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Fiction and Affect:
Studies in the Mid-Twentieth Century American Novel and its Utopian Contexts

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Fiction and Affect: Studies in the Mid-Twentieth Century American Novel and its Utopian Contexts

Darren Millar

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Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the PhD degree in English Literature

Department of English
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Abstract

This dissertation examines selected mid-Twentieth Century novels by four American writers (Carson McCullers, James Baldwin, William Styron, and Vladimir Nabokov) in order to offer a reappraisal of a difficult and often overlooked moment in the history of American fiction. Specifically, it considers how writers with liberal tendencies respond to the political inhibitions of a culture increasingly dominated by the consensus discourse of the Cold War. Rather than giving over to cynicism by adopting strictly apolitical themes, these writers demonstrate a commitment to liberal society through the values of tolerance, diversity, and a distinctively liberal openness to the future community. This optimistic way of reading of the often superficially bleak fiction of mid-century rests on a rejection of the common premise that the postwar moment marks the end of history, of ideology, and of utopia. I undertake this initiative by means of a theoretical engagement with the concepts of affect and utopia. First, I offer a reconsideration of the concept of utopia in order to understand how utopian thinking may survive the historicist crisis in which it becomes neither possible nor desirable to imagine a political alternative to the status quo. Postwar (or post-historicist) utopia does not depend on the articulation of a specific future state or goal but dwells in the potential for change and future possibility inherent in the present moment. This revision of utopia provides a unique opportunity to engage the mid-century novel, for the latter's preoccupation with the meaning of affective experience represents a similar attempt to locate social potential within the present moment. The various readings of mid-century American novels that follow collectively strive to express and explore the connection between the fictional treatment of affect and the unique terms and conditions of liberal utopia as it emerges in the context of mid-century American culture.

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American Fiction and the Utopian Imagination at Mid-Century

> As long as our country has a politically active Right and a politically active Left, this argument [about which hope to allow ourselves and which to forgo] will continue. It is at the heart of the nation's political life, but the Left is responsible for keeping it going. For the Right never thinks that anything much needs to be changed: it thinks the country is basically in good shape, and may well have been in better shape in the past. It sees the Left's struggle for social justice as mere troublemaking, as utopian foolishness. The Left, by definition, is the party of hope. It insists that our nation remains unachieved. (Rorty14)

The novels featured in this study represent a period of American history characterized by containment, consensus, and complacency. In February, 1946, George F. Kennan, then working at the American Embassy in Moscow, sent a telegram to Washington warning of a militant and expansionist Soviet Union, thereby catalyzing a new direction in American foreign policy that would become known as the containment doctrine of the Cold War. In the mid-fifties, Senator Joseph McCarthy focused attention on the communist threat at home, and the brief success of his tactics indicated the degree to which portions of the American public were willing to be terrorized by the enemy within. By the time Eisenhower ended his tenure in office in 1961, moderation had become the political order of the decade: he had ended war in Korea and postponed early conflict in Vietnam, though his status quo of peace would be short lived. If this brief sketch suggests anything, it is that, politically at least, these were years of paralysis. No wonder the novels represented here should be so preoccupied with questions of potential and change.

The cultural front presents much of the same picture. While the Truman Doctrine had officially divided the world into two massive camps of the free and the enslaved, the liberal intellectuals best in the position to question this large-scale reduction were too

busy creating their own camps to take much notice. The attempt of critics such as Lionel Trilling, Irving Howe, and Philip Rahv to renegotiate the relation between politics and culture in the face of what they saw as new historical realities resulted in the generally accepted idea that "politics" must remain uncontaminated by ideology – and hence, in effect, by the partisan commitment and decisive action-taking by which politics was traditionally understood. Trilling's cautious tread in the preface to *The Liberal Imagination* suggests the limited extent to which politics could be thought at all: "clearly," he writes, "it is no longer possible to think of politics except as the politics of culture, the organization of human life toward some end or other, toward the modification of sentiments, which is to say the quality of human life" (ix). Liberals like Trilling hoped that by removing politics from ideology in this way they would save the former from the dangerous tendency to simplify complex realities that had made totalitarianism at first so attractive and then such a horrific failure. But in so doing they inevitably wound up participating in a consensus discourse that brought liberals and conservatives closer together and basically deprived liberalism of its progressive core. Political change, they felt, must advance from skepticism about the very ideals that recommend change in the first place, for as Trilling warned, "the world is a complex and unexpected and terrible place which is not always to be understood by the mind as we use it in our everyday tasks" (xii). Given such conditions, one wonders how change in the political sense was to advance at all. So perhaps it is no surprise that the novels represented here approach their obsession with change through a confused admixture of uncertainty and hope.

Broadly speaking, these are the conditions under which progressive idealism in the forties and fifties had to wane, hide, or die. Critics associated with the New York

intellectuals (Trilling, Rahv, Howe) struggled to redefine their relation to politics so as to distance themselves from the radicalism of the thirties. Others, such as the southern New Critics, eschewed politics altogether in their embrace of the ahistoricical poetics of modernism. And writers of fiction, for their part, turned away from the social and political concerns that had characterized novels like Wright's *Native Son* and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* in pursuit of more specifically existential explorations of the meaning of life in postwar America. The quasi-mysticism of Kerouac, the bitter alienation of J.D. Salinger, and the Catholic symbolism of Flannery O'Connor all reflect this shift in emphasis. Similarly, the four writers I deal with in this study – Carson McCullers, James Baldwin, William Styron, and Vladimir Nabokov – all share, despite vast differences in background and approach, a common unwillingness or inability to articulate their liberalism through the conventional political themes that had been available to fiction in the thirties. McCullers abandons social realism in favour of a mythology of interpersonal relationships; Nabokov avows a strict aestheticism; Styron is mainly interested in the existential ramifications of personal tragedy; and Baldwin, in many ways the most politically engaged of the four, approaches social problems through the psycho-sexual dynamics of individual fear and repression. Yet none of these writers is without liberal sympathies. All express, in their own ways, commitment to ideals of tolerance, plurality, and, perhaps most significantly, an active involvement in social life. The condition is that they do so without placing those values against the backdrop of a sweeping revolutionary change as envisioned by Marxism. For these writers, change is primarily a local phenomenon that nonetheless carries the emergent hope of a wider social transformation.

The object of this dissertation is to explore the persistence of liberal ideals in works that might otherwise appear to be at home in the depoliticized literary climate of the 40s and 50s. By liberal ideals I mean commitment to tolerance, plurality, and social involvement, as above, but also and more importantly a commitment to change as a virtue in its own right – that is, as the condition of potential that is a necessary starting point for any progressive attitude towards the future. I focus on change because within the wide radius of the liberal center it is the category that is most germane to Leftist interests and the area where the Left seems to find itself in trouble. Indeed, if Richard Rorty is correct in saying that the greatest challenge facing the Left today is that its motivating commitment to change has been eviscerated by the current "spirit of detached spectatorship" (*Achieving* 11), then change is still a problem for the Left, and its history of crisis may be traced through the history of the Cold War. A variety of reasons may be elicited to explain this crisis. The one that interests me here, however, has to do with a lapse in reading. The failure of the utopian socialist movements that galvanized the world in the first half of the twentieth century is often read in terms of the failure of hope itself. The beginning of the postwar period has thus often been read as the dawn of an era of ends: the end of ideology (Bell), the end of modernism (Jameson), the end of victory culture (Englehardt), and the end of the utopian imagination (Booker) represent but a few of the obituaries that have been written about this cultural moment. The resulting consensus seems to be that when the collapse of totalizing historical narratives makes the idea of wide-scale social transformation suspicious and undesirable, those interested in progressive social change are at a loss. Instead of seeking new avenues of hope and new opportunities for transformation, they must either give in to pessimism about the future or

else channel their radicalism into theories that turn politics into something they can manage, such as ethics, subversion, or play (Whalen-Bridge 7). There is certainly no shortage of pessimism in the later twentieth century, and theories that "destabilize" or "problematize" the notion of politics abound (see Siebers). But it is true also that this culture of ends makes it difficult to see, let alone value, the persistence of hope through the frosts of the Cold War. One of my aims is thus to expose this hope and to consider its viability as an expression of Leftist aspirations.

Hovering above this pursuit is the always difficult question of the relationship between literature and politics. I do not intend to tackle this problem directly. My attempt, however, to recover what I have called Leftist ideals from ostensibly apolitical fiction will imply that I am claiming political relevance for the novel nonetheless. I am indeed making such a claim, and I am aware that in so doing I shall be employing the softened concept of the political that has emerged in academic criticism during the past twenty years. To the extent that it is possible, however, I would like to distinguish my own brand of soft politics from the kind that is current in cultural studies. The novels in this study do not promote or otherwise explore political ideas; nor do they directly encourage reform. But this does not mean that the only way to read them politically is to expose the ideological substructure that shapes the representation of races, genders, or classes within their pages. My notion of politics is soft because it does not require that literary works refer to parties or platforms or procedures to be termed political, and I make this allowance not in order to proclaim everything political (which is not quite true anyway) but in order to see what literature shares with politics beyond its so-called constructedness as a visible expression of human culture. When I say that the novel is

political, I mean that the novel, like politics, is concerned with human stakes in society and in the future of society. Granted, stakes are a product of history and therefore stand to be scrutinized as such. But one of the novel's tasks is to perform this scrutiny, to propose the relationships that might matter to individuals and to explore the nature of their stakes in those relationships. Novels do not have to make overt political claims in order to explore the conditions that make politics possible and investments worthwhile.

My interest in what is at stake in the fiction of the forties and fifties leads me to focus on two areas of inquiry which combine to produce a third. First, I am led to focus on affect as the novelistic representation of the individual's most immediate involvement in the world. Affect is where politics begins, where stakes are worked out and the question of the future, of what to do next, is most urgently raised. Second, I am led to ask how the general shift in attitude towards politics at this time has an impact upon the existence of utopia and its dream of a better world. This question is especially significant where it concerns the novel, for it seems to me that skepticism about the survival of utopia also implies skepticism about the survival of fiction writing itself. Based on my observations about the persistence of utopia, therefore, I am led to explore the important interconnection between affect and utopia. Utopia, like affect, borders on possible futures and represents a particular kind of disposition towards the unfolding present. My hope is that these various investigations will result in a way of reading the fiction of the 40s and 50s that not only recovers some of its obscure political content but also foregrounds how utopia might be read as one of the stakes of mid-century fiction more generally.

1. Affect, Politics, and the Novel

For the political left, the intellectual fallout of global events of the late forties and fifties tended to paralysis. In a *Partisan Review* symposium from 1952, Philip Rahv lamented what he called the *embourgeoisement* of American intellectuals and the subsequent disappearance of the idea of socialism from their discussions. No one, it seemed, could speak progressively about politics anymore: "The illusion that our society is in its very nature immune to tragic social conflicts and collisions has been revived, and once more it is assumed that the more acute problems of the modern epoch are unreal so far as we are concerned" (Rahv 331). The reasons behind this new phase of American exceptionalism are manifold, but Rahv recognized one important theme in the air at the time. Following the disillusionment with Stalinism in particular and with ideology in general, American democracy looked like the real thing. Not only did it offer freedom and opportunity to its citizens, but it had the singular advantage of actually existing, and there was no better evidence of its existence than the wave of prosperity that had swept American shores since the end of the war. The false promises of ideology could lead to the horrors of totalitarianism. But as a counter to these, democracy, it could be certain, was good, and it was real.

At this point in American intellectual history, reality was a much sought political ground. Even when it was used (as Rahv thought it was) to exempt Americans from the turmoil of history and hence from exigencies of political struggle, it remained, at bottom, a claim to legitimacy and privilege that belied its latent political significance. Those on the left who saw American democracy in a less complacent light than the bemused denizens imagined by Rahv nonetheless still preferred to oppose "reality" to "ideology"

and "utopia" because the former term admitted of the real-world complexity that the latter purportedly failed to acknowledge. Neither position was particularly effective at identifying problems or proposing solutions, but the emphasis on reality at least befitted the left's "chastened mood" (Rahv 328). And while this kind of atmosphere tended to immobilize rather than enable political action, it provided an opportunity at least to reassess the political function of the American novel, which, as Rahv himself had argued some years earlier, already displayed a marked obsession with the real.[1] The broad context in which intellectuals were struggling to redefine their relationship to politics via a more sensitive rapprochement with reality thus becomes the occasion for a renegotiation of the relationship between art and politics. Despite some appearances to the contrary, however, politics was never entirely left out of the discussion.

For example, in *American Fiction in the Cold War*, Thomas Hill Schaub identifies the consensus discourse of revisionist liberalism as the intellectual context in which writers and critics from all political stripes attempted to litigate the divorce of art and politics after the Second World War. Old Left critics like Trilling, chastened by a renewed sensitivity to the moral ambiguity behind partisan acts, recognized the need for a new aesthetic ideal that would accommodate a complex view of reality and prevent the naïve reductions of ideology to which proletarian fiction had been heir. This revision of literary ideals set the stage for the canonization of modernist aesthetics in the fifties and, as Schaub notes, made the Old Left critics terminologically resemble the southern New

[1] In "The Cult of Experience in American Writing" (1940), Rahv claims that "urge toward and immersion in experience" is the quintessential feature of American literature (10). Yet the Marxist in Rahv is not confident that this drive to experience, so long as it remains uncoupled with the ideas, values, and judgements that create a total picture of life, is capable of producing literature of quality. Indeed, he says, the American artist "all too often is so absorbed in experience that he is satisfied to let it 'write its own ticket' – to carry him, that is, to its own chance or casual destination" (12).

Critics, whose espousal of paradox, irony, and ambiguity as formal criteria reflect a similar (albeit ahistorical) valorization of complexity (40). Fiction writers, for their part, had to struggle not only with the task of reorienting the novel in the face of postwar reality, but with the increasing emphasis on form on the part of critics – an emphasis that many (Schaub cites Creeley, Sorrentino, Bellow, Ellison, and Kerouac) found constrictive because of the subordination of experience to craft that it entailed. So they, too, sought an aesthetic that was more faithful to the fluid and turbulent experience they knew (Schaub 51-5). In so doing, however, they gave up the opportunity to articulate their sense of dislocation in the form of coherent social criticism.[2] Thus the common assumption spanning the conflicting motives and values of those involved in literary production in the postwar years is that politics as it had been known and practiced was not an appropriate concern for the novel of the present.

Yet politics, as I observed previously, was not left behind altogether. Behind the reassessment of the novel's form and function was a lingering concern to maintain the social relevance of literature. The New Critical aesthetic, for instance, revered literary values as the repository of "the moral and intellectual order upon which society ought to rest" (Tate cited in Schaub 28) – even though the New Critics were generally suspicious of the social implications of the novel. The New York intellectuals, unable to recognize or accept the political implications of the New Critics' ahistoricism, insisted specifically on the social significance of the novel because they found in it the most developed representation of the social world and, in that, the best vehicle for socially motivated

[2] In "Mass Society and Post-Modern Fiction," Irving Howe identified contemporary novelists' inability to turn their grievances into articulate social complaint as a special feature of postwar writing that he termed "post-modern." Howe cites many of the same novelists discussed by Schaub.

criticism currently available (30). And writers, whatever their awareness or interest in the debates occupying the academic literati, were concerned with maintaining their relevance in a society blinded by the false promises of consumerism and prosperity (59).[3] For all parties, then, the effort to renegotiate the function of the novel hinged on the ability to maintain the association of art and social hope without veering into the dangerous realms of ideology and propaganda. And in most cases, this effort resulted in the insertion of some notion of politics through a discourse on affect.

For example, Schaub characterizes the preference for the first person point of view in novels from the postwar period as a deliberate break with outmoded socialist forms of the novel (sprawling canvases of large casts of characters caught up in the tidal movements of history) in order to install individual psychology as a new locus of cultural opposition and subversion – a trend he finds especially marked in writers associated with some form of socialism (Mailer and McCarthy) (69). In a cultural context defined by generalities such as "mass society," "organization," and "conformity," the individual consciousness of the first person narrator provides a site of resistance and a place to mark the personal, aesthetic, and political contradictions where private experience departs from the perceived public domain (81). The inevitable focus on affective states that first person accounts entail may thus be seen as taking part in a wider reconceptualization of the political in which the dichotomy between private and public significance is being replaced by a new sense of the pervasiveness of history. The novelistic "shift from economy to mind" (Schaub 69) is not necessarily an abandonment of social hope or a resignation to passivity on the part of writers; rather, it is a way of exploring how politics

[3] Schaub cites Mailer: "It is worth something to remind ourselves that the great artists – certainly the moderns – are almost always in opposition to their society, and that integration, acceptance, non-alienation, etc. etc., have been more conducive to propaganda than art" (*Advertisements* 177; Schaub 59).

might signify on the level of the individual subject. And the way to conduct this exploration is to follow the fluxions and disruptions of affect.

There are good reasons for looking more closely at the significance of affect in the critical and literary discourse of the mid-twentieth century, for the moment's chastened political mood lent itself to a kind of introspective navel-gazing about the purity and motives and the role of the emotions in intellectual life. Even the objectivist poetics of the New Critics indicate how fraught the problem of the emotions could be. William Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardlsey's landmark 1949 essay "The Affective Fallacy" represents an attempt to purify poetry of the emotional excesses that could lead to interpretive conflict, a sign, Tobin Siebers has argued, of their Cold War anxieties about the political dangers of getting carried away with one's feelings.[4] Wimsatt and Beardsley want to stabilize the emotive value of poetry by locating it in a concrete network of textual symbols and relationships rather than in the spontaneous and idiosyncratic responses of readers. In this way the emotive value of textual artifacts can be observed from a distance, as it were, from which point of view emotions are clearly attached to objects, causes are directly linked to effects, and the more obscure and unpredictable phenomena of psychic life are safely contained by an appeal to observable rules of poetic decorum. As an expression of the New Critical emphasis on poetic autonomy, Wimsatt and Beardsley's essay is simply an attempt to establish a set of criteria for objectively discussing the emotive value of literary texts. Placed in the political context of the Cold War, however, it is a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of unrestrained emotionalism. This fact is quickly confirmed by the note of hysteria in their

[4] Siebers dwells at length on the Cold War context of Wimsatt and Beardsley's essay in *Cold War Criticism and the Politics of Skepticism* (37-46).

definition of emotion, which, they say, "has a well-known capacity to fortify opinion, to inflame cognition, and to grow upon itself in surprising proportion to grains of reason. We have mob psychology, psychosis, and neurosis" (Wimsatt 26-7). The implied alternative to New Critical objectivity is, as Siebers argues, "to fall prey to emotional chaos, mob psychology, soul cultivation, mass hallucination, and charismatic leadership" (Siebers *Cold* 38).

While conservative critics thus worried about how to make the emotions more available to objective analysis and understanding, liberals faced a problem of a slightly different order. Liberalism needs to appeal to the emotions in order to exist. The affective life is the validation of its appeal to social justice. The need for such validation is why sentimentality has so often served reformist ends in literary works. But as Trilling observed, liberalism in practice only tends to vitiate the emotions by abstracting them: "The paradox is that liberalism is concerned with the emotions above all else, as proof of which the word happiness stands at the very center of its thought, but in its effort to establish the emotions, or certain among them, in some sort of freedom, liberalism tends to deny them in their full possibility" (x). The process of making the emotions serve political ends is liable to fix emotions as ideas, and ideas, insofar as they might appear to us as fully coherent and autonomous and complete in themselves, are liable to become fixed as absolutes, as "moral passions." Trilling's project in *The Liberal Imagination* is thus to turn ideas back into emotions again, to insist that the attempt to distinguish between them is risky because it ignores the origin of ideas in social relationships and the unstable affective conditions that accrue to them. For this purpose, he introduces the concept of moral realism. Moral realism promotes "the perception of the dangers of the

moral life itself" (213) by reassessing the motives that lie behind ostensibly good impulses, which, he observes, can be "even more willful and imperious and impatient than the self-seeking passions" (214). The problem, however, is that this scrupulous assessment of the latent affective content of moral and political ideas does little to restore the ground that was lost by the inclination to abstraction in the first place. Trilling's call for heightened moral realism promotes an awareness of complexity, ambiguity, and difficulty. Yet this kind of attitude can only culminate in a politics of hesitation and delay. At worst, it results in nostalgia, repression, or reaction, all of which show how close Trilling's liberalism had come to conservatism's quasi-emotional ground.

Trilling's move to reconsider the relationship of liberalism and the emotions results from his recognition that what is at stake in the latter is the creation of attitudes that enter social life in the form of moral and (following his own soft use of the term) political behavior – that is, in action. Wimsatt and Beardsley, by virtue of their hysterical distrust of all things socio-political, implicitly make the same recognition when they attempt to bar subjectivism, ambiguity, and irrationality from the study of the emotions in poetry. But where conservatism can easily sustain its recursions to tradition on the emotional observation that the present sphere of action is a fallen realm, liberalism finds its emotional motivations stalled. So human actions and the moral ideas that often justify them emerge out of a suspicious miasma of impulse and ideology and unreason, and just minds would do well to consider their motivations carefully before committing to the great fray of doing. But how is this state of affairs to yield the sense of possibility that is so fundamental to the liberal aspiration to improve? Reviewing *The Liberal Imagination* when it came out in 1950, R.W.B. Lewis observed that Trilling's liberalism "is not a plan

for creative action, but a device for shoring up defenses....It cannot conclude in what Mr. Trilling looks for, the renovation of the will for the benefit of art and life, though it may succeed in piling up enough sandbags for the will to endure a little longer" (153). Crouched in his foxhole, the liberal is only a conservative armed with recalcitrant hope – which means he has little to contribute politically at all. Or, as Irving Howe suggested somewhat more forcefully: "while a concern with moral problems is right in itself, it is no adequate substitute for an *active* moral passion against social injustice" ("Liberalism"155). How, then, does one cross from doubt to conviction, from sober skepticism to the expansive enthusiasm for possibility that one should expect from the liberal position?

Of course Trilling was aware of the limitations of his position. He was after all an advocate of limitations as well as of openness and flexibility. In "Art and Fortune," he acknowledged the present lack of political will in the world and attributed it in part to the failure of the inquiring mind before the horrors of recent history. But it is important to remember that he was writing about the liberal imagination, not liberal political ideology, and that he viewed the failure of the will in the sphere of practical action as a symptom of a more general cultural malaise in which he could not bring himself fully to believe. Despite its death knells tolling everywhere around him, Trilling held that the novel still had the power to "do something in the work of reconstituting and renovating the will" (260). This is because of the novel's special commerce with the capacity of the creative mind to transcend its limited circumstances, a capacity he identified with romance. Furnishing his idea of romance from James, Trilling turns to the preface to *The Ambassadors*, where James writes that "the romantic stands...for the things that, with all

the facilities in the world, all the wealth and all the courage and all the wit and all the adventure, we never *can* directly know; the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit of thought and desire" (cited in Trilling 259). The peculiar moral quality of the novel is that it describes this "beautiful circuit of thought and desire" which is none other than the will to believe – to believe not in the ideal nor even necessarily in the future, but in the inherent value of change and in the capacity to improve. Thus, Trilling explains, romance "stands for the world of unfolding possibility, for that which, when brought to actuality, is powerfully operative. It is thus a synonym for the will in its creative aspect, especially in its aspect of *moral* creativeness, as it subjects itself to criticism and conceives for itself new states of being" (260).

Trilling has his own ideas about what kind of novel is best suited to conduct the renovation of the will in the midst of the twentieth century crisis, and I need not go into those ideas here. The point I want to make is that Trilling observes how the liberal imagination persists and has always persisted in the face of a certain impossibility that is the world's stubborn refusal to give us what we ask of it. Liberalism at mid-century stands in an agonized relation to its own inspiring emotions, but this does not mean that it is finally bereft of the affect on which it lives. It means rather that liberalism must find its possibility within the confounding affective circumstances that shape contemporary life: horror, anxiety, loss, and despair. Trilling could not observe with confidence that the novel of his day was living up to the social promise he placed in it; certainly he found American fiction to be wanting in its engagement with its own supposed liberal democratic principles. But the novels in this study show that even where emotional conditions are discouraging, there is possibility to be found in the affect-experience

nonetheless. Nabokov stages a flight from the sorrows of history, Styron confronts the ineluctability of human suffering, and Baldwin and McCullers both wrestle with the anxiety of being. But each in his or her own individual way retains a sense of experience that is charged with inherently social and inherently liberal possibility. It will remain the burden of the chapters that follow to explain how.

2. Hope & The Utopian Imagination

Recognizing the persistence of hope in the cultural productions of mid-twentieth century America is a vexed task. The experience of world events, from the rise of Fascism and the Stalinist purge trials of the thirties to the horrors of Belsen and Buchenwald and finally Hiroshima and Nagasaki, obviously made it difficult to feel good about the course of human history, even if in light of these events the value of democracy seemed everywhere affirmed. Social critics thus tended to revise their attitudes towards the idea of the future and the realization of its possibilities. This trend is perhaps most famously represented by Karl Popper's monumental works *The Poverty of Historicism* (1944) and *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945). Popper railed against the dangers of historicism, by which he meant the appeal to a myth of destiny to justify the actions of the present. Historicism, he warned, "gives *certainty* regarding the ultimate outcome of human history" (*Open* 9), and this dream of perfectability is the origin of totalitarianism. Counter-totalitarian logic thus requires the adoption of skepticism and uncertainty regarding ultimate ends. The difficulty, however, is that even when it is meant to avert disaster, skepticism does not resemble hope in any way. After totalitarianism, progressive thought had to struggle with a loss of the confidence that formerly gave

impetus to its constructive social and political critique. Indeed, for fear of what happens when passionate conviction goes untempered by sobering reason, hope in its inspiring and revolutionary aspects inevitably became an object of suspicion. Hope was no longer fully reliable as an incentive to social change.

It may therefore be said that the experience of the twentieth century took a good deal of the juice out of the fruit of utopia. The juice, of course, is not the idea of a better world, but the motivating affective forces that make such an idea alluring and incite social change. Writing at the end of the 1950s, Daniel Bell identified this historical loss of spirit with the end of a certain kind of ideology. Bell follows Karl Mannheim in distinguishing between particular and total ideology. Particular ideology is a set of values and beliefs that disguise and therefore protect the interests of the individual who holds them; such interests may involve property ownership, political representation, or social status. Total ideology, by contrast, is a set of values and beliefs related to an individual's belonging to a particular historico-social epoch or group. [5] As Bell understands it, total ideology is

> an all-inclusive system of comprehensive reality, it is a set of beliefs, infused with passion, and seeks to transform the whole of a way of life. This commitment to ideology – the yearning for a "cause," or the satisfaction of deep moral feelings – is *not* necessarily the reflection of interests in the shape of ideas. Ideology, in this sense, and in the sense that we use it here, is a secular religion. (401)

[5] While an individual's private interests cannot be separated from his belonging to a particular socio-historical group, Mannheim's point in distinguishing these two forms of ideology is that no individual participates in the full range of ideologies available to his class; nor is total ideology simply the sum total of a range of fragmented individual experiences: "As soon as the total conception of ideology is used, we attempt to reconstruct the whole outlook of a social group, and neither the concrete individuals nor the abstract sum of them can legitimately be considered as bearers of this ideological thought-system as a whole. The aim of the analysis on this level is the reconstruction of the systematic theoretical basis underlying the single judgments of the individual." (Mannheim 59).

Thus, for Bell, the end of ideology in the 1950s (and the decline of socialism that attends it) is related to a shift in the affective structure of intellectual life. Ideas had lost their capacity to enchant and enthrall, partly because their aura depended on an experience of social cohesion that was no longer historically tenable. This diagnosis coincides with Frederic Jameson's view that the postwar period inaugurates a new "waning of affect." The phrase seems to suggest that the culture has entered a generalized state of apathy, but Jameson's point is rather that the subject has become "decentered," by which he means that individuals have lost their ideological sense of place in the world. As a result, subjective experience has become "free-floating and impersonal" (16), and so long as experience remains this way it is impossible to connect to narratives of social organization and collective striving such as Marxism and utopian socialism had once provided. For both Jameson and Bell, then, the desiccation of utopia results from the decline of a particular structure of feeling whose individual affect is articulated through an experience of social cohesion.

Crucially, however, the decline of this structure of feeling is specifically associated with the Party of the Left. It hardly seems reasonable to claim that the dislocation of subjects in the postwar (or postmodern, for Jameson) world has led to the universal abrogation of the experience of cohesion that makes collective striving possible. Indeed, as Lawrence Grossberg has argued, postmodern culture has proven remarkably adept at marshalling individual affect into collective structures that serve to reify conservative ideology. Bell's loss of secular faith pertains strictly to the revolutionary enthusiasms of the left, its love of transformation and its dream of fraternity, and it is the curtailment of these specifically leftist excitements that are usually taken to signal the end

of the utopian imagination. Such loss implies that the utopian imagination thrives not only on an ideal of social betterment (a coherently articulated set of goals) but also on a relatively unified affective base (an experience of social cohesion in the form of total ideology). In my view, these presuppositions raise a couple of important problems. For one, the idea that utopia must express a specific ideological content does not account for the possible persistence of utopian thought in other forms. Utopianism is of course not the sole property of the radical left, and it is wrong to assume that the collapse of one is equal to the death of the other. Two, the idea that total ideology is somehow necessary to the flourishing of utopian forces provokes the question that utopianism might exist in relation to other structures of feeling.[6] In other words, it assumes that historical conditions of social fragmentation and subjective displacement are necessarily obstacles to the expression of utopian consciousness. I do not think that this is the case.

Working by the above presuppositions imposes considerable limitations on the study of the utopian imagination in mid-century culture. For example, M. Keith Booker's *The Post-Utopian Imagination* constitutes the most sustained study of the topic currently available, but his narrow definition of utopia leaves a lot of questions unexamined. Like Bell, Booker observes that the postwar years (specifically 1945-63) saw the decline of socialism in the west. This becomes the occasion to observe that utopianism entered a state of collapse as well. Booker defines the utopian imagination as "an ability to imagine a preferable systemic alternative to the status quo, while at the

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[6] Though he is talking about the decline of socialism and its utopian narratives of revolutionary transformation, Bell prefers to say that it is ideology, not utopia, that has come to an end: "The end of ideology is not – should not be – the end of utopia as well. If anything, one can begin anew the discussion of utopia only by being aware of the trap of ideology" (405). Bell does not, however, pursue the question of how postwar utopia might thrive after the collapse of total ideology, or what kind of structure of feeling might serve as its foundation.

same time, imagining a historical process that might lead in the direction of that alternative" (5). He attributes the impoverishment of the utopian imagination to a number of historical circumstances: the collapse of the Communist Party and the decimation of the trade union movement in the fifties (193); the fear of the future, whether in the form of nuclear annihilation, the Red Terror, or the decadence brought on by affluence and commercialism gone rampant (7); finally, a consumer culture that stimulates utopian energies only to co-opt them in the interests of the capitalist status quo (2). In causing the failure to imagine "any sort of large-scale, systematic alternative to consumer capitalism" (8) across the field of cultural production, these factors set the stage for the cultural hegemony of late capitalism and the emergence of postmodernism, which sees liberal democracy as the only horizon (192). Booker's work is thus important for establishing the historical conditions for the decline of political radicalism. But in restricting his definition of utopia to a systemic leftist alternative to the status quo, Booker ends up dismissing all other expressions of utopian consciousness as being "decidedly weak" (8) in energy. As a result he does not take into account the ways in which left-leaning utopianism was being restructured in the postwar years, as I aim to do throughout this study.

The most obvious problem facing the left after the Second World War was that the Soviet experience had demonstrated the inherent conservatism of their utopian ideology. Totalitarianism was reactionary and socially constrictive, and any utopian scheme purporting to describe with confidence a future state of society could now be counted as politically dangerous. Utopia, as a result, is deprived of the predictive content

that could describe what a systemic alternative to the status quo might look like.[7] Furthermore, lacking a description of the content of utopia, the function of utopia suffers as well, for it is difficult to instigate change without a clear conception of the goals to be achieved. What remains is the form of utopia, its continued existence as the articulation of a desire that moves towards an ever-expanding realization of social possibility that nonetheless remains ambiguous in terms of content. From this perspective one can observe that the function of utopia is not entirely eviscerated but rather adapts to the new structure of utopia in the capacity of an engendering awareness. The function of utopia in this context is not to initiate specific forms of political implementation but to mark the social itself as a site of proliferating experience and value. These are the conditions in which the (leftist) utopian imagination persists in the mid-century period.

Booker's eulogy for the utopian imagination aside, postwar reality calls for a new approach to utopia that allows for the inchoate nature of its content and recognizes its revised function as an opening for social possibility rather than a direct incentive for purposive action. I have in mind something along the lines of what Gianni Vattimo has proposed under the name "heterotopia."[8] In *The Transparent Society*, Vattimo argues that the aesthetic project of modernity represented in large part a dream of reconciling aesthetic experience with everyday life that can only be described as utopian. For

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[7] I am indebted to Ruth Levitas' tripartite schema for defining utopia in terms of content (a particular portrayal of an ideal society), form (a way of describing such societies, such as a literary genre), and function (the purpose attributed to utopian imagining). As her wonderfully comprehensive study shows, utopian theorists have defined their object using various combinations and permutations of these three aspects of utopia.

[8] Tobin Siebers has built on the Vattimo's concept of heterotopia in a collection of essays under the same name. For Siebers, postmodern utopia is characterized by an ideal of social harmony that is inclusive of difference, "a dream about wholeness in which various parts are allowed their autonomy" (7). The term heterotopia is appealing because, he argues, postmodern utopia is conceived according to the sexual politics of the romantic couple. Defined as the site of difference, the romantic couple serves as the postmodern romance of community in which all difference (including the non-difference of same-sex partners) is entitled to its shot at happiness.

bourgeois thinkers like Dewey and the Marxist-influenced Adorno, Lukacs, and Marcuse, art held the promise of the universal fulfillment and emancipation of mankind, and even if prevailing social conditions meant that aesthetic experience was isolated it nonetheless held the promise of rehabilitating the whole of life. During the decades following the Second World War, this widely held utopian conception of aesthetic experience began to change in response to the development of the society of mass communication. The mass media's impact is felt in the fracturing of human experience through the rapid transmission of multiple world-views to all areas of society as well as in the flattening of experience that attends the mass circulation and consumption of media images. The effects are twofold. First, the fracturing of experience contributes to the erosion of the sense of universal history that is necessary to the utopian dream of emancipation. Vattimo thus identifies modern utopia with the belief in a universal human community that is no longer historically tenable (much as we have seen in Bell and Jameson, above). Second, the flattening of experience that results from the hyper-mediation of everything changes the way we experience reality. This change is both a disenchantment and a disburdening. Freed from the gravity of reference, reality undergoes a "weakening of its persuasive force" (59), becoming more pliable hence more open to the counter-authoritarian experiences of oscillation and play. Potentially, then, the thinness of late- or postmodern reality is accompanied by a new sense of possibility for self-invention and renewal.

The utopian dream of universal emancipation is superseded by the heterotopian experience of the free play of possibility and the contingency of values. This shift is reflected in the idea that aesthetic experience is an experience of community. Following Gadamer (who is following Kant), Vattimo argues that the experience of the beautiful

locates the observer in a community of like observers who share a common appreciation of similar objects. The appreciation of beauty is thus a form of reflexive judgment that arises from and refers to a community of consensus. In the period before the development of mass communications technology, it was possible to perceive the community of observers in terms of humanity as a whole. With the rise of the mass media, however, this perception of the universal human community is no longer possible. Aesthetic experience continues to be an experience of community, but the concept of universality in the context of the mass proliferation of communitarian models means that the total human community can only be recognized in terms of dissensus. The observer of the beautiful now participates in one community among many, and this experience of universality as multiplicity constitutes the new experience of heterotopia. "Our experience of the beautiful in the recognition of models that make the world and community is restricted to the moment when these worlds and communities present themselves explicitly as plural" (69). Thus, heterotopia requires the recognition of others; aesthetic experience is no longer authentic when it fails to recognize its context as a plurality of "beautifuls" and is prone to substitute for its own provisional community the experience of humankind as a whole.

Vattimo's concept of heterotopia reflects a world in which the experience of human totality on which the older utopias subsisted is not only untenable but also undesirable. In this we can observe how the characteristic of melioration that is common to utopian thought persists even in the absence of a concrete utopian content. Heterotopia is an experience of disorientation and contingency, but it is a disorientation and contingency taken in stride as the necessary precondition of human potential and

freedom: in short, of the social good. The concept itself is thus an expression of the persistence of utopian hope in the age of the end of utopia. It allows us to recognize how hope in the postwar context need not take the shape of the buoyant and expansive yearning that one might be inclined to associate with the utopian passions of other times. Insofar as hope is an anticipation of meliorative change, it is just as likely to uplift and soar as it is to plunge into the sticky morass of worldly experience. And if the works studied here are any indication, then this latter is the direction in which hope can be seen to move in the postwar situation. Indeed, it seems to me that the threading of hope through anxiety, confusion, desperation, and even violence – the very conditions that would seem to negate it – is a sign that hope in the postwar moment finds its strength not in escapist fantasies but in the difficult work of real-world possibility.

Yet it would be wrong to suggest that the other kind of utopia, the escapist or transcendental utopia, dies out in the period of sobriety following the Second World War. Utopia has as many different aspects as there are ideas of the good, and its conservative strands are readily seen in the works I have included in this study. Conservative utopia finds its expression in the euphoric dream of the whole, in communities of exclusion, in fantasies of upward mobility and of technological gratification; it resolves or occludes the disunity of experience in order to try a taste of ease at the end of time. But when it appears in the literary fiction of mid-century, it is dialectically subsumed by the realization of the utopia of the left. This latter appears wherever the disunity of experience is recognized as a condition of possibility rather than an occasion for reaction or flight. The utopia of the left thus looks into the future from the vantage of anxiety and confusion; indeed it sees in anxiety and confusion the very conditions of the enlargement

of experience that liberalism has always sought. In this sense the affects associated with the utopia of the left should not be seen as symptoms of the failure to imagine the future in terms of progressive change. Quite the opposite: they are symptoms of a profound investment in the work of worldly involvement. And it is thanks to the importance of affect in facilitating this work that we can observe the perseverance of utopia in the liberal tradition as carried out by the novels in this study.

3. Affect & Utopia

> A state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality in which it occurs. (Mannheim 192)

As I hope to make clear, utopia cannot be understood apart from affect; nor can affect be understood apart from utopia. The chapters that follow endeavour to contribute to the work of this understanding. The authors they deal with come from a variety of backgrounds and bring their own issues to bear on problems related to affect and utopia. Each thus provides the opportunity to engage a new problem that arises in the discourse of liberal hope in the mid-century American novel.

In Chapter One, on Carson McCullers, I attempt to chart in more concrete terms some of the interrelations between affect and utopia that have so far remained abstract. In the first section of the chapter, I explore how *The Member of the Wedding* serves to juxtapose contrasting conceptions of utopia that may be characterized along the liberal/conservative lines I have drawn above. In finally recommending the utopian sensibility of Frankie Addams, the novel makes it possible to see how liberal utopia involves first and foremost a relation to time and change that privileges the manifestation of social potential in affective experience itself rather than indulging in prescriptions of

imagined alternative social arrangements. The second section of the chapter builds on this connection by exploring the social valence of romantic love in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. As we shall see, love for McCullers is a highly personal affect-experience that is tragically limited from an individual point of view but potentially regenerative from the point of view of its ramifications in the wider social field. In this part of the chapter readers can expect to find a more thoroughgoing theoretical explanation of the concepts of affect, emotion, potential, and possibility that opens the way for understanding how to read the potential of the social field over and against the limiting experience of personal tragedy. In the end, McCullers' fictional sensibility is paradoxically revealed as a kind of tragic determinism that does not foreclose on the potential of new inventions and interventions in the social domain. Her work is thus "incomplete" insofar as it gestures towards this always unfinished aspect of human togetherness and belonging.

Chapter Two takes a slightly different approach, partly in order to anticipate a problem that is surreptitiously introduced in the theoretical proceedings of Chapter One. There, affect appears as a nonsubjective, impersonal force that happens between individuals and even undermines the very notions of subjectivity and personality on which the "individual" as such depends. Lest it appear that I am announcing for the thousandth time the death of the subject, I undertake in this chapter to explore the personal (emotional) side of the affect/emotion paradox in order to leave room for the enlivening of the subject through the realization of individual agency even in the face of the impersonality of its affect. The work of James Baldwin provides an appropriate entry into this problem. From very early on in his career Baldwin identified his mission to surpass the novelistic shortcomings of his predecessors with the project of humanizing

his characters.[9] Part of this process of humanization involved attributing of agency to characters who he felt would otherwise have no hope of challenging, let alone overcoming, the very formidable obstacles placed in the way of their freedom by a repressive social order. Thus, in chapter two, the problem of individual agency serves as a guide to Baldwin's meditations on the relationship between self-awareness, social involvement, and utopian transformation. In section one I turn to *The Fire Next Time*, a formative essay in Baldwin's political stance that deals explicitly with the problem of social revolution and utopia as he saw it in the early sixties. Here we find that social movements such as the Elijah Mohammed's Nation of Islam offer compensatory utopias for the social dilemmas of postwar America that do nothing to empower the individuals who get involved in them. Indeed, these kinds of utopias are associated with what might be called the deracination of agency because through them individuals effectively surrender their power of self-determination. Having thus established the connection between (conservative) utopia and failed agency, I then move back in time to Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, in which a similar relationship between utopia and individual (dis)empowerment is explored in more strictly characterological terms. Section two thus delves more deeply into the psychological substructure of the kinds of conservative utopian attitudes explored in *The Fire Next Time*.

To facilitate this explication, I distinguish between moral conviction and emotional rationality as two opposing ways of relating to the awareness of contingency

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[9] In the process of honing his artistic sensibilities Baldwin's favorite scratching post was Richard Wright: "[*Native Son*'s] Bigger has no discernible relationship to himself, to his own life, to his own people, nor to any other people...and his force comes, not from his significance as a social (or anti-social) unit, but from his significance as the incarnation of a myth....What this means for the novel is that a necessary dimension has been cut away; this dimension being the relationship that Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life" ("Many" 27).

and change that is implicit in utopian thinking. Moral conviction, exemplified by the novel's tyrant patriarch Gabriel Grimes, is a way of imposing a compensatory certainty on the awareness of contingency that does nothing to influence or accommodate the instability it has acknowledged. Indeed, moral conviction belongs to the order of conservative utopia because it depends on an idea of the necessity of the future that contradicts the internal logic of the emotions themselves. Basically, then, it denies the potentiating power of affect by suppressing the instability inherent in emotional experience in view of a necessary idea of history, in this case having to do with Christian salvation. Moral conviction thus fails to enable an empowering self-relation to the process of change because it views this process in the traumatizing light of historical inevitability. Emotional rationality, by contrast, allows for the recognition of the embeddedness of the self in its social and historical contexts by acknowledging that emotional responses are socially derived and therefore often contradictory, misleading, and, from the point of view of the conscious agent who feels them, inappropriate. And always, of course, they are contingent and subject to revision. Emotional rationality thus allows for the realization of individual agency in the process of working through the impersonal affective component of one's personal emotional life. Section three of the chapter develops this idea of emotional rationality in relation to Gabriel's stepson John. John, unlike Gabriel, exhibits an entirely different kind of emotional introspection that allows him to grow as an individual and as a self-determining agent of change. The logic of emotional rationality allows us to see that these conflicts indicate not only his own inner turmoil but also inconsistencies inhering in the social field, and the process of struggling with them is part of the process of accepting and taking responsibility for his

involvement in history. In the end, agency is revealed to be a kind of self-relation in which acknowledging the impersonality of affect is the way to start appropriating the historical forces that are at work on the self and putting them to work in the interest of self-determination. This kind of agency is appropriate to the liberal model of utopia because it originates in the potential of the present to be other than it is, and in the ability of the self to be present to that potential and to discover new ways of relating, to self and to others.

Chapter Four picks up two independent threads introduced in chapters Two and Three and ties them together into a new strand of argument about the relationship between affect and collective experience. The first thread refers to the theme of tragedy briefly introduced during the discussion of Carson McCullers in Chapter Two. The second refers to the state of emotional introspection represented by John Grimes in Chapter Three. In Chapter Four, I identify a similar self-relation to the impersonality of affect by the name of skepticism, and tragedy (and the tragic affect it entails) is the means by which this skepticism is both enabled and paradoxically overcome. The case material for this chapter comes from the early work of William Styron, drawing most heavily on his second novel, *Set This House on Fire*. Styron's work often dwells on the meaning of tragedy in relation to the existential and moral dilemmas of contemporary life. In *Set This House on Fire* in particular, he establishes isolated individual human suffering as the precondition of a form of potential community which has no precedent in social custom but must be invented from moment to moment by the individuals who find relations within it. Skepticism is the hope and potential of this kind of community, for it enables the withdrawal from identification, certainty, and knowledge that stalls the reproduction

of older social formations by making room for ever new reinterpretations of and interventions in social practice. The first part of the chapter thus develops the concept of skepticism through three tragic situations culled from Styron's earliest works. Here, we find that tragedy enables the skeptical admission of the absolute separateness of human experience. Though absolute, this separateness is nonetheless transcended in the recognition of relationship that skepticism entails.

Section two delves into a sampling of theoretical perspectives on tragedy in order to establish how the relationship that has been discovered among admittedly separate individuals may be viewed in terms of collective experience. Specifically, I identify Styron's approach to tragedy with the anti-mimetic theories propounded by Bertrolt Brecht and Augusto Baol. Styron's narrative (i.e., non-dramatic) intervention in the anti-mimetic tradition provides ample opportunity for exposing the limitations of mimetic identification which presupposes the common experiential ground of different individuals. Here as elsewhere, the impersonality of affect is the key to recognizing that what appears as a common ground in which individuals might neatly identify with each other is in fact a far more complex field of socially mediated motivations and impulses. In light of this skeptical appraisal, the socially integrative function of catharsis becomes frustrated, for the skeptical individual is as estranged from his own experience as he is from the experience of the others with whom mimesis would unite him. The third section of the chapter takes these anti-mimetic insights into the incomprehensibility of human experience and connects them to the prospects of hope in a social world debased by consumption. Again, tragedy is enlisted as the form of experience which most clearly indicates the absolute separateness of human beings from one another and the

incommensurability of their experience. Rather than leading to irreparable alienation and despair, however, this observation marks the potential that the individual may grant the humanity of the other. And in granting the humanity of the other, we find the potential for new differential ways of relating to one another and to ourselves. Skepticism thus formulated is a far cry from the navel-gazing paralysis with which it has been associated by critics like Tobin Siebers. In this formulation, skepticism mobilizes the creation of the human and its social meanings.

In Chapter Five, we will find that Vladimir Nabokov's work approaches the problem of affect from a different angle. Among the authors treated in this study Nabokov is in many ways the most utopian because his privileging of such affective phenomena as "aesthetic bliss" leads him to renounce the turbulence of history for "other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm" (Nabokov "On a Book" 314-15). (In this capacity he is also perhaps the least liberal, a problem I shall address in a moment.) The salient affective experience in his work may thus be identified as a state of passion in which the subject quite literally loses itself in the blur of its own becoming. In keeping with a materialist theory which views affect as a condition of worldly embeddedness, my interest lies in how this passion reveals its historicity in spite of itself. That is, rather than viewing these passionate moments in terms of their putative transcendence of history, I read them in terms of their immanence to worldly conditions of relationship and change. In this sense they do not lead us out of time and history but rather bring us into contact with the immediacy of worldly belonging. The first section of the chapter lays some of the groundwork for performing a materialist reading of Nabokov's passion. The second section then launches a reading of *Bend*

Sinister, one of Nabokov's more overtly political novels. *Bend Sinister* creates a portrait of a world in which vulnerability to the passions appears as the primary condition of the political involvement of the individual. "Involvement" of course should be understood not in terms of political voluntarism (for which Nabokov has nothing but contempt) but rather terms of the ineluctable state of being-in-relation with others (i.e., embeddedness) which is paradoxically realized most intensely in moments of passion. The novel's dystopian inversions are apparent in its characters' persistent failure to experience fully this state of passion as embeddedness. This failure applies equally to the Ekwilist revolutionaries who have commandeered the state as well as to the philosopher Krug who resists them. In the former case the dispassionateness of the revolutionaries is attributed to their mediocrity: they lack the originality of insight that would lead them to such an exceptional experience. In the latter case the dispassionateness of Krug may be attributed to his too-secure belief that "Nothing can happen to Krug the Rock" (89). The result is that neither party is fully cognizant of the nature of its involvement with other, and this ignorance culminates in a series of fatal errors that finally destroys the hopes of both.

The political context of *Bend Sinister* makes it possible to see how Nabokov's ostensibly ahistorical investment in the passions may be recuperated in the service of liberal utopia. The relative absence of passion in the world of *Bend Sinister* appears to be the condition in which individuals use each other carelessly and cause each other needless harm. This dystopian situation may be attributed to the fact that passion is the condition in which individuals are the most involved in their attachments and therefore the most vulnerable. To find oneself in passion is to recognize one's embeddedness, and this is in some sense also to recognize one's indebtedness. The experience in and of the

other in the experience of passion is therefore a potential precondition of a certain kind of social wish: that individuals should be free to make, to nurture, and to protect their attachments; that their vulnerability in those attachments should be respected; and that they should be allowed to suffer the loss of them on their own terms. The obverse utopian side of Nabokov's sinister bend represents a world in which the flourishing of affective potential is implicitly related to a state of social health and well-being. In Nabokov as in the other writers represented in this study, then, affect is revealed to be essential to the articulation of utopia in its mid-century context.

The Incomplete Works of Carson McCullers

> There's nothing that makes you so aware of the improvisation of human existence as a song unfinished. (McCullers *Ballad* 122)

Carson McCullers was old enough in the 1930s to lightly proclaim herself a Communist agitator (Carr 38-9), and though her participation in the movement was largely vicarious she maintained some involvement in leftist politics throughout her life. She actively supported the Democratic Party in the 1960 election and challenged the segregationist policies of the Columbus Public Library in 1948 and again in 1961 (Savigneau 186-7, 292). In her fiction, by contrast, and especially in the works following *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* in 1940, she followed the trend of mid-century writers in subordinating her political interests in favour of more existential and psychological themes. There is no contradiction in this. McCullers' fiction should be read not in terms of a diminishing interest in social issues but rather as a reorientation of the same concerns in light of psychological realities. Indeed, in an important passage from a brief 1949 essay, McCullers explicitly indicates her view of the political implications of emotional states:

> 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. The lover responds in a new way to nature and may even write poetry. Love is affirmation; it motivates the *yes* responses and the sense of wider communication. Love casts out fear, and in the security of this togetherness we find contentment, courage. We no longer fear the age-old

> haunting questions: "Who am I?" "Why am I" "Where am I going" – and having cast out fear, we can be honest and charitable.
>
> For fear is a primary source of evil. And when the question "Who am I" recurs and is unanswered, then fear and frustration project a negative attitude. The bewildered soul can answer only: "Since I do not understand 'Who I am,' I only know what I am *not*." The corollary of this emotional incertitude is snobbism, intolerance and racial hate. The xenophobic individual can only reject and destroy, as the xenophobic nation inevitably makes war. (*Mortgaged* 260)

In what follows I am going to explore the social extension of the "we" of which McCullers here speaks, especially in light of the paradox in which love is said to open new relations between the personality and the world. These remarks should of course be weighed in view of her fiction, and her fiction suggests that the personal consequences of love are ultimately tragic and that loneliness must be unrequited in the end. It therefore seems appropriate to understand the generative capacity of love not in terms of its personal effects, which are fatally disappointing, but rather in terms of its ramifications across the social field, where personal tragedy is absorbed into a wider range of potential. Another way of putting this is to say that the real potential of this extremely personal affect called "love" is not ultimately personal but belongs to a much wider network of social relations. I hope to arrive at this understanding by way of two theoretical excursions into McCullers' work. The first, dealing with *The Member of the Wedding*, reads Frankie Addams' highly affective personality in light of the novel's various articulations of utopian fantasy, thereby establishing the important link between personal affect and the social dimension of McCullers' thought. These reflections lay the

groundwork for a second section on *The Ballad of the Sad Café* in which I engage in a much more thorough examination of the social dimensions of affective experience. Ultimately the point is to arrive at an understanding of how love, even in its tragic personal aspect, may be viewed as a condition of social hope more generally.

1. "The World is a Sudden Place": Utopia in *The Member of the Wedding*

Frankie Addams, the twelve year old protagonist of Carson McCuller's *The Member of the Wedding*, possesses a heightened sensitivity to time. Perhaps for this reason she is also petulant, selfish, manipulative, and naïve, for her awareness of time is a highly affective condition and she must constantly adjust herself in the face of it. She is struck by the alien quality of experience, by the indescribable singularity of a "feeling [which] she could not name" (2), and she has observed the process whereby the newness of such feeling is soon absorbed into the familiar: "Whenever a sudden change had come about there was a certain doubt during the time when it was happening; but after sleeping through a night, and on the very next day, the change did not seem so sudden after all" (44). Her affect is an occasion to reflect as well as react, and as a result she has a unique awareness of the inconstancy of things. Frankie sees everywhere during her twelfth summer the frozen look of a world slowed down in spite of itself, as if she has caught space in a lie: everything around her, the glaring sidewalks, the crazy walls of the kitchen covered with John Henry's queer drawings, the moths pressing at the screen, the season itself "like a silent crazy jungle under glass" (1) – everything in this frozen stifled world is in motion, and the discrepancy between this press to move and the perception

which freezes it renders time so drawn-out and intolerable that she can hardly stand to bear it. And then there is her precocious awareness of impermanence:

> I wonder if you have ever thought about this. Here we are – right now. This very minute. Now. But while we're talking right now, this minute is passing. And it will never come again. Never in all the world. When it is gone it is gone. No power on earth could bring it back again. It is gone. Have you ever thought about that? (115)

Frankie, in short, is uniquely attuned to instability and process, and it is no wonder that she should be volatile and unstable as an individual as well. But these are also, as I hope to demonstrate, the conditions which create her utopian consciousness. Frankie Addams' perception of uncertainty in time is also the basis of her utopian imagination.

I offer this notion that Frankie is uniquely attuned to process in contrast to the idea that she is caught between two points, as if she is trapped in a conceptual dog-run between past and future modes of her existence. This latter point of view has been proposed by Oliver Evans, who argues that "Berenice and John Henry represent two worlds (of experience and innocence respectively) between which Frankie darts uncertainly back and forth, feeling at home in neither" (110). There is some reason to give credence to this claim. Like so many of McCullers' characters, Frankie is in-between in many capacities, straddling the borders of childhood and adulthood, femininity and masculinity, and sickness and health (she has growing pains). But in all of these cases the state of in-between does not adequately capture the idea that Frankie is in transit. The in-between presupposes her identification with preexisting, hypostatized subject positions which reinforce the idea that there might be such a thing as "feeling at

home" if only one could find the place. In order to emphasize her temporal disposition, I want to read Frankie as being in process – not between two points, but in relation to an undefined potential which introduces a destabilizing tendency into her character. This kind of approach has been introduced by the more recent work of Sarah Gleeson-White, who reads in McCullers' fiction an affirmation of becoming which "precludes any possibility of stasis and foreclosure in the politics of identity" (4). Frankie's temporal disposition should be read in light of this impossibility of foreclosure, for her relation to the future is only a relation to incompleteness and uncertainty in the present. Indeed, rather than seeing Frankie as occupying a position in-between past and future, it is important to place her in the immediate context of the now.

The condition that enables us to place her in this immediate context is, of course, the affect which indicates something happening in the world of time. Thus we first notice her temporal disposition in the form of fear: "Frankie had become an unjoined person who hung around in doorways, and she was afraid" (1). Fear, granted, is a retraction of a kind, but it is no less a response to the awareness of impending change than hope, and in both cases these responses allow us to see that Frankie is at the front of a process of emergence. Indeed, the range of emotions she experiences around the idea of the future is a symptom of the instability at the heart of her vision, and this instability is built directly into the structure of her utopian schemes. As fervent as her hope can be, it fails to connect her dream of joining to anything much other than movement itself. Here is Frankie feverishly imagining her marriage to her brother and his wife:

> "Boyoman! Manoboy!" she said. "When we leave Winter Hill we're going to more places than you ever thought about or even knew existed. Just where we

> will go first I don't know, and it don't matter. Because after we go to that place we're going on to another. We mean to keep moving, the three of us. Here today and gone tomorrow. Alaska, China, Iceland, South America. Traveling on trains. Letting her rip on motorcycles. Flying all around the world in aeroplanes. Here today and gone tomorrow. All over the world. It's the damn truth. Boyoman!" (111)

By the end of the novel, the devastated dream of the wedding is replaced by another, equally heady with the buzz of anticipation, and it does not matter because Frankie's utopia is not significantly dependent on the realization of some future state of being. Hers is a utopia without content, a relation to potential whose primary function is to volatilize rather than reify the conditions of the present. This utopia represents a paradox in which the future is obscure but not, for that, less real; indeed the world as it now appears loses some of its substance in the face of this impending unknown. "Because of the wedding, these distant lands, the world, seemed altogether possible and near. It was the actual present, in fact, that seemed to F. Jasmine a little bit unreal" (67). As an imaginative departure into a distant future, utopia always returns to the present to expose the latter's contingency. Contingency is the condition in which we find both the future and Frankie's self welling up.

Utopia is not, however, a merely personal concern, as idiosyncratic as it might be. The social dimension of utopia is related to the loneliness from which it springs. Indeed, *The Member of the Wedding* contains a dialogue about utopia that keeps returning to different experiences of loneliness as the precondition of social involvement. Up until the day before the wedding, utopian planning has been a regular feature of the Addams

household daily schedule. At about five in the afternoon, just as twilight sets in, Frankie and John Henry and Berenice Sadie Brown sit around the table to criticize God's creation and come up with their own versions of an improved alternate world. All three are different, and each is based on a unique perception of social needs and relationships. John Henry, for instance, does not have a clear sense of social difference, and as a result he has not developed the sense of self-world incongruity that would galvanize his need for social connection. "I'm not a bit lonesome," he says, distinguishing his own feelings from Frankie's desire to be involved with others (40). Because he does not recognize the social as something from which he feels himself excluded, John Henry does not think in the "global terms" that would acknowledge disparity and lack as the basis of social relationships (91). In other words, his sense of the wider world has not yet evolved to exclude himself. He imagines all worldly improvements in terms of his own body – "the sudden long arm that could stretch from here to California," for instance – and to environmental conditions relating to that body: "chocolate dirt and lemonade." Thus, John Henry's utopian improvements are limited to his own person, and candy flowers and a tail are all he needs to see that the world is a better place.

The utopias of Frankie and Berenice, on the other hand, both have a more global perspective that incorporates changes of a social as well as a personal nature. Both stem from a sense of injustice that is itself a lesson in the loneliness John Henry does not yet understand: that some should have what others do not, and that the world is neither equal nor fair. Because of this awareness, improvements to the world must accommodate social factors, and the utopias of Frankie and Berenice are therefore much more politically attuned. Still, important differences remain. Like so much else that comes out

of Berenice's experienced mouth, her perfect world is highly conventional: to eliminate racial prejudice, there would be human beings of only one colour, and everyone would be "as one loving family on the earth." There would be no war or violence, no starvation, and no want of food or work. Most importantly, her first husband would still be alive. Social and personal welfare are united; all is health, happiness, and harmony. As lovely as they are, the very conventionality of these ideas belies the weakness of their potential. Berenice, it seems, is lost in a reverie without affect. Her utopia thus contrasts sharply with Frankie's highly engaged and much more spontaneous imagination.

Consider Frankie's improved creation. While she agrees with the social principles underpinning Berenice's world, she augments them with a few flourishes of her own. First she acknowledges the importance of movement and the merit of distinction with "an aeroplane and a motorcycle to each person, a world club with certificates and badges, and a better law of gravity" (92). She admits, too, the necessity of strife: "She did not completely agree with Berenice about the war; and sometimes she said she would have one War Island in the world where those who wanted to could go and fight or donate blood, and she might go for a while as a WAC in the air corps." And in addition to more snow – a personal embellishment coming from a person who has rarely had to live with the stuff – she thinks there should be more freedom to be. "She planned it so that people could instantly change back and forth from boys to girls, whichever way they wanted." Berenice establishes fairness as an end in itself, as if the elimination of physical and economic differences will amount to the elimination of suffering altogether. Frankie, by contrast, sees fairness as a means toward greater differentiation, mobility, and change.

Frankie's utopia looks into the future only to return to say that the present is not radically different enough. And here there is another important distinction to be observed between Frankie's and Berenice's points of view. The implicit criticism of Berenice's imagined world is not only that the present is limited by racial prejudice and socio-economic inequality, but that it changes, and for the worse: in her creation, Ludie Freeman would not have died. Her ideal world is therefore built on a perception of specific lack, for the world, in her eyes, is not complete without him. This fixation on lack becomes further apparent in her theory of love, for Berenice attributes her three failed subsequent marriages to her unconscious struggle to recapture part of the first:

> I loved Ludie and he was the first man I loved. Therefore, I had to go copy myself forever afterward. What I did was to marry off little pieces of Ludie whenever I came across them. It was just my misfortune they all turned out to be the wrong pieces. My intention was to repeat me and Ludie. (101)

The affect that moves Berenice to fall in love and to dream of a world without difference and change is enchained to a specific condition: the existence or non-existence of Ludie Freeman. No wonder her subsequent marriages are destined to fail. Her affect is dependent on the representation of a specific content in her own life. Similarly, her improved creation is conceived in terms of the elimination of difference and inequality – a delimitation rather than an embrace of potential. There is no point of departure here for innovation and improvement, only a reduction to the same. Berenice cannot accommodate change in her dreams.

Frankie is equally interested in the idea of lack in the world: her forward-leaning disposition is quick to discern that state of "unfinished" at the scene of a future unfolding.

Yet unlike Berenice, she is not troubled by the thought that the future includes difference. Upon overhearing a neighbour tuning his piano, for example, she reflects on the agonies of tonality:

> It is that last note. If you start with A and go on up to G, there is a curious thing that seems to make the difference between G and A all the difference in the world. Twice as much difference as between any other two notes in the scale. Yet they are side by side there on the piano just as close together as the other notes. Do ray mee fo sol la tee. Tee. Tee. Tee. It could drive you wild! (103)

What is important here is how Frankie understands completion: the pleasing sense of closure the last note gives to the ear depends on a sequence of notes in between, so that the withheld tonal note – especially in the case of a scale, when the tonal note is played an octave higher – is a repetition understood differentially. Frankie imagines completion in terms of some anticipated but as of yet unarrived state, not as the provision of some predetermined quality or condition; her affect is articulated only to the presence or absence of change. And just as her improved creation stresses the value of movement, variation, speed, and possibility, her emphasis in thinking about tonality is on difference – on the greatness of the difference contrasted with the nearness of the proximity of the two notes.

In all of Frankie's reflections on human relationships, it is precisely this problem of difference in proximity that intrigues her.

> There are all these people here who I don't even know by sight or name. And we pass alongside each other and don't have any connection. And they don't know me and I don't know them. And now I'm leaving town and there are all these

> people I will never know....All these people and you don't know what joins them up. There's bound to be some sort of reason and connection. Yet somehow I can't seem to name it. I don't know. (110, 115)

This is why Berenice's warning against Frankie's obsession with the wedding fails to hit the mark. It fails to comprehend how Frankie's experience differs from her own. Based on her own theory of love, Berenice assumes that the wedding is going to become the irrevocable foundation of all Frankie's future love interests:

> If you start out falling in love with some unheard-of thing like that, what is going to happen to you? If you take a mania like this, it won't be the last time and of that you can be sure. So what will become of you? Will you be trying to break into weddings the rest of your days? And what kind of life would that be? (102)

She does not see that Frankie has never been interested in the wedding *per se* – rather, Frankie is interested in the idea of relationship that it accommodates, and all her fantasies about being a member conceive of the wedding as a kind of induction into a much wider and much more varied world of experience. Thus, her brother and future sister-in-law are of less interest in themselves than the unexpressed and inexpressible potential that she sees in them. As she wonders aloud to Berenice,

> Have you ever seen any people that afterward you remember more like a feeling than a picture?....[Jarvis and Janice] were the two prettiest people I ever saw. Yet it was like I couldn't see all of them I wanted to see. My brains couldn't gather together quick enough and take it all in. And then they were gone. You see what I mean? (27-8)

There is a lack of specific image-content in Frankie's obsession. Indeed, her love-affect is triggered a second time not by a metonymic representation of the wedding (as Berenice's repetition theory would have it) but by a glimpse of two black boys in an alley whose pose mysteriously "reflected the sudden picture of her brother and the bride that had so shocked her" (70). The two boys are like a metaphor for a relationship – the belonging together of differences – that could itself be figured any number of ways. The articulation of Frankie's affect to relationships denoting difference would thus seem to disallow the "mania" of repetition alluded to by Berenice in her warning, for as the last paragraph of the novel indicates, any statement of obsession is going to be cut short by the arrival of some anticipated – yet unexpected – otherness: "'I am simply mad about-- ' But the statement was left unfinished for the hush was shattered when, with an instant shock of happiness, she heard the ringing of the bell" (153). The future and its contents are far from foreclosed, and Frankie's wild enthusiasm aside, it is Berenice whose attitude begins to resemble a mania. Frankie only awaits the sudden unknown. Berenice, by contrast, expects the resurrection of the dead.

The Member of the Wedding thus distinguishes two forms of utopian consciousness: one which is keyed to the potential of the present, and one which is keyed quite hopelessly to the future realization of an image actually belonging to past. These two forms recall Terry Eagleton's distinction between good and bad utopianism, or utopianism which is capable of transforming the present and utopianism which imagines an impossible future that can never be reached. This latter is bad because it "grabs instantly for a future, projecting itself by an act of will or imagination beyond the compromised political structures of the present" (25). Of course, one might be inclined

to confuse Frankie's childishness for precisely this kind of subjunctive thinking, as Bernice does when she warns her about the foolishness of her wedding plans. But surely it is Berenice who is afflicted with "desir[ing] uselessly rather than feasibly," as Eagleton puts it. Frankie's desire reflects the "good" form of utopianism because, for one, it enables her to revise her plans to adapt to new realities. She is not immobilized by the realization that her initial plans are only "child plans that would never work" (148), and when the wedding scheme fails she moves on to her next fixation, this time involving her new friend Mary Littlejohn. More importantly, however, Frankie's utopianism brings her into closer proximity with the "compromised political structures of the present" because it brings her into contact with other people, and it is through these contacts that political structures are reproduced and, where potential is recognized, reformed. The utopian imagination of this awkward and impulsive twelve year old girl thus invokes the potential of a much wider social field. Since her utopian view is based on proximity, relationship, and difference, it requires only that there be togetherness, not that togetherness should look or behave in any particular way. All it requires, in other words, is other people, and others are where the potential of the social finally lies.

2. Loneliness as Social Wish: Affect in *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*

I have suggested that loneliness in *The Member of the Wedding* is the psychological precondition of the social or global utopia. Loneliness stems from the recognition of social difference and the perceived discrepancy between self and the collective that attends it. The utopias of Frankie and Berenice both respond to this condition by imagining some ideal form of togetherness in which the discrepancy is

either removed or overcome. John Henry, by contrast, does not imagine a social utopia because his perception of social experience does not penetrate the distinctions that mark others as different from each other and from himself. So far as he is concerned, society either is, or it is not. For this reason John Henry could be at home with anyone; Frankie, on the other hand, is lonely in a crowd.

John Henry, however, does not live long, and in his gruesome death McCullers seems to insist on loneliness as an inevitable fact of life. Indeed loneliness is one of the chief preoccupations of her work, from *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* to *Clock without Hands*, the latter of which features a dying protagonist whose name phonetically invokes his condition: Malone. The recurrence of this theme has led some readers to adopt a tragic view of her work. Loneliness appears in McCullers' fiction as an irrevocable human condition, and the desire for connection it engenders leads only to individual disappointment and despair. Yet we can maintain this tragic view only if we consider loneliness apart from the social tendency it introduces into the lives of her characters. That is, loneliness is the basis of a tragic desire, but it also releases a generative force into the social field. This force is not a source of tragedy but, quite the reverse, the condition of possibility in which the social dream of connection continues to persist even after all individual hopes have been dashed.

Loneliness is the emotional state in which one recognizes one's social needs, regardless of whether the nature of those needs is actually apparent. Frankie, for instance, does not seem to be fully aware of her social needs, whether they are for love or acceptance or privilege, or what will be served by fulfilling them. In fact the very inchoateness of her needs is the guarantee that the community she seeks can take no

certain shape in her mind. Loneliness is thus the condition that impels her coming together with others to form various new configurations of togetherness, and it cannot be said for certain what those configurations will look like or what they will mean for the individuals involved when they develop. We may observe simply that the individuals involved are affected, and that as a result of this phenomenon they affect others in their turn. I will therefore refer to this unpredictable and uncontainable social happening by the name of affect.[1]

To repeat: an event is an affect insofar as it affects someone, and it affects someone insofar as it bestows on her the capacity to affect another in turn. This mutual exchange of force should be understood independently of whatever specific changes may be observed to come about as a result of the event. Affect is a mute capacity, an abstraction of cause and effect that has no necessary connection to motive or outcome: it is, quite simply, the state in which a thing (a subject or a community) is be observed to be different than itself. In this sense affect may be understood as the interface between subjective experience and objective existence, a force carried over from the meeting of a body with other bodies so that those bodies can be seen to be mutually involved in and mutually productive of each other. It should be pointed out that affect is not exactly emotion, though emotion has affect in it. Emotion is what happens to a subject, whereas affect is subjectless and impersonal.

If loneliness represents the isolation of individuals from each other, then affect is the limit at which the isolation of an individual both begins and ends. If we consider the

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[1] My reflections on affect have been greatly influenced by Brian Massumi's work in *Parables for the Virtual*. For Massumi, affect is equated with intensity which appears (as effect) in the strength or duration of an image resulting from the meeting of bodies constituting an event (24). Massumi's ideas will feature more prominently below.

individual as a subject to whom something happens, affect (in the guise of emotions and sensations) appears to arrive from the outside; it is a missive from the world, and in falling upon the subject it marks the point where the subject and the world are different. From the perspective of subjectivity, then, affect marks the beginning of isolation. If, on the other hand, we view affect not as something that happens *to* a subject but rather as something that happens, an impersonal force into which the subject is drawn as a necessary result of its belonging to the world, then the individual ceases to resemble a subject and is revealed as more of a conduit in a broader process of becoming and change. From the perspective of an affect which is impersonal, then, affect marks a merger of individuals that conceptually brings their mutual isolation to an end.

Affect is thus inherently tragic when viewed as a property of the subject, for it announces the latter's isolation from the world. If on the other hand we reverse this conceptual schema and view the subject as a property of affect, then we no longer need to be so glum. In this light the subject appears not as a dying and separate thing but as a surge that passes like a wave or a ripple of forces that traverse the social field. The distinction may be observed as that between the formation of reactionary bodies that strive to arrest the forces of change and the generation of potential that produces those forces and indeed makes the reaction possible in the first place. This paradox should become clearer in the following excursus on *The Ballad of the Sad Café.*

Readers of McCullers will be familiar with the expectation-charged quality of her fictional world, and *The Ballad of the Sad Café* is no exception. It is as if McCullers' narrative is a time-suspended medium awaiting the impress of some incident to set things in motion. This air of receptivity establishes the fictional world as a field already charged

with the eventfulness of what will come. Thus, when a hunchbacked stranger appears one evening before a group of regulars on the steps of Miss Amelia's store, he seems not to arrive from the outside but emerges rather from within the very pregnant stillness that has bespoken his absence from the scene for all these years. Mind you, the characters on the steps do not see it this way. To them, the little man with the huge ears and the lopsided suitcase is an outsider indeed. The arrival of the hunchback is thus an emergence that is immediately contained by the subjects to whom the arrival occurs. Cousin Lymon, as they see it, is something that has happened to them, and they react by forming bodies that mark the lines of difference within the social field. Thus, Miss Amelia and Lymon Willis, the one orphaned and the other "kin with no one" (7), become connected in some rare way and temporarily disappear into the seclusion of Amelia's life. The people of the town become a body of a different sort. Not having seen the hunchback after a day, the townsfolk begin to circulate a story that Miss Amelia has murdered the man for something in his suitcase. Some of the men therefore form a posse to serve the interest of a justice they have created of their own accord. And then there are the incredulous few who, having tried to understand and sympathize with Amelia's solitary ways, feel for her "something near to pity" (14) and form a group of their own. The event thus creates an organization of bodies, or of bodies within bodies, across the social field.

These bodies are reactionary formations in that they reproduce lines of difference that are already inherent in the social organization. Amelia is already an outsider, so in some ways it is no surprise that she should have something in common with the hunchback. As for the posse, they have long ago assigned guilt to Amelia (and, in the

same move, righteousness to themselves); the hunchback's purported murder is therefore just an occasion to fulfill an old destiny. And the few who choose not to get involved have long ago accepted her oddity and so maintain the same old distance. The arrival of the hunchback thus redraws the divisions that precede him. At the same time, however, this redrawing of boundaries introduces a new potential into the relationships that are exposed in the process. What Lymon introduces into the social field is the event of connection, and the subsequent (re)organization of bodies within that field can do nothing to alter this fact. Of course the people so organized would like to deny it – they all decide Lymon's kinship claim is "a trumped up business" (13) – but before long the hunchback has not only made himself at home in Amelia's household but established a connection with everyone who had tried to draw imaginary lines between themselves, the imagined murderer, and her imagined victim in the first place. McCullers is quite insistent on this special facility of Lymon's: "He had only been in the store half an hour before an immediate contact had been established between him and each individual" (20). Whatever happens, Lymon's arrival creates a series of contacts that volatilize social relations within the town.

In light of these contacts the reactionary bodies that initially appeared so solid assume a phantasmagoric cast. The posse, for example, is positioned in relation to the forces it has defined itself against: both the suspicious character Amelia and the strange man she is supposed to have murdered. The nature of this relation is by no means stable and in fact undermines the substantial cohesiveness of all parties by exposing their mutual codependency. The formation of a group into a body is thus exposed as a temporary suspension of particles rather than the creation of identity:

> Some eight or ten men had convened on the porch of Miss Amelia's store. They were silent and were indeed just waiting about. They themselves did not know what they were waiting for, but it was this: in times of tension, when some great action is impending, men gather and wait in this way. And after a time there will come a moment when all together they will act in unison, not from thought or from the will of any one man, but as though their instincts had merged together so that the decision belongs to no single one of them, but to the group as a whole. (15-6)

We see that the posse is actually not-yet: nothing is self-identical with its future, and given the unpredictability inherent in the relationships which define it, there is no way of saying what it might become. How appropriate, then, that the posse should finally emerge as itself when Amelia closes her office door against it: "Now to the group on the porch this gesture acted as a signal. The time had come....just at that moment the instinct to act came on them" (17). Amelia's door is the difference between the two parties which now find themselves on one side or another. It enables their self-definition as such: to be on this side is to have the righteousness, the social graces, and the normative values belonging to the group; to be on the other side is to be suspect, miserly, isolationist and aloof. Yet as the force that brings these discrete bodies into being, the closing door also reveals the true opacity of the relationship between them. They need each other, but each cannot know what the other is. The group is thus mobilized to fulfill its destiny when the closing of the door removes Amelia from plain sight. Its destiny is guided by a false star, the image of what surely must lie on the other side of the door but which

cannot be corroborated by any means. Whatever happens, the bodies that emerge here carry with them the guilt of their own false premises.

Affect is the signal of the closed door. It is also the "contact" that Lymon Willis establishes between himself and Amelia and the rest of the town. But I like the metaphor of the closed door, for it is the clearest reminder that affect is impersonal, subjectless: it is neither Amelia herself nor the posse but some force which moves between them that sets them on different trajectories and simultaneously makes those trajectories contingent on each other. Affect is thus a form of potential. Yet as "form" it must be distinguished from representation, for there is no determinate relation between the potential inherent in affect and the particular forms that emerge as a result. The posse, for example, does not need to become violent, or righteous, or even cohesive as a result of the closed door; the only law here is that it becomes, and the form it assumes is a different matter. Massumi distinguishes these levels of form as "intensity" and "qualification" (25), both of which are embodied, but only the latter of which can be said to have content. "Intensity is qualifiable as an emotional state, and that state is static – temporal and narrative noise. It is a state of suspense, potentially of disruption. It is like a temporal sink, a hole in time as we conceive and narrativize it" (26).[2] As form, affect cannot be qualified; it is the difference between the blur of Miss Amelia's becoming and the particular event of Miss Amelia falling in love with a dwarf. The first is potential, the second, narrative.

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[2] Massumi's identification of intensity with an emotional state may be confusing given my earlier claim that affect and emotion are not synonymous. This confusion may be cleared by observing that Massumi's emotional state in this instance is not the same as the emotional states we recognize in daily life and which serve as psychological and narrative cues for action and reaction. These latter are qualified forms of emotional experience and must be distinguished from intensity as such, which is always "in excess of any narrative or functional line" (26).

Yet this is not to suggest a simple opposition between unqualified happening and determinate event, or between formlessness and form. Affect, recall, is not outside of language and qualified experience. If affect is a sinkhole, it creates a space to be filled with language, an opportunity for language to become, and with its becoming language reproduces the conditions of emergence in which affect is expressed. The difference is that language selects, reduces or contains the affect by ascribing to it a content: love, for example, or fear or hope. Miss Amelia, affected, falls in love: "so much was clear to everyone" (*Ballad* 25). This attribution contains the affect in a socially qualified form. But at the same time the attribution creates a new form of potential that is realizable as narrative possibility. Affect loops back into language in the form of an anticipation, an emptiness within which to build a future. What will happen? Will they marry? Will Miss Amelia become more sociable? Will Lymon break her heart? Just as affect provides the conditions for an emergence, so too does that emergence provide the conditions for an intensification of affect. Which is to say that in addition to the real possibilities language represents – the concrete categorizations, identifications, differentiations and explications it brings into being – language also actualizes the virtual because it registers the very conditions of possibility itself. Affect resides within language just as it resides within the subject: as the form of its own contingency, self-difference, and becoming.

An important distinction may therefore be made between the virtual potential of affect and the kind of potential that is realized in the form of language and representation. Alan Bourassa helpfully distinguishes the potentiality of the virtual from the potentiality of the real by observing that the real is only a realization of a possibility that always-already preceded it: "a thing may manifest as many possibilities as it will, so long as it

remains itself" (74). Possibility is in this sense change without newness; it is the assignment of a familiar state of incipience to an emerging state of affairs. Thus, it is possible that Miss Amelia's affair will end comically – that her love for Lymon will lead to personal vindication and union with her beloved – and it is also possible that her affair will end tragically, that she will die spurned and alone. The anticipation that attaches to either possibility is inherently reactionary. It assumes a direct line of relationship between a cause and an effect, the only rational evidence for which is the history of causality contained in narratives. In this sense, anticipation is always mediated by the cultural reserve of narrative genres, and the possibility it envisages, though it remains uncertain so long as it is yet to be realized, is trained on a certain outcome, one way or another. Henceforward, this kind of representational anticipation will be indicated by the term possibility.

In contrast to possibility, virtual potential is observed only as the fact of a thing's having differed from itself in the course of its becoming; it lacks specifiable content because it is always in process. Hence it is registered rather than represented in language. The virtual is that component of the possible that is visible in something having changed, but not in what it has changed into: in becoming tragic, Miss Amelia's affair represents a possibility; in becoming, it registers the virtual, the not-yet on the way into being. This seems abstract, but it must be noted that the virtual is a material concrete condition of the real becoming undone at all instants. For this reason, the generation of affect – in Amelia's meeting with Lymon, for instance – arouses universal vigilance. Everyone is concerned because affect puts reality at risk. It is as if the entire network of personal and

social relations depends on Amelia's remaining within the limits of a reality in which she is sexless, loveless, miserly and proud.

The distinction between real possibility and virtual potential will appear more concrete if we consider love as the single most generative affective force in McCullers' narrative. From the point of view of the possibilities of love, there is a logic of destiny at work. To love in McCuller's world is to construct an entirely personal and idiosyncratic fantasy:

> A most mediocre person can be the object of a love which is wild, extravagant, and beautiful as the poison lilies of the swamp. A good man may be the stimulus for a love both violent and debased, or a jabbering madman may bring about in the soul of someone a tender and simple idyll. Therefore, the value and quality of any love is determined solely by the lover himself. (27)

Not that the lover has any choice in this matter. Miss Amelia does not choose to love Lymon any more than Lymon chooses – as if he could – to love Amelia. Still, the relationship makes a certain amount of sense. It makes sense from the point of view of a self which lacks and which, lacking, finds in the beloved some idea of its own completion. This is why the love relationships in McCullers' work are so one-sided and so covetous. Amelia, for instance, has no skills that do not involve her hands, so the only good use she has for people is to make them well or to make money from them. "People, unless they are willy-nilly or very sick, cannot be taken into the hands and changed overnight into something more worthwhile and profitable. So that the only use that Miss Amelia had for other people was to make money out of them. And in this she succeeded" (5). This accounts for Merlie Ryan's theory that she "murdered [Lymon] for something

in that suitcase" (13), for her relations with people have always, from his point of view, been determined by economic motives. But her motives aren't entirely profit oriented, either, for she was "considered a good doctor. Her hands, though very large and bony, had a light touch about them....She charged no fees whatsoever and always had a raft of patients" (17). "Profit," then, is "improvement" more narrowly defined, and Miss Amelia's miserliness is but an effect of her handiness in certain types of affairs and her ineptitutde in others. When Lymon comes along with his "crooked little legs, ...[his] great warped chest and the hump that sat on his shoulders" (7), he represents the possibility that Miss Amelia might be able to use her hands – note how "gingerly, with one long brown forefinger, she touched the hump on his back" (9) – to turn a human being into "something more worthwhile and profitable." More importantly, Lymon brings a new element to bear: he represents a possibility rooted in and emerging from the already established limits of her personality, limits that state what she can and cannot do without ceasing to be "herself": she can doctor and she can profit, but she cannot "relate" to the community in any way that is otherwise worthwhile. In Cousin Lymon she finds a new relation and (possibly) a new way of relating, but one which depends for its point of departure on her already well established husbandry skills.

However mysterious and inexplicable Amelia's love for Lymon may appear, it makes sense in relation to herself and her own limits. A similar logic is discernible in Lymon's love for Marvin Macy: Lymon opines that Marvin has been to Atlanta and the penitentiary, and it is clear that the latter represents all the remote experience this sickly busybody would gather to himself were he not confined by his illness and dependent on his kin. His love for Marvin Macy is an extension of an old longing which is born from

his limited experience and which, in engendering "a new, strange loneliness" (26), only serves to reify those limits. The possibilities of love thus walk the border between two past tenses of the self: one that has been and one that has not been, but both of which may be qualified in terms of known properties. Lymon might find fulfillment in his relationship with Marvin Macy, and then again he might not. But neither possibility will do much to alter our perception of him as the one who wants exposure to the world. Indeed, in both cases that perception is affirmed.

Tragedy is the most suitable form for this kind of love, for our hope in love's transformative power is bound to be dashed by the persistent redundancy of the lover. So much for the possibility of love. But this does not mean that love is without potential. Love, as McCullers would have it, is not entirely the autonomous projection of the lover, "a world intense and strange, complete in himself" (26). It is also a register of the virtual, and in this way it can be said that the potential of love makes no sense at all. To love is to make a plea for relation – "any possible relation with the beloved, even if this experience can cause him only pain" (27) – and here we find the lover who would be "complete in himself" radically exposed to his own contingency. Two characteristics distinguish the lover in McCullers' work, and both express this contingency: gift-giving and entreaty. In an attempt to win over his new wife, Marvin Macy goes to Society City and returns with presents; eventually he signs over everything he owns (32). Lymon, beloved of Amelia, "owned almost everything on the premises, for when he was cross Miss Amelia would prowl about and find him some present – so that now there was hardly anything close at hand to give him" (32). Himself lovelorn, Lymon uses an old trick on Marvin Macy: he wiggles his ears, "smiling…with an entreaty that was near to

desperation" (49). Such gestures invariably place the lover at the mercy of the beloved (who, in turn, invariably fails to meet the lover's needs) – but what is important here is that the plea for relation knows no certain (possible) outcome. Whereas in possibility a thing can be different only in such a way that it does not cease to be itself by definition (so the possibilities for Amelia's love are her own happiness and sadness, her own fulfillment and frustration, and so forth), the potential of a thing is in its capacity to differ from itself – the capacity, that is, to be in relation, to be caught up in events, to be affected and to affect in turn. The potential of the lover is that s/he is by definition only partially realized and only a partial realization of a much broader range of potential.

So long as we talk about (mere) possibility we are limited by the law of non-contradiction which states that nothing can both be and not be at the same time and in the same respect. We cannot recognize that Amelia's potential to love is also the potential to become the Café and also to become the people who frequent it. We cannot recognize that Amelia's love does in fact become the Café and that the people who frequent it do indeed become Amelia. Beholden to the law of non-contradiction, we would explain away these strange transformations with the help of metaphor: the Café "represents" Amelia's love, or it is a "symbol," as if there was a Café that existed independently of Amelia that would continue to exist without her – as if the two are connected only insofar as they can be compared, and compared only so as to understand the identity of each. The virtual, by contrast, enables us to recognize that the coming into being of the Café and the becoming of Amelia are involved in each other in a real, material way, and that in sharing the same capacity to become they do indeed become each other. After the three days of intrigue following Lymon's arrival, three days of speculation about what laws

have been broken, what crimes committed, and what measures should be taken, something different happens: Amelia, who has never allowed anyone to drink on her premises but herself, goes to the kitchen with Lymon following closely and brings back bottles into the store: "Does anyone want waiting on?" (21). The hunchback's arrival thus affects a series of changes that implicate not only the two people involved but the town as a whole, for with the Café comes society and with society a newfound sense of belonging and self-worth: "There, for a few hours at least, the deep bitter knowing that you are not worth much in the world could be laid low" (55). Though it may not be within Amelia's possibilities to become a source of communal well-being – she remains, throughout the time the Café is open, as shrewd a warden of her own interests as ever – it is well within her potential to become not only a lover but a Café and in fact society itself. Amelia's love relates to her own possibilities; Amelia's affect relates to the potential of the community in which she plays a part.

Reading McCullers is an exercise in recognizing this potential which surpasses the tragic isolation of her characters. It is as though the plea for relation which she identifies with her lovers continues to sound even after all possible hope appears to have been dashed, much like the penultimate G-note in Frankie Addams' unfinished scale. The virtual quality of this potential accounts for the lingering sense of futurity which persists despite the otherwise fatalistic outcome of her narratives. As a representation of a future, *The Ballad of the Sad Café* appears finished; the story ends, the forces of evil having triumphed. Marvin Macy and Cousin Lymon "did everything ruinous they could think of" (69) before quitting town, and the once powerful Amelia has grown ragged and sallow, "Her voice…broken, soft, and sad as the wheezy whine of the church pump-

organ" (70). The town sinks into torpor, and "the soul rots with boredom" (71). Yet in her finale McCullers invokes the story's opening line – "Yes, the town is dreary" (70) – and thereby concludes by reinstating a familiar moment of incipience. Here we find, in addition to "nothing whatsoever to do," a strange house where a hand occasionally appears in a window, and sometimes a terrible face, "sexless and white, with two gray crossed eyes which are turned inward so sharply that they seem to be exchanging with each other one long and secret gaze of grief" (4-5). These images of inwardness and desolation point in two directions at once: into the tragic past of disappointed hopes and foiled possibility, but also into the uncertain future of the story to follow. They mark, in other words, not just the sorry outcome of past events but the potential that new connections may be made and other outcomes may ensue. Part of this potential is readerly: by inviting us to notice this hand and face at the window, McCullers establishes a new point of contact for Amelia that may, potentially, produce new relations and new arrangements of possibility across the social field.

Conceived both in terms of the intra-textual network of fictional relationships and the extra- or inter-textual field in which her works are received and read, the social is the dimension to which Carson McCullers' works speak in their incompleteness. As I say, Amelia's love is her own, but the affect in her love belongs to the general becoming of the community. Her flourishing is everyone's flourishing, mediated by the life of the Café; when she falls, the town falls – no matter that she has always been an outsider anyway. The potential of affect thus breaks out of the closed circuits of narrative possibility and spills over into the collective experience of the whole field. In other words, the tragedy of Miss Amelia is also the shared loss of a small Southern community,

and in making this connection clear McCullers locates individual isolation immediately within a social context in which isolation does not ultimately make sense. We are left, as a result, with an uneasy sense that something has gone wrong here, and that the isolation of Amelia is neither necessary nor final. The *Ballad*'s tragic foreclosure of possibility thus resolves into a question about the shared social responsibility for individual disappointment and failure.

As if to emphasize that her discourse on loneliness is geared to the question of social potential more generally, McCullers ends *The Ballad* with an envoy, separately titled "The Twelve Mortal Men." This envoy is meant to alleviate the atmosphere of suffocating boredom that frames *The Ballad* proper by suggesting that one had "might as well" (71) go listen to the singing of the chain gang at work on the Forks Falls highway just outside of town. From one point of view, then, the envoy represents a last-ditch and finally unsuccessful attempt to escape narrative closure.[3] For example, the utopian images of human labour, road-building, and voices blended in song inspire a kind of fantasy about these "twelve mortal men who are together" (72) that might relieve some of the weight of the tragedy that has gone before. Yet the fact that these men are chained at the ankle and watched over by an armed guard ironically undermines the utopian imagery and mocks the socially progressive ideals that this desegregated group of seven black and five white men might otherwise represent. McCullers thus invites us to partake in a

[3] Critics tend to be divided on how to read the envoy, but most have a hard time coming to terms with its deterministic undertones. Whittle, for example, views the chain-gang as an affirmation of the transcendent power of art, but juxtaposes this affirmation with *The Ballad*'s overwhelming sense of fatality: "Its purpose is to provide an affirmation which contrasts with the failure of the major characters to escape their fate" (158). Gannon draws parallels between the envoy and *The Ballad* proper in order to emphasize the note of failure sounding in each: "when [the chain gang's song] ends, the void and the sense of loss are a keener pain" (60). Margaret Whitt draws attention to the envoy's latent social theme but concludes that its "elevation of love from Eros to Agape succeeds precisely by way of ironic failure" (121). Yet she cannot deny "a perverse hope, disturbing enough to let that message in the chain gang's song reverberate" (122).

utopian fantasy only to pull us up short by placing chains around our feet. But this does not mean that the envoy's utopian overtures fail. The passage should be read not as an aborted utopian flight into an uncompromised other reality but rather as a turning towards history and the social conditions through which suffering is produced. From this perspective the chains around the prisoners' feet do not merely inhibit their freedom. The chains which bind must also connect. And in this the restrictions on the individual are redeemed through the potential of the group. The utopia of Carson McCullers does not reach beyond the structures of the present but, in involving itself in them directly, seeks out new and materially viable opportunities for social improvisation and renewal.

"It Came to Him that He Must Move": Affect, Emotion, and Agency in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *The Fire Next Time*

> I think all theories are suspect, that the finest principles may have to be modified, or may even be pulverized by the demands of life, and that one must find, therefore, one's moral center and move through the world hoping that this center will guide one aright. (Baldwin "Autobiographical" 9)
>
> Now, this country is going to be transformed. It will not be transformed by an act of God, but by all of us, by you and me. I don't believe any longer that we can afford to say that it is entirely out of our hands. We need the world we're living in and we have to make it over. (Baldwin "Fire" 230)
>
> Causes are notoriously bloodthirsty. (Baldwin "Everybody's" 12)

Long before getting involved as a spokesman in the civil rights movement of the sixties, James Baldwin, like other writers of his generation, set himself a mandate to write novels that could reflect social realities without reducing them to the neatly packaged sociological paradigms made available by the proletarian fiction of the thirties. His twofold commitment to attend to the "demands of life" and to find the "moral center" that would help one survive them squares his work with the prevailing existential and psychological orientation of American fiction in the immediate postwar years. But given his increasing devotion to public causes as his career took off, Baldwin's preoccupation with "life" was by no means a form of deliberate political nearsightedness on his own part. It was, rather, part of a sustained meditation on the underpinnings of American morality and the political institutions, especially racism, such a morality served to justify. Baldwin insisted repeatedly that his readers should strive to come to terms with the complexity of experience by acknowledging the profound role of psychological and existential factors in shaping their attitudes to each other and to the larger political entity they are collectively in the process of building. Indeed he was so preoccupied with the

role of individual affect in socio-political change that he devoted *The Fire Next Time*, a book length essay, to exploring how the current affective condition of Americans would lead inevitably to wide-scale social transformation for the worse if something was not done to change the way they feel – about themselves, about each other, and about the future. Baldwin's work up to the publication of *The Fire Next Time* thus provides an entry into a network of problems surrounding affect, historical process, and utopia in the postwar period. Specifically, his work is engaged with exposing how the potential of affect to instigate change is reduced and how human behavior becomes predictable (and predictably limited) as a result. The exposure of this process thus poses a critique of utopia as a determinate historical ideal (what I have elsewhere called conservative utopia or utopia with image-content) and offers in its place a liberal utopian vision in which the future is not only possible but full of potential – a future wide open to fluidity, difference, and change.

The main concern of this chapter is to demonstrate that what is at stake in these contrasting conceptions of utopia is the agency of individuals whose actions constitute the historical process and who therefore have the power, so long as they have the agency, to initiate change. In the utopian thinking of the sort Baldwin is interested in exposing, agency is falsely construed as operating externally to individuals and their relationships. To counter this idea, Baldwin emphasizes that agency is an individual, not an institutional or even world-historical capacity, and that only individuals have the power to build communities and to decide what they want their future to look like. This understanding of agency does not grant absolute ascendancy to the individual will, however. In keeping with his liberal values, Baldwin holds that the agency of the individual must bridge the

meeting of individual needs with the imperatives of community life. Agency is ultimately a social phenomenon: though it is the individual's power to instigate change, it is not a power belonging to or originating in the individual alone. As we shall see, the way to this discovery is to identify agency with the experience of affect, which always finds the individual subject situated in relation to others and therefore at the site of a wider social becoming.

Within this liberal model of subjectivity, the complexity of affective experience appears in the form of a paradox. Although emotion differs from affect in that the former refers to a self with a specific history and a specific set of expectations, emotion is also the form in which affect is manifested in the subject. So while affect and emotion are different, they appear together; emotion is affect referred to the more or less continuous historical entity experienced as the self. As explained in the previous chapter, affect is an unmediated, inarticulate potentiating force that motivates change and has the power to disrupt the idea of the self and to derail the planned course of history: it is something happening. In the form of emotion, however, affect speaks to the individual's most pressing needs and establishes his/her orientation to future goals: it is something happening, to me. In the affect/emotion paradox, the feeling of urgency relates to both the ahistorical, nonsubjective force of affect as well as to the historically situated self. It is the awareness that I feel and that my feeling has absolutely everything to do with who I am, accompanied by the question of what makes me feel and why I feel the way I do. This awareness is not an apportioning of blame but rather a discovery of the historical situatedness of the self (I have been made to feel this way, I did not choose it) simultaneous with the discovery of the profound personal investment of the self in its

history, that the way I feel has everything to do with my right to life and my freedom to respond to it in my own way. Because of the affect/emotion paradox, the liberal subject is able to recognize that one's feelings are both absolute in their strength of force and arbitrary in their situatedness; that they are necessary insofar as they demand one's attention, even to the point of making one act unreflectively, but not necessary insofar as they could be, given different experience, different attitudes, and different points of view, other than they are. As I hope to demonstrate, agency in Baldwin's formulation thus involves the distancing operation of viewing emotion beside itself so as to recognize (or misrecognize) the quality of its necessity. Only thus can emotion appear as potential rather than as fated, thus beginning the widening of the utopian horizon.

1. *The Fire Next Time:* The Externalization of Agency in Conservative Utopia

Published in book form in the heat of the civil rights movement, *The Fire Next Time* contains perhaps Baldwin's most fully developed meditation on the role of affect in the historical process. First and foremost an exposition on the limited opportunities available to blacks in American society at the time, the essay explains why Elijah Mohammed's Nation of Islam movement has such strong appeal for a subjugated and disillusioned people and warns that without some intervention by "the relatively conscious whites and relatively conscious blacks" Baldwin is trying to reach, America will be transformed by the apocalyptic violence of a rising Black Nation – a distinctly dystopian future, as he understands it ("Fire" 346). The argument develops a line that had long been central to Baldwin's thought. America's identity problems in general and its racial tensions in particular are a direct result of the overconfidence of those who

refuse to acknowledge "this enormous incoherence, these enormous puddings, this shapeless thing" called Amercan experience for fear of compromising what little power they think they possess ("Notes" 228). The failure to acknowledge the great confusion at the heart of American life is a repudiation of responsibility and, he implies, of civic duty, for the failure to know oneself inevitably makes it impossible to understand others and to treat them with the dignity and respect they hopefully deserve. In *The Fire Next Time*, the consequence of this failure is understood to include the possibility, indeed the inevitability, of wide-scale social transformation, for a Nation of Islam would only instate the existing hatred and intolerance of America's racial divide on a constitutional level. The forces of change are already in the works, he says – "we are living in an age of revolution, whether we will or no" (338) – and only self-reflection will recover the potential that can prevent the future from ending fatalistically. Baldwin's utopian intervention in the Black Nation movement thus entails locating an element of uncertainty in a process whose outcome is to all appearances inevitable. As we shall see, he finds this uncertainty in the individual agency that such dreams of nationhood apparently work to efface.

In the course of the essay, Baldwin draws a parallel between the prophetic belief that sustains Elijah Mohammed's movement and his own involvement in the evangelical church of Harlem as a young man. Both cases offer individual empowerment through ostensibly utopian paradigms in which are promised the resolution of the struggles of the present day. In the former, the individual is promised inclusion in the future Black Nation, and in the latter, the individual is promised induction into the community of the Saved. Despite the empowerment that appears to grow from these promises of inclusion,

however, Baldwin finds that the psychological prerequisite in either case is an attitude of individual powerlessness in the face of impending change. Early in the essay, for example, Baldwin describes his former religious crisis in terms of the dawning realization of fear: "I became, during my fourteenth year, for the first time in my life, afraid – afraid of the evil within me and afraid of the evil without" (296). The affective shift from contentment to fear results from his newfound perception that he is powerless to control the direction of his life. Moreover, it results from the conviction that the future is no less certain for his perceived lack of control. As he explains, "Owing to the way I had been raised, the abrupt discomfort that all this aroused in me and the fact that I had no idea what my voice or my mind or my body was likely to do next caused me to consider myself one of the most depraved people on earth" (297). Wherever the powers lead him, his conclusion, made all the more convincing by the force of his fear, is that he is damned, and this episode in his own life serves to enlarge his awareness of the lives of the people around him. Everywhere on the Harlem streets he finds the children of his own generation settling into their roles as matrons or handymen, clinging, he says, to the lesser life – often to addiction and crime – in order to avoid the greater ruin of desiring what they cannot have. "And there seemed to be no way whatever to remove this cloud that stood between them and the sun, between them and love and life and power, between them and whatever it was they wanted. One did not have to be very bright to realize how little one could do to change one's situation" (298). In this construction, fear is founded on the belief in the inevitability of a certain kind of future, a belief which amounts to a devastation of agency on the part of the individual.

Part of the problem Baldwin addresses is that this devastation of agency often goes unrecognized because it is often manifest as a kind of agency in its own right. Individuals who are on one level fundamentally convinced of their powerlessness can on another level exude all the confidence and authority promised to them by their belief. This is made possible when the subject derives his or her authority to influence change from an external (i.e., institutional) authority and thus obviates the need to exercise personal responsibility for his or her choices. The same structure of derivative or externalized agency is apparent in desperation, which is, of course, the primary affective condition Baldwin is at pains to describe. According to Aaron Ben Ze-ev, desperation is similar to despair in that both involve a strong element of affirmative desire that is countered by the certainty that the desired-for situation will not come to pass (482). Both emotions therefore implicate the subject's agency, for in both cases one perceives oneself to be powerless to bring about a desired situation. Yet desperation differs from despair in that, while both emotions anticipate a negative future in an absolute way, despair does not incite one to action and may even become indifference, while desperation involves a strong motivational component (482). Desperation thus mimics individual agency because the desperate individual is driven to act. Crucially, however, the drive to act is not chosen – the individual *is driven* – and the motive cannot therefore properly be called agency. Indeed, as Ben Ze-ev notes, "the actions taken by a desperate person are usually not connected with the specific desired situation, since such a situation is considered to be contracertain; these actions usually relate to other aspects of a person's life" (482). Action in this scenario is a form of compensation for an agency that has become to all practical purposes non-existent.

Baldwin makes reference to this compensation-action when he explains how, having first stumbled upon the irrevocable fact of his hopelessness at the age of fourteen, he sought a "gimmick" to help him break out of his situation and achieve some sort of life. Indeed, he says, all boys in his situation have to resort to some such tactic if they are to survive. The problem, he adds, is that "*it does not matter what the gimmick is*" ("Fire" 301, italics his). For Baldwin, it was the Harlem Church; for the youth of the current generation, it could just as easily be, and increasingly is, Elijah Mohammed. Baldwin thus exposes one way in which the potentiating affect of individuals is limited and contained by arrangements of power. Deprived of the hope of ever realizing (and in some cases of imagining) one's own desires, one finds something else to cling to instead and thereby discovers some kind of agency in the absence of individual choice. The rise of Christianity, Baldwin reminds us, was itself made possible by the revolutionary energy of a subjugated people, and this energy must, given the present unrest of millions of black Americans, come into the world again (312). But revolutionary energy of this kind does not thereby deliver the newly hopeful to a genuine utopian state, for the "way out" is only a compensatory reaction that does nothing to address one's real needs, whatever those may be. Indeed, the promise of deliverance will be empty so long as Americans continue to find hope in sources external to their own potential – in institutional "gimmicks" which represent ulterior interests and which individuals can therefore serve without acting on their own behalf. The real emancipatory potential is in how Americans feel – not as members of a religious body or a state, but as themselves, as individuals with their own unique and self-determined prerogatives for growth and well-being.

Hopelessness as a primary affective attitude is thus exposed as a powerful political instrument. It sustains on an individual psychological level a misrecognition of agency that is reified externally by the denial of rights through social and political practices. And, importantly, hopelessness itself is sustained by forms of belief that hold the future to be certain, regardless of whether that certainty is expressed in terms of utopian or dystopian providence. The belief of the oppressed is therefore as important a factor in political oppression as the material obstacles put in place by the oppressor. Ideas about black success, for instance, may reflect the actual success rate of blacks in overcoming the obstacles to education, work, and community put in place by a racist white society, but "black success" also reflects a cultural value assigned to blackness that is quite independent of (even while it is productive of) those so-called real conditions. As Baldwin explains, his father's ideas about the likelihood of his children's success had far greater impact than the obstacles themselves, and this is because those ideas allowed him to join his fears to a specific representation of the future:

> The fear that I heard in my father's voice, for example, when he realized that I really *believed* I could do anything a white boy could do, and had every intention of proving it, was not at all like the fear I heard when one of us was ill or had fallen down the stairs or strayed too far from the house. It was another fear, a fear that the child, in challenging the white world's assumptions, was putting himself in the path of destruction. ("Fire" 302)

Controlled as much by hard experience as by his own belief that his child's destruction is inevitable, Baldwin's father becomes an instrument of the very power that would subjugate and destroy his children, and the son's affirmation of his potential ("I could do

anything") is countered by the more powerful conviction that his fate is sealed. In this way, hopelessness is passed from generation to generation: "all the fears with which I had grown up, and which were now a part of me and controlled my vision of the world, rose up like a wall between the world and me, and drove me into the church" (303). Fear is thus a force that routs agency and thereby binds individuals to predetermined courses of action and desire. The actions that result from this kind fear are clearly a function of the power of others rather than a function of the self-determining individual. (I leave aside for the moment the question of what this self-determining individual might look like.)

Baldwin's critique of utopia in *The Fire Next Time* is, at heart, a critique of social determinism. In it, he maintains that social determinism does not imply a necessary relation between individuals and the social and psychological forces that are responsible for shaping their lives. Rather, social determinism is an individual orientation to the historical process in which agency is misrecognized as operating externally, as if history is something that happens to individuals rather than something that happens between them. The idea of social determinism is always therefore to some extent an illusion based on a perception of individual powerlessness that may have socio-political grounding (e.g., in a racist state) but is not for that matter absolute. Indeed, Baldwin insists that the individual is always in the last instance responsible for confronting his own fears, no matter how impossible the conditions under which that confrontation must take place.[1] The confrontation with the self uncovers the potential to initiate change and, with it, the individual agency that conservative utopia denies.

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[1] One of Baldwin's criticisms of the naturalism of Richard Wright is that Bigger Thomas is nothing more than a product of his environment and that Wright therefore gives his character no more humanity than the

2. Moral Conviction versus the Paradox of Emotional Rationality

> One cannot argue with anyone's experience or decision or belief. ("Fire" 328)

It has so far been established that conservative utopia operates through an externalization of agency whereby the individual becomes convinced that his role in history is passive. This passivity is experientially grounded in affective states related to hopelessness. Desperation is the key emotion explored in *The Fire Next Time*, but fear, jealousy, resentment, and hatred might also be added to the list – all those states in which one perceives oneself to be powerless (or feels one's power to be threatened) in the face of impending change. These affective states are derived from real socio-political conditions, but they are also a matter of belief. It is one thing to be denied a future or a say in it by the institutionalized practices of the society in which one lives, and it is another thing to believe that the obstacle originates in the self, as if powerlessness were an *a priori* condition. When hopelessness is enforced as a primary affective condition of the subjugated, affect is made into an instrument of political control, for it affirms on a subjective level the lack of agency that is actually being denied as a result of political conditions. The potential of individual agency is thereby effectively contained.[2]

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racist society accused of destroying him. Baldwin attempts to correct this trend with Rufus Scott in *Another Country* by insisting that even in utter desperation, Rufus is accountable for his own actions: "Rufus was partly responsible for his doom, and in presenting him as partly responsible, I was attempting to break out of the whole sentimental image of the afflicted nigger driven that way (to suicide) by white people" (Baldwin cited in Clark 128).

[2] Affect can be entrained only temporarily to political ends, for it is always in excess of its containment by structures of feeling such as the hopelessness discussed here. Baldwin acknowledges this when he says that "time reveals the foundations on which any kingdom rests" ("Fire" 316). Racist society can enforce the subjugation of black people by making it nearly impossible for them to advance in life, thereby ensuring, for a time, the hopelessness that prevents the oppressed from confronting their situation directly. But eventually the oppressed will be driven to find the "gimmick" that will "set [them] on [their] way," as Baldwin puts it, and this gimmick will possibly release enough pent up energy to fuel a wide-scale social revolution. (This is the revolution Baldwin prophetically alludes to at the end of the essay: "*God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*" (347, italics his). Where affect (and the

These thoughts imply that the individual is always on some level (but not totally) responsible for its own subjugation, for the primary obstacle in the way of one's empowerment as an agent in the historical process is awareness. This point is particularly clear in Baldwin's argument that the precondition of racism is the enslavement of the racist to himself. Intolerance is first and foremost a self-relation, and it is always therefore within reach of the individual to do something about it. The real problem is that false confidence inhibits self-analysis and therefore neutralizes agency on an individual level. And while neither the Christian Church nor the Nation of Islam – both utopian movements of a kind – are ultimately empowering for the individuals involved, individuals nonetheless tend to find power in such movements and subsequently come to command the appearance of the authority they are desperate to achieve. For Baldwin, the origin of this false confidence is the moral conviction on which their ideological commitments are based.

Baldwin had been working through the problem of moral conviction long before the publication of *The Fire Next Time*, for he had already explored his early involvement in the Harlem Church in his first novel, the autobiographical *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, published in 1953. In it, he established Gabriel Grimes (modeled after David Baldwin, his stepfather) as the kind of character whose Christian righteousness serves as a cover for a more fundamental existential vacuity. Grimes is a powerful figure who commands respect in the Church community and reigns as a tyrant over his family, but he is also a coward, a hypocrite, and, at bottom, a failure. The novel implies that the source of Grimes' false authority is his blind conviction that he has been chosen by God to sire a

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emotions) are concerned, change is inevitable – but the inevitability of change is not the problem. The problem is that the instigation of revolution by such secondary means as a "gimmick" might bring about a future that no one had the foresight to choose.

long line of the elect. In developing his character, however, Baldwin suggests that there is more involved in Grimes' conviction than a vain unwillingness to face up to reality (though the latter does, of course, play a significant role). More to the point, the moral conviction of Gabriel Grimes entails a specific orientation to change and the future. Indeed, while the novel portrays the mounting antagonism between Gabriel and his son John as an Oedipal struggle of the will, it can also be viewed as a struggle to determine which psychological orientation to the future will prevail: the utopian idealism of Gabriel, or the more hopeful, more potentially affective awareness of John.

Gabriel's moral conviction imposes on him a sense of the necessity of future events and thus further harrows his already damaged sense of his own agency. The necessity he identifies with the future does nothing to resolve the profound insecurity in his life. That is, it does not give him confidence in the outcome of events. For each possible event he can imagine there is another just as possible; the unfolding of events is simply a matter of realizing which of a limited range of options will follow. Grimes' sense of necessity simply overlays his uncertainty with the confidence that he knows what the future, however it turns out to be, will mean. In other words, Grimes is incapable of imagining a future that he has not already related to in a moral way. If his prodigal son Roy returns to the fold, he knows (or feels) that as Roy's father he will himself be vindicated as one of God's chosen. Likewise, he knows that if the stepson John rises up to challenge him, Gabriel will lose that validation and with it the moral authority he has claimed for himself through his relationship with God. Either situation is possible, but both cases entail a moral consequence that has been decided prior to their actual realization. Indeed, his hypocritical unwillingness to celebrate John's conversion

at the end of the novel is a result of his unwillingness to accept morally a future which he knows is entirely possible. The necessity of the future is thus a projection of Grimes' sense of righteousness: anything is possible, but one scenario *must* happen if he is to be vindicated. And he must be vindicated if there is going to be any meaningful future for him.

Gabriel Grimes' moral conviction thus relates to his most profound sense of personal security. If something does not come to pass that he is convinced must come to pass, then his sense of self is at risk. This is because his conviction derives from the intuition of what is good for the self, an intuition that operates with the axiomatic authority of the unconscious and therefore appears absolute. Moral conviction may therefore be classified with the emotions because it shares with the latter the function of evaluating circumstances according to a deeply felt standard of good. As Martha Nussbaum explains, the emotions "are our ways of registering how things are with respect to the external (i.e., uncontrolled) items that we view as salient for our well-being" (4). Yet moral conviction is not an emotion itself exactly so much as a particular way of relating to emotional phenomena. As Nussbaum's formulation suggests, the emotions represent our relationships to objects which we deem to be personally important but over which we do not have absolute control for the simple reason that the objects are external. The intensity of the emotion is in many ways a measure of the extremity of the experience of control (or lack thereof): terror is an extreme emotional response to a threatening object against which we are powerless, and one kind of romantic love is an extreme emotional response to a desired object of which we are in possession (or so we feel). Emotions therefore indicate the underlying uncertainty inherent in our relations

with objects (Ben Ze-ev 482). We might indeed identify this element of uncertainty as the affective component of emotional experience: the reason we are affected emotionally is because we have registered some shift in our situation with respect to a world we cannot fully control. This shift implies that the emotions are a constant process of orientation and reorientation with respect to unstable self-world relationships. Conviction, however, refuses to recognize the emotions as taking part in a process of orientation and takes for granted that they are absolute expressions of the way things are and the way things are going to be. In this way Grimes fails to see that his emotions (fear, terror, anger, hatred) are actually fallible rationalizations rooted in uncertainty. Instead, they are authoritative responses to a future which is to his mind absolutely necessary even if its outcome remains uncertain. In this light, moral conviction is the suppression of the real potential inherent in change and an attempt to regulate or even deny the affective content of the emotions.

It is therefore appropriate that Gabriel's convictions should do nothing to empower him but, quite the reverse, enslave him to an idea of history in which he appears to have no personal involvement – even while he reads everything in terms of his own interests. By refusing to grant the outcome of uncertainty *in* uncertainty, and by masking uncertainty with the confidence that things must turn out one way or another – for good or for evil, for Grimes or against – Gabriel refuses to acknowledge the affect which represents his real involvement in the world around him. Thus, Grimes does not recognize his own agency because his sense of necessity makes him blind to the affective richness of his own experience. It is telling in this light that Gabriel Grimes' moral conviction accompanies a repressive narrowing of the range of emotions that factor

significantly in his experience. When Roy is stabbed, for instance, the stricken father "mutter[s] sweet, delirious things to Roy, and his hands, when he dip[s] them again in the basin and wr[i]ng[s] out the cloth, [are] trembling" (42). Clearly, the man who is known for his anger is also capable of great tenderness and concern, but it is rare that these emotions find expression in his life. Similarly, when he thinks of Esther after so many years, he finds the "dumb, pale, startled ghosts of joy and desire hovering in him yet" (116), but neither of these feelings plays a part in the tale of temptation and fall he has constructed around their affair. His relationship with the illegitimate son who is born of the same affair is based also on a refusal to acknowledge his feelings for the boy: seeing him in the street, he "wished to smile down into the boy's face, to pause and touch him on the forehead, did none of these things, but walked on" (139). Concern, joy, desire, affection: these emotions would awaken him to the positive value of his relationships with others and, more importantly, to the factor of his own interests within those relationships. But because they would contradict his moral conviction by exposing his involvement in the fallen world all around him, he cannot acknowledge his interests without introducing major internal conflict. And insofar as he fails subsequently to account for a large dimension of his emotional life, he ignores an important source of authority respecting his judgments. The emotions, as I have already suggested, are an unconscious form of evaluation that reflects an individual's deeply held sense of what is right (and wrong) with the world.

In addition to narrowing the range of emotional experience he is willing to admit to himself, Grimes' moral conviction thus leads him to ignore the rationality of his own emotions, including the emotion underlying and supporting his conviction. Only thus

could he deceive himself with the idea that the feelings he does acknowledge are an index of the absolute truth. Emotional rationality represents a paradox by which the ostensibly private, idiosyncratic and spontaneous flux of feeling is revealed to be a response to environmental conditions that is learned over time. In other words, if emotion is a judgment, then it involves some reference to a standard and cannot be said to be truly spontaneous and unbidden. The idea of emotional rationality is especially important when we consider that emotion is often enlisted as the authority and legitimation of moral choices, as in the idea that a thing is good because one feels it to be so. The point is that the authority of emotions is deceptive because they are only ostensibly spontaneous and are in fact the result of a unique history of experience in which the individual has learned to distinguish unconsciously between what is good and what is bad in the world with respect to the self. If we accept the rationality of emotions then we cannot like Grimes truly say that we are right in our feelings and convictions. We can say only that we have reasoned ourselves to be so.

The paradox of emotional rationality allows us to recognize that emotion is socially mediated affect. What would appear to be a combination of autonomic physiological and psychological reflexes is actually a kind of micro-rationality involving the evaluation of circumstances and the assignment of a value that will determine how the individual should react. Though the standard of value appears to be natural – emotions do "just happen," after all – it is actually derived from any number of the cultural institutions through which socialized morality is inculcated in the individual: the family, the school, the workplace, the marketplace, and so on. Indeed, because multiple moral authorities inevitably contribute to condition an individual's sense of the good, emotional

conflict can be recognized as a manifestation of social contradictions on the level of the subject. This is because each case of emotional decision-making involves the provisional resolution of indeterminacy that is implicit in the very idea of the social good understood as the collective ambition of a number of individuals. As Aaron Ben-Ze'ev explains, the emotions serve as a "moral compass" that can help orient the individual in the always unstable place between what is recognized as social expectation on the one hand and individual desire on the other (264). Guilt, for example, indicates that one feels the need to modify behavior to better accommodate the moral expectations of society, whereas indignation is a kind of demand that the world conform more closely to one's ideals. The first case gives priority to social morality, and the second gives priority to individual desire. Each case represents one possible resolution to a contradiction inhering in the social field. Emotional disturbance therefore indicates inconsistencies within a social system by marking the points where the latter's conceptions of individual good are incongruous with its conception of what is good for the community.[3]

Because his self-understanding is characterized by moral conviction rather than emotional rationality, Gabriel Grimes is in many ways the novel's least conflicted character. He insists on believing that his individual desires are completely harmonized with those of the Church when clearly they are not, as Florence persistently reminds him. As a result, he overlooks an important social contradiction that is embodied in his emotional experience. His concern for his illegitimate son Royal conflicts with his shame over the boy's illegitimacy and therefore with the very determination of illegitimacy as a marker of social worthlessness. What is exposed in the emotion that he subsequently

[3] My reflections on emotions and morality are indebted to Ben-Ze'ev, especially chapter 9, "Emotions and Rationality."

refuses to recognize is that the determination of father-son relationships by the institution of Christian marriage does not accommodate the full range of relationships in which paternal feelings actually flourish. His failure to acknowledge this inconsistency is evident in his relationship with his stepson John as well, for Gabriel is extremely resentful that he should have to behave in a paternal manner to a boy who is not his biological son and who therefore no more fits the patrilinear ideal than the bastard Royal. In this case he feels the command to express paternal feelings where no such feelings actually exist. Most importantly, by failing to acknowledge what should be a source of considerable emotional conflict, Gabriel denies himself the opportunity to realize the agency that is inherent in the discovery of the rationality of emotions.

We thus begin to see the connection between Grimes' denial of affect and his lack of personal agency. There is no greater evidence of this man's powerlessness than the constant and desperate demands he makes on those things he cannot control. In his mind, Roy *must* prove himself worthy of God's chosen one, and John *must* prove himself unworthy, a satanic usurper. In either case Gabriel's vindication is dependent on their doings, and everything they accomplish or fail to accomplish towards the fulfillment of his vision is therefore only an implicit reminder of how little influence he has on the outcome of events. Indeed, Gabriel Grimes is stunningly oblivious to his own capacity to influence change, and as a result he fails to see his own role in events whose outcome appears to be anyone's responsibility but his own. Early in the novel when Roy is injured and the household is in turmoil, Gabriel lashes out, first at John, then at Elizabeth, for having been absent, and for therefore having allowed Roy's injury to happen: "I'm going to be wanting to know just how come you let this boy go out and get half killed," he

warns his wife (43). When Esther, his mistress, reminds him that he was her seducer, not the devil, he is unable to acknowledge his own desire: "though she accused him of lusting after her in his heart, it was she who, when she looked at him, insisted on seeing not God's minister but a 'pretty man'" (123). In the same way, he refuses to acknowledge his responsibility to Royal, his first illegitimate son: "Gabriel watched him run headlong, like David's headlong son, towards the disaster that had been waiting for him from the moment he had been conceived" (139). Gabriel consistently denies his own role in the shaping of events and, with it, his potential to initiate change.

The moral conviction that dominates Grimes' view of the world is therefore much like the "gimmick" Baldwin discusses in *The Fire Next Time*. This gimmick enables Grimes to overcome his feelings of powerlessness, not by empowering him but by absolving him of the responsibility that the recognition of agency entails. To acknowledge responsibility where there is no hope is simply too unmanageable a prospect for the man. Grimes' conviction is thus a futile but nonetheless appropriate response to the problem faced by all the novel's major characters: how to cope with a future that is to all appearances without potential. For example, Florence's imagination has been fired by tales of her mother's deliverance from slavery at the end of the Civil War, and as a result she has long had the ambition "to walk out one morning through the cabin door, never to return" (72). But all her attempts to break free of the cycles of history have led only to the church – "her mother's starting-place" (66) – and an unbelief that would be no more redeeming were it faith. Elizabeth is likewise committed to the same track of weariness and disappointment. Looking back over her life and fall, as she conceives it, she concludes that "there was something she overlooked. *Pride goeth before*

destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (156, italics in original). She now wonders how to warn her son John of the inevitability that caught her by surprise, "to help him to endure what could now no longer be changed" (116) by letting him understand this ritual of disappointed hopes before he is destroyed along with the rest of them. In all of these cases, certainty is associated with a fatalistic attitude to history that results from the individuals' failure to recognize and engage their own agency.

Baldwin's utopian project of challenging this orientation to the future entails recovering the uncertainty on which it is based, for uncertainty is the precondition of the individual agency that might introduce difference into the above history of cyclic repetitiousness. This agency may be explained in the following way. Insofar as the process of emotional reasoning is largely unconscious, the ruling, we might say, of a clandestine deliberator, we cannot admit full responsibility for it as conscious agents. Thus we find motivation but not agency in our feelings, for we do not choose the way we feel. Agency is found only when we deny the autonomy of the emotions and assume some responsibility for deliberating about them when they occur. That is, agency is accepting that one's feelings are also the feelings one would have chosen had one been given the opportunity – or, if they are not, then that they have no authority and should make room for feelings of a different order. Rather than a conscious will-to-an-end, agency is a process of making room to feel and act differently, a way of taking responsibility for the contingency of one's deepest assumptions that pushes the self ever on toward the realization of its potential. Gabriel Grimes, quite simply, is too introspectively short-sighted to make this kind of room for himself.

3. The Agency of John Grimes

Baldwin frequently enjoins his characters (and his readers) to get to know themselves and each other because he associates individual empowerment with emotional introspection. This empowerment is actually the result of discovering the impersonality of affect, for what appears in this process is the realization that though the emotions are a property of the self's embeddedness in the world they are not for that reason a necessary or defining feature of the self. Another way of putting this is to say that though these emotions are mine, they are not me. Agency arises in the recognition of this difference. Thus, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Gabriel's ultimately disempowering habit of avoiding emotional introspection contrasts with his stepson John's heightened self-awareness. Indeed, in establishing the tension between Gabriel and John as the novel's central conflict, Baldwin creates an apparatus for exploring his larger preoccupation with the effect of different introspective habits on the development of the self. And of course one of the most striking ways in which John differs from Gabriel is his expansive utopian sensibility. While Gabriel preaches the gospel of relinquishment – "better to wait, like Job, through all the days of our appointed time than to rise up, unready, before God speaks" (120) – John is galvanized by movement, process, and change. The religious crisis which occupies the novel's foreground is precipitated by his awakening to the tremendous potential of his own affect: "He did not know why, but there arose in him and exaltation and a sense of power, and he ran up the hill like an engine, or a madman, willing to throw himself headlong into the city that glowed before him" (33). Because John's affect is not misrecognized by moral conviction, it irrupts in the potentiating conflict that dominates his mind with increasing intensity until his religious salvation at

the end of the novel. And it is because of his understanding of emotional rationality that the same conversion experience that is the root of Gabriel's disempowerment is empowering for John. Indeed, the awareness of social contradictions John gains through his emotional introspection enables his agency and secures, provisionally at least, his future as a "Great Leader of His People" (19).

The beginning of the novel establishes John's conflict as a divided desire between the Harlem Church to which he has been promised and the greater world, represented in the mysterious life of the city, that is an increasing source of fascination for him. His inability to reconcile himself to either future is not, however, the source of the conflict itself, as if he simply cannot decide between two equally tantalizing options. John's divided desire is an expression of his longing to commit to one or the other in hopes of resolving a deeper ambivalence in his life. The mystery of the city holds the promise of deliverance from the inconsistencies of the church, just as the church has promised to deliver him from the sorrows and uncertainties of his mortal life:

> He longed for a light that would teach him, forever and forever, and beyond all question, the way to go; for a power that would bind him, forever and forever, and beyond all crying to the love of God. Or else he wished to stand up now, and leave this tabernacle and never see these people any more. (80)

His conflict, then, is a result of his inability to reconcile a number of conflicting emotions stemming from his involvement in the Church. These conflicting emotions are not merely a result of John's complex individual desires but reflect larger inconsistencies within the social organization itself.

The explicit terms of John's conflict are made clear in a passage occurring towards the end of the section called "Gabriel's Prayer." John has been struggling to pray but cannot because he doubts God's ability to deliver him and his family from the trouble they have known all their lives. His reflections on the family's trouble then lead him to speculate on his future in the Church after his promised salvation. At that time, he believes,

> He and his father would be equals, in the sight, and the sound, and the love of God. Then his father could not beat him any more – he, John, the Lord's anointed. He could speak to his father then as men spoke to one another – as sons spoke to their fathers, not in trembling but in sweet confidence, not in hatred but in love. His father could not cast him out, whom God had gathered in.
>
> Yet, trembling, he knew that this was not what he wanted. He did not *want* to love his father; he wanted to hate him, to cherish that hatred, and give his hatred words one day. (145)

The passage makes clear that there are two emotional bases underlying John's interest in the Church: one, his desire to be included in its community (affirmation, joy, and love), and two, his desire to supersede and vanquish his father as one of its chosen ones (hatred, envy, and revenge). It is important to recognize that the hatred he feels at this point is not experienced as something that might drive him from the Church, as if it means that he must seek satisfaction elsewhere. Rather, he has come to understand that hatred is in fact the primary condition of his emotional investment in the Church. For this reason hatred appears to him as such an elusive psychological object: he cannot reconcile it with the promise of love the Church has always held out to him. Hence, "The storm that raged in

him tonight could not uproot this hatred, the mightiest tree in all John's country, all that remained tonight, in this, John's floodtime" (145). The feeling that he has identified at this moment is that last obstacle in the way of his commitment, for it indicates an emotional complexity that prevents the formation of conviction that would secure his membership in the Church community.

The recognition of the feeling entails the recognition of an inconsistency in the kinds of satisfaction he derives from his relationship with the Church. As the above passage suggests, he is drawn to the Church because it represents an ideal community in which "he could speak to his father as men speak to one another" (145); at the same time, however, he realizes that the community is based on the preferential treatment of individuals and the establishment of hierarchies: "His father could not cast him out, whom God had gathered in" (145). John's struggle thus exposes how the Church offers him mutually contradictory satisfactions. On the one hand, he derives emotional satisfaction from situations that affirm his need for belonging, and the Church serves this function. Thus, he attends Sunday morning services with his family ("they all rise together on that day" [11]), fulfills responsibilities such as cleaning up before tarry service, and, importantly, participates in ceremonies such as conversion on the threshing floor. On the other hand, the Church's promise of belonging is undermined by the *ressentiment* on which that longing is predicated. Involvement in the Church now appears to be a determination of individual power, not brotherhood. Thus, John knows that to join the Church as one of the Saints would not mean becoming equal with his father, but putting the latter in his place: "his father was only a caretaker in the House of God" (50). Because the Church as John understands it offers inconsistent conceptions of

the good – one found in belonging, the other in power – the satisfaction of one means the violation of the other. From the point of view of domination, belonging feels like submission, and from the point of view of belonging, domination starts to feel like pride. John's emotional introspection thus exposes an inconsistency in the social expectations he has learned from church society. He feels it is wrong, this pride (the Bible itself would tell him so), but he also feels that it justifies him, that it in fact might grant him authority by securing his ascendancy over the father who stands in his way.

John's emotional introspection thus reveals that the Church's promise of community is a false one. A community built on *ressentiment* is one in which the ideal of inclusiveness disguises a more fundamental lack. This kind of community only substitutes a group identity in place of the individual identity that was the motive for seeking community in the first place; it is, in other words, a collective of non-individuals. Significantly, the underlying psychological structure of this collective of the disempowered involves the belief that the other has what the self has not. This belief is the beginning of the hatred John has come to identify in himself, for hatred is the attempt to control the other by willing its destruction. The church thus offers an illusion of power that does nothing to enable the agency of the individual who hopes to gain by that power – so long, at least, as the illusion goes unchallenged.

At risk in John's entry into the community of Saints is therefore the very sense of empowerment that he stands to gain by joining it. If John is to gain genuine authority over his father, his conversion must not compromise his agency in the way the same experience clearly did for Gabriel, and his ability to do so will depend on his awareness of emotional rationality. To feel is to be present to one's desires and, through them, to

one's situatedness in the social world. In John's case, feeling brings him to an understanding of his involvement in the Harlem Church, and that means understanding the contradictory terms in which if offers empowerment. Of course, having understood his feeling, he could do anything: he could join the Church and vanquish his father on its terms, and he could leave the church and seek community elsewhere. But the fact remains that he will do something regardless, for the affective component of these emotions means that he is already different and moving, already negotiating new relationships. Agency lies precisely in his awareness of this fact: it is a matter of recognizing how the self is embedded in social contexts that are perpetually renewed through the emotions that define the self's relationships. Agency is the discovery that the self is at all times actively participating in the forces of change, for affect is that force, and the emotions its psychic register. If agency by this definition involves choice, then choice is not as simple a matter as deciding how to act. By this definition, agency involves the recognition that choice has already happened, and that the self is already involved in relationships. The individual who comes to this awareness gains both uncertainty and authority at once, for he sees in the self both the embodiment of complex social forces as well as an active, conscious relation to those forces.

It is significant that Baldwin should close the novel and this phase of John's inner struggle by inducting him into the Church rather than simply having him reject it. If we read *Go Tell It on the Mountain* autobiographically, then John's situation at the end of the novel marks the beginning of an involvement that Baldwin himself was soon to reject. But the novel is less interested in making explicit arguments about the Church than in establishing the terms on which an individual can secure his freedom, and this is because

Baldwin is aware that freedom is not found outside of the context he finds oppressive but must be found within it. The confirmation that "John was free – *whom the Son sets free is free indeed*" – is thus ambivalent, for freedom won is not freedom guaranteed: "he had only to stand fast in his liberty" (216). His ability to do so will depend on his ability to maintain the perspective that is so hard-won in his experience on the threshing floor. Indeed, John's conversion experience is a kind of ratification of the self-relationship he has already established in his introspective processes throughout the novel.

This self-relationship marks as other what might else appear to be the most intensely personal fluctuations of the interior life. When he falls to the floor, for instance, John is overcome by forces which, like the emotions, he cannot consciously control. In the same way that he earlier comes to regard his hatred from the outside, he marks these forces as representing an alien agency: "Something moved in John's body which was not John" (193). Indeed, Baldwin implies that even his most immediate emotional responses appear to him at this moment as the effect of some already vanished and finally ungraspable event: "John had not felt the wound, but only the agony, had not felt the fall, but only the fear; and lay here, now helpless, screaming, at the very bottom of darkness" (193). To be so outside his experience is not, however, to abandon his agency, as if he is simply the puppet of some larger force; it is to recognize that the force that moves him in his innermost self is a social as much as a personal force, that his emotions are not original movements of the self but the effects of some other imperceptible movement, and that his experience is always, at one remove, other than it seems. The helplessness he feels at this moment is a result of his recognition of the uncertainty at the heart of his experience. His helplessness (though not his uncertainty) is redeemed when he finally

glimpses the Lord and the darkness in which he finds himself, "for a moment only, was filled with a light he could not bear" (204). Whatever the mystical content of this experience, it is important because in it he discovers an affirmative presence that changes the darkness to light without making it any more comprehensible or bearable. Thus, he discovers faith in the awareness that the forces he cannot understand need not be terrifying or disabling.

John's acceptance of his relationship to this affirmative presence is empowering in two ways, both related to utopia. First, his awareness introduces him to a radical loneliness that is the beginning of utopian longing. The distanced self-regard he has developed over the course of the novel gives him insight into the complexity of his experience, but it also deprives him of the security of identity. Though he gains a world in acknowledging the forces that move him, he also, paradoxically, gives up the possibility of coherence, and with it the possibility of being known or named. (This is an important theme of Baldwin's: nobody knows his name.) At the same time, however, he knows he must bear witness to this isolation, and witness means the sharing of testimony. His thoughts after the experience lead him to appeal to Elisha:

> "I was by myself down there. I won't never forget. May God forget me if I forget....
>
> "Elisha, no matter what happens to me, where I go, what folks say about me, no matter what *any*body says, you remember – please remember – I was saved. I was *there.*" (220, italics in original)

The revelation of loneliness is thus empowering because it emphasizes the need for community in the absence of shared understanding. This is an idea of community built

on tolerance and forgiveness – "no matter what anybody says" – rather than on pre-established standards of inclusiveness.

Secondly, the awareness that the conscious self is equal neither to the complexity of its motivations nor to the diffuseness of its effects is an awareness grounded in hope: in complexity, there is potential. John indicates that he suspects his salvation is only temporary by appealing to Elisha to remember it, but his uncertainty with respect to the future nonetheless remains positive. Indeed, the novel's last lines affirm his utopian mood: "I'm coming. I'm on my way" (221). The vocational calling that "he must testify" (207) and his subsequent devotion to emotional introspection and analysis are his means of breaking from the repetitious cycle of enslavement that has marred the history of his family and his race. He has been mulling over the historical problem of prophecy since early in the novel, and these speculations come to a head in an imaginary confrontation with his father while John is laid out on the threshing floor. He recalls once having glimpsed his naked father in the bath and connects the episode to the biblical story of Noah's drunkenness:

> How could John be cursed for having seen in a bathtub what another man – if that other man had ever lived – had seen two thousand years ago, lying in an open tent? Could a curse come down so many ages? Did it live in time, or in the moment? But John found no answer to this, for he was in the moment, and out of time. (197)

Baldwin draws on a number of important themes in this passage. Noah's curse on Canaan – a "*servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren*" (197, italics in original) –

links the biblical origin of slavery with an ancient sexual shame.[4] In the prophetic context of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, this curse is renewed in Gabriel Grimes, whose inability to tolerate what he sees as sexual impurity in either himself or others culminates in the bitterness that poisons his relationships and indirectly leads to the death of his unacknowledged illegitimate son. So long as the repression continues, Baldwin implies, so will the conditions in which individuals cannot be free. John, being in the moment, sees not the historical necessity of the curse but only a wrathful father who is approaching to "beat the sin out of him." Connecting his knowledge of his father's "hideous nakedness" with his own sense of sin, he identifies Gabriel's hypocrisy and understands that the curse, far from being timeless, is "renewed from moment to moment, from father to son" (197). The act of renewal thus exposes the potential of the moment in which two thousand years of so-called necessity is found to be a mask for the immediate negotiable relationship of a father and his son.

Thus, for John, the utopian potential of the moment is expressed in a shame which, as it is renewable, is also revocable. The only thing necessary about this shame is that it affects the individuals who feel it and the individuals who encounter its effects. That those same individuals should fear social rejection on the basis of their perceived sin is a matter of historical circumstance. That they could be, from moment to moment, other than they are is an insight of utopian potential. Baldwin locates this potential in the insight of the subject who recognizes his agency in the fact of his situatedness in relationships which are by their very nature uncertain. This kind of subject always returns to his experience to find, even in the most immediate and seemingly personal of

[4] Feldman (90) and Leeming (190-2), among others, discuss Baldwin's thematic preoccupation with the connection between racism and sexual repression.

feelings, the impress of relationships in the impersonality of the affect which moves him. Whatever their nature, these feelings do not reflect the ultimate truth about the self. They reflect only the nature of its relationships, its human contexts, and the affective call to life which affords the opportunity to differ.

The Ends of Tragedy: Skepticism and Social Hope in William Styron's *Set this House on Fire*

> Tragedy...is inseparable from a certain modest hope regarding the human animal. And it is the glimpse of this brighter possibility that raises sadness out of the pathetic towards the tragic. (Miller 10)

Though they often culminate in a great downward plunge into darkness, William Styron's early works are nonetheless alive with utopian energy. There is, first of all, the rosy lyricism of alcohol, and there is the sublime uplift of music, and nostalgia which looks to the past as to another country. There is the richness of his imagery, which seems to find such promise in sensation for sensation's sake. And there are characters, Milton Loftis, Lieutenant Culver, and Cass Kinsolving in particular, who keep at least one foot firmly planted in a fantasy world of freedom and repose. Given the generally tragic atmosphere of Styron's works, these utopian elements might appear as little more than sunny interludes that serve to make the dark patches darker by contrast. But it is possible too that they are more profoundly connected to his preoccupation with alienation, failure, and despair. All the wild hope and utopian longing expressed in his work is displaced from the social world in which it arose, and if it meets with frustration then this is only to bring hope back down to the world again. Utopian and counter-utopian tendencies are thus caught together in a dialectical tension, the working through of which is to open a space for hope to exist in a real and material way. Tragedy plays an elemental role in this process. On the one hand it imposes a limit on the utopian imagination, countering fantasies of transcendence with brutal facts of the mortal and mundane. But on the other hand it reinvests those limitations with the potential for individual and social renewal. Tragedy thus figures significantly in the development of Styron's social consciousness.

In what follows I am going to read tragedy in light of the skepticism which critics such as Tobin Siebers have identified as the philosophical donné of the postwar period. Skepticism and tragedy seem to belong together because among all representations of affective experience, tragedy is perhaps the most likely to raise questions about the limitations involved in communicating human suffering and about the problem of mutual understanding that such limitations imply. Indeed, the connection of tragedy with skepticism is particularly appropriate in the postwar period, for this is when significant doubt begins to emerge about the viability of tragedy as a mode of literary representation in the modern world. As we shall see, however, tragedy remains a vital part of Styron's literary project, and skepticism plays an important role in ensuring its continuing vitality. The idea of skepticism that emerges in this chapter will therefore look different than the paralysis or withdrawal that is often associated with Cold War attitudes. Quite to the contrary, we are dealing here with a skepticism which mobilizes rather than stalls.

1. Weeping without Reason: The Beginning of Skepticism

> Who will remember Michele, anyhow? [Cass] thought. Slowly he opened his eyes and gazed at the softly brightening sea, thinking: No, unless dust can feel suffering, there will be no one to remember his death. No one. But if dust can feel suffering maybe this suffering dust will get in the eyes of men who feed too well, and maybe they will weep without knowing why, and maybe this dust will tell them how this man died. (*Set this House on Fire* 453)

Often in Styron's fiction the feeling of agape, of love for one's fellow humans, appears as the most unlikely of phenomena. Should the insensate world become sensate, should men who eat open their eyes as well as their mouths, should pain proceed without injury, then – maybe – the isolation of individuals will be transcended, and they will come to know the suffering of others. Yet time and again we meet characters who

overcome the conditions that are set against them to achieve, if only fleetingly, just such knowledge. The Italian policeman who releases Cass Kinsolving from his legal obligations at the end of *Set this House on Fire* tells of only three episodes in his life when he (the Italian) lost his normally cool composure and wept: once when he witnessed the death of his brother, burnt to a cinder by a bomb during the war; a second time at the bedside of a contemptible and friendless Englishwoman who had taken her own life; and again on the day Francesca died and he realized what would happen to Cass if he were tried for Mason's murder. The knowledge he draws from these experiences is not exactly empathic, he concludes, but it ineluctably reflects a shared experience:

> It was not for you [Cass] that I wept, nor for Francesca, but without self-pity for *myself* – because I understood something. When I wept in this extraordinary way, which is so rare for me, I could not help but think again of my brother and the Englishwoman and then all that had happened here in Sambuco, and I wept out of my own understanding. And that understanding was that this existence itself is an imprisonment. Like that Englishwoman we are serving sentences in solitary confinement, unable to speak. All of us. Once we were at least able to talk with our Jailer, but now even He has gone away, leaving us alone with the knowledge of insufferable loss. Like that woman, we can only leave notes to Him – unread notes, notes that mean nothing. (497)

Luigi's weeping represents an important paradox in Styron's thinking about the nature of social experience, a paradox which underlies his investment in tragedy and which, as such, emerges recurrently in his situations. Luigi weeps because he realizes that we all must suffer alone and in silence, without hope of disburdening ourselves through the

deliverance of communication. Yet this realization does not occur in isolation. *Something* is communicated in the encounter with the suffering other, something Luigi identifies as the fact of human solitude. The paradox is that somehow a fundamentally alienating insight is transformed into the grounds for community, for an "all of us." Nothing, apparently, so binds us together as our mutual misunderstanding.

This is the condition in which human beings encounter each other in Styron's work. Here is another example. In *The Long March*, Al Mannix wants to expose the stupidity and callousness of a military system that orders untrained men out on a thirty-six mile forced march. So he completes the march, even suffering a nail in his boot for ten miles of it, but does so in such a state of bitterness and outrage that he makes his submission into a rebellious act. His statement, however, fails. Not only does he end up completing the march as ordered, thus fulfilling the expectations he had set out to prove ridiculous, but in the end he is physically defeated and faced with court martial for gross insubordination. Colonel Templeton and the Marine Corps and the whole system of bureaucratized and indifferent humanity to which they belong carry on as stupidly and callously as before, entirely untouched by Mannix's puny and insignificant struggle. Still, Al's actions must amount to something. He gains nothing by his protest, but he does gain, ironically, in the fact that his protest is not heard, that his statement, like Luigi's notes, is a message going nowhere. These gains become evident in the novel's closing episode, in which he has an encounter with one of the black maids who works in the barracks. Mannix has just returned from the march and is making his agonizing way to the shower, his face a badge of "tortured and gigantic suffering" (83). Culver, the novel's central consciousness and Mannix's most sympathetic witness, is about to offer

to help but is interrupted by the maid, who interrupts her own work to offer a word of condolence. "Oh my, you poor man," she says, "What you been doin'? Do it hurt?" (83). The woman, who has no relationship with Mannix whatsoever, then answers her own question: "Do it hurt? Oh, I bet it does. 'Deed it does" (83). Culver remembers the episode as a moment of contact, "one unspoken moment of human understanding" (83) in which Mannix might at last find some vindication for his pain. But clearly it is nothing of the sort. These understanding strangers know nothing of each other's pain: the maid has no clearer view of the symbolic resonances of Mannix's struggle than he has of her life as a cleaning woman in a Carolina officer's mess. What is more, her few simple words, so apt and yet so disproportionate to the magnitude of his experience, are more accurate for what they fail to say than for what they actually convey, and one can almost hear the wah-wah trumpet accompanying metaphysical bathos as Mannix cynically repeats them to spite his own pride: "'Deed it does." If there is communication here, it misses the mark; the woman's gesture to lessen the gap between them only registers a distance which widens even as it appears to close. Yet it is precisely this failure to speak, and the discordant silence of the irony through which Mannix finally reveals himself, that vindicates his suffering and is the meaningful issue of the encounter. Mannix gains when it becomes clear that his experience cannot be shared, for it is his isolation, not his pain, that admits him to the human fold.

Evidently, then, there is a form of skepticism which overcomes itself in the positing. A third example might state the case more clearly. There is a coda at the end of *Lie Down in Darkness*. Critics[1] have viewed this coda as a weak if well intentioned nod towards renewal after the tragic dissolution of the plot. Peyton Loftis has finally been

[1] For example, Jones (14), Janeway (23), Baumbach (31).

buried, Milton Loftis' plea to salvage his marriage has been finally rebuffed, and Helen Loftis has uttered her final Lear-like synopsis of life with the words "Nothing! Nothing! Nothing! Nothing!" (370). Now, in what appears to be a last minute reprieve from its own darkness, the narrative turns to some of the novel's lesser characters, the Peyton family's black servants, as they attend one of the revivalist meetings of the itinerant preacher Daddy Faith. It is true that for some, Ella Swan in particular, Daddy Faith offers respite from sorrow and hope for salvation, and they come away from the meeting feeling genuinely renewed. But to read the coda as a final reprieve from darkness is to ignore the dubious nature of the hope offered in its portrait of charlatanism and to fail to recognize a familiar refrain in LaRuth's blubbering and inconsolable grief. La Ruth's lamentations sour whatever feeling of uplift the coda might offer by continuing to sound the note of tragic loss that begins in the novel's opening scene. La Ruth is not a major player in *Lie Down in Darkness*; her most prominent appearance occurs when she makes a fool of herself at Peyton's wedding by introducing the cake trailing a string of hotdogs that have accidentally become snarled in her apron. But in her role as the novel's last witness to Peyton's death, she functions as a kind of chorus figure who comments on the significance of the preceding action. And as the last holdout against the baptismal reassurances of Daddy Faith, La Ruth's comment appears to be that there is no hope for love or faith, and that there ultimately is no justification for the Peyton family debacle:

> Sister Adelphia crushed out the water from her robe and sat down on the bench next to Ella with a bottle of Seven-Up. "Whoo-ee, Sister, I seen 'em all now."
>
> "Amen!" said Brother Andrew.

> "Dat was *one,* all right," said Ella. "It was in dis world." All sins washed away, her warfare accomplished, her iniquity pardoned beneath the touch of his hands, in the flooding seas.
>
> La Ruth let the melon rind drop from her fingers and began to moan. "I don't know," she said, "comin' around to thinkin' about all dat time an' ev'ything, po' Peyton, po' little Peyton. Gone! Gone!" She thrust her head in her hands and spread out her legs, snuffling into the wet sleeves of the robe. "God knows, I don't know...."
>
> Sister Adelphia sniffed scornfully, rattling her beads. "Ain't you been baptized, Sister?" she said. (381)

The question goes unanswered, the narrative passing instead over to Ella Swan, who proceeds to work herself into a frenzy of Jesus affirmation. The omission of La Ruth's answer is important, however, because it affirms the irresolution in her response to Peyton's death. Much like Luigi's weeping and Mannix's irony, the loss that finds no relief in baptism expresses the awareness that there are times when no human word or deed will suffice to heal the wound that experience has made. La Ruth's reminder is that apparently there is no deliverance from the solitude to which our partial perspectives condemn us.

Yet it must also be said that somehow the irremediable aloneness to which La Ruth's grief gives voice effaces itself, and this is where the skeptical insight begins to be transformed. La Ruth recognizes something in Peyton's death that her mother does not. She must remember that her mother had added to her humiliation over the hotdogs by chastising her in front of the entire wedding party, and how Peyton had intervened on her

behalf with a few quick words and a brief embrace, saying, "That's all right, La Ruth. Thank you for the lovely cake. Everything's O.K., La Ruth" (272). It is a gesture that Milton, watching, recognizes as being "neither lofty nor patronizing, but spontaneous and unaffected" (272), and it immediately smoothes the situation by dispelling the awkwardness and quieting La Ruth's tears. More importantly, though, it serves to intimate a kind of promise: that assurance might be found in other people, that there might be understanding in the world after all. La Ruth grieves as much for this promise as for Peyton. And regardless of her level of awareness, La Ruth's grief, if we are willing to notice it, singles her out from her congregation and from her obscurity in the novel and wins for her, I would like to suggest, a certain status that she might not otherwise have. If we recognize in her grief a familiar upset and a familiar loss, then we have partly overcome the distance that apparently could not be crossed.

The skepticism that is simultaneously enacted and overcome in these instances is related to the nature of the affects with which Styron is dealing. I am going to designate these experiences as tragic affects because, while they might be more specifically identified as the generic emotional experiences of "anguish" or "grief," they make visible one of the characteristic features of affect that "emotion" as such tends to obscure: namely, its singularity. Because the emotions associated with tragedy grow out of such extreme circumstances, those who witness them are disposed to approach the sufferer with a heightened sensitivity that cannot be entirely distinguished from awe (I say not entirely because one might be inclined to call such sensitivity care; but care, too, is born of reverence). It is as if a dispensation has been made that entitles the sufferer to the exceptional privacy of an experience too profound to touch. And yet something else

happens in the awe that so holds the witness back. More than any other, the tragic affect announces its incommensurability with any feeling we might name; yet it also exposes its social embeddedness through the contingency and loss that have conditioned it. One person's experience may be incommensurate with the experience of another, but that does not mean that each is condemned to experience alone.

Tragedy thus reveals an important fact about the nature of community. Stanley Cavell has suggested that tragedy confronts us with the ineluctable fact of the separateness of the other, the fact that "I cannot do and suffer what it is another's to do and suffer" (154). All we can do is to confirm the fact of our separateness. But this we cannot do alone. Separateness is the "unity of our condition" (154), and it implies the existence of community even while it dissolves all forms of relationship in the act of bringing us together. Put another way, the confirmation of our separateness, that I am I, here, and you are you, there, is itself a function of community in the sense that it requires the contiguity of the subjects involved: the spectator must witness the tragedy of the other if she is to be in awe of it, which means that the other must first at least be posited as such. Since, however, what is acknowledged in this process is separateness itself, the community so founded has no other basis than the incommensurable perspectives of its constituents. Cavell ruminates further:

> The only essential difference between them and me is that they are there and I am not. And to empty ourselves of all other difference can be confirmed in the presence of an audience, of the community, because every difference established between us, other than separateness, is established by the community – that is, by us, in obedience to the community. It is by responding with this knowledge that

> the community keeps itself in touch with nature. (With Being, I would say, if I knew how.) (154)

Possessed with this knowledge, the community (which is to say the individual who acts in obedience to a communal idea) must act in the interest of its founding condition: i.e., the non-prioritized separateness of its members. The single great imperative of the social contract in Cavell's formulation would be to ensure the forbearance of healthy disparity – or, in a different formulation, "to try to free people into the condition of love" (Styron *Set* 362). From one point of view, this marks the end of community. But from another, of course, it marks a beginning.

Based on the above three examples from Styron's works, the nature of the tragic affect may be described as follows. First, the sufferer of tragedy is in some way inconsolable. This is as true of Mannix's tearless irony as it is of the more conventional bereavements of Luigi and La Ruth. To suffer without promise of comfort or justice is to find an impassable divide between oneself and the rest of humanity and to grow deaf to the words that pass between people in the effort of understanding. Secondly, the tragic affect finds the sufferer at the center of unique forces. Socially, the inconsolable individual takes on special status by evoking the pity and awe of those around him: this is the empathic nature of the tragic phenomenon identified by Aristotle in the theory of catharsis. Those who are capable of profound suffering tend to accrue, for all their flaws, a little more respect and consideration than those who are not, so that even in the deepest depths of solitude they find themselves in company. (The determination of "profound" as opposed to "ordinary" suffering is another matter to which I shall return.) This social characteristic of tragic affect introduces its special relationship with hope. In tragedy,

something yet contradicts the evidence that proves how little it avails to be human. To raise tragedy from mere catastrophe requires the attribution of dignity to human wretchedness. Yet this most generous and fantastical attribution of worth can only be made in the luxury of a certain distance from the experience itself. The recognition of tragedy thus depends on a dual movement of withdrawal and approach: tragedy appears when we acknowledge an unbridgeable distance which we then deign to cross anyway. The hope in tragedy is thus discovered in the paradoxical terms of its appearance. Its dignified portrait of suffering is carried forward on a social level only, and this is despite the fact that in marking tragedy we inevitably highlight the limitations and failures of the social itself. The tragic affect is both the failure and the promise of community. Where tragic affect appears, there the hope of community might be.

2. Tragedy and Collective Experience

Tragedy has often been closely identified with collective experience, and for this reason it has been said that the twentieth century makes tragedy obsolete. As Raymond Williams suggests, the response to modern catastrophe is such that some are inclined to find the old form of tragedy inadequate to the new experience: "That there has been tragedy (or chivalry, or community) but that lacking this belief, that rule, we are now incapable of it, is a common response of this kind" (45). But it is possible to see, with Williams, that the diagnosis might be premature. For instance, George Steiner identifies the end of tragedy with the decline of collective experience. In true tragedy, he writes, "The playwright depended on the existence of a common ground; a kind of preliminary pact of understanding had been drawn up between himself and his society" (320).

Modernity has deprived us of this common ground: ergo, the death of tragedy. But surely what Steiner means to say is that modernity itself is a source of considerable loss to social life, that the real tragedy lies in a wrong turn taken somewhere in human history. If this is the case, then Steiner himself is the chorus on the modern stage, and in mourning the loss of collective experience he reveals his commitment to an ideal that defies the condition he describes: hope remains the condition of his desire. Never mind for the moment that hope has become so confused as to be misrecognized for despair.

Tragedy persists wherever there is hope for a better world. The problem is that sometimes hope is obstructed, and when this is the case tragedy also seems to disappear. In the twentieth century, utopian hope appears to be paralyzed by the prevalence of anti-utopian ideologies which cast it as naïve escapism at best, or as social engineering at worst. The failure to recognize the persistence of tragedy in this context results from the difficulty of connecting hope to real-world material properties so that it might appear as something other than foolish daydreaming or dangerous idealism. In such a context, tragedy itself must be altered, for without a circumspect commitment to the seriousness of the human situations it depicts, tragedy is likely to appear as black comedy or melodrama. But it does not follow that tragedy, let alone collective experience, is dead. As Williams suggests, to recognize the persistence of tragedy one must first admit that like anything it is susceptible to historical variations as a result of which it is not consistently recognizable. Tragedy, like society, is historically and culturally specific (45). Indeed, its relationship to social experience means that its variations can be traced to changes in the nature of that experience, and it is to these changes that we must attend if we are to understand the conditions and possibilities of hope in each context. For

example, the habit of questioning the relevance or even the existence of tragedy discussed above suggests that the identity of tragedy has shifted from the suffering of the individual to the more abstract problem of the comprehensibility of suffering. What is tragic is not suffering in its own right but the fact that we might not know what to make of it when we see it, if indeed we can see it at all. Certainly this is the tragic ethos that underwrites Steiner's perception of historical decline and his claim that tragedy is dead, and it is evident in Styron's explorations of skepticism as well.

If it is true that tragedy can no longer represent suffering without first raising questions about its own meaning, then it is possible to conclude that the possibilities for collective experience have taken a turn for the worse. Indeed, the negative implications of postwar tragedy should be apparent already: the sociological conditions of modernity have made compassion difficult to achieve as suffering is more difficult to recognize and understand. Thus, end-of-tragedy theories do register important concerns about how the incommensurability of modern experience impinges on the effectiveness of political concepts such as equality and justice. If we are unable to see how another's experience might be commensurate with our own, then we have lost the primary affective basis of social commitment, and the end of tragedy *is* the end of civilization. But then again, the end of civilization might not be so bad. The regenerative side of the problem of incommensurability is that it casts just such concepts as humanity and civilization into confusion. The incommensurability of human experience means that suffering "in its own right" cannot be taken for granted, or not at least insofar as it can be imputed to a generalized human subject in the figure of the tragic hero. Suffering must be recognized as a product of specific real-world contexts rather than as an unalterable metaphysical

condition – which means also that its recognizability as such is left open to question. And here the problem of the distinction between "profound" and "ordinary" suffering opens the door to social hope. The indeterminacy of the exact properties of human suffering means that suffering is now able to appear in heretofore undiscovered contexts and situations. As a result, the question "is this suffering?" can be seen as part of a search for its greater visibility across a range of social phenomena.

It tends to be the case that hope must contend with uncertainty if it is to survive in the postwar context. But at least some twentieth century tragic and dramatic theorists have recognized that tragedy can continue to play a vital social role if it can exploit the fact that the meaning and purpose of experience is by no means certain. This line of thought constitutes a reaction against the concept of collective experience as the prevailing mimetic theory understands it. Aristotelean theory, for example, is based on an idea of empathic identification between the spectator and the tragic hero that presupposes both a shared social knowledge and a common experience in tragic suffering. The exercise of *pathos* depends first on the recognition (*anagnorisis*) of a tragic situation, and this requires that the concept of tragedy has a certain degree of generic stability. The convention that the hero is of noble birth would be one example of how this stability is maintained. (We see also in this example how the generic naturalization of tragedy reflects specific social interests with an investment in regulating the categorization of human suffering.) From *anagnorisis* the spectator may move on to the richer affective identification of *catharsis* in which the suffering on stage generates pity and fear in the observer. Aristotelean tragedy thus presupposes a common social ground and a shared experience of suffering. More importantly, the ritual of the drama

means that the potentially disruptive force of tragic affect is effectively contained. The spectator can now leave the theater having discharged the suffering she has witnessed and of which she has (briefly) recognized herself to be a part; the tragedy in which the suffering was made visible stays tactfully behind in the theater. Thus, in the mimetic tradition, tragedy has a socially integrative function.[2]

For critics of the mimetic tradition such as Augusto Boal and Bertolt Brecht, the presupposition of shared experience in the mimetic model is coercive, and dangerously so: *pathos* functions to perpetuate a false idea of reality by regulating the spectator's identifications and resolving emotional conflicts that might otherwise spill out of the theater and enter the wider field of praxis. In Brecht's view, for instance, the drama's integrative function is to turn the audience into a "cowed, credulous, hypnotized mass" (Brecht 188). Thus, Brechtian theater is designed to resist the empathic processes that knit actor, character, and audience into a seamless collective whole by dispelling the sense of familiarity with which the spectator is able passively to view any action as given. The revolutionary moment comes when *catharsis* fails and the spectator is denied the solace of an appropriate – i.e., habitual – affective response. This raises the response to the level of conscious awareness, transforming the spectator from passive observer to active revolutionary consciousness.

Of course Styron does not work in the theater; nor do his political affiliations resemble Brecht's in any obvious way. Nonetheless Brecht's revision of the primary

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[2] The negative spin I have given the Aristotelean theory of catharsis is derived from Boal. See Part One of *Theater of the Oppressed*, "Aristotle's Coercive System of Tragedy." Boal would be critical of the inherent propriety of the mimetic model as identified by Halliwell: "There is, in [the] conception of tragic experience, no divorce between thought, or understanding, and feeling, since to feel in the right way towards the right things just *is* one integral dimension of understanding their human sense and meaning" (254).

function of dramatic identification provides a useful parallel for Styron's own approach to the role of tragedy in a world he finds threatened by the debasements of consumer culture and mass benightedness. What is more, his novelistic interventions into the nature and meaning of tragic experience provide an extremely effective apparatus for generating anti-mimetic insights. I have suggested that hope, if it to be found, must be recovered from present social arrangements, and this means altering the psycho-social conditions in which those arrangements are passively apprehended as given. To this end *Set this House on Fire* deploys a range of strategies that frustrate the smooth operation of mimetic identification. Perhaps the most obvious of these is its use of modernist narrative technique: the events in Sambuco are pieced together over the course of an extended dialogue between Peter Leverett and Cass himself, distancing the chief events of the story behind the obfuscations of memory and individual point of view. Cass and Peter thus constitute a miniature interpretive community who must actively work together to engage in the reconstruction of the events. More interesting, however, is the use of digression to slow down and complicate the imputation of motivations to Cass's actions. Cass's narrative is ostensibly an account of the events leading up to Mason Flagg's death, but his explanations are digressive to the point of haziness: the story begins, he insists, not with Mason, but "in me, early, way back" (249), and the narrative that follows is full of detours and diversions, often accompanied by dubious provisos about their relevance: "I think maybe sometimes you'll be able to see how this figured in with what happened to me there in Sambuco" (379). The effect of this strategy is not merely to test the reader's patience, but to make it difficult if not impossible for the reader to assume a clear and stable relationship between action and its putative origins in individual motivation.

Cass's narrative purports to explain what happened in Sambuco, but if anything his protracted elaborations serve to imply that events are overdetermined by complex influences that encompass both psychological as well as sociological explanations, among possible others. Under these conditions the question of tragedy and indeed of experience in general must be circulated endlessly, for consensus about the ultimate justification or meaning of any event is extremely difficult to achieve.

A particularly pointed illustration of this principle occurs in the account of Cass and Lonnie's trip to dispossess a poor black family named Crawfoot of a radio. The episode is divided into two parts. The first introduces Lonnie as the kind of southern gentleman who is known to "get along good with the niggers" (372) and recounts how on the day in question he dealt with a black customer at his Western Auto Store. The second part describes how, later that afternoon, the two white men drove out together in search of the radio. No clear connection is made between the two events other than to say that they occurred on the same day, but the fact that the memory belongs to the summer Cass turned fifteen and "came to manhood" (371) suggests that male sexuality might be the common theme. Indeed, sexuality is involved in an important way in both parts of the story. In the first, an old man named Jupe has come into the store to inquire after a radiator-cap ornament for his car. The cap is shaped like a naked woman, and he insists with quiet embarrassment that it is actually for his son. Lonnie, however, takes off in knee-slapping raillery about the doggedness of the old man's libido before finally asking Cass to fetch the ornament. Now what appears as Lonnie's good-natured if condescending jocularity in the first part is revealed in the second to be a boiling hotbed of sexual impotence and rage. Arriving at the Crawfoot cabin to find no one at home,

Cass and Lonnie let themselves in and search the premises for the radio. When they eventually find it, the discovery that it is cracked sends Lonnie into a fit of destructive violence. Cass looks on with horror but fails to object, and when Lonnie calls on him to help upset the family's large cast-iron stove, Cass is unaccountably unable to resist. Worse, he lends an arm to Lonnie's violence, overwhelmed by a newfound feeling of sexual power:

> And then you know I remember this, see, how as we stood there bent over heaving and sweating a tremendous warm excitement came over me, a feeling that – well, it was almost a feeling of anger, too, as if I'd picked up some of this young lout of a maniac's fury and was set on teaching the niggers, too. By God, this feeling, you know, I remember it – it was in my loins, hot, flowing, sexual. I knew it was wrong, I knew all this, understand, but it was as if once I'd lost my courage anyway, once I'd given in – like some virgin, you see, who's finally stopped struggling and said to hell with it – then I could actually do what I was doing almost even with a sense of righteousness. All the clichés and shibboleths I'd been brought up with came rolling back – a nigger wasn't much more than an animal anyway, specially field niggers, crooked niggers like this Crawfoot....(378)

The episode implicitly relates the racist acts of both men to their drive for sexual dominance. In so doing, it provides a model for understanding the social nature of affect in terms of a mimetic identification through which the affective impetus of one man exerts a determining influence on the motivations of another. What is more, it suggests that this process of identification exerts a naturalizing influence, as if the feelings

engendered in the heat of the moment derive from some immanent well of human experience beyond all mediation. For example, Cass's metaphor of the struggling virgin represents the sexual drive as a force that exists prior to the compunction that checks it, implying that sexual violence results from a natural or original desire that morality must work to repress. But Styron's point is to challenge, not to promote, the assumptions behind mimetic identification. The illusion of immediacy that may be derived from the relatively unconscious spontaneity of affective experience (i.e., the illusion of the personality of affect) is one of the main obstacles to recuperating the potential inherent in that experience, and Styron is at pains to expose this illusion in various ways. For one, Cass turns the tables on the alignment of sexual violence with nature by drawing attention to the way racist ideology is invoked to justify and even extend his fury at the height of its passion. Clearly, his desire is not isolated from his social environment (as the immediate influence of Lonnie also testifies), and the force of his own agency cannot be distinguished from the more generalized social forces in which he is a participant. Cass's individual desire is revealed at this moment to be an expression of larger social prerogatives.

Yet this is not to say either that the ostensibly external forces representing this social prerogative have priority in themselves. There is no sense in which the racist interests of society exist anywhere "outside" the individual affects through which they are manifest as feeling. The belief in this kind of external agency would imply the existence of some sort of transcendental puppeteer who manipulates individuals by programming their desires to suit his own evil purposes. Of course no such agency exists. Affect originates neither within nor without individual subjects: it originates between them.

The social forces that appear under the guise of an external influence on individual motivation are the result of the widespread actualization of certain affective tendencies that have generated their own social momentum. Cass's aggression is fueled by racist ideology, by the shibboleths and clichés with which he is familiar as a white southerner, but these ideas also derive a certain confirmation and reality from the righteousness he is given to feel in submitting to his desire. What happens, then, is that individual affective experience and social influence in the form of ideology support and confirm each other. The result is that there is no ground left on which to suppose that any motivation originating in affect can be separated from social determinations; nor is it possible to abstract these social determinations from the affective experiences which lend them reality by actualizing them in feeling. The attempt to trace a simple causal line from action to motivation is frustrated by the fact that when it comes to affect, the line where individual motivations begin and end is always blurry.

The difficulty of coming to a consensus about the ultimate justification and meaning of action is related to the problem that motivation cannot be reduced to isolated individuals ("Cass" or "Lonnie") on the one hand, and it cannot be reduced to abstract social principles "Southern racism" on the other. And yet the necessity of making these attributions cannot be dispensed with either. All individuals are complicit in the social construction of reality insofar as they are capable of affect, and this means that all individuals share a degree of responsibility for the world in which they live. Such responsibility is, in fact, one of the major thematic interests of *Set this House on Fire*: Cass is a "regular *puddle* of self" (254) who must learn to carry what is to him an especially crushing load of personal responsibility without sinking into a mire of guilt

and self-loathing. Responsibility is so difficult because it arises with the recognition that the self contains the capacity to be otherwise, and this includes the capacity for good as well as evil. In the episode at Crawfoot's cabin, Cass discovers this capacity in a compunction that is no less "spontaneous" than his aggressive desire: he is "sickened to his entrails in a way he had never been" (377), and at one point even makes an "involuntary step" (376) to prevent further damage. The affective force of sexual aggression that motivates his participation in Lonnie's violence thus co-exists with an equally affective force of moral compunction that encourages him to prevent it. Cass is clearly exposed to multiple motivations on an affective level, and in light of these his actions appear as a reduction of personal, as well as social, potential. It remains that he could have been, indeed can be, other than he was and is.

The upshot of these ideas is that Styron's work counters the unimpeded process of identification in the mimetic tradition by throwing up obstacles that mystify rather than clarify the nature of human action. One does not see oneself reflected in the experience of the other in any clear and unproblematic way. Indeed, looking into the private history of affect, one does not find a clear and unproblematic image of the self anywhere, as Cass's introspective explorations so often reveal. There is always a problem of judgment with respect to selves and others that inclines one to skepticism. But in Styron's work at least, skepticism has a positive social value, for it leads to the recovery of a potential that would otherwise remain invisible. This potential is intimately related to skepticism's challenge to collective experience.

The episode in Crawfoot's cabin lodges a suspicion about the implications of shared experience by associating vicarious participation with destructiveness rather than

with social hope. Cass's curiosity is drawn to a photograph of the Crawfoot family, but whatever glimmer of *pathos* his curiosity might afford is quickly shattered along with the picture when Lonnie hurls it across the room. Clearly, something passes between Cass and Lonnie at this point, "a queasy visceral feeling of excitement" (376) that overpowers Cass's compunction and results in his joining the violence. The power of Lonnie's fury is thus that it is able to strike a chord in the younger man that drowns out his own conscience. Indeed, one of the morals that Cass draws from this story is that northerners will not understand the south until they "realize that they've got as many Lonnies and as many young Casses in dear old Dixie as they've got boll weevils, [and that it's] *those* two guys that's going to make the blood flow in the streets" (378). The powerful identification of white men with each other thus directly imperils the humanity of black people by perpetuating the conditions in which the latter remains unseen. And as the Crawfoot incident demonstrates, the power of this clannish group identification is very much rooted in the common affective base that enables two men to act as if they were one.

Skepticism enters as a way of dissolving this common affective base because, as I hope to have demonstrated, the skeptical glance imposes the same barrier on self-understanding that it imposes on understanding the other. At the time, Cass helped Lonnie destroy the cabin because he recognized in the latter's rage some of his own frustration and anger. This recognition does not mean, however, that he was *all* frustration and anger, for there was another Cass who stood back and watched and felt the promptings of a contradictory desire, a contradiction that was not resolved in the ensuing act. Now as I have suggested, the act is a reduction of the full affective potential of the

situation, and this reduction is carried over into the clannishness that further entrenches the action in its now familiar course as the feeling of the one man confirms and legitimizes the feeling of the other. What must be understood is that the reduction is only manifest in the action; on the level of affect, a wider field of potential remains. Skepticism aids this understanding because it acknowledges that the appearance of two men acting as if they were one is no more than an appearance. Indeed, skepticism recognizes that the consistency of one individual's actions does not mean the consistency of the individual. It implies that what appears to be the case is, in fact, probably not the case, that other factors and considerations presently unavailable are necessary if one is to arrive at an understanding which in any case will never be complete. And in light of this, it implies that all those Lonnies and young Casses could have been and can be other than they were and are.

Where there is doubt, there is hope. Such is the difficulty of the problem we are dealing with, for doubt is usually taken to imply something else entirely, a matter of frustration instead of a new arrangement of possibilities. But the aim of *Set this House on Fire* is to investigate doubt so as to recuperate its insights on behalf of discovery and renewal. The same Cass Kinsolving who leaves the Crawfoot cabin behind goes on to become a tortured existential drunk in Paris and Sambuco, and the same drunken ruin goes on to become the world-wizened angler whom Peter Leverett finds fishing on the Ashley, as free as an aged Huck Finn in his floppy straw hat. Throughout these transformations Cass comes to accept the fact that neither the sufferings nor the satisfactions of the moment are absolute, and that, in fact, there remains a future in which to act, to negotiate, to ameliorate the conditions of existence as they are known. Much of

this awareness depends on his acceptance of human suffering as a product of specific material circumstances and not of immutable cosmological blight. Indeed, his gradual resolve to overcome his pitiful existential wallowing and enter the world as a responsible agent hangs on his skeptical withdrawal from the search for ultimate explanations. "Maybe," he reflects at one point, "it is just that in the end some secrets should be hid forever" (363). Faced with despair over universal imponderables, Cass can at least attempt to redress the immediate suffering of Michele and his family, for theirs is a situation that responds to food and medicine even if it does not yield completely to understanding. In this way, skepticism opens the door to social hope and personal renewal.

3. The Visibility of the Human

> "Nossir," Cass told me, "I didn't know what that message was, but I knew something else. I mean this crazy chill and thrill of understanding as I lay there in the shadows. I knew *something*." (*Set* 368)

Skepticism asks that we doubt appearances, and it follows that we must doubt the appearance of tragedy as well. After all, the recognition of tragedy implies that we have understood the wrong we have witnessed as if it were our own, and skepticism denies us this understanding. How am I to care if I cannot feel what the other feels? What does the other have to do with me if our experience is different? How can I recognize what is wrong for another if I cannot achieve clarity for myself? Obviously these are impossible questions. But they are important because they presuppose that the community in which they are asked does not yet exist, or that its existence is at the very most incomplete. So while it is true that we must doubt the existence of tragedy, it is equally true that we must

doubt its obsolescence. The potential that this event or that experience might indeed be tragic is the potential of community itself, the potential that I might be involved, that events might concern me in a significant way. Of course the question is dismissed as easily as it is raised. But when it is raised, it bears with it the utopian anticipation of a world of collective interests and ideals.

The proposition which *Set this House on Fire* therefore attempts to make clear is that the human subject of tragic suffering cannot be seen, not even in the most obvious of circumstances. Of course this should not be confused with the kind of invisibility that enables Luigi to condemn the entire lot of Italian peasantry as "less than animals" and to insist that "they should be exterminated" (331). Rather, the unseen subject should make visible its own opacity, which is to say that it should, in the best of ethical circumstances at least, bear the mark of its own incommensurability. Surely this is the function of the three ragged load-bearing women from the valley who intrude on Cass's Arcadian reveries with their imagery of "stooped and downcast bondage" (341). Their grueling poverty upsets Cass because he cannot assimilate their obvious suffering to any comprehensible vision of the world. When he witnesses the "brutal catastrophe" (351) of one of these women's futile struggle to hoist her fallen burden onto her back, his feeling of powerlessness is so overwhelming that he deliberately tries to force the image from his mind. (Ironically, his willed blindness to abject poverty turns up the false promise of a political solution: "Fixing his eyes on a distant wall, Cass made his mind a blank, conscious only of a greasy thumbprint on one lens of his glasses, through which he read, unthinking, three blurred white faded words: VOTATE DEMOCRAZIA CRISTIANA" [351].) But Cass is exceptional in this novel for his recurrent failure to be selective in his

perceptions. Of the above episode with Lonnie he tells Peter that "there are no amends or atonement for a thing like that," but that the inability finally to put his guilt behind him is itself a form of reparation: "What I mean is, you live with it. You live with it even when you've put it out of your mind – or think you have – and maybe there's some penance or justice in that" (379). In a similar way, the brutal apparition of the peasant woman enters his awareness in the form of a contradiction that he cannot ultimately swallow, no matter how much alcohol he consumes in hopes of washing it down. And this contradiction, though difficult, is the potential of social hope.

The affective conditions of guilt, sorrow, and pity persistently intrude on Cass's utopian fantasies of illimitable peace and repose, and understandably he does what he can to ignore them. Yet he is one of the few characters in the novel who is totally unsuccessful in doing so, and he is the only character who makes an effort to relieve the suffering of a man whom everyone else seems to have dismissed as a hopeless if not worthless case. The social criticism of *Set this House on Fire* is thus trained on a world in which the visibility of the human has been compromised by a systemic failure of perception. Few in this world have either the desire or the means to see in the "American" or "Italian" who stands before them an obvious and inviolable obstacle to the understanding. This is because few are in a position to question what they see, either because they literally cannot afford to (generally, the Italians), or because to do so would be to inconvenience their privilege (generally, the Americans). The greater shame, clearly, is on the Americans: as Cass remarks of a Wisconsin woman he encounters in a Paris café, "when I gazed into her eyes she had dollar signs there, as if they'd been glazed on in twin shining symbols of avarice and venality and greed" (283). The

shortsightedness of this kind of American is all the more repulsive in Cass's eyes because it is so unnecessary. Affluence should dispel needs, not engender them, and prosperity should liberate rather than impoverish the imagination. But in so many cases the American acts as if she is motivated by hunger, as if her desire has all the urgency and priority of a necessary condition. Indeed, for her, wants and needs have been confused, and power has eclipsed hunger as the more important demand.

Styron's concern here is to expose the impact of economic interests and of American consumerism in particular on social relations. Cass himself is no stranger to the constraints of the economic imperative. The family has lost their small income from Poppy's American properties by the time they reach Sambuco, and he is forced to submit to slavish humiliation at Mason Flagg's hands in order to keep himself in groceries and booze and to procure the medicine, unavailable to Italians, for Michele's tuberculosis. The trained seal act in which Cass performs on command for Mason's party guests is an indication of the extent to which he has been morally and spiritually debased by economic necessity at this moment. But his debasement itself is of secondary interest compared to the fact that there is such demand for it among the representative Americans of Flagg's Hollywood entourage. Among those who witness his act, only Alonzo Cripps and Peter Leverett appear not to enjoy it. The implication is that Cass's debasement is largely imperceptible to these people, or at least that their individual assessments of it are not strong enough or courageous enough to resist Mason's pitch of "the greatest one-man show since the days of the great departed Jolson" (186). Indeed, given the general uneasy silence with which the crowd first greets the scene, this would appear to be the case: Cass's debasement, which is here comparable to the debasement of American

blacks by Al Jolson and by economic and racial oppression in general, is made imperceptible because the judgment of individual audience members is unconsciously deferred to the judgement of the crowd. Peter Leverett's ineffectual compunction during this scene may thus be usefully paralleled with Cass's reticence in Crawfoot's cabin. In both cases the outcome of the situation is influenced by the presence of others, and in both cases this influence is shown to be as unnecessary as it is powerful.

The point is that the understanding of the human is threatened whenever the human becomes visible. In the "overwhelming, general bafflement and uneasiness" (186) with which Mason's guests greet Cass's act, there is the potential for something human to appear. But the laughter that immediately unites the crowd is nothing less than an interpretation carried out on an affective level, and in that moment Cass's humanity is lost along with whatever tragedy the scene might have contained. Of course the loss is not irrevocable. It is symptomatic, however, of a mounting social tendency in which the human tends to disappear behind the surface of a spectacle. What they see when they look at Cass playing the trained seal *might* be tragedy, and it *might* be something else; as consensus has it, though, Cass is an object for their entertainment and delight. In this sense at least the experience conforms to a logic with which all of them, actors and entertainers and journalists and sycophants alike, are familiar, for they are all well acquainted with the logic of consumption.

There is perhaps no need to outline the ways in which *Set this House on Fire* criticizes the effects of consumption on social life. Suffice it to say that Mason Flagg is Cass's antithesis in the novel and the chief representative of a form of consciousness that experiences all social relationships in terms of "recompense and hire" (173). This

consciousness is directly responsible for Mason's eagerness to please, for his cultivated charm, and for his predatory sexuality. It reflects a form of social experience which subordinates relationships to an abstract interest and undervalues the spontaneous prerogatives of mutual involvement. Within this framework, the human appears strictly as that which may prove useful in serving the ends of an already articulated desire. This is how the human becomes understandable: it is that which is useful, or that which is not. Consumption thus debases the human by reducing it to its known purposes. When really, of course, the human has no known purpose whatsoever.

It should by now be clear how skepticism offers a challenge to the logic of consumption. Only when the human is understood as that which exceeds its own appearance can we say that subjectivity is knowable, for the human then appears as that which cannot be fully seen or known. Skepticism thus functions paradoxically as an operation that acknowledges the insurmountable separateness of individuals even while it surmounts that separateness with the same blind gesture. The recognition that Cass's trained seal act might be an occasion of tragedy would be just such an acknowledgement, for it would entail the recognition that his suffering is unknown, that it is incommensurable with any other experience, and that it cannot therefore be justified. In this way, tragedy exposes the basic condition in which human beings are involved with each other in Styron's work. Each knows his own solitude without reason. But none, for all that, is actually alone.

"The Tender Nucleus of a Personal Matter": Vladimir Nabokov's Worldly Disposition

> One of the few times I said to myself anywhere: "Now, that's a nice spot for a permanent home," I would immediately hear in my mind the thunder of an avalanche carrying away the hundreds of far places which I would destroy by the very act of settling in one particular nook of the earth. (Nabokov *Strong Opinions* 27)

The advantage of the literary study of affect is that it approaches the novel's interest in subjectivity through a materialist understanding of history which views the subject as a product of specific and variable social forces. In this way it makes possible an understanding of the subject as conditioned by its historical context right down to its most private, most idiosyncratic, most apparently immediate feelings and drives. Yet this does not mean that subjectivity is simply a passive construction of historical forces over which the individual exerts no influence. The point of affect is that even in its impersonality it speaks to the subject's own properties as a changing, mobile thing, properties which are identical with the historical process and for which the individual is free to take responsibility if it so chooses. When I say that the theory of affect is part of a materialist understanding of history I therefore mean it to be understood that affect is involved in the production of history in a significant way. It is in affect that human relationships are most concretely realized, and it is also in affect that those relationships are revealed to be unstable, contingent, and subject to improvisation and reappraisal. The novels considered so far in this study have represented affective experience in such a way as to expose openings in a world in which the possibilities for individual and collective transformation appear to be diminished. Their utopian content lies in their preoccupation with the incompleteness of human perception and in their persistent

expression of unease regarding the social status quo. Thus, without describing political platforms or advocating reformist strategies of any kind, these novels represent concentrations of yearning for the improved historical circumstances of greater social awareness and the heightened sensitivity to suffering and to beauty that follows.

In light of this yearning, the work of Vladimir Nabokov presents important contributions and challenges. On the one hand a careful reading of his novels should make it difficult if not impossible to conclude that they advocate anything less than greater social awareness and heightened sensitivity to suffering and to beauty. On the other hand any attempt to associate his work with social concerns will appear highly unlikely. Vladimir Nabokov, after all, professes to have no interest in society whatsoever. Of the role of literature in society he writes that "it is only important to the individual, and only the individual reader is important to me. I don't give a damn for the group, the community, the masses, and so forth," and adds that "there can be no question that what makes a work of fiction safe from larvae and rust is not its social importance but its art, only its art" (*Strong Opinions* 33, *SO* hereafter). The socially minded critic will thus be disappointed to find that in Nabokov's view the extent of a work's engagement with history is precisely the reason it should be dismissed. Nabokov is quite insistent in his dismissal: "Frankly, a national, folklore, class, masonic, religious, or any other communal aura involuntarily prejudices me against a novel, making it harder for me to peel the offered fruit so as to get at the nectar of possible talent" (*SO* 113). The meddlesome social critic should clearly think twice before setting up camp in this writer's backyard.

However, with most things Nabokovian one would be amiss to settle for so summary a statement, and the problem of Nabokov's anti- or a-social tendency can be answered readily enough. Regardless of the familiar note of disdain in his tone, his contempt for the social is based primarily on aesthetic grounds. Nabokov rejects society as a category not because he is indifferent to human problems but because his affirmation of the paramount importance of the originality, uniqueness, and complexity of experience leads him to explore situations in individual terms. Besides, from an artistic point of view, social concern is a form of modishness that drags the imagination into the gutter of popular cliché. A distinction should therefore be made between "society," a fashionable literary generalization, and "sociality," not a term Nabokov uses but one which might be usefully applied to the representation of social experience that emerges in his novels. Indeed, if sociality is defined as the condition in which individuals co-exist and subsequently impose on each other, then it is fair to say that sociality is one of Nabokov's dominant themes.

Nabokov's work is of interest to me because he engages social experience at the level of the atomized individual and not at the level of the group. The conditions of the working class, the issue of race, the position of women: simply put, these themes are not part of Nabokov's territory. As his statements about his creative enterprise suggest, he is really only concerned with a figure he calls the artist, and this figure is unique because his activities ideally cannot be assimilated to the so-called destiny of a nation, class, gender, or race. I am not trying to claim that Nabokov's work somehow transcends the discursive contexts of nation, class, gender or race: obviously his characters are not created in a vacuum, and the field work he put into researching his novels (*Lolita* is a

case in point) reveals the extent to which he was invested in history in spite of himself. My argument rather is that Nabokov's emphasis on individual perception and creativity leads him to dwell with characteristic fascination on those moments when the individual finds himself caught up in the eventfulness of his own existence, and it is in the light of such moments that we find the individual in closest proximity to the affective potential of experience. Nabokov's apparently anti-social disposition thus provides an opportunity to explore the ways in which affect can articulate a subject's historical embeddedness in spite of the overt anti-social and anti-historical claims of the author himself. As I hope to show, Nabokov's prioritization of individual affect ultimately destabilizes the individual subject by finding the latter in a web of relations with its social others. Affect does not therefore lead us to the unreclaimable privacy of individual experience but takes us instead to the verge at which social formations are continually reinvented and renewed.

The chapter that follows is divided into two sections. The first attempts to address the problem of approaching a metaphysical writer like Nabokov through a materialist theory of affect. A great deal of criticism as well as some of the author's own expository writing suggest that we should read Nabokov not for his material interests, but rather for his transcendental ideas. I think that a great deal is to be gained by putting aside his transcendental notions and focusing instead upon his relationship to material conditions, for these are, of course, the conditions of his art, regardless of his purported investment in alternate realities. Section one therefore performs the theoretical wrangling that is necessary to make my materialist reading of Nabokov at least feasible. The second part of the chapter attempts to identify how his ideas about the passions connect up with the problem of worldly commitment and change. Towards this end I will turn to a

reading of *Bend Sinister*, because while it is in some ways the least utopian of his works (ending as it does with a triple dose of destruction, death and despair), it also one of his most political. My point will be to show how it poses, regardless of its overt claims, important questions about the mutual involvement of individual and state and therefore about the historical process more generally. In both sections it will become apparent that I am reading Nabokov against the grain, mostly of his own statements but sometimes against the grain of the prevailing critical climate. Nonetheless I have attempted to do so in keeping with the Nabokovian spirit of discovery.

1. Reading Idealism Materially

His own exhortations on the subject aside, the main reason it is difficult to see Nabokov as a writer who is engaged with the problem of sociality is that as a result of his aestheticism he often appears aloof to the mundane problems of human existence. When he does explore the involvement of human subjects with one another, sociality tends to appear as a form of controlled aggression in which the vulnerable are objectified and manipulated by someone more powerful than they, and often to humorous ends. Critics like Elena Sommers and Zoran Kuzmanovich have wrestled with how to take some of Nabokov's excesses in this department. We are dealing after all with a writer who refers to his own characters as "galley slaves" (*SO* 95), a statement which might lead one to conclude that when it comes to matters of human co-existence and mutual involvement Nabokov is something of a curmudgeon. Certainly it seems that in his positive moments, i.e., when he is most engaged, most inspired, most utopian and forward looking, Nabokov's preferred form of worldly involvement is not a form of social interaction at

all. As he explains in *Speak, Memory*, he was drawn to his entomological pursuits in part by "the acute desire to be alone, since any companion, no matter how quiet, interfered with the concentrated enjoyment of my mania" (126). Nabokov's perceptual activities stem from hours of solitary study, not from his life with others. His passions, it appears, have little to do with his relationships with other people.

This problem is compounded if we consider that the privileging of perceptual activity is related to Nabokov's metaphysical views and hence to his transcendental or otherworldy ideals, not to his worldly involvement. Vladimir E. Alexandrov, for instance, explains how canonical Nabokovian experiences such as "inspiration" and "cosmic synchronization" are related to his intuition of *potustoronnost* – "a noun derived from an adjective denoting a quality or state that pertains to the 'other side' of the boundary separating life and death" (3). Similarly, D. Barton Johnson emphasizes how Nabokov's aesthetic cosmology reflects his belief that the world of things is but a shadow of the true reality. Perception of this-world phenomena is therefore only a first step of expanding consciousness that eventually culminates in the negation of present reality. Hence, in Johnson's formulation, the transparency of worldly conditions is finally exposed: "nothing matters. The horror, the anguish, the pain are not real." (210-1)

I do not wish to contest the nature or the importance of Nabokov's metaphysics. I do however wish to observe that emphasizing his idealism, which is associated by both Johnson (2) and Alexandrov with neo-Platonism, leads rather unsatisfyingly to a dimension of experience that Nabokov himself could not articulate clearly and seems to have preferred not to anyway. Far more interesting to me is the thought that the terms surrounding Nabokov's otherwordly intuition categorize it as a feeling, a forefeeling to

be exact, and that the only thing we might therefore say with confidence about Nabokov's otherworld is that it finds its material expression as affect. As much as the nature of this affect may be implicated in otherworldly beliefs, it remains, as affect, firmly grounded in the materiality of the present, and therefore stands to reveal a great deal about Nabokov's worldly disposition. My approach to the question of experience in this section will therefore develop as follows. Rather than taking the metaphysical route that would lead us away from time and consciousness and human involvement, I am going to follow Nabokov's affect back into the world, as it were, to show how it affirms the necessity of worldly responsibility and care. In the end Nabokov's perceptual activity will be revealed not as the simple asocial activity it first appears, but rather as a mode of passionate experience which structurally depends on a commitment to an otherness which is inherently social.

I will begin with the observation that so far as his expository meditations on the subject are concerned, Nabokov's most prized affective states contain a strong anticipatory element. Or, rather, they are related to a sense of timelessness that is itself taken to anticipate a higher evolution of consciousness. For instance, in "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," he writes of an experience called inspiration:

> A passerby whistles a tune at the exact moment that you notice the reflection of a branch in a puddle which in its turn, and simultaneously, recalls a combination of deep green leaves and excited birds in some old garden, and the old friend, long dead, suddenly steps out of the past, smiling and closing his dripping umbrella. The whole thing lasts one radiant second and the motion of impressions and images is so swift that you cannot check the exact laws which attend their

> recognition, formation, and fusion...; it is like a jigsaw puzzle that instantly comes together in your brain with the brain itself unable to understand how and why the pieces fit, and you experience a shuddering sensation of wild magic, of some inner resurrection, as if a dead man were revived by a sparkling drug which has been rapidly mixed in your presence. (377-8)

Here, random perceptions provoke the memory with such force that the past looms up again as if miraculously revitalized; in the same instant the randomness of the perceptions is cancelled by the intimation of a pattern in the coincidence. Thus the observer is surprised by a sense of order that the very arbitrariness of the incidents would otherwise appear to contradict. If the consciousness so affected happens to belong to an artist, the special thrill and wonderment that result is accompanied by a germ of creativity:

> The inspiration of genius adds a third ingredient: it is the past and the present *and* the future (your book) that come together in a sudden flash; thus the entire circle of time is perceived, which is another way of saying that it ceases to exist. (378)

The perception of timelessness thus hinges on the surprise discovery of a kind of continuity behind otherwise arbitrary occurrences, a continuity that cuts through the present prompt, the memory evoked, and the future image or work that will grow out of the experience. This continuity is so exact that Nabokov describes it in terms of a "perfect fusion" (377) of discrete temporal experiences within a single moment. Past, present, and future cease to be markers of temporal distinction and become, paradoxically, related aspects of a whole experience. Thus, as he puts it in *Speak, Memory*, "the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time.... -- all forming an instantaneous and transparent organism of events" (*SM* 218).

The nature of this continuous time element needs to be considered carefully, for it seems to me that it is easy to become ensnared in the language Nabokov uses to describe his experiences. When he says that the past, the present, and the future come together, he is employing the clock-logic of temporality. The "future" represented by the creative work born in the flash of the moment might thus appear to stand outside the experience itself, as if there were a book revolving hypostatically in some fifth dimension, awaiting the clarion call that will announce the world's readiness to receive it. Indeed, in some instances Nabokov's comments suggest that this is precisely what he believes.[1] To accept this idea unconditionally, however, is to revert to the logic of linear, chronological time that the experience of timelessness logically subverts. Surely this is the trap Alexandrov falls into when he states that for Nabokov, "facts about the external world are not an end in themselves in art, and serve finally as a springboard toward the otherworldly" (32). Given statements such as this, we are likely to forget that "facts about the external world" cannot be isolated from the affect through which they appear to consciousness, and furthermore that affect does not propel individuals into other worlds but rather involves them in this one. Alexandrov's way of reading Nabokov's metaphysical intuitions confuses the intimation for the thing it intimates, substituting a representation or a concept for what is essentially an affect. Timelessness logically cannot follow time, as if it were some ontological second stage behind or after this reality, as if it existed independently of the familiar world. To follow is to be in some

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[1] Arguing on behalf of Nabokov's neo-Platonism, Alexandrov cites *Strong Opinions*: "I am afraid to get mixed up with Plato, whom I do not care for, but I do think that in my case it is true that the entire book, before it is written, seems to be ready ideally in some other, now transparent, now dimming, dimension, and my job is to take down as much of it as I can make out and as precisely as I am humanly able to do" (*SO* 69; Alexandrov 29).

way incomplete, and timelessness, as Nabokov was fond of saying, is perfect, a complete circle, an organic whole.

I am well aware that there is plenty of evidence in Nabokov's own work that supports what I am here trying to question: namely, the idea that Nabokov's cosmology is dualistic, or that he posits the existence of a transcendental realm above or after or outside this one. His strategy of shutting down his novels and dismissing his characters as fictions is just one indication of his desire to police an imagined (and rather too neat) boundary between life and art, this world and the other. But I do not wish to suggest that reading Nabokov in terms of his transcendental metaphysics is fallacious. I only wish to point out that there are limitations to doing so, that a materialist reading of these same tendencies will discover important insights about his attitude to this world, regardless of his ideas about the other one. Besides, there is plenty of evidence that supports reading Nabokov from a materialist point of view. One important consideration in this regard is Nabokov's frequent insistence that the future does not exist. The future is only a retroactive attribution applied to successive events in the past. "If, then, the future can be said to exist, it is only a continuity hypostatized on the basis of 'our experience of succession, on our faith in logic and habit, and it consists not of 'future events' which do not exist, but of possibilities compounded instantaneously" (Boyd *Ada* 55). The potential that the future represents should not therefore be confused with its actualization: nor should the book that grows out of the experience be confused with the experience itself, or the otherworld beyond this one with the intimation that it exists. In other words, the continuous time element in Nabokov's inspiration should not be confused with something other than, outside of, or distinct from the Now of the experience itself. Nabokov is only

after all talking about the present, "one radiant second" which the limited functioning of consciousness is unable to assimilate or organize. The only "outside" with respect to that wholeness is blind and blinkered consciousness itself – and this is not a true outside, only a limitation imposed on insight from within.

Nabokov seems to be describing an experience of time which defies the historico-philosophical division of temporality into past, present, and future. In this respect his epiphanic experience resembles the earliest and most extreme form of utopian mentality identified by Karl Mannheim: the orgiastic ecstasy of the Chiliasts. According to Mannheim,

> The Chiliast expects a union with the immediate present. Hence he is not preoccupied in his daily life with optimistic hopes for the future or romantic reminiscences. His attitude is characterized by a tense expectation. He is always on his toes awaiting the propitious moment and thus there is no inner articulation of time for him. He is not actually concerned with the millennium that is to come: what is important for him is that it happened here and now, and that it arose from mundane existence, as a sudden swing over into another kind of existence. (217)

Associating Nabokov with the Chiliasts involves considerable irony, for as Mannheim points out, this movement originated with the earliest stirrings of political consciousness among the peasantry and emerges in its modern form in the anarchism of Bakunin. Nonetheless the connection appropriately captures the sense in which Nabokov's experience of the present is simultaneously both ahistorical and grounded in the immediacy of his life-world. It is ahistorical insofar as it bears no relation to the goals of an imagined future as we might find them articulated in utopian formulas of a different

type. Yet it is grounded in his life-world insofar as he seeks it in and through the material being of his mundane existence. This is as close to an affective utopia as we are likely to get.

The Chiliastic ideal thus makes it possible to see that the bliss, ecstasy, mania, and fervour that characterize Nabokov's experience of the present are modes of immanence, not of transcendence. In chapter one of *Speak, Memory*, for instance, he attributes his first awareness of time to the discovery of his age in relation to his parents:

> I was given a tremendously invigorating shock. As if subjected to a second baptism, on more divine lines than the Greek Catholic ducking undergone fifty months earlier by a howling, half-drowned half-Victor,...I felt myself plunged into a radiant and mobile medium that was none other than the pure element of time. One shared it – just as excited bathers share shining seawater – with creatures that were not oneself but that were joined to one by time's common flow, an environment quite different from the spatial world, which not only man but apes and butterflies can perceive. (21-2)

As Leona Toker explains, what is relinquished here is the self, not the world: "The experience of pure time, genuine duration, is achievable in these magical moments when self-interested pragmatic activity is abandoned" (135). The awareness of pure time thus involves the fact that "one shared it" with others, so that by means of an awareness of others one is able to assign a burgeoning consciousness to oneself. Thus, reflecting on the episode from his "present ridge of remote, isolated, almost uninhabited time, [Nabokov] see[s] [his] diminutive self as celebrating, on that August day in 1907, the birth of sentient life" (*SM* 22). The shock of discovery entailed in the awareness of pure

time marks his awakening to his own state of being in the world, which is that he is subject to growth and change and embedded in a shifting network of relations with others. This is not an experience of transcendence by any means.

If Nabokov's ideas about time are not enough to make the case for reading his idealism materially, then perhaps something may be said about his reluctance to represent the transcendental otherworld that he was so fond of musing about. As Alexandrov himself admits, Nabokov's other world is rarely available in other than evasive and circumlocutory terms (4). For example, he cites as "one of the most candid avowals of [Nabokov's] belief in the otherworld" a paragraph in which Nabokov has playfully inserted an important ellipsis:

> That human life is but a first installment of the serial soul and that one's individual secret is not lost in the process of earthly dissolution, becomes a matter of religious faith, when we remember that only commonsense rules immortality out. A creative writer, creative in the particular sense I am attempting to convey, cannot help feeling that in his rejecting the world of the matter-of-fact, in his taking sides with the irrational, the illogical, the inexplicable, and the fundamentally good, he is performing something similar in a rudimentary way to what [*two pages missing*] under the cloudy skies of gray Venus. (cited 56-7; see also "L&C" 377, *sic*).

Alexandrov proves his point about Nabokov's metaphysical ideals here by filling in the gap from an earlier version of the lecture: "[the true artist] is performing something similar in a rudimentary way *to what* [sic] *the spirit may be expected to perform, when the time comes, on a vaster and more satisfactory scale*" (cited 57, italics and square

brackets in original). Clearly, however, in making his revisions for the 1951 version of the essay Nabokov felt that the elision expressed his point about the other world more accurately: that it is finally ineffable, and that whatever the artist feels himself to be doing is only an inkling based on an intimation, however strong it may feel. There is ultimately remarkably little to be said about this utopian plane other than that it holds the promise of immortality, of perfection, of "reality" itself – a thing inferred from negatives, from shadows, from glimpses of buckles and folds in a fabric. When the vagaries of language make a negative of paradise, all we are really left with is the confidence that some such wholeness nonetheless exists: a feeling, in other words, of affirmation and hope. This is the feeling of which utopia consists, and feeling, insofar as it registers an affect, is grounded in the world. As Nabokov himself puts it, "Tentacles, not wings, are Apollo's natural members" (*SM* 218).

2. *Bend Sinister* and the Anatomy of Passion

> A madman is reluctant to look at himself in a mirror because the face he sees is not his own: his personality is beheaded; that of the artist is increased. (Nabokov "Art of Literature and Commonsense" 377)

When we accept the hypothesis that Nabokov's otherworld should be read in terms of its immanent expression rather than of its transcendent status, or rather that in the face of its immanent manifestation the transcendent in itself is (literally) immaterial, we can observe that the continuous time element in Nabokov's experience of "cosmic synchronization" or of "inspiration" is nothing other than the awareness that things are always in process, always becoming other than they appear to be. The future, then, should be seen not as an event that has yet to arrive but a condition of eventfulness itself,

the potential that inhabits an event in the form of its own self-difference. In the same way, the past is not an event that has passed: it is the mind operating on that same condition of potential so as to draw an associative link between what I have called the present prompt and the resurrected memory. The whistled tune and the reflected branch in the example cited above could not become the long dead friend if not for this potential; and likewise the long dead friend could not be resurrected in this garden if not for his own potential to be other than he is or was. (Note, too, that Nabokov's account gives ontological status to prompt and association alike: there is no question of one being more or less real than the other. All belong to the same field of potential.) The awareness that coheres in these moments is represented as a series of relations among disparate elements because this is the only way to articulate the awareness of potential that the moment engenders. Indeed the fact that the terms of the reference inevitably revert to the logic of temporality (the former friend, the present garden, the book to come) reveals how little they have to do with the continuous element in the experience itself, for as temporal elements they appear distinct from each other. What is continuous in the experience is not any of these things which are only inadequate ways of registering its effects. The real shock that cuts through past, present and future is quite simply the shock of discovering potentiality itself, and this is not something that can be represented using the differentiating system of language which belongs to time.

But the problem is more complicated still. Sustained, the shock of discovery becomes passion, and passion reveals the extent to which the subject and its worldly conditions are mutually involved. Nabokov likes the words bliss, mania, dementia, and fever because he wants to emphasize that conditions of possibility are interesting only

insofar as they concern individual consciousness – only, that is, insofar as they matter *to someone*. The continuous element in the experience is therefore not potential itself alone, but potential with a strong measure of personal salience. The sound of a stranger whistling or the reflection of a branch in a puddle is not going to significantly affect the observer unless the observer has something invested in those experiences. What could the fact that things are other than they appear have to do with me, with my own potential as a human being? Nabokov's explanation of inspiration suggests that for him at least these random experiences share a similar emotional valence as his fondness for his old friend and his enthusiasm for his creative work. Worldly potential is thus implicitly related to his personal well being: the glimpse of a reflection is no incidental phenomenon but bears directly on his capacities as an individual. In this way we can see that the individual in passion is involved in the becoming of the world.

But passion, the root of which means "to suffer," is two-faced. I have just observed that the subject's passionate relation to conditions of possibility is in some way proprietary: the fascination with the potential inherent in worldly phenomena is supported by an underlying sense that such conditions refer to personal interest. The impact of this awareness on the subject, however, is complex and shifting, and for good reason. The fact that things can and will be other than they now appear, that potential pursues difference while caring nothing for life or death, is a matter of considerable existential import from a mortal point of view. On the one hand this fact can be taken to stand for the tragic instability at the heart of things, the presence of death, the inevitability of decay: passion as a way of dying. The subject who thus reads in the world's potential only his own death will generally find the emotional valence of affect to

be negative, and as a result will forever be measuring his vulnerability to weakness against the inexorable onslaught of time and chance. Readers of Nabokov will recognize the presence of this kind of attitude in his writing; it is behind the persona whom Michael Wood has called the mandarin, the Nabokov who is arrogant and condescending and dismissive, the author of a highly crafted image of emotional and intellectual invulnerability. On the other hand, however, conditions of possibility can be taken to promise a bounty of hope and amelioration, and readers of Nabokov will be equally familiar with the writer whose passionate love of sensuous existence powerfully conveys his conviction that life is full of promise. The difference in these attitudes may be attributed to the fact that passion must be interpreted in hindsight, from the point of view of a subject that is in fact obviated in the moment of passion itself. The subject in passion is in the midst, as it were – of birth and death, of self and other, of past and future – and it is difficult to determine the concrete nature of this condition. The subject out of passion, however – as if such a thing were possible – would like to imagine it has gained the perspective of a static position from which to evaluate the experience for better or worse. If worse, potential is construed negatively because its relation to the subject is inevitably destructive. This subject is understood as being closed, complete, finished, and whatever happens to it threatens it with the reminder that all things pass. If better, however, the discovery of potential marks a positive contribution to a subject that is understood as being in process and unfinished. The shifting attitudes towards conditions of possibility therefore represent different aspects of the same passionate engagement viewed from the perspective of an interpretation that has resolved the value of the experience one way or another. It goes without saying that the negative interpretation is

the more "self-interested" or reactionary, for its standard of value is a self whose potential would appear to have passed, a self with only disappointment and decline to look forward to.

As for Nabokov's more positive attitudes, those who read him through his metaphysics may be inclined ascribe them to his belief that the soul continues after death. The ego that is not bound to mortal conditions will of course have nothing to lose when fate deals its final trump card. To leave the assessment at that, however, is to overlook the significance of Nabokov's worldly commitments. It is one thing to take solace in thoughts of the immortality of the soul. But it is quite another to take strength in the thought that the world does not begin and end with the individual, that one's social embeddedness is not a negative sign of individual contingency but a positive condition of surprise and discovery. The self that is revealed in Nabokov's most positive moments is one whose measure of personal salience reaches beyond the limited confines of strictly individual interest to embrace a principle of otherness. For this reason the self who is dissolved in passion, who is becoming-other (which is also to say being effaced), tends to be valued positively in Nabokov's world. Passion is a factor supporting a more general optimism.

Consider the critique of Ekwilism in *Bend Sinister*. Appropriated by the engineers of Padukgrad as the ideology behind the Party of Average Man, Ekwilism holds that inequality is the root of all sorrow and subsequently "introduce[s] balance as a basis for universal bliss" (75). It so happens that the crackpot author of this theory never managed to explain how his ideal of human uniformity was to be achieved. But its measure was to be consciousness itself, the global amount of which he held to be

computable and which therefore needed only be distributed evenly to achieve the desired end. For Nabokov, Ekwilism represents a number of preposterous violations of sense: one, that human consciousness is computable and can be measured; two, that the individual is a human vessel "containing" a finite amount of the stuff; three, that sameness should be prized over difference, uniformity over variation. These violations may be summed up by the fact that the theory fails to account in any way for human passion. For example, Ekwilism finds its farcical narrative corollary in a newspaper comic about Mr. and Mrs. Etermon (Everyman), a perfectly average couple whose vulgar materialism and utterly uninspired enjoyment of banal things provides the second major ideological influence on the Party of Average Man. As the narrator points out, the cartoon (and indeed the very premise of Ekwilism itself) is fatally limited:

> Actually, with a little perspicacity, one might learn many curious things about Etermons, things that made them so different from one another that Etermon, except as a cartoonist's transient character, could not be said to exist. All of a sudden transfigured, his eyes narrowly glowing, Mr. Etermon (whom we have just seen mildly pottering about the house) locks himself up in the bathroom with his prize – a prize we prefer not to name; another Etermon, straight from his shabby office, slips into the silence of a great library to gloat over certain old maps of which he will not speak at home; a third Etermon with a fourth Etermon's wife anxiously discusses the future of a child she has managed to bear him in secret during the time her husband (now back in his armchair at home) was fighting in a remote jungle land where, in his turn, he has seen moths the size of a spread fan, and trees at night pulsating rhythmically with countless fireflies. No, the average

> vessels are not as simple as they appear: it is a conjuror's set and nobody, not even the enchanter himself, really knows what and how much they hold. (79)

This passage indicates not only that the political ideology of Padukgrad is founded on a shallow perception of individual human complexity, but that human complexity, for Nabokov at least, is indissociable from those fits of passionate engagement which the writer himself might associate with butterfly hunting but which here assume different forms depending on the individual concerned. Respecting these passions two important observations stand to be made. One is that they bear the mark of an otherness which is not fully reclaimable from the point of view of a shared language. Only the individual knows the nature of his prize, the content of those maps, the anticipation of that child, the amazement of those visions; passion appears to be the result of an utterly singular relationship between the individual and his world. The second is that this singularity does not reify the concept of individual experience, but, quite the contrary, calls its bluff. Ekwilist theory views individuals as vessels, each holding its own bit of consciousness which can be measured and, if need be, topped up or depleted to achieve uniform levels. Passion, however, is an event marking the disappearance of the individual as such. The locked bathroom, the remote carrel, the furtive appointment and the foreign land all represent sites of disappearance. This is Nabokov's way of figuring not only the subject's invisibility from the point of view of language but its elision in the event of passion. This is because in passion the individual cannot be said to exist except as a process: the individual in passion is becoming.

That Nabokov should celebrate passion as a counter to the universalizing logic of Ekwilism indicates his openness to an ideal of otherness and difference and his positive

orientation to the incompleteness of the subject. To put it more simply, he feels good about the event of self-erasure which is from another point of view a kind of death. The effacement of self in passion is thus experienced in terms of expansion rather than of diminution or loss.[2] What enables this point of view is his belief in the value of relationship. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov explains how his love for his family serves as a balance that secures his place in a universe compromised by uncertainty and death: "I have to have all space and all time participate in my emotion, in my mortal love, so that the edge of its mortality is taken off, thus helping me to fight the utter degradation, ridicule, and horror of having developed an infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence" (297). Love is the only thing that redeems consciousness from its individual limitations, and this is as true when he is engaged in solitary perceptual pursuits as when he is immediately involved in the world of his wife and son. Indeed, in the passage following the one above he goes on to parallel the discoveries made by new parents with the birth of the mind of their child. The point is not simply that the parents discover wonder in the newborn child's mind, but that their wonder is itself a kind of birth. After outlining some of the mysteries of his infant son, he concludes: "It occurs to me that the closet reproduction of the mind's birth obtainable is the stab of wonder that accompanies the precise moment when, gazing at a tangle of twigs and leaves, one suddenly realizes that what had seemed a natural component of that tangle is a marvelously disguised insect or bird" (298). Love is the condition in which other

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[2] The idea of beheading, a familiar trope in Nabokov's work, provides two perspectives on his obsession with becoming. From the point of view of the formed self – the point of view of politics, history, and reason – beheading means death, loss, the terror at the end of representation. From the point of view of the self incomplete, on the other hand, beheading refunds the loss of reason with the gain of worldly belonging. This is beheading as passion, the awe in the eye of events. These perspectives are not mutually exclusive but loop into each other in an eternally unresolved tension between megalomania and madness.

discoveries are made, even when those discoveries themselves have little apparently to do with other people. The awareness of the self as a network of valued relationships guarantees that such care should be taken to attend to other phenomena in general. Love, in other words, promotes curiosity, attention, inquiry, and hope.

It begins to be apparent that there is a connection between the ostensibly solitary pursuits of passion and the love of other people. In *Bend Sinister*, this connection is made quite explicit: philosopher Krug, world renowned for treading uncharted regions of thought, is rendered creatively impotent by the death of his wife, and much of the novel deals with his struggle to come to terms with her death and to find light in the world again. It is as if his love of otherness for its own sake is derived from his love for Olga: "he was empty, he would never write another book, he was too old to bend and rebuild the world which had crashed when she died" (157). The novel's recurrent image of Olga divesting herself of her jewels after the ball thus figures as a way of raising the question of the meaning of her death. For Krug, the image represents her mortal disintegration, and the shame he feels in this connection recalls Nabokov's comments about the humiliation of having collected "an infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence." Here is the image of Olga as she appears in Krug's dream:

> Olga was revealed sitting before her mirror and taking off her jewels after the ball. Still clad in cherry-red velvet, her strong gleaming elbows thrown back and lifted like wings, she had begun to unclasp at the back of her neck her dazzling dog collar. He knew it would come off together with her vertebrae – that in fact it was the crystal of her vertebrae – and he experienced an agonizing sense of impropriety at the thought that everybody in the room would observe and take

> down in writing her inevitable, pitiful, innocent disintegration. There was a flash, a click: with both hands she removed her beautiful head and, not looking at it, carefully, carefully, dear, smiling a dim smile of amused recollection (who could have guessed at the dance that the real jewels were pawned?), she placed the beautiful imitation upon the marble ledge of the toilet table. Then he knew that all the rest would come off too, the rings together with the fingers, the bronze slippers with the toes, the breasts with the lace that cupped them...his pity and shame reached their climax, and at the ultimate gesture of the tall cold stripteaser, prowling pumalike up and down the stage, with a horrible qualm Krug awoke. (82)

Krug's shame stems from the thought that the dignity of his love should be subjected to so commonplace a phenomenon as death, a debasement that is all the more devastating because the dream has turned this death into an examination theme for a whole roomful of schoolboys (one can only imagine the reams of hackneyed existential and religious prose to result from this exercise). But the fact that the image appears to Krug in an anxiety dream – "the recurrent dream we all know" (63) – raises the question of the appropriateness of a response which Krug, having been caught by death off-guard, is not yet prepared to make. Krug is humiliated by this vulgar display or mortal vulnerability: but is there no other way of reading, of feeling his love's death than as "her inevitable, pitiful, innocent disintegration"? Insofar as she is dead and gone there is no hope of recovering the feelings he held for her: tenderness, compatibility, desire, indeed the whole secret province of their belonging to each other dies with her. But insofar as her

disintegration is a vanishing act and a terrible tease, however, there remains the question of her ongoing presence in death. How might Olga transcend her mortal coil?[3]

The point, of course, is that Nabokov, or the dream producers, or "someone in the know" (64) is egging Krug on to deal with his grief by confronting death with all his power of insight and originality and pride. In subsequent chapters, Krug does just that: in chapter six he states that "my intelligence does not accept the transformation of physical discontinuity into the permanent continuity of a nonphysical element escaping the obvious law" (99), and in chapter twelve he cryptically explains to his son David that "even *if* she were dead she would not be dead for you or for me" (161). The former, it seems, is a rejection of conventional notions of the afterlife; the latter is a rejection of conventional notions of mortality. As he progresses with his metaphysical inquiries, however, he continues to fumble emotionally. He attempts to absolve his grief by containing the traces of her physical being: her photographs, her furs, her toiletries and other things he locks up in a box under the stairs, as if in burying her objects he might come to forget her and so do away with death by banishment. No matter how close he comes to putting his intimations of the otherworld into words (and he comes close, in "a rush of second-rate inspiration" [193] that hits him one day after Olga appears in dream), he fails to see her post-mortal lingering in any other terms than the worldly curse of his unspeakable grief. No wonder the dream ends upon a violent assertion of the body: for

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[3] Elena Rakhimova Sommers' article describes how, "merging with iridescent *potustoronnost'* (otherworld) upon her death, Olga *becomes* the otherworld, charging it with her special presence, feminizing it, and, in a real sense, "Olgaizing" it" (62). In my materialist reading of the novel, the idea that Olga attempts to contact Krug from the "otherworld" is a projection based on certain affective conditions that are associated with Krug's joy in life. In other words, Olga does not inhabit another world; she inhabits this one in the form of affect. Insofar as Krug is unable to experience these affects after her death, however, Sommers and I are in agreement: "Krug overlooks all the otherworldly intimations in the immediate world and is thus unable to realize that the 'Olgaized' beyond is right by his side, it surrounds him, it is here and now" (68).

Krug, the uncertainty of mortal dissolution is countered by the solidity of physical mass. Krug's problem is that he has difficulty recognizing that Olga transcends the physical limitations of her body as the passion he shared with her and which might continue to exist as a disembodied force in the world. His difficulty is due to the fact that he is dispassionate, and the sign of his dispassion is his delusion that he is too much an individual, that he is autonomous and therefore invulnerable. He has become unable to open himself to otherness, to place his loss in the context of a larger concern, and for the same reason he grows insensitive to the suffering of others and to the vulnerability of his son. Reiterated throughout the novel with the blunt persistence of stupidity, his conviction that "Nothing can happen to Krug the Rock" (89) is the source of his downfall. Krug loses David because from his point of view worldly potential has achieved negative affective valence: change is configured as loss. A genius of philosophy, he is in this respect too logical for his own good.

It would be unfair, of course, to blame Krug for mourning his wife. Her death results from the arbitrary incident of an automobile accident, and insofar as Krug does not choose his wife's death he is only a passive victim of circumstance. But it is difficult to say the same in the case of David. It seems to me that Krug has naïve ideas about his individual autonomy and hence is in some degree complicit, by stubbornness and near-sightedness and inaction, in the death of his son. Nor do I think that this is a very far-fetched an assessment to make. Despite the heroic lustre he acquires through his refusal to compromise with mediocrity, Krug is not a very sympathetic or even likeable character: he is a bully; he is short with his servants; oddly, for one who is so haughtily dismissive of the need for academic solidarity, he is overconfident in his indispensability

to foreign universities; he disregards the advice of his friends and is finally not above abandoning them. Indeed if he did not so resemble Nabokov's own persona in these qualities, the punishment meted out to the poor fellow by the end of the novel might be taken to suggest that his creator has marshaled cosmological forces to undermine his psychology by proving its limitations. In any case Krug, who is in so many respects a paragon of Nabokovian virtue – his pride, independence of mind, originality of insight, and conjugal and filial devotion all position him as a positive character in Nabokov's world – is limited in that he cannot (or can no longer) undergo that effacement of self that underwrites the processes of both suffering and renewal, the passionate involvement that finds potential even in death. The state that deprives him so cruelly of his son is of course responsible for producing this condition. But perhaps Krug's disposition is equally to blame.

As I see it, the problem is that he is too much self, too much Krug, and as a result he becomes detached from his own suffering which is at this time his only real connection to worldly events and processes. Nabokov dwells on his stature as if to emphasize the clumsy worldliness of this abstract man: he is "a big heavy man in his early forties, with untidy, fusty, or faintly grizzled locks and a roughly hewn face....[a] strong compact dusky forehead...pale steely eyes...in their squarish orbits under the shaggy eyebrows....ears...of goodly size....[with] two deep folds of flesh diverg[ing] from the nose along the large cheeks" (46-7). It is appropriate, then, Krug's grief is more congestion than flow, and that it divides rather than effaces the self:

> He was sorry now he had yielded to [the] temptation [of tears] for he could not stop yielding and the throbbing man in him was soaked. As usual he

> discriminated between the throbbing one and the one that looked on: looked on with concern, with sympathy, with a sigh, or with bland surprise. This was the last stronghold of the dualism he abhorred. The square root of I is I. Footnotes, forget-me-nots. The stranger quietly watching the torrents of local grief from an abstract bank. A familiar figure, albeit anonymous and aloof. He saw me crying when I was ten and led me to a looking glass in an unused room...so that I might study my dissolving face. He has listened to me with raised eyebrows when I said things which I had no business to say. In every mask I tried on, there were slits for his eyes. Even at the very moment I was rocked by the convulsion men value most. My savior, my witness. (6-7)

This insistent, perhaps pathological self-regard, which "saves" him from undignified displays of emotional vulnerability only to condemn him to the back benches of his own experience, is an important factor in understanding one of *Bend Sinister*'s most glaring moral problems: namely, the question of why Krug refuses to address a threat which he nonetheless sees clearly. For it cannot be said that Krug is unaware of the danger to which his son is exposed so long as he remains within reach of state forces who are seeking leverage on him.[4] When at one point the boy wanders off, the frantic Krug envisions several possible explanations for his disappearance, the most nightmarish of which proves to be disturbingly prophetic by the novel's end:

> I must not lose my head, thought Adam the Ninth – for by now there were quite a number of these serial Krugs: turning this way and that like the baffled buffeted

[4] The baboons of Padukgrad are seeking some way to gain Krug's compliance as an apologist for Ekwilism. Eventually will they find Krug's weakness in his little son David, employing what Nabokov calls "'the lever of love' – the diabolical method (applied so successfully by the Soviets) of tying a rebel to his wretched country by his own twisted heartstrings" (*Bend* vii).

> seeker in a game of blindman's buff: battering with imaginary fists a cardboard police station to pulp; running through nightmare tunnels; half-hiding together with Olga behind a tree to watch David warily tiptoe around another, his whole body ready for a little shiver of glee; searching an intricate dungeon where, somewhere, a shrieking child was being tortured by experienced hands; hugging the boots of a uniformed brute; strangling the brute amid a chaos of overturned furniture; finding a small skeleton in a dark cellar. (103)

Given the manic intensity of these visions, it is odd that Krug should fail to act on them by immediately removing David from the grasp of Paduk's thugs and morons. But after locating the boy in an alley down which he has been lured by another young fellow with a top, Krug resumes, shakily but firmly, his (by now increasingly dubious) conviction that he cannot be touched by the powers of chance. That is, he remains, or thinks he remains, uninvolved in the events unfolding around him, a notion which he will eventually come to regret. The problem, here as elsewhere, is Krug's dispassionateness. Krug thinks that he must not, indeed cannot "lose his head", even as it splinters into an infinity of Krugs and Krug-watchers who demonstrate that the head is only an illusion fostered by a stoical regard. Krug's love for his son is the basis of his involvement in the world. Yet for some reason he is unable to fully understand the nature of that involvement and to act on it accordingly.

Nabokov is saying something important about history here, even while proclaiming not to. The point of *Bend Sinister*, as he puts it in his foreword to the book, is to explore "the subtle use of...'the lever of love' – the diabolical method (applied so successfully by the Soviets) of tying a rebel to his wretched country by his own twisted

heartstrings" (vii). Insofar as Paduk manages to locate Krug's "handle" in his young son David, the book serves as a powerful example of the horrible lengths to which the state can go in order to achieve its ends. But there is another point to be gleaned from Nabokov's approach. The state that needs to manipulate the heartstrings of its citizens is also dependent on those heartstrings, and this suggests that the real locus of power in any state is in the affective capacity of its individuals. State control thus rests on individual vulnerability: there is no leverage without the potential to cause suffering. But individual vulnerability is a result of attachments which are beyond the ability of the state to generate. These attachments are experienced most directly in the form of the passions which Ekwilism so gravely misunderstands. The passions, indeed, are what "make" history: not political parties or manifestoes but the capacity of individuals to experience becoming which is neither impersonal nor for that matter strictly personal, an experience in which the self is effaced only to be reborn in the potentiating juncture of its affective relations with otherness. Krug's peculiar blindness is that he never really makes the connection between his own personal loss and the world's potential to change; this is why he underestimates both the power of the state and the strength of his own autonomy. He fails to see until it is too late that he is already bound by his heartstrings, that these, indeed, are the condition of his involvement and belonging. The novel's political argument is that any state that discourages, disables, or otherwise compromises its citizen's freedom to love ultimately compromises its own power. But on another level, the novel is a reminder that passion is a necessary counter to the politicization of everyday life, and that passion is not a property of the state.

In the last few pages of *Bend Sinister*, Krug's dispassionateness emerges as the perfect symptom of an anti-world that is now complete, a world in which finally nothing can be said to matter. At one time a rebel of sorts, Krug is released into madness and then further blessed by a bullet to the head while reliving an old after-school assault on Paduk. But there is no need for a rebel where there is no history anyway. The farce that is enacted in the form of the Ekwilist state has no more historical impact than an overextended schoolyard drama, and Krug's regression to his boyhood self in the last scene suggests how little things appear to have changed. But this is precisely the point. Nothing changes in a social state in which individual affects have no value apart from their political leverage. The heartstrings that attach individuals to the world are the basis of hope itself, and a political regime which can guarantee only suffering will quickly exhaust its possibilities by suffocating the source of its power. It is important in this respect that Krug's madness at the end of the novel save him from his suffering self only to secure his complete indifference to others: "You silly people," he explains to the friends and colleagues who have assembled to beg for their lives, "what on earth are you afraid of? What does it all matter?" (236). Deprived of the logical self that grows paralyzed with loss, Krug is freed from his suffering; but denied the anchor of love that assures his interest in others, Krug is freed from responsibility as well – the same responsibility that might make of him a rebel (or a martyr) for the Ekwilist (or any) cause. Lacking in sensitivity, compassion, and interest, Krug, by the end of the novel, is not much of anything at all. Certainly in the last scene he is no better, except perhaps in terms of physical strength, than the Ekwilist thugs who have had a hand in creating him.

We are left, perhaps bitterly, perhaps not, with the aftertaste of a dream. The novel turns to paper in our hands. Nabokov tells us to rest assured with the thought that Krug's tormentors are "only absurd mirages, illusions oppressive to Krug during his brief spell of being, but harmlessly fading away when [Nabokov] dismiss[es] the cast" (*BS* vii), and of course the same must hold for Krug himself. But I, for one, have never been satisfied with Nabokov's injunctions to aestheticize his characters, especially considering the affective investments that have so clearly been put into creating (and understanding) them; and I do not think I am alone. It is easy to be outraged or in the very least annoyed at having to suffer with Krug through the brutal torture and murder of his son only to be told that none of it is real, that we are dealing with the harmless whims of the artist's fancy. To aestheticize Nabokov's characters in this way is an insult to the sensitivity of his readers and to the power of his art as well. But there is something to be said for the deliberateness of this provocation. To be frustrated with Nabokov's arrogant dismissals is to be confronted with the fact that we are already invested in his characters and that we have already established a relation to them that is at least material if it is not "real." I think it is right to read Nabokov's injunctions to aestheticize in this way. The claim that nothing matters because it is only art is not itself accurate, not in what it says. What is accurate is how it is capable of engendering a reaction that inevitably pulls the reader into the field of his or her own attachments. This is *Bend Sinister*'s accomplishment: it situates the reader in the world of what is happening at the same time that it says this need not necessarily be so. Does it matter that there is unnecessary suffering in the world, or that this silly schoolyard war been has carried on for so long? Of course it does not. And yet we are here, and matter it does.

Conclusion: The Human Side of Affect

I have suggested that utopia in the mid-twentieth century undergoes a kind of embarrassment with respect to its content. It is one thing to dream of a future state of society but quite another to explain what the future social state will look like. This embarrassment is evident in political discourse which feels that the subject of utopia must be avoided in favour of more immediate and practical concerns. Likewise, as Levitas points out, it is detected in the attachment of new meanings to a word which has widely come to signify foolishness or naivety, as if utopia were coterminous not merely with fantasy but with daft puerility as well. Utopian thought can survive this bad reputation if we accept that it does not require a clearly defined content in order to subsist. Indeed, a little diffidence regarding the actual shape of a hoped-for condition might even be a good thing, for the mind thus freed of the need to be certain can range over the fields of the possible at will. Of course the difficulty with this scenario is that it implies the unlikely condition of anticipation thriving without its objects, as if one could hope for something without hoping for anything. Yet this is precisely the phenomenon I am trying to describe. Utopia without content is like anticipation without an object. How can hope exist without a clear goal in view?

My own hope is that it has become clear how the mid-century American novels included in this study answer this question. If we could ask the authors directly about what kind of future they envision for their society it is doubtful that they would have no inkling of what they might like to see happen. Nonetheless it would be appropriate if they avoided the question or made only cryptic statements about opportunity, togetherness, potential, and the like. Such evasiveness is in keeping with the quality of

social hope expressed in their works. Yet the apparent lack of clearly defined utopian content should not to be taken to mean the end of utopia or the failure to think positively about the future. The form and the structure of these writers' utopia can and does remain to a significant degree inchoate because their relationship to it is expressed primarily in terms of potential.

The idea that the present relation to the future makes the prediction of utopian content impossible is by no means new to utopian theory. Marx rejected utopia on the same basis: utopian consciousness is necessarily limited by its own historical conditions and cannot therefore predict with any certainty what only dialectical historical process will reveal. Utopian thinking for orthodox Marxism is therefore a form of false consciousness that imposes idealism in the place of a properly materialist understanding of history (Levitas 52). My own take on these themes is that utopian consciousness is necessarily created by its own historical conditions and therefore finds its very potential in the capacity of those conditions to be other than they presently are. In this sense there may be no "true consciousness" but only an ongoing process of relinquishing the old forms of consciousness by discovering new modes of thinking and being within the material structures of the present. The guarantee that this process of discovery is ongoing (even to the point of being interminable) is that these material structures are reified and reproduced in affect, and affect is always in process and unstable. And of course we also find in affect the guarantee that these discoveries have social significance. Even while it addresses the subject on the apparently most personal level of the feelings and emotions, affect is in fact an expression of being in the world and of being involved with others. This concept is recalled in the formula that states, "my affect is mine, but it is not me."

Through it we are led to understand how the impersonality of affect contains the potential of the self to be other than it was and is, and how this same potential returns to galvanize the social field. Thus, affect may be identified as the material condition of utopia itself, with or without the attendant image of a future or ideal world.

In speaking of utopia I have therefore left aside the question of whether there is such a thing as a utopian genre (though put to the question I would say that all literary expression is utopian insofar as it voices an interest in the importance of change and possibility in human experience). So far as I have been concerned the important question is not to ask how utopia is represented, as in what literary topoi or techniques constitute or fail to constitute utopia, but rather to ask how utopia is manifest in human consciousness and experience – how, in other words, it arises in the first place as an object of literary concern. My initial inspiration in this regard was Ernst Bloch, whose monumental three-volume *The Principle of Hope* (written, coincidentally, in the United States during the 1950s) provides the framework for viewing utopia as a function of consciousness. Of particular interest to me was his critique of the Freudian unconscious, which, he complains, is merely a container of that which has dropped out of consciousness, the forgotten and the repressed: "The unconscious here is therefore exclusively *No-Longer-Conscious*; as such it populates solely the moonshine landscape of cerebral loss" (115). In opposition to the past-bound unconscious Bloch posits a Not-Yet-Conscious which is the "psychological birthplace of the New" (116). Bloch's refreshing insistence on this capacity for potential welling up led me to reflect on the conditions in which such potential might emerge in the generally pessimistic and gloomily existential subject represented in the mid-century American novel. If a theory

of affect could be established to accommodate both this sense of emergent potential as well as the social significance of that potential, then the relatively apolitical fiction of this period might be reclaimed on behalf of a criticism invested in social hope. The bulk of the project being complete, it now remains with the reader to evaluate my success in this endeavour. Nonetheless a few reflections may yet be made about the analysis of affect in the context of literature and literary interpretation.

One of my working assumptions has been that literary works themselves are capable of considerable affective potential. Given the undemanding inertness of the printed page, this observation would be revolutionary if it were not so obvious. We have no better example of the impersonality of affect than its abiding existence in the abstract life of words.[1] But there is another point to be drawn from this observation. Something happens to the reading subject that is analogous to some of the observations I have made about subjectivity throughout these chapters. The reading subject is relocated to an imaginary space which belongs neither to reality "out there" nor exactly to the familiar interior landscape of the mind, a virtual space Mary Jacobus has called "the scene of reading." Within this space, sensations and emotions with real psychic existence are generated in the absence of a real world to provoke them. The experience of reading thus affirms the life of language and the expression of the human contained therein. And at the same time the experience of reading affirms the virtual origin of the human in a fiction. The affective life of the readers represents the potentiality of being in the absence of necessary cause.

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[1] See Denise Riley's *Impersonal Passion* for a treatise on the impersonality of affect in ordinary language use.

The reading of literature provides a unique opportunity for observing the process by which affect is recognized as emotion and thus effectively given shape as a specifically human experience. Which means that the obverse is also true: reading provides a unique opportunity to observe the process by which "human experience" as such disappears within the field of its own potential. Still, it takes a certain perspective to arrive at this discovery. Affect must be witnessed for its potential to truly ramify. My point throughout therefore has not been to embrace affect as an end in itself – affect has no "end" as such – but to discover the means by which the potential it represents may be made available to the human discourse on utopia. There is nothing utopian in affect itself. Affect is only difference coming into being in the capacity of things to be other than they seem and are, and its only value is quantitative, one of intensity. To value it is therefore to appropriate its potential on behalf of some human interest. In the mid-century novels represented here, this interest may be identified with a liberal conception of utopia which turns to experience in search of new opportunities for the invention and improvisation of the self and its social contexts. Thus, the potential of affect becomes utopian only when it is viewed in the light of some desire.

I prefer to call this desiring perspective which looks towards affect as towards an end by the name of the human. I like this name because like a natty old coat it recalls us to a sense of what we have been and where we have come from. And in putting it on, we suddenly see how shabby we are, how moth-eaten and out of style. This human perspective has not been absent from the novels represented in this study, and I doubt it could be absent from any novel. In Carson McCullers, I would identify it with the ear turned towards the piano in anticipation of the end of the scale. In James Baldwin, it is

found in the agency of John Grimes. It goes by the name of skepticism in the chapter on William Styron, and in Nabokov it is the remote eye that regards the divisions and devotions of the self. In all of these cases the salient point to observe is that the perspective thus gained on affect is itself always in movement, itself always swept up in a process of becoming that submits to affect even while it seems to withdraw. The human as such is always disappearing even as it becomes. This is how the human remains open in its capacity for redefinition and renewal.

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