not when he marries a woman he barely knows.
- 24 Ted Berrigan, "Jack Kerouac, The Art of Fiction, No. 41," *Paris Review*, 43 (1968).

# 5 The Visionary Cinema of James Baldwin

## Mystery and Contradiction in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

Contradiction is our wretchedness, and the sense of our wretchedness is the sense of reality. . . . All the rest is imaginary.

Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

Race in America, the civil rights movement, and African-American literature after the Second World War are all subjects far larger than the postwar counterculture, yet it is difficult to imagine the counterculture without them. At a purely impersonal level, the relative economic conditions of whites and blacks offered some of the strongest available evidence that American culture had to change. To cite only one representative political document of the era, the *Port Huron Statement* lists the dispossession of black Americans first, ahead of even the military industrial complex, in its rundown of the country's disgraces; and with the possible exception of lynchings, economic disparities were only the most quantifiable outrage in a period when Jim Crow laws were still on the books. Against this flagrantly discriminatory status quo, the civil rights movement presented a morally unassailable force for progress, a new model of political action, and a demonstration that possibilities beyond acquiescent conformity could be imagined, despite the most quiescent of times. While the base of the movement's leadership in the African-American church placed it at some distance from the literary world, a new generation of black writers, like Ralph Ellison, whose *Invisible Man* (1951) remains one of the indispensable American novels of the period, offered an intellectual counterpart to a very visible campaign directed by ministers. At such a moment, a former teenaged preacher turned strikingly eloquent essayist, novelist, and sometime resident of Paris and Greenwich Village could not have avoided becoming a significant figure.

Of all the writers discussed in this book, James Baldwin has retained the greatest part of the respect he was accorded in his lifetime, although the details of his achievement are far from settled, and the complexity of his legacy guarantees that they will not be settled any time soon. The issue of race continues to cast a long shadow on American culture, while the more general tolerance for homosexuality in the contemporary world has

made it much easier to recognize the accomplishment of his second novel, *Giovanni's Room* (1955), a book that Baldwin had some trouble getting published due to its unapologetic rendering of subject matter that many postwar readers could not stomach. The disagreements now have more to do with the merit of the later writings in comparison to the earlier, and once again the year 1965 makes a convenient dividing line for reasons to be explained. But the complexities do not end there. Baldwin's distance from the postwar counterculture has already been noted, and his criticisms were so incisive that they amount to a practical demonstration of what it means to *see* in his work, a theme that is directly connected to two other major concerns: his idiosyncratic relationship to Christianity—it is only a slight exaggeration to say that some version of the word *mystery* appears every few pages in his books—and his lifelong interest in theater and film, which received its final expression two years before his death in his warm praise for Stan Lathan's film of his first novel. Anyone who intends to form an estimate of Baldwin's handling of these intricately related issues has little choice but to take them one by one. Only then does it become clear that, along with *mystery*, another term, which I will call *contradiction*, is a constant in his work and that these two related ideas not only are present from the beginning in his debut novel but are notable for their relative absence from Lathan's adaptation of that book.

Baldwin's most developed critique of the postwar counterculture is his essay on Norman Mailer, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy" (1961), which incorporates a brief dismissal of Kerouac and other unnamed "Suzuki rhythm boys" as well. The ideas advanced in this wickedly well calculated piece are much more complex than they have usually been taken to be. Among other things a reply to Mailer's condescending remarks on Baldwin in *Advertisements for Myself* ("too charming to be major"), this "love letter" to his erstwhile friend employs the conceit of a literary playground face-off among "boys" to make some distinctly grown-up points, even as it insinuates that the playground might be a fitting environment for the combative author of "The White Negro." At its most basic, the argument is simple. Mailer had dredged up a damaging stereotype to indulge a fantasy that is still common enough today among white adolescents: the sense that their lives would be more intense, more spontaneous, more authentic—somehow more *real*—if they were black. This is imagination taken for reality, and Baldwin's criticism belongs to the ancient tradition of Platonic distrust of the imagination as the supplier of misleading copies of an original truth, except that, in his existential reformulation of the theme, the original truth is that there *is* no original truth. The world, he contends, has

prepared no place for you, and if the world had its way, no place would ever exist. Now, this is true for everyone, but, in the case of a Negro, this truth is absolutely naked: if he deludes himself about it, he will die.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to Mailer's white negro, who chases a lost plenitude of experience in a state of arrested innocence, Baldwin's black negro embodies a disabused adulthood shaped by the knowledge that there is no design in which he figures, no destiny prearranged for his benefit.

This much is familiar, and although Baldwin's broadly existential emphasis does outline some common ground with the more tough-minded of his countercultural contemporaries, the related thematics of maturity and immaturity instead calls to mind his supporters in the liberal establishment, like Lionel Trilling, who heard an echo of his own tragic view of life in Baldwin.<sup>2</sup> "I do *not* like bohemia or bohemians," Baldwin says in the "Autobiographical Notes" prefaced to the first of his volumes of essays, and while he maintains that "all theories are suspect" (9), his diagnosis of the mind of white America is developed in a manner at least superficially akin to the Freudianism of Trilling and his followers:

I am afraid that most of the white people I have ever known impressed me as being in the grip of a weird nostalgia, dreaming of a vanished state of security and order . . . They put me in mind of children crying because the breast has been taken away.

(270)

The breast is not the organ that most preoccupied Mailer, however, and Baldwin's scorn for his phallic self-regard and glorification of the orgasm is rooted in an awareness that this particular white male fantasy involves a conception of the black male as something like a fetish object. The innocence of childhood, whose loss Freud theorized as a psychological castration, is projected onto another, who becomes the focus of a contradiction—both a figure of presence, the imagined bearer of an enviable fullness of experience, and a maddening reminder of its absence. This line of thought is developed in various passages scattered throughout Baldwin's essays, and its ultimate tendency is spelled out by his gruesome short story "Going to Meet the Man" (1965), in which a racist sheriff finds that his potency has been restored when he recalls the lynching and castration of a black man.

"But why," Baldwin asks, "should it be necessary to borrow the Depression language of deprived Negroes, which eventually evolved into jive and bop talk, in order to justify such a grim system of delusions? Why malign the sorely menaced sexuality of Negroes in order to justify the white man's own sexual panic?" (277–78). In "The White Negro," the black man is once again assigned the role of ideal phallus, which the hipster longs to possess; and Baldwin characterizes this countercultural "system of delusions" with a significant choice of word: *mystique*. For him, the hip attitude is little more than a complicated *exercice du style* that amounts to an evasion of the real complications of human relationships; the beatnik goes on the road rather than face the realities of life and love. This is mystification rather than mystery, and there is no more flagrant example than the passage

added to the published version of *On the Road* that details Kerouac's fantasy of the happy lives of black slum dwellers, whom he glimpses hidden in the shadows but for "the dusky knee of some mysterious sensuous gal." The "gal" is mysterious only in the hip wanderer's dreams, which Baldwin describes as marked by "real pain, and real loss," but "thin, like soup too long diluted" (278).

One form of mystery in Baldwin's work is characterized, then, by a simple contradiction between fantasy and reality, imagined presence and felt absence; and his response is to demystify what he would elsewhere call the "labyrinth of attitudes" to which it gives rise.<sup>3</sup> This *mystique* is only another strategy of evasion, a frantic effort to preserve a fragile sense of self; moreover, in the extreme case of Mailer's effusions, it results in "the belligerence of his stance, and the really rather pontifical tone of his voice" (280):

Norman felt compelled to carry their *mystique* further than they had, to be more "hip," or more "beat," to dominate, in fact, their dreaming field; and since this *mystique* depended on a total rejection of life, and insisted on the fulfillment of an infantile dream of love, the *mystique* could only be extended into violence. No one is more dangerous than he who imagines himself pure in heart; for his purity is, by definition, unassailable.

(277)

The triumph would appear to be complete: the overbearing countercultural fantasist is exposed as an aggrieved and aggressive child, leaving the exponent of disillusioned maturity in charge of the playground.

Except that this is not the only sense of the word *mystery* in Baldwin's writings or even in this very personal essay, where the metaphor of vision is subtly introduced in such phrases as the declaration, quoted earlier, that the existential truth of the world's indifference to one's destiny is "absolutely naked" to black Americans and even in the title ("The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy"). Baldwin sees in Mailer one of the most talented of his contemporaries, a writer engaged in a common project, which he describes as an effort to "excavate the buried consciousness of this country" (283)—an echo of a novel that was a decisive influence on him, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where the aspiring artist famously sets out "to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race."<sup>4</sup> Among other things, the allusion emphasizes the personal nature of the writer's task, as Baldwin admits his own attempts to evade the reality of experience through various "unreal alternatives" ("drinking, screwing, fighting"), which have helped him to understand the crisis that Mailer is going through, as manifested by such non-literary gestures as running for mayor of New York and stabbing his wife (this last episode Baldwin discreetly declines to mention, but it would have been the first thing that most readers thought of at

the time). He himself had faced “a terrifying adventure, not too unlike the conundrum that seems to menace Norman now”; and his substitution of the metaphor of excavation, bringing something to the surface and into view, for Joyce’s pre-industrial image complements the references to vision that appear throughout the essay, as when he rounds off the account of his own personal crisis with an unexpected reversal: “And beneath all this . . . was that sense, that suspicion—which is the glory and torment of every writer—that what was happening to me might be turned to good account, that I was trembling on the edge of great revelations” (273–74). The passage recalls the programmatic statement of artistic intent from his earliest important essay, “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1949): “It is this power of revelation which is the business of the novelist, this journey toward a more vast reality which must take precedence over all other claims” (13).

Several points need to be emphasized here, the first of which has to do with the personal nature of the mystery or “conundrum” that Baldwin invokes in these passages, one that is felt by artists in an especially acute way. *Mystery* and *conundrum* are synonyms in Baldwin’s writings, and they are inseparable from crisis and suffering, as various passages in his essays make clear:

any writer . . . finds that the things which hurt him and the things which helped him cannot be divorced from each other; he could be helped in a certain way only because he was hurt in a certain way; and his help is simply to be enabled to move from one conundrum to the next—one is tempted to say that he moves from one disaster to the next.

(6)

The closeness of these words is important to recognize, especially as *conundrum* is so often used as a synonym for *problem*; and a problem is just what a mystery or conundrum is not in the Christian existentialist tradition of which, I believe, Baldwin can be understood as representing an African-American version. Of course, Baldwin would have objected to being described as an existentialist, a school of thought that he associated with Albert Camus, whose views on Algeria he detested; however, a pair of analogies may bring out the utility of the comparison. They are meant as a contribution to an area of criticism that over the past few decades has concerned itself with detailing the theological assumptions of Baldwin’s work, filling in the religious background of a writer who, although as harshly critical of institutional Christianity as he was of the counterculture, went on professing his allegiance to a certain conception of Jesus Christ until his death.<sup>5</sup>

The first of these analogies comes from a philosopher and playwright who was similarly unhappy about the label *existentialist*, the French Catholic author Gabriel Marcel, who in *Being and Having* (1933) proposed a distinction between problem and mystery that seems to bring out a pivotal

aspect of Baldwin's thinking. For Marcel, the distinction itself is a revealing product of the modern world, which abounds in solutions to technical problems—that is, problems which can be approached objectively and solved through some combination of reason and technique. Such problems are not dependent on the unique experience of the solver; indeed, the very mark of a scientifically valid solution is that it can be replicated by others, and the scientific method has been so successful that it has thrown into doubt the validity of any question that cannot be answered by scientific means. Yet a moment's thought will tell us that human life abounds in questions of this type, questions that are inseparable from the questioner, and for this variety of question Marcel reserves the term *mystery*. A problem stands before and apart from the would-be solver, whereas a mystery “is something in which I myself am involved, and it can therefore only be thought of as a *sphere in which the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning and initial validity*.”<sup>6</sup> A mystery—the question of being, the “problem” of evil—is, then, a meta-problem, one that cannot be “solved” in the rational sense of the word.

This distinction is immediately relevant when one notices that, over a lifetime of writing about the issue of race, Baldwin remained almost completely uninterested in advancing anything resembling a concrete policy proposal; his role is most typically that of the observer who “sees,” “looks at,” “bears witness to” situations in which he is intimately involved.<sup>7</sup> It also parallels the most important instance—one that was similarly important to Baldwin—of Marcel's signature distinction between being and having: the union of mind and body. The latter is in fact a pair of terms that bridge the distinction; we speak conventionally of “having” a body, yet in an equally meaningful sense one “is” one's body. It's possible to look on one's own body objectively (for example, as the site of a medical problem that may be cured by scientific means); however, to be aware of that body as inseparable from one's very existence is to cross a conceptual threshold. Beyond it, one cannot regard a person as something that one can “have,” yet it is also inadequate to regard personhood as disembodied mind or spirit rather than as the sum total of an existential union that remains a mystery. These insights are at the heart of Baldwin's fine essay on Andre Gide's *Madeleine*, “The Male Prison” (1954), where Gide is described as the dignified victim of a collision between mind and body in the respective forms of Protestantism and homosexuality, one that resulted in collateral damage to his wife, whom he could look upon only as a superior spiritual presence rather than as a woman with a body, not to mention a succession of Arab boys, whom he could treat only as bodies because he did not consider them as equals.

There is perhaps an irony in the insistence among Christian existentialists on the body as the sensuous and suffering physical extension of a person, at least by comparison with the most influential of their secular counterparts—Heidegger, for example, who seems to acknowledge that *Dasein* has

a body only when it is wielding carpentry tools—for the denial of the body in institutional Christianity is a familiar enough complaint:

One of the things that has happened, it seems to me, with the rise of the Christian Church, was precisely the denial of a certain kind of spontaneity, a certain kind of joy, a certain kind of freedom, which a man can only have when he is in touch with himself, his surroundings, his women and his children.<sup>8</sup>

Women and children were not Baldwin's primary concern, however; and one of the boldest moves he would make was to reappropriate the Christian understanding of mystery as a figure for the male body understood as the means of access to another person, an experience that necessarily produces a conflict with conventional assumptions about masculinity. It is an opportunity for growth that the narrator of *Giovanni's Room* senses, but one that produces a struggle with himself, an ordeal from which he ultimately shrinks:

That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would lose my manhood. Precisely, I wanted to know that mystery and feel that power and have that promise fulfilled through me.<sup>9</sup>

In the final pages of the novel, when the narrator comes to realize that he doesn't know himself, he contemplates his own body in a mirror and sees it as "the incarnation of a mystery," which "hurries toward revelation"; and the body-as-mystery becomes fused with the theme of maturity when he quotes from First Corinthians: "*When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.*" In the aftermath of his failure of nerve, he now longs "to make this prophecy come true" (359).

The denial of the body is, in Baldwin's opinion, a cultural deformation to which African-American Christians are susceptible no less than white Christians, with the enormous difference that the frustrations and longings aroused by that denial in white Christianity have reinforced the racism from which the African-American church has traditionally offered some refuge. If not for the presence of black people, Baldwin observes (in one of those glaringly artificial assumptions of the white point of view to which he was given in his earliest essays), "we might be forced to deal within ourselves and our own personalities, with all those vices, all those conundrums, and all those mysteries with which we have invested the Negro race."<sup>10</sup> Alternatively, in search of escape from the role they have been assigned by racist mystifications, Americans may fall victim to the varieties of excess that Mailer celebrated but that Baldwin characterizes as a "male prison" of evasive physical indulgence, one in which

homosexuals are especially in danger of becoming confined: “today’s unlucky deviant can only save himself by the most tremendous exertion of all his forces from falling into an underworld in which he never meets either men or women, where it is impossible to have either a lover or a friend, where the possibility of genuine human involvement has altogether ceased.”<sup>11</sup> Whereas the church is the province of self-denying females and angrily neutered males, the street—Kerouac’s road—is littered with men so trapped in their masculinity that they can’t get through to women or to each other. At the extremes, the intolerance of the preacher and the “belligerence” of Mailer’s countercultural sallies both tend toward dogmatism and violence.

This summons to “tremendous exertion,” an acknowledgment of the indispensability of individual agency, is worth pausing over because it forms the necessary complement to the equally important passive components of Baldwin’s highly personal version of Christianity, but also because it is so easily forgotten when one begins to speak in terms of broad social categories and sweeping generalizations, as he would later be increasingly inclined to do. It is perhaps the most attractively independent-minded characteristic of the Baldwin of the postwar era, the man who began his first book by declaring that “one must find . . . one’s own moral center and move through the world hoping that this center will guide one aright” (9), and who repeated a decade later in *The Fire Next Time* (1963) that the “person who distrusts himself has no touchstone for reality—for this touchstone can be only oneself” (312). Such self-assurance would serve him well in executing the most remarkable maneuver that one could have imagined from the author of “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy.” Having dispensed with Mailer’s puerile exposition of the postwar counterculture, he went on to sound—in a finer tone, as it were—every one of its major themes, recovering precisely that “certain kind of spontaneity,” “certain kind of joy,” and “certain kind of freedom” that he had earlier seemed to dismiss as a destructive stereotype. Just as Mailer had begun by noting the catastrophic effect of the Bomb on assumptions about human progress, Baldwin recognizes, in *The Fire Next Time*, “the threat of universal extinction hanging over all the world today,” a development that “changes, totally and forever, the nature of reality and brings into devastating question the true meaning of man’s history” (319). Most strikingly, he reformulates Mailer’s central notion of “the enormous present” as follows: “To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread” (311). At times, he even offers the kind of quasi-Buddhist perspective that one might have expected more readily from a Suzuki rhythm boy:

I speak of change not on the surface but in the depths—change in the sense of renewal. But renewal becomes impossible if one supposes things

to be constant that are not—safety, for example, or money, or power. One clings then to chimeras.

(339)

The precariousness of the postwar world, a broadly existential outlook, an emphasis on sensuous immersion in the present moment, a recognition of the inevitable transience of human experience and the many ways that its denial fosters illusion—the item that is missing from this list is surrealism, the region of interest that has to do with what lies beyond the conscious mind and individual agency, the last of which was so important to Baldwin as artist, friend, and lover. I have mentioned the significance he attributed to notions like growth, maturity, and adulthood—an overlap with the mainstream liberalism of the period—but growth is not something that can be willed, although it may be a by-product of struggle. One approaches a paradox here, for the act that Baldwin most venerates is the non-act of becoming vulnerable, exposing oneself to risk, opening oneself to the sufferings of others (his Jesus is preeminently the countercultural figure who said: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me”).<sup>12</sup> Hence the metaphor of excavation, which is, of course, a metaphor of the mental landscape. For Baldwin, wretchedness and suffering are a kind of fire, an explosive that blows the deeper truths of human existence into view. One must find the courage to expose oneself to the heat of the blast or else remain imprisoned in a dreamworld—he is regularly sarcastic on the phrase “the American dream”—which is a place of frigid isolation and stasis. These metaphors are a constant in his work, especially in his sprawling novel of New York City life, *Another Country* (1962), published the year after “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy”:

And what were these terrors? They were buried beneath the impossible language of the time, lived underground where nearly all of the time’s true feeling spitefully and incessantly fermented. Precisely, therefore, to the extent that they were inexpressible, were these terrors mighty, precisely because they lived in the dark were their shapes obscene.

(541)

Even strangers on the sidewalk flash messages of a desperate subterranean mystery: “The girls along Fifth Avenue wore their bright clothes like semaphores, trying helplessly to bring to the male attention the news of their mysterious trouble. . . . This note of despair, of buried despair, was insistently, constantly struck.” (571).

What must be burned away is, in short, a false sense of self; and Baldwin’s theology, if one can speak of such a thing in the case of a deliberately unsystematic thinker, is a version of the *via negativa*.<sup>13</sup> It marks out an individual path in fiction and expository prose, improvised like a jazz musician in an unmistakably African-American idiom, a blues at the crossroads of

modern psychology and an ancient apophatic tradition that reaches back as far as the Apostolic Age and beyond. I will have more to say about the specifically African-American character of Baldwin's oeuvre, an aspect of his work that is inseparable from his lifelong interest in theater and the cinema; but first it may be helpful to draw one more comparison, in this case to a thinker whose fierce asceticism might seem an unlikely match for a novelist who accumulated ex-lovers along with empty whiskey bottles. Nevertheless, Simone Weil, a Jewish-born philosopher who notoriously preferred the New Testament to the Old, outlined in her scattered writings a negative theology that reads almost like a gloss on the religious dimension of Baldwin's work, especially as regards the closely related concepts of mystery and contradiction.

There is a passage near the end of *The Fire Next Time* that, with its tone of challenge and the hard-edged, paradoxical turn it gives to the most undeniable of existential truths, is strikingly reminiscent of Weil:

Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the *fact* of death—ought to decide, indeed, to *earn* one's death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life.

(339)

Mystery, "the conundrum of life," is defined by the coexistence of opposites, the daylight world of beauty and what Baldwin calls the "terrifying darkness" when, "for each of us, the sun will go down for the last time" (339). For Weil, too, mystery was defined by contradiction, as was life itself, and throughout her own short life, she elaborated a Platonic critique of the imagination that parallels Baldwin's comments on his Beat contemporaries in particular and on white America in general. "Americans do not believe in death," Baldwin comments, "and that is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them" (339). Or, as Weil put it, "there is no contradiction in what is imaginary," but the paradoxical truth is that "death is the most precious thing that has been given to man."<sup>14</sup> Imagination effects an aggrandizement of the self at the expense of others; it betrays a failure to admit that one is not God. For the central contradiction in her work is that of creator and creation, and their union is represented by Christ on the cross, understood not as the emblem of an institutionalized religion in which one may "imprison" oneself, but as a figure of mystery—the coexistence of divine love and the suffering of this world.<sup>15</sup>

"Contradiction experienced to the very depths of the being," Weil wrote, "tears us heart and soul: It is the cross" (151); and she shocked

her Catholic friends by conceiving of a God who is utterly absent from His own creation. After incarnating Himself in Christ as love, He negated Himself, abandoning His earthly body to a suffering that is the human condition and remaining silent to Christ's anguished question: "Why hast thou forsaken me?" In doing so, He provided humanity with a divine example: the crucifix becomes the symbol of a hierarchical metaphysics figured as a phenomenology of height and depth, rising and falling. By negating ourselves and thus refusing the illusions that imagination fabricates—illusions that form the support structure for a tenuously inflated sense of self and are therefore protected with the most desperate sort of violence—we rise toward the state of grace called love. By contrast, the inescapable character of this world manifests itself in what Weil terms "gravity" or "force," the downward-tending pull of necessity that eventually turns every human being into a thing.

Suffering degrades and destroys us. It can happen that we pass love by and fall tragically away from the divine on this downward course, but it may also happen that in suffering we learn to accept our transience and ultimate nothingness, which is the precondition for love. To do so, one must make a certain kind of effort, perform a "non-acting action" that Weil calls "attention" and that she describes as a heightened consciousness of contradiction. In this way, the personal becomes impersonal. Following the deity's example, one abandons oneself, "decreates" oneself, which is paradoxically the gesture that makes genuine creation possible: "Extreme attention is what constitutes the creative faculty in man and the only extreme attention is religious" (170). Attention, a non-act of love, nurtures the creativity that is apparent in every historical period; yet it can happen only in the present, for past and future are figments of the imagination, illusions of security, continuity, and permanence with which we console and mislead ourselves. Golden ages are for the sentimental, and afterlives are for the weak. The only realities are the present moment and the assurance that it will end.

This brief sketch of some of Weil's major themes (which could serve equally well as a theological primer on the cinema of Ingmar Bergman, the director Baldwin most admired) has distinct parallels in Baldwin's work, especially in those passages that insist on the form of self-abandonment that he calls "vulnerability" or "nakedness"—the attitude of openness that enables the state of grace:

Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word "love" here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.

These statements carry some definite implications. For one thing, they ought to make us wary of efforts to assimilate Baldwin to a naïve identity politics or any conception of selfhood that ignores the role of contradiction in his work and his conviction that growth, the difficult climb toward grace, is achieved through an abandonment of the self rather than its hardening in conformity with religious or political dogma. Baldwin could be hard, but normally it was when he was confronted with white negroes or some other piece of imaginary nonsense concocted by the American mainstream. The more interesting question has to do with how a negative theology like the one that is implicit in his work situates itself with respect to community and traditions—in a word, the domain of culture—and how that effort is complicated by the terrible history of race in America.

Here it may be useful to consider one last analogy with the thought of Simone Weil, who spoke of culture as a sort of intermediary, both a separation and a means of connection between human beings as well as between heaven and earth. Envisioning it symbolically as the horizontal axis of the cross, she saw it as indispensable and strove to expand her own learning beyond the West to encompass such distant traditions as Hinduism and Buddhism. These *metaxu* are what make human life possible, she believed, for they are where contradiction manifests itself. Thus, in characteristically paradoxical fashion, she argued that one comes to respect other cultures by learning how to rise above culture, to “make of our own country not an idol, but a steppingstone toward God” (202). To enlarge the point, she used an image familiar to Baldwin:

The existence of opposite virtues in the souls of the saints. The metaphor of climbing corresponds to this. If I am walking on the side of a mountain, I can see first a lake, then, after a few steps, a forest. I have to choose either the lake or the forest. If I want to see both lake and forest at once, I have to climb higher.

Only the mountain does not exist. It is made of air. One cannot go up: It is necessary to be drawn.

(152)

The mountain, according to the old spiritual, is where one goes to tell the news “that Jesus Christ is born.” One does not go there willfully, however; one must lose oneself and be drawn toward those heights. Something like this is what the young Baldwin meant when he described the novel as having a “power of revelation” and the project of the novelist as a form of growth, a “journey toward a more vast reality.” It is, he wrote in “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” only in “ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness,” that “we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves” (13).

Baldwin would not always maintain that commitment to paradox. There is widespread agreement that his writing changed after the civil rights movement achieved its initial successes, culminating in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, but also raising the question of how that progress could be sustained in the face of inertia, resistance, and acts of violence that he felt deeply and took personally (he would end the sixties with the most serious of his several suicide attempts). Recent years have seen an effort to defend the achievement of the older Baldwin, notably by Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., who makes the interesting argument that the fragmentation, memory lapses, and generally haphazard quality of the later essays are a formal experiment, a conscious attempt to evoke the author's traumatized state of mind.<sup>16</sup> Of course, a deliberate experiment along these lines may have been the best that Baldwin could do under the circumstances. My own view is closer to the older and, I believe, still more widespread one that his late essays are compromised by his own suffering—by the pain and rage that are written all over everything he produced after 1965.

Yet the greatest weakness of Baldwin's later writing is not his understandable pain and rage but his increasing unwillingness to make distinctions. As early as *The Fire Next Time*, his habitual reliance on gross abstractions like "the Negro," "the White Man," "Europe," "Africa," "the North," "the South," or indeed "the West"—the last of which he seems prepared to dismiss in a manner reminiscent of Bowles' placidly apocalyptic forecasts—stands in blank contrast to the vivid precision of the narrative passages. In the latter part of his career, the problem becomes endemic. Disillusioned by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., he habitually brushes aside anything that might complicate the stark, twofold picture of an oppressed minority and an oppressive majority. In *No Name in the Street* (1972), his attempt to find common cause with the proponents of a violent and crude-minded identity politics, which he was entirely capable of seeing through, makes for a cringing, evasive conclusion to the book. He had loved King, but he was also taken with Eldridge Cleaver, who had insulted him with homophobic slurs; and he was outraged by the police killing of Bobby Hutton, although he doesn't see fit to mention the armed ambush of two police officers that preceded it—a notable omission for a writer who had so often repeated the warning that violence only begets more violence. Similarly, his mournful threnody "Medgar, Malcolm, Martin" inadvertently suggests one of those standardized tests in which the subject is invited to identify the term that differs from the others. The first and last were heroic figures murdered by old-fashioned racists, whereas the second was a work in progress at the time of his death, a gifted orator who had the courage to disavow the hypocrisy of a puritanical cult, which responded in gangland fashion. It turned out that he took his religion seriously, and his intransigence goaded bogus puritans into doing the work of the racists for them. This was tragic irony as well as tragedy and perhaps the premiere example of the violence that black Americans have inflicted on one another.

In his last and worst book, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985), Baldwin repeatedly emphasizes the possible innocence of Wayne Williams, although he seems a little flummoxed by the thought of a college-educated, middle-class black serial killer with an obnoxiously petulant personality and a fractious relationship with his father that can't help but recall Baldwin's own. The largest portion of this bizarrely punctuated volume is given over to condemning racism and poverty with justifiable, if predictable contempt, yet one comes away with the sense that he was simply unable to find a place for a man like Williams in the broad categories to which he was by that time addicted and instead fell back on talk of "the universal mystery of men" (20). This is less evidence of things not seen than evidence of things disregarded—a mystery that couldn't be solved in black and white.

Still, the virtue of the book is that it throws into high relief another kind of contradiction that bedeviled this author: the tension between his liberating insistence on the Americanness of black Americans—the conviction that African Americans, perhaps even more so than European Americans, are free to create their lives from what they have at hand—and an enervating habit of conflating race and culture, as if blacks and whites were condemned to be no more or less than what their racial ancestry dictated. Once one becomes aware of it, this reductive predisposition can be spotted even in such celebrated pieces as his early essay "Stranger in the Village" (1953), which launches its argument from the dubious premise that the unworldly residents of an Alpine mountain town have a more natural claim to the monuments of European culture than a brilliant writer of African descent whose every paragraph displays his immersion in Henry James and the Bible. Baldwin's insistence on taking this debilitating idea as his point of departure reveals the extent to which he himself was subject to fantasies of racial blessing and privation similar to the ones he was so dexterous at calling out in his Beat contemporaries, and—pace those who would paper over the deficiencies of his later writings—it is the aspect of his legacy that most deserves to be abandoned. As he was still fully capable of protesting in a better mood, "I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me, certainly, but I am, also, much more than that. So are we all."<sup>17</sup>

In the later Baldwin, the struggle with racism becomes the struggle of a perennial victim against a fundamentally inhuman external adversary—a "white devil"—and if he began as one of the great religious writers of his era, he ended as a case study in the religion of racial politics, a casualty of frustrations born of the country's inability to change rapidly enough at a time when it was in fact changing more rapidly than many could accept. The most incisive early critic of the counterculture, the man who exposed its shallower pretensions from a perspective "both free and bound . . . a bondage which liberates you into something of the glory and suffering of the world," became an embittered Jeremiah of airless anti-racism and left behind the younger writer who at his best understood that the struggle with a demeaning culture is also a struggle with oneself, an unabating effort to

distinguish the genuinely creative examples that the wider world has to offer from the seductive but simplistic temptations that forever present themselves as substitutes.<sup>18</sup>

It would be misleading to give the impression that the older Baldwin simply dropped the religious commitments elaborated in his earlier writings (although he does seem to have felt that most white people were never going to understand them); on the contrary, there are any number of statements in his later work—I have just quoted a couple—that sound the same theological note as the earlier. The shift in emphasis is impossible to miss, however, and one well publicized episode in his life, the events of a few days in February of 1965, reveals the direction of the shift in compressed form. Those few days saw, first, what was arguably the finest of Baldwin's many extraordinary performances as a public speaker, when he defeated William F. Buckley, Jr., in a formal debate at Cambridge University, winning a standing ovation and the post-debate vote by a convincing total—irrefutable evidence, if any was still needed, of his ability to deliver a morally undeniable sermon against racism, taking himself as his text and skillfully drawing his audience into his own personal experience. Three days later, Malcolm X was murdered, and a distraught Baldwin, waylaid by reporters, informed the baffled press corps that *they* had killed Malcolm X.

On one level, there is some truth to the claim. What Baldwin meant, of course, is that the legacy of racial oppression—"time, circumstance, history"—had created the cultural conditions in which a black man who spoke unmentionable truths in uncompromising fashion would come to a violent end. Yet the charge begs a question that Baldwin had asked repeatedly in his earlier work but tended to leave unanswered in the remaining two decades of his life: How does one break a cycle of violence? Or, to put it more provocatively, what to do with the knowledge that African-American culture can produce a murderer as easily as it can produce a James Baldwin? For what is absent from the charge that, while the finger on the trigger was black, it was the white race that killed Malcolm X is any room for the "tremendous effort" of self-negation that Baldwin saw as indispensable to anyone who sets out to contend with the paradoxes of human life.<sup>19</sup> It is a question that throws a harsh light on the junction of race and culture—a topic that many would prefer to leave in discreet darkness—and it raises the related question of agency; for culture too is something of a mystery, one that involves forces beyond the rational mind. Just as we cannot will growth, it is unclear to what extent we have it in our power to rise above culture or at least to distinguish creative from destructive influences; and if it is in any way meaningful to speak of a "universal mystery of men," one must go on to ask how some who suffer manage to respond with love while others turn their suffering on those around them.

Among Baldwin's later essays, however, there is one book that deserves to stand with his earlier ones, and it represents an effort to take on this very issue, to show how racist stereotypes, Christian prohibitions, and their

destructive effects become lodged in the mind, and to outline a personal and specifically African-American response. *The Devil Finds Work* (1975) is a volume of film criticism, a major area of interest for Baldwin and one that had preoccupied him from his earliest adulthood, when he took acting classes alongside Marlon Brando and, a few years later, declared somewhat insincerely that he wasn't sure he *had* any interests "unless the morbid desire to own a sixteen-millimeter camera and make experimental movies can be so classified" (9). If one expands the field to include the theater and the kind of pulpit performance at which Baldwin excelled, it is apparent that these interests drew a sizable part of his attention, as evidenced not only by his three plays and innumerable speaking engagements but also by his movie reviews, his feature article on Ingmar Bergman, his various film projects both realized and unrealized, his on-camera turns in documentaries by others, and his protracted, unrewarding attempt to write the screenplay for a Hollywood production of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.<sup>20</sup> In the long view, *The Devil Finds Work* appears as both the culmination of a lifelong interest and a meditation on mystery, race, and culture that looks back over the whole of Baldwin's career to the final pages of his first novel.

This is in some respects the most unusual of film books, for it may seem that the author's intention is to consign the cinema to the same moral junkheap on which he was by this phase of his life ready to deposit much of Western culture. As always in Baldwin's essays, the point of view is personal, that of an African-American man raised in extreme poverty in Harlem between the wars, a time when, he reminds us, black people had not yet moved even as far north as the Bronx. In the pressure cooker of an impoverished and forcibly segregated neighborhood, one mystery took precedence over all others:

I had found white people to be unutterably menacing, terrifying, mysterious—wicked: and they were mysterious, in fact, to the extent that they were wicked: the unfathomable question being, precisely, this one: what, under heaven, or beneath the sea, or in the catacombs of hell, could cause any people to act as white people acted?<sup>21</sup>

In his efforts to unravel this mystery, the young Baldwin got little help from the movies, which gave him a shadow world in the Platonic sense, a dream-life of imaginary innocence, whose essential falsity was disclosed by comparison with the Harlem streets. The few black faces to appear on the screen belonged to contemptible figures, the "shuffling negro" actors of the era, and it was only at certain moments that white movie stars appeared even marginally black—that is to say, real: Henry Fonda's "stubborn, patient, wide-legged" walk at the end of *The Grapes of Wrath* or Sylvia Sidney, who "was always being beaten up, victimized, weeping" (494). The mystery of whiteness was the problem of evil itself, whereas Hollywood cinema, despite

similar moments of coded reality from later black performers, remained little more than another mystification.

By contrast, the novel—above all, the nineteenth-century realist novel—and the theater offered a larger measure of the kind of reality that, even as a child, Baldwin could recognize as genuine: aristocratic cruelty and the resulting implacable hatred of Madame Defarge in *A Tale of Two Cities* or the astonishing spectacle of Orson Welles' all-black production of *Macbeth*, a tale of gangster ambition and downfall enacted in recognizable “flesh and blood” (504). In this last example, the fusion of Shakespeare with African-American flesh and blood gives the lie to any simplistic understanding of the relationship between race and culture, even as it anticipates the successful union of African-American culture and humanity laid bare on the stage that Baldwin would find in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). To a black audience, this was “flesh and blood corroborating flesh and blood” (524), and the implicit pairing of these two theatrical experiences sets up what is perhaps his single most lyrically insightful comment on race and culture:

Identity would seem to be the garment in which one covers the nakedness of the self: in which case, it is best that the garment be loose, a little like the robes of the desert, through which robes one's nakedness can always be felt, and, sometimes, discerned. This trust in one's nakedness is all that gives one the power to change one's robes.

(537)

Conscious of one's nakedness, divested of imaginary falsehoods and racial essentialisms, one is free to don Shakespearean robes or the everyday apparel of the contemporary black family as one sees fit.

The hasty reader may come away from *The Devil Finds Work* with the impression that Baldwin's aim is to assess the medium of film as inherently inferior to the theater, which has a unique ability to reveal one's nakedness. Thus, it is in the very nature of theatrical experience, symbolized by the radiance visible below the curtain just before it rises, to present an existential reality, the unknowability of what is to come:

That narrow ribbon of light contains a mystery. That mystery may contain the future—you are, yourself, suspended, as mortal as that ribbon. No one can possibly know what is about to happen: it is happening, each time, for the first time, for the only time

(501).

The most basic contradiction of mortal life, existence shaped by suffering and a death that must be earned, was intrinsic to two powerful cultural influences, the theater and the Christian church, which was itself a species of theater, as Baldwin came to recognize. In the person of his stepfather,

however, it was relentlessly hostile to literature, the theater, the movies, and all other non-religious influences, enforcing the familiar conflict between the sacred and the secular, institutional Christianity and worldly experience, which the young minister could barely acknowledge to himself. For though he was quietly resentful of the harsh God who spoke to Job from a position of strict authority,

something in me, out of the unbelievable pride and sorrow and beauty of my father's face, caused me to understand—I did not understand, perhaps I still do not understand, and never will—caused me to begin to accept the fatality and the inexorability of that voice out of the whirlwind, for if one is not able to live with so crushing and continuing a mystery, one is not able to live.

(486)

A hard life and a death that the white world was always ready to inflict, the grim reality of the streets and the imaginary indulgences of that other world, the sacred theater of the church and the compelling experience of its secular counterpart—there was no available resolution of the conflicts that he faced, especially when he considered that his piously abusive stepfather might even be “as mysteriously wicked as white people” (482).

These passages take their place alongside the finest moments in Baldwin's work, each of which returns obsessively to the figure of his stepfather and the visionary experience that was the turning point of his young life: *The Fire Next Time*; “Notes of a Native Son” (1955), which is the most indelible of the early essays; and, of course, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), where that experience was first narrated in fictional form. Two points need to be put forward here, although they can be borne out only through close reading. The first is that, despite the common ground between Baldwin's metaphors of mental excavation and the Freudianism prevalent among his liberal supporters in the postwar era, the complex psychology of his novels and essays looks for treatment not to the psychoanalyst's couch but rather to communal experience of a uniquely African-American kind. Whatever its failings as an institution, the church provided the model for an experience of mystery with the power to heal and bring about growth, a theme nowhere more eloquently sounded than in the pages of *The Devil Finds Work* that describe the religious ritual called “pleading the blood.” Undergone as a kind of drama with the support of one's co-religionists, this is “a plea to whosoever had loved us enough to spill his blood for us, that he might sprinkle the soul with his love once more, to give us power over Satan, and the love and courage to live out our days” (565). A pitched battle between light and darkness, the soul faced off against the Devil or Jacob wrestling with the angel, it is a theatrical event experienced by the subject as a vision, a sequence of moving images that enact fundamental contradictions of human life: the coexistence of transience and eternity, destruction and creation,

violence and love. By such means, one is “set free . . . to live among one’s terrors, hour by hour and day by day alone, and yet never alone” (566). The word that Baldwin uses to name this experience is *revelation*, which, he tells us, has all but lost its meaning, yet it is the only word for an experience that is much older than Christianity. The special achievement of African Americans, one that has made them the custodians of tradition and the potential rescuers of American culture, is to have recognized in the forms of the Christian religion—so easily distorted into self-denial and intolerance—forces that predate *any* religion.

The other point that needs to be emphasized is one that is more personal to Baldwin and concerns the role of his stepfather in his own version of this drama. Simply put, his stepfather is the central figure of contradiction in his writing, the embodiment of good and evil, paternal love and a violent intolerance that amounted to a throughgoing rejection of the life into which he had been born. This last statement will no doubt strike some as dramatic in a sense rather different from Baldwin’s understanding of the church as a form of theater; but considered in the context of his mature writing and the history of African-American culture, it is unavoidable, and to deny it is to deny a measure of the complexities and paradoxes of human experience that Baldwin was determined not to ignore, at least in the earlier part of his career. His stepfather’s love for him, expressed as the fulfillment of a duty to prepare him for the racism he would face, was a stifled, impotent emotion curdled into fanaticism, narrow-mindedness, and brutality. It was the distorted expression of a suffering apparently inflicted by God on an imperfect modern Job along with his entire race, one that “drags us into the icy and fiery center of a mystery: how have we endured? But the key word, there, is *we*” (509). The whole tragic drama of African-American culture was summed up in this impossible figure and the choices he implicitly presented.

There is quite a bit more to be said about both these points, but first one must ask what becomes of the cinema in this film book that, in the manner of the later Baldwin, finds so little to celebrate in American film. The answer, I believe, is not that the cinema is a medium inherently inferior to the theater’s presence in the moment and openness to the future—after all, one could find those same deficiencies in Baldwin’s own preferred medium of narrative fiction—but rather that, in America at least, the cinema was an unfulfilled art form controlled by a venal corporate establishment. Here one might note his rather different opinion of European cinema, voiced at feature length in his article on Ingmar Bergman, another minister’s son, who had shown how an outrageously severe upbringing could be transformed into cinematic achievement; and in *The Devil Finds Work*, Baldwin even offers the tongue-in-cheek suggestion that *The Exorcist* might have been a good film if it had been directed by Bergman. Equally in keeping with that book’s concentration on the devil of racism and its effects as they are expressed and reinforced by the movies are his remarks on Fritz Lang, who, in his German films as well as his early American ones, brought to the

screen what Baldwin calls an “obsession” with “the ways in which we are all responsible for the creation, and the fate, of the isolated monster: whom we isolate because we recognize him as living within us” (495). Whether he had in mind his own struggle with various devils or his stepfather’s less successful ordeal he doesn’t say, but to anyone steeped in his work the possible applications of the comment are palpable.

Characteristically, Baldwin had ended his article on Bergman from fifteen years earlier with a personal excursus: the cinema of a Northern Protestant, great as it may be, will obviously not present an exact blueprint for the cinema of an African-American one. What he envisioned for himself was, instead, a film of African-American history, beginning with “slaves, boarding the good ship *Jesus*, a white ship, on a dark sea, with masters as white as the sails of their ships, and slaves as black as the ocean.”<sup>22</sup> And on it would go through the generations: in each era, a rebellious figure would appear only to suffer a violent death, right down to the present, when the hero of the story would “probably be a junkie” like the protagonist of “*Sonny’s Blues*” (1957)—a junkie or perhaps an artist like Sonny or like Baldwin himself, someone who can turn anguish into artistry as convincing as Bergman’s (246). How, he asks, would Bergman manage a love story set on the streets of New York? What would American cinema look like if one could make a film along the lines of the movie he carried in his head?

Whereas the theater functioned for Bergman as an extended dress rehearsal for his films, Baldwin argued that American cinema would continue to be little more than inferior theater as long as it remained a fantasy, a dream of innocence churned out by an industry with all the failings of the larger society. By contrast, the cinema he had in mind was a visionary cinema in two senses of the word. Unlike European cinema, in which a filmmaker of Bergman’s caliber could work his way into a position where he was at liberty to realize his ideas, the cinema of African-American experience, as Baldwin imagined it, remained largely unrealized, a state of affairs that began to change only near the end of his life with Stan Lathan’s film version of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1985) and after his death, when his cherished Malcolm X project would finally be realized by Spike Lee (1992), and Barry Jenkins would make the love story set on the streets of New York that Baldwin once envisioned in the form of a film version of his late novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*, published in 1974 but not brought to the screen until 2018.

Yet Baldwin’s was a visionary cinema in quite a different sense as well, and it remains an open question whether anyone has thus far done justice to it. The passages in his novels that take the place of the surrealist strain in the postwar counterculture, those hallucinatory moments when his characters face the contradictions of human existence in heightened and markedly cinematic form, bring the reader up against an experience of mystery that is both unexpectedly modern and distinctly African-American. When, for example, in the opening pages of *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been*

*Gone* (1968), the famous actor Leo Proudhammer envisions himself performing his own death as he suffers a heart attack and decides that “it was a death scene being played not onstage but on camera” with the camera placed “just above my head,” the reader may recognize in that last phrase an allusion to the old gospel song that Ida sings in *Another Country*: “Just above my head/I hear music in the air./And I really do believe/There’s a God somewhere” (646).<sup>23</sup> That heavenly camera just above the head of the protagonist suffering on the cross once again invokes the phenomenology of height and depth elaborated by so many passages in Baldwin’s work and thus signals the presence of a mystery. Such a mystery aims at revelation, and the scene of revelation to which Baldwin regularly returns is the episode of “pleading the blood” at the end of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. The realization of this crucial scene on film reveals much not only about the new African-American cinema that began to take shape toward the end of Baldwin’s life but also about its relationship to the postwar period, when his first and finest novel was written.

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Stan Lathan’s adaptation of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is chronologically the first of the films discussed in this book to appear after *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*; it is also among the more artistically successful, although one would never guess as much from its current near invisibility in cinema history. Despite a cast that includes a generous representation of the most distinguished African-American actors of the era, it has languished in undeserved obscurity since it was first broadcast on public television in January of 1985.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps this has to do with its having been made for television by a television insider, one of the first African-American directors to attain a position of power in the industry, at a time when film and television had not yet drawn together into the single enterprise they have since become, and the small screen was still regarded by many as unworthy of serious artistic consideration. Whatever the reason for its failure to win a later audience, the film was a source of satisfaction to the aging Baldwin, who had little more than two years to live and had been irritated that none of his novels had inspired film adaptations. Lathan’s film “did not betray the book,” he assured *The New York Times*; and this was, he added, “the book I had to write if I was ever going to write anything else. . . . I had to deal with what hurt me most. I had to deal with my father.”<sup>25</sup>

It’s not hard to see why Baldwin was pleased with the film. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is the work of seasoned professionals, who efficiently refashioned the novel’s complex structure, composed of scenes that occur at several different historical moments, into a coherent dramatic form by means of flashbacks and information conveyed through dialogue. He must also have been delighted by the scenes of religious worship. The first of these, especially, has something of the feel of documentary filmmaking,

as the camera pans slowly over the congregation dressed in their Sunday attire, clapping, singing, beating tambourines, and dancing to an exuberant piano accompaniment. This scene realizes a project that Baldwin had twice attempted unsuccessfully in younger years, when he first had the idea of producing a book together with a photographer friend about Harlem storefront churches, a scheme that was never completed, and then not long afterward planned a film on the subject that also came to nought.<sup>26</sup> For all his reservations about Christianity, he recognized that the spectacle of these services represented the kind of affirmative union of culture and race—the enactment of a distinctively African-American cultural practice by black “flesh and blood”—that he also sought in the theater; and Lathan’s handling of the scene captures the ceremony’s quality of spirited devotion without lapsing into exoticism.

Yet, perhaps inevitably, much is sacrificed in the transition to film, some of it including those uniquely African-American forms of expression to which Baldwin was so attuned. One of the most important relationships in the book, that of the young protagonist’s stepfather, Gabriel Grimes, and Gabriel’s sister, Florence, is communicated by a turbulent scene in which Florence threatens to reveal information about Gabriel’s past infidelity that will shortly be spelled out in flashbacks. This brief gesture makes the point adequately enough; but the penultimate scene in the novel, in which Florence informs Gabriel that she will indeed reveal this information and that she has a letter from his long dead first wife to substantiate it, is entirely missing. The omission of the scene is not unjustifiable—the closing moments of the film belong to the protagonist, John Grimes, whose own relationship with his stepfather must take precedence—but it is unfortunate nonetheless. For the scene is built around some of Baldwin’s most artful dialogue, an exchange in which African-American speech patterns—what would come to be called “Black English,” a major area of interest for him—play a crucial role.<sup>27</sup>

Specifically, the scene features the conspicuous deployment of what linguists have called the “counter-expectational” *done* in African-American speech.<sup>28</sup> Once thought to be a marker of the recent past tense or perhaps just a stylistic flourish, the word *done* in a sentence like Gabriel’s assertion that “the Lord done give me a sign to make me know I been forgiven” actually carries a meaning that has nothing to do with tense and no direct equivalent in Standard English (208). It announces a condition that is unexpected, surprising, perhaps even a bolt from the blue, and is thus a small example of the ways that African-American culture offers a complexity specific to itself, one that is in no way a lesser equivalent of some feature of mainstream American culture but is in fact an enrichment of it. And what is notable about this final face-off between Gabriel and his sister, an exchange in which the *done* appears repeatedly and insistently in the speech of both characters, is that the suppositions forcefully thrust aside with each use of the word are the other person’s claims on moral truth. It is a struggle of

competing revelations, one in which the imagery of height and depth, represented by the mountain and the excavation of buried realities, comes to the fore; and Gabriel's intolerance is exposed as a self-serving corruption of the culture.

"Let the dead bury the dead," Gabriel tells his sister: "What you want to go rummaging around back there, digging up things what's all forgotten now?" (206). But a passing ambulance recalls the fact of mortality, a sign that the past will not stay buried and that judgment is at hand. Gabriel has warned that John still has "the steep side of the mountain to climb," yet his warning raises the question of his own example, and the *done* underscores some merciless truths (205). "Where is your life, Gabriel?" Florence asks. "Ain't it all done gone for nothing?" (207). And again: "You done made enough folks pay for sin, it's time you started paying" (208). Finally, Gabriel's own competing revelation is disallowed when Florence anticipates him by inquiring sarcastically what the Lord "done said to you—that you didn't want to hear?" (208). Baldwin's feeling for the complexity of human relationships is never more acute than in passages like this one, as it is clear that both characters are compromised—Florence abandoned their dying mother just as Gabriel abandoned his lover and his illegitimate child—but the ongoing sin that he must face is his brutal treatment of his wife and her own illegitimate child. "If you done caused souls right and left to stumble and fall," his sister demands: "What you going to do when the wagon comes?" (207). Poverty and racism have contributed to everyone's missteps; however, from the perspective of a death that must be earned, no one is innocent. Sins of the flesh can be forgiven, but cruelty and hypocrisy cannot; and Baldwin's dialogue brings this peripheral revelation to the surface in quintessentially African-American fashion.

The comparison of this important scene, excluded from the very climax of the narrative, with the opening scene in the church gives an indication of the aesthetic trade-offs that the film asks the viewer to accept. In exchange for a vibrant and faithful realization of African-American life onscreen, the novel's rich imagery and elaborate interweaving of the themes of mystery and contradiction are minimized—present but in vestigial and simplified form. Which is not to say that the film doesn't include some effective strokes that are wholly in keeping with the thematic emphases of the novel. The reader is given to understand that racism is a fact of life for all these characters, that it limits their possibilities much as the bounds of the neighborhood limit where they may live; and in the section of the book that narrates the suicide of Elizabeth's lover and John's biological father after a false arrest and beating by the police, the reader is furnished with an illustration of the role that racist violence has played in producing the circumstances depicted in the narrative. These events are reduced to a moment of tearful dialogue in the film and so lose much of the dramatic force that they have in the novel, yet the filmmakers find methods natural to their medium to reinforce the point. For example, before John travels downtown to spend

his birthday money, the scene is interrupted by a short flashback that takes place about thirteen years earlier, when Gabriel, holding the infant John, assures Elizabeth that, “with a fine son like this, the Lord will surely bless you.” This initial irony—for the statement is true, but the marriage to which it leads will be a mixed blessing at best—is then elaborated in the sequence that follows, as John’s voiceover conveys his intimation that the city will “reveal mysteries my eyes had never seen,” introducing a second irony when at that moment he meets the hostile gaze of a uniformed figure standing guard behind a wrought iron fence. Taken together, these two successive ironies, built from the smallest of hints in the novel, sketch in the relationship between Gabriel’s devout flattery, the frustrations it conceals, and the forces that have shaped his life as they will shape his stepson’s. The sequence achieves its aim with admirable economy—these are mysteries that will be far from liberating.

The episode of John’s afternoon downtown is one of the most important in the narrative, and here too the filmmakers have exploited the resources of the medium to advantage, as this is the segment of the book in which Baldwin’s interest in the cinema and his implicit recognition of its influence on his life overlap with his project as a novelist. When John, the author’s surrogate, ignores his stepfather’s warnings and enters a movie theater, the film creates a mildly reflexive moment by interpolating shots from the movie that he sees. Although Baldwin doesn’t name the film, it is unmistakably *Of Human Bondage* (1934), the first of several adaptations of Somerset Maugham’s 1915 novel, starring Leslie Howard and Bette Davis, who became a household name following her performance in this film. The shots that Lathan has chosen to quote—a tightening close-up of Davis’ famously large eyes over a glass of champagne, her sparsely clad figure in a mirror, a plate-smashing tantrum—indicate that this is a glimpse into a world that is as exciting as it is sinful, and their appearance as a movie within a movie invites viewers to draw their own conclusions about the power of cinema, in however perilous a way, to expand the horizons of a cloistered adolescent like John. I will return to the first of these shots, which has a significance that extends beyond the role it is assigned in Lathan’s film; but to appreciate its importance, one must first recall how much has been left out to achieve the film’s greatly foreshortened effects.

In the novel, the conflict in John’s mind between the sacred and the secular is announced on the opening page; however, it is elaborated with an intricacy far greater than the film manages to imply. “Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father” (9); but John, who is turning fourteen on the day the narrative begins and has already resolved to have “another life,” considers himself a sinner as a result of his emergent sexuality, which is described with a trace of ambiguity (17). The stain on the ceiling above the bed where his solitary sins are committed “slowly transformed itself into a woman’s nakedness” (16); yet his attraction to the good-looking Elisha, with whom

he playfully wrestles in the empty church, suggests a homoerotic focus that Baldwin was not yet prepared to acknowledge directly. This erotic fluidity is paired with a cultural fluidity when John ventures downtown, and the novel's governing imagery throws conventional religious values into doubt. Unlike Broadway, the way of the cross is a narrow way; but John has won praise for his writing from the white world, and the attractiveness of that world is represented not just by the generosity of his teacher but also by the midtown skyscrapers, which stand in visible contrast to the lowly buildings of Harlem. The imagery of height and depth is further developed when John ascends the first mountain to appear in the novel, the hill in Central Park, where he imagines himself someday the ruler of the city yet is disturbed by the thought that these loveless heights signify not "life eternal" but death and the pit of fire (32).

As in Simone Weil, the novel's dense imagery is arranged in contradictory but reversible pairs on the perpendicular axes of the vertical and the horizontal, a religious dimension of height and depth and a cultural dimension of lateral distance. Institutional Christianity conventionally defines the good as an ascetic refusal of the body and the temptations of the worldly mind, but in the person of John's stepfather and the impoverished life he represents, it seems as deserving of hellfire as the lovelessness of the white world. On the cultural plane, the life that his family leads is not without love—his mother remembered his birthday after all—but it is narrow in more respects than the Christian injunction to choose the narrow way and offers nothing like the sense of possibility that he feels downtown. In this respect, the hill in the park is akin to the mountain in Simone Weil's aphorism: a prospect that offers a broader view of the world in all its contradictory complexity—what Baldwin called "a more vast reality."

At precisely this difficult moment, as John struggles "to find a compromise between the way that led to life everlasting and the way that ended in the pit" (38), cinematic imagery and the cinema itself appear in the novel. Horse-drawn carriages at the south end of the park remind him of films he has seen and inspire a fantasy of himself as a country squire with a horse, a mansion, a beautiful wife, and children, for whom at Christmas he would buy electric trains. The details of this passage, including that last one, which specifies just the sort of costly present that a poor boy from Harlem would *not* get for Christmas, associate the cinema with an imaginary world from which every contradiction has been banished; and he finds it challenging to answer the question: "what would he teach his children when they gathered around him in the evening?" (33). From there, John continues south to 42nd Street and the movie theaters with their lurid posters, which invite him in to see a rather different kind of film, even as he half expects to be exposed as a sinner and struck down by the deity's disapproval.

What is most significant about John's response to *Of Human Bondage*—a point on which the novel offers considerably more detail than Lathan's film version of the scene—is his near total identification with the Bette Davis

character and dismissal of the hapless male protagonist, who “was certainly a fool” (36). Slumming among the lower classes, this gentle-hearted naïf falls for a woman who takes his money and treats him coldly. Here, one suspects, was an early illustration of the “infantile dream of love” that Baldwin would reject in his countercultural contemporaries, a “*mystique*” of poverty that deserves only scorn. By contrast, the remorseless female lead lives a life that is both utterly free and magnificently abandoned; she represents an immorality so total that it approaches a kind of negative sainthood and pursues her downward course toward death with an explicitness that this pre-code film doesn’t soft peddle, offering the earliest example in Hollywood cinema of a female star’s willing association with moral ugliness and physical decay. John’s reaction is emphatic: “He wanted to be like her, only more powerful, more thorough, more cruel; to make those around him, those who had hurt him, suffer” (37). His recognition of a kinship in alienation is driven by feelings that would not be hard to divine even without Baldwin’s comment, some thirty-two years later, that it was his stepfather who had hurt him most.

The forms of that injury are detailed throughout the opening section of the novel, but one passage in particular stands out as especially relevant to this movie-going scene. Dispatching his chores without enthusiasm, John wipes off a foggy mirror and, with a shock, comes face-to-face with his own image in the glass: “His father had always said that his was the face of Satan—and was there not something—in the lift of the eyebrow, in the way his rough hair formed a V on his brow—that bore witness to his father’s words?” He studies the “two great eyes, and a broad low forehead, and the triangle of his nose, and his enormous mouth, and the barely perceptible cleft in his chin, which was, his father said, the mark of the devil’s little finger”; and he finds himself confronted with “the face of a stranger who held secrets that John could never know” (25). It is an image of mystery, the opaqueness of a seemingly unlovable selfhood that has been identified by his father with the ultimate evil but actually embodies possibilities that, as the narrative will demonstrate, have not yet been revealed.

That revelation comes in the final section of the book, and it is above all a matter of eyes and vision. It is also the point at which the film version of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* proves to be a fundamentally different sort of enterprise from the novel. For the visionary experience that John undergoes in the climactic episode of “pleading the blood” is brought to the screen from outside the mind of the protagonist as a primarily theatrical happening rather than as the first-person, “cinematic” experience that it is in the book. Whether the filmmakers believed that they couldn’t do justice to Baldwin’s visions or that such a forthrightly surreal segment would puzzle a mass audience, they chose to maintain the realist aesthetic of the film at the expense of leaving the substance of John’s revelation in obscurity and then having to explain, through recourse to a voiceover at the end, that John is not about to be reconciled with his stepfather, despite his transformative

religious experience, but instead has become, in some unspecified sense, his own man. Although the film brings a faithful portrait of African-American life to the screen, what the viewer is left with after John delivers his final line—"I'm ready; I'm coming; I'm on my way"—is not altogether distinguishable from a generic coming-of-age story.

By contrast, the final section of the novel is something truly unique in postwar American literature, an extended visionary sequence that is both psychologically convincing and poetically resonant in the traditional religious terms that it favors as a mode of expression. It is the counterpart of the surrealist strain in the postwar counterculture, a drama of mental depths that acknowledges the fundamentally erotic power of the body but situates that awareness within a communal ritual of suffering and healing expressed in the figurative language of a specifically African-American brand of Christianity. Here the vertical imagery of damnation and salvation takes precedence, as John is first cast into the pit of fire and then elevated to the city of God in a passage dense with allusions to the cross and the visionary books of the Bible, Ezekiel and Revelation among others, as well as quotations from spirituals that invoke those same sources. He emerges finally into the morning light, described in language borrowed from another John, the author of the Fourth Gospel, as an ever-changing veil over the heart of the world, which is, "out of mysteries abysmal, recreating, each day, the earth. That heart, that breath, without which *was not anything made which was made.*" These are, we are given to understand, metaphysical mysteries that will be lived as a ceaseless succession of contradictions: "Out of joy strength came, strength that was fashioned to bear sorrow: sorrow brought forth joy" (211).

It is anything but a willed experience. The "decreation" or opening of the self has rarely been described so vividly: "He was like a rock, a dead man's body, a dying bird, fallen from an awful height; something that had no power of itself, any more, to turn" (187). Struck down by a force that is at once ambiguously erotic and supernatural—"something moved in John that was not John"—he is filled with a barely endurable anguish and "cracked . . . open, as wood beneath the axe cracks down the middle" (187). The utter passivity of what Baldwin would come to call "nakedness" or "vulnerability" is so complete that it can look for salvation only to something outside itself; for "he knew, as he was struck again and screamed again, his throat like burning ashes, and as he turned again, his body hanging from him like a useless weight, a heavy, rotting carcass, that if he were not lifted he would never rise" (189). On the *via negativa*, one does not actively climb the mountain; rather, as Simone Weil observed, "it is necessary to be drawn."

The fusion of religion and psychology in a traditional imagery of height and depth is not difficult to parse, but the function of the horizontal axis of culture in John's experience is a more subtle affair—so much so that it forces one to look outside the novel at the extensive reflections that Baldwin would continue to write on the experience in his own young life that lies

behind this episode. I have called John's visions "cinematic," a description that deliberately raises the question of their relationship to the movie-going episode in the opening section of the novel, which may help to explain a key moment in the visionary passages, one that clearly recalls his journey downtown. Walking with his stepfather on a street that is "whiter than the snow," John is flanked by buildings "rising like spears into the sky, and they were made of beaten gold and silver." The memory of the snow in Central Park and the glittering skyscrapers of midtown is not hard to make out here, nor is the influence of his stepfather's view of the white world—"John knew that these buildings were not for him"—but the vision becomes enigmatic when an ancient black woman, "drunk, and dirty, and very old," appears on the street:

His father was astonished to see her, and beside himself with anger; but John was glad. He clapped his hands, and cried:

"See! She's uglier than Mama! She's uglier than me!"

"You mighty proud, ain't you," his father said, "to be the Devil's son?"

(192)

Furthering the connection with the opening section of the novel, this passage refers back to the mirror episode, when John had studied his own image in the glass and noted features inscribed there, according to his stepfather, by the Devil. But what is it about this old woman that causes his exultation? Why does it delight him that she is uglier than he or his mother is, and what does it have to do with the movie-going episode in the novel's opening section?

Some twenty-two years later, Baldwin himself supplied the answers to these questions in *The Devil Finds Work*, where he explained that "what we called *the movies* . . . was actually my first entrance into the cinema of my mind," although he may not have realized just how precisely this information draws together the opening and concluding sections of his first novel (483). We have seen that John, perhaps aided by his ambiguous sexuality, identified with the Bette Davis character in *Of Human Bondage*. In *The Devil Finds Work*, Baldwin writes of the salutary effect that his own first sight of the actress' arresting but unconventional looks had on him when he was taken to see another film, *20,000 Years in Sing Sing* (1932). This was an experience that undermined the authority of his stepfather's judgment, the constantly reiterated opinion that his "frog-eyes" made him "the ugliest boy he had ever seen"; and Baldwin eventually came to understand that this abuse was actually aimed at his mother, who had the same prominent eyes. In doing so, his stepfather was attacking the center of love in his life, an act that he could neither comprehend nor forgive, and there follows the parenthesis in which he mentions entertaining the possibility that his stepfather

might be “as mysteriously wicked as white people” (481–82). Then, in the darkness of a movie theater, he suddenly found himself confronted with Bette Davis, “in close-up, over a champagne glass, pop-eyes popping”; and he realized that he had caught his stepfather “in an infirmity.” For what he saw was a movie star, white and presumably rich, with the same eyes that he and his mother had, a feature he could only call ugly: “I felt exactly the same way I felt, just before this moment, or just after, when I was in the street, playing, and I saw an old, very black, and very drunk woman stumbling up the sidewalk, and I ran upstairs to make my mother come to the window and see what I had found: *You see? You see? She’s uglier than you, Mama! She’s uglier than me!*” (482).

The system of identifications here is extraordinarily complex and rife with contradiction, but at least one point seems inescapable: it was the experience of a broader culture, specifically the culture of Hollywood film, that helped Baldwin to fend off the dominance of his damaged and abusive stepfather. For the play of whiteness and blackness in the passage from *The Devil Finds Work* is crucial: the old woman is described as “very black,” but through the medium of a feeling she is identified with Bette Davis, who was in that era not only very young but also very white. In both *20,000 Years in Sing Sing* and *Of Human Bondage*, her hair is dyed blonde; and Baldwin further complicates the contradictions by describing her skin as having “the dead-white greenish cast of something crawling from under a rock,” although “when she moved, she moved just like a nigger” (482).

At this point, it may be helpful to insert some facts and a speculation: in *20,000 Years in Sing Sing*, Bette Davis’ face above a champagne glass appears just once, superimposed over a shot of the prison buildings in the opening credit sequence; and the superimposition of images makes her skin appear distinctly gray rather than white. But when a similar image, complete with champagne glass, appears in *Of Human Bondage*—the shot that Stan Lathan quotes in his film of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*—her skin is brilliantly white, and as the shot tightens, her huge eyes come to dominate the screen. The speculation is unprovable; however, it seems likely that Baldwin, who was working from forty-year-old memories of these films (memories that would not have been easy to refresh in the mid-1970s), had fused the two images in his mind. If so, it suggests a curious conclusion: the image of Bette Davis in *Of Human Bondage* is, so to speak, virtually present in the cinematically oriented visionary sequence of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, even though there is no further mention of her after the early movie-going episode. A bizarre hybrid figure composed of a youthful, champagne-sipping, very white Bette Davis and a drunken black crone is the counterpart in opposition to the primary contradiction of love stifled by racism and barely contained hatred personified by John’s stepfather in the novel and, at one remove, by Baldwin’s own stepfather.

The passage is, then, a development of the relationship between the idea of contradiction and what Baldwin’s generation was in the habit of calling

“inversion.” The inversions of race and age, beauty and ugliness, represented by the strange combination of Bette Davis and the old woman on the street, complement the inversion of gender indicated by the author’s and his fictional surrogate’s identification with these two female figures, joined in an unlikely union of similarity and difference. And from this identification Baldwin discovered something about himself. As he put it in *The Devil Finds Work*, he “discovered that my infirmity might not be my doom: my infirmity, or infirmities, might be forged into weapons” (483). From the necessary passivity of the visionary experience, the exposure of a naked and vulnerable self to an otherness that is both erotic and religious, he arrived at a state in which one more inversion was possible: the inversion of passion into action—the “tremendous exertion of all his forces” that he spoke of in his essay on Gide and that he would manifest in all his many efforts as writer, orator, and activist. It was the process by which a particularly astute critic of the counterculture came to envision a counterculture of his own.

In this respect, Baldwin both is and is not akin to the novelists whose work is considered in these pages. Setting himself apart from the postwar counterculture (or at least from its most dubious tendencies), he elaborated a version of its central theme of mystery that is at once deeply traditional, rooted in the Christian associations of the word, distinctively African-American in a creative rather than a limiting sense, and highly personal, worked out through the medium of an autobiographical film projected in the cinema of his mind. It is the narrative of his struggle with the figure of his stepfather, who housed, fed, and clothed him, who prepared him for the horrors of American racism, but who insisted that those horrors would never change, enforced that lesson with violence, and so represented the original of the limiting conflation of race and culture into which Baldwin himself tended to lapse at his most pessimistic moments. When in his vision John walks the streets of the silver and gold city, he knows that its buildings “were not for him—not today,” and the echo of his stepfather’s voice reinforces the judgment: “*no, nor tomorrow either!*” (192). At precisely that moment, the strange old woman appears; John finds his voice; and he begins his rebellion against the crippling notion that the descendants of Ham, said to have populated Africa, are the inheritors of an eternal curse, the mythical origin of his stepfather’s unbearable racial bitterness.

“Hatred, which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated and this was an immutable law,” Baldwin writes in the final paragraphs of “Notes of a Native Son,” the title essay of his first collection, which takes the form of a eulogy for his stepfather; and the passage develops into the most memorable expression of contradiction in his work. “It began to seem,” he continues, “that one would have to hold in the mind forever two ideas which seemed to be in opposition.” The first, which is Baldwin’s rejection of the legacy of his stepfather, is that one must accept life as it is without bitterness, that to do otherwise would be to give in to one’s own destruction, even though “injustice is a commonplace.” The second is that

“one must never, in one’s own life, accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all one’s strength” (84). In this superb essay, published the year of the Montgomery bus boycott, Baldwin again presents a view of contradiction that aims at no synthesis and anticipates no resolution. Instead, it takes the form of an attention and a determination that, while the contradictions of human existence will never disappear, the culture in which they are lived out must change.

## Notes

- 1 James Baldwin, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 279. All references to Baldwin’s essays are to this volume.
- 2 On Baldwin and Trilling, see Jay Garcia, “James Baldwin, Lionel Trilling, American Studies, and the Freudian Tragic,” *James Baldwin Review*, 3.1 (2017): 65–88.
- 3 *The Fire Next Time*, in *Collected Essays*, 312.
- 4 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 275–76.
- 5 See, for example, Michael F. Lynch, “Beyond Guilt and Innocence: Redemptive Suffering and Love in Baldwin’s *Another Country*,” *Obsidian II*, 7.1/2 (Spring–Summer 1992): 1–18; and “Just Above My Head: James Baldwin’s Quest for Belief,” *Literature and Theology*, 11.3 (September 1997): 284–98. On Baldwin’s late relationship to Christianity, see his remarks on “the church I come from” in “The Price of the Ticket” (1985)—a Christian church, but one that, he hastens to add, “is not at all the same church to which white Americans belong” (841). In his last years, Baldwin resumed attending Baptist services.
- 6 Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, trans. Katherine Farrer (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1949), 117. It should be noted that, as a Christian, Marcel insists on a distinction between the mysterious and the unknowable, which is merely a negative, “the limiting case of the problematic” (118), whereas a mystery is an intuition toward which the mind reaches in a positive act that can’t be formulated rationally or even put into words. This secondary distinction represents a Christian demurral from the way the term is used in this book, which Marcel would have considered unacceptably broad.
- 7 Baldwin’s most dramatic deviation from his purely prophetic stance is also the least defensible: his embrace of armed militance during the Black Power era. This was to mistake for an apocalyptic and revolutionary juncture, one analogous to the anti-colonial struggles of dark-skinned people in places like Algeria, a situation that would have been better understood as an exceptionally complex and difficult set of uniquely American problems.
- 8 “White Racism or World Community?” in *Collected Essays*, 754.
- 9 *Early Novels and Stories*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 226. All references to Baldwin’s early fiction are to this volume.
- 10 “In Search of a Majority,” in *Collected Essays*, 219.
- 11 “The Male Prison,” in *Collected Essays*, 234.
- 12 Matthew 25:40. See “White Racism or World Community?”
- 13 “I am not a theologian in any way whatever.” “White Racism or World Community?” 749.
- 14 *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Arthur Wills (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 151, 137. All further references are to this edition.

- 15 It is fascinating to read in David Leeming's biography that, during rehearsals of his theatrical adaptation of *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin found it hard to watch the scene in which Giovanni spits on a crucifix and even joked to Engin Cezzar, the Turkish actor who played Giovanni, that it could only have been performed so well by a Moslem. See *James Baldwin* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1994), 151.
- 16 See Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (New York: Random House, 2020), esp. 43–47.
- 17 "Introduction to *Notes of a Native Son*, 1984," in *Collected Essays*, 810.
- 18 *No Name in the Street*, in *Collected Essays*, 366.
- 19 Self-negation is not the same thing as self-denial. The latter is exemplified by the renunciation of the body that Baldwin rejected in institutionalized Christianity, whereas the outstanding example of the former in American history is the non-violent ethos of the early civil rights movement.
- 20 Even the Cambridge Union speech included a particularly effective movie reference: "It comes as a great shock to discover that," when you were rooting for Gary Cooper to kill the Indians, "the Indians were *you*." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Tek9h3a5wQ>
- 21 *The Devil Finds Work*, in *Collected Essays*, 481.
- 22 "The Northern Protestant," in *Collected Essays*, 245.
- 23 *Later Novels*, ed. Darryl Pinckney (New York: Library of America, 2015), 9. Baldwin would adopt the phrase as the title of his last novel.
- 24 It is available for free download at <https://archive.org/details/GoTellItToTheMountain1984> (the confusion over the title on the website is inexplicable). In retrospect, Lathan may be the key figure in the early nexus of African-American literature and the television industry. It was he who was responsible for the two adaptations of African-American authors broadcast as part of the *American Short Story* series on PBS: Richard Wright's "Almos' a Man" (aired in 1976) and Ernest J. Gaines' "The Sky is Grey" (aired in 1980). The series was produced by Robert Geller, who was also responsible for the financing of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, an effort that took some eight years to bring off.
- 25 "James Baldwin Reflects on 'Go Tell It' PBS Film," *The New York Times*, January 10, 1985.
- 26 See Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 54, 98.
- 27 See "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me What Is?" (1979), in *Collected Essays*, 780–83.
- 28 See John McWhorter, *Talking Back, Talking Black: Truths About America's Lingua Franca* (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2017), 40–42. McWhorter's exposition builds on work done by Elizabeth Dayton and presented in a conference paper, "Aspect and Modality in Grammaticalization of *done* in AAE Filmic Speech," *Society for Caribbean Linguistics*, Barbados, 2010. Dayton researched her work by watching every African-American film made over about a twenty-year period beginning in the mid-1980s.

## 6 Counterculture Revisited: *Young Adam* Fifty Years Later

[A]ll categories are utilitarian; when they cease to be recognized as such,  
they become obnoxious.

Editorial Statement for *Merlin*

It's been decades since the name of Alexander Trocchi has drawn the kind of polarized reactions that the man himself cultivated with such energy in his lifetime, so long that most viewers of David Mackenzie's film version of *Young Adam* (2003) were probably only dimly aware of his once considerable notoriety (as Scotland's answer to the Beat Generation, as practicing addict and proselytizer for the legalization of drugs, as pornographer and political radical, as scourge of conformity and target of indignant denunciation). What they saw was a bleak and at times brutal piece of cinema, occasionally uneven, but compelling and carefully meditated by the director and cast, who turned in uniformly excellent performances. Although some reviewers complained about the slow pace and depressing atmosphere, no one suggested that the film was anything but a faithful realization of Trocchi's half-century-old novel; and there is in fact a high degree of correspondence between the two, at least on the level of character, setting, and incident. Yet much had changed in the intervening decades. By the time of the film's release, the postwar counterculture, once an inescapable feature of every thinking person's mental landscape, had receded into the background and become an object of selective recollection, making it unlikely that Trocchi's narrative would reappear untouched by historical differences. Whether the filmmakers consciously sought to transform their material, the subtle shifts in emphasis from page to screen are worthy of close attention, for they reveal much about the distance between the characteristic concerns of our century and those of fifty years earlier.

Mackenzie has said that in his version of *Young Adam* he was "trying to explore degrees of guilt and innocence."<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the film is conceived as a character study detailing the fall from grace, increasing alienation, and negative apotheosis of the protagonist, a young man named Joe. In the aftermath of a failed relationship, Joe has taken work on a canal barge, where

he quietly carries a terrible secret: his ex-lover, Cathie, has since drowned in an apparent accident, which he witnessed but can't report for fear of being charged with her murder. To compound his difficulties, he has been unlucky enough to be present at the recovery of her body the following day. Lying low in the world of the docks and canals around Glasgow, he enters into an affair with the bargeman's wife, Ella, which ends badly after he also becomes involved with her recently widowed sister. All along, he watches warily as the investigation of Cathie's death proceeds. A convenient patsy, a married man and father, is arrested; and there is a trial, which Joe attends after leaving the barge and taking lodgings in town with a working-class couple (his privileges of room and board include access to the wife's bed). The innocent man is convicted and, to Joe's horror, condemned to death.

Such a bald summary is a little misleading, though, because the character's progress is not given in linear fashion. The scheme of flashbacks, already something of a cinematic device in the novel, is preserved with only minor changes, but the time shifts have been made to accentuate the director's conception of the material. Thus, Joe is presented first as an almost indistinguishable part of the grimy world in which he moves and then, over the course of the film, stands out from it in greater and greater relief. Even before the initial flashback, however, we begin to suspect that he may not have originated in the working-class environment where we meet him, as he spins a tale in incongruously florid language about the final moments of the woman whose body he and his baffled listener have found in the river that morning, an episode that is related through indirect dialogue in the novel and not given anything like the same emphasis. Little by little, the ex-bohemian and aspiring writer comes into view behind the bargeman to whom we have been introduced, and the whole is tied together by various objects that connect past and present—a typewriter, a photograph, a mirror—each of which is abandoned at a significant moment in Joe's decline. Shot in a somberly beautiful visual language of gray-greens and gray-blues (a palette well suited to a meditation on shades of gray), the film is an impressionistic reconstruction of a slow-motion fall into moral disaster.

How much of this eminently plausible interpretation of Trocchi's narrative is supported by the text? Surprisingly little. There is, of course, the title, which invites us to look on Joe and his world as fallen, and there is the appearance in the final sentence of the loaded word "disintegration," which is both a reference to the adjournment of a legal proceeding and an implicit commentary on the condition of the protagonist.<sup>2</sup> What comes between these two framing gestures, however, is a deeply ambiguous first-person narrative, a stream of language sometimes guarded, sometimes startling, that is for the most part unconcerned to establish reference points outside of itself by which the narrator might be put into any kind of perspective (here the novel stands in particularly striking contrast to the film, where Joe is presented from the outside to such a degree that he seems occasionally inscrutable). Why one might choose to look beyond the perfectly convincing

interpretation of this narrative that Mackenzie and his actors have given us will require some explanation, although we might begin by observing that to determine the guilt or innocence of a character like Joe, one must make reference to a stable system of values. And Trocchi was far more interested in tearing down such systems than he was in building them up.

In many ways, *Young Adam* is a product of the postwar Parisian milieu in which it was written, and early reviewers were quick to note its resemblance to a familiar precursor, Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1942), which offers an initial indication of how the author thought about his material. Camus' novel, as many readers will recall, is the story of a man who fails to pay lip service to some of the most cherished values of his society. He stands by impassively at his mother's funeral, remains indifferent to the prospect of advancing his career, and can't bring himself to care much one way or another about the woman with whom he has been conducting an affair. He lives an obscure life and is generally content to be left alone, a "stranger" to the preconceptions of others. Then he is put on trial for shooting a man and receives a death sentence, but it's apparent that he has been condemned at least as much for his failure to respect established values as for the crime of which he's accused. With this apparently simple narrative, the author himself took a shot at some of the dominant pieties of his time: the cult of motherhood, the equation of success in business with success in life, the inevitability of romantic love. Although going out to look for a fight with a gun in one's pocket doesn't make for perfect innocence, Camus chose to lay the blame elsewhere: "In our society, any man who does not weep at his mother's funeral runs the risk of being sentenced to death."<sup>3</sup> For him, it is the unholy alliance of the justice system, religious authority, and public opinion that is guilty of murder, not his protagonist; and his view touched a sympathetic nerve in a great many of his contemporaries, including Alexander Trocchi.

Like Camus, Trocchi reserves the full weight of his indignation for the police and the courts, which condemn an innocent man for a crime that may be no crime at all. In a novel where few things are clear, there is no mistaking the intensity of the narrator's contempt for legal power. Gazing at the judge, he has the impression that he is "being stared at by a venomous old turtle" (136), and he imagines the man presiding over his courtroom stripped of his judicial robes:

The thought was more than amusing. The judge would be an old man. He would lose all dignity if he were forced to perform without his majestic trappings. His skinniness, his obesity perhaps, would give the lie to the odour of righteousness. The crowd would laugh at his pomposity and shout down the brutality of his sentence. All judges, it occurred to me, all lawyers and lawyers' clerks ought to be forced to try their case in the nude.<sup>4</sup>

Earlier in the novel, he recoils at the thought of “an impersonal machine whose function it was to maintain order, to explain the presence of an ambiguous thing like a corpse, to see that, if foul play was deduced, someone atoned for it that the moral structure of the system might be preserved—that was horrifying” (87). It’s difficult to read passages like these without feeling that at such moments the voices of the narrator and the author are all but indistinguishable.

This is the simplest shift of emphasis between novel and film: whereas the latter is primarily concerned with the guilt or innocence of its main character, the former presents an indictment of an impersonal and ultimately murderous society. Unfortunately, the contrast is not quite as neat as this formula suggests; for the issue of Joe’s guilt is not entirely absent from the novel, as we shall see, and the film does register some indignation at the police and the courts. Nevertheless, while Mackenzie’s version of *Young Adam* preserves the feeling of growing horror at the miscarriage of justice that comes to pass in its final scenes (the cold light in this part of the film is a nicely calculated effect), the ending has a different feeling from the corresponding section of the novel for the simple reason that *Young Adam* is a historical film set fifty years in the past. As we watch these scenes, the knowledge that Britain had not had the death penalty for forty of those years—the result of a campaign that began with the execution of Ruth Ellis in 1955, the year after Trocchi’s novel was first published—combines with the look of the spectators’ clothing to remind us that this trial belongs to an era that was considerably less tolerant than our own (interestingly, Mackenzie has expressed the hope that the episode might still carry some critical force in the United States, where the death penalty remains in effect in many states). For this reason, the horror that hangs over the final scenes is directed less at the present-day justice system or at society itself than it is inspired by our sense of the protagonist’s moral condition, when it becomes apparent that the execution of an innocent man will be one more consequence of the events in which Joe is implicated.

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The concluding pages are not the only place in the novel where one feels an “anti-social” emphasis. Rather than guilt and innocence, much of the book is concerned with another issue characteristic of its era: the distinction between authentic experience and bad faith—or even just social convention—which is rejected by Trocchi as secondhand and false. This issue is implicitly present from the outset in the orientation of the prose toward the vivid rendering of sensation; it’s there, for example, even in such straightforwardly descriptive writing as this paragraph about the recovery of the corpse from the River Clyde:

I leaned down until my face was nearly touching the water and with my right hand got hold of one of the ankles. She turned over smoothly

then, like the fat underbelly of a fish. Together we pulled her to the surface and, dripping a curtain of river-water, over the gunwale. Her weight settled with a flat, splashing sound on the wooden boards of the deck. Puddles of water formed quickly at the knees and where the chin lay.

(3)

Like the Camus of *The Stranger* or *The Plague* (think of the swimming scenes in those books) as well as Hemingway and D. H. Lawrence at their best, Trocchi wants to suggest that the registering of physical detail forms a kind of bedrock experience prior to any attempt to impose meaning on it. For these writers, it's the experience of the body in contact with its environment that gives the feeling of being fully alive:

I was no longer bored. From the moment I had wakened that morning things had begun to happen, nothing spectacular—I'm not talking about the corpse—but a kind of excitement at the edges of me. I was aware of a kind of prenatal odour in things. As I rolled my cigarette I could feel the dull ringing at the tips of my fingers, brought on no doubt by handling the shovel. The air smelled good.

(16)

He's not talking about the corpse, yet in a sense he is. Before everything else, before questions of guilt and innocence, before even the practical implications of his grisly discovery, what is significant is the difference between a dead body and a living one.

The desire to "come naked to apprehension" is a regular theme in Trocchi's writing, not only in *Young Adam* but also in *Cain's Book* (1960), where the conventions of fiction—plot, character, and so forth—have been jettisoned as irrelevant, leaving a difficult-to-classify compendium of semi-autobiographical jottings and self-analysis.<sup>5</sup> Here the subject of narcotics comes to the fore, but readers of *Young Adam* will be struck by the continuity between the sensibility on display in that relatively more conventional novel and passages like the following from *Cain's Book*:

At certain moments I find myself looking on my whole life as leading up to the present moment, the present being all I have to affirm. It's somehow undignified to speak of the past or to think about the future. I don't seriously occupy myself with the question in the "here-and-now," lying on my bunk and, under the influence of heroin, inviolable. That is one of the virtues of the drug, that it empties such questions of all anguish, transports them to another region, a painless theoretical region, a play region, surprising, fertile, and unmoral. One is no longer grotesquely involved in the becoming. One simply is.

(11)

The position of the drifter lying alone in his bunk on a scow tied up in the East River is emblematic of the distance that Trocchi's narrators constantly strive to place between themselves and society, so that the world of becoming, here represented by the distant spires of Manhattan, can be kept at least temporarily at bay. At such moments, "the perceiving turns inward, the eyelids droop, the blood is aware of itself, a slow phosphorescence in all the fabric of flesh and nerve and bone" (11).

Yet ensconced in this *paradis artificiel* the narrator discovers a snake in the grass: "It's not possible to come quite naked to apprehension and for the past year I have found it difficult to sustain even an approximate attitude without shit, horse, heroin" (12). Absorbed in "the meaningless texture of the present moment," he nevertheless finds that something unpleasant has begun to make itself felt: "it wasn't long before the sense of being alone overtook me and drained me of all hope of ever entering the city with its complicated relations, its plexus of outrageous purpose" (12). In this passage too, Trocchi is close to Camus and a host of other twentieth-century writers. Having rejected the world of society with its hopelessly inauthentic and manipulative ways of knowing, he finds that solitude has also become treacherous, and he feels its dangers most acutely when he struggles with his chosen medium of language:

—The facts. Stick to the facts. A fine empirical principle, but below the level of language the facts slide away like a lava . . . if sometimes words leap up, sudden, unnatural, squint and jingling skeletons from the page, accusing me and amusing me with their obscene shakes and making the world mad, I suppose it is because they take a kind of ancestral revenge upon me who at each moment is ready to marshal them again for death and resurrection. No doubt I shall go on writing, stumbling across tundras of unmeaning, planting words like bloody flags in my wake.

(12)

The bravado of Trocchi's rhetoric in these sentences is deceptive. Although he lived for another quarter century, he would write little more than a few manifesto-like essays in anarchist politics and never published another novel.

Returning to *Young Adam* after a detour through the netherworld of *Cain's Book*, one is confronted by a host of parallels, even though the favored route to experience in the earlier work is not drugs but sex—especially the spontaneous and more or less anonymous kind. Thus, in the first of the flashbacks, what is important to Joe in his seduction of Cathie is the way that the experience forced both of them to abandon their accustomed social identities and strike out into the unknown:

I was a stranger. In the normal way of things there is a structure you have to build up of another person in terms of which that person must

make his impact on you. Beyond this structural idea there is no experience; the structure itself is armour against it. For two people to come close together it is necessary to destroy the structures in terms of which each experiences the other.

(34)

Allowing that this process involves some tentativeness, he nevertheless concludes by dispensing the incendiary advice that it is “necessary only to act ‘as if’ one’s conventional categories were arbitrary for one to come gradually to know that they are, that the profoundest experiences are in the ordinary situation locked out from one’s arena of experience by the inflexible barrier of good character” (34).

We might pause to underline the extremism of the assertion that the only experience worthy of the name is that which is had entirely outside conventional social relationships. It bespeaks a degree of alienation that Trocchi apparently felt quite sincerely, and it leads him directly into difficulties both philosophical and emotional. As in the troubling afterthoughts to the praise of heroin recorded in *Cain’s Book*, the narrator of *Young Adam* is compelled to admit that the fullness of experience he aims for is not really available in physical encounters, however useful such unplanned collisions between bodies may be for shattering the “whole system of weights and measures which a conventional upbringing [has] bequeathed” (34). With the benefit of hindsight, one could argue that the passages in which Joe acknowledges the elusiveness of the authenticity that he so forcefully promotes contain some of the most insightful writing in the book. Consider the following paragraph, in which the problem is posed in the form of a binary opposition:

Touch convinced in a way in which sight did not. I was struck by the fact that sight is hypnotized by the surfaces of things; more than that, it can know only surfaces, flatnesses at a distance, meager depths at close range. But the wetness of water felt on the hand and on the wrist is more intimate and more convincing than its colour or even than any flat expanse of sea. The eye, I thought, could never get to the centre of things; there was no intimate connection between my eye and a plant on the windowsill or between my eye and the woman to whom I was about to make love.

(29)

Initially, this seems to be a problem of distance: the inadequacy of sight demands completion by the fulfillment of touch. Moreover, Joe’s example suggests something of the pathos that attaches to this problem in human relationships, as he describes how he would be provoked by the sight of Cathie “sitting on the bed with her knees up, a book in her hands” (29). Looking over at her absorbed in her reading, he would feel a need “to

destroy the distance”—that is, to replace sight with touch and so to realize what the eye promises. There is also in the example an implicit and slightly ominous demand for recognition, which anticipates the dynamics of the violent episode that is the subject of the final flashback.

Yet it quickly becomes apparent that this fullness of experience will remain out of reach. Sight registers a unity that is insufficient by virtue of its remoteness and insubstantiality, and it goads the narrator by appearing to possess an autonomy that he lacks (Cathie seems to need only her book, not him), so he moves to intrude on that autonomy and to confirm the substance of what he sees through touch. But touch is insufficient in its own way:

I wanted to touch what I saw. But I could only touch a soft thing, a moist thing, a vibrant, clinging thing. Sight and touch may be correlative but their objects are vitally different. Ceasing to see the rise of her breast as I pressed my lips to it to confirm it within myself, the thing which I wished to confirm fled away from me, and in its place was something soft and warm. There was no intimate and necessary relation between what I saw and what I touched. The impressions existed together like a stone and a melody, ludicrous, fraudulent, absurd. It is the feeling that something has eluded you.

(30)

The erotic focus of Trocchi's reflections should not distract us from the metaphysical cast of his thought. He has rejected social experience as counterfeit and seeks the genuine article in the realm of corporeal sensation and physical fact. Once there, however, he finds that a second dualism has come to life, as the experience furnished by one sense falls short and seems to require completion by a different one, which then proves inadequate in turn. As a whole, the passage is a textbook illustration of Jacques Derrida's "logic of the supplement," whereby the term assumed to embody metaphysical presence is forever giving way to another and thus revealing that the loss of presence has always already taken place.<sup>6</sup> As Trocchi himself might say, one is inevitably and endlessly "involved in the becoming."

With this moment of exceptional self-consciousness on the part of the author, one arrives at perhaps the strongest motive for narrative in the book. For what *Young Adam* actually records is the passage not just from one sense impression to another but from one *woman* to another, as Joe moves from Cathie to Ella, from Ella to Gwendoline, and from Gwendoline to Connie in a progress marked by ever greater degrees of impersonality. It's a compulsive movement, whose psychology is, not surprisingly, rather similar to that of drug addiction; and it raises the distinct possibility that the ostensible motives for the story—Cathie's death and the subsequent police investigation—are secondary inventions that function as embellishments of the main action. Trocchi's disdain for the artifice of fiction lends support to this hypothesis, and it's easy enough to see how a writer who insisted so strongly

on the authenticity of experience could become impatient with mere fabrication. As Joe says about the book he plans to write, "I don't have a plot. I don't have characters. I'm not interested in all the usual paraphernalia. Don't you understand? That's literature, false. I've got to start with the here and now" (121). If this distinction between "literature" and "the here and now" can indeed be felt in *Young Adam*, then we need to ask whether there may be a different narrative lying just beneath the surface of the novel, a humbler and less sensational story that was never really concealed in the first place. This is a story not about the death of a woman but about the death of a love affair and the series of increasingly empty liaisons that follow, as the narrator tries in vain to recapture something of the happiness he once had or at least to forget his grief. In this narrative, the disintegration that threatens him in the final sentence of the book is primarily an emotional rather than a moral condition, and the paradise lost alluded to in the title is simply an earlier time in Joe's life, a time that was over before the story began.

"There was a time, I suppose, when we were happy" (121), Joe muses at the onset of the last and most disturbing flashback, in which he finally offers an account of his life together with Cathie. The Wordsworthian echo and the equivocal "I suppose" are significant. Trocchi never presents a definition of happiness, but it's clear that he has in mind an especially intense and sustained version of the elusive fullness of experience that he has evoked from time to time. Elsewhere, he offers an analysis that complements his reflections on sensation. It comes very late in the book, when he passes a group of college students in the park, two young men and a young woman carrying books under their arms and laughing. A college dropout, Joe finds himself helplessly envious:

A feeling almost of despair came over me. I felt a devastating sense of loss for something which I had never had, and it didn't occur to me that that something was a thing which no one ever possesses for the simple reason that it is something which is created in being seen and which exists only for the spectator without whom it could never become an object to tantalize. . . . Afterwards I saw that, that it is ludicrous to envy someone a situation which does not exist for him because he is part of it and because it can only be seen, and thus exist, from the outside and then always as a lack.

(139–40)

Perhaps happiness is just a name one gives to something that can be described only at a distance or in retrospect "as a lack." In any event, the understanding that one's pain is ludicrous doesn't make it less painful, and the entire line of thought casts Trocchi's efforts to immerse himself in the present so as to escape the anguish of becoming in a less-than-heroic light. The desire to "come naked to apprehension" begins to look suspiciously like a need for self-medication.

If the narrative of Joe's affair with Cathie and his subsequent liaisons is the real heart of *Young Adam*, then why include the sensational embellishments at all? Why does Cathie have to die and the unfortunate plumber have to be brought to trial? Aside from the obvious objectives of creating narrative tension and flaying the justice system, the answer seems to be that Trocchi wants his alter egos to be criminals, at least in the eyes of the world. His goal is more easily achieved in *Cain's Book*: as a drug addict, the protagonist is a criminal by definition, and this is perhaps another reason why that book is less in need of the resources of fiction than *Young Adam*, whose narrator, though a marginal member of society, is not technically in violation of the law until he walks away from the scene of Cathie's death. At one point, Joe even suggests that the sudden, unexpected inception of his desire for Ella might be explained as an effect of his newly acquired criminal status:

I wondered how much of a coincidence it was that I first made love with Ella on the day Cathie's body came floating back to me like a little hunk of synthetic guilt. I wondered how much I was moved by an instinctive need of a woman at the precise moment, on that precise day, because I was suddenly an outlaw beyond any intellectual and voluntary commission, not for now but *from now on*.

(89–90)

Is the accident of Cathie's death, then, the lynchpin that holds together the two dominant motifs of desire and rebellion? It's tempting to interpret these wayward impulses in existentialist fashion as arising from a contingency, and the idea would be plausible if this were indeed the moment in which they originated.

There is, however, abundant evidence in *Young Adam* that both impulses were already present long before Cathie's fatal slip. As we have seen, Joe's seduction of Cathie was as much about their mutual rejection of the received dictates of good behavior as it was about his spontaneous attraction to a woman with whom he had not yet exchanged a word. Likewise, his account of their time together makes it apparent that their initial happiness depended on their ability to keep society at bay and that the relationship went bad over the need to earn money. As he's preparing to leave Ella, Joe confesses that the origin of his dissatisfaction with others is buried too deep in the past to be unearthed:

It has always been that way with me as far as I can remember. I am a rootless kind of man. Often I find myself anxious to become involved with other people, but I am no sooner involved than I wish to be free again. Ten years ago I walked out of a university one spring morning with a small overnight bag. I never returned. Since then I have worked when I needed money, because I felt like moving, because I had to break

out of a situation in which, though the necessities of life were provided for me, I felt myself being crushed.

(100)

Ultimately, Joe has to acknowledge an element of mystery in his life, a *mise-en-abyme* that is inseparable from the sadness *Young Adam* still manages to evoke. We can never completely “destroy the distance” between ourselves and others. Once, it seemed possible to be happy; now it doesn’t; and when happiness has gone, all our most frantic efforts can’t bring it back. If Trocchi’s defiantly self-dramatizing way of expressing these common truths feels out of step with the twenty-first century, there is nevertheless a rueful sense of familiarity in renewing one’s acquaintance with an author whose strongest qualities are his sovereign independence of mind and tersely uncompromising language. He is no more at home in our era than he was in his own, but one may still recognize in him a certain less-than-happy part of oneself.

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One way to highlight the contrasts between Trocchi’s novel and Mackenzie’s film is to look at the different ways that each uses a symbol like Joe’s shaving mirror, which figures prominently at the very beginning of the novel. The opening paragraphs are among the most ambiguous in the book, for the author unquestionably wants to suggest more than the narrator is willing to reveal. The unstated circumstance, as the reader will come to understand only later, is Cathie’s death, which has occurred between the last time Joe looked at his reflection in the mirror and the present moment. Yet the issue that preoccupies him is a philosophical one: the “break in continuity which I have always felt to exist between acts that I committed yesterday and my present consciousness of them” (1). As in *Cain’s Book*, Trocchi’s concern is with the reality of the here and now as opposed to the artificiality of the structures we use to hold those individual moments together in some larger conceptual unity. In this case, the dubious concept is that of the self, and as before there is an acknowledgment of the deceptiveness of language:

I don’t ask whether I am the ‘I’ who looked or the image which was seen, the man who acted or the man who thought about the act. For I know now that it is the structure of language itself which is treacherous. The problem comes into being as soon as I use the word ‘I’. There is no contradiction in things, only in the words we invent to refer to things. It is the word ‘I’ which is arbitrary and which contains within it its own inadequacy and its own contradiction.

(1–2)

Joe is plainly a troubled man, and one may suspect that he is trying to dodge responsibility for his actions by rejecting the idea of a unified self that could

be held accountable. His repeated assurances that there is “no problem,” the “hyena’s laugh” that he hears “beyond the dark edge of the universe,” even his closing confession that “between then and now [he has] smoked nine cigarettes” all serve to undermine his coolly analytical pose. Still, it’s not clear that one ought to convict him of evasiveness here. Under severe emotional pressure, he may already be heading toward the disintegration alluded to in the book’s final sentence, but this may also be because, in the author’s opinion, none of us is held together very securely to begin with.

In the film, the mirror plays an even more prominent role, appearing on several occasions and most importantly in the final scene, when after looking at his image one last time Joe tosses it into the water. What is absent, however, is anything resembling Trocchi’s meditation on the artificiality of the self and the treacherousness of language; instead, the director has introduced a new detail, which lends the mirror an entirely different set of associations. Across the bottom of the glass runs a two-line inscription from Cathie: “Think of me when you look at yourself/with undying love. C.” The ostensible meaning of these words is ironic: the dead woman’s love is undying, but her gesture of affection has become a reminder of a curse that Joe can’t escape. He may throw the mirror away, but he won’t be able to put her death behind him so easily, for it is as much a part of him as his own reflection. And there is a further implication. Laid out over two lines, the inscription is evidently meant to be read as a complete statement followed by a closing phrase and signature initial; however, the punctuation suggests another possibility—that Joe has a tendency to look at himself with undying love. Read in this way, the demand that he think of Cathie at such moments becomes an admonishment of his narcissism. In the film, then, the contention is not that Joe’s self is fragmentary or artificial but rather that it is a unified object of fascination for him and perhaps even that it tends to obscure his view of others.

By interpreting Joe’s character as narcissistic, the filmmakers have shrewdly elaborated on details in the novel with which we are familiar, such as the demand for recognition that hovers over his relations with Cathie. At the same time, the film’s external perspective places us at a considerably greater distance from Joe than does Trocchi’s first-person narrative, which allows only certain elements of his environment to appear within his field of attention. For example, one might expect that the situation of a college-educated drifter with literary pretensions living among bargemen and truck drivers would raise questions of class, but Trocchi is remarkably uninterested in the subject—or rather his feelings about it are so simple that they can be easily summarized: he despises the working class because they work. It’s true that Joe has a fondness for some individuals, like Ella’s husband, Les, and he pities the falsely accused plumber, Goon; however, the latter’s background is an impediment to Joe’s sympathy:

As a representative of the industrious working classes he was in a sense my enemy. I dislike people who make a virtue of work. And in a way

he was a part, if an uncritical one, of the society which might condemn him in a sense in which I was not.

(86)

Again, there is absolutely no suggestion that the author's views on the subject differ from those of his narrator. The plumber has even been saddled with just the kind of undignified surname that Matthew Arnold lamented as one of the innumerable small degradations meted out to the poor from birth (in the film, he is renamed Gordon). Concealed in the margins of society, Joe is well placed to record many details of working-class life, yet the author's interest in imagining what the world might feel like to a person born into that life is distinctly limited.

By contrast, the film captures the texture of working-class life in 1950s Scotland with admirable precision (especially in details like the portable bathtub over an open fire on the bank of the canal) and, at several junctures, creates opportunities for the actors to fill out the novel's lightly sketched portraits of working-class characters. One of these comes at the moment when Joe's affair with Ella is discovered, and he goes up on deck to confront Les. In the novel, this scene is not narrated; instead, the text simply breaks off, and we hear a few particulars of the conversation only after Joe has returned below to tell Ella that her husband has left her. In the film, the scene is represented at length. Peter Mullan conveys Les' fury and helplessness with a finely controlled piece of physical acting, striding up to his much younger rival as if to deliver a blow, then pulling up at the last moment and instead hitting Joe (and the viewer) with the information that the barge belongs to Ella, a detail that readers of the novel have learned much earlier. The effect is wrenching: only now do we grasp the full consequences of the affair, as we take in the situation of a man over fifty who has lost his family and, despite his camouflage of tattoos and masculine airs, has little else.

Even more extraordinary is Tilda Swinton's invention of the character of Ella, which is so compelling that it has the effect of pulling the film's center of gravity away from Joe for a time simply by putting a fully realized human being onscreen with him. In her case too, the economic conditions of a way of life shape her character to a painful degree. She may own the barge that provides her livelihood, but it's already an anachronism in post-war Scotland, which is only waiting for the end of gasoline rationing for trucks to take away her business. More to the point, one sees how a way of life that offers the illusion of freedom and self-determination to men like Joe and Les is in fact almost unbearably claustrophobic, and the lack of physical space on the boat matches Ella's lack of options. Canal barges of this type required more than one person and usually at least three to operate them, creating a perpetual need to have men around, and the feeling of being at liberty that comes with traveling on the water requires that one "forget how ludicrously small the distances are," as Joe observes in the novel (28). The limits of Ella's life are as close as the banks of the canal.

Stuck in a loveless marriage to a much older man, Ella is understandably vulnerable to Joe's advances; however, the intensity of her struggle with herself emerges only in the scene of their second tryst, when it becomes apparent that she and Joe are headed for an ongoing affair rather than an isolated encounter. Who can blame Ella for wanting more from the world than the narrow existence she has been granted? And yet what is most effective about the scene is that the viewer is brought to see how much it costs her to give in to her desire for more life. This time, the basic elements are all present in the novel, suggesting that here the author understands the situation better than Joe does:

I put out my hand and touched her shoulder. It was only then that I realized she was crying, not loudly, but softly into the pillow. I could not see why. My fingers, conscious of their own awkwardness, were still on her shoulder.

At that moment she moved her arm.

'Go away, Joe! I don't want to see you!'

'You're mad,' I said uncertainly. I was mystified.

(69)

From these hints, the director and his actors have constructed a sequence of terrific emotional intensity, which places Ella squarely at the center of the drama, as Tilda Swinton's face collapses midway through an embrace that Ella can't resist but also can't quite bring herself to share. Arguably the most effective moment in the film, it shifts the balance decisively away from the novel's almost unbroken emphasis on Joe's experience.

It's in the representation of the protagonist, however, that the differences between the film and the novel are most readily apparent, especially as regards the crucial question of his guilt or innocence. In the novel, this question is complicated by Joe's occasionally hyperbolic sensibility. Everything we know about what has happened comes from him, and he is hardly a disinterested party. For example, halfway through the book, he announces bluntly that he "killed Cathie" but then follows this seeming confession with the statement: "There's no point in denying it since no one would believe me" (73). A few pages later (and with a comparable sense of the dramatic), he quotes from *Macbeth*, placing himself in the role of the stealthy regicide: "Thou sure and firm-set earth, hear not my step . . . for fear the very stones" (83). We have already seen one instance in which he alludes to his guilt—when he tells us that Cathie's body "came floating back to [him] like a little hunk of synthetic guilt" (89)<sup>7</sup>—and there are others. Early in the novel, before we have learned anything about the circumstances of Cathie's death, he remarks: "The mere thought of having my fingerprints taken made me feel guilty" (17). Yet in thinking back on his relationship with Cathie, Joe has much to feel guilty about without including her death among his

offenses; and when one recalls his indictment of the justice system, it's not difficult to see how these passages also serve to illustrate the power of that system to draw its victims into its way of thinking so that they become complicit in their own destruction. Rejecting the idea that he has a duty to go to the police, he concludes: "My responsibility in the matter was simply a convenient social fiction, one which had shamed God knows how many men into assisting at their own murder" (87). And when he questions himself specifically about the circumstances of his ex-lover's disastrous plunge, his tone is firm: "Perhaps some would say that I was to blame because my reactions were so slow. I must have willed her death. I don't think so" (77).

Mackenzie's film is faithful to the novel in so many ways that one might easily overlook the shifts of emphasis that I have been reviewing, and admittedly his version of Cathie's death is not obviously different from the facts of the case as they are given by Trocchi's narrator. But there is one change that cannot be ignored: the addition of an entire scene. This is the sequence in which Ella's young son is accidentally pulled overboard while dipping a bucket into the canal and is rescued by Joe, who immediately throws aside the book he was reading and goes into the water after him. The sequence performs several functions. It places Ella solidly in Joe's debt and raises him in her estimation, as it's obvious that her son is the one person in the world she truly cares for. In addition, as Mackenzie has pointed out, it serves to "externalize things going on inside Joe's head"—presumably by allowing him to act out what he desperately wishes he had done when Cathie suffered her similar mishap.<sup>8</sup> Yet these lesser functions are outweighed by another and much more important one, for the scene establishes beyond a doubt that Joe is perfectly capable of diving into the water without warning and saving a life. Whether or not he "willed" Cathie's death remains unclear, but one thing is certain: the protagonist of the film can't deny, as the narrator of the novel does, that he is to blame for the slowness of his reaction—clearly, he is.

By inserting this inconsequential-looking scene, Mackenzie has removed a crucial ambiguity from his source. Now Joe cannot be defended as a victim of circumstance but instead takes his place alongside those other water-bedeviled antiheroes of modern narrative, Conrad's Lord Jim and Camus' suave attorney Clamence in *The Fall* (1956), as a man whose failure at the moment of truth is his own undeniable contribution to the web of contingencies that reveals him to be something less than he thought he was. Narcissistic and self-regarding, the protagonist of the film is an irretrievably compromised figure, and in thus portraying him Mackenzie has done exactly what he set out to do: he has made a film in which questions of guilt and innocence are paramount.

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What do the differences between the novel and the film version of *Young Adam* reveal? By way of answering this question, I want to consider one

more important contrast. We have seen that a prominent strain of reflection in Trocchi's work is the unreliability of language, although in *Young Adam* his narrator nevertheless aspires to be a writer himself. The implication is that writing involves a constant and perhaps even a losing battle against the sort of falseness that the author contemptuously dismisses as "literature," but that the struggle is a noble one compared to the compromises most people make with convention. Like so many novels of its time, *Young Adam* offers writing as the one genuine example of unalienated labor; however, it's a labor that Joe is forced to abandon under the pressures described in the book. One senses that Trocchi was often in danger of giving up on writing himself before he finally did so a few years later, and his enthusiasm for the role of the artist is more tentative than that of his contemporaries (he seems to have been more comfortable in the role of the criminal). With the narrator of *Young Adam*, one is already halfway to the cynical figure who emerges in *Cain's Book* to scorn reverence for the artist's vocation as one more hopelessly square illusion. Encountering an old acquaintance given to expressions of such reverence, the junkie-narrator is happy to touch him up for money—an easy feat, it turns out, because the man believes he's supporting a starving artist (160–64). This willingness to trade on his own past accomplishments anticipates the purely commercial relationship to books that Trocchi himself would eventually assume in his improbable final incarnation as a dealer in rare editions, when he became a familiar character in the Notting Hill area, known on the street as "Scots Alec."

Writing is also abandoned in Mackenzie's version of *Young Adam* but with the important difference that it never figured very largely in the film to begin with. There is no reflection on the intricacies and duplicities of language here, no indication that writing is anything but what rebellious young men of Joe's era did with their abundant spare time, frustrating themselves and annoying their girlfriends. The myth of the artist, that potent justification for all varieties of bad behavior, appears only as a common accessory of the narcissistic personality; and when Joe heaves his typewriter into the water, it's difficult to feel that much has been lost, even though one suspects that the director would like us to view this self-punishing act as a milestone in his decline. Perhaps significantly, we learn near the end of the film that the main action of the plot began when Joe discarded his literary ambitions and Les, intrigued by his strange gesture, invited him home. It's as if the film wanted to thrust the distracting figure of the artist aside once and for all so that we can see what kind of man Joe really is.

Whereas the novel declares the heroic but impossible ambition to push beyond language to the realm of authentic experience, even while acknowledging its elusiveness, the film remains wary of the attitude of entitlement so often assumed by creative artists, instead treating it as typical of a certain kind of man. The differences between the two mark the distance between the postwar counterculture and its assimilation by later generations. The contempt bordering on paranoia that Trocchi leveled at mainstream society,

the insistence on raw experience with an emphasis on the sexual and chemically assisted varieties, even the abandonment of an artistic project in favor of a grandiose but vaguely conceived political movement—all these belong to their period as inevitably as Tupperware and tailfins. By contrast, Mackenzie's film is part of a tendency, widely evident in twenty-first-century culture, to reestablish standards of judgment by incorporating what has been learned in the aftermath of the earlier period. One sees it in the film's broadly sympathetic but unromanticized depiction of working-class characters: freed of generalizations both positive and negative, they can be represented with their virtues and limitations intact. One sees it, too, in the attention given to the social situation of women and especially to the character of Ella, whose plight is dramatized with considerable virtuosity and insight. And one sees it above all in the rather less sparing depiction of the protagonist, whose self-absorption and partial responsibility for his own misfortune are unmistakable.

There is, moreover, one scene in which Joe's behavior calls for an epithet stronger than self-absorption: the final flashback, in which he meets Cathie's disdain with a grotesquely sexualized violence. This episode introduces a host of complications, even though, taken on its own terms, it has a certain psychological plausibility. Following Joe's reminiscence of the affair's early days, his outrage is credible as a reaction to what he perceives as Cathie's betrayal of the rebellion on which their relationship was based. Having learned that they lived together in a cottage in the country, that Joe earned money by taking on a variety of menial jobs, and that Cathie eventually went to work in an office so he could stay home and write, the reader is prepared for his bitter perception that she has capitulated to convention when she shows impatience with his lack of interest in worldly success. In this context, his outrageous treatment of her might be understood as a desperate attempt to drag their relationship back into the realm of uncharted experience where it began.

What Joe actually does, however, is compel Cathie, in the crudest possible way, to act out a drama of domination and submission that reestablishes the traditional hierarchy of gender roles at a moment when his masculinity has been called into question. She was out working; he was home making custard. The implicit gender reversal goes unmentioned, but from the vantage point of an age in which awareness of such dynamics has become more common, it's no great stretch to imagine that resentment of it enters into his motivations.<sup>9</sup> Instead of a gesture of uncompromising rebellion, Joe's behavior looks more like an atavistic regression, the hysterical reaction of a wounded narcissist; and in that respect it's no different from the beating that, early in the novel, he reports having heard Les give to Ella in frustration at his impotence. Together with the note of self-satisfaction that creeps into his account of the episode, it has the effect of destroying the last remnant of our confidence in Joe as a source of moral authority, especially as his conduct in his relations with every other woman in the book has also

been less than admirable. The figure of the angry rebel who rages against large-scale social forces but takes it out on the women in his vicinity is a tiresomely familiar one, and the contemporary reader quickly loses patience with him. Characters of this type could thrive in the environment of the postwar era, but sympathy for their fragile egos has greatly diminished in the decades since the advent of modern feminism.

This scene was the most troublesome obstacle that the filmmakers had to navigate in adapting *Young Adam* for a later audience, and it is, predictably, the most problematic moment in the film. Without even the contextualization provided by the brief history given in the novel, Joe's behavior becomes contemptible to such an extent that the viewer is reluctant to grant him any sympathy at all, no matter how heavily qualified. Some might suggest that Cathie's willingness to submit to such treatment and then welcome him back into bed later that night confirms (or at least excuses) his conduct, but the argument can't stand close inspection. Theirs is no longer a happy relationship, and her compliance only proves that he has read her correctly: she is no less trapped in traditional gender roles than he is, an unflattering piece of information that we have already learned when, in an earlier flashback, she tries to get Joe to marry her and provide a father for her unborn child. Although one has to admire the courage of the actors in delivering a faithful dramatization of such a disquieting scene, it's hard to escape the sense that in this case fidelity to the literary source gives rise to as many problems as it solves, and one is struck by the irony that the film runs into difficulties at a moment when it's reproducing the action of the novel most literally (a late example of Trocchi's unparalleled ability to get people into trouble—even from beyond the grave). More than the pace of the narrative or the grimness of the material, this is probably the reason why Mackenzie's version of *Young Adam* had a mixed reception: it's just too easy to dismiss the protagonist for his flaws and the film along with him.

Why would Trocchi choose to give such prominence to an episode that he surely knew would repel many readers? Here some textual history is in order, especially as it's so far from the ordinary. In the case of a novel that contains significant transgressive content and appeared in different versions over a period of years, the natural assumption is that the earlier editions, published in less tolerant times, will bear the marks of censorship, whereas the later ones will include material that was originally suppressed. Almost exactly the opposite is the case with *Young Adam*. While it appears that the manuscript Trocchi originally offered to the ineffable Maurice Girodias included relatively little erotic content, the version published by Olympia Press in 1954 had been expanded according to Girodias' specifications to make it a viable piece of commercial pornography like Trocchi's other Olympia novels. The book's public history thus begins with an act of literary self-violation, a capitulation to the demands of an exceptionally unyielding marketplace by an author so pressed by poverty that he was evidently in no mood to argue. "You know the rule: one scene per chapter," Girodias

had demanded; “otherwise my clients will raise hell. They are not easily impressed by atmospheres and so on.”<sup>10</sup>

When in later years Trocchi found himself in a position to publish revised versions of the novel unaffected by the demands of the pornography market, he deleted a substantial amount of text, including the elaborations he had inserted for the benefit of Girodias’ clients—all except one.<sup>11</sup> Why remove the other erotic passages but keep this one? It’s conceivable that he felt the book needed a climactic revelation of some sort, and it’s also possible that, as the English artist and writer Stewart Home has maintained, the custard scene is a “proto-postmodern” gesture intended to destroy any remaining sense of the narrator’s reliability, to highlight the possibility that Joe may be a murderer after all, and thus to stretch the novel’s ambiguities to the breaking point.<sup>12</sup> This reading has a loose affinity with the deconstructive insights noted earlier, although the argument that the violently offensive climax is a prepared and controlled feature of the book’s narrative strategy is less than convincing (it’s more like a stink bomb planted at a literary gathering). Nor is it entirely accurate to describe the scene as an emotionally flat pornographic genre piece, as certain details had a demonstrably personal resonance for the author; however, the motivations behind Trocchi’s creative decisions can be glimpsed only by reviewing the changes he made for the later editions as he pursued the undignified task of revising his book in public.

In the Olympia edition, the custard scene appears at a much earlier point in the novel, where it serves to illustrate a passage of reflections on “the constant presence of violence in the sexual act.”<sup>13</sup> It seems that, at an unspecified point in their relationship, Joe and Cathie had become bored:

When we had lived together for some time, the constriction of our life set us at a distance from one another. . . . It was the necessity to break through those constrictions that led us, unconsciously for the most part, to explore violence.

(89)

The ensuing scene is given just as it appears in the final version of the novel, although in its original context it has only an oblique relationship to the rest of the book, and as a whole the passage bears an uncomfortable resemblance to an over-the-top specimen of an advice column on how to rejuvenate a flagging marriage. Apparently, Trocchi decided that it didn’t rise to the level of his other philosophical insights, because he dropped it from the later editions, along with the preposterous episode that originally served as the climactic scene between Joe and Cathie. In the original version, Cathie comes home from work to find Joe idly doing a crossword puzzle and begins a heated argument about her desire for marriage and children, which he regards as a prison. She throws a cup of hot tea over him and then smashes the tea set. He responds by taking an ax to the furniture, which he deems

guilty of symbolizing domestic tranquility. Enraged, she rushes at him and scratches his face. He knocks her to the floor, and they have violent (and, one imagines, rather painful) sex on the broken crockery. Despite all the rough and tumble, he informs us that they still might have reconciled had it not been for the untimely arrival of a priest. Viewing the mess, the clerical visitor takes it upon himself to mediate but succeeds only in further angering the atheistic narrator, who collects his things and leaves for good (142).

This was well over the line into absurdity, and the scene is absent from the comparatively sober text published in 1961 by Heineman in Britain and Signet in the United States. There Trocchi replaced it with a heavily abbreviated and censored version of the custard scene, in which an earnest Joe invites Cathie to sample the custard he has made for her, only to have her seize the bowl and fling it through the window. This version is the closest he would come to producing a text that conforms at all comfortably to the tenets of realism, but it seems that he was unhappy with the passive role he had assigned his fictional alter ego (and also, perhaps, with his attempt at literary respectability), as in the final revision the abbreviated custard scene was in turn scrapped and the uncensored original resurrected and imported into the climactic position. At the beginning of the Heineman/Signet version of the episode, however, Trocchi had introduced some autobiographical material, which he retained in the final version, thus creating an entirely new constellation of meaning by fusing this more recently composed passage with the already existent text of the custard scene. In describing the period that Joe and Cathie spent living in the country, impoverished but happy, Trocchi was plainly recalling the time that he and his first wife had passed in just such circumstances during the late 1940s, a time when, as an acquaintance later put it, they were “sometimes hard up” but “very happy.”<sup>14</sup> In those days, he wrote with facility, producing a variety of literary efforts, including the earliest attempts at the novel that would become *Young Adam*. When he came to establish the final text of the book, however, his facility was long gone, and his life as a creative writer was over. It is therefore of particular significance that, in the Heineman/Signet version as well as in the considerably more shocking final text, the custard incident is said to have occurred on a day when Joe had found himself unable to write, so that Cathie, who wishes he would just write “an ordinary book, one other people will understand,” becomes the target not only of his disdain for the ordinary but of his creative frustrations as well: “Do you think it’s easy? Do you think all I have to do is sit down and write the bloody thing?” (121).<sup>15</sup>

We’ve heard this complaint before. The author, forced by poverty into undignified circumstances, retreats from the city and in solitude confronts the maddening medium of language, as “the facts,” together with the sometimes “obnoxious” categories we use to make practical sense of them, “slide away like a lava” under his gaze. With *Cain’s Book*, Trocchi arrived at a moment of mortifying self-awareness that seemed to leave him with only one option: “to suspend such facts, to exist simply in abeyance, to give

up (if you will)” (11–12). This moment had been a long time coming, and *Young Adam* rehearses its approach in a variety of ways, most dramatically through the final version of the episode under discussion, in which the author’s surrogate now seems to thrash not just his lover but also his vocation, his stingy muse, and the entire enterprise of imaginative literature. The demand for unmediated experience has turned into its opposite; the desire for more life has given way to a desire for death.<sup>16</sup>

With the tortured history of the novel before us, it becomes apparent that the less satisfying aspects of Mackenzie’s otherwise impressive film are inseparable from the decision to minimize the protagonist’s thoughts and language in favor of a painterly meditation on his long slide into irremediable guilt. Deprived of Trocchi’s striking intellect and crisply incisive sentences, one is left with only the cinematic counterpart of his junkie self, who, as a lengthy roster of eminent acquaintances have attested, regularly walked away from floundering people at his own convenience (though not necessarily at theirs) and turned his suffering against his intimates.<sup>17</sup> By the time he came to put *Young Adam* into its final form, he had so often compromised himself, betrayed those around him, and explained away the ensuing catastrophes that the elision of categories had become more a matter of opportunism than a quest for authenticity, and disgust with himself and the world had overcome the resources of his once considerable talent. This is a story without a happy ending, a cautionary tale suitable for only the maturest of audiences.

## Notes

- 1 Except where otherwise indicated, the director’s remarks are from the commentary voiceover on the 2004 DVD release of the film.
- 2 “Mr Justice Parkington was gone and the disintegration was already taking place.” Alexander Trocchi, *Young Adam* (New York: Grove Press, 2003), 146. All further citations appear in the text. This reprint, timed to coincide with the film’s release, is of the final (1966) text of the novel.
- 3 Albert Camus, “Preface to *The Stranger*” (1956), in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 335.
- 4 The passage owes a debt to Céline, who recommends that priests be visualized in this fashion. See *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932), trans. Ralph Mannheim (New York: New Directions, 1983), 290–91.
- 5 Alexander Trocchi, *Cain’s Book* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 12. All further citations appear in the text.
- 6 See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (1967), trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976).
- 7 The phrase “synthetic guilt” is suggestive. It may be that Joe is not referring to his own feelings here but is again alluding to appearances. The body is like a “hunk of synthetic guilt” because it seems to implicate him in a crime, just as Goon’s conviction is woven together from available evidence. In a similar vein, Joe describes the prosecutor’s questions as “counterfeit” (137) and later observes that “they had created a crime and now they had created a man to fit it” (144). The analogy is with synthetic fabrics, which were newly available in

the fifties (acrylic, for example, debuted in 1950 and polyester in 1953); they are, of course, just the sort of product that countercultural writers disdained as symbolic of the inauthenticity of mainstream society. I'm grateful to Vernon Shetley for suggesting this point.

- 8 Liza Bear, "Tough Talk with *Young Adam* Director David Mackenzie," *indieWire*, April 16, 2004.
- 9 A later episode in Trocchi's life seems broadly relevant here. In March of 1966, a woman named Eva Figes accused him in print of having abandoned heterosexuality and retreated into a drug-induced stupor out of fear of powerful women. He replied at length and in great indignation: "I am famous, even notorious, for my heterosexual extravaganzas." See Scott, *The Making of the Monster*, 183.
- 10 Quoted in Scott, *The Making of the Monster*, 81.
- 11 The Olympia text is considerably longer than any other version of the novel. In addition to the pornographic elaborations, it includes a lengthy final section that continues Joe's story beyond the point where the later versions end. Trocchi must have felt that this continuation diffused the impact of the ending, as the subsequent texts all conclude with the courtroom scene.
- 12 See Stewart Home, "Young Adam Introduction," <https://scotsalec.wordpress.com> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9bQXyRXGes>.
- 13 Francis Lengel (Alexander Trocchi), *Young Adam* (Paris: Olympia Press, 1954), 90. All further citations appear in the text.
- 14 Scott, *The Making of the Monster*, 22.
- 15 In the Olympia version, there is no indication that Joe is a writer, and it's notable that his complaint about the difficulty of writing appears for the first time in the revisions made for the 1961 editions—that is, in the immediate wake of the struggles recorded in *Cain's Book*.
- 16 For an account of the death obsession on display in *Cain's Book* and elsewhere, see James Campbell, "Alexander Trocchi: The Biggest Fiend of All," *Antioch Review*, 50.3 (1992): 458–72.
- 17 The inventory of notable individuals whom Trocchi at one time or another could count among his friends included Samuel Beckett, Norman Mailer, R. D. Laing, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, George Plimpton, Eric Clapton, Robert Creeley, and Leonard Cohen, among many others. More than one was left in the lurch as the circumstances of addiction demanded.

## 7 The Gay Science of William Burroughs: *Naked Lunch* on Page and Screen

I think that the whole line between art and science will break down, and that scientists, I hope, will be more creative and writers more scientific.

Interview

If anybody ought to go to the extermination chambers, definitely scientists. . . . they're reality-addicts.

Interview

When the black sheep of a respectable midwestern family pursues a life of drug addiction and petty crime, then rounds out his youth by accidentally killing his wife, the odds of his ending up a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters are not great. From this perspective, the case of William Burroughs may seem like a kind of miracle: very few manage to come back from such a beginning, let alone go on to high-profile literary success. Yet even now when his name is mentioned, it's as likely to be met with flickers of disgust as demonstrations of partisan fervor. His books were the strongest of medicines in their day, and they remain so in ours, even though Burroughs did what he could to discredit the visceral opposition that his writing is still capable of provoking in some quarters. Disgust, he once observed, "doesn't refer to the books but to the subjective reaction of the person making the complaint. . . . How far would people get in physics if discovery was described as disgusting—"Your formula is disgusting and filthy?"<sup>1</sup>

The mad scientist is only one of the fringe personae that Burroughs adopted in his many interviews, guest spots, and public appearances; and to classify him as a representative of the postwar counterculture is to advance something close to tautology. When *Naked Lunch* first appeared (in France, three years later in this country), it drew immediate attention from the law, suffering the proverbial fate of being banned in Boston, where it eventually prevailed in the last major literary censorship trial in American history (1966) and thus provided yet another of those symbolic episodes that establish the end of the postwar period around the middle of the decade.

Once attractively described as “the most sinister American novel . . . to attain the status of a classic,” it’s just the highest pinnacle in a range of work that, taken in its entirety as a multi-faceted enterprise encompassing writing, performance, and audio and visual media, represents one of the most singular and refractory achievements of the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Equipped with a maniacal inventiveness and a ferocious resolve to transgress every prohibition, Burroughs set himself against the forces that shaped the lives of the comfortable WASP middle class, forces that in certain obvious respects had made him what he was. The Harvard-educated offspring of a prominent clan, he detested the concept of the family and remained indifferent to the privileges it entailed, academic or otherwise. The most American of personalities, he had no patience with America or with the very idea of a nation.

More than any other writer discussed in this book, more even than Jack Kerouac, who often voiced a similar conception of his career, Burroughs viewed his work as a single project, which is inseparable from the life of its creator (for some years, he applied the title *Naked Lunch* to his first three books as a whole prior to conferring it definitively on his fourth). Beginning with the publication of *Junky* in 1953 and continuing right up through the journal entries that he set down only days before his death in 1997, he was steadily engaged in the elaboration of an exceptional sensibility; and it’s a measure of his tenacity that he eventually succeeded in making himself a familiar presence in the popular culture, well known to many who were only dimly aware of his reputation as a man of letters. Although he doesn’t appear in David Cronenberg’s film *Naked Lunch* (1991), his numerous appearances in other films and on television rendered his gaunt, unsmiling figure, typically clad in a three-piece suit and faintly suggesting a hostile undertaker, a visible point of reference in the media culture of the 1980s and 90s. As a result, any estimation of his place in the postwar counterculture faces the task of contending with his own evolving self-interpretation over the decades that followed, not to mention the efforts of a still growing host of commentators. The world may have changed, but his low estimate of it did not, and he conducted his personal intervention in what he took to be an ongoing catastrophe until the very end.

Despite the utterly untraditional form of his books—the term *novel* is more a matter of convenience than a precise descriptor—Burroughs returns constantly to a group of themes that stand in a significant, if eccentric relationship not only to the postwar counterculture but to earlier versions of modernism and beyond. His work displays a level of complexity that places him among the most intellectually challenging of writers, yet his interests are so heterogeneous and are woven together in such a personal way that they nearly defy logical exposition. One immerses oneself in Burroughs and little by little comes to recognize his regular preoccupations as they appear in book after book, leading from one to another in freely associative fashion. It isn’t that there are no important differences between the earlier work

and *Naked Lunch*, between *Naked Lunch* and the three doggedly opaque novels that came after it (*The Soft Machine*, *Nova Express*, and *The Ticket That Exploded*), or between his writings from the decades of the postwar counterculture and his later books. It's rather that, because each individual text is subordinate to the ongoing project, the internal relationships between elements within the different books are ultimately less crucial than their elaboration throughout the entire corpus of the author's work. Many possible approaches to that larger whole are imaginable, but none feels appreciably more direct than any other, and all lead eventually to the cluster of dominant themes that epitomize the performative embodiment of the unique figure called William S. Burroughs. Faced with such an uncommon phenomenon, one can only choose a point of departure and begin.

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To locate the distinctive position that Burroughs occupies in the postwar counterculture, one might start by sketching his oblique relationship to its major French influences. Like his friends Paul Bowles and Alexander Trocchi (as well as every other literary resident of Tangier and the Left Bank in the fifties), he was fully aware of existentialism—one of his infrequent female characters is introduced as “a thin brunette girl in slacks. Clothes and hairdo suggest existentialist bars of all the world cities”—and his dismissal of orthodox religion was at least as firm as the existentialists'.<sup>3</sup> An infamous episode in *Naked Lunch*, cast as a parody of a radio show (“And now The Prophet's Hour”), subjects the central figures of the major religions to a succession of indignities: Christ (“this citizen, this fucking Philistine wandered in from Podunk Baal or someplace”), the Buddha (“A notorious metabolic junky . . . Makes his own you dig”), Mohammed (“An Egyptian ad man on the skids”), along with a couple of others (“Leave what Confucius say stand with Little Audrey and the shaggy dogs”). To the counterculture's later infatuation with guru worship, Burroughs was largely immune: “Are we never to be free of this grey-beard loon lurking on every mountain top in Tibet, subject to drag himself out of a hut in the Amazon, waylay one in the Bowery? ‘I've been expecting you, my son,’ and he make with a silo full of corn” (95–7).

Burroughs was no existentialist, however, and elsewhere in the book he alerts the reader to the origin of one of those insults (“grey-beard loon”) through the medium of a lecture by an unhinged professor to a class of juvenile delinquents on another drug-assisted text, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*: “What the Mariner actually says is not important . . . He may be rambling, irrelevant, even crude and rampant senile. But something happens to the Wedding Guest.” The Mariner, it seems, is reading the Wedding Guest's mind, gaining “ESP awareness” of his “dreams and schemes”; the disguise of the gray-beard loon, like that of the Holy Man, conceals an ulterior motive: “Many agents use this approach—they are notoriously

long-winded bores and bad listeners” (73–4). Coming as it does out of nowhere, the mention of “agents” can only lead one to ask: Agents of what? And that is the central question in Burroughs’ work. He readily acknowledges that, to the skeptical mind, the world seems to turn on contingencies, yet he insists that although events appear to be merely arbitrary and contingent, they are in fact intended and meticulously planned—the question is by what or whom. In various places, he gives a range of answers to this question, some predictable (the US and Soviet governments), others less so (a trust of giant extraterrestrial insects), but there is little doubt that the presence of a controlling authority in every aspect of life has been the central problem of human existence at least since the ancient Egyptians. It’s the most unlikely mystery to be set forth by any writer of the postwar counterculture.

As with existentialism, so too with surrealism. Burroughs acknowledged the importance of the surrealist precedent, describing *The Soft Machine* (1961–8) as “an expansion of my South American experiences, with surreal extensions,” although he took a critical view of the history of the movement typical of his Beat contemporaries: “The Surrealists started things off, but only Artaud stayed with it.”<sup>4</sup> In his friend and collaborator Brion Gysin, he had a living example of the fate of many who had gravitated to André Breton’s circle during the interwar years. At the age of nineteen in 1935, Gysin had seen his paintings included in a surrealist exhibition; then, after some insufficiently respectful remarks on his part (or perhaps just a too-obvious display of his homosexuality), they were taken down on Breton’s orders, an experience that left him with a lifelong paranoia on a par with Burroughs’ own.<sup>5</sup> It was to Gysin that Burroughs attributed the invention of the cut-up technique that would play such an important role in his novels of the 1960s and that constitutes his most obvious inheritance from his surrealist predecessors. A half century on, it seems a classic case of an avant-garde idea that is more stimulating to discuss in theory than to experience in practice, yet the discussion reveals much not only about Burroughs’ relationship to surrealism but also about his own representative concerns.

It’s impossible to miss the resemblance between the most striking of Burroughs’ cut-up passages—new texts created by joining fragments of existing ones, either by slicing up the page and rearranging the pieces or by folding it in half and laying it on top of another—and French surrealist poetry of the twenties and thirties, especially those examples that hew closely to the formula of yoking together radically unlike things in a pair of lines or even a single line.<sup>6</sup> It’s a style that often veers close to anarchic comedy, and Burroughs’ cut-up passages are occasionally marked by a similar species of daft humor (“ejaculated with adequate military protection”).<sup>7</sup> At other times, they display an unanticipated degree of poetic richness:

— an odor of deluge and courage to let go — In the open air a boy  
waiting —Smiles overtake someone walking — The questions drift

down slowly out of an old dream — mountain wind caught in the door — the odor of drowned suns trailing her linen sweat in the final ape of history —

(74)

Reading such passages, one senses that the method is not simply aleatory or “automatic,” to use the surrealists’ preferred term, but is actually closer to the exercise that Paul Klee recommends in his diaries: first, draw from nature; then, invert the picture and concentrate on the purely formal aspects of the image; finally, return the picture to its original position and reconcile the two.<sup>8</sup> In the same spirit, Burroughs lets the arbitrarily juxtaposed grammatical fragments suggest entirely new phrases, which he then selects and touches up with an eye on the overall effect—here an apocalyptic and elegiac moment, subtly augmented by the allusion to Aldous Huxley’s *Ape and Essence* (1948), a novel that, like *The Ticket That Exploded*, deals with the possible destruction of the human race. Whatever else one might say about such passages (and the unfortunate truth is that the memorable ones are all too infrequent), they do unquestionably achieve the modernist aim of defamiliarizing the language, forcing us to recognize it for the anesthetizing collection of shop-worn expressions and habitual thought patterns it so often is.

Yet neither Burroughs nor the surrealists sought merely to disrupt conventional habits of linguistic expression, a simple enough task, which can be accomplished by a variety of means other than the clashing juxtapositions that mark both the fragmentary prose of the cut-ups and the poetry of Breton, Eluard, Péret, and others. No less than the surrealists, Burroughs strove to gain access to the unconscious mind; but his conception of the unconscious and what can be found there is uniquely his, a characteristic mix of provocative insight and dumbfounding assertion, and it departs radically from the orthodox Freudianism that the surrealists took as the basis of their project. Like many contemporary thinkers, Burroughs held that the unconscious does not exist in a fixed and unchanging condition but varies considerably from culture to culture and from one age to the next. Even in the recent history of the West, it has become something other than what it was at the high-water mark of Victorian repression, when Freud noted the incidence of hysteria among his patients and traced it to unconscious conflicts, but then made the mistake of assuming that those conflicts were a timeless and inevitable consequence of social life—the price we pay for civilization itself rather than the by-product of a particular kind of civilization. At his most hyperbolic, Burroughs occasionally goes so far as to maintain that the unconscious, in Freud’s understanding of the concept, no longer exists; and he suggests that the whole issue might be better understood according to modern neurological science as a relationship between different parts of the brain. On this view, it follows that we should be aiming for “a harmonious coexistence of the two brain hemispheres rather than attempting to gain

a precarious territorial advantage for the so-called rational hemisphere.”<sup>9</sup> Instead of a seething well of repressed urges, the modern unconscious is more like a neighboring but foreign country, one whose existence doesn’t always fully register with us but whose ways are accessible to the attentive intellect.

This shift from the vertical to the horizontal, from the familiar imagery of upper daylight and lower darkness to an effort of psychological surveillance over adjacent terrain, is a signature feature of Burroughs’ writing. The surrealist image was a depth charge dropped into the murky regions of the Freudian unconscious with the aim of blasting manifestations of desire free of the repression that held them down. Burroughs’ work is, by contrast, a cross-border reconnaissance of the powers that inhabit the other side of the brain; and he sometimes uses the illustration of travel in physical space—say, a flight from Tangier to Gibraltar—to illustrate his ideas, even employing multiple columns of print to record what is going on simultaneously in different regions of his mind. On one side of the page, we’re given an unadorned recording of physical actions; in a second column, a running accompaniment of interwoven associations triggered by details of the passing environment; and, in a third, excerpts from the books the author has brought with him to read on his trip. This is writing that aims at an ecumenical registering of the different regions of mental experience, each set quite literally next to the others.<sup>10</sup>

Burroughs considered it essential for the writer, no less than the marksman, fencer, boxer, or driver of an automobile, to subdue the rational intelligence—to avoid “overthinking,” as the contemporary phrase has it—and thus to remain open to information and impulses from the right brain. Not everything that one encounters in one’s mental research is harmless, though, and the relationship between language and human consciousness is, for Burroughs, the fundamental illustration. Preeminently a constituent element of the rational mind, language is a medium that must be resisted even as it’s being used. It is, he never tires of reminding us, a system of purely arbitrary signifiers that forever tempts its users to fall into binary constructions, assumptions of identity concealed in the verb *to be*, and implications of singularity and essence introduced surreptitiously by the definite article before the noun.<sup>11</sup> Few writers have been as suspicious of their medium as Burroughs was, and one often has the impression that he would have preferred to communicate in pictures or at least in a picture-based form of writing like Chinese, if not to remain entirely silent (an option he claimed to find attractive). For him more than most, the passage from writing to performance would come naturally; however, while he recognized the extraordinary power of electronic media, he did not, like his admirer Marshall McLuhan, believe that they would eventually replace the written word, nor did he ever abandon writing but instead sought to turn to advantage the dangerous tool he had chosen to employ.

Despite his patrician education, Burroughs tended to gravitate toward wildly speculative ideas, often first encountered in popular science magazines,

and the development of his thinking about language and consciousness is a case in point. In later years, he would be much influenced by Julian Jaynes' *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1976), one of those books that, in the words of Richard Dawkins, "is either complete rubbish or a work of consummate genius."<sup>12</sup> Jaynes' argument, based on evidence drawn from readings of ancient cultural materials (but hardly rising to the standard of scientific proof), is that before sometime around the year 1000 BCE, human beings had no consciousness that could be said to have been aware of itself as such. At that time, human activity was largely the product of custom and unmediated impulse; however, when situations arose requiring decisions, left-brain activity was dictated by voices that originated in the right brain and were experienced as the commands of a chieftain or a god—to hear them was to obey. From a very early point in human history, then, language was inseparable from the exercise of a despotic, quasi-supernatural authority; and we can still find traces of this ancient coincidence of divine word and human deed in the testimony of schizophrenics, who often report that they were commanded to perform certain acts by voices they were powerless to disregard.

The preceding is interesting and at least plausible, but at this point things get distinctly strange. "As to where the voices came from in the first place and how they gained access to the non-dominant brain hemisphere," Burroughs comments, "that is one of the great mysteries"; and he ventures the poker-faced suggestion that this "word virus" may have been released into the human population in prehistoric times by alien visitors as a means of controlling the violent ape-like beings they found inhabiting the planet.<sup>13</sup> Apart from these conjectures, perhaps the most telling feature of his musings on the subject is his firm dismissal of the opinion that, since the Bronze Age, has gradually emerged as the most commonly accepted one—that the voices have no external source but exist only in people's heads—which he rejected as a specimen of the kind of binary thinking that is encouraged by language. Rather than be lulled by such seductive but misleading intellectual habits (events must be *either* mental *or* physical), he was instead both alarmed and captivated by the idea of a language that has the potency of a physical act. After all, isn't the machinery of modern propaganda (represented most notably for Burroughs by the Luce Empire) a voice in all our heads, coaxing us to buy products we don't need and support causes we don't believe in? And doesn't it have the power to incite an implacable fear and loathing of people we've never met, the citizens of other arbitrarily delimited nations, to the point where we begin to think we might sleep better at night if they could all be safely incinerated?

The word *real*, Burroughs once said, "is a very ambiguous word indeed. It has often been my experience when talking to someone during a schizophrenic or so-called psychotic episode, that they made more sense then than they did later, when they decided that all this was not real."<sup>14</sup> His remark that Antonin Artaud, perhaps the most influential schizophrenic in the modern

canon, was the only surrealist who had “stayed with it” is the statement of an affinity that many have sensed without ever spelling it out in detail.<sup>15</sup> In fact, it goes well beyond the conviction that the voices in our heads merit a critically attentive hearing. Along with his fellow surrealists, the author of *The Nerve Meter* (1925)—a Burroughsian title before the fact—aimed to incite a revolution in consciousness, an expansion of the mind beyond the limits of rational thought; however, he parted company with Breton over the latter’s embrace of Marxism and the Third International, thus anticipating the rejection of organized left-wing politics that would typify writers of the postwar counterculture. Like Burroughs, Artaud thought that art should become “scientific,” by which both often seemed to mean something more like what others would call magical, spiritual, or religious. “Today, as in the past, the masses are hungry for mystery,” Artaud declared in *The Theater and Its Double* (1938); “they ask only to become aware of the laws according to which destiny is revealed.”<sup>16</sup> Conversely, Burroughs, who saw no contradiction in advertising his commitment to magical thinking, proposed that Einstein might be classified as a theologian.<sup>17</sup> For him, science was above all a kind of principled open-mindedness, a willingness to allow for the possible truth of any hypothesis, no matter how odd, and magical truths were only scientific facts that had not yet been firmly established.

Artaud had never studied medicine as Burroughs did, yet his view of modern culture was that of a physician charged with the treatment of a patient in need of radical surgery: the illness was critical and therefore demanded the most extreme of cures. For this reason, the new kind of art he imagined was not to be understood as offering mere aesthetic pleasure; it was to be violent, racking, agonizing—an experience infused with heightened emotions and suffered by the public with equally excruciating immediacy. No subject was too painful, too brutal, or too obscene for treatment, and the presentation of this startling material would subordinate language and instead take on the character of a gesture or action (hence the privileged position accorded the theater in Artaud’s writings), but a gesture that would reach out beyond the limits of representation with effects comparable to those of a religious ritual. Artaud shared with Burroughs, who had done graduate work in anthropology, an interest in tribal cultures as conservators of experiences that the modern world had lost, such as those delivered by magical sacraments and the ingestion of peyote and *yagé*, which Burroughs hoped would grant him telepathic powers (in the event, his experience was less than empowering but still dramatic: he saw himself transformed into an indigenous woman).<sup>18</sup> Forces consigned to the collective past or banished entirely from the Western world would be summoned anew and enlisted in the task of healing a sick culture.

Artaud’s fascinatingly paradoxical way of imagining the transformation he sought offers an additional parallel. Whereas he regarded the world itself—the day-to-day reality that the surrealists so disdained—as sordid, insubstantial, and fleeting, he envisioned the wrenching renovation of the

spirit that he aimed to bring about in fully material terms, as in that strangest and most evocative of images, the “body without organs” mentioned in his radio play *To Have Done with the Judgment of God* (1947) and later taken up by Gilles Deleuze and put to his own uses in the generically indeterminate works that he coauthored with Félix Guattari in the 1970s.<sup>19</sup> Since then, this resonant but obscure phrase has received so much creative elaboration from others that one hesitates to generalize about what Artaud himself may have had in mind, but it seems at least moderately clear that he was seeking a limit-term, a hypothetical state in which one would be blessedly free from “automatic reactions”—primarily the debased, involuntary conduct that he associated with sexuality but perhaps also the conditioned behavior that he saw as induced by capitalist and communist societies alike and believed would lead to disastrous international conflicts.<sup>20</sup> In any event, what is apparent is that Artaud imagined his spiritual ideal as an actual *body*, one that would exist in the same field of experience as any other object, and in doing so he produced a term that implicitly evades the dualism that Burroughs regularly warned against.

One is reminded of Artaud’s anguished striving toward this atypical ideal not so much by any of the individual bodies that crowd Burroughs’ novels as by the spectacle of the impending dissolution of the world in the valedictory “Silence to Say Goodbye” chapter of *The Ticket That Exploded*, where the author dismisses the dualist god, the leader of the interplanetary Nova Mob, who goes by the symbolically double name Mr Bradley Mr Martin. This text exists in more than one form, but the richest version comes from a recording made in 1965:

Goodbye to Mr Martin, who never had courage to let go . . . Child of Nova, the story over — I fold distant fingers — The doctor on stage, hand falling — Slow metal fires tap on the bloody sky — I think now I go home — Goodbye to William — You and I fading — Silence to say you are yourself, Mr Bradley Mr Martin, who never existed at all — Silence to say goodbye —<sup>21</sup>

Responding to Allen Ginsberg’s query, Burroughs explained that this dissolution was necessary to neutralize a conspiracy of the Nova Mob to destroy the earth and in turn introduces “the theme that the only future is to enter into a spirit, a completely spirit state.”<sup>22</sup> Whereas Artaud had envisioned his spirit as a palpable body, Burroughs envisioned bodies transformed into spirits in some barely imaginable leap of evolutionary development. Like the surrealists, he believed that this spirit state or “body of light” could be glimpsed in dreams.<sup>23</sup> It would be a timeless, non-binary condition in which one would be liberated once and for all from the tyrannical circus of gender roles enacted metaphorically in Burroughs’ novels by what he calls “undifferentiated tissue,” a nightmare substance that causes male and female parts to transform into one another and sometimes even to absorb their owners

(resulting, ironically, in organs without bodies).<sup>24</sup> What these two opposing but complementary visions have in common is the wish to dispense with the debilitating idea of a spirit contained in a vulnerable body, that fallible “soft machine” subject to all manner of addictions and invasions by controlling entities. Over the years, more than a few readers have been perplexed by Burroughs’ version of this transformation, although quite possibly Artaud would have understood that the “courage to let go” is what one must have to recognize that the imperative to distinguish body from spirit “never existed at all” and that ultimately it might be preferable just “to say you are yourself.”

But if we were to concentrate only on those occasional passages that offer something like conventional eloquence and analyze them as if they were choice excerpts from Joyce or Eliot or any of the other high modernist figures whose pulverization of the language Burroughs admired, we would be passing silently over the most obviously Artaudian feature of his writing. Like all his novels, *The Ticket That Exploded* is a book meant to go off in the reader’s face. Thus, only a few pages in, one comes upon the following more or less typical passage concerning something called a “Sex Skin”: “They got this awful mollusk eats the hanged boys body and soul in the orgasm and they love being eaten because of this liquefying gook it secretes and rubs all over them but maybe I’m talking too much about private things” (4). The interlude seems to invite a line of dialogue that Burroughs’ characters frequently repeat: “Most distasteful thing I ever stand still for.” Both *The Soft Machine* and *The Ticket That Exploded* incorporate material originally introduced in *Naked Lunch*, and avid readers will recognize two images already familiar from the earlier book: Bradley the Buyer, the narcotics agent who has become addicted to absorbing the bodies of the junkies he detains (“schlupping” them up), and that ultimate obscenity, the orgasm of the hanged man at the moment of death. Burroughs is tireless in crafting variations on these two motifs, as in the following anthropological bagatelle from *The Ticket That Exploded*, which reprises and develops the first of them:

Ward Island is afflicted by a disease so terrible that the entire ceremonial life of the natives revolves around fear of the disease and precautions to avoid it — The onset is sudden — The victim is seen abusing himself publicly while addressing some unseen presence with endearing terms — He becomes dirty and emaciated — In the final stages he is literally eaten alive by his invisible partner and subsides into the state of an insect larva paralyzed, slobbering and covered by a caustic green slime that seeps from the rectum — In this condition they are carried out into the mud flats by the superstitious natives and left to the mercy of land crabs — (Note: This practice has been forbidden by the resident governor)

(108–9)

Passages like this tend to divide readers into two groups: those who find them hilariously awful and those who find them just awful.

Burroughs' rancid sense of humor is often spoken of as if it were a detachable feature of his writing, an easy error to fall into inasmuch as it was so plainly a quality of the man himself; however, it usually serves a definite function in his work. If his understanding of the relationship between consciousness and the unconscious engineers a conceptual shift from the vertical to the horizontal, his humor accentuates a verticality that, rather than ascending into the evolutionary future, more often descends toward interspecies metamorphosis. In Burroughs, the human is always in danger of sinking into the subhuman, a tendency apparent as early as his first novel:

Mary selected some gone numbers [on the jukebox] and beat on the table with the expression of a masturbating idiot.

New Orleans is inordinately noisy. The drivers orient themselves largely by the use of their horns, like bats.

He is as specialized as an insect, for the performance of some inconceivably vile function.<sup>25</sup>

Although the narrator's disdain for these lower forms of life is evident, no one should assume that it expresses a consistently realized moral code, least of all in the orgasmic gallows scenes that occur throughout Burroughs' work beginning with *Naked Lunch*. It's true that there are flashes of campy humor even in the book's most unnerving parts, like the moment in "Hassan's Rumpus Room" when Naked Mr. America acts out his frenzy of self-love and ends up landing in the mud; and elsewhere in the novel individual passages display a clear satirical intent, as in the scenes that ridicule southern bigots. But to treat the book's elaborate executions as a satire on capital punishment, as Burroughs' earliest apologists were wont to do (obligingly following his lead in the later "Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness"), is to betray something like a determination not to notice the patently obsessive character of these sequences: the voices emanating from *his* right brain tended to propose mass hangings accompanied by gymnastically challenging feats of sodomy.<sup>26</sup> The fact that, outside of his novels, the author considered capital punishment barbaric is beside the point. In *Naked Lunch*, we are being invited to glide, like Naked Mr. America, "obliquely down" into the mud (64).

Jack Kerouac's oft-quoted judgment that Burroughs is "the greatest satirical writer since Jonathan Swift" can be entertained only if one has in mind those aspects of Swift's writing that exceed the role of the classical satirist—his fixations, his all-consuming hatreds, his horror of the body. It's a fundamental mistake, however, to view Burroughs as the kind of satirist who attacks contemptible behavior in the name of a higher morality, chastising society for not living up to its own advertised standards, raising an unflattering mirror to the world in the hope of effecting a correction toward values endorsed by the satirist. Burroughs is not writing an exceptionally gross *Peri Bathos* for

the Space Age, even though he reaches for his favorite images as regularly as any neoclassical author (instead of the Homeric rosy-fingered dawn and oxen of the sun, he gives us “the junk-sick dawn” and “a cow with the aftosa”). The lapse into animal, insectoid, or even mineral states that is incessantly and often riotously evoked in his work belongs not to some high-minded effort of reform but rather to Artaud’s quintessentially modern project of “a general devaluation of values.”<sup>27</sup> Just as Burroughs refuses all metaphysical dualisms, he dismisses all ethical systems as well and rejects the notions of good and evil as relative: “Something is good or evil according to your needs and the nature of your organism. . . . I think it’s naïve to predicate any absolutes there; [the distinction between good and evil] only has reference to the conditions of life of a given organism or species or society.”<sup>28</sup>

In the background, of course, stands a figure even more influential than Artaud, although in place of anything beyond the occasional reference to Nietzsche, Burroughs preferred to cite the motto attributed to Hasan-i Sabbah, the leader of the medieval Nizari Assassins: “Nothing is true, everything is permitted.”<sup>29</sup> Even so, it’s hard to miss the Nietzschean tenor of his opinions: “I don’t think anything happens in this universe except by some power—or individual—making it happen. . . . I believe all events are produced by will.”<sup>30</sup> The countercultural novelist, like Artaud and every other modern artist who takes Nietzsche’s “transvaluation of values” as his *cri de coeur*, asserts himself through an effort of will alone, and his principal material is himself. Burroughs writes all of himself into his work, leaving out nothing and measuring the degree of his achievement by the extent of his disjunction from the society that he has rejected, that has rejected him in turn, and that would control him if it could. His writing is thrown back at the world in the most aggressive terms he can muster; it aims to shock and discompose. At the theoretical extreme, it would be a text so potent that it would kill the reader: “What is the writer trying to do? He’s trying to reproduce in the reader’s mind a certain experience, and if he were completely successful in that, the reproduction of the experience would be complete. Perhaps fortunately, [he’s] not that successful.”<sup>31</sup>

Like every other modern artist of this type, Burroughs set himself a goal that necessarily could not be achieved, leaving him—especially in his work of the postwar era—with assemblies of inspired fragments rather than novels in the traditional sense. It’s easy enough to see what is not there in *Naked Lunch* and in the trilogy of books that came after it: there are no fully developed narratives, no characters with anything more than a rudimentary psychology, no relationships other than associations of convenience and manipulation. What *is* there is the author himself—his swarming imagination, his sick wit, his erotic obsessions, his vast fund of obscure scientific information, his awareness that there is no moral cellar to human experience, no point beyond which one can’t sink any farther. And there is his weaponized paranoia, his determination to confront a suspect world fully armed, even though he was not always the steadiest of shots.

Burroughs' unfinished second novel, *Queer*, drafted in 1952 but not published until 1985, is perhaps the most unusual anomaly in his anomalous career. An autobiographical narrative without an ending—the young man whom the author was pursuing evaded him so successfully that he was left without a conclusion to write—it has a textual history that is complex even by the standards of Burroughs' much-revised oeuvre. Parts of the manuscript were used to fill out the text of *Junky* when that novel was published the following year. Other parts were taken from contemporaneous letters and from another unpublished manuscript when *Queer* finally saw the light of day over three decades later as part of a seven-book publishing deal intended to solve the aging Burroughs' financial problems (during the intervening years, he had regularly waved off questions about the unpublished novel, dismissing it as juvenilia).<sup>32</sup> The most remarkable thing in the published book, however, is neither the original manuscript nor the final section that was tacked on to give the narrative some semblance of an ending but rather the introduction that Burroughs added at the time of publication.

This introduction is vintage Burroughs, drawing on letters of the period to set the scene of the novel's composition in the lawless Mexico City of the postwar era: "The city appealed to me. The slum areas compared favorably with anything in Asia for sheer filth and poverty. . . . It was sinister and gloomy and chaotic, with the special chaos of a dream" (122). In these ominous surroundings, Burroughs devoted himself to the seduction of a "phantom presence," the young man he renamed Allerton in the novel, all the while suffering the frayed nerves and maudlin emotions of withdrawal from addiction to opiates (128). If the book has an oneiric atmosphere, Burroughs here assumes the role of dream interpreter, for the most striking aspect of his remarks is his evident desire to push the reading of the novel in a direction that few would have taken without his prompting. Dispensing with any pretense of respect for the distinction between the author and his fictional alter ego, he proceeds directly to the analysis of his own murky motives for pursuing Allerton in the first place and then choosing to memorialize the whole embarrassing episode in a written narrative. It was not, he tells us, sexual desire alone that drove him. Bereft of the emotional shelter but also the severe self-limitation of the addict's habitual state, he found himself in need of another consciousness to applaud his improvised comic monologues and so to register his existence, which, in a characteristically scientific simile, he claims was in danger of "painful dispersal, like an unobserved photon" (130). Forerunners of his mature literary work, these barroom performances anticipate the flights of energetically inventive grotesquerie that constitute *Naked Lunch*; and the impetus for the writing of this early novel and all his subsequent works, he maintains, can be traced to the same desire for recognition that manifested itself in his verbal courtship of an exceptionally reluctant listener.

This much is unremarkable and entirely credible, although it's worth noting that in these pages Burroughs falls back on a conceptual language that one would more readily expect from an author with existentialist views.<sup>33</sup>

Yet here once again, just as the world begins to resemble a godless welter of vanishing photons, it turns out that the presence of a dreamlike atmosphere is not the mark of an absurd universe given human meaning only by fleeting acts of intersubjective recognition but a sign that truly malevolent forces are at work. Neither the original manuscript of *Queer* nor any of the added material makes even the slightest allusion to the shooting death of Burroughs' wife, Joan Vollmer, in a drunken game of William Tell, a disaster about which he had been reticent, if not entirely silent for decades, until in this introduction he chose not only to discard his reticence but to insist that the book had been "motivated and formed" by it (131). In passing, Burroughs describes his wife's death as "accidental"; but there are no accidents in the Burroughsian universe, and what his rereading of his old manuscript drove him against his will to recall, according to him, was "the knowledge of possession," "a hateful, parasitic occupation" by "the invader, the Ugly Spirit" (132, 135).

This was apparently an adversary with whom he had struggled for much of his adult life. As early as 1939, his efforts to study Egyptian hieroglyphics at the University of Chicago were interrupted by a disembodied voice screaming in his ear that he didn't belong there. The spirit, it seems, felt threatened by the knowledge he might acquire from the ancient Egyptians about the ways of possessing entities. And Burroughs takes pains to emphasize that he is not referring to any mere psychological specter that originated in his mind—"As if there were some clear-cut difference between inner and outer" (132)—but to a possessor of a distinctly medieval cast, who locates a point of entry, takes up residence in its host, and then makes every effort to disguise its presence. With considerable ingenuity, he suggests that the modern psychological explanation for such phenomena may have been planted by the demon itself to throw us off the track, "since nothing is more dangerous to a possessor than being seen as a separate, invading creature by the host it has invaded" (132). His drift, in any case, is not hard to catch: it was this malign presence whose "dead hand" was "waiting to slip over his like a glove" at the moment when he fired the shot that killed his wife (132). By inducing him to commit an irrevocable act, it placed him in a position from which he had "no choice except to write [his] way out" (135).

Unsurprisingly, the claim that Burroughs would never have become a writer but for this horrific incident has provoked a range of responses, some openly skeptical.<sup>34</sup> The inconvenient detail that he had already completed a 150-page draft of *Junky* before Joan's death in September of 1951 certainly spoils the neatness of the interpretation, yet if one ignores the talk of demonic possession, his assertion is not incredible. As a homosexual in an intolerant age, not to mention an addict and small-time criminal, he must have felt he had plenty to prove even before he shot his wife; but her death could only have made him acutely aware that it would take an exceptional effort on his part to keep from being wholly and permanently defined by it. Despite his claims of supernatural interference, his self-analysis in the

introduction to *Queer* shows he was enough of an existential psychologist to feel that, unless he could compel the world to recognize him as something else, he would always be first and foremost the man who had killed his wife. Here it may be relevant that Burroughs' own name for the genre of savagely comic-phantasmagoric fragment with which he tried to win recognition from Allerton and later brought to such a pitch of creativity in *Naked Lunch* was *routine*, although critics have tended to assume that he had in mind only the sort of routine one might see on the nightclub or vaudeville circuit. More to the point in this context is another, equally familiar slang use of the word in midcentury America: an evasive line of patter ("he gave me a routine"), what one says to distract a listener from what one doesn't care to talk about.

By the mid-1980s, however, Burroughs did want to talk about it, and the introduction to *Queer* represents his most significant literary contribution to his own self-creation as a public character, which at that time was well on the way to eclipsing his novels as a cultural presence. Although he had appeared in some short experimental films directed by Antony Balch in the early 1960s, this increasingly visible and performative phase of his career began in earnest only after his return to the United States in the mid-1970s, following a quarter century of expatriate life in Mexico City, Tangier, Paris, and London. In more than one of his interviews, Burroughs demonstrates a shrewd awareness of how a writer like Hemingway could become a prisoner of his own legend, and with the support of his handlers he displayed a degree of sophistication in managing his public image that would have been utterly foreign to a writer of Hemingway's generation. The most notable high points include the three-day "Nova Convention" in 1978, a celebration of all things Burroughs, in which the author was joined by a gaggle of postmodern intellectuals, rock stars, and downtown celebrities; a 1981 appearance on *Saturday Night Live*, where he was introduced by Lauren Hutton as "the greatest living writer in America"; Howard Brookner's feature-length documentary *Burroughs: The Movie* (1983), shot extensively in his windowless Bowery loft; and his performance as a junkie ex-priest in Gus Van Sant's *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989). Collectively, these varied projects constitute a self-conscious reinvention of the author as a character in his own right, one whose checkered history he now took a keen interest in embellishing.

We have seen how Burroughs writes himself into his work, how his own idiosyncratic sensibility is both his creative material and the ammunition for his assault on convention, so it may be helpful to reflect on the differences between his latter-day presentation of himself in performance and what he had long been doing in print. For there is no doubt that, as early as *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs the writer understood his relationship to writing with a clarity of purpose that is elaborated at length in his journals of the period. "I include the author in the novel," he declares in 1957: "I must put myself, every fucking cell of me, at the disposal of this work."<sup>35</sup> And again:

The fragmentary quality of the work is inherent in the method and will resolve itself so far as necessary. That is, I include the author . . . in the novel, and by so doing separate myself from him so that he becomes another character, central to be sure, occupying a special position, but not myself at all. This could go on in an endless serial arrangement, but I would always be the observer and not the participant by the very act of writing about a figure who represents myself.<sup>36</sup>

The character of the author is “not myself,” not “the actual man,” but this isn’t because he’s an artificial construction—on the contrary, he must be real enough to be dangerous (“the routine,” we are told, “can endanger the audience”).<sup>37</sup> Rather, it’s because, as Burroughs would later contend, “[t]here is no actual man. . . . the idea of an actual person is an illusion.”<sup>38</sup> In place of the actual man, there is only the “serial arrangement” of the writer investing his torrent of words with a selfhood that is necessarily fragmentary and inconstant. The actual man can be summed up by the nickname that Burroughs was given on the streets of Tangier: *el hombre invisible*.

So how does the highly visible public character that Burroughs created in his later years differ from the one who figures in his writing? To an extent, the answer is simple: it’s a matter of addition—above all, of the spectral presence of the author himself, with his laconic manner, arid intonations, and flawless timing—along with some notable subtractions. It capitalizes on the minor celebrity status that was then still being granted to recognized, if controversial writers, an aura of diabolical accomplishment that served him well in front of audiences who often had only a vague awareness of the notorious works and deeds to which he owed his fame. Whereas the Burroughs of the postwar era regarded himself as a failure, the Burroughs one encountered on college campuses, in the movies, and on television had long been celebrated as a founding member of the Beat Generation, the legendary author of *Naked Lunch*; and he plainly enjoyed the accolades he was finally beginning to collect. But this “grandpa from hell,” as one of his interviewers dubbed him, could not really be called dangerous, no matter how many times he was photographed taking target practice or demonstrating exotic weapons; and the character he presented had a rehearsed and finished quality that stands in contrast to the wild unpredictability and open-endedness of his written counterpart. It was a routine that quickly became familiar.

David Cronenberg’s *Naked Lunch* belongs to this late-period elaboration of the character and legend of William S. Burroughs, even though Burroughs himself was only a consultant on the film and had no creative input (Cronenberg was aware of Bernardo Bertolucci’s decision to devise an onscreen role for Paul Bowles in his film of *The Sheltering Sky* and considered it a distracting blunder). The film is the original work of an independent auteur, albeit one who by his own admission owed a considerable debt to Burroughs; and not only Cronenberg himself but two of his actors, Peter

Weller and Roy Scheider, had been longtime fans. A personal tribute from a sympathetic source, *Naked Lunch* stands somewhat apart from the other films discussed in this book in that it doesn't attempt the all-but-impossible task of adapting Burroughs' episodic novel for a mainstream audience but instead places the author's fictional alter ego, William Lee, at the center of what is in effect a fantasia on Burroughsian themes, a hallucinatory evocation of how the book came to be written. As was perhaps inevitable in view of its studio pedigree, the film imposes a narrative assembled from episodes in the author's life—notably, Burroughs' own account of his wife's death in the introduction to *Queer*—on one of the most relentlessly non-linear of modern novelists, yet it remains a determinedly ambiguous piece of cinema, one that will be experienced differently by different viewers for reasons that require explanation.

Cronenberg's film has proven to be a fat target for Burroughs' academic critics, who have assailed it for slighting one or another aspect of his work. Thus, Timothy S. Murphy finds it insufficiently faithful to the politically disruptive Burroughs he champions in *Wising Up the Marks* (1997), and Jamie Russell, in *Queer Burroughs* (2001), finds it, well, insufficiently queer. Both are correct that Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* is not Burroughs', and both present arguments that are valid with respect to certain dimensions of Burroughs' work; however, neither is quite fair to Cronenberg. Of the two, Russell's remarks are the most straightforward: the protagonist of the film is a man who is troubled by his unacknowledged homosexuality and has sex with women, whereas Burroughs (who did have sex with women, an experience he likened to settling for tortillas when what one really wants is a steak) was defiantly out of the closet from an early age and wrote about his own homosexuality so frankly that his work was at first unpublishable.<sup>39</sup> These facts are not in dispute, but Russell's criticism is a statement of preference rather than the exposure of a defect intrinsic to the film. Here one might cite the example of Burroughs himself, who regretted that the film didn't feature an openly gay protagonist but respected the desire of another artist to make the film he had to make rather than the one others might want him to make.<sup>40</sup> A film that does full justice to Burroughs as a pioneer of gay writing still awaits its director and funding.

The argument of *Wising Up the Marks* is more involved, and there is just enough force to it that it deserves close examination.<sup>41</sup> Murphy objects to the decision to give the film a narrative structure (although it's hard to imagine how it would have gotten made without one), and he is scornful of the choice of a storyline as familiar as the making of an artist, which he traces to its origins in the nineteenth century. He seems to forget, however, that it was Burroughs himself who introduced this venerable theme when, in the introduction to *Queer*, he made the sensational claim that he would never have become a writer if not for his wife's death. A romantic idea of the artist's vocation is nothing new, but it is not especially out of character for Burroughs or any of his Beat contemporaries either; and only if one

insists on a restricted conception of his work will it seem like a hopelessly irrelevant choice for a film about him. In truth, Cronenberg could just as easily have organized his film around the far more ancient theme of demonic possession without violating the spirit of Burroughs' rag-bag assemblage of science, philosophy, and out-and-out superstition.

Murphy's criticism of the film is driven by his commitment to the Artaudian Burroughs of the postwar era as filtered through the writings of Deleuze and Guattari, whose re-conception of the body without organs celebrates the evasion of assimilation, the ability to make oneself a "body" that can't be integrated into the system of capitalist production. But this post-May '68 ideal was already dated by the 1990s, as the older Burroughs himself seemed to recognize when he professed that "selling books is my business."<sup>42</sup> Here as much as anywhere one feels the need for a historical perspective. It has been observed that the generals in charge of each new war are always fighting the last one, and this observation could be extended to the American academic world, where each new historical moment tends to be met with the theoretical enthusiasms of the one before. The sad truth is that no studio film made on a sizable budget can entirely evade the logic of capitalism, and Murphy's unhappiness with *Naked Lunch* for failing to escape the status of a commodity is not just unrealistic, it's also a little unkind in view of the colossal amount of money that Cronenberg managed to lose in pursuit of his personal vision (just 2.6 million dollars in ticket sales on an eighteen-million-dollar budget).<sup>43</sup>

Yet Murphy has good reason to accuse the film of aestheticizing the once shocking material that Cronenberg drew from Burroughs, even though the full disruptive power of that material could have been felt only in a world that enforced a range of prohibitions long since relaxed by the time of this adaptation. For all the considerable craft that went into the making of *Naked Lunch*, there is indeed an unthreatening quality to the result; and it has become axiomatic that one can find more unsettling imagery of a Burroughsian variety in earlier Cronenberg films like *The Brood* (1979) and *Scanners* (1981), which Burroughs is known to have admired (he is said to have been especially delighted with the exploding heads). By comparison, his reported reaction to a key image in *Naked Lunch* is revealing. According to Cronenberg, when Burroughs visited the set, he was enchanted by the tabletop-sized typewriter/scarab beetle that speaks out of its suspiciously human-looking anus, a creature that appears nowhere in his own work, and he declared it "very, very cute."<sup>44</sup> But *cute* is a word that Burroughs reserved for specific purposes, notably to describe certain favored animals like cats and lemurs, whose company he claimed to prefer to that of human beings (he considered the latter species anything but cute). It simply isn't a word he would have applied to his own most aggressively disconcerting imagery.

The surreal device that so charmed Burroughs is a juxtaposition of the writing machine with a grotesque embodiment of the protagonist's disavowed homosexuality, suggesting both his tendency to regard his own

desires as monstrous and the proximity of those desires to his literary vocation. As the voice of his unspoken urges and a representative of the mysterious organization for which he becomes an agent, the typewriter bug is a compressed symbolic eruption of the hallucinatory surface of the narrative. Ostensibly set in the specific place and time announced in the opening frame—"New York City, 1953"—the film evokes the postwar era with a flurry of period details: fedoras, silk ties, print dresses, fifties-style graphics in the title sequence. Beyond supplying a historical rationale for Lee's reluctance to admit his sexual ambivalence, however, the midcentury setting functions only as the stylistic ground for a kind of fantastic elaboration that reveals a kinship between the film's representational strategies and the unreliable narrators of that other major literary influence on Cronenberg's work, Vladimir Nabokov.<sup>45</sup> Like the suspect testimonials of Nabokov's addled protagonists, Lee's drug-induced hallucinations create multiple levels of reference, as in the film's most disturbing scene, when he sees the encounter between Yves Cloquet and his own young lover, Kiki, as a predatory assault by an enormous centipede, while the soundtrack suggests that he may be merely witnessing a voluntary sexual act through hysterically homophobic eyes. The film depicts writing as a report on a reality that not only is fraught with the dangers of addiction—to drugs, sex, control—but tends to give way to other realities with no firm epistemological ground to stand on, much as the North African decor of *Interzone* occasionally slips to reveal glimpses of New York City, where it's possible that the events of the narrative are actually taking place.

The literal peeling away of a disguise eventually reveals Dr. Benway as the highest point (that we're permitted to see) in the pyramid of control. It's a fitting choice on Cronenberg's part, and Roy Scheider's performance in the penultimate scene captures something of the character's lunatic exuberance, although there is still a distance between this relatively restrained figure and the explosively mad one who turns up repeatedly in Burroughs' novels to indulge in lethal antics like attempting to restart an arrested heart with a toilet plunger. By common consent, at least among those who respond to Burroughs' writing, Benway is his most memorable character, and he represents a point at which Burroughs' sensibility opens onto one of the larger concerns of the postwar counterculture. He is in fact a negative alter ego of the author, who had had a semester's worth of medical school in Vienna only a little over a year before the character made his debut in Burroughs' first routine, "Twilight's Last Gleaming," originally written in 1938, then published and republished in various forms over the next fifty years, notably as a chapter of *Nova Express* (1964). The figure of the quack doctor, sometimes wielding a scalpel with an alarming lack of care, other times appearing as a simpering, prying psychiatrist eager to root out homosexuality with pretentiously named diagnostics, represents everything that Burroughs detested about the authority that science and the medical professions arrogated to themselves and then discharged with little concern for the

human consequences. Whether botching an operation or inflicting medically inspired tortures on behalf of some overbearing intelligence agency, Benway could be the literary mascot of the anti-psychiatry movement and the critique of science that would figure so prominently in the intellectual life of the subsequent era.

Of course, none of this is likely to occur even as a matter of historical interest to viewers of the film who aren't also readers of the novel, as Cronenberg's reimagining of Benway is not particularly distinguishable from many another shape-shifting kingpin figure. And the variety of experiences that viewers take away from the film will depend not just on their familiarity with Burroughs' novel but also on another trait that *Naked Lunch* shares with a host of films about the postwar counterculture. The popularity of the Beat writers has always depended as much on fascination with their lives as on enthusiasm for their work, and Cronenberg's film is very much an example of this quasi-subcultural immersion in biographical detail. As a result, the film will be a different experience for anyone with so much as a working knowledge of the biographies of Burroughs, Kerouac, and Ginsberg than for the entirely uninitiated; and viewers who also happen to be acquainted with the lives of Paul and Jane Bowles as well as those of such minor figures on the Tangier scene as Cherifa, who exercised a sinister sway over Jane Bowles, or Burroughs' lover Kiki, who was murdered by a jealous boyfriend, will be able to play the game of spotting similarities and differences at a highly elaborated level of detail. In a representative example, early in the film the Ginsberg character, Martin, recites from a handwritten manuscript in the incantatory style that Ginsberg made famous; however, the text is not a poem by Ginsberg but a passage from *Naked Lunch*, which at this point in the narrative has not yet been written. Such intricate involutions suggest the extent to which Cronenberg uses the literary and biographical sources to create a self-referential echo chamber for viewers in the know.

This dialogue with secondary materials becomes especially challenging at those moments when the film gestures toward matters that touch on the emotional and psychological makeup of the Burroughs-surrogate around which the narrative is built. At two different points in the film, once in a pair of letters and then again in an anguished confession after Hank and Martin have departed to return to their own lives, the protagonist reveals the isolation and loneliness behind his hardboiled exterior; and his revelations echo the biographical record ("misses Joan terribly," Kerouac wrote to Ginsberg while staying with Burroughs after Joan's death).<sup>46</sup> In light of these moments, it's not surprising that, at the climax of the film, Lee should tell Benway that he needs Joan Frost with him, although his claim that he can't write without her is suspect inasmuch as he has already written much of *Naked Lunch* by then. The most revealing crack in the character's façade comes early on, however, in the scene immediately preceding Martin's recitation and the subsequent William Tell episode, when Lee is inexplicably overcome by tears in an indoor market somewhere in New York City. The

scene is plainly an allusion to the passage from the introduction to *Queer* in which Burroughs tells of how he was mysteriously overwhelmed with emotion on the afternoon of Joan's death while on his way to have a knife sharpened by an itinerant tradesman: "as I walked down the street toward his cart a feeling of loss and sadness that had weighed on me all day so I could hardly breath intensified to such an extent that I found tears streaming down my face" (134). The passage proceeds in deliberately circumspect fashion, but his mention of a "precognitive" dream two paragraphs later strongly implies that in retrospect he considers the episode a forewarning of the calamity that was about to take place, perhaps even a sign that the "Ugly Spirit" was already stirring within him.

Cronenberg's version of these events steers clear of such necromancy. Although we are later told that Lee has been "programmed" by his mysterious handlers to shoot his wife, the film gives us enough details to outline a purely psychological interpretation. Lee's emotional spasm is immediately preceded by a brief exchange of glances with a young Near Eastern man, who is selling dried centipedes at a stall in the market. The presence of the centipedes announces the surfacing of a psychological conflict between Lee's emotional connection to his wife and the same-sex desires that the circumstances of the scene imply, as centipedes throughout the film are associated with the perilous, predatory, and addictive aspects of sexuality, which Lee repeatedly tries to banish (as when he stuns a centipede with his pyrethrum-laced breath). Thus, Kiki wears a centipede pendant around his neck when he begins his seduction of Lee, and Lee in turn sees Kiki as the victim of an overgrown version of the same creature in the scene already mentioned. At no point in the film does Lee find emotional satisfaction, however, not with the evidently very available Kiki, whose gender is a problem for him, nor with either of the two Joans, as the first is an addict given to blasé sexual indulgences with his closest friends, and the second has same-sex desires of her own. These involve a prior commitment to the dominating Fadela, who interrupts her tryst with Lee, driving away the centipede-like entity that their passion has called forth in an apparently spontaneous mutation of something akin to undifferentiated tissue.

It's significant that when Lee returns to the apartment he shares with his wife at the onset of the first William Tell scene, he is carrying a package of centipedes acquired from the young man in the market, indicating that a transaction between them has occurred. The shooting itself is enacted in a flat, inscrutable fashion, but the psychological components of the scene are all in place (though virtually impossible to make out on a first viewing of the film, especially if one knows nothing of Burroughs' life and work). Joan Lee's death may not be the result of a conscious intention; however, it eventually becomes apparent that the protagonist is suffering from a combination of inadmissible desires, guilt at having given in to them, and disgust with his wife for her own failings. He has a wish to be free and an acute awareness that freedom means the loss of such emotional security as he

has been able to enjoy, along with exposure to new forms of addiction and control. Like so many moments in this resolutely bizarre film, the shooting is both understated and overdetermined.

But what to make of the hypnotic repetition of the William Tell scene, this time with Joan Frost instead of Joan Lee, at the very end? It's not the only significant repetition in the film. In two successive early scenes, Lee obliges first his insect case manager, then his wife, when each asks him to "rub some of this powder on my lips," the second time to the strains of Thelonious Monk's "Misterioso" on the menacing soundtrack by Howard Shore and Ornette Coleman. The mysterious unifying element shared by the protagonist's otherwise conflicting impulses toward gay and straight sex, it seems, is the addictiveness of both, which exposes everyone involved to the possibility of control. The final scene is something else, however, as the return of the two detectives, Hauser and O'Brien, is obviously meant to echo Burroughs' frame structure in *Naked Lunch*, with the two representatives of state control in its most direct form converted into border guards on the threshold of Annexia, a cipher for the uncharted territory that Lee will reconnoiter as an artist. When they inspect his pen (!) and demand that he prove he's a writer by writing something, he responds by again fatally failing to shoot a glass off his companion's head; and by ending the film with this enigmatic scene, Cronenberg seems to dare the viewer to opt for an interpretation that is as crass as it is offensive: to become a writer, one must shoot one's wife.

Close readers of Burroughs may be aware of other options, though. In the introduction to *Queer*, he speaks of the connection he feels to the young English writer Denton Welch, who was crippled in a bicycle accident at the age of seventeen. Reviewing the string of trivial events that led up to that life-altering tragedy, Burroughs is so struck by their seeming insignificance that he is tempted to invest them with a portentous meaning: "If he had stayed a little longer here, not so long there, he would have missed his appointment with the female motorist who hit his bicycle from behind for no apparent reason" (131). Yet one need not invoke the occult to understand the feelings he's describing. In the wake of a catastrophic accident, there is an almost irresistible desire to go back and replay the events of the day, making only the slightest of changes, just enough so that the outcome is different the second time around. This is the possibility that the ending of Cronenberg's film dangles before the viewer's eyes and then brutally snatches away. There can be no other outcome than this one because Joan's death has *already happened*—a point underlined by the device of having the characters of Joan Lee and Joan Frost played by the same actress (Judy Davis). The tragedy that has been hanging over the protagonist since early in the film cannot be wished away, and Lee is left with no choice except to write his way out.

It should be apparent that in Burroughs' novels science functions mostly as a springboard for boundless speculation, regardless of how much he insists that his books are based on "science fact" rather than science fiction.<sup>47</sup> A list of the interests he pursued at one time or another over the course of his career reads like an inventory of crackpot beliefs old and new: telepathy, time travel, divination, astral projection, flying saucers, alien abductions, succubus visitations, etc.<sup>48</sup> At least some of these enthusiasms are given a measure of relevance by their position on the frontier of the mind/body division that he sought to overcome, although investigation of the topic must make its way through a host of slippery definitions. For example, there is no denying that what Burroughs characterizes as "time travel" bears a remarkable resemblance to old-fashioned memory or that what he identifies as "telepathy" sounds suspiciously like empathy and educated guesswork (an old horse trader always knows the price another will settle for).<sup>49</sup> Still, more than any of the others, one such esoteric interest has an informing relationship to his writing on a par with that of Madame Blavatsky to Yeats' poetry: the psychology of Wilhelm Reich.

Reich's career, from his beginnings as a brilliant but increasingly unorthodox follower of Freud to his apotheosis as the very incarnation of the mad scientist, battling invasive aliens over the Arizona desert and suffering unjust persecution by the government, could only have recommended him to Burroughs, who had his own problems with sanity and the law and had already rejected the American psychoanalytic establishment's classification of homosexuality as a perversion by the time he began to read Reich in the late forties. What he found in the pages of *The Function of the Orgasm* (1927), *Character Analysis* (1933), *The Cancer Biopathy* (1948), and other works was immediately recognizable as a new version of an idea with a long history in German thought: that of a primary energy or life force, called *Wille* ("will") by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and *Wunsch* ("wish" or "libido") by Freud. Burroughs was sufficiently taken with this new formulation that he composed a short essay on Reich, which was originally intended as a chapter of *Junky* but was eventually excised from the published novel because of its wholly discursive nature.<sup>50</sup> Briefly, Reich held that the energy behind all existence takes the form of electron-like particles he called *orgones* (his own coinage from a combination of "organism" and "orgasm") and that it is everywhere—in living things, but also in the earth's ozone layer and in natural phenomena like St. Elmo's Fire and the Northern Lights. Orgone deficiency is a factor in cancer, according to Reich; and so, Burroughs reasoned, it may have something to do with the symptoms of withdrawal from addiction too, as both tend to produce an emaciated body.<sup>51</sup> The condition can be treated by placing the patient inside an orgone accumulator: a large box made of organic material and lined with sheet metal, which attracts and retains more free-floating orgones than are able to escape from it and thus exposes the sufferer to a beneficial—and, in Burroughs' own testimony, sexually stimulating—concentration of these life-giving particles. Burroughs

soon built himself an accumulator, the first of many, which he used for the rest of his life with what he claimed were entirely satisfactory results; and he later suggested that orgone energy, properly directed, might be employed “to disperse the miasma of idiotic prurience and anxiety that blocks any scientific investigation of sexual phenomena.”<sup>52</sup>

Although these ideas found no rigorous scientific support, Burroughs was hardly the only prominent exponent of the postwar counterculture to swear by them. Norman Mailer, a man to whom potency mattered greatly, is said to have owned several orgone accumulators, and Reich later served as an inspiration for those currents in anti-psychiatry of which Deleuze and Guattari are the most celebrated example. It would be tedious to catalog all the many references to ozone, metallic blue light, and other supposedly orgone-infused elements in Burroughs’ novels; however, some idea of their omnipresence can be had from the passage in *The Soft Machine*, quoted in an earlier footnote, that describes Johnny’s mobile jockstrap of undifferentiated tissue and his “goggles flickering Northern Lights.” Allusions like this one are a regular feature of Burroughs’ private language, and it’s important to recognize how largely that private language figures in his work. No doubt the concept of the orgone held a special interest for him because, in Reich’s account, it has a double nature rather like Schopenhauer’s description of the body as the only entity we can know as both subject and object. Orgones have an objective, perceptible existence in the world (assuming one accepts that things like the blue of the ether are proof of their presence), but they also influence subjective states: one *feels* the gathering or waning of the life force as one’s orgones are enriched or depleted. The orgone thus straddles the dualism that Burroughs so distrusted, and Reich’s work provided other concepts that point toward something like a phenomenology of Burroughs’ writing, a means of navigating the world of his novels by appreciating the extent to which they are organized around oppositions like hardness and softness, heaviness and lightness.

One such concept is the notion of “character armor,” which Reich evolved to summarize the effects of internalized societal pressures on the flow of biological energy within the human subject. He conceived of these adverse effects as a process of hardening, a condition expressed psychologically and even physically through the development of a rigidified musculature, which he attempted to treat by a therapeutic regime that involved a literal laying on of hands, with the analyst doubling as masseuse to coax the unnaturally seized-up flesh back to a healthy pliability. One thinks immediately of the innumerable creatures in Burroughs’ novels that are equipped with an insectoid or crustacean exoskeleton, like the scorpion and crab men in *The Soft Machine*. Of course, nothing better epitomizes the internal short-circuiting that Reich associated with the armored personality than the affectless, desexualized state of the addict, who sits like a stone for hours at a time, his flow of orgones replaced by the infusion of

a parasitic foreign agent that also both possesses physical properties and induces mental states and is sometimes even described in mineral or metallic terms (including Burroughs' most widely expropriated coinage: "heavy metal"). It may be no accident that, in the throes of withdrawal, the suffering junkie's fortified exoskeleton declines into a mere skeleton again, as he senses that "the life energy has been shut off so that all the cells in the body are suffocating," making him feel as if he were "subsiding into a pile of bones."<sup>53</sup> Or, like the "Oblique Addict" in *Naked Lunch*, whose "charge connection" is withdrawn, he falls into "such violent electric convulsions that his bones shake loose, and he dies with the skeleton straining to climb out of his unendurable flesh and run in a straight line to the nearest cemetery" (58).

Burroughs' highly evocative accounts of the addict's experience are the creative products of his experimentation on himself, and they return us inevitably to the relationship between the character of the author and his language. For it is the literary counterpart of Burroughs himself who is the most prominent armored personality in his work. Many have observed that the style with which he made his debut as a writer in *Junky* owes a clear debt to the hardboiled prose of Raymond Chandler and Mickey Spillane, and the evolution of this pulp style into the perfectly modulated hipster accents on the opening page of *Naked Lunch* explicitly reveals the literary equivalent of the armored personality as a response to the societal pressure represented by the pursuing detectives:

I can feel the heat closing in, feel them out there making their moves, setting up their devil doll stool pigeons, crooning over my spoon and dropper I throw away at Washington Square Station, vault a turnstile and two flights down the iron stairs, catch an uptown A train.

(3)

The headlong rush of phrases with their hurried omissions (*as I vault a turnstile and run two flights down . . .*), suggesting that the speaker is rushing the language as he rushes ahead of the law, departs from the earthbound parataxis of *Junky* but retains the sense of a protective stylistic cover donned against the likes of the hapless "flatfoot" on his trail. At the other extreme (and at the other end of the book, in the second half of the frame narrative that is its only structural device), the language clenches up into fragments as the speaker introduces his two nemeses, whom he will have to shoot if he is to avoid capture:

Hauser and O'Brien. They had been on the City Narcotic Squad for 20 years. Old-timers like me. I been on the junk for 16 years. They weren't bad as laws go. At least O'Brien wasn't. . . . Not a bad guy, and I didn't want to do it. But it was my only chance.

(175)

In *Naked Lunch*, the armored personality is also an armed personality, who inhabits what Burroughs insisted was a “war universe.”<sup>54</sup>

The hardness of the nascent countercultural style covers an inner softness, and Burroughs is even less comfortable with this seemingly more accommodating texture than he is with the unyielding exteriors of his humanoid crabs and insects. In his journal from the period when he was writing *Naked Lunch*, he imagines an annoying electrician of his acquaintance on the couch: “I can see some Reichian analyst who has succeeded in dislodging the electrician’s character armor. The analyst staggers back, blasted, blighted, a trembling hand covers his eyes: ‘Put it back! For the love of Christ, put it back!’”<sup>55</sup> In other cases, though, softness is no joke, as with Mary, a disquieting character in *Junky*, who has “something boneless about her, like a deep-sea creature . . . a shapeless, protoplasmic mass undulating over the dark sea floor”:

She went on to tell me how her days were numbered by a rare disease. “Only twenty-six cases on record. In a few years I won’t be able to get around at all. You see, my system can’t absorb calcium and the bones are slowly dissolving. My legs will have to be amputated eventually, then the arms.”<sup>56</sup>

Total bonelessness is a regular danger in Burroughs’ novels, as some drug, disease, or deficiency assails his characters. In *The Soft Machine*, we learn that the “perfect product . . . the habit-forming drug” has a “precise molecular affinity for its client of predilection” and so “takes over all functions from the addict including his completely unnecessary under the uh circumstances and cumbersome skeleton. Reducing him ultimately to the helpless condition of a larva” (41). And later in the same novel we hear of an unfortunate South American explorer who suffered a similar fate by natural means: “No calcium in the area you understand. One blighter lost his entire skeleton and we had to carry him about in a canvas bathtub. A jaguar lapped him up in the end, largely for the salt I think” (98).

But the softness that makes Burroughs most uncomfortable is the one he carries within himself. In the introduction to *Queer*, he contrasts the behavior of his surrogate in that novel with the Lee of *Junky*, who is “covered, protected,” whereas in *Queer* “the cover is removed,” and “everything that has been held in check by junk spills out” (127). In the novel itself, the imagery that Burroughs employs to describe his own alter ego is strikingly reminiscent of his description of the “shapeless, protoplasmic” Mary:

In the dark theater Lee could feel his body pull toward Allerton, an amoeboid protoplasmic projection, straining with a blind worm hunger to enter the other’s body, to breath with his lungs, see with his eyes, learn the feel of his viscera and genitals.

And so, by a roundabout but revealingly autobiographical path, we arrive back at the first of the two major classes of image introduced earlier—that of Bradley the Buyer in *Naked Lunch*, whose *modus operandi* is memorably described by one of his victims:

Most distasteful thing I ever stand still for . . . Some way he make himself all soft like a blob of jelly and surround me so nasty. Then he gets wet all over like with green slime. So I guess he come to some kinda awful climax . . . I come near wiggling with that green stuff all over me, and he stink like a old rotten cantaloupe.

(15)

Viewed in this context, Burroughs' imagery suggests a degree of self-loathing that is startling in its intensity. No doubt much of it is due, as Jamie Russell has argued, to his abhorrence of the "effeminate paradigm," the prejudice enshrined in postwar American psychology that the male homosexual must be in some sense a failed woman, with the entire complement of lisping, limp-wristed stereotypes figured into the bargain. To the highly masculine-identified Burroughs, this degrading self-image was perhaps the most threatening of the controlling agents that lurk in the pages of his fiction, and much of his overwhelming distaste for effeminate men (not to mention his famous misogyny) can be explained by his horror of it.<sup>57</sup> Here, especially, the extremity of the imagery implies a degree of personal involvement that exceeds any merely satiric impulse. When this passage and others like it are read next to the autobiographical confessions in *Queer*, what comes across most strongly is the author's disgust with the vile creature he's describing and so, by extension, with himself.

Examined closely, the image discloses at least three distinct layers of revulsion. There is, first, the topical satire on the narcotics detective who is addicted to his power of arrest no less than the junkie is addicted to his junk. In Burroughs' misogynist vision, this "dick" is ironically revealed to be a mucilaginous, predatory feminine organism driven constantly to restore itself by engulfing and absorbing its masculine prey. Second, there is the conceptual assault on the stereotypical effeminate character, a scientifically authorized slander advanced as the truth about homosexuality *tout court*, which Burroughs regularly deals with by projecting it onto some revolting monstrosity like this unappealing precursor of the many other parasitic doppelgängers and "Venusian" villains in his work. And finally, well below the surface of the text, there is his mortifying awareness of the softness in himself, a carefully concealed emotional neediness that his biographers, drawing on the testimony of ex-lovers, have described as borderline alarming. Even Allen Ginsberg, conceivably the most tolerant man on the planet, found it necessary to end his affair with Burroughs after the latter's tendency to abandon his customary reserve, transform unexpectedly into a giggling approximation of a bashful debutante, and

confess a longing to “schlup” him up in the manner of Bradley the Buyer had become just too disturbing.<sup>58</sup>

This particular strain of imagery thus expresses a contradiction between a demeaning stereotype, which Burroughs viewed as an instrument of control and rejected in the name of an independent masculinity, and the emotional difficulties he encountered in living as an openly gay man without falling into that stereotype himself. The result was a schizophrenic attribution of the most disagreeable features of the stereotype to some agent of coercive authority like the narcotics detective satirized in the passage under discussion. This, in essence, is Jamie Russell’s argument about *Naked Lunch*, although putting it that way makes the book sound more like an incurable disease than a work of literature. Even at a distance of six decades, Burroughs still retains some of his ability to “endanger the reader”; however, many who encounter his writing in the twenty-first century will find that the experience it delivers can’t possibly approach the levels of salutary shock and horror it was able to produce in the postwar era. The question hanging in the air, then, is whether *Naked Lunch* can now be anything more than a psychological document of a particularly unhappy period in the history of homosexuality in America, a moment when a gay writer could be so thoroughly self-divided that, in lashing out against the forces aiming to marginalize and control him, he was also lashing out against himself (and wounding quite a few women and other gay men in the process). If the question can be answered in the affirmative, it’s because of the tenacity with which Burroughs adhered to his sense of purpose—his own idiosyncratic version of the Nietzschean “Yes” to life—and thereby succeeded in transmuting his surpassingly irregular personal drama into an efflorescence of style and imagery that is not easily forgotten. It’s a spectacle whose hidden dimensions can be appreciated only by reading him closely, with judicious input from several decades worth of scholarship, as Burroughs’ imagery is shaped by the same eccentric private language that informs his allusions to Reich.

Just how private that language could be is evident from the testimony of the cheerfully candid Allen Ginsberg, who not only supplied a behind-the-scenes perspective on his ex-lover’s emotional life but also offered gossip on a related matter, which could only have heightened the sense of contradiction Burroughs must have felt: his sexual preference was for the passive role, from which position he astonished Ginsberg with his ability to reach orgasms unassisted by manual contact (a talent he brags about in curiously macho fashion in a passage excised from the manuscript of *Naked Lunch*, where he threatens to “strip himself brother naked” and “spare his gentle readers nothing”).<sup>59</sup> As Ginsberg himself realized, this is the experience that inspires that other most persistent and obsessive strain of imagery in Burroughs’ writing: the orgasm of the hanged man at the moment of death.

In fact, it inspires a whole catamitic gallows poetics. Consider, for example, the centipede, one of the most regular visitors to Burroughs’

image bank, having appeared as early as *Junky* in a nightmare vision of New York in ruins, with enormous centipedes crawling “in and out of empty bars and cafeterias and drugstores” on 42nd Street.<sup>60</sup> In *The Yage Letters*, the centipede turns up again, this time within the human body in the mature phase of a disease called “The Crusts,” when a larger-than-normal edition of the creature “can be seen stirring beneath the skin, so abjectly repulsive” that “a man 8 months gone with centipede can name his own price to go somewhere else.”<sup>61</sup> But it is only with *Naked Lunch* that the centipede begins to manifest a voracious hunger, like the “blind worm hunger” that the amoeboid Lee of *Queer* feels for Allerton, and the visual analogy between the jumbo centipede and the human spinal column is made explicit in the chapter entitled “Meeting of International Conference of Technological Psychiatry”:

“Gentlemen, the human nervous system can be reduced to a compact and abbreviated spinal column. The brain, front, middle and rear must follow the adenoid, the wisdom tooth, the appendix . . . I give you My Masterwork: *The Complete All-American Deanxietized Man* . . .”

Blast of trumpets: The Man is carried in by two Negro Bearers who drop him on the platform with bestial, sneering brutality . . . The Man wriggles . . . His flesh turns to viscid, transparent jelly that drifts away in green mist, unveiling a monster black centipede.

“Man, that mother fucker’s hungry,” screams one of the bearers.  
 “I’m getting out of here, me.”

(87–89)

The Hollywood B-movie trappings support Burroughs’ satiric purpose, as yet another pompous representative of control falls victim to the unanticipated consequences of his scientific hubris. At the same time, the passage establishes the correspondence between the centipede and the human backbone (a metaphorical function performed in Cronenberg’s film by the “Sex Blob” in a remarkable insight on the part of the filmmakers, marred only by the beast’s appearance during a heterosexual encounter—here if anywhere the complaint that the film isn’t gay enough is on the mark). The unstated association driving the metamorphoses of the centipede-backbone—another mediating term between body and mind, represented in Burroughs’ private language by the prostate and the hypothalamus—is revealed in another passage from the excised manuscript materials: “Prostate white as an eye receives the delight massage, shoot it up the spine to the hypothalamus with delicious bone tickles, the spine squeeze the body in spasms of delight and throws its white juice.”<sup>62</sup>

The spinal column in turn becomes a metaphor of phallic rigidity, and the moment when it “throws its white juice” is also the moment when the armor goes soft in a quasi-apocalyptic transformation imagined by Burroughs as a breaking of bones, with the heaviness of the body suspended from

the noose providing its own release. There is no question that Burroughs was influenced by the Reichian emphasis on the orgasm as a discharge of accumulated tension and a momentary obliteration of consciousness necessary to the continuity of psychic health, although his satiric vision of the "All-American Deanxietized Man" implies a certain skepticism about the health-giving capabilities of such "insect lusts" (187). For his part, Reich's observation that the armored personality is typically both mechanistic and mystical is arguably even more to the point in the case of this author.<sup>63</sup> For Reich was a prophet of the body over and against the machine and the spirit; despite his madness, his aim was the eminently sane one of a better life on this earth. But for Burroughs life on this earth was often sheer torment, and the transformation he sought involved either a complete departure from the body or at least a radical lightening of its cumbersome mass, permitting its ascendance into space and assumption of the "spirit state" that he spoke of. His interest in a decidedly mechanistic brand of science has its counterpart in the mystical "body of light"—the very lightest of bodies—which recalls the light of the orgone and represents the only lasting freedom he could imagine from the false refuge of addiction and the conflicts of sexual preference and imposed gender images that he struggled with all his life.

"A cry of despair wrenched his body: 'I have to get *out* of here. I have to make a break,'" Burroughs wrote in an unpublished short story that dates from the same period as *Naked Lunch*.<sup>64</sup> In another story from those years called "The Finger," he fictionalizes the appalling episode in which, at the age of twenty-six in 1940, he amputated the little finger of his left hand with a pair of poultry sheers in a "Van Gogh trip" intended to impress a young hustler who had tormented him by having sex with women in ear-shot of his bedroom (in the story, his tormentor is turned into a woman). The circumstances of this insane act are narrated matter-of-factly up to the point where he feels "a sudden deep pity" for the wounded finger lying disconsolately on the dresser, pockets the severed digit, and, after bandaging himself up, ventures out into the street: "Waves of euphoria swept through him . . . Goodwill flowed out of him for everyone he saw, for the whole world. A lifetime of defensive hostility had fallen from him."<sup>65</sup> The story ends after a tense meeting with his analyst, who advises a visit to Bellevue for proper medical treatment and then, to his great indignation, promptly has him committed.

While the bone that was broken in this episode was, fortunately, in his finger rather than in his neck, the sequence of events, from intense suffering and the need to "make a break" to the exhilaration of release from his defensive armor into a more emotionally satisfying world, is the prototype of the many scenes of transformative executions in his fiction, even though in this slight tale the degree of imaginative elaboration is so small that it ends up being little more than a document of mental illness. As Burroughs himself admitted, he never had much luck with short stories. But what was the process by which this broken finger became the Sailor's broken pen in

the spectacularly horrible “Black Meat” chapter of *Naked Lunch*, a writing instrument that emits an intoxicating dark miasma, “like boiling fur” (45)? And through what strange transformations did the junkie’s needle, symbolized in that passage by a pen loaded with an imaginary drug, become the pen loaded with darkly intoxicating language that Burroughs wielded in his most memorable book—the potently imaginative tool that Cronenberg hands his protagonist at the end of his film? This is a mystery that must remain unsolved. Against all reasonable expectations, Burroughs lived to be eighty-three years old and, after beginning at the unheard-of age of thirty-nine, published over twenty-five volumes—none quite as remarkable as *Naked Lunch*, it’s true, but an imposing record nonetheless. By whatever accidents of fortune and genetics, he long outlived the postwar counterculture as well as any number of its representatives, even though they were his juniors by many years. Although a substantial part of his career falls outside the era with which this book is concerned, some remarks on his later novels and on his work as a whole are in order by way of conclusion.

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At this point in history, it seems unlikely that Burroughs will ever be widely popular with what remains of the reading public. Apart from the deliberately rebarbative aspects of his work, his frequently expressed misogyny will always be a stumbling block for many, and there is no reason to repeat at any length the feeble excuses usually offered in his defense on this issue—that he was put off by the domestic dominance of puritanical matrons in the St. Louis of his youth; that he was at bottom a misanthrope who took a dim view of humanity in general; that he hoped to see the species evolve beyond any need for a biologically unnecessary and philosophically disagreeable division into two different sexes; that some of his best friends were women (Susan Sontag, Patti Smith, Laurie Anderson). All these statements are true enough, but none excuses the glaring failure of imagination represented by his complete lack of interest in the experience of half the human race. The same man who was capable of noteworthy feats of empathy toward cats and lemurs was at his limit when it came to women.

Similarly, his disgust with effeminacy has not won him many friends among the more forward-thinking parts of the gay community (or among the corresponding parts of the straight world either, for that matter), and although his relationship to this issue is complex and fraught, observations like the following probably won’t ever seem much more charitable than they do now: “Fags are ventriloquists’ dummies who have moved in and taken over the ventriloquist. The dummy sits in a queer bar nursing his beer, and uncontrollably yapping out of a rigid doll face.”<sup>66</sup> Yet the courage demonstrated by his willingness to declare himself an openly gay writer in a period when such openness meant widespread ostracism is undeniable, and there is a coterie of readers prepared to acknowledge the extent of his

accomplishments without endorsing his more outrageous views. For them, he is something like the Wyndham Lewis of the postwar counterculture—an artist whose opinions can't be approved but whose achievements can't be denied. And, of course, Burroughs has been fully embraced by the exponents of one theoretical school, who, under the influence of Deleuze and Guattari, attribute a productively subversive force to his brand of madness.

Is there room for an appreciative but critical perspective? At this belated moment, there's no point in trying to explain away Burroughs' more absurd or offensive ideas, and little about his later work is apt to change anyone's view of him, although some may be thankful for the more generous supply of narrative to be found there. The later novels, beginning with *The Wild Boys* (1971) and continuing through the subsequent books that include additional Wild Boys material, the Red Night trilogy (1981–7), and the novella *Ghost of Chance* (1991), are for the most part cut from the same cloth (including a taxing amount of repetition). They are installments in a gay separatist mythology and offer various versions of an all-male utopia, from eighteenth-century pirates to nineteenth-century cowboys to post-apocalyptic teenage warriors in jockstraps and Mercury sandals. As such, they represent one of the most significant trends to have come to the fore in the wake of the global counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s: the fragmentation of the politics of the oppressed into movements representing distinct interest groups. Whether the separating out of individuals according to features like race, gender, and sexual preference has been an entirely positive development, and what sort of balance might be desirable between the legitimate demands of interest-group identities and the need for broader alliances are interesting and pressing questions; but few answers are to be found in Burroughs' later novels, where the common wisdom among his gay characters is that pretty much everyone else—and especially the envoys of traditional American bigotry—should be either warded off or killed.

One of these books, however, does stand out for what it reveals about the development of his views. *The Western Lands* (1987) is the final novel in the Red Night trilogy and Burroughs' single richest piece of writing after *Naked Lunch*. It's a book largely concerned with death and the afterlife, and it offers more detail than any other about his conception of the "spirit state" that he proposed to assume. Here, too, he has not escaped criticism, as he leaves little doubt that what he has in mind, once the current evolutionary condition of the human body and its heavy skeleton has been superseded, is not some liberated condition entirely beyond gender divisions but a state of pure, unadulterated maleness; and plenty of support can be found in this late text for anyone who may have suspected all along that his sophisticated project of undoing binary oppositions was only a cover for what amounts to a full-blown essentialism—a radiant Gnostic ideal of masculinity, blissfully disporting itself in outer space, where it will be forever secure from any threat of effeminate contamination.<sup>67</sup> Burroughs thus definitively parts company with the proponents of schizoanalysis, with the

queer theorists, and with the preference of both for a ludic, polymorphous body, whereas from the perspective of queer theory he remains a somewhat old-fashioned figure, whose interest in the male body doesn't extend much beyond the penis, the anus, and the tribute that the first of those organs might offer the second.<sup>68</sup>

As always in Burroughs, monotheism and organized religion are objects of aversion in *The Western Lands*, where they are additionally charged with conspiring to suppress evolution—not the theory but the process itself. The “spirit state,” it seems, will be a world of many gods, in which all men may be *Übermenschen*, provided they resist the temptations of false paradises. These “deadly illusion drugs” can leave a man stranded “with his hunger, his thirst, his carnal needs, his awkward, bungling body, abrasive, dreary, dead-end surfaces where everything is exactly what it seems to be. There is no mystery, no magic” (128–9). In this Nietzschean universe of suspicion and constant conflict, the satisfactions that life can offer have nothing to do with meager middle-class notions of happiness but are the by-products of creativity and struggle. Accordingly, while science provides a framework for Burroughs' imaginative constructions, mere technocrats are denounced as the kind of “reality addicts” who gave us the atomic bomb. In response to the calamities they perpetrate in the terrestrial realm, he once again affirms the indispensability of dreams: “You need your dreams, they are a biologic necessity, your lifeline to space, to the state of a God” (181). Not only do we need our dreams, it turns out, we have the power to invent them—to “make our own Western Lands” (164).

At this point, one may recall how Burroughs opens the novel by completing a phrase that, in the introduction to *Queer*, seemed to imply only escape from an intolerable past. His aim, he now tells us, is “to write his way” not only out of the condition of a pariah but out of death itself (3). Later, he returns to this theme by striking a more traditional note than one had become accustomed to hearing from him: “Well, that's what art is all about, isn't it? All creative thought, actually. A bid for immortality” (165). To anyone who has gamely followed (in however hypothetical a frame of mind) his cryptic remarks on the “spirit state” to which he had occasionally alluded over the previous quarter century, this passage must come as something of a surprise; and another moment, at the very end of the book, complements these reflections by assuming a wistful, if uncharacteristically sober tone:

It was a hectic, portentous time in Paris, in 1959, at the Beat Hotel, No. 9, rue Git-le-Coeur. We all thought we were interplanetary agents involved in a deadly struggle . . . battles . . . codes . . . ambushes. It seemed real at the time. From here, who knows? We were promised transport out of Time and into Space. . . .

It all reads like sci-fi from here. Not very good sci-fi, but real enough at the time. There were casualties . . . quite a number.

Well, there isn't any transport out. There isn't any important assignment. It's every man for himself.

(252)

The passage is hard to read without a touch of the regret felt by the witnesses at Don Quixote's deathbed, who find themselves urging him not to abandon his dreams of knight errantry. When one's dreams have been dispelled, Burroughs now ruefully acknowledges, all that remains is the elderly writer "in Kansas with [his] cats, like the honorary agent for a planet that went out light-years ago" (252).

Much as one of those numerous casualties, Alexander Trocchi, sought an authenticity of experience that turned out to be difficult to pin down, Burroughs was compelled late in his career to admit that his own uncommon ideal was equally elusive, so he was thrown back on a form of romantic irony that conceives of the artist's vocation as a striving toward a paradise of the imagination—a "spirit state" never to be reached in this lifetime. Reluctantly relinquishing his ambition to produce a language capable of obliterating existing realities, he came, ironically, to endorse something very much like the self-conscious artifice for which Cronenberg has been criticized: "an oasis that is self-sustaining, recreated by the inhabitants . . . a land of dreams" (164–5). At the end of the day, however, the romantic's ideal matters less than the way he has gone about pursuing it. Few readers who aren't avid gardeners are likely to be enchanted by the thought of a mystical *blaue Blume*, yet the incongruity of his ideal makes Novalis in no way less worth reading; and Burroughs is at home in the spiritual company of Novalis and Nietzsche, of Rimbaud and the similarly trigger-happy Paul Verlaine, just as in his own century he recognized a kinship with Antonin Artaud. Such writers are judged ultimately not by the specifics of their ideals but by the audaciousness of their inventions. Which is not to say that Burroughs should be exempt from all criticism of a philosophical, moral, or political variety, but just how important *is* an impeccable philosophical, moral, or political position in the case of someone like him? What many are unwilling to admit is that the one thing capable of redeeming a writer of his stamp from being flat-out wrong is to be sufficiently, gloriously strange—to be possessed of a madness that carries conviction—and, by that measure at least, Burroughs is a towering figure of the postwar era.

## Notes

- 1 *Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs 1960–1997*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 94.
- 2 John Updike, "Dark Smile, Devilish Saints," *The New Yorker*, August 11, 1980.
- 3 William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*, ed. James Grauerholz and Barry Miles (New York: Grove Press, 2001), 75. All further citations appear in the text. Burroughs later moderated his opinion of Buddhism and, though

- never an adherent, recognized the parallel with his own efforts to overcome the interference of the rational—or, as he would say, left-brain—ego.
- 4 *Burroughs Live*, 77, 136. On Artaud and the Beats, see the two essays by Joanna Pawlik cited in Chapter 1, “Artaud in Performance: Dissident Surrealism and the Postwar American Avant-Garde” and “Surrealism, Beat Literature and the San Francisco Renaissance.” On surrealism and cut-ups, see Burroughs’ own essay “The Cut-Up Method of Brion Gysin,” in *The Third Mind*, ed. William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin (London: John Calder, 1979), 29–37; and Oliver Harris, “Cutting Up the Corpse,” in *The Exquisite Corpse: Chance and Collaboration in Surrealism’s Parlor Game*, ed. Kanta Kochar-Lindgren, Davis Scheiderman, and Tom Denlinger (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 89–103.
  - 5 “A paranoid,” Burroughs once remarked, “might be defined as someone who has some idea as to what is actually going on.” *Burroughs Live*, 161.
  - 6 Some of the purest illustrations can be found in the work of Benjamin Péret, a poet Burroughs came to know in Paris in the late fifties: “If the wind permits it/ despair will ravage the healthy countries”; “Nevermore will the metro beg for a drink.” *From the Hidden Storehouse: Selected Poems*, trans. Keith Hollaman (Oberlin, OH: FIELD Translation Series 6, 1981), 21, 53.
  - 7 *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962–7), ed. Oliver Harris (New York: Grove Press, 2014), 81. All further citations appear in the text.
  - 8 *The Diaries of Paul Klee*, ed. Felix Klee (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1964), 226. Burroughs, who admired Klee’s work and frequently cited his writings, confirmed that the method of the cut-ups was conscious and not automatic. See *The Job: Interviews with William Burroughs* (1970) (New York: Penguin, 1989), 29–30.
  - 9 “On Freud and the Unconscious,” in *The Adding Machine: Selected Essays* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1986), 91. See also Victor Bockris, *With William Burroughs: A Report from the Bunker* (New York: Grove Press, 1981), 138–41.
  - 10 “Who is the Walks Beside You Written Third?” (1965), in *The Burroughs File* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1984). The cut-up title scrambles a famous line from Burroughs’ fellow St. Louis native, T.S. Eliot. In this reworking, it’s probably safe to assume that “the third who walks beside you” is not Christ.
  - 11 As is often the case with this author, Burroughs held opinions on language that are commonly echoed in many areas of contemporary thought but that he had acquired from an uncommon source: the “general semantics” of Alfred Korzybski, whose lectures he attended in the late 1930s.
  - 12 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), 350.
  - 13 “On Coincidence,” in *The Adding Machine*, 98.
  - 14 *Burroughs Live*, 84.
  - 15 See, for example, the passing remarks on Burroughs and Artaud in John Tytell, *Naked Angels: Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976), 120.
  - 16 *Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), 253.
  - 17 See Ted Morgan, *Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of William S. Burroughs* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988), 605.
  - 18 See William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, *The Yage Letters Redux*, ed. Oliver Harris (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2006), 97; and *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*, 92.
  - 19 “When you will have made him a body without organs,/then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions/and restored him to his true

- freedom.” *Selected Writings*, 571. On Burroughs and Deleuze, see Timothy S. Murphy, *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).
- 20 See the letter that Artaud addressed to the director of Radiodiffusion Française after the latter refused to allow the play to be broadcast: “one would have to be very naïve, Wladimir Porché, to be alive at this time and not to realize that American capitalism like Russian communism are both leading us to war.” *Selected Writings*, 580.
- 21 “Mr Bradley Mr Martin Hear Us through the Hole in Thin Air,” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H\\_HQxU0BFsM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_HQxU0BFsM).
- 22 *Burroughs Live*, 130.
- 23 The Gnostic image of the “astral body” or “body of light” is taken from the writings of the English occultist Aleister Crowley. See “Civilian Defense,” in *The Adding Machine*, 82. On Burroughs and Gnosticism, see Gregory Stephenson, “The Gnostic Vision of William S. Burroughs,” in *The Daybreak Boys: Essays on the Literature of the Beat Generation* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 59–73.
- 24 Here as elsewhere in Burroughs the scientific definition of undifferentiated (stem) cells is only the starting point for outrageous imaginative elaboration: “The lights dimmed and Johnny pranced out in goggles flickering Northern Lights wearing a jockstrap of Undifferentiated Tissue that must be in constant motion to avoid crystallization. A penis rose out of the jock and dissolved in pink light back to a clitoris, balls retract into cunt with a fluid plop.” *The Soft Machine*, ed. Oliver Harris (New York: Grove Press, 2014), 67. All further citations appear in the text. See also the following passage from the same novel: “Carl walked a long row of living penis urns made from men whose penis has absorbed the body with vestigial arms and legs breathing through purple fungoid gills” (107). This passage offers a schematic illustration of how Burroughs’ imagery functions: one’s first impulse is to laugh at the satiric possibilities inherent in the idea of men absorbed by their penises, but the addition of precise but increasingly unsavory details (those purple fungoid gills, and the description doesn’t stop there) creates an unsettling undercurrent in the laughter. Another example—indeed, the feminized counterpart of these penis men—is “the man who taught his asshole to talk” in *Naked Lunch*, where undifferentiated tissue makes its first appearance (111).
- 25 William S. Burroughs, *Junky: The Definitive Text of “Junk,”* ed. Oliver Harris (New York: Grove Press, 2003), 20, 70, 111. The opposition is made explicit on the final page, which contrasts the descent into addiction to opiates that the book has chronicled to the “uncut kick” of *yagé* that the narrator hopes will bring him telepathic powers and release from “the claims of the aging, cautious, nagging, frightened flesh” (150).
- 26 The relevant passage from “Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness” (1960) appears on page 205 of the Grauerholz and Miles edition of *Naked Lunch*.
- 27 “The Activity of the Surrealist Research Bureau” (1925), in *Selected Writings*, 105. See also his “Manifesto in Clear Language” (1925): “If I believe neither in Evil nor in Good, if I feel such a strong inclination to destroy, if there is nothing in the order of principles to which I can reasonably accede, the underlying reason is in my flesh.” *Selected Writings*, 108.
- 28 *The Job*, 75.
- 29 Nietzsche discusses the Nizari Assassins and their famous motto in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 148–53.
- 30 *Burroughs Live*, 79.

- 31 *Burroughs Live*, 165.
- 32 The book's textual history has been unraveled by Oliver Harris in his 25th anniversary edition (New York: Penguin Books, 2010). All further citations appear in the text.
- 33 This was not a new development. As early as *The Job*, he had argued that, in contrast to women, what men seek in sexual relationships is not love but recognition (118).
- 34 It was his companion for the last two decades of his life, James Grauerholz, who first pointed out that Burroughs was already a writer at the time of his wife's death, although Burroughs may have felt that becoming a writer involved more than just beginning to write. See Barry Miles, *Call Me Burroughs: A Life* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2013), 216.
- 35 William S. Burroughs, *Interzone*, ed. James Grauerholz (New York: Penguin, 1989), 89.
- 36 *Interzone*, 87.
- 37 *Interzone*, 127.
- 38 *Burroughs Live*, 707.
- 39 See Jamie Russell, *Queer Burroughs* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 2–3. A similar argument is made at greater length and with stronger expressions of annoyance in Richard Dellamora, *Apocalyptic Overtures: Sexual Politics and the Sense of an Ending* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 103–28. On Burroughs' experience of heterosexuality, see Miles, *Call Me Burroughs*, 196.
- 40 William S. Burroughs, "Introduction," in *Everything is Permitted: The Making of Naked Lunch*, ed. Ira Silverberg (New York: Grove Press, 1992), 14.
- 41 See Murphy, *Wising Up the Marks*, 67–73.
- 42 *Burroughs Live*, 492.
- 43 The arguments offered by Murphy and Russell are two sides of the same (1990s-vintage) coin and illustrate the limitations of a predominantly theoretical-political judgment of literary texts. Murphy is right to emphasize the destabilizing, schizophrenic quality of Burroughs' writing; however, his claim that it evades the logic of capitalism is unpersuasive, and his celebration of the opportunities it offers for the cultivation of new kinds of community is just a bad fit for such a harrowing and misanthropic writer. For his part, Russell is right to insist on the importance of homosexual experience in Burroughs' work, and his demonstration that the schizophrenic fragmentation of the novels is an unwelcome product of the author's struggles against the effeminate identity assigned to gay men in the postwar era is convincing. But his contention that what is missing in Burroughs is an integrated homosexual identity—a sort of queer "actual man"—needs, at the very least, more nuance in the case of a writer who explicitly denied the existence of such a thing for anyone, gay or straight. Russell comes uncomfortably close to treating the novels of the postwar era as documents of a pathology and finds little to celebrate in their teeming energy and disturbing imaginative audacity—that is, in the very qualities for which most readers look to Burroughs in the first place. The analysis of his style and imagery in the latter part of this chapter is an attempt to understand the genesis of those qualities.
- 44 Cronenberg's remarks can be found on the director's commentary that accompanies the Blue-ray DVD release of the film.
- 45 It might seem that Burroughs and Nabokov—the two opposite poles of many a course on the postwar American novel—would have nothing to say to one another, yet Burroughs once made use of *Pale Fire* (1962) in a cut-up. See "My Legs Señor," in *Exterminator!* (1973) (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 160–1.
- 46 Miles, *Call Me Burroughs*, 221.

- 47 *Burroughs Live*, 525.
- 48 The list goes on: sensory deprivation tanks, stroboscopic light therapies, and Dianetics. On the role of the latter in Burroughs' work, see Russell, *Queer Burroughs*, 64–84.
- 49 *Burroughs Live*, 299–300.
- 50 It has been reprinted as an appendix in Oliver Harris' edition (157–61).
- 51 For an account of Reich's influence on Burroughs' theories of addiction, see Allan Johnston, "The Burroughs Biopathy: William S. Burroughs' *Junky* and *Naked Lunch* and Reichian Theory," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* (Spring 1984): 107–20. Jamie Russell discusses the influence of Reich on Burroughs' later novels in *Queer Burroughs*, 170–6.
- 52 "My Experiences with Wilhelm Reich's Orgone Box," in *The Adding Machine*, 199.
- 53 *Junky*, 92.
- 54 *Burroughs Live*, 736.
- 55 *Interzone*, 91.
- 56 *Junky*, 18–19.
- 57 See *Queer Burroughs*, 9–56.
- 58 See *Call Me Burroughs*, 244–6, and *Literary Outlaw*, 230–1.
- 59 *Interzone*, 137.
- 60 *Junky*, 32.
- 61 *The Yage Letters Redux*, 85.
- 62 *Interzone*, 141. By contrast, in *Naked Lunch*, the desexualized junkie is said to have "a spine like a frozen hydraulic jack" (208).
- 63 See Wilhelm Reich, *Selected Writings: An Introduction to Orgonomy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 9.
- 64 "Lee and the Boys" (1954?), in *Interzone*, 35.
- 65 *Interzone*, 15.
- 66 *Junky*, 73.
- 67 "This is the logical evolutionary step. The physical body is not designed for space conditions in present form. Too heavy, since it is encumbered with a skeleton to maintain upright position in a gravity field." To coax the evolutionary process along a properly astral path, the author recommends a sort of Buddhist defecation: "Empty all thought and all feeling, voiding thought and feeling out through the tail of the spine. This will leave you a skeleton of crystal bone." William S. Burroughs, *The Western Lands* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 192, 243. All further references appear in the text. At times, Burroughs' misogyny can be entertaining: "Remember that as a man your Ka must be a male, so any female Ka is sure to be a lethal imposter, happily embraced by an appalling percentage of idiotic and besotted males just aching to be turned into swine" (201). In his account of ancient Egyptian religious culture, the Ka is "the only reliable guide through the Land of the Dead to the Western Lands"—hence the danger posed by female pretenders (5). If, however, "the Western Lands are reached by the contact of two males, the myth of duality is exploded and the initiates can realize their natural state. The Western Lands is the natural, uncorrupted state of all male humans" (74–5).
- 68 See *Queer Burroughs*, 165.

## 8 *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* and the Ethnographic Imagination

Is [anthropological research] a normal occupation like any other profession, the only difference being that the office or laboratory is separated from the practitioner's home by a distance of several thousand kilometres? Or does it result from a more radical choice, which implies that the anthropologist is calling into question the system in which he was born and brought up?

Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*

Saul Zaentz, the famously stubborn producer who brought *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* to the screen, worked for over a quarter century to do the same for Peter Matthiessen's *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* (1965) and was rewarded for his pains with the worst box office disaster of his career. An impressively accomplished novel with an exotic setting, a large cast of characters, and a gripping plot, Matthiessen's book must have seemed like a sure thing to the unusually literate Zaentz, who after finally securing the rights engaged a talented director, Héctor Babenco, then at the height of his reputation following *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985); an experienced screenwriter, Jean-Claude Carrière, with several films by Luis Buñuel to his credit; and a roster of high-profile acting talent. It didn't matter. The resulting film, a three-hour epic released in December of 1991, was seen by so few people that the handful of encouraging reviews it received couldn't avert its rapid departure from theaters, leaving the production over thirty million dollars in the red. Clearly, something had gone wrong—something that makes the book such a compelling experience didn't get into the film, or maybe it was that something had changed since 1965, when Matthiessen's novel had seemed so fresh.

There are, of course, other reasons why the film didn't find an audience, including its aforementioned three-hour running time and at least one acting fiasco vulnerable to open ridicule (Hazel Quarrier's mad scene, a turn that the actress in the role, Kathy Bates, would probably like to forget). Moreover, in the transition to the screen, two other characters suffer deformations typical of mainstream commercial cinema. With his commanding air, athletic good looks, and attractive wife, the head missionary,

Leslie Huben, enjoys a puritanical glamour in the novel until his cowardice becomes apparent; but as realized by John Lithgow in the film, the character borders on stereotype from the outset. When he strides into a room and peremptorily denounces a new acquaintance as a carrier of “the plague of blasphemy and fornication,” one senses that no miracles of nuanced character development are forthcoming. Likewise, the book makes it clear that a significant part of the contrast between Huben and his newly arrived subordinate, Martin Quarrier, has to do with the latter’s unprepossessing appearance; however, in the film, the role went to Aidan Quinn, whose striking looks, following an antediluvian Hollywood convention, are ineffectively neutralized by a godawful pair of glasses.

Still, a few blemishes notwithstanding, *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* is no amateurish piece of work, and it’s hardly the only film of its era to make unusual demands on the public’s attention span.<sup>1</sup> To identify not just why it failed to win over audiences but, more importantly, what it can help us to understand about the novel on which it’s based, we would do better to begin with the most surprising shortcoming of the adaptation (at least in view of its generous running time). Hewing doggedly to the bare events of the narrative, the film is marked by a degree of compression that makes scenes difficult to parse and leaves the ending unresolved to an extent that can only feel like a let-down after the marathon viewing experience that precedes it. This is a film in which things are highly visible yet simultaneously unclear or uncontrolled. On the side of visibility, it’s hard to think of another major studio production in which so many people spend so much time naked. Thus, when the state-of-the-art masterpieces of physical conditioning that are Tom Berenger and Daryl Hannah meet in a fateful love scene, one cannot help but be awed by the spectacle; however, lacking the psychological elaboration given in the novel—a subtle sketch of a woman’s doubts about her strict religious upbringing—one may yet wonder why, exactly, this previously chaste goddess is suffering herself to be kissed by a ruffian got up as an Indian. Day-to-day nudity is the norm among the uncontacted Amazonian tribe, the Niaruna, around which the plot revolves, and the film makes a commendable effort to depict their world with respect, even to the extent of having them portrayed by non-professional actors from indigenous backgrounds. Yet there is evidence that the uncensored presence of children among the onscreen throngs has bothered some viewers. Here the film gave its audience not too little but too much and so managed to overstep one of the few hard-and-fast taboos remaining in our own society.<sup>2</sup>

This side issue is worth noting because of its ironic relation to a large subject crucial to the narrative, one that is itself both visible and invisible. Culture is right there before our eyes in the form of images, artifacts, behaviors, and bodies clothed and unclothed. It’s not for nothing that the function of the ethnographer—which is what Quarrier becomes with his painstakingly compiled notebooks, drawings, and dictionaries of native speech—is traditionally understood to be that of a participant observer, and in the task

of exhibiting culture, film has an advantage over all other media in its ability to capture appearances in detail and in motion. But superficial information can be deceptive, as Quarrier learns only too late when he is informed that Kisu, the deity whose similar-sounding name he has invoked to encourage the Niaruna to worship Jesus, is actually an ill-tempered bringer of floods, who commands the natives' deference mainly because he is thought to dwell much nearer at hand than his benevolent but remote counterpart in Niaruna cosmology. The film version of *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* is similarly vague on the large part of culture that remains unseen—the part made up of the categories, customs, and values that filter and organize the experience of human beings, drawing together the disparate elements into a coherent conception of the world. To understand where it succeeds, where it falls short, and what it may yet have to teach us about cultures and countercultures, we must return to the source: the remarkable novel that caught Saul Zaentz's attention so many years earlier.

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To anyone whose expectations have been formed by the small warehouse of publications about the Beats and their associates, the appearance of Peter Matthiessen in these pages may be a surprise. Even the one European representative of the group included here, Alexander Trocchi, was linked to the others by his friendships with Burroughs and Ginsberg, whereas Matthiessen had only a passing acquaintance with Trocchi, who was somewhat closer to his childhood friend and fellow *Paris Review* editor George Plimpton.<sup>3</sup> He did, however, maintain cordial relations with Ginsberg, who shared his commitment to Buddhism and first crossed paths with him at the end of the South American journey that would provide the background for *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*. In *The Cloud Forest* (1961), his book about that trip, Matthiessen tells of how he came to experiment with ayahuasca following the experience of having put together a makeshift expedition that penetrated deep into the jungle and recovered a giant prehistoric fossil, the upper mandible of some enormous ancestor of the crocodile, only to see it confiscated by the Peruvian police. Having lost his sofa-sized trophy and put himself through a round of psychic dislocation, he then came upon “the wandering beat poet Allen Ginsberg,” who had turned up improbably in South America like a figure in a folktale. Matthiessen presented him with a generous sample of the ayahuasca and later received in return a gratifying letter in which Ginsberg agreed that the drug fully deserved its nickname (“the vine of death”) but also, as if to confirm that the episode had been more than just a dream, reported that he had seen the “excellent monstrous fossil.”<sup>4</sup>

The whiff of mildly hallucinogenic enchantment that comes off the final pages of *The Cloud Forest* is the sign of an orientation that Matthiessen shares with the other writers in this book. If one asks how a man who was

raised on Fifth Avenue and a Connecticut estate, got his education at Yale and the Sorbonne, worked (however briefly and ineffectually) for the CIA, and published much of his mature writing in *The New Yorker* can be called a representative of the postwar counterculture, the answer begins to emerge in his summary of his experiences in South America:

I haven't said that I've had a magnificent morning. I have. And curiously, the magnificence did not consist of finding what we were after—more poor old bones, and thus a certain scientific confirmation of the site—but lay instead in the purity of this jungle stream. . . . it occurred to me that, aside from its beauty—for it is precisely this inner, mysterious quality of the jungle, represented well by this lost stream, that I have been searching for and feel I have found at last—there was an adventure here, an exploration, however timid.

(239–40)

The exploration, it's clear, has been internal no less than external, and its rewards can be seen in the author's expanded relationship with the natural world. From time to time throughout *The Cloud Forest*, he has recorded his own varying humors as well as the moods of those around him, beginning aboard ship, when he mentions the third mate's contempt for the jungle and later reveals his own "uneasy feeling that the jungle has eluded [him]" (57), a feeling related to the intuition of levels beyond levels of reality symbolized by the book's titular image. The jungle is a place of mystery, we're told repeatedly, a Conradian realm of obscuring mists; and it's perhaps significant that, in Matthiessen's account, ayahuasca produces "a sense of several simultaneous worlds" (262).

"Samsāra is nirvana, nirvana is samsāra," according to an adage associated with the second-century sage Nāgārjuna.<sup>5</sup> The mutable world of birth, death, and the flowing stream becomes a paradise to the enlightened mind; and although Matthiessen would not discover Buddhism for some years after he described the "deep happiness and peace" that he felt at the close of his South American journey, one senses that the internal adventure had already begun when he wrote those words (246). The insight recorded in this passage is more a glimpse of an elusive tranquility than the attainment of anything like lasting wisdom; however, its affinity with the many other expressions of momentary fullness of experience in the literature of the postwar counterculture is apparent, as is this author's characteristic way of pairing the unmotivated "magnificence" of the moment with that "certain scientific confirmation of the site" he originally thought he was after. There is in *The Cloud Forest*, as in much of Matthiessen's nature writing, a strategy of drawing together two contrasting modes of perception, which one is tempted to describe—oversimply, no doubt—as a bringing together of typically Eastern and Western ways of experiencing the world. Matthiessen the amateur naturalist has the scientific information at his fingertips or, even

when he doesn't, is always concerned to get it from an informed source (he brought photos of his giant jawbone to leading experts on fossil reptiles, who identified it as belonging to a previously unknown thirty-five-foot species that lived more than five million years ago). Yet the taxonomic impulse is only one part of the total experience, as is evident from a related stylistic device that is especially prominent in *The Cloud Forest*. Again and again, wildlife is introduced according to the formula of offering first a sensuous description and only then the identifying name, as in the example of a beguiling tree that appears from a distance "to bear huge silver flowers. This is the *imbauba*, one of a great number of medicinal trees used by the river people, and its silver flowers are only its great floppy leaves blown over" (33). The demystifying information fixes the experience in the constellation of accumulated knowledge but doesn't entirely eclipse the splendor of the initial image, which anticipates the "silver glitter" of the river in the sunset at the close of the narrative (245). "As so often happens," Matthiessen writes of such instances of blissful contact with the natural world, "we did not comprehend, did not evaluate our experience until it was all over and gone forever from our days" (240). The event and our delayed comprehension of the event have their separate moments, but one is no less valid than the other.

*At Play in the Fields of the Lord* was Matthiessen's seventh book, following three novels and three works of nonfiction, and it represented a breakthrough for him. By the third and most interesting of the early novels, *Raditzer* (1961), he had refined a fictional relative of the authorial persona whose consciousness lends significance to the narrative of *The Cloud Forest*. A sort of grown-up Holden Caulfield, he's a young man in revolt against his genteel origins, burdened with an acute sense of obligation toward others entailed by his social advantages, and disdainful of the expectation of his relatives—above all, his emotionally distant father—that he will take steps to maintain his position in the insular world of privilege that is his birthright. Published in the same year that Matthiessen would evoke the purity of the jungle stream in *The Cloud Forest*, *Raditzer* supplies the other term of a dialectic of purity and abjection that recalls *The Sheltering Sky*. Like Bowles, Matthiessen seems to have begun from existentialist assumptions; the writer whose name comes up most frequently in *The Cloud Forest* is Albert Camus, although even in that book there is a persistent undercurrent of philosophical discontent and searching. For the Matthiessen protagonist is an exceptionally restless character, and in *Raditzer* his impulse to distance himself from parental pressures and a new marriage that he regards with equivocation leads him to enlist in the navy, where he comes to know a shipmate who is in every respect his opposite: a stunted, sniveling, grasping former orphan, who is instinctively shunned by his fellows. Like Eric Lyle in *The Sheltering Sky*, Raditzer is a swindler who feels that the world owes him a living but whose machinations are so inept that he is destined to fail even as a cheat. Like Lyle, too, his incarnation of the abject includes

incest; however, in his case he merely blundered into it by accident (his mother was a prostitute). Although the novel's protagonist, Charles Stark, avoids the fate of Port Moresby, the narrative is engineered ironically in such a way that he transcends the limited self-knowledge of his class by being brought face to face with his own abjection—the Raditzer within him, so to speak—whereas Raditzer, who has secretly idealized Stark as living proof that purity is possible, is unexpectedly devastated by the degradation of his hero, whose fall from grace he helped to bring about.

In Matthiessen's work, the confrontation with the form of cultural otherness represented by the abject produces little resembling the disconcerting surrealist imagery that one finds in Bowles and Burroughs (a partial exception is the chapters in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* that render the effects of ayahuasca). Instead, it announces a development that would have been difficult to predict on the basis of his earlier writing but seems profoundly related in retrospect. In his next book, *Under the Mountain Wall* (1962), the authorial persona is suppressed entirely in favor of direct description of a culture that is about as far as one can get from Western norms. A combination of ethnographic observation and novelistic technique, this book was the product of its author's participation in the 1961 Harvard-Peabody expedition to the interior of New Guinea, an undertaking known to many as a result of the disappearance and likely death of another venturesome son of the upper classes, David Rockefeller. While his method raises some obvious questions about how the presence of the ethnographic observer may have influenced the behavior he witnessed and how his own cultural presuppositions may have shaped his portrait of Kurelu society, the book remains an entrancing read, unsentimental in its depiction of a culture marked by a state of more or less permanent warfare with neighboring tribes but compassionate in its richly detailed evocation of daily life among a people who had had almost no contact with the outside world prior to 1954.<sup>6</sup> This was, Matthiessen writes, "a unique chance, perhaps the last, to describe a lost culture in the terrible beauty of its pure estate," the last moment before the coming of military patrols and missionaries would turn the Kurelu into just another "primitive" tribe.<sup>7</sup> More to the point, the book he wrote about them ushered in his finest achievements as a novelist. Although the authorial persona would return in his later nonfiction—most notably in the apex of his work in the genre, *The Snow Leopard* (1978)—it's absent from the novels of his maturity, each of which portrays a culture in the early stages of contact with the modern world, beginning with *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* and including *Far Tortuga* (1975), a *tour de force* written largely in the dialect of West Indian turtle fishermen, and his masterpiece of turn-of-the-century life in the Florida Everglades, the Watson trilogy, later revised as the single 900-page volume *Shadow Country* (2008).

Matthiessen is sometimes described as a wholly transparent writer, and he certainly had no interest in the kind of Joycean complexity represented by the cerebral puzzles of a Nabokov or Pynchon.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless,

it's misleading to suggest, as at least one critic has done, that he can be dismissed as nothing more than a purveyor of romantic primitivism and anti-modern bias.<sup>9</sup> In fact, his work is highly complex, and it's a complexity that draws the attentive reader into some of the crucial cultural and philosophical questions of the age. In *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, one witnesses both a recapitulation of major themes of the postwar counterculture and the advent of issues that have turned out to be among the most pressing of subsequent years. These emerge in Matthiessen's writing as a trio of implicit paradoxes. The first becomes evident when one reflects on the irony of a writer who took so strong an interest in cultures like that of the Kurelu—cultures that could still be observed in their “pure estate”—but who was at the same time so plainly dissatisfied with his own high-WASP cultural inheritance, which he would also describe as possessing purity but of a depressingly sterile and lifeless sort (it's no accident that the protagonist of *Raditzer* is named Stark). Something about the experience of having had an exceptionally refined and exclusive version of Western culture fed to him with the proverbial silver spoon left him with a keen appreciation of both the splendor and the deadliness of cultural purity, and in his work a tendency to lament the loss of that “terrible beauty” coexists with an awareness of the inevitable need for cultures to change.

Yet there is reason to lament beyond the wish to show compassion for defenseless people in the grip of historical forces beyond their understanding or control. One of Matthiessen's most cherished speculations is that the Zen Buddhism that would play such an important role in his own life is simply the formal cultivation of a kind of unselfconscious experience common to many indigenous peoples, from the Native Americans whose cause he took up in his most *engagé* writing to the Sherpas he came to know during the Himalayan adventure recorded in *The Snow Leopard*. “The native American traditions are Eastern cultures, thousands of miles and perhaps thousands of years from their source,” he declares, enumerating several pages worth of parallels.<sup>10</sup> And the wealth of such traditions around the world ought to be a comfort to modern people confronting existential realities, “a profound consolation, perhaps the only one, to this haunted animal that wastes most of a long and ghostly life wandering the future and the past on its hind legs, looking for meanings, only to see in the eyes of others of its kind that it must die” (53). Instead, we have resigned ourselves to the increasingly rapid decline of these traditions and come to doubt the quality of the experience they preserve, even as “the desperate instinct that our life passes unlive” is externalized as “proliferation without joy, corrosive money rot, the gross befouling of the earth and air and water from which we came” (39).

Matthiessen's prescient commitment to conservation—his *Wildlife in America* (1959) predates even Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962)—does not, however, involve a wholesale dismissal of modernity, much less a rejection of its signature intellectual achievement, modern science. The sheer

quantity of scientific information included in his works of nonfiction gives the lie to any such caricature of his views, not to mention the very design of *The Snow Leopard*. As no reader of that book needs to be reminded, Matthiessen's traveling companion in the high Himalayas, the terse and fearless "GS," is both a scientist and a near-legendary figure in his discipline, the field biologist George Schaller, himself the author of many books and a man who has personally rediscovered three species long thought to be extinct (he was also, at that time, one of only two Westerners to have seen the elusive snow leopard in the wild). Not only does his post-Enlightenment skepticism serve as a counterweight to the author's Buddhist-inspired meditations, but the sophisticated programs of conservation that he champions are offered as our best hope to reverse, or at least retard, the disastrous progress of environmental destruction. As if to underscore the paradoxical relationship between the modern and the "primitive" in his work, Matthiessen observes that in practice, when it comes to destruction of the natural environment, the indigenous peoples he admires have been only proportionally less profligate than their non-indigenous contemporaries. For example, he lays to rest the sentimental myth that the Plains Indians had a traditionally respectful relationship with the buffalo and took no more than they needed. Actually, they slaughtered the hapless creatures as wastefully as the white man and so hastened the decay of their own traditional culture.<sup>11</sup>

This second paradox is closely related to a third. Abjection is the fate of a society whose culture has been eroded to the point where tradition no longer offers unselfconscious answers to existential questions; and many well-intentioned projects have produced effects directly contrary to their stated goals, as with the missionaries whose attempts to instruct indigenous peoples in Christian principles set in motion a process that frequently has resulted in drunkenness, squalor, and social decay. As Matthiessen observes in *The Cloud Forest*, "the exposure of a primitive tribe to missionaries, however successful—because of the care, generosity, and devotion of the missionaries, the tribe is almost always benefited at the outset—is followed more often than not by its extinction, through the subsequent exploitation, mixed breeding, alcohol, and disease that arrive not with the advent of the Word but with civilization" (132–3). The loss of cultural purity is often followed by abjection, and it's no surprise that, in Matthiessen's treatment of the theme, the most disturbing manifestation of the abject is incest with a first-degree relative. Claude Lévi-Strauss' thesis that the incest prohibition universally forms the basis of culture is among the most familiar in modern anthropology; no doubt the primary status of the taboo makes its violation an exceptionally forceful statement of cultural disorder.<sup>12</sup>

There is no question that Matthiessen exhibits a measure of the same nostalgia before the decline of the indigenous that is movingly expressed in Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), and in that respect, too, his early work is representative of the postwar period. Yet the elegiac attitude is balanced by other insights that, like *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* itself,

come to the fore in the mid-1960s to announce the end of the postwar counterculture and the emergence of something else. One of the most important has already been introduced in my reading of *The Sheltering Sky*, although in that early harbinger of cultural change, the process is left incomplete by the interventions of death and insanity. Mary Douglas' demonstration of the interdependent relationship between purity and impurity not only introduces a historical dimension in the analysis of particular cultures but is itself a significant event in the intellectual history of the 1960s.<sup>13</sup> Impurity, she shows, is not always a mere symptom of decay but can also be an indicator of change, a manifestation of the process of renewal by which cultures escape the barren condition of a too-fully-achieved purity (and surely one of the most unsettling aspects of cultural change is that it's often indistinguishable from degeneracy). It may seem unlikely that such a rarefied insight on the part of an English academic working among remote African tribal societies could bear any demonstrable relationship to events occurring at the same time on the streets of New York and San Francisco, but evidence suggests that the historical correlation may be more than accidental. One such piece of evidence is *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*.

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The evocation of a mystery—especially the mystery of a culture far removed from one's own and in harmony with its environment to a degree that one can only imagine—is a challenge in any medium. It calls for an impressionistic poetry of consummate craft:

The Indians moved like shadows of an owl, flowing in silence across fallen trees and skirting evil pools in a pigeon-toed, shuffle-step trot that looked awkward but was not, while he, stepping more surely than ever before, seemed by comparison to flounder along like something wounded. Yet as the mission fell behind, he moved more eagerly, and an ease returned to him, filling his body like warm sunlight.

(186)

For all its beauty, the proliferation of similes in this paragraph suggests an effort to summon the ineffable, to gesture toward an invisible interiority by a process of substitution and opposition in which analogous images are made to stand in for the unrepresentable experience itself ("Now he had sensed something unnamable and always known, something glimpsed, hinted at, withheld by sun and wind, by the enormous sky"—79). Thus, the shadows of an unseen predator, which only seem awkward and ironically pigeon-like, are contrasted with the genuine awkwardness of the would-be deity Lewis Moon, who remains the wounded prey of self-consciousness but, as he draws away from civilization, feels the warmth of the sunlight within him. The juxtapositions of light and shadow, predator and prey,

grace and awkwardness, jungle and mission, form the kind of meaningful pattern that a thinker of Lévi-Strauss' bent would identify as a structure; and the tactic of suggesting the inner life of an indigenous culture through a succession of likenesses and contrasts points back to the desire that animates these sentences no less than the experience they describe—the feeling, like a muscle memory, that there are ways of living less inhibited than our own.<sup>14</sup> This innate dynamism, familiar to children no less than to native peoples, is perhaps what is named by the Lakota word *wakan*, cited by Quarrier earlier in the novel: the Great Spirit, “the Life Force, the Great Mystery” (58).<sup>15</sup>

Matthiessen, however, makes no pretense of attributing any inherent *moral* superiority to the Niaruna. As it happens, this was not the first time he had described the Indian walk, and one need only compare the equivalent passage from his first novel, *Race Rock* (1954), to see how far he was from promoting the indigenous as exemplary:

he moved slowly at first, letting the wooded edges, the tree placement, the breaks of sky seep from his memory, moving faster as he caught the sense of the wood like an odor out of the past, in a long loping Indian stride, knees bent, feet pigeon-toed and low to the ground, so that the dead sticks were turned like plowed earth rather than stepped on.<sup>16</sup>

The sentence makes up for its comparative lack of poetic force with a greater wealth of explanatory detail: one walks this way to retain the advantage of the hunter by keeping silent. But the paradoxical complexity of these issues in Matthiessen's work comes to the fore when one considers that the furtive traveler in this passage is Cady Stanton, a character elsewhere described, not implausibly, as a sadist and a fascist. By the same token, his portrayal of the Niaruna in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* is notable for its refusal to idealize his native characters, whose culture is exceptional not for the unusually admirable conduct of its members but for the immediacy of experience that it preserves.

Impersonating a god, Lewis Moon descends into this intense and self-contained world as the very strangest of participant observers. Like the culture of the Kurelu in *Under the Mountain Wall*, Niaruna culture is attractive by virtue of its purity, which here means not just freedom from contamination by modernity but also the ability to offer its members a life lived in vibrant relationships with each other and with a natural environment from which they are aware of little separation. So, for example, Moon's relations with his Niaruna consort, Pindi, are unexpectedly complicated by her insistence on restricting sexual activity to the daylight hours. After dark, a divinity such as himself, whose powers are indistinct from those of the most dangerous nocturnal creatures, might “turn himself into Anaconda-person, and she would give birth to snakes” (180). And just as the world of the Kurelu is shaped by reciprocal hostilities with other native peoples, Niaruna life includes a measure of oblivious cruelty that the author is careful to detail,

drawing on observations of indigenous behaviors and attitudes recorded in *The Cloud Forest*. Thus, after Pindi does eventually give birth not to snakes but to twins, Moon is horrified to learn that, out of shame and discretion, she has buried one of them alive because “[o]nly animals drop more than one” (266). With similar unconcern, Tukanu, forbidden by his chief from visiting the mission to pursue his newly acquired taste for praying, suggests as the next best option that the converted Indians might instead be dispatched *en masse*: “As an alternative to salvation, Tukanu had hit upon a massacre” (176).

The “terrible beauty” of Niaruna culture in its “pure estate” finds its counterpart in the abjection that has marked the life of that culture’s nearest observer, Meriwether Lewis Moon, whose given names identify him as a traveler, an explorer, and a searcher as well as a liaison to indigenous peoples (although there is irony in his bitter knowledge that one of the objectives of the Lewis and Clark expedition was to establish sovereignty over Indian lands). He is also, as his surname suggests, a man in the dark, however brightly he may once have shone with the reflected light of his military and educational accomplishments, which offered the possibility of advancement beyond the confines of the reservation where he was born. Since then, however, he has been on a journey, like the moths in the bit of folklore that opens the novel, said to be drawn one night each month toward the moon rather than to the lanterns: “the idea of the moths in the high darkness, straining upward, filled him with longing, and at these times he would know that he had not found what he was looking for, nor come closer to discovering what it was” (1). An imaginative transformation of the restless authorial surrogates in Matthiessen’s early novels, Moon is a half-breed like Bromden in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, caught between the world of his forefathers and the American mainstream, and like Bromden he lives up to his name with fits of unfathomable behavior suggestive of lunacy.

During the early scenes in the bar of the aptly styled Gran Hotel Dolores, however, it becomes apparent that insanity is not an exact description of Moon’s odd conduct, that he is more precisely a man divided against himself, once again forced to do the bidding of those, like Guzmán, who will never regard a “mestizo” as an equal. In the past, his efforts to rebel against this state of affairs have been self-destructive, and his semi-incoherent anger is implicit in the drunken insults he tosses at the poorly defended Quarrier (whose naïve face, inviting abuse, is unforgettably described as “bald with anxiety and tiresome small agonies”—44). Like Port Moresby in *The Sheltering Sky*, he spends a tortured moment in a disgusting latrine, aware that his life is in the toilet and reflecting on his unsettled past and uncertain future: “He had confronted this same latrine on every continent and not once had it come up with an answer” (56). Most troubling of all, his willingness to court “a totally meaningless end” for himself and his partner manifests itself in an airborne struggle in which he gains the upper hand only through sheer indifference to death (85).

This episode, in which Moon asserts his refusal to bomb the Niaruna by facing down his ethically flexible partner, Wolfe, is one of the scenes in Babenco's film that most successfully expands on the novel. Instead of a pair of hair-raising dives, the film has Moon aim the plane straight at what some may recognize as the world's highest waterfall. Located in southeastern Venezuela (in reality, far from the ostensible location of the narrative in the border country of southeastern Peru), this towering cataract is popularly known as Angel Falls after the American pilot Jimmie Angel, the first to fly over the summit, where in 1937 he crash-landed his plane, saddling himself and his passengers with an eleven-day trek down the mountain. Annoyed by the imperial symbolism, the Venezuelan government has urged the adoption of the Pemón Indian name for the falls instead, and the combination of the spectacular natural phenomenon with the resented origin of its unofficial appellation in a *yanqui* exploit makes the site a thematically resonant choice for the scene that plays out there. The soaring cascade, flanked by a rainbow, is a compelling figure of indigenous mystery and an implicit challenge to the overmastering will of the modern aviator, who approaches it at the risk of his own destruction.

At the same time, the scene also underscores another important point of reference, the existential sense of contingency, which will become a crucial factor when disease arbitrarily throws the previously stable worlds of the missionaries and the Niaruna both into disorder. Isolated against the vast landscape of buttes and jungle that surrounds the falls, the minuscule plane, shot from above at a distance, is as effective an emblem of human isolation and insignificance as the diminutive figures silhouetted against the desert expanse in Bertolucci's film of *The Sheltering Sky*; and the imagery recalls the references to Camus that, in *The Cloud Forest*, served as shorthand for Matthiessen's own initial philosophical orientation when he approached the mysteries of the jungle. To die unobserved in such a place would indeed be "a totally meaningless end," and Moon chooses instead to veer off at the last moment after he has succeeded in unnerving his enraged companion.

The film does next to nothing, however, with the extraordinary episode that follows, in which Moon drinks ayahuasca and experiences a lengthy succession of perceptual distortions, flashbacks, hallucinations, and dreams, culminating in his night flight and parachuted descent into the country of the Niaruna. Apart from three enigmatic shots—one of the Niaruna warrior, later revealed to be Aeore, firing an arrow at the plane; another of Moon regarding his own stupefied figure from a distance; and a third of an ominously empty canoe—the experience is depicted only externally; and it's left to the actor to evoke his character's inner turmoil through primal screams—a disappointing choice inasmuch as the corresponding sequence in the book constitutes a thematic blueprint of the narrative (and practically begs for cinematic realization). This is, as mentioned earlier, the place where Matthiessen's writing comes closest to surrealism, although not so much to the disquieting surrealist imagery of Bowles and Burroughs, which

seems to issue uncensored from some unholy region of the author's mind, as to Ken Kesey's American surrealism, where the influence of Faulknerian stream of consciousness can be felt in the way that memories from the character's past abruptly surface interlaced with associations from the present. For example, a belligerent, racist lawman with whom Moon once clashed in an incident from his youth is called "Sheriff Guzmán," suggesting that this earlier tormentor has been run together in his mind with the overbearing Comandante, whose coercion he is presently enduring; and both are of the same breed as the taunting figures responsible for his sudden departure from the university and his current status as a fugitive (91, 102-3).

Similarly, Moon's tussle with Wolfie, in which he has a knifepoint shoved up against his throat, apparently triggers a memory of a distant incident from his boyhood involving a struggle with a wolf caught in a trap. He tried to finish it off with a makeshift spear, albeit not too deftly; and the animal all but turned the tables on him, leaving him in a position where he himself could have been killed (underscoring the reversal, he now feels that his own chest has been pierced by a spear). The incident has parallels with his recollection of his vision quest, a Native-American rite of passage involving a four-day period of fasting in the wilderness. This, too, was a less-than-satisfactory experience, as his meditations were interrupted by a reminder of the modern world in the form of a droning plane, and he failed to recover the goose that he shot at the end of his fast. Paired with the scenes of his mistreatment by racists, these two incidents enlarge the reader's awareness of Moon's predicament: he has been excluded by the mainstream culture, yet at the same time he feels himself to be something less than a "real" Indian, even as he retains an inchoate sense that "[t]here is a lost reality, a reality lost long ago" (94).

Two of his partner's passing remarks also figure in his hallucinations and involuntary memories. Early in the book, Wolfie dismisses the Niaruna as "a bunch of starvin' jungle rats" (36), and Moon, whose identification with the Indians has grown alongside his abjection, now sees himself transformed into "a famine rat," complete with whiskers and twitching nose (98). Later, Wolfie, a lapsed Jew turned soldier of fortune, refers to the Niaruna as "the Lost Tribe of Israel" (80), a remark that recalls a missionary who once told Moon and a group of other Native-American children that they were the Lost Tribe of Israel, "under God's everlasting curse," and then threatened to beat him unless he prayed hard to overcome the misfortune of his birth (89). This last incident is part of a group of memories that have to do with the ambivalent role, both demeaning and enriching, played by the culture of the white man in his education, including parodies of verses by Poe and Browning and excerpts from a scientific text on the *banisteriopsis caapi* vine, from which ayahuasca is made.

*Culture* is indeed the operative word here, for as one tallies up these seemingly random episodes, it becomes evident that the common organizing element among them is the primordial opposition between nature and

culture, which also unites the images in the paragraph describing the Indian walk. As is often the case with such binary oppositions, this age-old pair is loaded to favor one term over the other, although not always the same one. For example, in Moon's experience, the associations of being Indian and being white originally favored the latter, which possessed all the attractions of modernity: "He was not like the old men, nor even like his father; he spoke American and raised the American flag at school; he wore blue jeans and looked at magazines in stores and stood around outside the movie in the town, searching his pockets as if he had real money" (89). His education has been valuable to him, as his aforementioned scientific and literary knowledge demonstrates, and in this context one might also mention his impressively thorough familiarity with the Bible. Nevertheless, before this grand and pervasive culture, which is defined by the larger society as the only legitimate one, the half-breed feels himself to be on the side of nature in an unflattering sense: a vulture, a dog, a rat, and assorted insects populate his visions, along with the injured wolf that is in some way himself. This sad beast, caught in the trap of a culture not his own, might very well "flounder along like something wounded," as Moon does when he tries to walk like an Indian.

Culture, then, has a negative side too, and however useful it may be, his education hasn't sheltered him from the self-hatred aroused by such damaging aspects of the mainstream society as racism, religious bigotry, and threats of violence. These, along with his family's poverty and his sometimes-contentious relationship with his father, have left him harboring an anger that he can't control, and his explosive drive toward self-destruction is apparent in one of the two most troubling hallucinations that he experiences, the allegorical figure of Rage:

a huge and multilimbed galoot in hobnailed boots and spurs, eyes bulging, teeth grinding, cigars exploding in its mouth and flames shooting from its ears, bearing a club spiked with rusty nails, wearing brass knuckles and outsize six guns; in its blind snot-flying rage, it blew its own head off by mistake.

(98)

The other, which is associated with the degraded sexuality that apparently once came between him and a woman named Marguerite (who is said to have had "alabaster skin"—92), is the appalling vision of his mother, "Big Irma," as the main attraction in a tawdry parade, "all leer and wink, hiking her skirt to turn the ankle, pretty still beneath the mass of tired flesh, and trying in vain to shake a ball of hair and dog turd from her heel" (99). If the negative face of culture is represented at its worst by intolerant officials and arrogant men of God, the negative face of nature is characterized by self-obliterating anger and overtones of incest—in short, by the imagery of abjection.

Missing from this schema is the one remaining logical option: a positively valorized nature—or, to be more precise, a way of life so close to the natural world that it is aware of no distinction sharper than a distaste for the idea of giving birth to snakes. This is the tantalizing possibility toward which Moon's visions are drawn, the "lost reality" hinted at in his boyhood memory of once having been "a young animal among animals in a soft summer sunrise" (100). Except, of course, that the Niaruna are not animals. For all their closeness to the natural world, they too have a culture, and the working through of this anomaly—a culture so pure that it seems a part of nature—will be a task of the narrative. Even so, the structure of possibilities formed by the positive and negative valorizations of nature and culture is the key that unlocks the book, and it serves as a reminder that, despite his reputation as a writer immersed in the wisdom of the East, Matthiessen not only considered himself first and foremost a practitioner of that quintessentially Western literary form, the novel, but is actually among the most architectonic of novelists. In fact, one of the limitations of his three early novels is that they all rely on the same schematic device of positioning the main character between alternatives embodied by a pair of contrasting secondary characters. Here, too, *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* represents a major advance over his earlier work in the genre, as its cast of secondary characters is that much fuller and the scheme governing their development that much more subtly infused into the fiction.

Matthiessen's preference for symmetrical structures is apparent in his portraits of the two Protestant missionary couples, the Hubens and the Quarriers, whose individual members develop toward the four coordinates established in the ayahuasca sequence following the introduction of the narrative's principal motivating device: the existential fact of disease, as manifested in Billy Quarrier's death from blackwater fever and the infection of the Niaruna with a common flu virus, against which they have no immunity. Like the typhoid infection in *The Sheltering Sky*, these biological disasters are purely contingent events, and the author doesn't assign them a univocal meaning, but neither do they become the occasion for a meditation on meaninglessness. Instead, his interest is in how they are interpreted differently by different cultures and in how individual members of those cultures react to them. For example, the defining moment in Leslie Huben's evolution is his attempt to prevent Moon from transporting the antibiotics that would save many Niaruna lives back to the village instead of bringing the sick Indians to the mission, a far less practical option that would have let Huben give their recovery the appearance of a Christian miracle rather than the pagan one he knows Moon's administration of the drugs will be taken for. Although the imperial character of his faith has been present from the beginning in his talk of the Catholic "Opposition" and his opinion that the work of conversion will be easier if the Niaruna can be "cowed a bit" (24), his willingness to ignore the very Christian principles he claims to be spreading identifies him as a personification of those elements in the dominant culture that are willing to impose themselves by

force if necessary. His readiness to sacrifice Niaruna lives makes it plain that he belongs in the same category as Guzmán, who would simply exterminate the Indians in the name of progress.

There's a superficial similarity between Huben and Hazel Quarrier in that militarism is an aspect of her faith too, at least initially—the deity she worships has limited patience with sinners and strikes down iniquity “with his terrible swift sword” (24)—but what she most values in her religion is simple certainty: “Had Hazel been reared far away from the Protestant heartland of the Great Plains, she would have made a redoubtable Catholic or even Communist; it was the dogma that attracted her, the security of righteousness, for she felt no need to understand her faith” (65). Already disoriented by the harshness and unfamiliarity of her surroundings, she is thrown into despair by her son's death and sinks into an insanity marked by debased eroticism:

[She] spoke wildly of the jungle and could talk of nothing else, describing obscenely the obscenity of the flowering and rot, the pale phallic trunks and the dark soft caverns, the rampant hair, the slime and infestations. Once she ran naked from the hut at noon to sprawl and roll in the center of the clearing, writhing and howling, her arms extended to the forest, shivering as in a fit. “He is here,” she cried, “Satan is in this place, and He will take me!” Quarrier reached her first and took off his shirt to cover her; she was sweating so in the terrible humidity that she was covered with dirt and bits of leaf and humus.

(256)

Hazel's collapse plainly belongs to the same troubling class of imagery as Big Irma's similarly befouled sexuality. Whereas Huben comes to embody culture as an arrogant and domineering expansionism, Hazel's trajectory is toward nature at the negative extreme of abjection.

Nature in the form of an emergent sexuality is also an important feature of Andy Huben's development over the course of the narrative; however, the associations in her case are the very opposite of the eroticized degradation that Hazel comes to personify. As with her husband, the latent tendency of her character is indicated in the earliest scenes, when Quarrier, aroused by her beauty at the cost of his conscience, notices that “her clear face combined an air of innocence with something as saucy and irreverent as a hot cross bun” (19). Yet in these early scenes her voice retains “a quality of child-like wonder” (19), and when Moon looks at her, what he sees is “a small girl with straight brown hair to her shoulders and a clear open face” (37). From the beginning, Andy possesses an unimpeded emotional transparency and a developed capacity for empathy, which is visible in the pain she feels at the historical oppression of the Cheyenne (26). Still, the intimations of immaturity in these passages are no accident, and her naïveté is palpable in her initial inability either to see beyond her husband's imposing exterior

or to recognize her own unacknowledged motive in following Moon to try to stop what she thinks will be an attack on the Niaruna. The description of her as “a small girl” takes on greater significance when she becomes aware, after Billy Quarrier’s death, that Leslie has “shrunk”—that, despite his manly appearance, he is really just a boy (233, 291). She, by contrast, matures into an awareness of her own desire after her unclothed encounter with Moon, which she experiences as nothing less than a transfiguration of the natural world: “For the first time the jungle seemed like paradise, bugs, heat, mud, and all, and he was part of the jungle, he was beautiful. And I was beautiful” (259–60). Although her desire remains unfulfilled, she is no longer the callow “missionary’s wife” she once was (122). For all her newly discovered discontents, she is now an independent woman.

Like Andy, Martin Quarrier also deceives himself about his passion, albeit not about his passion for Andy, which he knows will bring him nothing but shame and indefensible jealousy. His governing passion is, rather, the passion of the intellectual, and the role he comes to play is prefigured by the scientific information and literary allusions that turn up in Moon’s ayahuasca visions. As I have noted, his detailed study of indigenous peoples identifies him specifically as an anthropologist, and for much of the novel he is able to convince himself that this pursuit can offer guidance to his evangelical efforts (although his wife knows better: “[H]ow was he ever to redeem a people whose religion seemed to him so beautiful?”—26). Only after Moon forces him to see that his proselytizing has been informed by a basic misunderstanding, represented in Sophoclean fashion by the loss of his glasses, is he able to recognize his true interest: “I’ve been more of an ethnologist than a missionary right along” (336). But his development over the course of the narrative doesn’t merely trace a path from the church to the university—that is, from one mainstream cultural practice to another. For ethnography is the cultural practice that calls into question the authority of Western culture itself, and Quarrier understands that it has fallen to him alone to thwart Guzmán’s aggression by warning Moon and the Niaruna that an attack is imminent, even though it costs him his life. His absurdities aside, he comes to occupy a position of crucial importance in the book as a figure of principle, who operates on the strength of his remaining convictions in a state of hopelessness akin to Moon’s at the beginning of the novel, having suffered both the death of his son and the subsequent collapse of his wife into madness. And when he dies, it is, significantly, at the hands not of a Niaruna warrior but of Moon’s negative counterpart in the narrative’s symmetrical architecture, the decultured and utterly unprincipled Indian Uyuyu.

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Quarrier’s bumbling heroism reminds us that Matthiessen is neither a romantic primitivist nor an absolute relativist, no matter how much his ethnographically informed perspective might influence him to suspend

judgment of particular actors in particular situations. He is very much a moralist but one who is constantly aware of his characters as members of different tribes and is therefore aiming for the most informed and the broadest possible perspective. It's quite clear, for example, that he believes the Niaruna would have been better off had they never been bothered by either the missionaries or the half-breed plague-carrier disguised as a god, whose wish to be an Indian wasn't strong enough to keep him away from the beautiful Andy Huben (that Moon finally lives up to the destructive reputation of his divine namesake, Kisu, is a sad irony). And just as Quarrier combines a Christian compassion for the vulnerable with an anthropologist's respect for the inherent worth of another culture, Matthiessen practices a similar *bricolage* in his assembly of the values by which the action of the novel might be judged. His own perspective is so subtly indicated, however, that it's no wonder he has been stood up as a primitivist straw man by unsympathetic critics, and he is no less reticent in his handling of his native characters than he is in his nuanced portraits of Moon and the missionaries.

Perhaps surprisingly, the world of the Niaruna turns out to be just as multi-faceted as that of the non-indigenous characters. On closer inspection, theirs is not quite a prelapsarian paradise of untroubled natural existence, even though, in a lighthearted moment, Boronai affirms that this is exactly what it is: "We have our river and our forest, we have fish and birds and animals to eat, and Witu'mai has taught us to grow manioc. Surely we are living in a golden time!" (191). But although he and his people exist in a state of uncommon intimacy with nature, we slowly come to understand that they must still manage the same existential facts as everyone else, a condition expressed by the imagery of sunlight and darkness that is a constant throughout the novel. The Niaruna are "touched by sun," Moon observes, taking in not just their smiles—"wider than he had thought men could smile"—but the way they cleave to the daylight and fear the darkness of night and the flooded forest, which teems with hazards both natural and supernatural (172). When Moon and Aeore dare to enter this world of shadows, they are followed by the call of "the white bellbird Ulua," which is "the spirit of a girl killed in the act of incest; if heard too close, Ulua's call would lead its victim to the spirit world, there to keep her company forever" (194). Like Moon himself, the Niaruna know the perils of abjection and spiritual paralysis.

*Et in Arcadia ego* might well be the epigraph to this part of the narrative, in which Moon reflects on the character of Boronai—his kindness to his eldest wife ("the Ugly One"), tempered only by the need to maintain the stern façade of leadership, and his tolerance for the hot-headed Aeore, who he understands will eventually replace him as chief. Moon's intuition that Boronai owes his eminence not just to his superior judgment but also to a mysterious knowledge that he can express only as legend is confirmed when Boronai recounts the story of Taipan and Amanaitu to the assembled tribe. As Quarrier would have no trouble recognizing, this is a legend of the Fall

and the Deluge, which tells of an original unity between man and nature in a world of darkness, a paradisiacal condition that was unfortunately disrupted by a rash of tit-for-tat slayings. These provoked the Great Ancestor, Witu'mai, to annihilate most living things with a catastrophic flood and then send His messenger to inform the remaining people that they would now have to choose between either darkness and eternal life or light and mortality. If they chose immortality and darkness and more bloodshed followed, they would get death and light instead. The people, upset at having such a choice thrust upon them, killed the messenger, at which point the heavens cleared, the sun came out, and an old man died (195–7).

The import of this story is uncertain at first, but eventually its relevance to the larger narrative begins to emerge. A daylight world of fecundity that provides everything the Niaruna require to live lives of unselfconscious absorption in the doings of their highly cohesive society, nature is also a night world of spiritual jeopardy, transience, and death. This is the inexpressible knowledge that Boronai possesses but can communicate only as legend, and it holds implications that he eventually demonstrates *in extremis*—that wisdom lies in knowing not only how to spend one's life but how to let go of it, not only how to live but how to die. It was in the pursuit of just such wisdom that Matthiessen would be drawn a few years later to the study of Zen Buddhism, a living tradition that nurtures this awareness as a matter of felt experience, and it's impossible not to think of the outstanding pages in *The Snow Leopard* that he would devote to the consolations available to traditional cultures in the presence of death when one reads his account of Boronai's passing: "His shrewd bright eye had dimmed, like the eye of a shedding snake, and in the way that the snake casts its skin he was preparing to recede stoically from his days, to die in the way that Indians so often died, by releasing his hold on life without a struggle" (283).

Yet if the legend of Taipan and Amanaitu obscurely gestures toward the wisdom that informs the chief's serenity on his deathbed—his ability to accept the whole of nature in both its abundance and its mutability—it also reveals a more problematic side of Niaruna culture, which is noticeable in the Indians' understanding of Billy Quarrier's death (and has been foreshadowed by a mention in one of the fragments of scientific text in the ayahasca episode). The Niaruna, it turns out, will not accept an unnaturally early death like Billy's as a contingent event but conclude instead that his illness must be the work of some unknown enemy, no matter how earnestly Quarrier tries to convince them that Billy's "only enemy is the mosquito" (207). As with the perpetrators of the vendetta-type slayings recounted in the legend, the Niaruna are prone to murderous internecine quarrels, and their suspicions of other tribes are so quick to flare up that they constantly threaten to wreck the project of organizing the indigenous peoples of the region into a united Indian nation. Whereas Niaruna nature is divided into a bounteous day world and a threatening night world, Niaruna culture includes a wise acceptance of both the positive and negative aspects

of nature but also displays a self-defeating predilection for what one may as well call tribalism.

The coming of the missionaries unintentionally exacerbates the touchiness and suspicion that go hand in hand with a simple binary division of the world into light and dark, friend and enemy, good and evil; and it is one of the narrative's many small ironies that the gifts meant to draw the natives toward Christianity instead provoke a host of unchristian squabbles. The arrival of the missionaries, we're given to understand, has meant the introduction of a decisive impurity into this seemingly pure culture, although, interestingly, Boronai's account of the bygone days of the tribe puts the entire conceptual formula in question:

He spoke of the great days of his clan, of how they controlled the hunting and the fishing rights far down into the country of the Sloth People, the Tiro, and from there across to the Tuaremi, and far to the east, toward the Sea of Life; all that land was of his clan. But now the clan had been forced westward by the Yuri Maha, their own kinsmen to the east—here Tukanu pointed at Aeore for Kisu-Mu's benefit—and they had been threatened from the west by the Green Indians and the Tiro. The Ancestors were very angry. He, Boronai, was very angry, and all of his people were very angry.

(181)

The "Green Indians"—Guzmán's soldiers dressed in military fatigues—represent the disruptive forces of Western culture to which the missionaries also belong; however, what is intriguing about Boronai's account is the information that the tribe has a history that predates the coming of the soldiers and missionaries. It is a story of conflicts with other indigenous peoples, one of whose members even now lives among them, and so raises the possibility that the "estate" of the Niaruna has never been absolutely pure, at least not since its mythical origin in a paradise where darkness and immortality were one.

This information casts the conflict between Aeore and Moon in an unexpected light, as it becomes a conflict between two agents of history, one of whom belongs to the earlier history of the region, whereas the other, for all that he would like to immerse himself in Niaruna life, is inescapably a representative of the invading forces destined to prevail over indigenous ways. Although his own origins are elsewhere, Aeore is Boronai's heir, the man whose boldness in assuming the role of shaman has identified him as the chief's natural successor. He is, we are told, a sort of modern among the Niaruna ancients, "interested not only in the fact of things but in how they worked; in this sense he was less primitive than any of his tribe" (185). As such, he is the figure whose ambitions are most threatened by the arrival of a presumed deity, and when Moon is forced to kill Aeore at the very end of the novel, it's only the last in a series of unhappy ironies. The half-breed

whose exclusion by the white man had convinced him that his place was among the Indians becomes yet another of the many lethal plagues that the Niaruna must endure on their downward course toward extinction.

This is the pessimistic point that Babenco and Carrière chose to emphasize at the end of their screenplay, and an examination of the consequences of their choice is revealing. Although, in the novel, other characters have intimated that Moon is not a god but a white man, and Aeore has suspected him of being a mere emissary of Kisu rather than the deity himself, the seemingly magical effect of Moon's revolver on Aeore draws a predictable response from the dying Indian: he confesses that, while he had not believed in him before, he is now convinced that Moon is really Kisu; and the tragedy of his death is heightened by our awareness that the character who, from the moment he fired an arrow at the plane, has most strikingly embodied the wild spirit of the Indians will die deceived. The film, however, proposes a revision of this climactic scene, foregoing the pathos of Aeore's death in a state of deception by rewriting his dying words to inflate the crushing irony of Moon's failed ambition: "You are not Kisu Mu; you are a white man." It would be small wonder if the handful of viewers who saw the film in theatrical release found this conclusion to be an unsatisfying payoff on their three-hour-plus investment of time. The final shots of Moon alone in the wilderness attempt to preserve, in an exasperatingly inscrutable way, some of the complex openness of the novel's conclusion, but the thrust of the film's ending remains disheartening: we can't escape the identities we're born with, and trying to do so just makes everything worse. It's an oddly fitting gesture for a historical moment that, having seen the idealism of the global counterculture recede into the past, was discovering the grim joys of a simple-minded identity politics, in which tribalism is the order of the day, and full minority status can be a jealously guarded privilege.

To be fair, though, I should note that there may be another factor behind the flat reception of Babenco's film more than a quarter century after the publication of the novel on which it's based. I have said that Matthiessen, like Lévi-Strauss and any number of earlier figures in the history of ethnography, evinces a nostalgia for the kind of traditional or, if one prefers, "pure" culture represented by the Niaruna, a type of society that could still be found in the postwar era, assuming one was prepared to venture deep enough into the Amazon rain forest or the interior of New Guinea (although even then it was plain that the days of such cultures were numbered). But by the time the film appeared in 1991, uncontacted societies had become so much a thing of the past that the premise of the narrative took on a certain remoteness, as if one were watching a film about an old conflict that had long been settled, however injuriously, and this feeling of historical distance may have had something to do with the shrug that greeted Babenco's efforts.<sup>17</sup> Still, a touch of nostalgia for tribal societies is only one aspect of Matthiessen's novel and arguably not the most important one. The conclusion of the book is palpably richer than the conclusion of the film, but to

appreciate its complexity, one must go back to the beginning and reflect on the title.

The phrase sounds like it might be a biblical quotation; however, it appears nowhere in the Bible, although there are multiple references to *working* in the fields of the Lord, as in the Parable of the Tares (Matthew 13:24–30) or in 1 Corinthians: “For we are laborers together with God: you are God’s field, you are God’s building” (3:9). It’s passages like these that Moon is echoing when he provokes Quarrier with the assertion that he himself is a missionary: “I’m at work in the fields of the Lord. *Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.* Mark, Chapter 16, Verse 15. You want to get preached to?” (46). Then, when Huben demands his location over the radio during his night flight under the influence of ayahuasca, he alters his own phrase, substituting “play” for “work,” and this version too is dismissed by the missionaries as more impious mockery. Padre Xantes, though, is intrigued:

“These final words of Moon, the evangelicals found them sacrilegious, no? But might not they have been just the reverse? St. Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican”—and Xantes modestly inclined his head—“St. Thomas Aquinas spoke highly of ‘playing in the world—’”

(234–5)

Ever combative, Huben fires back: “Well, saint or no saint, he stole that from *Proverbs!*” (235). And he is correct; the phrase does indeed come from Proverbs but from a version of the text that Huben would be unlikely to know: the Douay-Rheims translation (1582–1610), which became the Bible of the Counter-Reformation in England (and so would be likelier reading for a Catholic like Xantes than for an evangelical).<sup>18</sup> The text of the translation runs as follows: “I was with him forming all things: and was delighted every day playing before him at all times;/Playing in the world: and my delights were to be with the children of men” (8:30–1).

The author himself plays a bit here, and this scholarly game from a writer not known for bookish sports raises a question about the relevance of such an obscure text to his narrative. The speaker in Proverbs 8 is Divine Wisdom, here personified as a female figure, and she is talking about her place by the side of God during the creation and the delight with which she regarded His handiwork as it took shape. The assertion that her part in the endeavor was play rather than work is a ludic and affirmative gloss on the more sober report of Genesis (“God saw that it was good”), and it emphasizes that what was particularly good was the human part of the creation. It is also, inevitably, a gloss on the novel’s own myth of human origins, the legend of Taipan and Amanaitu, and implies that playful affirmation must be a part of the wisdom with which Boronai embraces the whole of nature. Unquestionably, there is more than one kind of play going on in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, some of them painful, irresponsible, and destructive;

but the game of allusions suggests that what the author most values is not the perhaps illusory purity of lost worlds but the delightful play of creative engagement with the existing world. As Moon tells Andy Huben through the haze of his intoxication, “When there’s a jungle waiting, you go through it and come out clean on the far side. Because if you struggle to back out, you get all snarled, and afterwards the jungle is still there, still waiting” (122). And one can be reasonably certain that, with this remark at least, he is speaking for his creator too, as his advice is a clear echo of the novel’s epigraph (from Hermann Hesse’s *Steppenwolf*—the first of several wolves to appear in the book): “The way to innocence, to the uncreated and to God leads on, not back, not back to the wolf or to the child, but ever further into sin, ever deeper into human life.” This way may involve playing games that leave one soiled, but it’s the only way forward.

The suggestion, then, is that play in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* can be understood in something like the sense it assumes in another key text of the mid-1960s, one that comes from a rather different region of intellectual life than Matthiessen’s novel but that in retrospect seems at least as significant a notice of the end of the postwar era: Jacques Derrida’s “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1966). Derrida’s essay, both an appreciation and a critique of Lévi-Strauss’ structural anthropology, famously begins with the announcement that “an event” has occurred in the history of structure and then proceeds to address themes that have emerged in my discussion of *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*. This event happened when, in a reflexive act of thought, it was discovered that the system of differences that forms the structure of a culture is limitless, that the organizing center on which the structure depends for its unity—an origin, a *telos*, a god—is never absolutely present as a part of the structure, and that the play of metaphorical substitutions within the structure is therefore potentially infinite. In the history of this development, ethnography had a crucial role, for the discipline appeared at precisely the moment when the centered structure of Western culture and its metaphysics became conscious of itself. The critique of ethnocentrism, Derrida observes, is “historically contemporaneous with the destruction of the history of metaphysics.”<sup>19</sup> And as soon as it became possible to look upon Western culture as one culture among others, the authority it had claimed—an authority that depends on centered structures like the Christian religion, with its deity who is somehow both present in his creation and apart from it—was thrown into doubt, and the idea that other cultures might possess a legitimacy and a unique experience unknown to the West became an imaginable possibility.

In Derrida’s view, one of the great contributions of Lévi-Strauss’ ethnography is its consciousness of itself as a Western discourse that has no option but to adapt tools rescued from a metaphysical structure that ethnography itself had begun to topple (or, as the much-abused word has it, to deconstruct). He singles out for praise Lévi-Strauss’ understanding that the

instruments he has to work with—concepts, categories, values—can prove themselves in pragmatic terms only and can't be justified by recourse to any higher authority. Even the founding distinction between nature and culture is ultimately shown to be just a useful conceptual pair, which ends up in a logical contradiction if pushed far enough (the incest prohibition is universal, like nature, but also particular, like culture, making its origin unthinkable). This is the technique of *bricolage* that, I've suggested, Matthiessen also practices in his assembly of an implied value system out of heterogeneous materials; and Derrida argues that to pretend to be doing anything else is to make oneself a character in a theological myth—perhaps a myth spun by a *bricoleur*. As Lévi-Strauss himself admits, ethnography is no less a form of mythmaking (“the myth of mythology”) than is writing a novel. From this perspective, one could say that writing a novel about the play of meanings between Western and indigenous cultures is something akin to spinning a myth of the myth of mythology.

It's with an understanding of play as the unbounded substitution of meanings across the “fields” of disparate cultures—meanings that can be evaluated only according to an improvised set of values drawn from such varied sources as religion, existential philosophy, and ethnography itself but given ultimate authority by none—that I want to approach the final pages of *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*. Matthiessen betrays some of the same nostalgic “ethic of archaic and natural innocence” that Derrida criticizes in Lévi-Strauss, but he also champions the “other side” of that ethic, which Derrida encourages us to favor: “the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming” (292). Thus, when Moon, alone on the savanna, weeps for the Indian dead among the Niaruna and in his own family but also for Quarrier and for himself, his weeping gives way finally to laughter: “He wept and wept, and though toward the end he began to smile, he kept on weeping until at last he breathed a tremendous sigh and laughed quietly, without tears” (371). This is the laughter of a man who has passed through the jungle of abjection—in his journey through the wilderness, he has once again heard the song of the white bellbird—and “come out clean on the far side.”

At this moment, it occurs to him to make himself, in effect, the bearer of a new culture:

Aeore said, We are naked and have nothing! Therefore, we must decorate ourselves, for if we did not, how are we to be told from animals?

He took up Aeore's achote and on his own chest drew the sun as a child would draw it, rough and bold, with violent rays; he threw his chest out.

(371)

Following this initial affirmation and starting from nothing, he next addresses a basic need: he must eat to survive, so he turns his attention not

to the white bellbird but to the curassow he has killed, which strikes him as the embodiment of natural mysteries: “He turned the dead thing in his hand, peered at it curiously: how mysteriously it was made!” (371). Moon gazes at the dead bird as if seeing the world for the first time, free of cultural preconceptions, a state that, in the most telling sentences of these final pages, he experiences as both a loss and a liberation:

He felt bereft, though of what he did not know. He was neither white nor Indian, man nor animal, but some mute, naked strand of protoplasm. He groaned with the ache of his own transience under this sky, as if, breathing too deeply, he might rise on the wind as lightly as a seed, without control or intimation of his fate.<sup>20</sup>

(372)

Among these searching phrases, which describe the experience that only a few years later Matthiessen would identify with the Zen Buddhist term *satori*, one stands out. Moon is neither white nor Indian, and he feels it as a loss, perhaps as a confirmation of his failure to become the “real” Indian he thought he might be. Yet there is another implication hidden in the phrase, one that resonates expansively with the symbolic act of founding a new culture: the neither/nor construction doesn’t rule out the possibility of a both/and reading. Moon is neither purely white nor purely Indian, but it’s still possible that he may be, however impurely, *both white and Indian*. This new culture, an invention of his own making, offers a new beginning and an alternative to the prejudice and violence he has fled, a nascent counter-culture that stands as a rebuke to the excesses of the Western world and an insistence that it become something richer and more inclusive than it has been. It’s a modest portent of the changes that, even when this uncommon novel first appeared, were already stirring around the globe.

## Notes

- 1 One need only draw the obvious comparison with the previous year’s Oscar winner for Best Picture, the unaccountably popular *Dances with Wolves*, which runs very nearly as long as *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* but made over \$420 million. It’s worth noting that, since its initial debacle, Babenco’s film has collected numerous admirers, despite being caught up in a legal tangle that prevented its release on DVD.
- 2 One viewer’s online comments are representative: “To us, the disturbing feature of the film was frontal nudity of little boys, and lingering frontal close ups. My wife and I are teachers of young children.” [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0101373/reviews?ref\\_=tt\\_urv](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0101373/reviews?ref_=tt_urv).
- 3 The editors of the *Paris Review* and the editors of *Merlin* moved in the same circles in Paris in the early fifties. Plimpton more than once told the story of his later effort to help Trocchi, who was being pursued by the authorities in New York and repaid him by fleeing the country with two of his suits, one worn over the other.

- 4 “The week has passed in a sort of dream, a kind of miasma of unreality which only a jungle town could induce.” Peter Matthiessen, *The Cloud Forest: A Chronicle of the South American Wilderness* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 262. All further citations appear in the text.
- 5 Matthiessen explains the saying in *Nine-Headed Dragon River: Zen Journals 1969–1982* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1988), 278–9.
- 6 These points are made by William Dowie in *Peter Matthiessen* (New York: Twayne, 1991), 64. Although written at a time when Matthiessen had published only the first volume of the Watson trilogy, Dowie’s book provides a useful introduction to his work and is still the only full-length study of a writer who has attracted remarkably little attention from academic critics.
- 7 Peter Matthiessen, *Under the Mountain Wall: A Chronicle of Two Seasons in Stone Age New Guinea* (New York: Penguin, 1990), xiv.
- 8 See the comments of the novelist Jim Harrison in Jeff Sewald’s documentary *Peter Matthiessen: No Boundaries* (2009). An exception is the scholarly play around the novel’s title noted below.
- 9 See the take-down by the idiosyncratic poet and critic Bruce Bawer, “Nature Boy: The Novels of Peter Matthiessen,” *The New Criterion*, 6 (June 1988): 32–40.
- 10 Peter Matthiessen, *The Snow Leopard* (New York: Penguin, 1978), 52. All further citations appear in the text. Matthiessen had already put this very argument into the mouth of the worldly wise Catholic priest, Padre Xantes, in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*: “Our Christian—that is, *Western*—outlook is rather lugubrious, do you not think? We have persuaded ourselves that abnegation—and he touched his cassock, not without irony—‘and self-sacrifice are superior to joyous self-expression, to the emotions—to simple *being*? Now . . . if we could just take time from our teaching of our poor Indians, we might *learn* something from them. After all, the Indians come out of Asia, theirs is essentially an Eastern culture; they do not seek for meaning; they *are*. They are not *heavy* the way we are, they are light as the air; their being is a mere particle of the universe, like a leaf or wing of dragonfly or wisp of cloud. Unlike ourselves, they are eternal.” Peter Matthiessen, *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 309. All further citations appear in the text.
- 11 Peter Matthiessen, *Wildlife in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 148. The sentimental myth is perpetuated in blissful ignorance by *Dances with Wolves*. In *The Cloud Forest*, Matthiessen records a parallel process in South America: “The Carajas are thought to be the most colorful tribe in Brazil, and before too long their craft will be as popular with Brazilian tourists as the Navaho blanket in the United States—unless the poor birds give out, which some of the prized species show every symptom of doing in this area. The pink feathers of the flamingo are considered the most valuable, but these birds, like the plumed egrets, are becoming difficult to obtain, and already the chicken is putting in an appearance in some of the poorer work” (132). As he notes elsewhere in the book, this is a reprisal a hundred years later of “the North American pattern, with the Indians, for a tiny gain, hastening the decline of the natural resources they depend on” (48).
- 12 See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949), trans. James Harle Bell and John Richard von Sturmer (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969).
- 13 Though not, strictly speaking, a practitioner of discontinuous history, Douglas shares with Kuhn, Foucault, and other like-minded figures in the intellectual history of the period an emphasis on the process by which one cultural frame of reference replaces another in the history of a given society.
- 14 Late in the novel, as if to confirm the association with structuralism, Matthiessen shows Padre Xantes cunningly theorizing in Lévi-Straussian terms: “he would

- have liked to test a theory that if one broke up the village structure, changed the shape and juxtaposition of the buildings, the Indians would be totally disoriented, and thus laid open to the first strong faith they were exposed to” (360).
- 15 Among the other experiments that Matthiessen would undertake in his next novel, *Far Tortuga*, the conscious effort to purge his descriptive prose of metaphor stands out as an effort to match the purity of the culture under description with a corresponding purity of language. The effect is twofold: it elevates the voices of the characters—that is, the language of the culture itself—into a position of much greater importance, and it places a far greater burden of interpretation on the reader. In the absence of characters like Moon and Quarrier, who assume the role of ethnographer within the narrative, the reader is forced to take on that role.
  - 16 Peter Matthiessen, *Race Rock* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 53.
  - 17 It’s dangerous to generalize too broadly, though. As recently as November 2018, a missionary was killed by the inhabitants of a small island in the Indian Ocean while pursuing his calling. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/24/world/asia/north-sentinel-island-missionary-killed.html>.
  - 18 Of course, Padre Xantes is also correct: Aquinas does quote Proverbs 8 approvingly, although he does so in the Latin text of his *Expositio* of the *De Hebdomadibus* of Boethius (c. 1260). Matthiessen likely encountered the translated passage in *Behold the Spirit: A Study in the Necessity of Mystical Religion* (1947) by Alan Watts, who in turn was quoting the French Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain’s *Art and Scholasticism* (1920). It was the English translator of Maritain’s book, J.F. Scanlan, who made use of the Douay-Rheims translation of Proverbs 8 in his rendering of Maritain’s quotation of Aquinas.
  - 19 Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 282. All further citations appear in the text.
  - 20 The echo in this passage of Padre Xantes’ remarks on what might be learned from the Indians (quoted in an earlier footnote) is surely deliberate.

## 9 Mystery, Myth, and Ritual: The Aftermath of the Counterculture

Behold, I shew you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed

1 Corinthians 15:51

If there's one thing everyone can agree on, it's that the counterculture no longer exists, at least not as the wide-ranging phenomenon it was in the late sixties and early seventies, when it became a vital presence on every continent except Antarctica. There are even some who, given to thinking in strictly political terms, would argue that it has *never* existed, that what was thought at the time to be a single many-headed entity was really a conglomerate of distinct life forms inhabiting adjacent and only occasionally overlapping territories, like the peace movement, the civil rights movement, feminism, ecology, gay rights, and so on. According to this view, the defining characteristic of the period is the emergence of a politics of specific causes, often linked to issues of identity; and it's undeniable that the prominence given to such movements and their successors has been the era's most enduring political legacy, even though many of those causes have histories that long predate the years in question, and some, like pacifism and sustainability, address issues of general concern. Yet, without straying from the exclusively political terms of the debate, one might still ask how it is that minority interests are so often backed by majorities with no obvious stake in their success. Isn't there always a larger collective behind the gains of unpopulous oppressed groups? And didn't the counterculture play a pivotal role in creating the climate of opinion that nowadays, for example, might lead a white, middle-class, heterosexual male to recognize the dignity of transgender people?

It's a familiar cliché that the three-quarters of a century between the end of World War II and the present has seen more dramatic changes than any comparable period in history. Within that span of time, the years 1965–75—an arbitrarily precise pair of dates suggested by a variety of events, none more significant for Americans than the landing of 3,500 Marines on the beach at Da Nang and the departure of the last helicopter from Saigon—are the

inevitable focus of debate, with some deploring the rejection of established norms that was so visibly a characteristic of the era and others drawing inspiration from the call to empathy and principle that marked the global counterculture at its best. Efforts to find common themes among the events of that contentious decade tend to devolve into generalities no more satisfying than these unless one resorts to an oblique strategy; and the strategy adopted in this book has been nothing if not oblique, focusing primarily on a collection of novels from the two decades just preceding the years of the global counterculture and secondarily on another period of a little less than three decades straddling the millennium, when filmmakers tried, with decidedly mixed results, to turn those narratives into films.<sup>1</sup> The hope has been that, through a close reading of the novels and an equally careful look at the films, we might learn something, necessarily partial but perhaps also underestimated, about certain defining aspects of the counterculture as they were set forth in the years just preceding its emergence into the mainstream and about how those features were occluded or transformed after the counterculture had become self-evidently a thing of the past. These readings have been so various, however, that a glaring need for summary remains.

They have also been deliberately selective. To the extent that the concerns of this book are historical, I have proceeded on the conviction that we are still living in the wake of the global counterculture—that a good deal of what is most at issue in the contemporary world was publicly defined, at least in broad strokes, during the crucial decade 1965–75, and that much depends on how we sort out our relationship to those years. I began with the development, currently at least as visible as ever on both the political left and the political right, that the modern world has seen the displacement of religious feeling onto politics, which is often pursued with a fervor born of the judgment that only some brand of radicalism can be an adequate response to a world that must live with the possibility of its own destruction and a history that can seem more unjust than inspiring. In this context, one cannot ignore the role of religion in the single most consequential political initiative of the postwar era, the civil rights movement; and it's not difficult to see that if one means to expose oneself to attack dogs and high-pressure hoses, a large measure of faith can be an invaluable support. And yet, a half-century on, I am struck by the extent to which things have reversed themselves, and the theme of reversal will be prominent in the remarks that follow. Although the counterculture has left a rich political inheritance in the form of causes once deemed secondary or minor, it now seems undeniable that politics pursued with a vehemence approaching religious belief is the single greatest danger to the contemporary world, as fanaticism and intolerance make it increasingly difficult for different tribes even to talk to one another, let alone to find mutually acceptable compromises. This is not an argument against religion so much as an argument in favor of returning religious emotion to its proper place. For some that place will be the traditional religions themselves, which are not about to go away, however much

their congregations may have declined in recent years. For others (and I include myself here), it will be the domain of culture—of art and speculative thought, understood broadly enough to include the major religious traditions—and, especially, of narrative.

In contrast to the practice of politics with the certitude of a religious votary, this study has been concerned with a kind of narrative that addresses what we do *not* know, one that offers something more than genre entertainment and something other than ideological or commercial manipulation. Here, too, questions of value cannot be avoided, and my contention is that the kind of narrative that takes up matters once thought to belong to the province of religion alone has a stronger claim on our attention than any other. To be sure, this is also the kind of narrative that runs the greatest risk of failure, and I have no doubt that some will point to the declining fortunes of the writers revisited in these pages and to the uneven achievements of those who have brought their work to the screen as evidence against my case. It is equally true that some of these writers embraced versions of political extremism themselves, in however inchoate a form, and the project of revisiting their writings has been complicated by the obligation to identify views that deserve to be consigned to the folklore of a now distant era. Nevertheless, as all-consuming as politics was for many at the time, the counterculture cannot be reduced to a collection of attitudes to be evaluated according to one's political convictions. On the contrary, it was a sweeping cultural transformation that sought to define itself in terms that echo some of the oldest themes in human history and to give them renewed and specifically contemporary forms. In the pages that follow, therefore, I will be reviewing the representative conceptions of mystery in the entire period of the postwar and global countercultures with an eye on how those conceptions have fared in more recent decades. And I will return to the question of narrative filmmaking as the inheritor of that project and consider not only its shortcomings but also a few of its more notable successes in reinventing some of the forms of mystery discussed in the preceding chapters for the twenty-first century.

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In 1960, the same year that J. Milton Yinger formulated his concept of “contraculture,” another American academic, one who had cultivated an intellectual style in distinct contrast to Yinger’s modest proposals, gave the Phi Beta Kappa address at Columbia University and then, a year later, published his remarks in *Harper’s Magazine*. Norman O. Brown’s “Apocalypse: The Place of Mystery in the Life of the Mind” is an outpouring in the vatic register characteristic of his writings after *Life Against Death*, a passionate declaration that, the rational mind having reached “the end of its tether,” the time had come to assert once again the centrality of mystery in human experience.<sup>2</sup> For Brown, the madness of the world at what he took to be

the end of history was too plain to be ignored. In 1960, there was no need to dwell on the memory of death camps or the threat of nuclear annihilation; they were in the thoughts of every thinking person already, evidence that technology, science, even reason itself had become the accomplices of a historically unprecedented insanity. Against this unholy madness, Brown recommended the holy madness of the Dionysian, Orphic, and Eleusinian mysteries; the visions of Protestant mystics like Jakob Böhme and George Fox; the Nietzschean perspective; and the aim of restoring a pre-Socratic understanding of truth as *aletheia*—as disclosure, unveiling, or revelation. In doing so, he joined a host of other twentieth-century thinkers who sought to evade or at least hold at arm's length the entire history of Western philosophy since the advent of Platonic dualism, Aristotelian science, and conceptions of truth as correspondence to some external reality. In their place, he advanced the long-discredited claims of ritual, “the power which makes all things new,” and especially the ritual conjuring performed by works of art, where truth is conveyed not as endorsed by science (a term that Brown contemptuously placed between quotation marks) but as embodied by myth (4).

One could hardly ask for a better *summa* of the associations attached to a word that has been something of a guiding thread in the preceding chapters. Mystery (*mysterium*, μυστήριον) is the potentially liberating sense that reality is more than it's been taken to be, that the greater truths are as yet unrevealed, that our lives can be something other than they are now. It is a key element in Jack Kerouac's religious makeup, where it assumes the form of divine enthusiasm and, in ecumenical fashion, takes its place alongside his orthodox Catholic heritage and Buddhist studies. It evokes the relationship to what Carson McCullers calls “the world,” and in the guise of a highly personal version of African-American Christianity, it is a constant point of reference throughout James Baldwin's career. It describes Alexander Trocchi's withering disdain for “literature” and quest to free himself from social convention in pursuit of an authenticity that the narrator of *Young Adam* aims to realize through uninhibited sensuous contact with the physical universe and the body of his lover. It is present as well in William Burroughs' equally trenchant mistrust of language, not to mention his Gnostic conception of a “spirit state,” the ultimate stage in an evolutionary process never imagined by Darwin, through which the human (or at least the male) body might leave this homophobic planet behind once and for all. And, finally, in relation to the two novels that frame this series of readings, *The Sheltering Sky* and *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, it takes on a meaning much like the one it has in the later work of Martin Heidegger, where “the mystery” designates the concealed regions of Being, including all those other cultural worlds that are presently unknown to us.<sup>3</sup>

Yet Brown, who fervently hoped that “human history goes from man to superman,” was nevertheless compelled to admit that he himself had not thus far achieved superman status: “I come to you not as one who has

supernatural powers, but as one who seeks for them, and who has some notions where to go to find them" (2). And in this respect, too, he was articulating an important part of the sensibility he shared with the writers whose work I have considered. For theirs are not prophetic books in the Blakean sense, not testimonies of direct and unmediated experience of the unseen world in the manner of the Protestant clairvoyants admired by Brown, although a certain amount of propaganda wishfully describes their work in just these terms. They are, rather, the writings of individuals who have sought such powers but as often as not come back with something else; and on those occasions when they do give us an imagery of cosmic unveiling, as in the last moments of Port Moresby's life in *The Sheltering Sky* or the final pages of *The Ticket That Exploded*, we are confronted not with a vision of the Lord's throne-chariot or a chorus of the morning stars but with the empty darkness of space following the death of a man or an entire planet. Even James Baldwin, who comes closest to writing a visionary episode in the traditional manner, informs the reader that his protagonist "saw the Lord" but refrains from describing exactly what he saw (197). In a more modest vein, those still capable of being moved by *On the Road* are less likely to find themselves affected by the scenes in which some divinity fails to appear, leaving only "God's empty chair" for company, than by the narrator's helpless love for his dynamic but troubled friend, who for all his energy is finally beyond help. Whereas nirvana remains stubbornly absent or impossible to sustain, the dharma of human compassion is, in this case, fully present.

Instead of the moment of visionary disclosure, the characteristic event recorded in these novels is the constantly receding quality of experience, whereby the sought-after condition—ecstasy, authenticity, presence—turns out to be elusive, a confounding occurrence that is close to the source of the narrative impulse itself and is succinctly summed up by Alexander Trocchi's observation that his desire to unite the senses in a complete experience left him with only stray impressions existing together incongruously, "like a stone and a melody." These are stories of seeking rather than finding, of groping one's way toward a "spirit state" but instead being lulled into false paradises by "deadly illusion drugs," which produce conditions in which there is "no mystery, no magic," but nightmares aplenty to fill a book as unnerving as *Naked Lunch*. Or they transport us by means of a dialectic of purity and abjection outside the boundaries of Western culture altogether and into the traditional life of the desert in *The Sheltering Sky* or the cultural world of a remote Amazonian tribe in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*; and although the second of those novels seems to complete a process left open by the ending of the first, its protagonist emerges from the jungle having become not the "real" Indian he thought he might be but the sort of culturally hybrid individual who in more recent years has become the primary focus of study among anthropologists now that uncontacted tribes have grown scarce. In their different ways, the protagonists of these novels are

all “on the avenue of the mystery,” but the places they end up are not the places they thought they were going, however much their journeys may have changed them along the way.

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A sense of the centrality of mystery to the extraordinary cultural developments of the age is also present in the two books that stand out among early discussions of the counterculture for the vivacity of the defense they mounted of what their authors saw happening among the young people around them (both were professors) as well as for the wide readership they commanded: Theodore Roszak’s *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1969) and Charles Reich’s *The Greening of America* (1970). Roszak, who did more than anyone to popularize a term that, as we’ve seen, had been bandied about by sociologists for almost two decades before he enshrined it in his title, did not reach back as far as the pre-Socratic era for likenesses; however, he did observe that the youthful exponents of the counterculture bore some resemblance to the primitive Christians, who had “awkwardly fashioned of Judaism and the mystery cults a minority culture that could not but seem absurd to Greco-Roman orthodoxy.”<sup>4</sup> And Reich, enumerating the experiences for which the contemporary equivalent of ancient orthodoxy had found no place, indignantly charged that the typical educated product of the age was convinced that “the richness, the satisfaction, the joy of life are to be found in power, success, status, acceptance, popularity, achievements, rewards, excellence, and the rational, competent mind,” but had no use for “dread, awe, wonder, mystery, accidents, failure, helplessness, magic.”<sup>5</sup>

Reich’s book has become notorious as perhaps the most extreme example of a tendency common to much writing of the era to define the counterculture as a new form of consciousness and then to predict optimistically that, this higher consciousness having been achieved, a better world will issue from it as naturally as the coming of springtime. In retrospect, it’s clear that he spectacularly overestimated the ability of consciousness alone to produce social change, and while he duly commented in passing on literature and film, he saved some of his most heartfelt praise for such things as the transformative effects of cannabis and surfing or the power of bell bottoms to liberate the ankles. Reading these piquant pages after a half century, one feels little surprise that a radical consciousness conceived as a host of benevolent intentions coupled with unconventional lifestyle choices failed to shake the foundations of the established order quite as thoroughly as he anticipated.

Still, one is struck by how much of Reich’s description sounds familiar fifty years later. His sketches of what he calls “Consciousness I” and “Consciousness II”—actually, two sets of infrequently stated but firmly entrenched cultural attitudes—are recognizable as the contrasting worlds

of what nowadays would be identified as red-state and blue-state America, both allegedly destined to be replaced by “Consciousness III,” the higher form of consciousness introduced by the counterculture. In Reich’s scheme, the first of these sets of views began its historical career in the previous century as “the traditional outlook of the American farmer, small businessman, and worker who is trying to get ahead” (16). It was basically innocent and stressed the freedom of the non-specialized individual, newly liberated from old-world structures of subordination, to realize his potential (for this individual was male) through energy and hard work. He was “the pioneer, the settler, the boy who makes good” (24); above all, his sense of himself was spiritual and put a premium on self-reliance. In his contemporary incarnation, he believes “that the least government governs best” and tends to vote for the candidate “who promises a return to earlier conditions of life, law and order, rectitude, and lower taxes” (25). Confronted with the changing landscape of post-Civil War America—the expansion of the market economy, the development of industrialism, the growth of cities—Consciousness I has been unable to address the ensuing complications other than by blaming “some malign outside influence”: communists, foreigners, minorities (26).

The difficulties with this loose way of posing the problem become hard to ignore when, to illustrate the nineteenth century’s celebration of individual potential, Reich quotes a pair of passages from Whitman and then, with no sense of contradiction, remarks that the poet “could be speaking for today’s youth” (23). Consciousness III is not distinct from Consciousness I, then, or at least not on those occasions when the latter, in its capacity as “repository and supporter of myth,” still seems vital and compelling (27). The older mindset is out-of-date—except when it isn’t. And in truth he is correct that the counterculture included a good many impulses that were highly traditional, and some of those impulses were already on display in certain countercultural novels of the postwar period, including a robust expression of the era’s pervasive sexism. Both Jack Kerouac and his admirer Ken Kesey proclaim the freedom of the (male) individual in a vein close to the patriotic libertarianism that has been a prominent feature of American culture since the Second World War, an attitude that is unmistakable in Kesey’s union-busting second novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1964), and even in the stars-and-stripes regalia favored by the Merry Pranksters.<sup>6</sup> The less appealing (but equally longstanding) aspect of this brand of flamboyant individualism can be witnessed in the atrocious treatment of women meted out by the man who was in so many ways the presiding spirit of the counterculture, Neal Cassady.

Mention of Cassady reminds us that the incarnation of the sovereign individual who figures most memorably in the novels of the postwar counterculture is the charismatic hero: the Cassady character in *On the Road*, whether he’s called by his own name in the scroll version of the manuscript or renamed Dean Moriarty in the published version, along with his

wholly fictional kinsman, Randle Patrick McMurphy, in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Charisma is at once the most vivid and the most ambiguous form of mystery; the individual who seems touched by grace makes us wonder about the source of a seemingly superhuman power but also about how that power will be used. It is, moreover, one of the most difficult things to convey in writing, and one finally has to take on faith the testimony of numerous people that Cassady actually possessed the personal qualities that so many noted in his lifetime, qualities captivating to such an extent that more than a few were willing to tolerate the erratic and thoughtless behavior that accompanied them (it must be said that these godlike attributes are not apparent in the existing, sixties-era film footage of Cassady, which displays only a superannuated speed freak dancing crazily or compulsively talking as fast as he once drove). The combination of boundless energy and a natural innocence that was able to survive any amount of indefensible behavior was at the heart of his appeal, and like the proverbial boy who comes from nothing (and in contrast to the familiar stereotype of the countercultural lay-about), he translated his energy into vigorous labor at even the humblest of jobs.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, he was a religious man, who for some years devoted himself to the self-help regime of the unlettered Christian seer Edgar Cayce.<sup>8</sup> Regarded from a certain angle, for better *and* for worse, Cassady was as traditionally American as the apple pie consumed by the narrator of *On the Road*.

The charismatic character has a special significance in the context of this study because charisma, though not a natural subject for literary representation, is an ancient phenomenon that was waiting for its ideal medium, and that medium is film. In the classic Weberian analysis, the emphasis is on the charismatic leader who holds sway over his followers through his presence in person, typically addressing a crowd from a stage or an elevated podium rather than through the less personal medium of written language; but with the coming of film (a nascent technology in Weber's day), charisma was given an entirely new scope that we have been grappling with ever since. The point is convincingly illustrated by the literary and cinematic versions of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Kesey's messianic allusions and images of cascading floodwaters pale in comparison to the ability of Jack Nicholson's screen presence to bring the mythic dimension of the material to life; and as the larger historical narrative that this study has to relate is one of myths that have faltered in the aftermath of the counterculture, we might pause for a moment to consider the case of this unique counterexample. It's not merely that the actor, through mastery of his craft, convinces the audience of his character's powers as a leader to rejuvenate his group of woebegone followers; it's also that he exercises a less rationally explainable influence over the audience itself, thanks to the medium of cinema. Consequently, the film version of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is the sole attempt to bring a novel of the postwar counterculture to the screen that is arguably superior to the book on which it's based, and the charismatic

presence of the lead actor is one of two major pieces of supporting evidence for that judgment.

The other, as I have noted, is the performance of Louise Fletcher as Nurse Ratched, a remarkably subtle and entirely successful effort to realize a female character who in the novel is little more than a buxom personification of the machinery of control. This is not to say that the revision of this character from absolutely one-dimensional to at least somewhat rounded can be called a feminist gesture. Nurse Ratched remains a villain of the hissable variety; and her final scene, in which she repeats the same morning routine that she went through at the start of the film, altered only by the neck brace she wears as a consequence of McMurphy's assault, lets us know that we should not expect her character to develop significantly. But the actress' success in telegraphing the presence of a person behind her chilly façade reveals an area where the limits of the mythic material as established by the postwar counterculture had begun to give way at a time when, following the emergence of feminism into the mainstream, the experience of women was becoming a significant focus of attention in American culture.

It is therefore a matter of interest that in *On the Road*, the latest and least successful of these adaptations, one of the few stretches of the film that isn't dead on the screen is the dance at the New Year's Eve party, a creatively cinematic elaboration of the novel's theme of ecstatic immersion in the present moment; and the effectiveness of the sequence is largely the work of Kristen Stewart, a genuine movie star, whose charisma is here given free rein.<sup>9</sup> One could easily overstate the ironies of the process by which a novel built around a famously charismatic man became a film enlivened only by the performance of a famously charismatic woman, yet it seems to have been the actress' intention that her character, a distinctly secondary and frequently abused figure in the book, should be felt as the undisclosed source of energy between the male leads.<sup>10</sup> In this case, however, the film lacks a masculine presence of comparable dynamism; and because the Cassidy character is central to the narrative, that absence is nearly fatal, although the idea of endowing Marylou with a degree of animating agency—kept undercover, so to speak, as the cinematic equivalent of a mystery—is by far the most interesting aspect of the project.

Charisma and its near relative, celebrity, are equivocal things, though. As Cronenberg's film of *Naked Lunch* reminds us, the Beats themselves had been turned into celebrities by the time these adaptations began to appear in 1985, with the most memorable personalities among them becoming the subjects of biographical films or even, in the case of William Burroughs, launching a second career as a performer and thus exchanging the unassimilable qualities of his writing for a respectable, if minor place in the starry firmament of popular culture. Nowadays one discourses learnedly on the exploits of Kerouac, Ginsberg, et al., with a kind of fascination usually reserved for the couplings and uncouplings of Hollywood luminaries, and it's difficult not to feel that something has decisively changed, especially

in view of the unsettling degree to which media-enhanced charisma and the resulting stratospheric levels of celebrity have become major factors in American politics, a development that was first noted in the postwar era with the Nixon–Kennedy debates and then emerged full blown with the election of a former movie star as president in 1980. It is perhaps not irrelevant that these films began to appear during the Reagan era, nor does it require much imagination to see that the union of Reich’s *Consciousness I* with the aura of stardom resulted in a rather different historical irony than the influence of charismatic women on films made from certain male-oriented novels of the postwar counterculture. It was the coming to power, by democratic means, of that quintessential modern equivalent of royalty, the celebrity.

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The historical, economic, and technological context in which the global counterculture emerged in the mid-1960s was of interest to Reich and Roszak, both of whom insisted that this new upheaval didn’t easily fit any inherited radical theory, although Roszak did acknowledge that his European contemporaries felt differently: “The heirs of an institutionalized left-wing legacy, the young radicals of Europe still tend to see themselves as the champions of ‘the people’ (meaning the working class) against the oppression of the bourgeoisie (meaning, in most cases, their own parents)” (2). As the European experience of the postwar counterculture has figured here in the shape of a novel and film from Scotland, I want to give a measure of attention to early writing about the counterculture in Britain, where progressive intellectuals were not especially inclined to appreciate the humor of Roszak’s jape. By the middle of the decade, the evolution of working-class culture into a rich complex of dissent had been detailed in some highly regarded books, notably Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), Raymond Williams’ *Culture and Society* (1958), and E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), all of which portrayed that culture as an established way of life formed in self-conscious opposition to the dominant culture of the propertied classes. The first two also noted with concern that this communal culture was being disrupted in the postwar industrialized world, with its burgeoning consumer ethos and mass communications, which they regarded as an influx of distracting trash. Of course, the broadly Marxist tradition that these writers embodied was, it hardly needs saying, less than congenial to Alexander Trocchi or any other writer of the postwar counterculture; and one imagines that, for their part, the older representatives of the left would have tended to share the communist, Scottish nationalist poet Hugh MacDairmid’s view of Trocchi as “cosmopolitan scum.”<sup>11</sup>

Their students and successors, however—in particular, the group that formed around the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies

(BCCCS), founded by Hoggart in 1964—took a strong interest in the new cultural developments of the postwar era, although the primary focus of their interest was not the counterculture itself but the working-class subcultures that sprang up in the decades following the Second World War and rapidly passed into oblivion or commercial assimilation. In their influential analysis, these were understood as latently political expressions of the encounter between the traditional working-class culture described by Hoggart, Williams, and Thompson and the relatively greater prosperity and growing consumer culture of postwar Britain. Thus, an exemplary study like Phil Cohen's "Sub-Cultural Conflict and Working Class Community" (1972) describes how the reconstruction of the East End of London, together with the modest but previously non-existent opportunities for advancement held out by the postwar world, met with an ambivalent response that was given subcultural expression by working-class youth.<sup>12</sup> The iconography of a subculture like the Mods, with their slim-cut suits, fishtail parkas, and Vespas, suggests an imaginary realization of the newly accessible white-collar world (which in reality might offer little more than a job as a file clerk), whereas the shaved heads, suspenders, and steel-toe boots of the Skinheads signified a rejection of possibilities felt as disruptive to the cohesiveness of traditional working-class life and a new affirmation of its style in deliberately brutish form. Participation in these subcultures was a matter not just of donning one or another set of meaningful accessories but of adopting a whole lifestyle, which the Birmingham theorists interpreted as a means of "winning space" from the dominant culture in a quickly-shifting social landscape, a "magical" but politically inflected response to change summed up by the title of the compendium volume that would become the principal statement of the group's work: *Resistance through Rituals* (1975).<sup>13</sup>

The study of social developments within the working class was, then, the main concern of the BCCCS rather than the counterculture, which was a subsidiary focus and a challenge added to the other challenges the group was facing. Cultural Studies as practiced by the Birmingham group was situated on the line between literary criticism and sociology, and it drew fire from both sides of that line. The spectacular dimension of subcultures was something new, but could a close reading of the apparel endorsed by such ephemeral "near-groups" as the Crombies or the Teddy Boys really have the same value as a close reading of a play by Shakespeare? And was there any empirical evidence that subcultural pursuits were actually lived by their aficionados as experiences distinct from the rest of working-class life or that they had any more of a political dimension than traditional leisure-time activities like football or snooker? Whereas the literary world suspected subcultures of being no more than crude theater, sociologists suspected them of being no more than theatrical. And it wasn't only that this brand of magic had its debunkers. By the end of the sixties, the relatively small-scale rituals through which it was expressed were not even the most dramatic social spectacle around.

The pages devoted to the counterculture in *Resistance through Rituals* are something of a study in critical indecision. In decided contrast to the largely symbolic activities of working-class subcultures, the counterculture included a sizable number of politically mobilized students, who organized sit-ins, marches, and demonstrations in support of worthy left-wing causes; and even the peace-loving hippies were actually going out and founding new societies in the form of rural communes and alternative collectives instead of contenting themselves with coded gestures of resistance. Yet the counterculture was predominantly middle-class, albeit with participants drawn from every level of society, and was never consistently anti-capitalist, although it did question established attitudes toward everything from sex to race to the environment. The Birmingham theorists recognized that these activities constituted a break of some sort; however, they also suspected that the whole thing could be a ruse by which the dominant culture was renewing and expanding itself: "This 'negating' of a dominant culture, but from *within* that culture, may account for the continual oscillation between two extremes: total critique and—its reverse—substantial incorporation. It initiated a profoundly ambiguous 'negative dialectic'" (49). In other words, these bourgeois radicals seemed to be changing the world, but they might turn out to be cosmopolitan scum after all.

By the end of the century, however, it appeared to intellectuals of a more traditional left-wing bent that the scum had floated to the surface even in their own periodicals; for although *Resistance through Rituals* (summoning italics to the service of the class struggle) had asserted "the stubborn *refusal of class . . . to disappear*" (17), it seemed to be doing precisely that in a number of later studies, where the once-youthful members of the Birmingham group found their work characterized in terms reminiscent of the stick-in-the-mud profile they had earlier assigned their own mentors. Rejecting the Marxist perspective for an approach sometimes described as postmodern, Sarah Thornton's *Club Cultures* (1995) and David Muggleton's *Inside Subculture* (2000) dismissed the class emphasis of the Birmingham group as incapable of doing justice to the individuality and heterogeneity of the contemporary world; and in 2004—a year after David Mackenzie's film of *Young Adam* was released—Andy Bennett and Keith Kahn-Harris edited another noteworthy collection of essays, this one entitled *After Subcultures*, which seemed prepared to retire the whole concept. More recently, Bennett and others have revived the once-suspect idea of counterculture and thus, in a sense, completed the counterculture's conquest of Birmingham.<sup>14</sup>

The details of this much-abbreviated history of one significant strand of intellectual life in the Anglophone world over the past fifty years are less important than the context it provides for *Young Adam*, easily the most interesting of the later films made from the novels of the postwar counterculture. For whatever Mackenzie's intentions may have been, he created a film that is almost perfectly faithful to Trocchi's novel but is at the same time *anti*-countercultural. Set in the period described by Hoggart and

Williams as witnessing the incipient breakup of traditional working-class culture, the film invites us to contemplate its half-century-old narrative from the perspective of a later era's awareness of the excesses of the counterculture as embodied by the self-involved protagonist. It shows no interest in the celebration of hybrid identities and free-floating intensities characteristic of the moment when it was made but offers instead a piece of kitchen-sink realism typical of the period it depicts, and the only ritual on display is that of the main character's compulsive and ultimately destructive quest for sexual freedom. Ironically, the plot does offer a mystery, but the sad tale of how the dead woman came to be in the river is not as momentous as what it reveals about the protagonist, who isn't a murderer but turns out to be thoroughly guilty nonetheless. In this respect, the film is concerned not with mystery but with demystification in the familiar Marxist sense, and what is demystified is the figure of the middle-class bohemian, whose countercultural pose conceals an ego perpetually in need of shoring up. In this version of the story, the myth of the artist is only the mask of the narcissist.

If Mackenzie's depiction of Joe recalls MacDairmid's estimate of Trocchi, the places and people arranged around this unprepossessing center are the result of creatively suggestive elaboration. Two of the film's barroom scenes offer a contrast that seems designed to illustrate the historical developments that worried Hoggart and Williams. In the first, Joe pretends to be suffering from a headache and begs off the game of darts that he has promised Les, quitting the traditional working-class environment of the pub to initiate his pursuit of Ella. In the other, he accompanies Ella's sister Gwendoline to a more upscale lounge, where they have a drink before heading off to a particularly sordid tryst in an alleyway. The first location is the epitome of the modest but neighborly communal environment, and here Les' disappointment at having lost his evening of darts is quickly remedied by a sociable stranger's offer to give him a game. The second, with its red leatherette benches and modern cocktail tables, belongs to the contemporary urban world that is evidently Gwendoline's preferred environment, as indicated by her up-to-date outfit, which is implicitly contrasted with her sister's drab garments. Newly widowed but not particularly bereaved, Gwendoline is a devotee of the pastime of "doing nothing" that was singled out by the Birmingham group as a defining feature of the working-class embrace of modernity.<sup>15</sup> As a result, the film implies, she has no better way to fill her time than to spoil her sister's affair with Joe by offering herself up to his easily kindled desire, an adult equivalent of the sort of "weird idea" represented in *Resistance through Rituals* by the street-corner kid's urge to smash bottles for lack of anything else to do. The character of Gwendoline recalls Hoggart's description of the "juke-box boys . . . who spend their evening listening in harshly lighted milk-bars to the 'nickelodeons,'" and his sketch of the places frequented by these regrettable types develops a contrast much like the parallel barroom scenes in *Young Adam*: "the nastiness of their modernistic knick-knacks, their glaring showiness [reveal] an aesthetic

breakdown so complete that, in comparison with them, the layout of the living-rooms in some of the poor houses from which the customers come seems to speak of a tradition as balanced and civilized as an eighteenth-century town house."<sup>16</sup> The film thus returns full circle to a critical perspective from the period of the novel on which it's based, and having kept company with the likes of Joe and Gwendoline in the interim, some may find it newly relevant.

Perhaps the single most ingenious transformation of the literary material performed by the film—a change that, in its quiet way, is emblematic of the filmmakers' rethinking of their source—is the conversion of the first-person narrator's sarcastic remark about "the industrious working classes" into a line of dialogue spoken by Cathie on the evening of her death. Upon learning that her ex-boyfriend has taken a job on a barge, she expresses mock surprise that this libertine *litterateur*, who was formerly so disdainful of honest employment, is now "in bed with the industrious working classes." The sarcasm that the novel directed against even the humblest members of society has been turned back on the randy protagonist; and Cathie's gibe is well calculated, as Joe is no more enamored of either manual *or* literary labor now than he was before and demonstrates as much by throwing his typewriter in the river. And by this point in the film one might be forgiven for feeling that we would all be better off if the species of self-indulgent countercultural sensibility that he personifies were to follow the machine into the water. *Young Adam* is not quite an unqualified success, despite the resourcefulness of the adaptation, as the revelations of the main character's shiftlessness, placed unavoidably at the center of a narrative conceived with rather different aims in mind, are a dismaying spectacle that leaves only so much room for the development of more sympathetic characters like Ella and Les. It's almost as if one of the casually cruel middle-class figures from the supporting cast of a Mike Leigh or Ken Loach film had been given his own movie. Still, by cutting against the grain of both his source material and his historical moment, Mackenzie has come closer than anyone in recent decades to turning a noteworthy novel of the postwar counterculture into an enduring piece of cinema.

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A resurgent individualism, whether in traditional or feminist garb, and the future of the European Left were not topics that Reich or Roszak chose to explore in detail; their emphasis was rather on what Reich called Consciousness II and Roszak called "the technocracy." In fact, these two writers were so much in agreement on this subject that it's worth a careful look at their analysis and what has become of it in later years. Whereas Reich's Consciousness I dated from the nineteenth century, this newer one developed over the first half of the twentieth in reaction to the excesses of the first: the domination of the Robber Barons, the increasingly evident

tendency of laissez-faire capitalism to stumble forward from crisis to crisis, and the crowning disaster of the Great Depression. Beginning with Wilsonian Progressivism and expanding under the New Deal, it set out to balance the earlier ethos of sacrifice in the name of self-betterment with an ethos of sacrifice for the common good, emphasizing the priority of large institutions, favoring managerial values, and thus creating the conditions for the rise of the organization man in the postwar era. Of course, Soviet-bloc communism and the various socialist reforms enacted in some Western European countries went much farther in this direction; however, an important claim of the countercultural critique was that it was diagnosing a syndrome more fundamental than capitalism or socialism—a tendency purportedly inherent in the entire industrialized world toward the development of a total system, one that, in Roszak's words, "eludes all traditional political categories" (8).

This thesis propelled both writers to flights of angry eloquence. Unlike the inheritors of the nineteenth-century mindset, who prided themselves on masculine competence in the face of the unknown (neither mentioned Hemingway, but there is no better illustration), the objective of the technocratic ethos was never to come upon the unknown either in the workplace or in one's spotless suburban home, as rational planning, efficient administration, and a uniformed security force could be counted on to escort it from the premises. Life would be sad and dull, perhaps, but comfortable and safe, provided one could avoid a nuclear holocaust. Yet if the older sort of consciousness was driven in part by fear of poverty and starvation, this newer one suffered its own insecurities inspired by the nebulosity of the achievements by which it measured itself, consisting as they did of positions in institutions and in society itself rather than something as tangible as a good harvest. The preference, therefore, was to steer clear of mystery through caution and conformism, to command experience rather than to have an experience, to know it all ahead of time rather than to open oneself to anything new. "Consciousness II believes in *control*," Reich observed (70); and Roszak contended that systemic integration had become so pervasive and accepted that "even those in the state and/or corporate structure who dominate our lives must find it impossible to conceive of themselves as the agents of totalitarian control" (9). In building his case, he didn't refer to the oeuvre of William Burroughs and, if he was familiar with it at all, no doubt considered it an egregious specimen of the "pornographic grotesquerie and bloodcurdling sadomasochism" that he had noticed cropping up around the fringes of the counterculture (an example of such "maniacal nihilism" that especially troubled him was the music of the Doors); but an unprejudiced look at Burroughs' writings would have disclosed a phantasmagoric equivalent of his own reflections on this theme (74-5).

He would also have found approval for his assault on what he regarded as the source of the problem in the dualism assumed by the conventional scientific worldview. For Roszak, like Norman O. Brown, was a fierce opponent of science and continued to describe himself as a "neo-Luddite" even after

he was later compelled to revise his characterization of the counterculture as anti-scientific. Just as Reich offered the most optimistic statement of the counterculture's ability to change the world through consciousness-raising, *The Making of a Counter Culture* offered the most aggressive statement of its case against reason. It's a case that had been made many times before and has been reiterated many times since: heir to the dualism of Plato and Aristotle, the Cartesian *cogito*, ensconced in its realm of pure reason, measures the world with an analytical eye and manipulates its surroundings with an instrumental detachment that regretfully accepts the possibility of horrifying atrocities as a by-product of its means-to-an-end thinking. In Roszak's view (which, to be fair, was hardly his alone), there is a direct line that runs from the *Discourse on Method* to the technocracy to the carpet bombing of third-world villages. And if the war machine then functioning at its peak in Vietnam was the logical consequence of Western philosophy and science, could a nuclear finale be far behind?

This was a story that convinced many listeners, but it was not the whole story about the counterculture's relationship to science, as Roszak himself shortly came to realize. In *From Satori to Silicon Valley* (1986), he acknowledged that, along with a dominant "reversionary" strain for which he had great sympathy—the retreat from industrial civilization represented by communes and experimental collectives (and, in this book, by a figure like Peter Matthiessen)—the counterculture also displayed a secondary "technophile" tendency, which was present from the beginning in, for example, the taste for amplified instruments and elaborate light shows at rock concerts or the interest in synthesized drugs like LSD.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps unexpectedly, it turns out that Jack Kerouac wasn't risking his countercultural credentials after all when he got excited about the purchase of an up-to-date refrigerator for his mother but was foreshadowing an enthusiasm for new technologies that would eventually become as representative as his Zen mountain-climbing in the company of Gary Snyder. Likewise, it's revealing that when characters in the novels of the postwar counterculture step outside the industrialized world, they sometimes come up against the unknown in the exceptionally unpleasant form of mortal illness, and at such a moment even the aspiring primitive Lewis Moon doesn't hesitate to enlist the aid of modern medicine.

Ironically, this is a topic on which William Burroughs could seem downright sensible by comparison. Although he shared Roszak's contempt for the abuses of technocratic reason—the tendency of scientists to become "reality addicts"—his views were, on the whole, unexceptional. Technology, he declared, is "more or less a neutral instrument"; the real problem is simply that, "with the present people in power, the more efficient the technology the more of a menace they are."<sup>18</sup> And while he didn't offer a philosophically precise definition of science, he added: "We know in general what we mean by it: an overall method of evaluating information according to experimental data, and as such it is obviously valuable."<sup>19</sup> At the same time, those who have had the experience of immersion in Burroughs' writing are aware

that “science” is also the name he assigns the larger project of exploring the unknown, of venturing a kind of bold experimentation, often employing himself as test subject, that is the very antithesis of making sure that everything is predictable ahead of time. It is, ultimately, a creative project, and in Burroughs’ laboratory of the lower depths, science and mystery find an unlikely common ground.

The point is that science and technology opened up enormous possibilities for creative activity during the twentieth century, and while it’s a point that Roszak was only grudgingly willing to concede, he admitted the countercultural appeal of such provocative, if congenitally opaque thinkers as Marshall McLuhan, who has come to seem especially prescient in retrospect. Among the era’s media technologies, audio recording and film occupy an intermediate place, much junior to the printed word but predating the sophisticated electronic media developed after World War II. For this very reason, the equipment to produce audio tape and film was the technology that had reached the point of becoming commercially available during the postwar period, so it’s unsurprising that these were the new forms of media to which notable figures of the postwar counterculture like Kerouac, Burroughs, and Kesey were drawn in their efforts to marshal technology in the service of myth. That the caliber of filmmaking on display in *Pull My Daisy* (1959) or *Towers Open Fire* (1963) was unlikely to win over a broad audience is less important than that Kerouac and Burroughs viewed these films as extensions of their writing, and the shot in which Burroughs chants incantations over a pile of film canisters in the second of those productions might be considered emblematic of the union of technology and mystery they hoped to achieve. It was only a matter of time before the countercultural sensibility announced itself in mainstream filmmaking, and one way of understanding the significance of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and other New Hollywood films is as the coming to fruition of a project begun in the postwar era. From this perspective, the later efforts of filmmakers to bring the novels of the postwar counterculture to the screen ought to have been the culmination of that project—the triumphant translation of some of the most hallowed countercultural myths into one of the most technologically advanced of mainstream narrative forms.

The problem was that the world in which those films were made was no longer the world of the postwar era; and although it’s undeniable that individual creative miscalculations account for some of their less successful features, it’s also likely that historical differences had something to do with the underwhelming reception they had at the time of their release. Modern feminism is only one of the crucial changes that have intervened to alter the minds of viewers in the wake of the global counterculture; another comes into view when one turns a critical eye on the once persuasive thesis of the all-enveloping environment of technocracy.<sup>20</sup> The idea of a total system, called “Big Brother,” “Moloch,” “the Combine,” or sometimes just “the System,” was a staple of postwar intellectual life; and coincidentally with

the emergence of the global counterculture in the late 1960s, it received influential reinforcement in a book whose author was a pillar of the liberal establishment and so, one might have thought, more likely to become a member of the technocracy than its critic. John Kenneth Galbraith's *The New Industrial State* (1967) was cited with approval by both Reich and Roszak, and one imagines that such a book from such a source must have given them more encouragement than either cared to admit. Galbraith offered a portrait of an industrial society that had reached a point of technological complexity so great that economic activity had been taken over to an unprecedented degree by large corporations. The interlocking committees that handled the decision-making in these giant firms were, he alleged, influential enough to bend government policy to their will and to avoid the hazards of the market by manipulating consumer demand through the power of advertising, even as they financed their own ever-expanding manufacturing operations. Society had thus become awash in things that nobody really needed but everybody was conditioned to want, and the faceless technicians who collectively steered the big firms enjoyed an all-but-unbreakable lock on their positions, which only some members of the educated classes—ironically, the very people who had been groomed to manage the complexities of modern economic life—had begun to oppose.<sup>21</sup>

There is enough truth in this picture and so much more that appeals to the imagination, echoing the efforts of innumerable creative artists who have presented dark portraits of malignly looming corporate entities, that one might not immediately notice just how wrong Galbraith was. It's certainly true that large corporations influence government policy to an unhealthy extent, and it's also true that the environment of advanced consumer capitalism has become a dream world in which it can be hard to distinguish one's real needs and deeply felt desires from the whims and fantasies stirred up by advertising. But has advertising ever been able to summon and shape the demands of consumers with such thoroughness that big business has been freed from the logic of the marketplace? Have large corporations ever held quite as secure a position in the economy as Galbraith maintained that they do? Even at the time, economists fully sympathetic to Galbraith's reformist inclinations pointed to the absence of evidence for these claims and the extent to which he had overstated his case.<sup>22</sup> And by the early 1990s, when the later group of films made from the novels of the postwar counterculture had begun to appear, his argument was in tatters. In 1994, Paul Krugman dismissed Galbraith's book as a prime example of style over substance in economic thought, and on its fiftieth anniversary, the Australian economist Joshua Gans was able to point out that the position of large corporations has turned out to be so much less secure than Galbraith claimed that, of the top ten firms in 1967, only two remained in the top ten by 2017.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, not only are the current leaders no bigger than the top ten of fifty years ago, but Galbraith missed an important countereffect: equity funds have grown so much that one of the most steadily successful, Berkshire Hathaway, has

itself made the top ten, buying up stock and breaking up the old corporate bureaucracies through outsourcing assisted by globalization. Here again the decisive turning point was the Reagan era, when it was made abundantly clear that big business had found a formidable rival in big capital.

What we are left with is a picture of advanced capitalism that is characterized much less by static control than by constant change, which over time has produced gross inequality as well as occasionally alarming levels of instability, as witnessed in the financial crisis of 2008 (and, of course, by 1990 the state of the bureaucracies in the former Soviet bloc was far more obviously dire). Corporations no longer provide anything like the kind of job security they once did, and those who think they might be satisfied with the life of the old-fashioned organization man now find that success in the world of big business requires not just an ability to climb the corporate ladder but a talent for leaping from one ladder to the next before the first starts to topple. On a humbler stratum, large numbers of once secure middle-class people are worried less about being enticed into sleepwalking through unfulfilling careers to pay for things they could do without than about finding jobs with salaries sufficient to pay for things they actually need. The deeper fear is not of being controlled by the system but of being shut out of it and joining the crowd of extraneous individuals who inhabit the old industrial centers and those rural regions that were once the homeland of self-reliant individualism. As finance and technology have come to the fore, becoming the major economic success stories of the past half century, many have looked on uneasily as their own prospects have dwindled, and what they've lost has not been offset by the kinds of opportunities from which they are in any position to profit.

By the time David Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* was released in 1991, the world that had shaped Burroughs' Cold War-era vision of the mysterious machinery of control was well on its way to being replaced by a new, if not necessarily more reassuring one in which the chance of obtaining enormous wealth offered itself to a lucky few but was accompanied by ominous signs of diminished hopes for many others. It's no surprise, therefore, that the film's handling of the theme of control has a formal feeling that has led some to accuse it of aestheticizing one of the most aggressively unbeautiful books ever written. When in the penultimate scene Dr. Benway strips off his disguise and proceeds to dispatch Lee on a new mission as his agent, the viewer experiences it not as the disclosure of anything important that was previously concealed but as an extravagantly artificial gesture borrowed from the genre of the spy thriller. It pays affectionate tribute to Burroughs and provides a convenient framework for the self-referential narrative of the writer's quest for experience but retains little mythical vitality in the post-countercultural world. For all its elaborate craft and richness of invention, the only mystery the film reveals has to do with the unexpected historical changes that allow even the most savagely anti-social works of art to be assimilated to the culture of a later era.

Nevertheless, it seems possible that Burroughs, who has been vigorously dismissed in so many quarters as a repellent figure, will eventually turn out to have had insights relevant to our own day; and perhaps even Theodore Roszak may come to appear less the epitome of Boomer techno-incompetence than he currently does. When in *The Soft Machine* Burroughs imagined “*the habit-forming drug,*” which has a “precise molecular affinity for its client of predilection” and “takes over all functions from the addict,” he could not have predicted the growing body of psychological literature that attests to the habit-forming power of the internet and the ability of this most consequential of modern technological innovations, through nothing more than regular use, to alter the malleable structure of the human brain, if not reducing its owner to “the helpless condition of a larva,” at least measurably degrading the memory, attention span, capacity for empathy, and ability to follow a complicated argument or narrative. Evidence that immoderate amounts of time spent online clicking from one small gratification to another makes one stupider and so easier to control is not a body of research that Silicon Valley has been eager to publicize, but it is impossible to ignore in the aftermath of books like Nicholas Carr’s *The Shallows* (2010), which concludes with the rallying cry that, although the internet may seem irresistible, “it’s only against such powerful cultural currents that countercultural movements take shape.”<sup>24</sup>

One should probably not try to anticipate what will come of the neo-McLuhanite current in contemporary thought, nor is it the business of this study to recommend policies or to endorse therapies. I am struck, however, by the way these developments have foregrounded the mystery of the brain in the face of enticements that, unlike the opiate addiction presently afflicting so many, would reduce it not to a crustacean, insect, or stone, as in Burroughs’ nightmare visions of drug dependency, but to a wholly novel kind of soft machine linked in a circuit of fascination to a keyboard and screen. If it now seems inevitable that we will henceforth be living in a universe of screens rather than print—that the Gutenberg galaxy was a temporary stage in human history, destined to be replaced by a galaxy of images and minds shaped by exposure to them—it is also possible to imagine that the heritage of the counterculture may take the form of a contest of screen against screen in which narrative filmmaking has a vital role to play. And with such considerations in mind, one can single out a handful of examples that seem to represent perhaps not a new canon but at least a few cases in which certain countercultural currents have been given renewed life in our century. They are far from obscure—in fact, they are among the most highly praised films of the last two decades—but their filial relationship to the novels and films discussed in this book is not immediately obvious and calls for explanation.

The first of these twenty-first-century examples ingeniously reimagines the possibility of a technology that deprives its clients of their mental

faculties and subjects them to control when they look to it for salvation. Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) is built around the conceit of a mind cleansed of painful memories by an imaginary technology and its not-so-benign masters (including a Dr. Benway-type figure), who use their power to conduct relationships to their advantage while ostensibly helping others to get over relationships gone bad. The imagery of an insensate man plugged into a laptop while his memories of a lost lover are erased from his brain (and tranquilized by injections, as if to underscore the parallel between old and new varieties of narcotics), could be an icon for the internet age; however, the condition at which it aims is more of a *reductio ad absurdum* of the Maileresque "enormous present": a state of existence from which past experience has been completely removed. Whatever it may mean to be present in the moment, it cannot mean life unremembered, and recent research is beginning to confirm what many have suspected all along—that memory is not just a storehouse of information, filed away as if the brain were no more than a ductile hard drive encumbered by burdens that might be better unloaded onto actual hard drives, but an active, creative process conducted in the moment alongside all other forms of present experience.<sup>25</sup> To be present in the moment, it seems, is still paradoxically to have the past at one's side.

The brilliance of Charlie Kaufman's screenplay is in its invention of a way to dramatize human resistance to the inexorable, technologically effected hollowing out of the mind, as the film's not quite oblivious protagonist realizes too late that he desperately wants to hold onto his memories, painful though some of them may be. Much could be said about the script's handling of narrative time, the performances of the actors, and the remarkable imagery that the filmmakers have devised to render the mental landscape under siege, but perhaps most importantly it should be pointed out that those who have accused the film of lacking character development seem not to have noticed that the crucial indicator comes early on, when the protagonist breaks from his routine commute.<sup>26</sup> Following an impulse from within his mind that he doesn't yet understand, he boards a train headed in the other direction, and we eventually learn that his once and future lover will also break with the suitor who has used ill-gotten information to win her over. These unconscious gestures become conscious at the end of the film, when he begs her not to walk out on him again and she doesn't. Thus, while the charge of technological determinism has always hovered over the McLuhanite vision, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* reserves a small but important place for human agency and growth, offering an evocation of the mystery of the mind that the surrealists would have recognized in its portrait of our relationships to technology and to each other. It is one of three unmistakably great films that I would nominate as successors to the countercultural heritage in twenty-first-century cinema.

The idea of a total system, conceived in technological, managerial, or economic terms (or in some combination of the above), is not a bogey that one hears frequently excoriated nowadays beyond the far left and far right, although there is widespread recognition of the extent to which technology has changed our lives. It's only fair to say, however, that most believe the benefits of technology outweigh the costs incurred in the form of mind-rotting addictions, loss of privacy, tech firm censorship, and the spread of misinformation, extremist propaganda, and bald-faced lies. Yet there is one sixties-era concept of the totalizing variety that is if anything more regularly mentioned now than it was when it first appeared: the idea of a "systemic," "structural," "societal," or "institutional" racism. Of course, it's not always clear that many who repeat these phrases have a very specific idea of what they mean, and in this respect their subsequent career has been like that of another term coined in the sixties but employed far more widely in later years: deconstruction. As with the latter expression, which has suffered the fate of being stripped of its philosophical meaning and reduced to little more than a synonym for analysis, *systemic racism* often seems to express only the discontented perception that there is still a lot of racism out there, either in the overt forms of police brutality and white-supremacist agitation or in covert guises, like the stiffer sentences handed down to black defendants, the dumbfounding assumption (evidently common among medical students) that blacks are less susceptible to pain than whites, or the targeting of minority communities by banks hawking subprime loans.<sup>27</sup> If this were all the term was intended to name, one might reasonably feel that *racism* alone, sans modifier, would do just as well.

The addition of *systemic* becomes meaningful, however, when the combination is used to underline the connection between racism and the large inequalities in areas like employment, housing, health care, and education that continue to plague black communities. This is the way Martin Luther King, Jr. used the word *structural* in his final book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (1967); and in *Black Power* (1967), Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton elaborated a complex model in which *structure* and *institution* were used to refer to social mechanisms that perpetuate racial inequalities in specific areas of society, whereas *system* named the totality of those mechanisms. Perhaps because overt and covert racism were still so common in the mid-sixties, neither King nor Carmichael and Hamilton felt much need to linger over the distinction between racist attitudes and their larger social effects. If anything, *Black Power* was more interested in collapsing that distinction; for in that book the concept of systemic racism was part of an avowedly political program that set out to transform black America in the direction of a socialist pan Africanism, and the system was understood as the apparatus of a colonial power occupying an African nation. Yet there is no necessary connection between the concept of systemic racism and anti-colonialist political theory, which nowadays strikes most observers as an untenable conception of the relationship

between black Americans and the rest of American society. On the contrary (and perhaps ironically), while the idea owes some of its contemporary currency to outrage over high-profile incidents of police brutality, its polemical value has been heightened by the rejection of racism that has become the chosen position of a secure majority of Americans. Now that racism, although still with us, is widely condemned and far less common than it was fifty years ago, the concept of a racism without (conscious) racists seems, at least in some quarters, even more useful than it did when it was first introduced.

Nevertheless, *systemic racism* has accumulated theoretical refinements that will seem as familiar as a photographic negative to anyone conversant with the history of the counterculture. In its most aggressive versions, the concept shifts the locus of struggle to the unconscious of white America. Racism may be less visible than it was previously, we are told, but it is nevertheless present in the form of implicit bias, which continues to exert an influence on institutions and, in unseen fashion, perpetuates longstanding inequalities. The sinister doppelganger of the surrealist conception of desire or Paul Goodman's appeal to "human nature," unconscious racism is said to be a hidden agent of repression, thwarting the goodwill of whites despite their conscious declarations and thus sustaining historical injustices. It is a dark divinity, which once disported openly in the mainstream culture but has since retreated to the recesses of the Caucasian psyche. In the most pessimistic formulations of the thesis, it is understood to be ineradicable or at least to call for therapeutic regimes that at their best make people a little more aware of stereotypical assumptions but at their worst recall the inquisitions and exorcisms of centuries long past. Of course, such a diagnosis cannot be disputed without laying oneself open to the charge of guilty denial; but it can at least be noted that a considerable amount of empirical research has thrown doubt on the supposition that implicit bias necessarily translates into explicit action.<sup>28</sup> Anyone may feel a momentary prejudice; however, without demonstrably widespread behavioral effects, it's hard to see how unconscious attitudes can be sufficiently systemic to support a large-scale system of ongoing oppression.

Still, there is a simpler, albeit less forceful way of understanding how the term *systemic racism* might have a meaning distinct from that of mere racism. If, in an experimental frame of mind, one imagines an America from which all forms of racism, covert and overt, conscious and unconscious, have been removed, that America would still be marked by substantial inequalities between the races, which are at least in part the result of racist laws, attitudes, and institutions in the now distant past. Without recourse to refinements like a quasi-demonic power lurking in the European-American soul, it's still easy enough to understand that a population lacking financial and educational resources and bearing the cultural scars of an earlier history of discrimination will find it difficult to advance in a competitive society, where blue-collar job opportunities have dwindled, differences in income

have swelled, and the failures of the educational system are matched by the zeal with which low-level drug offenses have been prosecuted. The totality of such conditions might justifiably be described as a systemic impediment to remedies for the aftereffects of historical racism.

Assuming one does not subscribe to a politics that aims to abolish and replace the major institutions of American society, the debate is now about questions of policy; and as important as those questions may be, they are relevant to the subject of narrative and mystery only insofar as the underlying assumptions of the participants come into view. At the heart of the matter is the issue of responsibility. Is it primarily the responsibility of the United States government, as the one ongoing actor in this historical drama, to address inequalities created by unjust laws in the past? Or is it ultimately the responsibility of African-Americans themselves to overcome those inequalities through their own individual efforts? The debate between these positions, which are characteristic of the political left and the political right, becomes especially bitter when it turns to the even more controversial problem of the destructive elements in African-American life—gang activity, drug dealing, violent crimes of which other black people are most often the victims—and the extent to which it is realistic to expect impoverished people to resist aspects of their local culture that perpetuate the suffering of the community. The recognition that this disagreement is an instance of the far more longstanding philosophical problem of determinism versus free will does not point to any obvious resolution, but it does convey the difficulty of the issue.<sup>29</sup> As with the prospect of technological determinism, the underlying question has to do with the possibility of agency.

In this arena, James Baldwin was plainly a man of the left, and from the mid-sixties on, he edged closer to the Carmichael-Hamilton view of things (at the end of *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, the middle-aged protagonist is literally in bed with a character based in part on Carmichael and, in the final pages, is reluctantly mulling over the latter's suggestion that they get themselves some guns). Yet although he sometimes betrayed debilitating assumptions about the identity of race and culture, he refused to accept any conception of the individual as the helpless product of some larger system—what he called “time, circumstance, history”—and the question of agency, together with his paradoxical commitment to a “tremendous effort” of vulnerability, is never far away. Baldwin strove to acknowledge the reality of forces that can be conceived only as large abstractions but also to portray their consequences for the most intimate relations between individuals who refuse to be defined by them. He has been charged with exhibiting a touch of gay elitism for nominating homosexual love as the model for the kind of “nakedness” he advocated; but it seems less helpful to question his celebration of his personal preferences than to recognize that the theme of the body-as-mystery, the opaque figure for the possibility of access to another person and the opportunity for growth that a relationship represents, has been among the richest aspects of his heritage as a writer of

narrative. It's a theme that distinguishes the finest achievements of African-American cinema in this century, as exemplified by the work of the director most openly indebted to his writing, Barry Jenkins.

I have already mentioned the overt tribute that Jenkins offered Baldwin in the form of his deft adaptation of *If Beale Street Could Talk*, but I don't believe anyone has ever cataloged the many ways his earlier and even more impressive film, *Moonlight* (2016), takes up themes that preoccupied Baldwin and even employs the working method described in his article on Ingmar Bergman. Much as the theater served Bergman as a laboratory for his films, Jenkins chose to adapt the work of the lavishly gifted playwright Tarell Alvin McRaney, whose original script offered a coming-of-age story like *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, but one that is quite a bit farther from being a straightforward genre narrative than Stan Lathan's film of that novel. The focus here on African-American "flesh and blood," the physical presence of black bodies that Baldwin considered so important to any dramatic medium that aims to convey the experience of black Americans, is impossible to miss, as is the association with suffering—also a regular emphasis of Baldwin's writing—conveyed by McRaney's original title: *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*. The body here is anything but an object, though; it is, by contrast, the obscure carapace or "front"—the slang term for the metal teeth the protagonist wears—for a narrative—that is given a consciously mythical resonance as it performs just the sort of excavation that Baldwin sought to execute in his novels.

That mythical resonance is augmented by a technique associated with one of Baldwin's favorite writers, James Joyce. Each of the film's sections is prefaced by a black screen, the first and last of which display two of the protagonist's nicknames, "Little" and "Black." These convey, respectively, his disparaged status among his childhood peers and the "hard" image he eventually comes to project, represented by his gaudy metal teeth and other paraphernalia of the flourishing drug dealer. His given name, however, is Chiron, pronounced "Shy-rown" but, as spelled out on the second of the three black screens, an allusion to the wise centaur of Greek mythology, who was rejected in disgust by his mother, then taken in and schooled by Apollo. As with Baldwin's own wide-ranging allusions to film and literature, *Moonlight* suggests a conception of African-American culture that is representationally faithful to, but in no way limited by, the local culture of the impoverished characters with which it is populated. Rather, it offers a complex picture of their world, one that—much as its characters are drawn to the freedom of the moonlit beach—gestures toward the oceanic possibilities of a broader and potentially more enabling culture.

In the film, Chiron waivers between man and beast, as he contends with both his reviled sexuality and the violence that is an inescapable part of his environment. On this topic, Jenkins' touch is so light that one simply has to know that the devastated look of the Liberty City neighborhood of Miami, where much of the early action takes place, was the aftereffect of destructive riots touched off by police killings in 1980 and 1989 and the subsequent

acquittal of the officers involved—the only notice of overt racism (or of white people) in the entire film. What we are shown instead is the accumulated effect of the circumstances that have produced a poor neighborhood and the pathologies that inevitably accompany it. In these harsh surroundings, Chiron is taken in by a flawed Apollo, who provides an alternative to his mother's homophobic disgust and the shame of her drug addiction as well as a refuge from the bullying that is the child's introduction to the ever-present violence of the neighborhood. Yet even as this benevolent paternal figure sets an example of tolerance, the viewer is aware from the opening scene that his own autonomy is made possible by his success in the drug trade, an avenue of advancement in a place otherwise devoid of opportunity but also the influence that has led to the degradation of Chiron's mother and will lead eventually to his own death. *Moonlight* takes no position on the question of responsibility for the various destructive forces that touch its characters' lives, from the offstage deaths inflicted by the police to the offstage death of Chiron's mentor. The film is, however, much concerned with another question that, as Baldwin put it, "drags us into the icy and fiery center of a mystery: how have we endured?" And the answers it gives amount to a contemporary reimagining of answers that Baldwin himself endorsed concerning the paradox of vulnerability and agency.

Although Chiron's homoerotic bent is suggested even in the scenes of his childhood (the film includes a playful wrestling match like the one in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*), his emotional world is a cipher. He utters no more than "three words together," as another character remarks, yet one senses the incompletely knowable complexity that is the inner life of every human being behind his safeguarded exterior. Much as Gabriel Grimes had found the mark of the devil in his son's countenance, Chiron's mother has identified the sign of a despised effeminacy in his walk; and the viewer understands that the cultivated hardness of his adult persona is, like the violence into which he erupts after he is beaten under impossible circumstances as an adolescent, a hostile reaction to a relentlessly hostile environment, a visceral impulse to hurt those who have hurt him. But none of the ambiguities that he has manifested throughout the film quite prepare us for the revelation of vulnerability that he makes in the final moments. It is a scene entirely in the spirit of Baldwin's fiction, although without any of the feeling of calculation that one gets from, say, the climactic scene between Eric and Vivaldo at the end of *Another Country*, the sense that the characters are being manipulated by the author to make a point. Instead, the viewer comes away with the conviction that what has been revealed in this concluding scene is the possibility of a way forward for these characters, that the excavation of an artificial sense of self, which Baldwin prescribed for the entire country, has been convincingly performed in this individual case. And one feels, too, that Jenkins has succeeded entirely in bringing Baldwin's intensely personal brand of countercultural wisdom forward into the twenty-first century.

The feature of contemporary social experience that the traditional leftist focus on class, as represented by the British Marxist tradition, has been least able to accommodate is its cultural diversity. Which is not to say that class differences have simply disappeared—on the contrary, inequality is greater now than at any moment since the Second World War, although few would deny that the oppositional working-class *Gemeinschaft* memorialized by Hoggart, Williams, and Thompson is, for the most part, a thing of the past. By the 1980s, however, it was undeniable that the image of a society divided between haves and have-nots had been complicated by a new awareness of differences in race, gender, and sexual preference; and it was similarly evident that the interest of the postwar counterculture in non-Western and indigenous cultures had anticipated a defining feature of the contemporary world, as representatives of cultures once separated by geographical distance came increasingly into contact with one another. From the perspective of the late twentieth century, *The Sheltering Sky* and *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* must have seemed like plausible candidates for a second look.

Yet neither of the films made from these two novels can be called satisfying, and while there are differences between them, their similarities make an instructive comparison. Although both are long, leisurely affairs, both nevertheless sacrifice important elements of the novels on which they're based. In particular, neither coherently translates the experiences of abjection and purity undergone by the protagonists of the novels and expressed by the surrealist dimension of *The Sheltering Sky* (reduced almost to insignificance in the film) and the ayahuasca sequence in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* (pared down to just three enigmatic shots). What the films give us instead is a hypertrophied sublime imagery, which invokes themes that are, broadly speaking, existential. The Angel Falls sequence in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* and the shots of human figures contrasted with desert landscapes of exhilarating grandeur in *The Sheltering Sky* establish what was, by the late twentieth century, a conventional relationship, immediately recognizable to anyone familiar with the novels of Joseph Conrad, between the tiny, transient affairs of human beings and an imposing, timeless, but impassive natural world. This contrast is certainly relevant to Bowles and Matthiessen; however, when the opposition that it establishes is left undeveloped, the representation of the encounter between Western and non-Western cultures remains defined largely by convention. The native inhabitants of the wild regions of the earth are assimilated to the sublime landscape either as a threatening other or—the less obnoxious but no less reductive option chosen by these two well-intentioned films—as the blandly beneficent emissaries of some gentler universe inaccessible to benighted Westerners. Either way, mystery dwindles to exotic stereotype.

This tendency is nowhere more apparent than in the treatment of erotic encounters between members of Western and non-Western cultures, a veritable minefield of such clichés planted by the history of Hollywood cinema. When Pindi leads the newly arrived deity Lewis Moon to a clearing

apart from her giggling companions, the sequence inevitably recalls previous exotic flops like *Green Mansions* (1959) and the jungle spectacles of an even earlier period—Dorothy Lamour minus the sarong. Apart from the nudity, Babenco's earnest effort to bring an indigenous culture to the screen isn't sufficiently detailed or distinctive to set it apart from the long and uninspiring record of past attempts to represent tribal societies in commercial cinema. Without a sharper sense of the inner world of these people, the mystery of a culture decisively different from one's own just doesn't seem all that mysterious. And the situation is no better with the genders reversed, as the early reviewers of *The Sheltering Sky* were quick to point out, recalling Valentino's sheik and the electrifying effect of that dashing son of the desert on Western women. It is, finally, impossible to escape the sense that both films are hamstrung by a combination of self-conscious politeness toward non-Western cultures and inability to imagine the worlds of those cultures at a level of complexity that would raise them above the long history of failure to do justice to the subject in earlier films. One can believe, as Heidegger did, that other cultures must remain to some extent a mystery yet feel dissatisfied with films whose efforts to imagine another culture pass so much of the work of evoking that mystery onto natural imagery, even as their narratives rely on familiar conventions of our own culture.

Such observations bring no joy and leave an uneasy awareness that criticism of this sort may seem to make light of the challenge of portraying another culture onscreen. Both of these films are honorable efforts, which take on the daunting task of representing societies completely removed from the modern world, and it's no easy thing to imagine how cinema might go about conveying the nuances of a culture that must still be represented as radically other. Certainly, neither filmmaker can be said to have given in to the dependence of a popular medium on mass audience approval and the resulting insistence (increasingly strong in recent decades) that films should be "relatable"—that their job is to reflect the manners and mores of our own culture for the gratification of its members.<sup>30</sup> No one can accuse Bertolucci and Babenco of mere cultural narcissism, but the question of how to do justice to the diversity of the age may be one that books like *The Sheltering Sky* and *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, with their existential conceits and narratives built around a kind of extreme (and nowadays extremely rare) intercultural encounter, are not equipped to answer, even though the second of those two novels does gesture toward new possibilities in its final pages.

It's hard to believe that literature will ever again enjoy the kind of cultural influence it exerted as recently as a half-century ago, so the need for filmmakers to find ways to convey the experience of mystery that was so important to the writers of the postwar counterculture—their belief that our major narrative forms must lift us outside of ourselves (the etymological meaning of *ecstasy*) and offer at least a glimpse of worlds beyond our own—is more pressing now than ever. Yet, in a technologized and globalized era, when cultural purity has become a thing of the past, the opportunity to step

entirely outside of modern society is all but unavailable, even as the need to cultivate an openness to the mystery of otherness is at least as urgent now as it was fifty years ago. It's a need that film can help to meet; and for this reason, the obligation of contemporary filmmakers to give us work that evokes that mystery with the subtlety, complexity, and richness it deserves is all the more insistent, despite the headwinds of a commercial environment in which a thousand voices would have us believe that cinema need never be anything but self-gratifying entertainment.

Fortunately, there are ways of thinking this obligation as well as stellar examples of how it might be upheld, and my third and most remarkable example of the countercultural heritage in twenty-first-century filmmaking can be profitably approached by way of the common ground between narrative and the ideas of one such prominent thinker. Arguably, the most influential response in modern thought to the Heideggerian account of the mystery of otherness is the work of Emmanuel Levinas, whose revision of the phenomenological tradition has been recognized as a major contribution to continental philosophy in the postwar era.<sup>31</sup> In books like *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and *Otherwise than Being* (1974), Levinas takes Heidegger's understanding of alterity as his starting point but transforms it in a sharply non-Heideggerian direction. For the later Heidegger, "the mystery" includes all those other cultural worlds that are not one's own, which, along with the inevitability of death, circumscribe the limited world of human existence. This is the world in which authentic being becomes possible, as we make use of the materials that our place on the earth offers us to "dwell poetically"—that is, to build, to craft, to create, and to await the coming of "the divinities": epochal figures who embody the culture at its highest pitch of excellence and so offer models for us to emulate. Such transformative moments are the most arresting instances of the realization of Being that Heidegger calls "the event" and describes as something like a secularized equivalent of the Pauline *kairos*. With its deliberately numinous quality, it is a line of thought open to abuse, not least of all by Heidegger himself, who famously mistook Hitler's rise to power for just such an event.<sup>32</sup>

Levinas, who posits the face-to-face encounter with the other as the archetypal situation of thought, departs from Heidegger by subordinating the consciousness of one's own death to a concern for the possible death of the other. His philosophy is "anti-foundational" in the sense that it rejects every effort to incorporate the other within a totalizing system and instead insists on the unlimited character of the encounter with the other, who cannot be known in a rational sense but for whom one has a responsibility that is infinite.<sup>33</sup> Human existence is not so much a matter of taking one's own place on the earth in the unblinking awareness of one's finite nature, as Heidegger would have it, but rather of recognizing the obligation to yield that place to the other, as in the common gesture of politeness that Levinas describes as the most basic of ethical acts: "Après vous, Monsieur." For him, the unknowability of the other is the original mystery, a boundless one

that is revealed only serially, and it entails an ethical responsibility that may be fulfilled in the simplest exercise of good manners but can extend as far as the sacrifice of one's own life for the life of the other. What Heidegger calls "care"—something he insists that beings who have been thrown into the world and have owned the inevitability of death must exercise—Levinas reinterprets as an unavoidable responsibility to care for the other, and it is in this break with the priority given to the preservation of one's own existence and the realization of one's own freedom that he locates the difference between culture and barbarism.

In Levinas' work, the face of the other is presented as unknowable but possessed of the unmistakable message of its own mortality, which he describes as the embodiment of the biblical injunction against murder. At bottom, it says: "Please don't kill me." Just as William Burroughs alleged that we inhabit a "war universe" (and this is perhaps the *only* thing these two figures have in common), Levinas considers violence as endemic to the human condition, an inescapable threat wished on us by our vulnerability to totalizing thought and by our very status as mortal beings. His response is to reverse the traditional emphasis of Western philosophy on the self, the same, the totality, and to locate an ethical injunction so demanding that few can hope to live up to it. He doesn't deny that society, the world that comes into being as soon as a third is added to the fundamental dyad of self and other, requires rational systems of thought (although all such systems involve a risk of abuse); his position is rather that the feeling of responsibility for the other is a "first philosophy" that precedes rational thought and even Heideggerian ontology. The face of the other, its expression of nakedness and suffering, points back to the affective basis of the trace of this preexisting responsibility that can still be glimpsed in abstract principles like justice, and any assertion of freedom that neglects to give precedence to the other is a failure to uphold that responsibility. It colludes with death, furthers the war of all against all, and brings the risk of remorse, which is the accusing other that one carries within oneself ("The other is in me and in the midst of my very identification").<sup>34</sup> By contrast, responsibility for the other is "a rationality of peace."<sup>35</sup>

One could say much more about Levinas' philosophy, but even these condensed remarks are useful for the insights they offer into Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma* (2018), a film that is no less a meditation on the era of the counter-culture than this book is. It is also the single most impressive example of the new Latin American cinema that has come to fruition in the twenty-first century, representing not just a major force in contemporary filmmaking but the continuing development of those strains of the countercultural inheritance that are concerned with the otherness embodied by indigenous, non-Western, and folk cultures. For example, if one asks what has become of the sense of "worldhood" found in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*—the sophisticated reimagining of that intuition of the unknowable totality of the world characteristic of pre-individualistic or mythical narrative—the

answer is that this strain of fiction-making has always been the defining feature of the Latin American *real maravilloso*, which is itself a major influence on Guillermo del Toro's finest films, *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) and *The Shape of Water* (2017). In *Roma*, Cuarón takes a different approach, returning to the period of the counterculture and to the life of an indigenous character, whose place in the modern world is so unassuming that it might easily pass unnoticed. The achievement of the film, an accomplishment on which Levinas' thought offers an invaluable perspective, is in its evocation of the unexpected immensity harbored by this modest figure; and the details of that achievement merit an extended examination.

More than a perspective, Levinas' work could be an index of the film's major themes and images. The assertion of freedom and the confrontation with alterity, the threat of violence and the face of the other, totality and infinity, remorse and peace—all are there, along with the issues of gender, race, class, and technology, all rendered in a cinematic style that is inseparable from the drama (a word that must be understood in a specific sense here). "Ethics is an optics," Levinas has written, and the meaning of his adage can be illustrated by a comparison of the sublime in *Roma* with the titular image of *The Sheltering Sky*.<sup>36</sup> An evocation of infinity by means of a figure that serves to contain the infinite, to render the overwhelming effect of its limitlessness manageable by the mind, the sublime image of the desert sky that is so gorgeously captured in Bertolucci's film offers a kind of existential cover for the protagonists, sheltering them in their isolated individuality from the nothingness beyond. This is the "veiled infinity" that Julia Kristeva has described, the "time of oblivion," which is broken only by "the moment when revelation bursts forth"—the flash of abjection, when death turns a human being into a thing, as in Port Moresby's vision of the sky opening to unveil the absence it has concealed. It is a staging of the existentialist account of mystery, and here the unknowability of the indigenous other remains subordinate to the greater unknowability that is the finiteness of mortality itself.

The sky, crossed by an emblem of technology in the form of a jetliner, figures largely in *Roma* as well, beginning with the opening shot, where it appears reflected in the water that the protagonist, Cleo, uses to wash the driveway, a task that serves as a contrasting emblem of the manual labor that defines her inferior status in the family. It's only in the final shot of the film that the sky becomes sublime, as Cleo ascends toward another passing jetliner to resume her work. What has happened to bring about this reversal from the domestic abjection of the wet paving stones fouled by a dog to the image of a woman scaling the heavens, her unassuming labors now figuratively placed on a level with the most impressive achievements of modern technology? Here, one might insert a suggestive comment from Levinas, who describes the encounter with the other as involving "conjunctures in being for which perhaps the term 'drama' would be most suitable" and refers us in a footnote to an equally interesting footnote from *The Case*

of Wagner (1888), where Nietzsche complains that the word *drama* has been persistently mistranslated as “action” (*Handlung*) when in fact “the ancient drama had in view scenes of great pathos” (*Das antike Drama hatte grosse Pathosscenen im Auge*).<sup>37</sup> To highlight the association with optics, one must make a point of retaining Nietzsche’s metaphor (lost in the standard English translation of the book), for he is getting at the paradox by which something invisible is nevertheless brought out on the stage. Action is not what drama is about, Nietzsche insists, and he reminds us that the ancients went out of their way to place it offstage or prior to the moment of representation. Instead, his preferred translation of *drama*, a word of Doric origin that, he tells us, once referred to the founding religious myth of a civilization, is either “story” (*Geschichte*) or—the very term that Heidegger employs to describe the authentic realization of Being—“event” (*Ereignis*): “not a doing but rather a happening.” Thus, ethics is an optics in the sense that it is a way of seeing what normally can’t be seen, an “event” or “happening” beyond representation. And the sublimity of the sky in the final scene of *Roma* is not a shelter against the negative infinity of the nothingness beyond, a screen punctured only by death, but an image that gestures toward the positive infinity of the encounter with the other—those “scenes of great pathos” that occur between the opening and closing moments of the film. It is what Levinas calls an “exteriority,” in contrast to the objectivity of mere action and the interiority of the existential subject shut up within itself and alone with its mortality.

The crystalline black and white photography that is the most striking feature of Cuarón’s cinematic style in *Roma* is, then, not just a signal that the film is a memory piece evoking the world of fifty years ago, but neither is it an indication that this is an essay in neorealism, despite the meticulous reconstruction of the director’s childhood home. In short, the film is not an action but an optics, a way of making the unseen visible. The sublime emerges from the drama itself and is earned only in the concluding view of the sky, which is felt as a release from the persistent imagery of enclosures, cages, and routines established in the opening scenes. *Roma* is full of examples of such finite, confining totalities. Even the dog wants to get out, and if sublimity is at the heart of the drama, it is produced in deliberate contrast to the ideal of classical and imperial unity alluded to in the film’s title. For we soon come to realize that this once modestly elegant but now slightly worn-looking middle-class neighborhood belongs to the history of violence no less than its namesake. It is a world where people—where men, especially—take their “place in the sun,” as in the quotation from Pascal that Levinas nominates as the exemplary description of the origins of oppression.<sup>38</sup> This effort of appropriation is depicted not as an act of existential heroism but as an expression of threatening self-aggrandizement conducted in spatial terms, as when the father of the family inches his massive, rumbling Ford into the narrow driveway; and all the little gestures of unthinking class superiority that the film portrays are displayed against the background of deadly land

disputes in the countryside and the government's refusal to cede space on the streets to the student protesters murdered by Cleo's unfaithful lover, the youthful *halcón* Fermín. It's significant that, for him, "everything came into focus" when he discovered martial arts and found freedom in iron discipline—"just like when you look at me," he tells Cleo. The fusion of the optics of violence with masculine self-gratification could not be more precisely captured.

One of the most ingenious aspects of the film is the subtlety with which it lays out the correspondences between the various forms of gender, race, and class coercion, from the most outwardly insignificant (the boys tease their sister about getting fat) to the most merciless state violence, while at the same time acknowledging that these destructive tendencies exist within an otherwise loving home. Similarly, technology, the favorite scapegoat of so much countercultural criticism, is represented not only by the big, overpowered American car and the assassin's gun but also by the jetliners that soar overhead and the hospital where Cleo receives quality medical care, thanks to her connection with a respectable middle-class family of doctors and scientists. There is no effective way to step outside society in *Roma*, nor is it at all clear that one would be wise to do so. Yet society remains a realm of violence, both physical and emotional, and the sharp focus of the camera offers an unclouded picture of how the various forms of cruelty become intertwined and amplify one another, above all in one of the film's major plot developments, when the security and well-being of the family are threatened by the father's desertion. Beginning in the early scenes, the boys already display the problem in miniature. "You were supposed to die," the older one tells the younger after some play with toy pistols: "'Cause it's my game." After their father departs, the play becomes rougher, although it's only the house that bears the physical scars. More ironically, their mother inflicts her own pain on Cleo, also the victim of a man's assertion of freedom, through a series of little demands and admonishments that her class position allows her to deliver without reason or regret.

The film is thus structured by a complex set of interrelated relationships of otherness—male/female, white/Mixteco, have/have-not—which also become instances of failure to fulfill the ethical imperative of responsibility to the other, and these dominant pairs are further elaborated through a secondary group of opposed associations: freedom/enclosure, American/Mexican, technology/manual labor, sky/water. The terms also reverse, however, forming a dense network of injury; one man's freedom is his wife's oppression, and the woman who suffers through her husband's desertion in turn becomes the tormentor of another. At the center of this network is Cleo, who speaks both Spanish and Mixteco, lives in the city but hails from the oppressed and poverty-stricken countryside, enjoys the affections of her cultivated middle-class family but is chastised and otherwise taken for granted by her employers. A far cry from the uncontacted indigenous tribe in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, she embodies the ambivalent,

hybrid identity, divested of exoticism, that is characteristic of otherness in the contemporary world; and when one recalls the importance that Levinas attributes to the face of the other, it may come to seem that the true center of *Roma* is Cleo's face, so rich in elusively subtle expressions yet so difficult to interpret with confidence.<sup>39</sup>

It's no accident that close-ups of Cleo's face in all its troubled opacity become frequent from the moment she realizes that she is not only pregnant but abandoned; for the pair of terms that will be more important than any other in *Roma* is mother and child, and it's perhaps relevant that Levinas identifies this primary relationship as the model of our feelings of responsibility toward the other, an ethical demand that can't be escaped, but one that puts us under such a crushing obligation that we may find ourselves violently trying to wish it away.<sup>40</sup> When Cleo gazes at the newborns in the maternity ward and a sudden tremor causes a piece of the ceiling to drop onto one of the incubators, the incident is not merely a bad omen but an indication of her unspoken desire (the next scene opens with a shot of make-shift graves in the countryside). A child is a future, and just as the wedding at the seaside resort will remind her of a future that is not to be, the near death of the infant in the hospital suggests a possibility that does in fact come to pass but won't be acknowledged until the climactic moment on the beach. Similarly, when Cleo accepts only a cup of *pulque* at the New Year's Eve celebration—ostensibly because anything stronger would be bad for her unborn child—and then the cup is accidentally broken, the significance of the incident becomes clear only later: instead of concern for the health of the baby, she has secretly felt a wish to pass on the violence that she herself has suffered, to deny it the future that has been denied to her. Eventually, through no fault of her own, Cleo's child is born dead, but this seemingly expedient turn of events hardly absolves her from remorse, as one of the most important details in the film implies. When the lifeless infant is given her to hold after the trauma of its birth and the massacre of protesters in the streets—the government's own spasm of violence against its political other—Cleo makes a small but important gesture: she looks into the face of the child. At that moment, in the harshest of the many reversals depicted in *Roma*, the character who has most steadily occupied the position of alterity comes face to face with the helpless other whom she has literally carried within herself and confronts the realization of her unspoken wish that it might die.

Of course, all this can be reconstructed only after the fact. *Roma* is not the sort of film that offers up everything on a single viewing, however overwhelming an experience that initial exposure might be (and the effectiveness of the climactic scene in which Cleo breaks down after she has rescued the children is undeniable). Only after all is said and done, though, do we come to understand why the camera remained with her so relentlessly as she crossed the beach, entered the water, and waded out through the waves: the action of the scene—her distance from the drowning children, their

condition as she advances toward them, the chances that she'll succeed or fail—all this is peripheral to the unseen drama of her inner life. The crucial fact, which the framing of the shot encourages us to hold in mind, is that she is putting her own life in danger for the life of the other; and the drama of the scene is in her triumph, at the risk of death, over the unacknowledged violence within her. Yet the full significance of the sequence emerges only after the action has ended, when the family members come together on the beach in a collective embrace, forming a totality whose apparent wholeness is shattered by something that deserves to be called a happening or an event: Cleo's anguished confession that she didn't want her child to be born. It's only then that we become fully aware of an excess that lifts us above the little world of middle-class existence, its genuine affections as well as its petty cruelties, and that will be represented by the image of the sky in the final scene. The enclosed unit of the family, it turns out, has concealed an immensity of pathos whose existence was hardly suspected. "I have so much to tell you," Cleo says to Adela at the end of the film—so much, in fact, that it can't be put into words, although we understand that it involves the overcoming of remorse and the peace that she has made with herself, which is commemorated by a quotation from the Upanishads and T.S. Eliot: "Shantih, Shantih, Shantih"—"the peace which passeth understanding."<sup>41</sup> If the peace that the counterculture wanted to bring to the world ever does arrive, one imagines it will feel something like this.

"Cinema is a mystery that we won't solve in a lifetime," Cuarón has remarked: "That's its beauty."<sup>42</sup> *Roma* proposes a continuing role for the cinema as a form of mythmaking that is the very opposite of relatability, an experience of the mystery of the dissimilar at the heart of the familiar and a drama that offers a glance at the infinite in the encounter with the other. It is also the single most accomplished contemporary demonstration of how themes and insights dating from the period of the counterculture might be taken up and transformed by twenty-first-century filmmakers. Although the rituals of movie-watching have themselves been transformed—the great majority of viewers will have seen *Roma* on a small screen rather than the large one of a theater—the film is proof that innovations in technology need not mean the abandonment of mystery or a neglect of the unique kind of optics represented by a complex and subtle work of art. One can only hope that others will follow Cuarón's example, as we go on trying to make sense of the much larger transformations we have witnessed in the years since the now distant era memorialized by his film.

A discussion of responsibility may seem like an odd way to end a book about a rebellious age, yet there's no denying that we continue to bear responsibility for the many problems we have inherited from the days of the counterculture, whether they take the form of economic or state violence, environmental destruction, or the multiple injustices of gender, race, and sexual orientation that trouble the twenty-first-century world. And, in a sense, Levinas' arguments for the extent of our responsibility to the other

take us back even farther, back to where we began, for the disasters of the Second World War hang over the genesis of his thought no less than over the novels of the postwar counterculture.<sup>43</sup> The world has indeed changed dramatically during the past three quarters of a century; however, it still shows little likelihood of witnessing the paradisiacal developments anticipated by the more optimistic partisans of the counterculture, so it may be that insights like the ones that Levinas has to offer are more valuable now than ever. At the outset of this concluding chapter, I remarked in passing that, at its best, the counterculture was a call to empathy and principle, a demand that we learn to imagine the lives of others and to live up to the ideals we claim to value; but it may be that even those noble sentiments assume too much. After all, principle is in the eye of the beholder, and empathy, indispensable though it may be, still operates on the assumption that others are basically no different from oneself. “The relationship with the other,” Levinas has written, “is not an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy through which we put ourselves in the other’s place; we recognize the other as resembling us, but exterior to us; the relationship with the other is a relationship with a Mystery.”<sup>44</sup> The responsibility that he advocates runs deeper than many care to acknowledge, but those in search of a rule of thumb for addressing the disparate problems of our time could do worse than to heed a philosopher whose thought has a personal quality it shares with the finest moments of the counterculture.

It’s possible, moreover, that some readers will look back on the avenue of the mystery as it’s evoked in the novels of the postwar counterculture—the quest for authenticity, the search for ecstasy, the cultivation of “It”—and discover that their most valuable recollections are not of the determined efforts to live in the moment that made those novels famous but of the narrator of *On the Road* when he takes his despised and abandoned friend under his protection or the evangelist-turned-ethnographer in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* when he puts his own life at risk to warn a defenseless tribe of an impending attack. These are impulses that deserve to be memorialized by any counterculture worthy of the name. In a late essay, Levinas suggests that the experience of the infinite in the encounter with the other can’t be overcome by thought but instead takes the shape of a feeling—perhaps something akin to the “adoration and bedazzlement” that Descartes mentions at the end of the Third Meditation, where infinity is understood as an attribute of God. To recast this argument in secular terms, he suggests, is to chart “the path of return of wisdom from heaven to earth.”<sup>45</sup> The sublime is nothing if not an overwhelming experience, one that creates a temptation to master the disruptive entity, to seek shelter beneath the protection of an idea, to reassert one’s self-sufficiency even at the cost of violence. Yet this would be to fail the most basic of ethical tests. For the other possibility—that we can remain open before this alien presence, that we can even come to greet it with feelings of a different kind—is the sole chance that peace and love might be more than just a saying from long ago.

## Notes

- 1 There is, of course, nothing original in the claim that the Beats and their associates previewed themes that came to define the global counterculture or that the counterculture cannot be understood in isolation from its beginnings in the postwar period, a point reiterated recently, with notable thoroughness, by Louis Menand in *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2021). For an earlier statement of the argument, see Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 45–57.
- 2 Norman O. Brown, “Apocalypse: The Place of Mystery in the Life of the Mind,” in *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 1. All further citations appear in the text.
- 3 Brown makes no mention of Heidegger, but while he was sympathetic enough toward Eastern religions to cite an illustration from Tibet, he nevertheless took the Heideggerian position that they do not have “the particular power our Western society needs; or rather I think that each society has access only to its own proper powers; or rather each society will get only the kind of power it knows how to ask for” (5).
- 4 Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1969), 43. All further citations appear in the text.
- 5 Charles Reich, *The Greening of America* (New York: Random House, 1970), 85. All further citations appear in the text.
- 6 Much of the clothing preferred by American representatives of the global counterculture, when not broadly old-fashioned and composed of garments once intended as work clothes, specifically reached back to the nineteenth century, as with the brief vogue of Civil War jackets and vests among men or the ubiquitous “prairie dresses” and other Victorian fashions among women. These items were the sartorial counterpart of a mentality that, whether consciously or not, sought a return to the pre-industrial world of small settlements and face-to-face relationships. In this respect, Kerouac’s jeans and plaid flannel shirts expressed a desire that continues to flare up at intervals today.
- 7 “He began work at the San Jose Tire Shop, drawing the night shift, as the newest employee, which he declared he preferred. . . . It didn’t matter to him that his job was rough and dirty; he still had to be the best worker.” Carolyn Cassady, *Off the Road*, 341–2. On the subject of Cassady’s unique character, the memoirs by the Beat women are essential reading, especially Carolyn Cassady’s unsparing portrait of his selfishness and infidelity (although the fact that these women continued to fight over him even after he was dead surely says something too).
- 8 See *Off the Road*, 221–2. Cassady was so entranced by the power of this famous charlatan’s disciples to put him in touch with his past lives that he named his dog Cayce (338).
- 9 The assessment of charisma is necessarily an unscientific business; however, it’s telling that the dance scene not only was accorded a prominent place in the film’s trailer but has been regularly excerpted and made a subject of discussion in interviews with the cast. One reason why the issue of media charisma tends to make people uncomfortable is that its most obvious measure is in dollars. Kristen Stewart waived her usual fee, said to have been \$12.5 million in 2012 (a year in which her total earnings came to \$34.5 million, the highest of any actress in the world), to appear in this modestly budgeted independent film.
- 10 “Kristen said she found the key to playing Marylou in the movie was to see her ‘as her own woman, not Neal’s.’ She would later tell Annie Santos . . . that she’d

- come to see Lu Anne [Henderson, the original of the character of Marylou] as the energy source for both men, and for *On the Road* itself.” *One and Only: The Untold Story of On the Road*, 44.
- 11 Scott, *The Making of the Monster*, 143.
  - 12 Phil Cohen, “Sub-Cultural Conflict and Working Class Community,” in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. Sarah Thornton and Ken Gelder (New York: Routledge, 2005), 86–93.
  - 13 *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (New York: Routledge, 2006). All further citations appear in the text.
  - 14 Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995). David Muggleton, *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style* (Oxford: Berg, 2000). Muggleton’s title is a backhand slap at the single most widely read book by a member of the Birmingham group, Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 1979). *After Subculture: Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture*, ed. Andy Bennett and Keith Kahn-Harris (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2004). Andy Bennett, “Reappraising ‘Counter culture,’” *Counter cultures and Popular Music*, ed. Sheila Whiteley and Jedediah Sklower (New York: Routledge, 2016), 17–28.
  - 15 Paul Corrigan, “Doing Nothing,” *Resistance through Rituals*, 84–7.
  - 16 Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), 247.
  - 17 See Theodore Roszak, *From Satori to Silicon Valley: San Francisco and the American Counterculture* (San Francisco, CA: Don’t Call It Frisco Press, 1986). On this subject, Reich had the clearer view from the start, noting these examples as well as the even more important one of the birth control pill.
  - 18 *The Job*, 68. Fourteen years after the publication of *From Satori to Silicon Valley*, Roszak appended some afterthoughts that could have been offered with Burroughs in mind. He suggested that the “baffling euphoric response” to the development of the internet, which he found disproportionate to the convenience of easy access to information, might be related to the “ancient Gnostic hunger to transcend the flesh.” But, he argued, far from preparing us for the liberated extraterrestrial existence that Burroughs envisioned, this desire for the digital had merely led to the creation of a new psychological type, the nerd, who is “given over to an alien blandness” and “searches for ways to digitize away all distinctions of quality, feeling, and affect.” See below for more on this issue.
  - 19 *The Job*, 97.
  - 20 Louis Menand presents an excellent summary of the most influential progenitors of this motif in the 1940s and 1950s. Along with Orwell of 1984, the key text is James Burnham’s *The Managerial Revolution* (1941). See *The Free World*, 35–54.
  - 21 John Kenneth Galbraith, *The New Industrial State* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967).
  - 22 See Robert Solow, “The New Industrial State, or Son of Affluence,” *The Public Interest*, 9, 108 (Fall 1967): “Galbraith’s story that the industrial firm has ‘planned’ itself into complete insulation from the vagaries of the market is an exaggeration, so much an exaggeration that it smacks of the put-on.”
  - 23 Paul Krugman, *Peddling Prosperity: Economic Sense and Nonsense in an Age of Diminished Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 13–15. Joshua Gans, “50 Years Ago an Economist Worried About Unchecked Corporate Power. Here’s What His Theory Got Wrong,” *Harvard Business Review*, August 22, 2017.

- 24 Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 228. Carr reviews a wealth of psychological studies and notes the trend of likeminded books, including Jaron Lanier's *You Are Not a Gadget* (2010), William Powers' *Hamlet's Blackberry* (2010), Bill Davidov's *Overconnected* (2011), Evgeny Morozov's *The Net Delusion* (2011), and Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together* (2011).
- 25 Carr's exposition of this research, which confirms an understanding of memory that would not have been foreign to the surrealists or, indeed, to romantic writers like Coleridge, is particularly apt: "What gives real memory its richness and its character, not to mention its mystery and fragility, is its contingency. It exists in time, changing as the body changes." (191).
- 26 See Andrew Sarris, "Eternal Sunshine Left My Mind Spotless," *The Observer*, March 29, 2004.
- 27 On the prejudices of future doctors, see Janice A. Sabin, "How We Fail Black Patients in Pain," *Association of American Medical Colleges*, January 6, 2020.
- 28 See, for example, F.L. Oswald, G. Mitchell, H. Blanton, J. Jaccard, and P.E. Tetlock, "Predicting Ethnic and Racial Discrimination: A Meta-Analysis of IAT Criterion Studies," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 105.2 (2013): 171–92.
- 29 On this subject, see Aaron Hanna, "The Limitations of Black Conservative Thought," *Quillette*, June 24, 2021.
- 30 See Rebecca Mead, "The Scourge of 'Relatability'" (*The New Yorker*, August 1, 2014) and Jeremy D. Larson, "Why Do We Obsess Over What's 'Relatable'?" (*The New York Times*, January 8, 2019): "Our egos fuel an ecosystem that can become acrid with familiarity. Instead of seeing 'relatable' as something that connects us, we may one day imagine it as a double negative: Relatability measures how strange something *isn't*, the lack of mystery itself." Larson observes that "relatability" began to appear as a term of praise in the entertainment-world literature of the 1980s, making it another piece of evidence that the Reagan era was the crucial period of assimilation between the counterculture and the period of the later films. Others have pointed out that it originated, ironically, in the era of the counterculture itself, as witnessed by the hopelessly vague expression: "I can relate to that."
- 31 Chief among the many commentators on his work is Jacques Derrida, whose long essay did much to encourage interest in Levinas. See "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas" (1964), *Writing and Difference*, 79–153; and also Derrida's later essay "At this very moment in this work here I am" (1980), Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, eds., *Re-Reading Levinas: Studies in Continental Thought* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991). On the relationship between Derrida and Levinas, see Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (1992) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).
- 32 To be sure, the Heidegger who matters most to Levinas is the early Heidegger of *Being and Time* (1927), although Levinas still considers the account of "being-with-others" (*Mitsein*) given in that book to be unsatisfactory, and indeed the others among whom *Dasein* finds itself merely serve to make up the cultural world in which it plays out its existence and risks becoming inauthentically submerged. It "marches alongside" these others, as opposed to regarding them face-to-face.
- 33 The invocation of infinity in Levinas' philosophy has been met with raised eyebrows by some, who suspect an attempt to smuggle in metaphysics by the back door, and it is certainly possible to read him as the theologian of a deity positioned beyond the reach of discourse. Yet there are at least two ways of understanding the concept of infinity that preserve the secular, anti-foundationalist

orientation of his thought. The first is metaphorical and hyperbolic: it is an attribute of the sublime, a rhetorical means of evoking the feeling of boundlessness and awe that accompanies the breaking of categories. On this subject, see Hilary Putnam, "Levinas and Judaism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 41–43. The other is closer to the literal sense of the word and refers to an expanded conception of the existential mystery of futurity, one that is not bounded by the close of an individual life but, through the parenting and teaching of later generations, extends forward as an ongoing conversation. To the extent that we are social beings, each of us represents an unlimited set of future possibilities; or, as Sartre put it, because each of us is "directly connected with the infinite possibilities of a free other," we are each "an infinite and inexhaustible synthesis of unrevealed properties" (*Being and Nothingness*, 359). Whether our possibilities turn out to be literally infinite or merely indefinite, it is a way of envisioning the perpetuation of a viably humane existence.

- 34 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1981), 125.
- 35 *Otherwise than Being*, 160. See also "The Vocation of the Other," in *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 113.
- 36 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 23.
- 37 *Totality and Infinity*, 28.
- 38 "That is my place in the sun.' That is how the usurpation of the whole world began." Pascal, *Pensées*, 295. Levinas often quoted this aphorism and used it as an epigraph to *Otherwise than Being*.
- 39 Cleo's reticence has led one critic, Richard Brody, to accuse the director of playing into the stereotype of inarticulate working people and to complain that the viewer is not given more information about the film's historical period and the culture of the region where Cleo was born. In short, he wants to solve the mystery posed by her face through an accumulation of knowledge, a strategy that seems especially ill advised when he regrets that we are told nothing about the availability of abortion in the Mexico of the early 1970s or the possibility that Cleo might have considered getting one. This is a case of projecting contemporary cosmopolitan values onto a character from another era and consequently failing to grasp how she herself would experience the events of her life. What is at issue is her inner conflict, which would be made only that much worse by terminating her pregnancy. Throughout the film, she repeatedly demonstrates her love of children, and the decision to withhold any open declaration of her feelings until the end of the narrative is crucial to its dramatic structure. Along with various factual mistakes—Adela isn't one of the "city nannies" who don't get invited downstairs; in fact, she isn't a nanny at all and isn't even present in the country—Brody's criticisms suggest that he hasn't looked very closely either at Cleo's face or at any other part of the film. See Richard Brody, "There's a Voice Missing in Alfonso Cuarón's 'Roma,'" *The New Yorker*, December 18, 2018.
- 40 See *Otherwise than Being*, 75–6, 102–9. The topic of gender difference in Levinas has inspired a minor scholarly industry. In addition to Derrida's "At this very moment in this work here I am," see also *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Tina Chanter (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001); Tina Chanter, *Time, Death, and the Feminine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); and Stella Sandford, *The Metaphysics of Love* (New Brunswick, NJ: The Athlone Press, 2000).

- 41 Eliot's Christianized translation of the Sanskrit mantra that he used as the last line of *The Waste Land* (1922).
- 42 Joe Utichi, "Roma's Alfonso Cuarón on Redefining Cinema in a Netflix Age & Lamenting Negative Oscar Campaigns," *Deadline*, February 8, 2019.
- 43 The ideas developed in Levinas' books of the postwar era were developed during his confinement as a prisoner of war.
- 44 *Time and the Other* (1947), trans. Richard A Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 75.
- 45 Emmanuel Levinas, "The Idea of the Infinite in Us," in *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London: Continuum, 1998), 190–1.

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