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**TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF DIRTY REALISM**

by

**TAMAS DOBOZY**

B.A./B.F.A., the University of Victoria, 1991

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## ABSTRACT

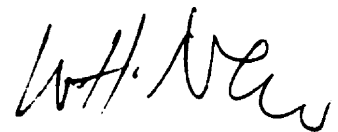
This thesis develops and refines a term used initially by Bill Buford to refer to works of contemporary realism. Dirty realism characterises a strain of realism first appearing in American and Canadian writing during the 1960s and increasing in prominence through the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. The study focuses on the scholarship surrounding both the term and the works of particular authors, and applies the theories of Fredric Jameson and Michel de Certeau to develop a basic critical vocabulary for engaging the fiction and poetry of Charles Bukowski, Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, and Mark Anthony Jarman, as well as other writers treated with less intensity, such as David Adams Richards, Helen Potrebenko, Al Purdy, and Bobbie Anne Mason. In particular, the dissertation attempts to develop a critical terminology through which to discuss dirty realist texts. The most prominent of such terms, the “hypocrisy aesthetic,” refers to dirty realism’s aesthetic of contradiction, discursive variance, and offsetting of theory against practice. The chapters of the dissertation deal with the emergence of the hypocrisy aesthetic through a study of literary genealogy, history, and theory.

The second chapter, “Dirty Realism: Genealogy,” traces the development of major currents in twentieth-century American realism, particularly naturalism. Arguing for dirty realism as a variant of naturalism, the chapter traces the transmission of ideas concerning dialectics, determinism, and commodity production from Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris, through James T. Farrell and John Steinbeck and ending with an extensive discussion of Charles Bukowski’s *Factotum*.

The third chapter, “Dirty Realism: History,” addresses the impact of the Cold War on the development of dirty realism. Referring to major critics on the period, this section of the dissertation follows the development of hypocrisy as a form of discourse eventuated by Cold War contradictions, particularly between that of democratic freedoms proclaimed abroad and the atmosphere of suspicion and paranoia on the domestic scene (as—in the USA—in the HUAC hearings chaired by Senator Joseph McCarthy).

The fourth chapter, "Dirty Realism: Theory," relies primarily on Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* and Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* to develop a model of dirty realism's operative tactics in the context of postmodern society. While Jameson envisions postmodernity as an inescapable cultural field absorbing all forms of alternative resistance, de Certeau envisions a way of operating within such a condition by appropriating elements and forms from the dominant system itself. With reference to Carver, Bukowski, Ford, and Jarman, this chapter investigates the isolation that results from the hypocrisy aesthetic, and examines the attempts these authors make either to guarantee themselves positions of liberty at the expense of communal co-operation or projects, or to critique such a position as a hindrance to finding solutions to the social atomisation that results from the Cold War and the "postmodern condition."

"Towards a Definition of Dirty Realism" attempts to situate dirty realism within a literary, historical, and cultural matrix, and to trace the development of its aesthetic from the intersection of such forces. It advances a theory of realism as contingent, provisional, mutating, and adapting to circumstance.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "W.H. New". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

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## One

### Dirty Realism: Introduction

#### I. Critical/Literary Backdrop

In 1983, critic and editor Bill Buford, drawing on a body of post-1960 American realists, devoted *Granta* eight to an emerged literary movement he dubbed “Dirty Realism.” In 1973, ten years before Buford’s term, Roland Barthes made a startling, and prophetic, observation on reading in *The Pleasure of the Text*, which would help elucidate the tactics of dirty realism. Dirty realism applies Barthes’s observations on “the reader of the text at the moment he takes his pleasure” (3), to the writer at the moment his or her pleasure requires. The dirty realist aesthetic of open hypocrisy<sup>1</sup> puts into practice what Barthes extrapolated from the position of the reader: “Imagine someone . . . who abolishes within himself all barriers, all classes, all exclusions, not by syncretism but by simple discard of that old specter: *logical contradiction*” (3). Like the “reader,” Dirty realism braves contradiction, flaunting and celebrating its disdain for consistency, logic, accountability; rather than “syncretism,” the dirty realists juxtapose various manifestations of the discrete (a juxtaposition characteristic of their historical moment and therefore a synthesis, *enacted on the textual level*, of the contrary modes and impulses of their age). Dirty realism is not only conscious of contradiction within its texts, but purposefully enacts it, marshalling volatile and subversive power by instating rules it refuses to live up to, by conscripting to its own ends incongruities latent in contemporary North American society, and by sustaining a careful equipoise available only through the passivity of the author.

Buford developed his term to describe a group of selected authors—Richard Ford, Jayne Anne Phillips, Raymond Carver, Elizabeth Tallent, Tobias Wolff and Bobbie Anne Mason—who, he felt, shared an aesthetic. Later, in *Granta* nineteen (1986), entitled “More Dirt,” Buford augmented his canon with Ellen Gilchrist and Louise Erdrich. Critics’ enthusiastic adoption of Buford’s term, if not his defining criteria, has left “dirty realism” as fraught with contradictions and variance as specific texts. Critical reception has broadened the inclusion of authors, genres and ethnicities in the dirty realist canon. Robert R. Wilson, in “Diane Schoemperlen’s Fiction:

The Clean, Well-Lit Worlds of Dirty Realism" (1990), brings Buford's term to bear on a Governor General's Award-winning Canadian novelist and short-story writer. Frank Shelton, Michael Mewshaw and Paul Quinn have referred to "dirty realism" when speaking of the work of Richard Ford, Raymond Carver, and Tobias Wolff. More recently, David W. Foster applied the term in his essay, "The Dirty Realism of Enrique Medina" (1997), published in the *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies*. In an article in *Backlogue* (1992), Leon Van Schaik speaks of dirty realism as an aesthetic and political movement in architecture, while Barbara J. Bloemink in "Realism Bites: Realism in Contemporary Art"—an article published alongside the exhibition of the same name at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (May 4 - June 23 1996)—discusses dirty realism in relation to visual art.<sup>2</sup> Buford's term has exceeded its original application, and now applies equally to non-American and non-white authors (Louise Erdrich, included in *Granta* nineteen, is a Native American), as well as to work in genres other than the short story. The aforementioned references, of course, regard only the formal, scholarly application of the term; but cross-pollination has occurred, nationally and internationally, among writers of realism affiliated critically or aesthetically with dirty realism. In a *Paris Review* interview, Richard Ford credits fellow realists "Ray Carver, Joy Williams, Mary Robison, Anne Beattie" (51) with directing his own writing away from an experimental, metafictional mode towards realism. In *Starting from Ameliasburgh: The Collected Prose of Al Purdy* (1995), Al Purdy (whose extensive correspondence with Charles Bukowski in the 1960s remains available in *The Bukowski/Purdy Letters*, 1983) announces his indebtedness to American writers such as Bukowski: "And like most of our best imports the strengthening quality of the mystique comes from the U.S." (347). Although this sentence refers to the influence of Beat and Black Mountain poetry on Canadian poets, it does testify to Purdy's wide reading in American literature and his openness—expressed in the phrase "best imports"—to borrowing from American culture. The openness to authors such as Bukowski does not suggest that American aesthetics serve as the "norm" from which Purdy writes—he does recognise distinctions between a writing of Canada and a writing of America—but rather that the Canada/U.S. border served to filter aspects of

dirty realism and that the term involves voices outside that of the white, male, American mainstream.

Application of the term dirty realism to various artistic fields, as well as to Hispanic, Canadian, women's, working-, and middle-class experience, makes it impossible to process the term as a school of writing or as a singular movement governed by unified representational concerns. In fact, the very lack of coherence among the sampled writers proves the one unifying characteristic: disparity is dirty realism's norm. As a field of writing, dirty realism seems less a uniform mass than an aggregate of specific, localised, personal narratives contingent upon the particulars of the experience they describe—almost a grouping of autonomous literary acts, where disparity supplies their defining characteristic. Viewed *en masse*, dirty realism fragments the totalizing view with constant exceptions; viewed in examples, a larger picture of tactical<sup>3</sup> responses to social, political and historical predicaments emerges.<sup>4</sup>

The advertisement for *Granta* nineteen promises a group of writers with an “unillusioned” view of urban and rural American life—a view uncluttered, both in style and content, by either what Raymond Carver, in *Fires* (1983), calls the “tricks” (14) of 1960s experimental writing, or what Buford terms “the large historical statement” (4) of previous realists and naturalists such as Saul Bellow or Theodore Dreiser. The term “unillusioned” also applies to the unmethodical, non-ideological<sup>5</sup> approach (successful or not) underlying the writing. Dirty realism doesn't deny the systematic but deploys a *non-systematic system*<sup>6</sup> to evade political affiliation (at least in any standardised left- or right-wing polemical form); for example, Neeli Cherkovski, in *Whitman's Wild Children* (1988), quotes Charles Bukowski as praising Pablo Neruda, with one *caveat*: “The problem is when he becomes political. That is his weakness” (13). Dirty realists distrust consistent epistemological frameworks—such as Neruda's rigorous, unified political platform—viewing them as flawed, a “weakness” in authorial vision.

Buford clarifies dirty realism's conceptual operative as

of a different scope—devoted to the local details, the nuances, the little disturbances in language and gesture—and it is entirely appropriate that its primary form is the short story and

that it is so conspicuously part of the American short story revival. (4)

Dirty realism fastens onto the “local,” the “nuances,” the “little disturbances,” not, I will argue, because it distrusts universal or summary statements—large-scale historical or sociological panoramas—but because it exploits and synthesises dialectical oppositions (“universal” versus “specific”), locating the universal within the specific; Cynthia J. Hallet, in her essay “Minimalism and the Short Story” (1996), observes that in the stories of some of Buford’s dirty realists one sees “the whole of society reflected in slivers of individual experience” (487). The details of dirty realism attest to a synthesis of opposites, to standing contradictions reconciled insofar as the reproducible text retains their juxtaposition in simultaneity; for example, Buford’s choice of genre itself suggests how dirty realism works “conspicuously” (4) within the inconspicuous, because marginal, genre of the short story. His article invites us to observe a conflictedness in dirty realism. Nuance piled on nuance, detail upon detail, dirty realism sifts the possible “ways” of seeing without devoting itself to one conviction, displaying alternating process and configuration rather than large-scale, overarching conclusions. Dirty realism’s scope, its focus on “nuance,” represents a withdrawal from summary verdicts.

Buford presented dirty realism exclusively through the short story. While it seems appropriate to introduce a group of writers emerging from the margins through a form marginalised by the scholarly and publishing industries,<sup>7</sup> a thorough study of the postwar period makes Buford’s choice of genre unrepresentative. The music of Tom Waits, the films of John Cassavettes and the novels, plays and comic books of Richard Ford, David Mamet and Frank Miller, respectively, exemplify a movement too unfixed for any one genre; though the short story offers important examples of dirty realism, so does the novel, play, poem, and even film script or pop lyric. *Granta* eight’s relevance, however, resides in its offering of stories not as a primer to dirty realism—appetisers, as usual, to the more wholesome novels—but as its pinnacle achievement. Apart from Edgar Allan Poe, few writers in American literature so enthusiastically engaged with the possibilities inherent in the short story; those who did—especially Hemingway—influenced the development of Buford’s authors. Even the novels—

Charles Bukowski's *Post Office* (1971), for example—seem anecdotal, more like suites of linked stories than large-scale narrative entities. This smallness of “scope,” or compression, borrowed from the short story, also characterises dirty realism’s poetry, with the short lyric or narrative dominating poetic production. Buford’s emphasis on the miniature—of dirty realism embodying the marginal, minor or microcosmic in American experience—relates the movement’s unconventional attitude: its radical lack of ambition (by “lack of ambition,” I mean its refusal of, or lack of interest in employing, the “grand” forms). Carver’s stories, rarely longer than ten pages, serve as perfect examples of Buford’s “miniature.” The story, “Fat” (1976), emblematic of Carver’s early work, takes place almost entirely over the space of a meal served and consumed in a restaurant, with the majority of the action occurring between a waitress and a customer. The texts of dirty realist authors routinely exhibit an aversion to portraying figures and situations beyond that of the everyday world. Ford’s works deal with hunters, boxers and real estate agents, Jarman’s with the unemployed, bar patrons, manual labourers and minor league hockey players. Rarely in their texts do historical figures appear or even receive mention (in contrast to the appearance of J. Edgar Hoover in Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*, 1997, or Lyndon Johnson in David Foster Wallace’s “Lyndon,” 1989). Underneath its many ruses and illusions, the authors of dirty realism aspire to the near-inconsequential; this lack of ambition figures as one of the central components in its subversive aesthetic.<sup>8</sup>

Robert R. Wilson closes his essay on Diane Schoemperlen’s fiction by delimiting the field of the dirty realist aesthetic:

The conceptual kernel of dirty realism is its controlled and highly consistent use of semiotic domains. As a narrative mode it systematically precludes conflict, otherness, and the haunting strangeness that sometimes arises in uncanny, multiplex texts. Above all, dirty realism provides little space for playfulness. The discourse . . . does not permit crossed paths, intercutting paths, or undercutting of either its discourse or . . . implicit norms (irony is reserved for the narrative voice speaking about characters and events that it controls). Structural minimalism . . . results from the methodical laying down of straight and uncrossed pathfulness. (105)

Wilson alternates between calling the writing “structural minimalism,” or, citing Buford, “dirty

realism" (90), and defines it as a "controlled and highly consistent use of semiotic domains." Using "paths" as a trope for narrative trajectory and discourse, Wilson maintains that dirty realism aspires to a monologism. By "monologic" I mean Bakhtin's notion of "forces that unite and centralize verbal-ideological thought, creating within a heteroglot national language the firm, stable linguistic nucleus of an officially recognized literary language" (271). Wilson conceives of dirty realism's "space" in sober, "unplayful" terminology; yet, the question remains as to what extent Wilson's understanding of "playfulness" hinges upon viewing dirty realism polemically, against a backdrop of wildly experimental (hence "playful") 1960s metafiction.<sup>9</sup> The "conflict, otherness" and "haunting strangeness" of the "multiplex text" does indeed occur as well in dirty realism, although through an aesthetic not superficially "multiplex" but disquietingly simple and singular (what Wilson calls "straight and uncrossed pathfulness"). The difference, I would argue, between the plural texts of metafiction and the singular texts of dirty realism remains superficial rather than intrinsic, and Wilson's differentiation focuses on formal elements to the detriment of historical and conceptual concerns shared by dirty realism and metafiction. Bakhtin's notion of language offers us an insight into the way even the most simplistic, apparently consistent mode of language usage can serve "multiplex" ends.

According to Bakhtin, language vacillates between monologism and what he calls heteroglossia, or "language plurality" (271), the unofficial dialects and linguistic hybrids that surround, embed or interpenetrate with official discourse; heteroglossia implies a "centrifugal" (272) force resisting permanent syntactical and grammatical fixity. Bakhtin suggests that socio-ideological discourse—whether Queen's English or Ebonics—constitutes a field of "battle" between forces striving to codify and regulate language—offering instances of correct and incorrect usage—and forces striving to disintegrate and mutate linguistic patterns:

Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward. (272)

Bakhtin's adjective, "uninterrupted," provides a key word for this study. "Uninterrupted" posits a notion of language as *constantly* "embattled," as simultaneously "centralizing" and

“decentralizing” itself, never entirely coalescing or fragmenting. For example, the word “bad” takes one regulated usage in the language of the status quo and another in African-American slang. As slang, it subverts the standard definition but simultaneously comes to mean its opposite; the subversive usage requires the official meaning and also takes on, in its turn, a definitive meaning within the African-American socio-ideological context. The word “bad” therefore comes to simultaneously connote a particular definition (in standard usage), and an opposite definition (in the practice of slang). In turn, centrifugal forces will eventually re-subvert “bad,” in the process restricting the “subversive” usage to specific meanings and regulations.

Bakhtin’s language inhabits dual grounds—fixity and unfixity—whereas Wilson’s adjectives, “controlled,” “consistent,” and “methodical”—and elsewhere “highly codified,” “essential” and “rigorous control” (89)—stereotype dirty realism as a writing of definite dimensions: “It does seem, despite an apparent diversity, extremely homogenous over the range of what is signified” (97). Wilson contends that dirty realism “obsessively” restricts itself to depicting “the working (and/or under) class,<sup>10</sup> its . . . gamut of experience, [and] . . . the ‘belly-side’ of contemporary life” (97). He considers dirty realism extremely programmatic; despite its “apparent diversity” (a characteristic he never clearly defines), it manages a linguistic and thematic self-containment. Unfortunately, Wilson never investigates how dirty realism effects this self-containment.

My argument contends that dirty realism offers a highly systematic non-system; its self-containment simultaneously offers its authors and protagonists an unlimited freedom. Accepting Wilson’s trope of “paths” for narrative trajectory, dirty realism (following the dual thrust of Bakhtin’s language) drives *in both directions at once*, towards the unified and the disintegrated. Its selective vocabulary restricts significance, but also lends itself to summary verdicts and universal statements. The “socio-ideological” impetus of dirty realist language conflicts with itself to issue a stream of oppositions; these writers intentionally contradict themselves. Dirty realism is, in Bakhtin’s words, “a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language” (272): not an egalitarian privileging of various

viewpoints or ideologies, but a scene of multiple, mutually-exclusive absolutes; Richard Ford, in *The Ultimate Good Luck* (1981)<sup>11</sup> most explicitly articulates the “scene” afforded by dirty realism: “Outside what you see, things are not one way, but other ways at once” (106). “Things” – the elements that constitute reality – “are” not “one way,” but “other ways at once.” The reality external to human cognition is a scene of conflicting (“other ways”) simultaneities (“at once”). Only language offers a ground capable of sustaining and reconciling this series of linguistic – *and ideological*<sup>12</sup> – absolutes. Dirty realism is not pluralism but plural. It licenses itself to occupy and execute contrary options while not necessarily authorising this conduct in general. An incident related by Cherkovski shows Bukowski hysterically demanding a woman’s faithfulness (25), while his own, purportedly autobiographical, narratives report one adultery after another. Frank Bascombe can say “anchored only to contingency” (439) in *Independence Day* (1995) to merge the absolute of “anchored only” – or “determined strictly by” – with “contingency” – or “situation dependent.” Reconciling “anchored” and “contingency,” the excerpt suggests the following paradox: the rule governing every situation is that there is no rule governing every situation (rules arise *from* the situation in question). Wilson underestimates dirty realism by focusing on “how” it says without noting the way in which “how” it says conditions “what” it says, though he diagnoses an underlying complexity: “surface simplicity masks interior intricacy. What ‘takes place’ actualizes, as a prism does a single spectral band, only a small fraction of the available paradigms” (81). Although Wilson admits that the writing of dirty realism everywhere evinces cognisance of the larger “available paradigms” which it observes only a “fraction of,” he fails to investigate the epistemological and aesthetic implications of dirty realism’s synthesis of the fraction with the whole.

To understand the process of diffraction first requires discerning the “single spectral band” that consumes Wilson’s and Buford’s attention. Buford finds milieu the most obvious characteristic of dirty realism:

**But these are strange stories: unadorned, unfurnished, low-rent tragedies about people who watch day-time television, read cheap romances or listen to country and western music. They are waitresses in roadside cafés, cashiers in supermarkets,**



construction workers, secretaries and unemployed cowboys. They play bingo, eat cheeseburgers, hunt deer and stay in cheap hotels. They drink a lot and are often in trouble: for stealing a car, breaking a window, pickpocketing a wallet. . . they could just about be from anywhere: drifters in a world cluttered with junk food and the oppressive details of modern consumerism. (4)

The stories' "unadorned" quality, their syntactical "cheapness," corresponds to the bank balance of their characters.<sup>13</sup> Dirty realism selects its protagonists from the societal pool known as "white trash," dealing with itinerants, poverty, rootlessness, and familial and occupational impermanence. Characters drift through an America defined and oppressed by the slogans and enterprises of commerce and consumerism. However, too prescriptive an approach to the movement's representative society excludes many dirty realist texts. Louise Erdrich reports events on Native reservations, and Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter* (1983) and *Independence Day* take on the middle class. Even Buford's categories cannot entirely cover the diverse band of writers *Granta* heaps together. Dirty realism doesn't only depict skid row drunks (as in Grant Buday's *Monday Night Man*, 1995); a scan of selected works reveals a range from strippers (Diana Atkinson's *Highways and Dancehalls*, 1995) to lawyers (Thomas McGuane's "Partners" in *To Skin a Cat: Stories*, 1986) to real-estate agents (*Independence Day*, 1995) to postal clerks and carriers (Charles Bukowski's *Post Office*, 1971) to professional athletes (Mark Anthony Jarman's *Salvage King Ya!*, 1997) to door to door salesmen and saleswomen (Raymond Carver's "Vitamins" in *Cathedral*, 1983). Dirty realism covers everything from the boarding-house to the suburban condo. An understanding of the movement requires a glance beyond milieu into sensibility, into dirty realism's cultural critique.

While attempting to qualify and categorise dirty realism, Buford's observations on milieu inform us of similarities among dirty realists not on the level of superficial characteristics but on the level of aesthetic practice. Buford's primary device for characterising the dirty realist milieu arrives in the artefacts and distractions provided by consumer society: "day-time television," "cheap romances," "country and western music," "bingo," "cheeseburgers," "cheap hotels." Consumer society, then, as it manifests itself across a broad social spectrum, forms the cultural locus of dirty realism. Moreover, characters are not defined by what they *are*, but by what they

do: waiting on tables, secretarial work, construction, drinking, hunting, stealing, "breaking a window," "pickpocketing." The process of action rather than a stable notion of identity constitutes dirty realism's view of the human as always developing, unfixed, *contingent upon its relation to context*. Oddly enough, Buford's list of specific interests and activities vanishes under the generalisation, "they could just about be from anywhere." Ultimately, neither locale, nor background, nor occupation truly matters, and a listlessness, a "drift" through the "oppressive details of modern consumerism" informs dirty realism. In other words, the details evident in dirty realism do not add up. The details function interchangeably rather than assisting to make, together, a summary statement; they "drift," never exactly cohering into a definitive conclusion. There is no hierarchy of parts, either epistemological or ethical: being from Kentucky no more delivers the final word on character than being from Alabama or Oregon. Society no longer conceives of the subject in terms of regional contingency.<sup>14</sup> Character types, place, occupations range on the shelf, generic as products, with little essential difference. Dirty realism acknowledges a social reification of the human that ignores class, occupation, background or birthday. No matter where the characters come from, they all exhibit identical tendencies. The characters of dirty realism are identifiable in spite of place. The notion of character as consumer subject and object relates to the consumer culture that informs the writing. If these characters are the product of anything, then they are products of a marketplace devoted to erasing differences (in class, occupation, background and generation)<sup>15</sup> in order to constitute the human as the buying public, as consumers in the midst of all-pervasive clutter. The disappearance of permanent definitions for the human, then, constitutes both the condition of the dirty realist character and his or her means of resistance.

Dirty realism dwells not on absolute values but on the constant exchange, interplay and balancing of available quantities, dwells on the way characters tactically deploy and discard the variety of "oppressive" cognitive paradigms (including essentialism), adopting whatever truth their particular situation requires and then discarding that truth when it no longer serves them. Thus dirty realism follows characters as they *proceed through*, not *arrive at*. As they consume the

artefacts of “modern consumerism,” so they also consume various moral, political and philosophical categories and stances—Marxism, capitalism, Christianity, machismo, essentialism, feminism, aestheticism—as required, then later discarding or discrediting such instances of use; as Fredric Jameson says in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), the advent of postmodernity accompanies a loss of “historicity” which, in turn, troubles the privileging of theoretical positions and assumptions (x-xi), since the lack of a stable diachronic sequence of history prevents the emergence of a prime world view. The assuming of contrary positions, the hypocrisy between theory and practice, evident in the aesthetic of dirty realism, corroborates its place in the postmodern.

## II. Consumer Clutter

### A. Maximalists

Mark Anthony Jarman, in his novel *Salvage King Ya!*, conforms to Buford’s character model. His first-person narrator, Drinkwater, an ageing hockey player at the tail end of his career, travels North America and Europe after employment, always returning to his patrimony: a junkyard located just outside Edmonton, Alberta. This novel portrays a “Salvage King,” a man presiding over a country of Buford’s “clutter”—cast-offs and fragments—whose governing consciousness accepts lyricism as its only advisor. The junkyard presents the debris Drinkwater drifts through. This drifting, rather than what he *drifts towards*, constitutes his existence; the subtitle, “A Herky-Jerky Picaresque”—with its implication of erratic movement—reinforces the fragmented sensibility of the text itself:

At my Salvage King Ya! junkyard I am ringing my modest borders with swift growing willow, so as not to offend *la turista*, Luddites, etc. Also wild roses, patio lanterns, golden birds overhead. I am a King of Junk, king of something. I have empire. . . . Now a hunter and collector, an antiquarian with fabulous auto limbs and glass bug-eyes for sneaky sports cars. Coyotes come every night to sniff my friend Neon’s life-size papier maché dinosaur, paying homage to other ancient kings. A red rooster crows, saying, Bring your bullet nose Studebakers and three-wheeled Messerschmitts, your Power Glides, hot rod Lincolns and Morris Minors. Your Borgwards from Mexico. Your Simcas. Your DeSotos. Your ex-jocks. Your dinosaurs. Your hearts and fenders. (211)

Drinkwater's "empire" consists of wrecked cars, airplanes, and papier maché dinosaurs. The mock-epic list of used machinery fits the picaresque mode. The final line's "hearts and fenders" evokes the stereotypical country and western song lyrics Wilson associates with dirty realism (84). In this excerpt, Jarman raises natural, literary, technological and pop culture references without implying any hierarchy among them (including a temporal hierarchy between antiques and more recent junk). He equates his own monarchy with that of dinosaurs, conflating materialism with the biological, the evolutionary, and extinction, but without elaborating this interface. In fact, only a stylised expression connects them; an effect of linguistic plenitude rather than logic governs the juxtaposition.<sup>16</sup> Jarman's domain is the "something," which means both "everything" and "nothing"; literary, scientific and corporate jargon allow him access to a multitude of references without application. Like the "bug-eyes" Drinkwater claims to have, his vision is multiple, beholding various images and ideas at once. He desires only to suspend as many disparate elements as possible at one time. This heteroglossia for the sake of heteroglossia celebrates the power of language to annex diversity, to function as a "bug eye." Jarman's picaresque moves not by plot or theme but by lyricism; this alone powers the narrative, harmonising Jarman's kingdom to the same four-four beat used by the musicians—Graham Parker, the Ramones, Gun Club—he often refers to. Language simultaneously energises and weakens, enacting both his "oppression," as Buford notes, and "release"; Drinkwater can freely rummage through and recombine junk in an infinitely variable play that allows him to avoid fixity or restriction to a monologic socio-ideological position, but, in the absence of such a position, he can't partake in the linguistic reliability necessary for community membership. The junk no more allows him to transcend the junkyard than language allows him to transcend his self. To do either he must draft a contract with another, a contract limiting the possibilities of signification to certain common denominators. Imprisoned in plenitude, no matter how far afield Drinkwater travels, the salvage yard pulls him back like a reminder. Buford's "clutter" represents the benefits and hazards of language as individual play rather than communal property. Lyricism embodies Drinkwater's resistance of the "social real" as well as his inability

to effect change within it; in Jarman, cornucopia hinders agency.

The “junk” of Drinkwater’s patrimony recalls debris, detritus, fallout from a society abundant in supply but lacking in demand, longevity and genuine application. Drinkwater’s own vocational history appears as much of a patchwork, as much of a directionless mishmash, as his junkyard: “Previous I was middle management, a bit of a con, an attendant lord swelling whatever. A grinder, a plumber, skin of teeth in a hair-trigger republic” (211). The conflation of junkyard with the human—*the view of the human as junkyard*—continues in the list at the end of the quotation, where “Borgwards,” “Simcas” and “DeSotos” belong to the same list as the “ex-jocks,” such as Drinkwater. The “hearts and fenders” of the last line presents, by allusion to the phrase “hearts and minds,” an oscillation of language between cliché and invention, and conjoins Quinn’s corporeal and emotional existence to “fender,” as in de-fender (he does serve, mainly, as a defence-man on ice), or as in “fending” for himself. Drinkwater uses language to subvert determinism of the subject; beholden to pre-existing patterns, both in language and on the ice, Drinkwater, as this sentence shows, relies on lyricism to liberate himself from the conventions that determine the individual both conceptually (language) and physically (on-ice position), conventions that perceive the human as passive subject in the linguistic and social matrix. Drinkwater must learn to navigate and deploy the junk that not only surrounds but also identifies him; he must “fend” for himself not only “like” a fender on a car, but “with” the car fender. The juxtaposition of heart with fender suggests that the relationship between Drinkwater and the fender is evenly metaphoric; since they are both junk neither can claim metaphorical predominance: the fender is Drinkwater and Drinkwater is the fender. The human is now an artefact—on all levels: human personality, history and society fracture into a heap of experiences and perspectives without any logical relation, components whose sum equals junk. By including everything in the list, Drinkwater invalidates the list as a means of classification, information storage or even delimiting priorities; when the list comes to include everything—from cars, to people, to dinosaurs, even to abstract symbols such as “hearts”—the list no longer functions as an epistemological register; it no longer maintains differences or particularities, no

longer classifies, and therefore fails to structure and order crucial distinctions necessary for knowing and being, for determining relations between self and surroundings. Similarly, the “centre” of Drinkwater’s “empire” is no different from its periphery, since the centre contains the same array of references—biological, scientific, literary, technological, mechanical, pop cultural—as the world “out there.” Is Drinkwater a scientist, a mechanic, a salesman? He is neither and all of these. Like the “bug eyes” he claims to have, Drinkwater sends his multiple vision over a multitude of arbitrary references; all is jargon. He conflates materialism with the biological, the commercial with the personal, lyricism with pop culture, all without elaborating the connections between these themes until the ideas and items in question are seen as disparate notions annexed into text. *The centre is disintegration.* Only text could possibly synthesise such disparity, such a lack of qualitative, intrinsic difference.

The undifferentiated quality of Drinkwater’s inherited empire mirrors Harry Quinn’s own inheritance in Richard Ford’s *The Ultimate Good Luck*: “Mexico was like Vietnam or L.A., only more disappointing—a great trivial abundance of crap the chief effect of which wasn’t variety but sameness” (15). Like Drinkwater, Quinn finds himself amidst “a great trivial abundance of crap,” whose very abundance, whose plenitude, provides not “variety” but “sameness.” The bewildering extensiveness of his geography leaves him without definite perspective on his own position: “on the periphery without a peripheral perspective” (36). Both Drinkwater and Quinn drift through “modest” “empires,” through a “world cluttered” with “modern consumerism,” sifting details “oppressive” because of their dizzying number. They are both on the outside (on the “periphery” or “borders”), yet they can come to no definite awareness of what it is they are outside of, or even a relational understanding between periphery and centre (“without a peripheral perspective,” or a non-centre of undifferentiated “junk”). In Drinkwater’s world everything is the same, equal, undifferentiated, including their selves; everything is up for grabs.

The conditions depicted by Ford and Jarman offer a fictional rendition of Fredric Jameson’s theory—outlined in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991)—of

contemporary, or “postindustrial,” society, as one witness to “a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life—from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself—can be said to have become ‘cultural’” (48). Jameson’s thesis argues for an all-pervasive cultural “submersion,” a state wherein the individual cannot locate a critical position not somehow already prepared in advance by market economy, or a position that capital cannot instantly colonise and commodify, absorbing and adding it to the existing stock of available merchandise. As Horkheimer and Adorno earlier noted, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972), “culture” has become an “industry”; culture is synonymous with “standardization” and “mass production” (121). Ford and Jarman’s free play with conflicting emblems, artefacts and concepts available to the postindustrial subject bears witness to the disappearance, as Jameson suggests, of culture as an autonomous “realm” (48); since culture is everywhere, *is everything*, the term no longer behaves in opposition to the non-cultural, and has therefore lost definite meaning. Anything can be elevated to cultural status. Quinn and Drinkwater indeed “drift,” decentered, anchorless, deploying, discarding, re-deploying the variety of options in a “system” Horkheimer and Adorno describe as “uniform as a whole and in every part” (120). Neither Drinkwater nor Quinn need worry about conceptual or logical contradiction, since access to a vast profusion of oftentimes contrary positions itself forms their moment in history: a moment when everything is authorised for consumption by the postindustrial system, a practice acknowledged by Ford in the *Paris Review*: “But, in my books, I try to authorize everything” (69). Contradiction no longer holds any epistemological terror for these writers, since no one position maintains enough cultural or logical superiority to incite conviction.

#### B. Minimalists

“Clutter” puts the dirt into realism, though not all of the authors under study approach that clutter through Jarman’s and Ford’s lyricism. In fact, the minimalism of Raymond Carver and Charles Bukowski represents a flip side of the movement: rather than utilising “clutter” they conspicuously strip it away. The postmodern realist, aware of the discursive systems

programming our vision of reality, attacks language until it becomes the protagonist. Heroically, they try to isolate, as Raymond Carver puts it in *Fires*, a “correctness” (26) of expression, attempt to depict a world you can “draw a bead on” (26). Minimalism strips so much of the story away that it leaves very few critical footholds, no character backgrounds for psychoanalysis, no wordplay to instruct irony, no contexts for political critique; instead, we inevitably begin to talk about how little the stories have to say, as Carver does: “The words can be so precise they may even sound flat, but they can still carry; if used right they can hit all the right notes” (18). Unlike Jarman, Carver distrusts plenitude, preferring momentum: “Get in, get out. Don’t linger. Go on” (13).

Carver and Bukowski opt for “truth,” not an ideological truth but rather an aesthetic one, where the story’s value rests upon craft<sup>17</sup>; by “aesthetic” I refer, again, to Williams’s<sup>18</sup> definition of the word in its adjectival sense, as referring to “questions of visual appearance and effect” as “distinct . . . from *social* or *cultural* interpretations”(28). Here, Williams suggests that intention determines approach; the “social” or “cultural” interpretation arises from an intention different from the aesthetic. Carver’s and Bukowski’s criteria for “good” writing pertain to the appearance or stylistic surfaces of the work rather than “social or cultural” effects of the work. Truth is, in fact, *style*.<sup>19</sup> Hitting the “right notes” regards an object of writing rather than its method.

In *Post Office*, Bukowski connects good writing with “honesty” (76), deciding that virtue resides in the aesthetic approach. Like Jarman, then, the “minimalists” of the dirty realist cannon similarly position style as the central focus of their writing. Their decision to pare down the language of their stories is as much a reaction to, and representation of, consumer “clutter” as Jarman’s syntactical overload.<sup>20</sup> Both Bukowski’s and Carver’s minimalism conforms to the hypocrisy aesthetic of dirty realism.

Raymond Carver, in the story “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” (1981) (from the collection of the same name), presents two couples sitting around in a room drinking, and discussing love. Each character illustrates his or her beliefs with parabolic anecdotes either



intended to counter the arguments of the other characters or to further elaborate his or her own points. In the end, however, the stories told by the characters ultimately indicate how story becomes commodity, how it comes to reflect only its own aesthetic parameters, and how it covers for (or excludes), rather than mirrors, the character's practice. Through the discrepancy between theory and practice—the *reason* for telling the stories and the *way* in which he or she tells them—each character mirrors the behaviour exhibited by Terri's Ed—the man who would say "I love you" (138) while beating her. Mel comments that Terri's story of Ed does not indicate love, to which Laura replies: "I don't know anything about Ed, or anything about the situation. But who can judge anyone else's situation" (139). Though the characters tell these stories in an attempt to communicate their beliefs, they continually debunk the telling itself as case-specific (and therefore inadmissible) when it threatens to confine them to any contractual definition of love. Like Ed, they want the freedom of incongruity.

Mel contradicts his own parable of love's longevity—in which an inability to view a loved one "breaks" a husband's heart (151)—by qualifying love as ephemeral: "If something happened to one of us tomorrow, I think the other one . . . would go out and love again . . . soon enough" (145), and, further, indicating that Laura would be, for him, interchangeable with Terri (150). The telling of story, the union experienced by the characters in their speaking of love conflicts with Mel's theory of love as self-generated; moreover, the very message of his story—love as a mutual bond—conflicts with his statement on the interchangeability of love's object. Carver's story witnesses the hypocrisy aesthetic by illustrating the disparity between a theory that attempts to bridge experience, yet whose practice recalls the self-referential, self-contained, non-transmissible "truth" of personal experience. Mel's story illustrates the way in which the type of story told inverts the specific (historical) reality of the storyteller.

"It just means what I said," Nick instructs the other characters at the end of his narrative, emphasising the manifest over the interpretative (153); he also suggests "meaning" resides in "saying," or that *the act of telling is the meaning*; the story "means" nothing but the contours, the surfaces, of its articulation. The variety of streamlined parables told by these

characters evinces a world cluttered with numerous reified messages that do not, and cannot (though they appear to) convey universal messages. The straightforwardness of their telling illustrates a world in which alienation from metanarrative constitutes the only commonality between people. Telling unites the characters; *the way they say* rather than *what they say* binds them. The characters toy with universal, encompassing narratives that the particularities of each of their conditions will not abide. This fragmented condition of superficial artifice defines their moment in history.

By witnessing how their relationships remain in a state of flux, unaffixed to universal realities, Carver's story recalls the characters as historically specific subjects instead of guardians of trans-historical truths. Their stories, rather than fixing the nature of love once and for all, become merely *more stories* in an historical moment characterised by atomisation and incoherence. The telling of stories in a miserable attempt to overcome disorder is Carver's "truth," and his minimalist aesthetic emblematises a response to clutter that avoids sounding the depths of experience by discarding elements that might complicate its clean rendition (which, however, only results in numerous unrelated and inadmissible parables littering the page).

However, counteracting this self-reflexivity evident in each character's inability to cede practice to theory, Nick admits, at the end: "I could hear everyone's heart" (154); in a story entitled "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" this statement suggests more than "saying"; for one thing he uses the verb "hearing," a primary sense in absorbing information; and the word "everyone" expands Nick's apprehension into the general. Secondly, the use of "heart" — a banal symbol of love — suggests this story talks of what "we," Carver's peers, say of love. By shifting from each character's story to Carver's story, we witness a negative synthesis between the absolute of parable and the specificity of experience. Carver authorises interpretation, not of what is said, but of the circumstances, the context, of saying. Practice contends with theory in a story both self-reflexive *and* referential. Carver's story, then, operates on the same level of "clutter" as Jarman, albeit a conceptual clutter. We do not know, finally, where to centre our understanding of the story, since the centre itself seems to be contradiction.

However, the character of the contradiction narrated informs us about the historical setting of the story. In other words, the refusal of the characters to permit a universal mode marks the return of the variegated, atomised, events, innumerable to the point of infinity, out of which universalised discourse arises (and which, in order for such discourse to serve as bridge between experience, it must ignore); what remains of storytelling, then, is a surface devoid of connection to an insupportable field of actualities. The context is lack of community, insofar as the characters refuse to cede authority to any master narrative, yet one in which, therefore, style has divorced function in order to supplant reality rather than refer to it. The atomisation of social experience has deprived storytelling of speaking for experience; instead, storytelling speaks of its stream-lines: it mediates nothing more than its fidelity to aesthetic rules, to presentation without (or in spite of) excess. *Style is truth.*

As Alan Nadel says, speaking of "excess" as "an informing principal of the postmodern condition," in *Containment Culture* (1995)<sup>21</sup>: "Less ain't more no more, no more, no more" (50). Sarcastically speaking, Nadel's chant suggests (as does Bell's essay) that the minimalism of "less" no longer implies "more," but only its own unique characteristic of "less." "Excess" or clutter marks the impotence of the minimalist text. The style of Carver's story, then, is precisely its "truth": a world of surfaces and empty narrative forms marked by their incapacity to render group experience, except insofar as the existence of such surfaces accounts for a shared condition of subjects denied means of viewing personal experience as anything other than exceptions to rules without historical precedent (personal or societal). This is Jameson's postmodern world of pastiche, of style without context, of saying as the action of a desire for the comprehensive (and, by extension, *comprehension*). We can "hear" everyone's heart, but cannot decode the intelligence behind the beats. We can no longer speak love; we can only talk about what we talk about when we talk of love. Large-scale definitions fragment, under scrutiny, into clutter that narrative can only ignore. Liberty from universal rules has arrived at the expense of communal and historical connections.

### C. Paradoxical Poetics

Al Purdy articulates a disparate unity in an interview conducted by Gary Geddes in 1968 and included in *Twentieth Century Poetry and Poetics* (1985). "I don't think that a man is consistent," Purdy says, "he contradicts himself at every turn" (635). Purdy predicates his view of the human on a being-in-contradiction. Further on, Purdy transposes this notion of inconsistency into aesthetic terminology, elaborating his notion of "stylistic" inconsistency with "substantive" terminology; what goes for "a man" on the level of being also goes on the level of literary production. "Man" can no more maintain a unified, reliable voice than unified, reliable behavioural modes. Purdy continues:

Housman, for instance, takes a very dim view of life for the most part, is very depressing—but human life isn't like that *all* of the time. You wake up in the morning, the sun is shining and you feel good; this also is a time when Housman could have written a poem. I can't believe he never felt good once in his life. (635)

"All" points to dirty realism's insistence on the paradox of the totality of human experience as a place of particulars in conflict, where different moods, perspectives and ideologies unite in their opposition, a space whose conceptualisation necessitates antagonism. This place, as Purdy suggests, is consistent in its inconsistency, or, to borrow from Stuart Hall, is an area of co-operation-in-conflict, of "sustained and mutually reinforcing antagonisms" (625).<sup>22</sup> In other words, a "dim view of life," in Purdy's opinion, necessitates a contrary "good" view of life. That Housman chose not to write poems at a "time" of happiness confines his aesthetic to a consistency of vision Purdy cannot "believe" in. Purdy can only lend credence to an aesthetic that contains opposites. An awareness of the "dim view" "reinforces" Purdy's awareness of feeling "good." The thing and its opposite, an "antagonism" between what is stated and the opposite that any statement reinforces itself against, informs Purdy's aesthetic vision. To read of a "dim view" only dialectically reinforces its antithesis, the "feeling good" view.

Purdy's poem, "My Grandfather's Country (Upper Hastings County)" (1972), hinges upon opposition; his poetry overlays the axis *and* poles, the entire "unified" field that permits, in its totality, sustained contradiction. "My Grandfather's Country (Upper Hastings County),"

speaks of patrimony and space, describing an inheritance not so much of geography but of a geographical *situation*. The poem seems, on the surface (as indicated by the title) to refer to a specific *site*, but in fact relates the problem of relation to a site, or situation. The poem's pastoral overtones shift between the conceptual (patrimony) and real (specific landscape), as the bracketed title implies.

Of course other things are also marvellous  
 sunsets happen if the atmospheric conditions are right  
 and the same goes for a blue sky  
 – there are deserts like great yellow beds of flowers  
 where a man can walk and walk into identical distance  
 like an arrow lost in its own target. (40)

The dominant mode of dirty realist poetics, free verse, allows Purdy freedom from any formal constraints, but still lets him claim “poetic form.”<sup>23</sup> Purdy presents dissimilar spaces through similar conditions. The same “atmospheric conditions” account for both midday and the coming of night, the poet finding both moments equally “marvellous.” He employs a metaphoric structure to equate the aridity of the “desert” with the fertility of “great yellow beds of flowers,” augmenting this equation with, “a man can walk and walk into identical distance.” The use of the word “walk” twice implies not only magnitude travelled but of one man walking simultaneously into two, “identical distances” – an omnipresent stroll.<sup>24</sup> The final line, “like an arrow lost in its own target,” exposes the “heart” of dirty realism. The simile – “like an arrow” – draws our attention to simulation, to the approximation between a thing and what it is not. The simile of the arrow becomes so important to the understanding of the poem that it effectively usurps the conceptual centre of the passage, displacing the thing it stands for (“man”) with poetic device. By drawing attention to simulation, Purdy offsets the poem's aesthetic “reality” (a linguistic one, as simile is strictly a linguistic exchange) from the human. Here we have likeness over identification, likeness dominating and supplanting identity. The destination of the arrow similarly highlights the indeterminacy of linguistic depiction. Surely “its own target” is the ideal place to “find” an arrow? If the target usually represents an arrow's purpose, an indispensable part of its identity, then what type of destination does Purdy signify? When is the achievement of a centre at the same time the loss of one? Finding the target, in dirty realism,

means to lose any definitive relation to it. With this paradox, Purdy grounds the essence of dirty realism in contradiction; since contradiction always contests the essential, it constitutes, at once, a grounding and non-grounding. By choosing contradiction as its essential component, the only consistent practice, for dirty realism, becomes hypocrisy.

Further on, Purdy's poem clarifies the disparity between theoretical commitment and aesthetic practice: "and if I must commit myself to love / for any one thing / it will be here in the red glow / where . . . / the clearings join and fences no longer divide" (41). This excerpt speaks of a necessity ("must") to "commit" emotionally ("love") to "one thing"; that "one thing," however, is simultaneously a "join[ing]" and "fenc[ing]" off. Forced into loving "one" thing, the poet chooses "one" position embodying contrary options. In this way he satisfies a need for singularity, yet remains free to pick and choose among mutually exclusive options. The "one thing" is, in fact, everything and nothing (to echo Jarman). The "fences," as well as the "clearings," remain defined and, therefore, by necessity, distinct: for "clearings" to remain clearings, uncleared areas must offset them; for "fences" to stand they must divide. Nevertheless, the clearings are "joined," and therefore undifferentiated from interstitial uncleared areas; the fences likewise "no longer divide." Purdy commits to *both* an enclosed and a non-enclosed space. He commits to contradiction, authorising every position. The poem goes on to speak of "the chemicals that after selection select themselves" (41). Again, we have the product of contraries. Pastoral and biological imagery depict a country determined and self-determined, inherited and composed, "selected" and "selecting," simultaneously irresponsible and responsible for ownership and presence—self-contained and free, determined and determining. The stanza climaxes in a series of paradoxes and irrelevancies, rendering an "intelligence" that

occasionally conceives of what it cannot conceive  
itself and function of itself:  
narrowing the problem down to a deaf mute in a wind tunnel  
narrowing the problem down to a blind man in a hall of  
mirrors  
narrowing the problem down— (41)

Purdy operates on a dialectical<sup>25</sup> register. The mind witnessing its own performance, the way it

functions, proceeds in a twofold movement, in a dialectical conjoining of opposites. In each case, “narrowing” the problem down only “widens” it. The propositions, a “deaf mute in a wind tunnel” and “a blind man in a hall of mirrors,” seem irreducible. From one perspective the predicaments appear benign, since a wind tunnel would no more obstruct a deaf mute than a hall of mirrors a blind man, as their disabilities prevent sensory confusion. The passage pinpoints the function of senses as the problem: a reliance on observable, empirical data disrupts the proper “function” of “intelligence,” or—if we use “intelligence” in its military connotation—the senses actually obstruct the gathering of information. Purdy therefore denigrates empirical findings in favour of abstract thought. From another perspective, however, the inabilities, while safeguarding the intelligence from confusion and alienation, also prevent it from going outside itself, from crafting an objective situational record; the deaf-mute cannot hear the wind whistling down the tunnel, nor the blind see himself infinitely reflected in the hall of mirrors. The absence of adequate sensory information leads us to rely too heavily on abstract, unverifiable speculation. In either case, concrete realities (deafness, muteness, blindness) curtail and determine our conceptual horizon at the same time as the conceptual horizon acknowledges its reliance (and therefore construction) on limited faculties. Conceiving of what it cannot conceive—the deaf mute realising a wind tunnel or the blind a hall of mirrors—poses both the mind’s gain and loss. Trapped between sensory reliance and conceptual excess, the final, truncated line of the stanza indicates that “intelligence” can’t “narrow down” its exact position; the intelligence always supplants the actual with metaphor, deafened, muted and blinded by its own linguistic and conceptual horizons (yet, in realising this, “intelligence” at least allows itself room to continually interrogate and re-interrogate its suppositions: understanding its “narrowness” leaves it room to conceive a “widening” in the elements outside the mind’s sensually-contingent operations). The “narrowing down,” then, to irreducible paradox typifies dirty realism and problematises its politics.

### *III. The Politics of Hypocrisy*

Dirty realism’s aesthetic focus—whether Carver’s “precision” or Jarman’s lyricism—accounts

for Buford (and, elsewhere, Wilson) regarding dirty realism as politically indeterminate. Buford writes:

These authors are, from one perspective, the youth of the sixties grown up, a generation that, having been raised on weed, whites and protest marches, is now suspicious of heroes, crusades and easy idealism. It is possible to see many of these stories as quietly political, at least in their details, but it is a politics considered from an arm's length: they are stories not of protest but of the occasion for it. (5)

Dirty realism's politics, or lack thereof, contest, and react against, the social activism of the 1960s. Instead of "crusades" and "idealism" we have politics latent in the stories' "details." The excerpt's final line expresses Buford's most telling statement; he characterises the stories as devoid of protest but descriptive of conditions, the "occasions," that have traditionally sparked protest or activism in the politically inclined.

In Richard Ford's novel, *Wildlife* (1990)<sup>26</sup>, Jeanette, the narrator's mother, says: "I don't feel sorry for anybody. I don't feel sorry for myself, so I don't see why I should feel sorry for those other people. In particular those I don't know very well" (65). Apparently callous, the mother's response supports Buford's claim that dirty realism deals with personal rather than political concerns, that it remains rooted in miniature rather than large-scale perspectives. As Jeanette's statement testifies – not pitying herself precludes her pitying others – dirty realism's "personal" is rarely "political," if political means proposals to alleviate, change or improve social conditions. Not that dirty realism doesn't have *political implications*, but it rarely names "issues." We must interpret, rather than receive, its politics, and so risk mistaking our own leanings for the author's. As Jeanette points out, concern, if exercised at all, remains rooted in the "particular," the circle one "know[s] very well." Dirty realism, with a few exceptions (most notably Bukowski), refuses to speak for social groups, marginalised or otherwise, though viewed as a body of literature it certainly speaks "of" a social formation, as well as testifying to political "atomisation" in the American milieu.

Wilson seconds Buford's opinion on dirty realism's lack of open political aspirations, but links this, importantly, with history: "Politics, insurrection, revolution, and war are absent



[from dirty realism]. The great human terrors—exile, torture, or death—have no roles. Loss is a recurring theme . . . but it occurs on the level of daily desire and frustration. It happens in the relationships between men and women, not in history” (80-81). By “history,” Wilson means a large-scale record of events, a series of happenings with national or international implication, not “personal history,” the record of the average family’s or citizen’s life. If we allow this definition of “history,” Wilson’s contention is accurate. Any political inquiry into dirty realism, if possible at all, must negotiate the problematic of the particular, the emphasis on experience, a contact with the real that illustrates a specific historical situation. History arises in the specific (itself telling of the fragmented way we now process information).

Dirty realism’s politics arise as the shadow (antithesis) of personal concerns. In the short story, “Winterkill,” included in the collection *Rock Springs* (1987)<sup>27</sup>, Richard Ford announces this antithetical thrust in dirty realism: “Troy . . . gasped with bitterness. Real bitterness. The worst I have ever heard from any man, and I have heard bitterness voiced, though it was a union matter then” (167). Here, the adjectives “real” and “worst” conflict the meaning of the excerpt. The first adjective indicates authentic and inauthentic displays of “bitterness,” the second bitterness by degree. Ford depicts the concept of “bitterness” in more than one way, raising, *at the same time*, personal and political associations. The authenticity of personal “bitterness” arises in relation to large-scale political enterprise, whose looming shadow Ford fears; history consists of fields of experience not fully “voiced” by institutional discourse (i.e. “union matters”). “Winterkill” speaks of a wariness of sacrificing the self to a greater discourse. Note also that the political consideration comes after personal experience, exemplifying dirty realism’s vacillation between experience and “top down” theorising, of the kind Stuart Hall describes as “a totalizing movement ‘in thought,’ in the analysis” (616). The word “though” preceding the “union matter” suggests a difference between the personal and the “matters” belonging to larger jurisdictions. The personal of experience conflicts with the generalities of political discourse to emphasise their separateness. At issue is the idea of determinism in Ford’s “analysis”; rather than “moving” towards conceptually (“in thought”)

totalizing the variance between the personal and political, Ford simply allows them to stand, together in their joint possession of the sentence, attesting to the dangers of the loss of individual expression, or historical specificity, to a larger historical discourse. In this way, Ford's writing disrupts the easy metonymical flow described by theorists such as Roman Jakobson; in this instance, Ford's text stalls progression from part to whole, instead contrasting and balancing two perspectives—personal and political—in stasis, in a synchronic juxtaposition.<sup>28</sup> The intersection of the personal and political remains terrorised by the threat of historical erasure. By returning to the provisional, Ford revives history from totalizing, analytical discursive modes. At the same time, the impossibility of developing an effective social discourse from Troy's situation recalls a need for political programs.<sup>29</sup>

Ford articulates the intersection of the personal with the political in *The Ultimate Good Luck*, where Harry and Rae Quinn discuss the authoritative gesture politics require: "'You can't call yourself a bum,' he said. 'Somebody else has to do that. You don't get it both ways'" (42). Here, Quinn denies the possibility of having it "both ways." One cannot choose "bum" as a self-designation; others must do so for you. Classifications always arrive from without, by imposition. Harry criticises Rae's liberty of adopting a generalised classification to avoid explaining her actions and experiences. Harry restricts this self-designation authoritatively, with the force of a rule, but then refuses to abide by it himself. He responds just as evasively when Rae asks him to determine whether she's a "bum" or not: "'I'm not an authority on anything,' he said. 'That's all'" (42). Denying one's authority on "all" subjects seems the same kind of generalised "cover" or "excuse" as the self-designation of "bum." An oscillation between saying and doing characterises Quinn. Ford's aesthetic becomes radical in self-consciously endorsing a system it refuses to practice.<sup>30</sup> A bit later, Rae mentions the problem with straightforward systems: "'Those little self-contained systems just get smaller. . . . They're fine. But they don't tolerate enough. . . . They make things simple. I thought I could get along with that. I should have figured it out a long time ago that I couldn't'" (42). Rae isolates the problem with Systems as "self-containment," their inability to accommodate the complexities

beyond their conceptual horizons, their intolerance of the inconsistencies demonstrated by Harry. Dirty realism resolves the problem between the complex and simple—“complex” meaning the contradictory faces of experience, and “simple” the monologic, “rigorous[ly] control[led] semiotic[s],” and “particularized” discourse Wilson and Buford find in dirty realism—not by reconciling the two sides (sitting on the axis between them) but by endorsing them both (occupying axis *and* poles). They phase irreconcilables into one unity, or, more accurately, sustain unity by retaining disparity. Hypocrisy allows for the one system that simultaneously “self-contains” and liberates itself, since, “at every turn,” its operational “logic” releases it from accountability to logic; its operational system prevents its entrapment in the systematic. The totalizing discourse Hall critiques finds enactment and undoing at every turn in Ford.

#### *IV. Individual and/or Community*

##### *A. Storytelling*

The playing out of options alongside the one at hand is dirty realism’s openly admitted policy, its intent. In the Geddes interview, speaking of form, Purdy says: “I reject nothing” (638). Geddes also says that Purdy’s verse “somehow . . . manages to be domestic and historical at the same time” (633), hinting at the simultaneity that characterises dirty realism. By exercising complete openness to all ideas, all forms, Purdy deliberates between authority and non-authority (authorising everything, he de-authorises all; as in Jarman’s list, the lack of evaluative differences prevents the maintenance of ethical, political, and moral frameworks; finally, the writing becomes an examination of everything, a willingness to admit all phenomena into the equation, rather than the prescriptive solution of favouring certain elements at the expense of others).<sup>31</sup> In the *Paris Review* interview, Richard Ford admits: “But, in my books I try to authorise everything” (69). Dirty realism’s all-inclusive rule permits it both a revolutionary and reactionary position, enabling it to utilise all the given options in its struggle for liberty.

This policy of undifferentiated inclusion results directly from an attempt to survive in a “culture”—as Jeffrey J. Folks describes it in his essay “Richard Ford: Postmodern Cowboys”

(1997)—“denied . . . coherent significance” (219). The stories in Richard Ford’s *Rock Springs* offer examples of characters utilising the incoherence of their worlds as a means of deflecting responsibility, overcoming loss, and guaranteeing their continued freedom. Incoherence becomes a way of operating in an atomised society.

Ford’s story “Great Falls,” tells of Jackie, a young man who returns home with his father one night to find his mother on her way out with another man. At the end of the story, events provoke Jackie to make a statement telling for *Rock Springs* as a whole:

Though possibly it—the answer [to Jackie’s bewilderment]—is simple; it is just low-life, some coldness in us all, some helplessness that causes us to misunderstand life when it is pure and plain, makes our existence seem like a border between two nothings, and makes us no more or less than animals who meet on the road—watchful, unforgiving, without patience or desire. (49)

Ford’s depiction of “low life” remarks upon the complications of a life “misunderstood.” The low-life is characterised by the epistemological confusion resulting from “pure and plain” life being channelled through thought. Ford’s low-life, then, is a condition wherein cogitation warps and mystifies the autonomous worlds of actuality and instinct. These stories depict the way characters make life “seem,” how they impose conceptual frameworks on experience until living appears as nothing more than “a border between two nothings” and human beings as “nothing more or less than animals.” Aware of the way thought warps and transforms the real, particularly thought as language, the characters of *Rock Springs* rely upon linguistic and conceptual inventiveness to make the world “seem” the way they want it, when they want it. As Folks tells us: “At the heart of this form of social oppression is the control of consciousness through the processing of cultural images and linguistic authority” (213). As Jackie realises, therefore, his own horrific image of life proceeds directly from the way he “processes” cultural images, from his lack of “linguistic authority.” His “helplessness” results in “misunderstanding”; yet his helplessness hinges upon his understanding. In order to better understand, Jackie will need to conceptually reconfigure himself vis-à-vis his surroundings.

Throughout the collection, characters attempt to cope with the inexplicable transformations life entails. For Sims, the protagonist of “Empire,” coping requires a carefully

orchestrated hypocrisy—what Folks terms “the duplicity of personal freedom” (219)—which ensures that Sims must never be one thing, must never surrender to one particular social or personal representation. Sims realises the license permitted by hypocrisy—a position wherein one is not beholden even to *one’s own rules*. Sims immediately adjusts his philosophy or ethics to accord with his recent actions, with little or no regard for the rules or formulations he may have held previous to a particular incident. Doris, the army officer with whom Sims cheats on his wife, most clearly expresses his consciously hypocritical attitude: “you can do a thing and have it mean nothing but what you feel that minute. You don’t have to give yourself away. . . .’ Sims thought it was right. He’d done it himself plenty of times” (143). In Sims’s world, one need not “give” one’s self “away,” need not commit to anything except the exigencies of the present (“nothing but what you feel that minute”), though later deeds or words may not accord with previously held “meaning.”

Ford maintains a careful equipoise between allowing readers into each character’s self-perception while at the same time viewing them from the outside. From Earl, the fugitive running from the police in a stolen Mercedes with his girlfriend and daughter in the title story, to the convict, Bobby, in “Sweethearts,” to the lesbians, Phyllis and Bonnie, in the most humorous story in the collection, “Going to the Dogs,” to Roy Brinson, the traumatised and enraged railway worker in “Optimists,” Ford unflinchingly probes the territory, as Folks puts it, of “social and economic dilemmas.” (214).<sup>32</sup> Folks finds the characters committed to the same basic ethical enterprise: “Within this society, Ford’s postmodern cowboys are utterly out of place; they stumble through life, hoping at best to avoid being hurt or causing harm to others, and aspiring only to communicate their anxiety” (214). These characters inhabit a territory of disenfranchisement; they take consolation by embodying loss in language, and, through language, somehow mitigating, or freeing themselves from, that loss.

To authorise “everything” or reject “nothing” ultimately ends in conflict. For instance, in “Sweethearts,” Richard Ford authorises both a liberal and misogynist viewpoint. Arlene answers Bobby’s query on how to keep his self-respect with the advice: “get centered” (52). A bit later, Bobby, trying to zero in on his problem, comments, “I put all my faith in women . . . I

see now that was wrong"; she replies: "I couldn't say" (53). Arlene simultaneously extends and withholds her complicity in "centering." First, she authorises a theory: the locating of a "center" which enables control. This suggests she knows Bobby's "being" well enough to prescribe a certain treatment. It also validates a platform from which one can make assured diagnosis of another in the first place. But when Bobby follows the advice, Arlene responds not with, "You are wrong," to indicate he'd chosen the wrong "center" – misogyny – but with " I couldn't say" – neither confirmation nor denial. She "can't say" what constitutes Bobby's "being" at all. In fact, she can't even reject the possibility that maybe, in Bobby's reality, one can't, *as a rule*, trust women. Arlene allows herself the freedom of endorsing a theory while refusing complicity in its practice. The conversation's ending—"And then no one spoke" (53)—indicates the cumulative effect of many a dirty realist text: the contradictions implode, leaving the static of silence. By granting Bobby an opportunity to find his own "center," Arlene permits him to pick his emotional outlet; this advice, however, leads him to pin his blame on women; Arlene's uncorrected advice, though liberal in the sense of permitting him a subjectivity, leads Bobby into a harmful generalisation Ford does not contradict.

In an interview with Huey Guagliardo, published in the *Southern Review* (1998), Ford posits a relationship between author and reader, one based not upon the truth or factuality of the writing itself, but on the ability of the writing to entertain, to offer consolation through the sonorities of language, and to provide an "order" and "structure" worth beholding in themselves (614). Again, story as surface rather than content or message permits an escape from entrapment in reified meanings. This relationship becomes implicit to *Rock Springs*. Throughout the book, characters confide in one another; they tell stories about themselves. The effect of these stories is rarely one of communication; rather, it joins the characters in a community whose shared condition is the inability to access one another's experience, or to go beyond one's own cognitive parameters. Paradoxically, this knowledge of solipsistic limitations serves to undo that very solipsism, insofar as it awakens the characters to their *contexts*;<sup>33</sup> through telling characters can, for a moment, glimpse how totally their experiences have occasioned their

thinking and, in doing so, recognise a world outside themselves, a world populated by others. These acts of telling, then, admit the characters into a community, even if only in the negative sense: a community founded on mutual incommunicability.

Story-as-sound forms a consolation for the people of *Rock Springs*. In “Winterkill,” for example, Nola tells Les and Troy about her husband, Larry, who died of a heart attack shortly after Nola discovered his unfaithfulness. While this parable of comeuppance—someone getting what they deserve—dovetails with traditional morality, neither Troy nor Les can particularly appreciate it, because the parable addresses an ideal world they do not inhabit. In the worlds of Troy and Les, there is no moral redress, people do not get what they deserve; fairness seems as remote a possibility as economic betterment. Nola herself recognises that her own fate seems inexplicable in comparison to the parable’s morality: “What happened to me is a better question” (156). Troy enthusiastically locates Nola not in absolute but in relational terms: “You’re here with us” (156). The act of telling leads not to an applicable, universal guideline for conduct—no rules whereby characters can shape or understand life—but rather to a position vis-à-vis others, communion in the storytelling *art*. Speaking itself—*sound*—rather than what is spoken reconciles self to community.

Throughout the collection life itself depends on telling; Sims, in “Empire,” comments: “She’d told him her whole life in ten minutes, and once the telling was finished the life itself seemed over too.” As Folks points out (213), survival in *Rock Springs* requires a person to carve out a linguistic niche. Baxter, in “Communist,” absolves himself of wrongdoing by justifying his actions in a variable code. He justifies trespassing on another man’s property by leaning on a Marxist ethic: “People shouldn’t own land anyway. . . . Anybody should be able to use it.” However, while promoting an idealistic vision of communal property, Baxter also refuses to acknowledge his own selfishness, covering up for his errant shooting of a duck with a view of life that approaches social Darwinism: “This can happen. It doesn’t matter.” He endorses and withholds the idea of responsibility. Further complicating the picture, Baxter’s reasons for wanting to go to the Soviet Union also conflict with Marxist imperatives: “Russians treated

Americans who came to live there like kings.” It is not equality that attracts Baxter to the Soviet Union but luxury and social importance. By not attempting to live, as Folks puts it, “coherently,” Baxter, like Sims, acts in complete freedom from his espoused principles; in Folks’s view he “can poach while claiming he is not poaching.” He can foster Marxism while acting in complete self-interest. Baxter can justify himself, acting any way he pleases, because he can manipulate language to camouflage his agendas; deploying a language unfixed from consensual meaning, Baxter offers a set of fluid, changeable justifications for why he does what he does. Because Baxter knows that narratives—as Ford admits to Gregory C. Morris in *Talking Up a Storm: Voices of the New West* (1994)—offer no “final explanations” for “human conduct” (108), the process of storytelling becomes an evasive tactic, for putting off “final” or “summary” positions; the interplay between various narrative constructs allows Baxter a license unacceptable to society, as represented by Les and Aileen. Though hypocrisy permits Baxter unlimited movement and jurisdiction, it ultimately prevents him from sustaining human relationships, which cannot survive without dependable, mutually assured linguistic coordinates. Lacking Nola’s, Les’s or Troy’s willingness to admit and observe solipsism, leaves Baxter “scared” (232), frightened, deprived of even the meagre reassurances that console the other characters.

The stories of *Rock Springs* depict a provisional synthesis of idea and act; as in Sims’s case, no long-range ideational or conceptual context exists for activity, only a momentary reconciliation between act and thinking specified by immediate concerns.<sup>34</sup> In the wider context, then, Ford leads us to understand that people deprived of a meaningful history and relationships, deprived of a place in the economy, will react and think with an arbitrariness equal to that of the society around them, an arbitrariness Michael Trussler—in his essay, “‘Famous Times’: Historicity in the Short Fiction of Richard Ford and Raymond Carver” (1994)—describes as the “dissonance, rather than cohesion among the various stories” (39). Unanchored from definitive history, characters act without considering precedent or antecedent. David Crouse, in his article, “Resisting Reduction: Closure in Richard Ford’s *Rock Springs* and Alice Munro’s



*Friend of My Youth* (1995), identifies Ford's opposition to the tradition of summational "epiphanies" at the end of his stories, as originating from "fictional worlds . . . complex to the point of confusion" (52). Echoing similar statements made by Ford himself, Crouse suggests that Ford's stories place "more and more responsibility for interpretation on the shoulders of the reader" (53). The stories therefore invite readerly interpretation, refusing to supply definitive solutions. As we witness the characters within the story attempting to interpret and makes sense of their situations, arriving at "multiple and possibly contradictory epiphanies" (Crouse 53), the text forces readers to question their own suppositions. Success in the "struggle for humanity" proceeds from the extent to which characters can manipulate available language, the extent to which they claim the imaginary, and the degree of self-consciousness attained in the foray against solipsism. In each case, their hypocrisy—the incoherence manifested between theory and practice, word and deed—reflects a world governed by incoherence. By bringing aesthetic forms (story) to bear on experience, characters manipulate the disparity between word and deed to reconfigure the world into terms more suitable to themselves. Hypocrisy becomes the *realpolitik* of individuals cut off from any possibility of coherent community values (except a coherence in the shared condition of fragmentation, alienation, atomisation).

#### B. Freedoms of Late-Industrial Capital

Dirty realism probes the extreme limits of personal freedom. The hypocrisy of dirty realism celebrates selfhood, in all its whims and capriciousness. The unreliability of a hypocritical practice ultimately prevents any kind of communal enterprise; co-operation requires reliability. Dirty realism's specificity turns almost totally exclusive at this point, a retreat into solipsism.

Charles Bukowski exhibits a sheer joy in renouncing all accountability. The title itself of his verse collection, *You Get So Alone at Times That It Just Makes Sense* (1986), rationalises isolation as the end logic of a societal condition of incoherence and divisiveness. His poem, "together," depicts a moment of impulsive immediacy. The title's irony becomes apparent near the end of the poem:

then I had a good roaring  
 drink  
 and I thought, we are all  
 doomed  
 together, that's all there is  
 to  
 it. (that's all there was  
 to that particular drink, just like all the others.) (129)

Bukowski achieves epiphany after his drinking buddies fall asleep; his realisation and its counter-realisation arrive in a moment of isolation; they also keep him isolated. The word “particular” denotes dirty realism’s approach to “truth.” “Truth” belongs to the moment of its articulation, remaining absolute, and ardently believed, but only within that moment. In this way, Bukowski’s particulars are universal. However, a following sentence or utterance may present a contrary or opposing truth—again absolute for that moment—that another truth in turn replaces; the poem binds these disparate absolutes in a wholeness; the entirety of the text serving as the site of polar opposition.

Bukowski’s free verse poetic form endorses inconsistency. He breaks lines and juxtaposes the key words, “drink” and “doomed,” against minor ones, “to” and “it,” by placing them prominently alone on lines; this arbitrariness challenges conventions and provokes our disdain. His later poetry (from which this sample comes) employs a diction so stripped down, so plain and apparently impromptu that his work pre-empts any appreciation of rigorous poetic effort; Daniel Waldron, in his introduction to Steve Richmond’s *Spinning off Bukowski* (1996), claims: “He [Bukowski] wrote compulsively, and tells how in the depths of his poverty, broke, freezing, he found a pencil stub and wrote ‘in the margins of dirty newspapers’ because nothing else was available” (7); and Bukowski upholds this mythic image of himself as a “compulsive” writer in the poem, “moving up the ladder,” in *Septuagenarian Stew* (1990), where his “editor and publisher” visits to inquire about recent poetry and, opening the closet, finds:

a  
 mountain of paper, single  
 sheets that had been stacked, stuffed and  
 thrown in there, they came  
 falling out. (227)

Later poems such as “moving up the ladder” are prose notes invaded by random line breaks.

Bukowski attacks the notion of a regulated, "poetic" poetry in a letter to James Boyar May: "But I say, why not? What the hell's wrong with a 6 or 7 or 37 line long prose statement that is broken into the readable advantage and clearness of the poem-form? . . . Must we always DEFINE AND CLASSIFY what is done? Can't, for God's sake, can't ART be ART without a program and numbers" (12). For Bukowski, the poem provides a medium for artistic caprice; he displaces the "program" of poetry for a poetry of pure "art." The form of a poem such as "together," then, inclines towards both a consciously poetic and anti-poetic practice, mirroring the suspended contradictions we find within its language itself. The absolutism of "we are all doomed" counterbalances, and is counterbalanced by, "that's all there was to that particular drink"; the absolute stands alongside the particular; the next statement "just like all the others," sets this drink, and its verdict, against the "other" drinks and theirs. The poem erects a series of absolutes. Unsurprisingly, Bukowski ends not with an image of "doom" but with one of salvation, the poet carrying an unconscious woman to her bed and ruminating on plenitude: "thinking, / well, I've gotten / this far / and that's plenty" (130). The closing statement expresses gratitude, not pessimism. The final image of woman and neighbour sleeping quietly resonates with peace.

Cherkovski's *Whitman's Wild Children* compounds Bukowski with Whitman through a paradoxical adherence to individuality and *community*:

Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, written in 1855, was a declaration of independence from conventions; it stood as a living example of what a man might create on his own terms, listening to his own voice. . . . *Leaves of Grass* praised the individual's uniqueness and called for a renewed understanding of our commonality. Whitman's poem rings with interconnectedness, though he stood alone. (xi)

Again we have conflicting oppositions, "independence from conventions" versus "a living example," "[individual] uniqueness" versus "commonality," "interconnectedness" and "[standing] alone." A contained opposition permeates Cherkovski's depiction of Whitman. This containment similarly characterises his view of Bukowski's inherited individuality:

His was a natural voice for the dispossessed. Not a crusader, still he led the charge by the single-mindedness of his vision. In

much of the poetry of his contemporaries, the jargon of the leftist movement entered the poems, especially in protesting social and economic injustices. Bukowski's protest had the feel of the outsider who lived beyond all limits and ideologies. (12)

Bukowski does, more than any other dirty realist, attempt a representative voice "for the dispossessed," but such attempts focus on conditions rather than solutions; Cherkovski notes that Bukowski offered "no escape route from the problems he identified" (33). Bukowski never resorts to social and economic "protest," never employs any kind of "leftist" "jargon" in addressing the hardships of the working- and underclass. As Buford points out, the poems do not "protest" but depict the "occasion" for it. The excerpt's final sentence elucidates the tenuous relationship between dirty realism and politics, implying that Bukowski attempted to live without limits (a vague term that encompasses ethical and moral configurations of behaviour, since configurations always imply do's and don'ts, or *limits*), but, more importantly, to live without evincing one particular ideology.<sup>35</sup> The lack of "ideology" doesn't mean that Bukowski cannot conceive a political attitude, but that he refuses to endorse one. He speaks for "the dispossessed" yet regards himself as an "outsider"; in other words, Bukowski both participates in communal affiliation (that of the "dispossessed") and rejects it (regarding himself as an "outsider"). Bukowski's texts continually render their author's ideology ambiguous and contradictory.

Dirty realism's ideological overdetermination confuses investigation into its political aspirations, and constantly refers the critic back to the narrator's subject position; in this way, the narration or writing—as is the case with minimalist writing—assumes the centre of attention. This rabid individuality, this fixation on the aesthetic, Cherkovski suggests, dates from Whitman: "Bukowski never consciously wrote an anti-war poem. His war is the war within, the war to remain an individual in the face of the mutilating effects of our society. *War All the Time* reflects this continuing battle to free oneself of the brutal system stifling the Whitmanic song of the self" (34). The "mutilation" of the individual by social forces appears most forcedly in Bukowski's novel on labour, *Factotum* (1975), where he describes the effects of wage labour upon the underclass, and where the machinery of late capital "stifles" the

individual from enjoying the promise of American democracy so effusively described by Whitman in *Song of Myself*.<sup>36</sup> Rather than celebrating or lauding the capitalist landscape of America, Bukowski mourns the damaged, “mutilated” psyches and bodies rendered to the pursuit of money and social “advancement.” Throughout, Bukowski’s poems and stories respond to the “stifling” oppression not only of “preconceptions of how a poem should be shaped” (29), “the urban landscape” (22), or “America itself” (15), but to the crusading “anti-war,” “leftist” politics of the 1960s. The “mutilation” appears on all fronts, the result of ideology on all sides of the American political spectrum.

As in Ford’s “Winterkill,” Bukowski perceives in political affiliation the displacement of the individual by the consensual, contractual obligations and responsibilities mass movements require to enact their strategies. On a deeper level, however, I will argue, following Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that Bukowski’s attitude towards communal enterprise in fact expresses an awareness of the inescapable atomisation characteristic of late-industrial capital, a fracturing of society into “monads” (141) under the auspices of a market-driven democracy. Bukowski’s hypocrisy—his attitude as outsider and insider, his adopting and discarding of various moral and ethical principles—responds to capital’s commodification, and “culturalization,” of all facets of American life, the conscription, as Fredric Jameson notes in *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, of virtually every available cultural effort into the consumer program (49). Bukowski’s “monadic” hypocrisy only replicates, and tactically responds to, the larger hypocrisy at work in the society around him. The freedom of contradiction Bukowski’s texts celebrate replicates the liberty of unrestricted trespass taken by the capitalist system.

The antagonism between a state run service and Bukowski the unreliable clerk powers such novels as *Post Office*. Bukowski’s hypocrisy becomes valorised in relation to a status quo. Encountering institutionalised hypocrisy, Bukowski demands the institutional figureheads acknowledge it. In *Post Office*, Hank argues with a supervisor who reprimands him for not “sticking a tray” in the allotted time; according to the supervisor, Hank, in effect, owes the post

office the difference between the allotted time and the time it took him to stick the tray. Hank responds: "Let's say I stick a tray in 8 minutes. According to the time-tested standard I have saved the post office 15 minutes. Now can I take these 15 minutes and go down to the cafeteria, have a slice of pie with ice cream, watch t.v. and come back" (105)? Naturally, the supervisor replies in the emphatic negative. Bukowski satirises institutions for their refusal to admit their hypocrisy, for their concealment behind a jargon masquerading as consistent (typified by the reproduction of official complaints against Hank in the fifth chapter of *Post Office*). Bukowski demands a language "honest" in acknowledging its own contradictions (while, hypocritically, his own language often obscures or attempts to "explain away" his own contradictions – which effectively muddies the moral impact of much of Bukowski's satire, but not the accuracy of its examination). Bukowski demands an admission of inconsistency, which would in turn break down institutionalised barriers between the individual and corporation. Bukowski's hypocrisy protests against, and co-opts (his protest, in fact, depends on co-optation, since he requires us to acknowledge that his display of hypocrisy echoes that of his social surroundings), the same unacknowledged practice in society. The hypocrisy aesthetic of Bukowski's "realism" is therefore an attempt at verisimilitude, at textually reproducing the "reality" of his historical moment.

#### *V. Postmodern Realities*

##### A. Hemingway's Burial

Dirty realism's attempt to depict the latter half of the twentieth century involves an elaboration and warping of previous strategies for verisimilitude. Carver, Ford, Bukowski and Jarman have all variously cited the influence of perhaps the most important twentieth-century realist, Ernest Hemingway.<sup>37</sup> While not all dirty realists equally admit to liking Hemingway, their mention of him generally involves referral to his texts as the standard against which they define their own realistic programs. A study of Hemingway's craft in relation to dirty realist texts conveys, by contrast, the application of an earlier realistic technique to the problems of representing the "reality" of postmodernity.

Hemingway, both as modernist and realist, influenced dirty realism. Sheldon Norman Grebstein, in his study, *Hemingway's Craft* (1973), underscores the relevant features of Hemingway's style. He refers to Hemingway's deceptive clarity, which alludes to emotional depth (xv), his avoidance of "direct exposition of theme, didactic description or discussion of character" (2), and, most importantly, the "zero ending":

which is exactly the contrary of the traditional well-made endings of nineteenth-century fiction, or to the kind of ending O. Henry carried almost to parody: the surprise-resolution neatly knotting up separate strands of plot by an ingenious twist of plot or revelation of character. The whole point of the zero ending is irresolution—to leave the reader suspended among the apparently unconnected lines of character and action, consequently forcing him back upon his own resources of insight and imagination. (2)

Grebstein's point is not that the "zero ending" validates all responses on the part of the reader, but rather that, because "lines of character and action" do not connect, the "irresolution" of the ending causes the reader to question the ways in which text manipulates the conclusions he or she draws. Certainly, any ending, no matter how disparate its elements, can only call to mind a limited number of possibilities and responses; however, Hemingway's ending does not intend to make the reader draw up a list of possibilities but to reflect on his or her position in relation to the text as an aesthetic, rather than documentary, artefact.

Dirty realism, as already stated, regards "oppositions" as an intrinsic aspect of "human experience" (Grebstein 26).<sup>38</sup> If we understand oppositions as incongruous elements of a personality, then the word describes "character" not only in Hemingway but in dirty realism as well; and Hemingway's structure—opacity, inexplicability, and suggestion rather than statement—reflects an experience of the human. Like Hemingway, dirty realists string together details in "suspension" without advising the reader on how to make "connections." However, Grebstein says that Hemingway's surfaces, such as the "burned-over stretch of hillside" in "Big Two-Hearted River: Part One," included in *In Our Time* (1925), "recreates" the "source" of an emotion (26), in this case Nick's recovery from trauma. Here, dirty realists differ from Hemingway by obstructing easy psychological or emotional identifications; more often than not

the simplicity of their surfaces represents a playing-upon, or subversion, of Hemingway's "structural design," "pattern," and summary "revelation" (26). They subvert the promises and expectations inherent to Hemingway's technique to convey the reality of a world in which simulation and pastiche confound our grasp of an empirical reality.

If readers find an iceberg under the "tip" of Hemingway's language, they find open ocean under dirty realism's; the "tip" of language is all there is. While Hemingway's language attempted to convey a precise reality, dirty realism's language illustrates how reality is a reified language. Dirty realism shimmies between empiricism and the idea that reality is nothing more than a particular configuration of text, a convincing act of simulation. A comparison of *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) and *Post Office*, respectively, illustrates dirty realism's subversion of Hemingway.

It seems she had one hemorrhage after another. They couldn't stop it. I went into the room and stayed with Catherine until she died. She was unconscious all the time, and it did not take her very long to die. (331)

The priest read his thing. I didn't listen. There was the coffin. What had been Betty was in there. It was very hot. The sun came down in one yellow sheet. A fly circled around. Halfway through the halfway funeral two guys in working clothes came carrying my wreath. The roses were dead, dead and dying in the heat, and they leaned the thing up against a nearby tree. Near the end of the service my wreath leaned forward and fell flat on its face. Nobody picked it up. Then it was over. (67-68)

Though Hemingway and Bukowski both avoid describing their characters' emotional interior during the death and funeral, they do not produce a similar effect; Hemingway's excerpt attempts to convey an unemotional, reportorial record of Catherine's death, while Bukowski's excerpt flaunts its inability to give a proper "objective" report. Syntax and style account for the difference. Hemingway, for instance, begins his paragraph with "seems," suggesting Frederick Henry's powerlessness to perceive anything immaterial about Catherine's death. The vagueness of "they" in the next sentence, rather than the more precise "doctors," implies a groping after an unknown quantity, a saving, metaphysical agency Henry would like to name. The abruptness of Hemingway's first two sentences mirrors the limitations of Henry's cognition<sup>39</sup>; the length of the



following sentences, both ending with conjugations of the verb “to die,” testifies to duration, to the length of time Henry, deprived of mental or physical resources, must wait for Catherine’s death; the verb also underscores, by repetition, the opacity of Catherine’s situation, the inability of words to render experience, as well as Henry’s inability to enter cognitively into her reality. Hemingway stresses the limitations of language, and by stressing these limitations, gestures at the turmoil under the surface, as well as the notion of an empirical reality outside syntax.

Conversely, Bukowski’s imprecision in using the word “thing” in his first sentence illustrates not a grasping after an understanding past the literal but a combination of *laissez faire* attitude and slang—a concern with image and style. Also, Bukowski’s sentences do not follow the rhythmical modulation of Hemingway. The laconic assertion “What had been Betty was in there” so closely approximates the preceding and following sentences that it becomes lost, glossed over. When Bukowski does depart from the fast, rapid-fire, listing of description, he recalls neither Betty’s nor his own situation, but the physicality of flowers; the repetition of “halfway” produces a sing-song rather than Hemingway’s dirge-effect. Bukowski’s writing mirrors the funeral’s cheapness and tawdriness, an impression fortified by the generic description: “two guys in working clothes.” The following sentence again uses the repetition of “dead” as well as long “e” vowel sounds to create a sing-song. The final sentence—“Then it was over”—unlike Hemingway’s “die,” which poses the inexpressibility of Henry’s emotions, means only what it says. Bukowski fixes not on what lies beneath telling but telling itself; and Betty’s funeral remains a told moment; it ends with the paragraph. For Hemingway, the inexplicability of death evinces an empirical and common reality outside language; Bukowski regards the event strictly as an exercise in literary style, drawing our attention to the surfaces of pastiche and simulation.

### B. Democracy

Both the stripped-down work of Bukowski and Carver and the lyrical fiction of Ford and Jarman exhibit an awareness of reality as lexicon; that dirty realism jettisons depth for self-conscious stylistics implies their recognition of the detachment of words from the genuine. In a

world of simulacra, dirty realism posits a verisimilitude whose reality principle is the inefficacy of representation. Dirty realists parody Hemingway not for his emotional intensity through verbal thrift, but for verbal thrift itself. This fixation on language places these writers' realism in a postmodern context. This relation to language informs a central problem of dirty realism: how to convey reality when the tool for apprehending it (language) becomes primarily significant for its style (i.e. its own contours, its ability to mask, overwrite and revision rather than reveal)? Prose, then, constantly refers us back to reading, to our own apprehension, through a juxtaposition of style and the "thing" the writing seems to uncover; dirty realist prose, extending the implications of this juxtaposition further, calls our attention to the narrative forms, aesthetic and social, that we participate in and endorse. The prose of dirty realism reveals a historical moment exemplified by "clutter," "simulation," and the loss of belief in the narratives of "ideology." By calling attention to these traits in contemporary society, dirty realism asks that we observe our own social and historical positions.<sup>40</sup>

Dirty realism shifts the writing of realism in a more democratic direction than did Hemingway's fiction, as Grebstein points out: "Hemingway's craft . . . so orders [the reader's experience] that the revelation[s] [seem] to arise from within the reader, without his consciousness that the writer has bestowed a great gift upon him" (26). The reader apprehends Henry's grief through Hemingway's careful modulation of prose rhythms and vocabulary choices; Bukowski's text, conversely, warns the reader against the influence of words—in effect, the writing posits the author not above (or hidden from) the reader's "consciousness," but alongside it. Bukowski constantly cautions us against surrender to, and manipulation by, another's text; for text, in the world of postmodern realism, has become a tool of hidden agendas, dominant systems and corporate control.<sup>41</sup> Thomas Hill Schaub, in *American Fiction in the Cold War* (1991), argues that Cold War criticism found the unified, controlling technique of earlier, pre-WW II fiction reflective of the growth of totalitarianism during the 1920s and 1930s; in Schaub's thesis, postwar critics encouraged a "democratic" aesthetic by valorising the appearance of conceptual, philosophical, political diversity—even contradiction—in the fictional

text (35-36). The stress on linguistic indeterminacy marks one method, on dirty realism's part, of opening the text to this diversity, of wresting fiction from totalitarian control by the author and permitting a democratic, readerly access to the construction of meaning. Bukowski's slangy phrasing ("read his thing") and dismissive, off-hand remarks ("Then it was over") leave the constructedness of his text, its irreverence, open to readerly scrutiny. Bukowski, in effect, dares us to *not follow along* with his narrative, to not surrender our perception to his guidance and control.

Suspicious of the way received modes of language channel and determine how we think of experience, dirty realism calls attention to language as ordering principle of reality. Realism, in the postwar period therefore demands that authors alert the reader's attention, first and foremost, to the way in which apprehension of reality is the effect of particular narrative styles, strategies and expectations. Bukowski's realism counters that of Hemingway by making readers hyper-conscious that their "revelations" arrive from their relation to the text and textual conventions, rather than the mediation of reality by language. Bukowski's style draws attention to a narrative consciousness—the author's—separate from the reader. The superficiality of the writing enforces a "democracy" by avoiding the "unstated" manipulation Grebstein finds in Hemingway. Bukowski continually highlights his position as an individual, an artist with no claims of solidarity with the readership, either on an aesthetic or political level.<sup>42</sup>

Mark Anthony Jarman likewise describes a burial that serves as a pastiche of Hemingway's aesthetic. In *Salvage King Ya!*, Drinkwater and his friend, Shirt Is Blue, bury a beloved dog, an action Jarman renders in a writing that calls more attention to its stylistic sheen than to the reality of grief.

Shirt is Blue drops her body down from this limbo and into the mountain and her eyes and mouth open suddenly, alive with the motion, really looking alive, as if Ubo sees what is right below in the sandy mountain and I expect the dog to stagger up one more time, wanting insanely to chase her damn stick, not to lie in the wet hole under the alpine trees but she's still quite dead and I'm not going to weep but do and walk away to sit on a rock by a cliff, whispering *poor Ubo, poor Ubo*, over and over as small rocks click down upon her. (36)

The parataxis begins an onrush of lyricism rather than grief. The parataxis appears for stylistic purposes, for its own sake. The repetitions of the dog's name and the word "alive," as well as the doubling back of "and I'm not going to weep but do" effect a rhythm antithetical to mourning. Jarman's repetitions recall the end of *A Farewell To Arms*, where Henry prays: "Don't let her die. Oh, God, please don't let her die. I'll do anything for you if you won't let her die. Please, please, please, dear God, don't let her die" (330). Hemingway's excessive repetition (and this excerpt only samples what goes on for an entire paragraph) conveys Henry's desperation at the impending loss of Catherine. But Jarman doesn't utilise excess as Hemingway does. Whereas Hemingway conveys desperation through a prose so hysterical that it replicates Henry's pain for the reader, Jarman's prose offers a grief so stylised that its reading brings pleasure (a pleasure, however, highly conscious of itself as such). Contradictions within the writing play out stylistically to highlight a highly polished entertainment disguised as the writing of grief. Where Hemingway recreates the keenness of Henry's desperation in an ugly turn of style, Jarman's writing commodifies grief, wrapping it in a shiny, rhythmical prose that states what it does not imply. Though the rhythms sound elegiac, they direct our attention, as all elegies do, towards the forms, conventions and tropes of expression rather than its cause.

While Jarman renders the elegiac with a technique different from that of Bukowski, he does so by similarly tuning us into the stylistic surfaces of the writing. Jarman plays upon Bakhtin's linguistic tensions, between the centripetal elegiac expression and the actual, centrifugal desire to speak grief outside of linguistic conventions. He follows this excerpt with a rhythmically contrasting near-comical set of rhetorical questions: "Why don't I care as much about what I'm doing to Intended? To people? Perhaps because they're not dead yet. Who makes more demands?" (36). The elegiac effect, which results from the writing's explicit, stylistic character, precedes a comic one, where short sentences show the absurdity of his reactions and the way they contrast, inconsistently, with his treatment of fellow human beings. The sudden shift in Jarman's emotion and writing style again alert us to stylistic surfaces and, therefore, to the necessity for new verbal forms to convey the actuality of grief.

As in Bukowski's text, Jarman's meaning resides within a particular writer/text or

reader/text relationship.<sup>43</sup> These authors continuously confront the reader with the instant pleasures of text, with their moment of consumption, and take an anti-academic stance on further explication. Bukowski and Jarman both propose a visceral textual encounter. This refusal to elaborate or corroborate meaning falls in with the wider dialectic in dirty realism between art and politics, between the text as an aesthetic object and cultural artefact. As usual, Jarman plays it both ways, refusing to endorse any particular reading in favour of an immediate relationship with text, while the writing constantly reminds us of the ways writing commodifies experience. As Alexander Varty put it, "Jarman's dependence on craft at the expense of character development and plot may leave some readers cold, but not those who thrill to a well-turned phrase" (31). Jarman's writing abandons the devices of "plot" and "character," and the way in which they manipulate expectation, for a writing focused almost exclusively on the "well-turned phrase," an encounter with style and surface not grounded in communication or transmission of ideas; the reader appropriates pleasure from the text as he or she chooses. Writing becomes a commodity insofar as it attempts to engage as wide a market as possible (by authorising everything). Democracy becomes a form of egalitarian commodity access.

Richard Ford, in the novella, "Occidentals," included in the collection *Women With Men* (1997), depicts a reaction to the death of a loved one in an equally explicit manner:

But he had learned something. He had commenced a new era in his life. There *were* eras. That much was unquestionable. They, he and Helen, had failed to make up a song. And yet, oddly, this would all be over by Christmas. He hadn't even written a letter to his parents. But in the time that remained here, he would. A long letter. And in his letter he would try as best he could, and with the many complications that would need detailing, to explain to them all that had happened to him here and what new ideas he had for the future. (255)

The ending of the story (like the ending to *Post Office*, as well as those in some of Carver's short stories, such as "Put Yourself in My Shoes") loops back to its beginning as we realise that Charley Matthews's "letter" takes the shape of the story we have just finished reading. This enclosure within the circularity of text does not bother Ford. In fact, this story testifies to his belief in the power of language to "explain" the "era" that came and went with his vacation in

Paris. At the same time, this circularity emits sinister overtones when we realise the repetitive pattern means Charley will never reveal what new “ideas” he has “for the future,” that, despite the lessons gained, he returns to the same old modes of behaviour. Ford’s language remains ambivalent, serving as a site for understanding as well as paralysis, a position both exalted and limited, again recalling Bakhtin’s site of struggle between a static but reassuring monologism and the protean shifting of heteroglossia (forces that exert a pull from without the story). In this case, following the loop backwards allows for an unbalancing *as well as* a reaffirmation of textual stability by reminding us of the story’s self-containment and what it leaves out. Also, if a life breaks down into “eras” then why deploy a circular, looping narrative that so effectively counters the idea? The story plays out both ironically and straight, giving Charley’s words the weight of conviction but embedding them within a structure that contests his assertions. Such manoeuvring effectively draws our attention to the simultaneous function of mutually exclusive impulses.

The answer to the dilemma of the conflict between the linear and circular in Ford’s text involves the presence of the reader. Just before the ending, Matthews visits his French editor, Madame de Grenelle, who makes the following observations about his novel: “‘Your book has the ring of actuality about it,’ she went on. ‘It’s fascinating. . . . It is your story, I think. The predicament. . . . Often, of course, you learn what your book is about after you write it. Sometimes after someone translates it and tells you’” (253). Ford invites the reader to “translate” the text into completion.<sup>44</sup> The way out of the “loop,” to reconcile the divergent impulses of the text, the way in which it becomes an “era” rather than a repetition involves the reader’s individual perception. Each reading or reader of the text translates the narrative into a context viable to a particular position or time; it becomes an “era” for the reader, and subsequent readings, if they occur, subsequent eras (whose demarcation, Ford reminds us, occur not because of the text but in our relation to it, in our ability to transpose it into our own context). The “ring of actuality” (i.e. the *echo* of actuality, or simulation) produces a “fascination” in the reader, who then applies the author’s story to various “predicaments” that

may or may not reflect the author's intention. Ford deliberately relinquishes authority.

Yet, at the same time, by liberating himself from the position of textual authority, as textual centre, by placing more of the interpretative burden on the shoulders of the reader, Ford complicates the reader's position. Crouse comments directly on Ford's unwillingness to impinge on readerly interpretation. Pointing to Ford's "contradictory epiphanies" (53), Crouse remarks upon the degree of open-endedness in Ford's text, its careful equipoise between, and awareness of, reification into "message" and commodity, and leaving gaps in the consistency of its structure in order to enable readerly intervention. Crouse could easily say the same of all dirty realism, since the varying ideologies presented, the contradictory sets of interpretation, and the hypocritical actions and gestures of the characters combine to challenge any attempt at constructing root causes or consistent visions of the work. Ford's texts emerge with democratic force: their contradictions and tensions riding the surface for readers to engage. In permitting intervention, Ford alerts the reader to the problematic of language. While the text promotes readerly agency, it simultaneously hinders it by using the static structure of the text itself to reflect the static epistemological and linguistic "loops" of the postmodern condition. If democracy is a state wherein everyone has a voice, then it is also a state wherein the multitude of conflicting voices often render strategic activity inoperable.

Dirty realism's democratic voice, I would argue, results from, and reacts to, a breakdown of any sort of programmatic aesthetic, political, or epistemological vision in the society around it. Its salient characteristics—contradiction, hypocrisy, the plural—convey the reality of a world dominated by surfaces and incoherent details. Market forces determine reality, and dirty realism's writing replicates the action of market forces in an aesthetic context. Like Hemingway, and the naturalist authors before and after him, dirty realism interrogates determinism: the action of the surrounding society upon the subject.

### C. Naturalist Authority

As shown by the comparison to Hemingway, dirty realism's authors write out of a tradition of American realism, particularly naturalism. Dirty realism, I would argue, comes out of the

“ideational” literature that Roger Seamon<sup>45</sup> examines in his article, “Naturalist Narratives and Ideational Context: A Theory of American Naturalist Fiction.” Seamon describes naturalist literature as “openly . . . [dependent] on theory” (47). He isolates this “theory” as an amalgam of “philosophical ideas such as materialism and determinism, Darwinian biological theory, and the rejection of various moral and artistic conventions that were deeply embedded in the idea of fiction” (48). Naturalism, according to Seamon, defined experience through particular models of thought prominent at the close of the nineteenth, and beginning of the twentieth, centuries. In the words of Frank Norris’s *The Responsibilities of the Novelist* (1903), naturalism “draws conclusions” (203); the notion of the “conclusive” and the possibility of its attainment through conceptual/epistemological models also occupies dirty realism.

Dirty realism likewise relies upon theory, though this reliance manifests in garbled theory<sup>46</sup> rather than the supposedly consistent platform elaborated by Norris. The famous “epiphanies” of dirty realism, as noted by Crouse, more often than not involve a loss of knowledge rather than gaining of insight—Carver’s “Cathedral,” in the collection of the same name, for example, ends with epiphanic “negation:” “My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn’t feel like I was inside anything” (228). Dirty realism’s catharsis involves not summary insight but an entry into a series of unanswerable questions (Ford’s “Rock Springs”) or a region impenetrable to thought, the “nowhere” area of “Cathedral’s” narrator; also, the narrator’s release does not so much inform the reader (we are aware from the start that he does not personify an exemplary attitude) as the character itself. Pleasure in Carver comes from watching the narrator make the realisation the reader *brought to the story from the start* and for the reader to subsequently question, as a result of the story’s open-ended, interpretative invitation, the suppositions through which he or she filters the narrator’s epiphany. Like naturalism, then, the texts of dirty realism recall theory, though in a negative, rather than affirmative, context.

Seamon offers a useful model for further comparing naturalism to dirty realism by elaborating the distinction between the terms “story” and “discourse:”



The best way to grasp the distinction is to say that what the characters are or could be aware of is part of the *story*, while the awareness shared by authors and audiences which is sealed off from the fictive world is the *discourse*. In the dream (though not the actuality) of realism there is no discourse, only the fictive world in its immediacy; but naturalist stories are both openly and deeply embedded in discourse.<sup>47</sup> (49)

The difference between “realism” (though Seamon means the turn-of-the-century realism attributed to Henry James) and naturalism manifests in the leaning of the latter towards “implicit” “conclusions” evident to the reader. According to Seamon, traditional realism—and to some degree dirty realism—tried to avoid the development of discernible “discourse” in the text; it attempted to convey the world with “immediacy,” without intrusion of a narrative consciousness.<sup>48</sup> Intention proves essential in discussing the movement in American writing from realism to naturalism to dirty realism. Most importantly, Seamon finds in naturalism a concern with style similar to that of dirty realism, but to a quite different end: “The rejection of fine writing was a commonplace in the naturalist credos, whose common rationale was that the writer was interested in truth. . . . Not writing well was another way of denying the audience pleasure” (55-56).<sup>49</sup> Seamon and other scholars (such as Christopher Wilson) see naturalists purposefully stripping their writing style of pleasure to reflect the “pervasive joylessness” (53) of a world of wage labour. By “marking” their “product,” i.e. the writing, with “the signs of the labor it cost” (54),<sup>50</sup> naturalism instilled within the audience an “outrage” against the conventions and expectations that underlay the mass consumption of fiction: “The pleasureless narrative rouses guilt in the complacent bourgeois reader, which is not assuaged by the author’s offering a reformist or sentimental solidarity with the audience. This leads to outrage against the author, who has violated the contract that fiction edify and/or please” (56). Naturalism tried to change the effect of fiction from a sedative into a stimulant—into an educational tool that did more than reinforce an ineffectual bourgeois ethic; the self-reflexive stylistics of their fiction aggressively confronted the conscription of the arts, in the form of pleasing commodities, into the system of capital.<sup>51</sup> The “joyless” reading they offered meant to shock the audience out of its stupor. To this end naturalism attempted “to write in an empirical manner and to demonstrate or illustrate the operation of certain laws” (53). By using style to raise audience

awareness, naturalism could therefore more handily alert its readership to various agendas.

Dirty realism picks up where naturalism left off in recognising that the “empirical manner” and “certain laws” the naturalists co-opted themselves represent verbal and syntactical constructs that offer a self-righteously “heroic” (56) pose: “They [the naturalists] flog themselves with the barrenness of both the moral and the sensual life, but in return they understand themselves as heroically able to face a world that others avoid” (58). The authority of naturalism provided an analgesic all its own. As naturalism felt “dis-illusioned” (52) through the revelations of science, Darwinism, Freudianism, and Marxism, dirty realism feels “unillusioned” even by the authority of these “theories.” As Hall points out, the “trans-historical” aspect of these theories, particularly vulgar Marxism,<sup>52</sup> clashes with the historical specificity that dirty realism *also* indulges:

This [structuralist] approach [to the cultural subject] clearly identifies a gap, not only in structuralism but in Marxism itself. The problem is that the manner in which this “subject” of culture is conceptualized is of a trans-historical and “universal” character: it addresses the subject-in-general, not historically-determinate social subjects, or socially determinate particular languages. (623)

Hall points to a weakness in Marxism acknowledged by Marx himself in the 1867 “Preface” to *Capital*: “But here individuals are dealt with only insofar as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class relations and class interests” (7). Marx provides a built-in critique of himself as a historically specific subject, a critique that later Marxists such as Hall take up as a problematic of Marxism; this problematic states that the subject of Marxism remains a “creature” of “the economic formation of society” as a “natural history” (7). In other words, Marx never loses sight of the “particularity” of the “relations” and “interests” his study envisions. Marx recognises his own reliance on the historical moment, and highlights the necessary vigilance of historical context. Hall notes that any conceptualisation of the cultural “subject” that does not first and foremost recognise the historically constructed, socially contingent, character of all concepts, risks reification into a “trans-historical” abstraction ignorant of its defining principal: history. By elevating the concept above history, by removing

it from historical causation, i.e. making it true not just for the context one is writing about, but for all historical contexts, one obscures the “historically-determinate,” or temporally particular, aspect of all “subjects,” including Marxism itself. Historical generalisations, therefore, obscure the specificity of the conditions that give rise to historical events. The heroic stance against conventional morality and accepted epistemology granted naturalists an “authority” no longer viable to dirty realists, who exist in a world where any form of “authority” is immediately suspect as a reified construction of forces unwilling to envision history as fluid, changeable and contingent, forces that depend upon the determination of history from theory rather than the recognition that history itself elaborates any given theory. Any systematic, coherent “discourse” elaborates a system of control, a semiotic structure that supplants the ungraspable movements of history (which cannot be grasped in their totality, i.e. we can never contain, thereby putting us at a distance from, or outside, the historical real) with a vocabulary whose central aim is maintaining its dominance.<sup>53</sup>

For dirty realism, history—as Richard Ford points out in *Independence Day*—means, first and foremost, what Fredric Jameson, in *Marxism and Form*, calls “the emergence of the concrete” (322)—such as a baseball hitting a young boy (361), rather than a trans-historical abstraction (although the subsequent process of “telling” history involves the elaboration, misconstruing and eventual burial of the actual under competing and contradictory generalisations, in turn undone by further unaccounted-for happenings). Determinism remains highly suspect for dirty realism, since the act of determining determinism involves the uncertain and shifting “realities” of linguistic construction. But dirty realism, like naturalism, recognises that historical discourse not only happens, but happens *inevitably*. However, in continuing to investigate determinism, dirty realism decides that it cannot heroically “face the world” because it cannot, in totality, view the world, except through mediation or the unrecoverable instance of “accident.” Aware that no clear demarcation exists between the fictional and real—what Nadel calls “a cognizance of the fissure between ‘history’ and ‘event’” (3)—dirty realism transforms the nineteenth-century “realism” of “unmediated representation” (Seamon 48) into a postmodern “mediation of the

unmediatable.” Dirty realism complicates causality; its Clyde Griffiths may murder, but their reasons for doing so—whether the result of the machinery of capitalism and/or their unconscious sexual impulses—always remain possible interpretations among the competing interpretations of history; a scepticism towards explaining retards trans-historical theorising. Dirty realism always returns to its suppositions, suspicious of the way discourse tends to reify (as we shall see, later on, in Bobbie Ann Mason), rather than reveal, history.<sup>54</sup>

#### D. The Disappearance of History

In *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* (1969),<sup>55</sup> Bukowski offers a window on the way dirty realism shimmies between the creation of discourse and the subsequent questioning that undoes the generalisations of that discourse to reintroduce history as an ungovernable, unaccountable (in its totality) force:

men are beaten simply for the sake of *beating*; courts are places where the ending is written first and all that precedes is simply vaudeville. men are taken into rooms for questioning and come out half-men or no-men at all. some men hope for revolution but when you revolt and set up your new government you find your new government is still the same old Papa, he has only put on a cardboard mask. (76)

This excerpt illustrates Bukowski’s cynical attitude towards social improvement. He suspects legislated solutions to crime, such as law courts, and fears radical alternatives to endemic injustice, such as revolution. The “paper mask” might as well stand for the interference between theory and history created by text. In Bukowski’s universal,<sup>56</sup> across-the-board condemnation, revolutions (unless they remain, in the words of *Marxism and Form*, “permanent revolution[s]” 362) ultimately reinscribe a political will and order that maintains itself at the expense of the social, human element (and, therefore, history). True or not, for Bukowski, revolutionary movements manifest the very conditions out of which they grew. Bukowski considers legislated religion, Christianity, and political ideologies, Marxism, as one and the same: “God got out of the tree, took the snake and Eden’s tight pussy away and now you’ve got Karl Marx throwing golden apples down from the same tree, mostly in blackface” (83). Bukowski finds that the “golden apples” promised by “Edenic” (utopian), teleological theories—Christian or Marxist—

all “taste” and amount to the same; *since history is social*, society can never reach an end of history, can never transcend it. Bukowski regards the “Edenic” as a ruse perpetrated by systems whose trans-historical vantages ultimately lapse back into the historical conditions that gave rise to them. With a Cold War pessimism, Bukowski predicts the decline of all revolutions from “hopeful” uprisings into the “same old” governments, tracing their inevitable movement towards legislation, hierarchy and oppression: “Marx is only tanks moving through Prague” (86). The practice of Marx (by Soviet forces) opposes the theory of Marx in a concrete instance whose reality undermines the trans-historical vulgar Marxism which would preserve an established order and discourse (Soviet supremacy, the maintenance of the Soviet Bloc rhetoric) at the expense of immediate historical imperatives.<sup>57</sup> Soviet-style Marxism actually obscured history under an established trans-historical political, military and economic structure.

However, Bukowski’s denigrating of all revolutions itself constitutes a universal theory of the type employed by revolutionaries. Mixed with this universal, however, Bukowski delivers a message of particularity: instead of determining the originary cause of violence, he views the phenomena as circular, outside the logical “cause and effect” of social reformers, who would attempt to end violence by isolating and eliminating the “reasons” for its occurrence; in the work of Bukowski, where “men are beaten simply for the sake of *beating*,” and where revolution only necessitates and engenders further revolution, *cause is effect*.<sup>58</sup> Rather than advance a general theory about the human predicament—unlike political and religious systems that posit a narrative of progress with an identifiable causal agent (and with a prescription for reversing the “fallen” condition)—Bukowski presents himself in a series of conflicting poses or attitudes in an attempt to elude any definitive or traceable pattern. Just as the Cold War informs Bukowski’s attitude towards Russian Marxism, it also informs his view of the possibilities offered by American democracy: “what do they offer us? Humphrey or Nixon. like I said, cold shit, warm shit, it’s all shit” (85). Bukowski’s final verdict on all political systems, left- or right-wing, arrives with the last clause: “it’s all shit.” This does not stop him, however, from pushing his own brand of universal hedonism and from promoting a Bukowskian “theory” of Cold War

cynicism. As Nadel points out, postmodern writing, unlike modernism, no longer regards history as an “enemy” but as an “accomplice”; dirty realists see “writing not as recording or recollecting history but as creating it” (39). Bukowski’s “creation” of history originates in the obvious instability of historical discourse, and so his text constructs history at the same time as it disparages such constructions. In dirty realism’s view of history we see the operation of the hypocrisy aesthetic.

#### E. Heroism (Revisited) and Biography

Dirty realism’s heroism differs from naturalism’s in that it considers itself heroic for *not being able to face the world*, and for its continued activity in the face of this defeat. The heroism of dirty realism results not from bravely accepting “a world that others avoid” but from living with defeat, as elaborated by Raymond Carver in *Fires*: “The anonymous husband, barefooted, / humiliated, trying to save his life, he / is the hero of this poem” (44). Admiration springs from confessions of inability, from weakness, from protecting one’s own life at the expense of all else. Heroism demands accommodating the unheroic—cowardice, humiliation and loss; Carver, no stranger to adultery, either on his or his wife’s part, conflates his own heroism in loss with the story of Pancho Villa, to wrest history from the hands of the victors and put it into the hands of the losers. The particulars of his life transform into the particulars of the story. No longer willing to countenance a traditional heroism of prescribed values and behavioural modes, dirty realism conflates biography with writing to suggest that a willingness to scrutinise the unheroic postures of the self is, in effect, the most heroic enterprise of all. Their ability to face their inability to face the world informs the dirty realist notion of the heroic.

Both Carver and Bukowski repeatedly emphasise personal defeat or retreat as the source of their artistry, and therefore their heroism (since writing in the face of almost insurmountable adversity proves the most heroic feat of dirty realism). In the essay “Fires” Raymond Carver credits his “kids” as exercising the major influence on the development of his writing (30); the essay also suggests that the dire circumstances of his life—poverty, alcoholism, an unhappy marriage—directly contributed to the idea of contradictory states in simultaneity:

“But I learned some things along the way. One of the things I learned is that I had to bend or else break. And I also learned that it is possible to bend and break at the same time” (27). The “same time” divulges how the contradictions of Carver’s life informed his aesthetic of simultaneity; and how his victory as an author ultimately owed more to his losses and limitations than to in-born greatness. Likewise, Bukowski, as depicted in *Spinning off Bukowski*, constantly urged his disciples to write from an “inner gut vision” (13).<sup>59</sup> Bukowski recommends writing from reaction, which necessarily implies a writing of the conditions that formed the self (in this regard, Bukowski stifles his reactions by ruminating hyper-consciously over the conditions that inform his character).

Dirty realism’s texts play at authenticity through their conjunction with the author’s experiences, further entrenching the focus on directly “lived” particulars (e.g. history) rather than the imagined conditions of another person’s or groups of persons’ existence. Textual authenticity develops out of the author’s firsthand experience with his or her material. Bukowski’s stature as cult figure—an image originating from his purportedly autobiographical writing—looms so large that it obliges editor Daniel Waldron to begin his “Foreword” to *Spinning Off Bukowski* with the disclaimer: “We like our heroes to be perfect. We don’t want flesh and blood; we want monuments. We demand idols—flawless, pure and super-human. Bukowski was none of these” (7).<sup>60</sup> Yet the image of Bukowski as “monument” proceeds from the writing itself, from its claim to heroism.

In *Septuagenarian Stew* (1990), a poem called “flying through space” describes coming just half an inch short of the school record during long jump practice and taking a self-consciously uncaring attitude towards the accomplishment; when the coach expresses amazement, “Chinaski” replies: “‘yeah? mind if I / shower now’” (40)? Walking away, feeling the coach and class watching him, Chinaski pretends to have “more important / things/ on [his] mind,” and, to demonstrate this:

so  
I stopped  
reached around  
and dug my

hand into my  
 ass and  
 scratched.

finishing that,  
 I walked off toward  
 the shower  
 room, feeling the  
 wonder  
 and confusion  
 behind  
 me. (41)

Bukowski's heroism arises in avoiding or denigrating accomplishment while at the same time recognising it, in failing to live up to expected standards and norms of behaviour, and solidifying his position as outsider by anti-social displays. The autobiographical tone of the poems suggests that Bukowski very much enjoyed and promoted his underground status; Neeli Cherkovski's *Whitman's Wild Children* corroborates the author's self-promotion in describing Bukowski's first visit: "Then he [Bukowski] looked at the photos of some of my literary heroes on the wall and said, 'Jesus, how come there are none of me'" (9)? The dovetailing of art with experience allows the texts of dirty realism to take on a dual context of fiction and life writing and to create a mystique around the writer's persona. This mystique lends the writing a further authenticity, which in turn strengthens the trust of the reader towards the written narrative (a trust then undermined by the style of the writing itself) and enhances the quality of the entertainment. The conjunction between biography and fiction proves one of dirty realism's main selling points, and actually proves evident of a capitulation to the marketplace (while the writing itself attempts to disavow participation in mainstream society). The heroic "outsider" posture of a dirty realist like Charles Bukowski finally serves to enhance his market value. Once again, a hypocrisy between intent (theory) and effect (practice) serves to allow dirty realists to operate through conflict. Their heroic posture of self-revelation arises from an unheroic impulse to personal gain.

#### VI. *Dirty Feminism*

The emphasis on life experience creates problems for dirty realist authors, particularly feminists.



The valorisation of the personal complicates—in some cases negates—the possibility of endorsing a group program. The emphasis on personal experience defies gender stereotypes, as well as specifies the historical and social construction of the subject (hence the possibility of affirmative change in the condition of the subject through a change in society). Diana Atkinson's experiences as a stripper stamps her novel on the same subject, *Highways and Dancehalls* (1995), with an authenticity that undercuts expectations of female concupiscence and eroticism. Similarly, Lorna Jackson, in *Dressing for Hope* (1995), follows women engaged in activities such as stripping and singing while her jacket "bio" reads: "For nine years, Lorna Jackson played country music in beer parlours and lounges in Vancouver and small-town British Columbia; then she quit touring to write." Jackson's legitimacy arises in the congruence between her lived life and the lives she records. As Schaub points out, Cold War narratives often served as a site where "private expression" and "public expression" came together—although rarely in a mutually reinforcing context; such narratives promoted the isolated or alienated self as the last peephole through which to observe the social and political machinery of the west (81).

This emphasis on direct experience or the particular material conditions of the author's life comes with its own conceptual limitations. Stuart Hall hints at why dirty realism must resort to, and accept, theorising where he critiques the pitfalls inherent to an engagement with "the concrete historical instance" (624)—which he views as the flip side to "trans-historical" Marxism: "From such a position [the concrete historical instance] neither a social formation, not the State, can be adequately thought" (624). Limiting oneself to direct experience, and neglecting to retain some semblance of theory, destroys the basis from which one can mount a "trans-personal" (rather than "trans-historical") enterprise. Although Cold War fiction managed to speak for the self, it refused to speak for the other. The feminist authors deploying hypocrisy to unfix themselves from the social matrix risk cutting themselves off from a contractual relationship with other politically engaged women. Dirty realism's demand for the personal and the particular, valorising direct experience over theoretical perspectives, and the "freedom" guaranteed them by hypocrisy, can stymie the prevalence of monologic models

Bakhtin sees as necessary for “social” interaction, including a monologic model for united feminist action. Recognising this, the authors mobilise contradiction as the shared condition whereupon the particular experiences of women converge.

The particular, personal nature of the text paradoxically segues into the group program. Nadel discloses one of the primary cultural discourses whose construction allowed for an approach to the monologic through heteroglossia: “Those [societal] narratives, filled with repressed duality, attempted to reconcile the cult of domesticity with the demand for domestic security . . . [and] made personal behaviour part of a global strategy” (xi). The emphasis on the personal in the writing of dirty feminists, such as Bobbie Ann Mason and Lorna Jackson, therefore copes with the narrative of domesticity (largely centred on the propriety of the nuclear family) and the way this narrative subordinates “personal behaviour” to a “security” in a way that stabilises the power of the nation-state by destabilising the social security of women outside the dominant discourse. As Nadel points out, Cold War discourse designated the nuclear family as the strongest, most efficacious social unit, while at the same time consistently qualified it as embattled, threatened by forces from without (these “forces” being any counter-discourses which did not jibe with the dominant conservative social model: homosexual, socialist, communist, feminist, liberal, etc.). Caught in the paradox of needing to maintain the superiority of the nuclear family, yet also to identify agents *possibly* more powerful than, hence posing a *serious* threat to, this model, Cold War discourse “repressed” its paradoxical conceptual duality under an us/them paradigm. The highly personal narratives of dirty feminists elaborates the repressed elements and co-opts the two-faced dualism of Cold War discourse to critique the status quo and, through that critique, to enable their own freedoms. The unity of “dirty feminist” narratives arises in the attempt to create tactical procedures that will help safeguard and maintain diverse and heterogeneous female lifestyles through the appropriation of conceptual paradigms featured in the dominant social discourse.

#### A. “Shiloh”

Bobby Ann Mason’s “Shiloh” (1982) considers the place of feminism on the “embattled,” shifting

ground of the hypocrisy aesthetic. The story traces the changing relations between a married couple, Leroy and Norma Jean Moffitt. Having lost his job as a truck-driver, Leroy declines in social and familial importance while Norma Jean begins her personal ascent. The narrative relates their backgrounds, marriage, the effect of Leroy's unemployment and, finally, a trip the couple takes to the civil war battlefield, Shiloh. The story witnesses Mason manipulating dirty realism's hypocrisy aesthetic in the interests of feminism.

The final paragraph of the story relates the confusion Leroy feels as Norma Jean symbolically "tests her wings": "Now she turns toward Leroy and waves her arms. Is she beckoning to him? She seems to be doing an exercise for her chest muscles" (16). Importantly, physical incapacity prevents Leroy from chasing after Norma Jean, suggesting their differences begin in the physical and end in the metaphoric. Dirty realism launches its personal vision from the physical. Leroy's failure to understand Norma Jean's and his own relation to the real stops him from approaching her. Conversely, Norma Jean co-opts the ambiguity inherent to signs, i.e. language (is she "beckoning" or "exercising?"), to give herself an exclusive "vantage" over the landscape, which, as Shiloh is the site of a Union victory in the civil war, means a vantage over history (insofar as history is written by the victors).

Norma Jean deploys ambiguity to elude "the king," or Leroy's socially authorised control, and to revise history to preclude or eliminate him. The realisation that signs constitute not only metaphorical (beckoning) but physical (exercising) phenomena gives Norma Jean her power over history; Leroy's failure to understand history as an actual as well as metaphorical occurrence separates him from "union" with his wife: "Leroy knows he is leaving out a lot. He is leaving out the insides of history. History was always just names and dates to him. It occurs to him that building a house out of logs is similarly empty—too simple. And the real inner workings of a marriage, like most of history, have escaped him" (16). By knowing, as all dirty realists do, that history involves "names and dates" (i.e. language) and "real inner" workings (actuality), or a non-mediated aspect, an aspect words cannot salve (as represented by the finality of the gravesites), empowers Norma Jean to take full stock of history and thereby contain and subvert it to her own ends. She understands that history, as a sign *and* event, is

both determined *and* determining. Leroy's mistake in thinking his consciousness the sole arbiter of history costs him his marriage.

Through the experience of Leroy we understand the emptiness of stereotypes that feminism struggles against. Just as the archetypal log cabin that Leroy builds contains no "inner workings" but merely offers a façade, the marriage of Leroy ("the king," or Elvis) and Norma Jean (or, Marilyn Monroe), and its traditional semblance of working husband/housebound wife likewise offers no actual interior.<sup>61</sup> As Elvis and Marilyn Monroe represent idealised versions of men and women as cultural standards, Leroy clings to an idealised form devoid of content. The civil war battlefield for him represents a cultural ideal, a stereotype he submits to, attempting to uncover its actuality too late. Conversely, Norma Jean does not outright reject cultural stereotypes but recognises in their pure formality a lack of historical attachment which she can manipulate to her advantage. When Norma Jean's mother, Mabel, says "I don't know what's gotten into that girl" (11), she puts her finger on the metamorphosis of a stereotype losing its ideal form from within, as its "inner workings" begin to warp the façade. The word "into" suggests that Mabel views her daughter as a hollow vessel, predicating Norma Jean's character on an exterior internally invaded by an unknown ("what's") force that defamiliarises her behaviour. Moreover, the sentence itself offers a commonplace response to mystification, a conditioned verbal construct which reinforces the bondage of the subject to representation (to definition by exterior, or genitalia) at the same time as it reinstates itself (through repetition) as the only viable maxim for such bondage; in any case, the commonplace saying regrounds itself as a practice that overwrites historical specificity with trans-historical stereotyping. Stereotypical modes of conduct and stereotypical social positions testify to the reification of character, to the notion of the human as trans-historical, unchanging, unaffected by variable social conditions. Personality becomes a static "exterior," like Leroy's history, devoid of any interior "workings" (this word implying a constant movement, a process, rather than an invariable "character"). Trapped in static stereotypes, the reified portraits of men and women reinforced by the icons of pop culture, Mabel and Leroy find themselves unable to cope with historical change, whereas Norma Jean utilises historical change to effect her liberation. Yet this

liberation, as the end of the story testifies, remains ambiguous, conceived within the context of “monuments” and “dust ruffles,” which would indicate that Norma Jean’s liberation from Leroy and Mabel does not mean a liberation from the social. Norma Jean recognises that she can manipulate her place in history but not remove herself from it. Identifying herself a socially determined allows Norma Jean access to social enterprise (feminism) while also retaining the power to speak on her own behalf in history.

To effect history, dirty realism requires both a conceptual and physical agency on the protagonist’s part. Norma Jean’s “signing” at the end of the story simultaneously renders a motion with and without implication, definite and interpretative. By playing off the self-evidently physical against the metaphorical, Norma Jean frees herself from the constraints, failures and disappointments of Leroy’s monologic history; trapped in his one “reading” of history, Leroy cannot keep up with Norma Jean. The conflict in simultaneity between “saying” and “doing,” between the apparent invitation and the self-centred activity of “exercise for *her* chest muscles” displays Norma Jean’s awareness of liberating contradiction,<sup>62</sup> of saying one thing and doing another at the same time. By not clarifying the connection or the difference between saying and doing, Mason allows Norma Jean to exercise both options. She can submit both signalling and not signalling to Leroy as an alibi for whatever action he takes in response. Norma Jean realises that the “embattled” tendency of language towards monologism and the subversion of heteroglossia empowers her to choose her syntactical response to the commonality of the real. In other words, she can use language to resist contract or to underwrite it. Norma Jean can, hypocritically, deny union on the grounds of miscommunication or employ the actuality of communication to craft new alliances. This serves the feminist project of Mason’s story. Shiloh proves both a victory *and* defeat of the “union.” In effect, Norma Jean, by manipulating signs and recognising the historical emptiness of stereotypes, can now manipulate those who make no such recognition and remain subordinated to trans-historical effigies. By instating hypocrisy as her monologism, Norma Jean can also access the subversive countersigning of heteroglossia.

### *Conclusion*

Dirty realism co-opts the conflict between the textual and the real. The textual artefact, the “embattled” language, permits the simultaneity necessary for hypocrisy. Text allows the writer to dwell upon, revise and encode physical events in divergent ways (while returning to physicality as distinct from language when a certain concept requires overturning or redirecting). Hypocrisy verbally or textually justifies the unalterable effects of physical action, such as sex, bodily harm or death; the authors’ plain syntax itself presents a type of hypocrisy: an evasion of the complexity underlying their justifications. The simple, laconic sentences and colloquial diction exhibit a supposedly forthright attitude towards experience; but this expression, instead, more often signifies an evasion or exasperation with the complexities it encounters. As Carver says in *Fires*: “What are insights? They don’t help any. They just make things harder” (24). Dirty realism avoids insights; after all, it seems safer to accept all positions as truthful than to scrutinise each for errors and inconsistency and then try and build to a model from the remnants. The notion of “rigour,” the golden rule of current theory, carries little currency in dirty realism. An aesthetic of hypocrisy, an essence in contradiction, protects the authors from logical refutation, since any discovered inconsistency only strengthens their position. This authorising of everything (which simultaneously cancels authority) illustrates an acute awareness of, and reaction to, the consumer logic of postmodernism.

Lorna Jackson’s short story “Science Diet,” from her collection, *Dressing for Hope* (1995), offers one final example to fill out this preliminary chapter on dirty realism. In this story, a character dying of cancer (or, rather, and significantly, of the treatment for it) intones the following affirmations to enable herself to rise off the couch: “I chant silent, irrational affirmations: *My body is balanced, in perfect harmony with the universe. My mind and body now manifest divine perfection. It works*” (94). These four brief sentences testify to the way ordinary language evades the complexities and convolutions necessary for explaining situations. First of all, the “cure” for the cancer, rather than the cancer itself, incapacitates the narrator, already indicating a convergence of binaries: sickness and cure exchange meaning so that the cure

recreates the incapacity of the sickness that demands it. The word "irrational" expresses Jackson's attitude towards the events of her story. "Chant" and "silent" co-operate, antagonistically, to reveal the conflict between the narrator's actual and stated position, her need to escape the isolation of the "silence" that she, at her present rate of decay, speeds towards. The italics of the affirmations underscore their presence as rote. And yet, these empty, irrational phrases do in fact empower her to rise; words "work." By highlighting language, Jackson telegraphs the assertive power of narrative, its ability to cover or warp the actual. Articulation permits Jackson to create a system—sparse, colloquial, irrational—in contradiction with her physical predicament. But her language at the same time reminds us of its position as merely text: these affirmations allow the narrator to rise not in actuality but because the story demands it. Similar affirmations follow, with identical results: "It works. I'm awake. I am alive" (98). The second time around, the affirmation sounds even more artificial, the narrative momentum even more forced. Jackson provides no answer to the question as to "how" the affirmations work. The story's mechanics remain irrational, outside explanation, recalling a reality of simulation-as-cultural-norm; the narrative mechanics operate because Jackson says they do. As an author, language allows her access to the freedom of a constructed history, but by constructing an exclusively syntactical history, Jackson puts herself outside as well as inside a common verifiable reality, which in turn returns us to a historical moment characterised by atomisation, simulation and undifferentiated commodification. The success of dirty realism depends on how totally the author "plays" the many options, how effectively they aestheticise their hypocrisy.

## ENDNOTES, CHAPTER ONE

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- <sup>1</sup> My notion of hypocrisy pertains to a manifest contradiction between theory and practice, to the authorizing of principles not followed in practice. This hypocrisy can appear in many forms, between an author's intent and an author's accomplishment, between the words and actions of a particular character in a literary work, or within the sociological, cultural, and historical background of the literature. My definition differs from standard usage only insofar as the hypocrisy manifested by dirty realism represents an intentional response to postmodernity. The practice is at once moral and amoral, "good" and "bad," filled with the tension of contraries. The logic of contradiction that animates much of dirty realist writing finds a suitable title in the "hypocrisy aesthetic," since contradiction as an artistic attainment or goal (or as a diagnostic reflection of the historical moment) finds its subversive character in a static and circular condition where disparities (i.e. between theory and practice) prevent the author from being pinned down, prevent his or her reification as a fixed subject.
- <sup>2</sup> Bloemink's article presages my own in saying, "Life is contradictory and our role ambiguous. For art to be meaningful today, it has to reflect this reality" (par. 21). Art, in order to attain verisimilitude, must now feature contradiction and ambiguity.
- <sup>3</sup> Use of the term "tactical" originates in my reading of de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). In this work, de Certeau refers to those momentary, provisional, fluid means of defying systems of discursive, economic and cultural dominance as "tactics" (xix). Tactics, according to de Certeau, operate in and on the "space" provided by dominant systems: "The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them" (xix). Tactics therefore serve "ends" achieved through an appropriation of "forces" "alien to," and imposed upon, the "weak," or those unable to constitute their own, specific discursive space. The confluence between de Certeau's "tactics" and my developing definition of dirty realism occurs most extensively in chapter four, "Dirty Realism: Theory," although references to de Certeau run throughout the thesis.
- <sup>4</sup> For reasons of space, this section will limit its representatives of dirty realism to Richard Ford, Mark Anthony Jarman, Al Purdy, Raymond Carver, Charles Bukowski, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Lorna Jackson.
- <sup>5</sup> By "ideology" I mean Raymond Williams's "neutral" sense of the term defined in *Keywords* (1976) as a "system of ideas" (129). The ideas presented by dirty realists do not coalesce into a "system"; instead, dirty realism, to borrow a description from Jameson's *Marxism and Form* (1971), exemplifies a "antisystematic systematization" (58), where it's "ideology," or system, seems an evasion of rigorous, consistent ideational or conceptual models. In reproducing the "reality" of its time—a reality of simulation, fractured narrative and social incoherence—the authors of dirty realism evade ideological fixity in the systematic sense understood by Williams.
- <sup>6</sup> Chapter two, "Dirty Realism: Genealogy," deals with the implication of this "non-systematic system" (or *Marxism and Form's* "antisystematic systematization," 58) in the genealogical development of Marxist dialectics in American realism.
- <sup>7</sup> In this regard see Madison Bell's abbreviated history of the popularity of the 1980s short story, in his essay "Less is Less: The Dwindling American Short Story" (1986). Bell regards marketing as having had a major impact on the development of the 1980s short story: "The prevailing problem with the marketing of the short story collection is its diversity. A truly various book of short fiction, one in which each story opens the door to a new world, does not package well" (68). The short story writers of dirty realism, in Bell's view, popularized an unpopular literary form. Noted scholar of the short story Charles E. May begins his "Preface" to *The New Short Story Theories* (1994) by recalling the critical neglect suffered by the genre prior to 1980 (xi).



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- <sup>8</sup> Bukowski, in *Ham on Rye* (1982), openly admits the dirty realist lack of aspiration: "I didn't know what I wanted. Yes, I did. I wanted someplace to hide out, someplace where one didn't have to do anything" (192). This "not doing anything" features prominently in Carver, Bukowski, Jarman, though not so prominently in Ford, whose own fiction, particularly the later novels, recognizes the importance of societal participation, particularly in the form of work.
- <sup>9</sup> This view of dirty realism as an antithesis to metafiction finds support in essays such as Carver's "Fires," as well as in critical works such as that of Bell, and the scholarship of critic Kristiann Versluys. There is a tendency to view the texts of dirty realism in opposition to metafiction rather than as a different aesthetic response to common historical and societal conditions. This polemic receives further analysis in my chapter four, "Dirty Realism: Theory."
- <sup>10</sup> Wilson's description opens up questions of "class" in Canadian/U.S. fiction. Although dirty realism does deal with the "underclass," it remains at issue whether the "underclass" in the work of a Canadian dirty realist such as Diane Schoemperlen is the same "underclass" in the work of U.S. writer Charles Bukowski.
- <sup>11</sup> The novel follows Harry Quinn, a veteran of the Vietnam War, on a quest to free Sonny, the brother of his lover, Rae, from incarceration in a Mexican prison. In Oaxaca, Quinn enlists the aid of a Mexican lawyer, Bernhardt, to negotiate Sonny's release. Sonny, formerly a professional basketball player, has run afoul of Deats, a Los Angeles drug dealer, who accuses him of stealing the drugs Sonny was meant to convey. In jail, fellow inmates in the employ of the numerous local drug interests target Sonny for retribution. In the course of Bernhardt's and Quinn's rescue attempt, the novel flashes back to Quinn's meeting and relationship with Rae. The flashbacks recount the various locales Quinn and Rae lived in, Quinn's rootless movements from one job to another, Rae's immersion in the popular culture of television and slick magazines; they also recall Quinn's boyhood, his family life, and his father's loss of a hand in a farming accident, a loss that incongruously leads to a more suitable, and happier, employment for the man. The flashbacks and the present narrative jointly depict the violence that has run like a theme throughout Quinn's existence, from the beating he endures as a re-po man, to his trigger-happy reaction to Rae's departure, to the brutality of Mexico. Rae's arrival in Oaxaca coincides with the vandalism of a Pepsi truck, and the political violence culminates in the bombing of a Baskin and Robbins, an event that kills several bystanders, including an American family. Just as a deal seems imminent for Sonny—following a meeting with the German, Zago, a major drug connection who promises to "protect" Quinn and deal with Deats—Bernhardt is gunned down in his office, depriving Quinn of his only "in" with the Mexican underworld. However, he is soon contacted by Susan Zago, Zago's wife and Bernhardt's former lover. Although Quinn believes she killed Bernhardt, he agrees to meet with her because she represents his last hope for freeing Sonny. Their rendezvous, however, ends in a bloodbath. Encountering Susan's associate, Muñoz, the boy who shot Bernhardt and, it turns out, Deats, Quinn retaliates to their threat by shooting his way to freedom, killing, in the process, Susan and a guard. The novel ends with him and Rae abandoning Sonny's cause.
- <sup>12</sup> Regarding ideology, I use Bakhtin's language paradigm not only literally but also metaphorically, as a trope for the presence of simultaneously conflicting conceptual systems.
- <sup>13</sup> Such thrift, Wilson contends, represents a reaction against the "descriptive passages, rhetorical figures, baroque elaboration" (90) of the 1960s experimental fiction produced by Barthes, Pynchon, Coover, Barthelme and Gaddis—though, in my estimation, dirty realism figures as an *another* reaction to postmodernity.
- <sup>14</sup> Jeffrey J. Folks addresses the "deterretorialized condition" (216) of Ford's characters. According to Folks, dominant discursive systems—in this case those of the federal U.S. government—have enacted geographically specific forms of legislation that have alienated the inhabitants of specific regions from identifying with those regions reconceived in official

discourse. The displacement of traditional modes of life by new laws of conduct and geographical relation has erased regional identities. Region, therefore, no longer assumes a defining characteristic in the categorization of the subject. These characters are, in Folks's term, "rootless" (215) denied geographical specificity by a government that constitutes them as undifferentiated subjects beholden to generalised legal principles.

- <sup>15</sup> These distinctions, and the way they impact character, have become increasingly difficult to sustain in the overdetermined world of dirty realism, though they do provide epistemological and social categories that characters can variously reference when the need arises. These categories, in fact, pertain now more to target markets rather than to social realities; a character's ability to evade the market depends upon his or her recognition of these pigeonholes as provisional and imaginative rather than actual.
- <sup>16</sup> In the *Paris Review* interview, Richard Ford praises the illogicality of language: "One of the ways sentences can surprise their maker, please their reader and uncover something new is that they get to the sense they make by other than ordinary logical means" (45). Jarman's text evades logical exposition, conveying "sense," instead, through textual music.
- <sup>17</sup> For more on Bukowski as a stylist see pgs. 41-42.
- <sup>18</sup> My use of these divergent strands of Marxism—from classical formulations by Marx, to the Frankfurt school dialectic of Horkheimer and Adorno, to the cultural studies of Williams, to the post-structuralist take of Jameson, to Stuart Hall's mixture of Marxism, deconstruction and post-colonial theory—touches upon ways of reading dirty realism, ways of contextualising and presenting particular instances of its tactics. The nature of the Marxist texts (and, later, the theories of de Certeau) used to facilitate this study attempt to accommodate the variations performed by dirty realists. While a scattershot technique of theoretical application proves useful in illuminating particular variations performed by dirty realists on the level of theory, and while it helps to facilitate my own theory on dirty realism through an assemblage of theoretical details, it unfortunately also has the effect of compromising the integrity of Marxist scholars who have developed classical Marxist formulations in not necessarily incommensurate but certainly different directions. In this instance, my deployment of Williams's reading of the word "aesthetic," distinguishes between a concern over craft from a concern over the "social or cultural" content of the art work. Williams's distinction between the "aesthetic," the "social" or the "cultural" marks off categories that engage dirty realism. Carver's and Bukowski's interest in "questions of visual appearance and effect," to the detriment of attempting to articulate a stable "social or cultural" context for our interpretation, tells us something about their aversion to endorsing or fully committing to any over-riding paradigm (which I discuss in chapter three, "Dirty Realism: History" under the term metanarrative), their preference for creating an interpretive impasse through contradiction. Their focus on aesthetic—as elaborated by Williams—at the expense of a stable interpretative content, furthermore introduces us to postmodernity's interest in style, surface, image and simulacra, an interest Jameson engages in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.
- <sup>19</sup> In chapter two, "Dirty Realism: Genealogy," I will indicate how the conjunction between "truth" and aesthetic arrives to dirty realism via a naturalistic strain in American realism. While early naturalist, such as Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris, saw truth as the inevitable result of a fiction written with honesty and reverence, dirty realism inverts this idea, contending that truth is an effect of a style bereft of honesty and reference. This distinction merely relates the changing "truth" of two different moments in the history of the twentieth century. Truth, like everything else in the world of postmodern realism, has become reified, an aesthetic commodity of sheer surfaces.
- <sup>20</sup> Chapters three and four of this study—those pertaining to dirty realism's historical moment, and to the ramifications of dirty realist "practice" in a postindustrial society—study the texts of minimalism—a term applied by critics such as Madison Smart Bell, in his essay "Less is Less" (*Harper's*, 272.1631, April 1986) to writers such as Raymond Carver—and the way they

exemplify the “fearsome homogeneity” of a world Bell sees as dominated by “the identical apartment and department store . . . from Seattle to Miami” (68). Bell, in comparing the stories of minimalism to identical, interchangeable, homogenous consumer artefacts (he view the minimalist aesthetic as a template for reproducing identical stories ) grounds dirty realism in a conscious, aestheticised response to an America cluttered with identical consumer options.

- <sup>21</sup> I deal in greater length with this work, which elaborates the aesthetics of the Cold War, in chapter three, “Dirty Realism: History.”
- <sup>22</sup> This notion of “reinforcing antagonisms” hints at the historical situation of dirty realism, and connects Canadian writers with their American peers. Developed during the middle and later stages of the Cold War, where the “balance” of west versus east very much fed into and buttressed the binary-reliant “us versus them” ideologies of communism and capitalism, dirty realism seems a literary step-child of the “mutually reinforcing antagonisms” at play globally during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Since Canada and the United States both belonged to the “west” of the global equation, they absorbed the Cold War paradigm into their literatures. Thomas Hill Schaub, in his study *American Fiction in the Cold War* (1991), refers to the cultural and conceptual fields that Cold War authors attempted to negotiate as characterised by “oppositions,” “cold war dualism” and “binarism” (79). Chapter three, “Dirty Realism: History,” deals more concretely with the effect of the Cold War on the literature of the period.
- <sup>23</sup> Charles Bukowski stretches the limits of line break and “poetic rhythm” even further. Bukowski’s poetics undergo lengthy discussion in chapter four, “Dirty Realism: Theory.”
- <sup>24</sup> The idea of “sameness,” of the “identical” though “different,” characterizes the writing of a society cluttered, as we saw in Jarman, with undifferentiated options. Just as Drinkwater loses himself in a world pervaded by “junk,” one which offers no appreciable hierarchy between parts, which commodifies all, including the human, into equal but different components, Purdy witnesses the commodification of concept through the metaphor of landscape.
- <sup>25</sup> My notion of the dialectical relies primarily on Fredric Jameson’s *Marxism and Form*. Jameson identifies the work of dialectics in auto-critique, or in enacting “thought about thought” (53), in order to constantly resist the reification of idea into trans-historical form. In Jameson’s argument, more fully elaborated in chapter two, “Dirty Realism: Genealogy,” the dialectical materialist constantly questions the source and form of his or her ideas as a way of regrounding the conceptual in social and historical forces. Epistemology remains contingent upon the material real. The mind must “conceive” of itself and the “function of itself” in order to remain in touch with the constantly transforming cultural and historical specifics that give rise to idea.
- <sup>26</sup> In *Wildlife*, Joe Brinson, the sixteen-year-old narrator, recounts the temporary dissolution of his family during the fall of 1960. His father, Jerry, accused of stealing by his employer—probably unfairly—quits his job at a golf course, and leaves his family to fight the forest fires raging in the mountains outside the town of Great Falls, Montana. Abandoned, Joe and his mother, Jeanette, must come to grips with the possibility that Jerry may not return. Jeanette seeks employment, and eventually begins seeing a married man, Warren Miller. Throughout the narrative, Joe copes with his sudden and unwanted independence, and with the realisation that he can no longer rely on his parents for steadfast counsel, since they, too, seem as equally prey to the accidents and pitfalls of life. At the end, Jerry returns and confronts Warren Miller, a confrontation that ends in Jerry’s humiliation before Joe’s eyes. Although Jeanette leaves the family home, and eventually Great Falls itself, a final chapter recounts her reunion and reconciliation with Jerry a year later, in 1961.
- <sup>27</sup> Set mainly in the small-towns of Montana, these stories again present the windswept, bleak, semi-rural, and often extremely limited economic horizons of the American mid-west
- <sup>28</sup> For a more extensive discussion on Roman Jakobson, metonymy and contiguity, see chapter four, “Dirty Realism: Theory.”

- <sup>29</sup> Moreover, this distrust of unions relates to a larger concern on the part of dirty realists other than Ford, who view the traditional union as no longer a voice in defence of the oppressed worker but as an organisation "colonized" (49), according to Jameson's *Postmodernism*, by capital. Helen Potrebenco, in *Taxi* (1975), speaks of the disappearance of the individual worker amidst union politics and money matters (7), and David Adams Richards, in *Nights Below Station Street* (1989), critiques union priorities (195). Interestingly, Canadian writers believe the union should speak, in Potrebenco's words, for the "mere worker," while American writers such as Richard Ford maintain more of a polemical position between the individual and the organisation, fearing the substitution of any organisational voice for the individual. See also p. 36-38 for Bukowski's distrust of left-wing organisations.
- <sup>30</sup> Richard Ford, in a recent CBC interview (1997), likewise coerces the universal out of the particular. He remarks on the scope of dirty realism: "Fiction, at least as I imagine it, is always devoted to particulars . . . they [the readers] will take these particulars that I write, and say, 'Yeah, I recognize that; that makes sense to me.' And that they will see the world in more cohesive terms." Again, we have complementary opposites: the "particular" and the "cohesive." Ford implies that a focus on particulars permits greater comprehension of wholeness. Later in the same interview, he contradicts this particularism with a universal: "I think it's the human condition to be slightly adrift." The phrase "human condition" ranks among the greatest rhetorical generalisations. Dirty realism provides unrestricted access to as many viewpoints, attitudes and positions as possible. As Earl, from "Rock Springs," states: "between the idea and the act a whole kingdom lies" (17); these texts occupy a "kingdom" of plural binaries, such as "idea" and "act." Their hypocrisy aesthetic celebrates conflict. Not surprisingly, Richard Ford's most successful novel, *Independence Day*, refers often, and borrows heavily, from Emerson's "Self Reliance." The confluence of independence, the individual and celebration of contradiction, I would argue, comes to dirty realism through the legacy of American "transcendentalism." Dirty Realism presents the end logic of Emerson's dictum: "Speak what you think now in hard words and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you say today" (78). Walt Whitman likewise provides a literary precedent: "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself / (I am large, I contain multitudes)" (123). Not surprisingly, Whitman's joyous contradiction comes from a poem titled, "Song of Myself." Neeli Cherkovski examines Bukowski in light of Whitman; see p. 36-37.
- <sup>31</sup> Raymond Carver less explicitly addresses the place of authority in fiction, although he does make claims that endorse a similar simultaneity. In an interview included in *Fires*, Carver conflates "good" (209) writing with "moral" writing, but undercuts this by stating that fiction "doesn't have to do anything" (209). By claiming and disavowing necessity in writing, he frees himself from the restraints of definitive positions while still letting himself state them. By not being accountable even to his own rules, Carver enjoys the freedom of hypocrisy.
- <sup>32</sup> These dilemmas result largely from downturns in the oil industry boom, union layoffs at the railway company, divorce proceedings, criminal pasts catching up with characters, and ways of life (particularly in regards to hunting and fishing) disrupted by federal regulations.
- <sup>33</sup> As with Purdy, the stories in Ford's writing serve a dialectical function of making solipsism aware of itself (though this awareness does not necessarily broaden its perspective).
- <sup>34</sup> *Marxism and Form* calls this idea "praxis," or action aware of itself and its historical and social underpinnings (188).
- <sup>35</sup> In this case, Cherkovski's "ideology" is more than "false consciousness," but rather, I think, a word he uses to imply "political program" or "agenda" (meaning rigorous, codified, exemplary norms of activity).
- <sup>36</sup> Chapter two, "Dirty Realism: Genealogy," deals extensively with Bukowski's *Factotum* in the context of late capital and wage labour.

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- <sup>37</sup> Ford mentions Hemingway in the Guagliardo interview; Carver refers to Hemingway in *Fires*, and Bukowski's writing, particularly *Septuagenarian Stew*, runs replete with odes to Hemingway's greatness.
- <sup>38</sup> Ford, in the *Paris Review*, says of character: "I think of them as changeable, provisional, decidedly unwhole" (46); elsewhere he calls character "incalculable . . . obscure . . . unpredictable" (46). Varty views Jarman's *Drinkwater* as a force of language rather than a genuine character (31). Bell also remarks upon the interchangeability of protagonists in minimalist fiction (65).
- <sup>39</sup> Paul Civello, in *American Literary Naturalism and its Twentieth-Century Transformations* (1994), speaks of Hemingway's naturalist legacy as the instating of individual consciousness, with all its strengths and limitations, as the sole arbiter of reality; see chapter two, "Dirty Realism: Genealogy."
- <sup>40</sup> Chapter three, "Dirty Realism: History" examines dirty realist writing in the context of the Cold War, drawing attention to the historical "narrative" and its various forms that emerged from the U.S./Soviet conflict.
- <sup>41</sup> Schaub agrees with this histrionic position, noting the dominant characteristic of Cold War fiction as "a form which is inherently suspicious of form—of any projected meaning" (79). Dirty realism mistrusts the formal conventions of realism, particularly that convention which suggests that language can serve as a disinterested, objective "projector" of events.
- <sup>42</sup> The suspicion of language and of linguistic interpretation and communication marks dirty realism's allegiance to the postmodern. The postmodern realism of dirty realist authors no longer observes the modernist primacy of the author as central literary consciousness in the way implied by Hemingway's prose. Purdy's literary preference tends away from exhibition and literal instruction; speaking of Earle Birney's *Turvey* in *Starting from Ameliaburgh*, he calls it "an object lesson in good prose—interesting, easily understood, and presenting ideas whose depths require further mental sounding on the part of the reader" (281). As with Carver's minimalism, Purdy prizes a fiction the reader must sound out, whose "ideas" necessitate personal interpretation. The presentation of the work itself encodes a message of individual endeavour. In *Hollywood* (1989), Bukowski replies to a question on integrity by saying the public will have to judge him not by his improved lifestyle but by the quality of his prose (58); he cedes qualitative verdict-making to the readership. Bukowski's and Purdy's direct, descriptive sentences, their refusal to assert meaning, and their invitation to interpretation preserve the primacy of particular and individual responses. Similarly, Richard Ford, in the Guagliardo interview, says "I think the telling of stories is in and of itself a way of persuading the reader away from whatever is plaguing her or him, and of asking the reader to believe that another and more felicitous order can be put on experience, and that this order has a structure that is, in an almost abstract way, pleasurable and beautiful to behold" (614). Ford, then, sees "story" as an enlightening of the reader to possibility, rather than conveying a specific instruction. Through the process of storytelling, the reader becomes aware of "another and more felicitous order," in other words, different ways of structuring experience in order to distance the self from "whatever is plaguing her or him." In each case, then, art becomes a resource, a suggestive method, rather than a prescriptive or conclusive statement. The author serves more as a collaborator with the reader, or even as a signpost, rather than a definitive, instructive entity. Dirty realists therefore view the reader's relation to their text as elective and democratic. Throughout, they reject positions of narrative authority vis-à-vis the readership.
- <sup>43</sup> In an interview printed in *Contemporary Authors*, Jarman announced: "I have little to say about my writing. I would rather write than talk about writing" (239). This refusal to elaborate suggests that Jarman so highly values the immediacy of the act, or moment, of writing, the direct experience of text unfolding, that he refuses to endorse subsequent commentary, or interpretative authority over his own texts. Jarman's unwillingness to comment on his writing leaves the determination of meaning in the hands of the reader.

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- <sup>44</sup> As Grenelle tells Charley, his English text is “not quite finished. . . . Because you cannot rely on the speaker” (253). The text is only “finished” once it has been interpreted and translated into the reader’s own language.
- <sup>45</sup> I use Seamon’s article here only to briefly outline and introduce the main ideas informing the links drawn between naturalism and dirty realism in chapter two, “Dirty Realism: Genealogy,” which refers to a wider body of naturalist scholars.
- <sup>46</sup> As the genealogical section intends to show, noted naturalist critics such as Donald Pizer question the degree to which early naturalists, such as Theodore Dreiser, could claim a consistent, logical philosophy. Although Seamon’s article introduces key debates in naturalism, it by no means constitutes the final word on the literary movement, whose theoretical, aesthetic, philosophical convolutions in fact more often than not suggest an aesthetic variance and philosophical permissiveness at odds with the codified definition suggested here.
- <sup>47</sup> This distinction appears in greater detail in Seymour Chatman’s *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978): 19-27.
- <sup>48</sup> Compare Seamon’s version of intent with what Grebstein views as Hemingway’s totalitarian control of the reader’s consciousness and already we perceive a glimmer of critical controversy over what, exactly, realism intended. Likewise, Wilson views dirty realism as a highly “controlled” form of writing, whose semiotic field remains confined by an intentionally narrowed aesthetic. What remains missing from these accounts is the historical setting, and the way it affected the claims made by realists, naturalists and dirty realists, whose objectivity, conclusive impulse and conceptual indeterminacy reflect, respectively, nineteenth and twentieth century historical moments in “objective,” empirical science, Darwinian social theories which viewed social behaviour through “conclusive” biological terms, and a postmodern world ruled by simulacra, scientific indeterminacy and a cultural commodification which “markets” a wide variety of conflicting consumer options. The connection between realism and history therefore offers one solution to the conflicting definitions of realism.
- <sup>49</sup> This, in turn, proves a controversial point, since many of the naturalist scholars discussed in the genealogy section insist that naturalism wrote the way it did as a *capitulation* to market tastes, particularly the taste for easy “sentiment” conveyed through purple prose.
- <sup>50</sup> This statement proves questionable, since general understanding holds that “bad” prose is easier to compose than “good” prose; hence “good” prose—through the very qualities that make it good, i.e. its lack of belabored artifice—comes “marked” with the greater amount of “labour it cost” than “bad” prose.
- <sup>51</sup> Again, critics such as Walter Benn Michaels, Laurie Merish and Eric Sundquist regard naturalist writing as a re-inscription of the capitalist ethos.
- <sup>52</sup> Later sections will elaborate the differences between classical and vulgar Marxism. It is my belief that dirty realism is intrinsically Marxist, though with a decidedly postmodern vantage.
- <sup>53</sup> This notion of discourse as a stable, “monologic” order of signs dedicated to containing and overwriting the particular, provisional and socially-constructed force that is history (for which Bakhtin’s “heteroglossia” furnishes a suitable metaphor) finds its most wholesome elaboration in Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Ordinary Life* (1988). De Certeau details the means by which the subjugated can, through the recognition of history as contingent, destabilise those discursive systems which attempt to define history according to generalised terms (rather than noting how history defines them). Chapter four, “Dirty Realism: Theory,” extensively references de Certeau, and how his theory of discourse and history illuminates the practice of dirty realism.
- <sup>54</sup> Jamson’s *Postmodernism* refers to the “loss of historicity” (x) as a distinctly postmodern condition wherein “historical deafness” results from the impossibility of any theory to resist conscription into the postmodern long enough to offer a historical diagnosis.

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- <sup>55</sup> This work presents a heteroglot text. Composed of equal parts fiction, autobiography, political editorial, fantasy and pornography, *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* collects several of the underground newspaper pieces Bukowski published in Los Angeles during the 1960s. It constitutes his most unorthodox text.
- <sup>56</sup> This instance provides an example of Bukowski, despite his avowed rejection of totalitarianism, hypocritically making a blanket statement that itself reifies history, making no consideration of the manifold particulars that differentiate various political revolutions throughout history. Thus, while Bukowski critiques revolution for ignoring the historical subject, he himself obscures history by creating a metanarrative of failure that presupposes the effects and conditions of particular revolutions past and future. Here, the hypocrisy aesthetic is in full swing.
- <sup>57</sup> The Prague uprising has all the characteristics of a Marxist revolution, with its student- and working-class agitation, antagonism towards an established, repressive, totalitarian regime, opposition to foreign imperialism, demand for better political conditions and cultural freedoms. The practice of Soviet Marxism, in this case, rhetorically overwrites and militarily erases an historical crisis of a sort which Marx himself attempted to alleviate. For more on the connection between dirty realism and the Cold War, see chapter three, "Dirty Realism: History."
- <sup>58</sup> I will further elaborate on the disappearance of categorical causes and effects in chapter two, "Dirty Realism: Genealogy," section III. B.
- <sup>59</sup> Similarly, Carver recommends, in the foreword to *On Becoming a Novelist* (1983), writing out of "experience" (xvii).
- <sup>60</sup> This notion of the "perfect" hero as "monument" seems one area of difference between American and Canadian cultural values. Richards's *Nights Below Station Street* presents, in the character of Joe Walsh, a character heroic in spite and because of his physical condition.
- <sup>61</sup> Once again, dirty realism confronts the characteristic "surface" of postmodernity, which contains no "deeper logic" (*Postmodernism* xii).
- <sup>62</sup> This liberation, of course, has limits; see chapter four, "Dirty Realism: Theory."

## Two

### **Dirty Realism: Genealogy<sup>1</sup>**

#### *Introduction*

Debate over twentieth-century realism (including its sub-variant, naturalism) has consistently focussed on the degree of its engagement with societal mores, conventions and products. From William Dean Howells to Charles Bukowski, American realism responds to the conditions of the historical moment. Immersed in the cultural present, realists deployed various strategies for inscribing their societal critique, sometimes omitting the extent of, or struggling against, their immersion in the surrounding milieu and, at other times, exploiting that immersion for purposes of activist, personal, or aesthetic prerogatives. The genealogical development of dirty realism indicates the awakening of American realists to the advent of an industrial commodity culture, and its increasing prevalence in daily life. The movement from realism to naturalism to dirty realism (insofar as these terms, and the writers they refer to, permit pigeonholing) traces a varying willingness to admit an inextricable cultural and historical affiliation between the author's product (their texts) and his or her respective society (in accord with the increasing predominance of culture in every aspect of American life). From attempts by early naturalists, including Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris, to claim a space outside society (one from which to level their criticisms), to mid-century naturalists, Frank Norris and John Steinbeck (more willing to admit of the complex inter-dependence between author and society), to late-century dirty realists, Richard Ford and Charles Bukowski (who have abandoned any possibility of autonomy for a writing that testifies to its complete submersion in history), the record of North American realism shows a gradual engagement with a dialectical notion of the historical moment.

The movement of realism towards the dialectical vision embodied in dirty realism's hypocrisy aesthetic witnessed various permutations during the twentieth century, permutations informed by changing historical conditions. The development of a truly dialectical realism followed from appraisals and reappraisals of the author's relation to surrounding cultural and



social forces. Realists—Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, J.T. Farrell, John Steinbeck, Richard Ford and Charles Bukowski—responded to the historical moment in an individual manner, and to stress a continuity of themes—a carrying-over of specific content—would work against the dialectical process embodied in their writing. While techniques did carry over from generation to generation, they did so only insofar as they remained serviceable in assisting the authors' engagement with the political, cultural and social life of the moment; and if any "tradition" exists in the writing, then it is this engagement with the present, a set of concerns about social organisation and its effects, rather than a conformity to a fixed set of aesthetic or philosophical conventions handed down from literary forebears to heirs (since, as we shall see, different times called for different tactics). Likewise, the record of the critical reception of realism indicates the degree to which various realists remained unconscious, or hyper-conscious, of their place in history, as well as the degree to which various critics overwrote their own topical fixations upon the texts of realism.

### *1. Initial Practitioners*

The debate over realism, elaborated by Donald Pizer in the collection of essays, articles and criticism entitled *Documents of American Realism and Naturalism* (1998),<sup>2</sup> roughly begins in the mid 1870s. The controversy consisted of a polemic that pitted a democratically-minded, socially-active aesthetic favouring the "commonplace" (William Dean Howells's term, according to Pizer, for the new mode of writing), versus the entrenched, reactionary and aristocratic purveyors of Romanticism (4-5). This polemic has featured largely in the history of scholarship concerned with realism, with scholars and critics examining the extent to which the so-called authors of the realistic mode succeeded in critiquing or capitulating to social, political and economic convention. The critical debate surrounding realism focussed more often than not on intention, with critics and the writers themselves either reacting to, or furthering, the proposals made by predecessors.

Intention covers an exceedingly wide ground. There is the intention of the author, often

elaborated by the authors themselves—in works such as Frank Norris’s “The Responsibilities of the Novelist” (1902) or James T. Farrell’s “Some Observations on Naturalism, So Called, in Fiction” (1950). This expression of conscious intent finds adjacent support in criticism (particularly *early* criticism, notes Pizer, 5), such as that of Hamlin Garland, H. H. Boyesen and Clarence Darrow, or Charles Dudley Warner or Hamilton Wright Mabie, who, in defence and attack, respectively, engaged directly with the stated intent of realistic writers such as Howells: “the critical discussion of American realism and naturalism was conducted as a public debate centring on the implications of these forms of expression for contemporary American life” (Pizer 181). This “discussion,” Pizer notes, developed from the fall-out of the American Civil War (3) and its attendant re-appraisal of democracy (4), from the “not uncommon nineteenth century conflict between religious faith and doubt” (7), from a reaction against, and challenge to, “the issue of sexuality in fiction” (7), and from the questions raised by Darwin’s evolutionary model (12) and the rise of empirical scientific methods in general (7). Early American realism, as embodied in the work of William Dean Howells, invoked “a century of Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democratic faith in the good sense, vigor, and moral insight of the common person” (4). The novels of Howells and his descendants turned from the fantasies of the then prevalent mass-marketed romance<sup>3</sup> to engage directly with the central social issues of their day—post-civil-war America, the rise of industry and consumer culture, increased American participation in world affairs, changing social values, the rise of science as the primary filter between human beings and the world—laying, in the process, the foundations for the auto-critique evident in postmodern fiction (which continually considers its own relationship with the culture it interrogates and serves). Though neither Howells nor Dreiser openly expressed how deeply their respective cultures infiltrated their work (on the contrary, Dreiser believed his works constituted “objective” programs for social reform, diagnostic projects through which he could scientifically examine his culture, as it were, from the outside), they turned the attention of the American novel towards the society that consumed it.

Realism of the late nineteenth century had, at its root, a deep suspicion of, if not outright hostility towards, what Theodore Dreiser called, in “True Art Speaks Plainly” (1903), “immutable forms” (155). By this phrase, Dreiser meant the theories—primarily Christian—which, regarded as eternal, universally applicable and unchanging, obstructed the view of history and society as socially-constructed (155). Seventy years later, Fredric Jameson, in *Marxism and Form*, would echo Dreiser’s “immutable forms”<sup>4</sup> with the word “hypostases” (56)—by which he means an “optical illusion of the substantiality of thought” (57), or the belief in the trans-historical content of a particular concept—when referring to the work of Marxist dialectics upon epistemology. In this context, Jameson’s theory of the Marxist dialectic provides a means of bridging the different forms taken by the critique of essentialist epistemology in naturalism and dirty realism; dirty realism’s indeterminacy partakes in a greater tradition of American realism. But, while Dreiser attacked the reliance on outdated epistemological models that could not account for, or sufficiently engage with, the transformations visible in history, he did not (or, more precisely, given the concerns of his time, *could not*) suddenly adopt the postmodern indeterminacy that features in dirty realism. In fact—as the current critics Walter Benn Michaels, Paul Civello, James R. Giles and June Howard all note—proponents of naturalism more often than not substituted their own immutable forms in place of Christian doctrine or nineteenth-century economics. They tackled the problems of their age by subordinating history to aesthetic precepts.

#### A. Aestheticism

Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900) offers a behavioural paradigm that rejects Christian categories of temptation or character for an absolute model compounded from evolution and biology: “A man’s fortune of material progress is very much the same as his bodily growth. Either he is growing stronger, healthier, wiser, as the youth approaching manhood, or he is growing weaker, older less incisive mentally, as the man approaching old age. There are no other states” (239). The absolute “either/or” of Dreiser’s statement indicates a reluctance to rigorously<sup>5</sup> question the

absolutism of a view that sees physiological decline as immutable and universal, a view that Walter Benn Michaels, in *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (1987), calls “the myth of equilibrium” (43). Dreiser displaces the “myth” of will with a “myth” of biology; men no longer determine their fates through force of will but through recognising and dealing with the effects of physiological decline: “Manhood appears here only as the impossible balance, the vanishing point youth approaches and old age falls away from” (Michaels 43). Here, Dreiser regards the body as the irreducible factor determining choice and behaviour. *Sister Carrie* not only, as Michaels notes, promotes the ideology of the desire-driven economy of early twentieth-century America (44), but also the absolutism of a late nineteenth-century empirical discourse. Yet the absolutism of Dreiser’s physiological model runs aground on contrary statements made elsewhere in his writing. The statement, “There are no other states,” seems to contradict, or at least complicate, Dreiser’s opposite contention, in “True Art Speaks Plainly,” that “Life is not made up of any one phase or condition of being.” (156). Dreiser turned to a metabolic model—Hurstwood’s “katasstates” and “anastates” (240)—derived from the scientist, Elmer Gates, as basis for explaining physical deterioration, and, around the same time as he published *Sister Carrie*, also declared the impossibility of any theory to affirm the “condition of being.” This contradiction seems almost intentional, although an apparent lack of self-consciousness disturbs our apprehension of it. Did Dreiser mean to contradict the essentialism apparent in *Sister Carrie* with the indeterminacy presented in “True Art Speaks Plainly?”

Donald Pizer’s essay, “American Literary Naturalism: The Example of Dreiser,” clarifies the evident discrepancy between “True Art Speaks Plainly” and *Sister Carrie*: “Dreiser’s infamous philosophical inconsistency is thus frequently a product of his belief that life is a ‘puzzle’ to which one can respond in different ways, depending on one’s makeup and experience” (63). Dreiser’s deployment of a mechanical, deterministic view of human life, Pizer contends, varied from novel to novel not because Dreiser had a muddled or “inconsistent” perception of philosophy but because he needed a great variety of philosophical attitudes to convey the variety

of existence. Already, then, in one of the earliest examples of naturalism, we witness the interchange, and relativising, of philosophical postures, a free play of absolute and often contentious conceptual positions. But Dreiser, as his essay tells us, did find one final refuge, one catch-all to reconcile the disparities in his writing: art. Art, he felt, conveyed the "truth": "The extent of all reality is the realm of the author's pen, and a true picture of life, honestly and reverentially set down, is both moral and artistic whether it offends the conventions or not" (180). Dreiser conflated morality with aesthetics, and regarded the "author" as the final arbiter of "truth." The writer, in Dreiser's practice, conscripts science to the service of an ultimate rendition of reality. Pizer's essay echoes this belief: "At his most successful, Dreiser embodies in his novels the permanent in life not despite the ideas of his own time but because, like most major artists, he uses the ideas of his own time as living vehicles to express the permanent in man's character and in man's vision of his condition and fate" (351). Art could reconcile particular contradictions by encompassing them within "a true picture of life," into what Pizer calls an expression of "the permanent in man's character and in man's vision of his condition and fate." The novels as a whole express a belief in aestheticism as providing the "permanent," or "unchanging" or, finally, "immutable" truth of the human condition. Dreiser, then, found in art his "immutable form." An art "honestly and reverentially" set down would convey, despite public opinion, despite convention, a permanent, universal, lasting truth, annealing within its greater mass (and Pizer speaks not of one novel by Dreiser, but of his canon) all the disparities evident in juxtapositions of its particular moments. Art does not display contradictions; it ultimately reconciles them. This notion of the art work as a synthesis of contradiction informs – albeit in a radically different manner – much of dirty realism (which also reconciles opposites by "authorizing everything," but without the concomitant reverence for art).

Dreiser's aestheticism differed from that of Theophile Gautier, expressed in the preface to his *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), or the later, English, variant of the movement, as practised by Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, who, respectively, questioned the utility of art, and insisted on a

division between art and "orthodoxy," by which Pater, in *The Renaissance* (1893), meant "The theory or idea or system which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of this experience [of living perceptively], in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract theory we have not identified with ourselves, or of what is only conventional, has no real claim upon us" (189). Pater's dictum of loving art "for its own sake" (190) pertains to an aestheticism that views prescriptive theory (and he does mention Hegel as a prescriptive philosopher, 189) as an impediment to the realisation of a fulfilled life. Therefore, Pater's aestheticism witnesses a divergence between "conventional" systems of theory or philosophy and vital artistic perception. The artist becomes a locus of virtues which transcend his or her age and which remain perceptible to later critics, no matter how removed they might be, historically, from the artist (xx-xxi). The critic can "disengage" the virtue of a work of art, like some "natural element," from its "adjuncts" (xx-xxi). The critic ascertains the "source" from which artistic virtue arises, and the "conditions" under which it is best "experienced," isolating the efficacy and worth of a work of art from its merely "common" (xxi) elements or conventions. While the common elements do not transcend the "conventional" "debris" of the art work's day and age, the virtues do. The artist therefore becomes the purveyor of a "natural element," which Pater terms "beauty," and which remains perceptible despite historical changes in the philosophical, ethical or social surroundings. The "virtues" of art elude historical or systematic enclosure.

Dreiser's aestheticism, unlike Pater's, instates the artist as sole arbiter of morality, as the caretaker of trans-historical truth. Here, rather than "crystallising" (xxi) a "natural element" – separable from the debris by the critic's capacity for identifying the most relevant component in engendering sensual pleasure – the author becomes an authority figure external to the historical moment. The difference between Pater and Dreiser's aestheticism hinges on authority. In Pater, the artist creates a work which in whole or in part transcends its historical moment, while Dreiser's artist manages to stand outside history and create a diagnostic art. In Pater, the critic dissects good from bad, while in Dreiser the artist has a full understanding of the elements

involved in his or her art. Both forms of aestheticism imply transcendence, but in one case the critic becomes the arbiter of virtue and, in the other, the artist. In Dreiser, the artist succeeds in creating a work that, by virtue of its diagnostic character, transcends the “conventions,” “systems” and “theories” of its day, arriving at the trans-historical “natural element” of intrinsic virtue. Dreiser’s artist succeeds to the place inhabited, according to *Marxism and Form*, by Hegel’s philosopher: “Hegel . . . reserved a single position outside of history for the philosopher of history himself, and was to that extent unable to grasp the notion of being-in-situation in its most paradoxical dimensions” (365). While Dreiser struggled against social ills, while he diagnosed many of the problems evident in his historical and social context, his methods remain intricately linked to that context; in particular his progressivist notion of social betterment was occasioned by the very form of teleological narratives, Christian and capitalist, that he critiqued. While Dreiser exhibits an awesome grasp of social ills, and offers remedies for many of them, his methods, like that of any writer, remain embedded within the historical moment. He made the best of the tools that came to hand, which makes the elucidation of his methodology (as it does for dirty realism) at the same time an elucidation of his time and place. Like Hegel, Dreiser, in works such as *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*, did not observe the “paradox” wherein any commentary on history is occasioned by that history itself, an observation that would have put him at odds with the naturalist notion Dreiser inherited from Zola of the naturalist author standing outside of society in the guise of a disinterested observer or scientist and making a full diagnosis of social conditions; it also would have put him at odds with attempts at social reform. At the time of Dreiser, the model of the detached, objective scientist was indeed normative (just as the normative perspective of postmodernity regards such a detachment as fictive); hence, Dreiser’s methods implicate him in his historical moment. Dreiser’s aestheticism therefore privileges the author as the person “out of history” whose grasp of universal truth enables him or her to levy a verdict against the social conventions of the moment without noting how that verdict itself arises from the social conventions it judges. Dreiser’s aesthetic historicism is

therefore complicated by an ahistorical tendency towards objectivity; within the work in question, *Sister Carrie*, we do not find Dreiser critiquing the epistemological confines of the author. This paradigmatic objectivity allowed Dreiser to view everything, except himself, as historically conditioned, and permitted a condescending view of the surrounding culture—particularly commodity culture—from which he could exempt his own commodity production (that of his novels). In Dreiser’s aestheticism we see the first glimmer of the dialectical, self-critical, self-negating literary practice, one that interrogates its contingent relationship with its society. Dreiser’s writing elaborates the fundamental paradox of a literary commentary on society, but his naturalism recoils from this paradox into an attitude of exemption from historical conditioning, largely because investigating such a paradox would detract from the important critique and exposure of social convention, which he regarded as the duty of his fiction.<sup>6</sup>

#### B. Consumer Culture and the First Glimmer of Dialectical Materialism

A further genealogical inheritance transmitted from early practitioners of realism through to dirty realism regards the inclusion of elements from popular culture. Critics as diverse as Michaels, Pizer, Civello, Seltzer and Howard have contended with the obvious thematic and philosophical import of the inclusion of artefacts from pop culture in early naturalistic works. Lori Merish, in “Engendering Naturalism: Narrative Form and Commodity Spectacle in U.S. Naturalist Fiction,” applies the current critical view of the relevance of pop commodities to an examination of *Sister Carrie* and Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*. In this essay, Merish interrogates the “technology of gender” (321) operating within the consumer sphere depicted by Dreiser: “In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser constructs taste as an expressly ‘feminine’ cultural practice, and underscores the new, public orientation of women’s consumer identities in mass culture” (320). According to Merish, Carrie’s observation of the way other women dress and behave, and her various “performances”—in which she adopts particular ways of walking, speaking and appearing—“reads like an allegory of feminine consumer education in the turn-of-the-century capitalist public sphere” (319). Although Merish develops an argument critical of Dreiser’s



representation of the link between the feminine and commodity fetishism, the point, here, remains Dreiser's engagement, for good or ill, on "the moment when American culture was beginning to see itself as more dependent on consumption than on a form of production that could be understood as masculine in character" (324). In other words, Dreiser presents one of the first appraisals of cultural consumption in American fiction.

Regarding their dependence "on consumption" as a *fait accompli*, Naturalists realised that any novel attempting a realistic portrayal of modern life had to, at some point, contend with what Frank Norris, in *McTeague* (1899), inscribes as the defining element of American life: possessions. Like Merish, Norris's text underscores the new reality of an America viewing itself through consumer items:

In the round bay window were his operating chair, his dental engine, and the movable rack on which he laid out his instruments. Three chairs, a bargain at the second-hand store, ranged themselves against the wall with military precision underneath a steel engraving of the court of Lorenzo de' Medici, which he had bought because there were a great many figures in it for money. Over the bed-lounge hung a rifle manufacturer's advertisement calendar which he never used. . . . But for one thing, McTeague would have been perfectly contented. . . . It was his ambition, his dream, to have projecting from that corner window a huge gilded tooth, a molar with enormous prongs, something gorgeous and attractive. (265)

This description of McTeague's office (not given in its entirety) shows the extent to which "contentment" had become a measure of "things," not only for the simple sake of social status through accumulation, but also for the qualities consumer objects project upon the person of McTeague himself. The word "projecting," in the description of the gilded tooth, serves to highlight the reversal of representation. McTeague's ownership of the items says less about the quality of the items themselves as the items say something about the qualities of McTeague. When his surroundings change, as they do when he loses his job as a dentist, then McTeague himself changes, not once but many times, turning from the gentle, befuddled dentist of his bachelor days, to the contented married man of the opening years with Trina, to the drunken unemployed brute previous to his separation, and finally a murderer on the run from the law; in

all cases, the loss of possessions arrives before the change of personality, raising the question of the degree to which personality is predicated on possessions. The projected tooth has more than a one-way function here, since it serves as the projection of McTeague's "ambition," yet its possession in turn projects onto McTeague behavioural standards his ambition alone cannot instigate. The initial description of the chairs further implies a reversal of representation. The chairs' most important characteristic hinges not on utility – i.e. on their use-value – but on the fact that they serve as reminders of a "bargain." Their description confirms their character as commodities, as items that elicited payment from McTeague, rather than useful objects McTeague employs for his own ease and comfort. Likewise, the engraving further aggravates the picture of want, since owning it similarly serves not to aesthetically please or placate McTeague but to incite in him thoughts of "money"; like the chairs, the engraving further entrenches the notion of McTeague as purchaser, as a collector of commodities, whose purchases only remind him of the acts and emblems of purchase itself and inculcate within him the ultimate standard of purchase: money.

The items in McTeague's office turn back on themselves, everywhere positing purchase as a return to purchase, as the endless circulation of commodities depicted in *Capital* (1867):

The repetition or renewal of the act of selling in order to buy, is kept within bounds by the very object it aims at, namely, consumption or the satisfaction of definite wants, an aim that lies altogether outside the sphere of circulation. But when we buy in order to sell, we, on the contrary, begin and end with the same thing, money, exchange value; and thereby the movement become interminable. (71)

The items in McTeague's office, therefore, stress the "interminable" in the "sphere of circulation" by reproducing, in their descriptions, the reversals of projection (the items need and determine McTeague, insofar as they "use" him as purchaser, rather than McTeague determining them through their use-value "outside the sphere of circulation") and the tautology of commodities whose presence serves only to witness and reinforce the system of exchange. To slightly alter Marx's formulation, the items in McTeague's office indicate that McTeague "buys in order to

[buy],” a process that the rest of the novel bears out in the depiction of McTeague’s attitude to Trina’s money (and Trina’s miserliness itself, where she spends money to have money).<sup>7</sup> Finally, the advertisement/calendar on the wall, “which [McTeague] never used,” recalls the increasing pervasiveness of advertising divorced from use-value, a fact Horkheimer and Adorno witness in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where they describe advertising as a marketplace strategy intended not “for people to get to know the kinds of goods” available, but as a means to further entrench the power of the “combines,” those industries who control access to advertising and therefore the character of goods available (162). Horkheimer and Adorno’s description of advertising illuminates *McTeague*. The advertising in the dentist’s office enacts a ruse of use-value that exposes it as serving not the needs of the owner of the commodity but to effect, instead, further advertising, to assist the continuance of the consumer cycle. By purporting to offer a use—keeping track of the days of the year—the calendar aims to distract the owner from its “true” utility as an advertisement for the sake of advertising. That McTeague does not use the calendar not only says something about McTeague as a person (i.e., he lives without concern for the temporal), but also testifies to the extent of advertising’s infiltration of the quotidian. Time is not marked by a succession of days (they are irrelevant, and have been effaced) but by the indeterminate and markedly anti-linear “circularity” of purchase. The permanence and solidity of the rifle manufacturer (or Horkheimer and Adorno’s “combine”) has supplanted metaphysical time with material time (time’s passage only has meaning in the sense of commodity tender), art with decorative representation (the picture serves not to represent a higher aesthetic order but to displace it with visual reminders of the marketplace), and use with a constant call and reminder of want. (The advertising advertises advertising: representing itself, it uncovers a marketplace existing for and of itself, an autonomous organism unprovoked by human need but everywhere provoking the phantom of that need to incite further acquisition). The advertisement transforms the aesthetic mandate of “art for art’s sake” to “advertising for advertising’s sake.” Again, use-value is short-circuited, as the advertisement lends itself not to use by an owner but as a further

goad and lure to the purchase of more effectively useless items camouflaged with use-value. The advertising implants a craving within the owner whose fulfilment it constantly postpones by further ruses and lures of use. In keeping with the “tautology” (71) Marx witnessed behind market capitalism, the calendar defines McTeague not as the possessor but as the subject possessed, a man under constant surveillance and bombardment of market forces which determine and demand his participation in commodity circulation. In the end, the calendar represents him: it appropriates his time, marking off the days on McTeague himself. As Horkheimer and Adorno note, advertising qualifies the goods accessible to human “use,” including the human itself.

The valuables in McTeague’s office confirm what Amy Kaplan notes of naturalism, in *The Social Construction of American Realism* (1988), as “the monotony of change as the quotidian, in an unresolved conflict” (10). What Marx diagnosed as a feature of capitalism some thirty years before Norris’s novel—the continual (ex) change of commodities and the competitive “conflict” between social classes—plays out concretely within the text itself on the level of commodity representation. The “quotidian” does appear here as a monotonous change—best illustrated by McTeague’s change of environs—which always subjugates the protagonist to commodity circulation, or the “unresolved,” and unresolvable, conflict between desire and a continually postponed fulfilment. The notorious ending to *McTeague* subordinates life itself to exchange value (the gold pieces in McTeague’s bag serve no practical purpose in the desert and, in that circumstance, offer a useless key to a, by then, obsolete reality); life works at the behest of an empty representation of money alienated from use. McTeague and Marcus sacrifice themselves to the emptied representation of money, to the devil’s circle of commodity circulation, a sphere that alienates the most intrinsic human needs (namely, survival).<sup>8</sup> Throughout *McTeague* commodities determine the individual,<sup>9</sup> menacing the continuance of a biologically-founded conception of human existence.

The effect of commodities in *McTeague*, and the facets of popular consumption evident in

Merish's reading of *Sister Carrie*, suggest that the early naturalists, Dreiser and Norris, felt threatened by the increasing prevalence of consumer culture at the turn of the century. But, as *The Gold Standard and the Logic Naturalism* proves, the lack of an auto-critique on the parts of Dreiser and Norris ultimately implicated them in the cultural conditions they tried to diagnose and ameliorate (insofar as they thought of their novels as instructive). In critiquing the popular romances of the day, Dreiser attempts to exempt himself from his surrounding cultural matrix, to cast his own works in a different role from the one played by *other* commodity items within those works themselves. The character of Ames in *Sister Carrie* dismisses the popular fictions of Albert Ross and Bertha Clay (which Pizer describes in a footnote to the text as "melodramatic, sentimental romance[s]," 236) by saying that they don't "amount to much" (236). To Carrie, Ames, as the spokesman for a higher order, delivers his verdict with the force of total condemnation: "Carrie felt that it was just kindly thought of a high order—the right thing to think, and wondered what else was right, according to him" (237). Ames appears as an instructive personage, leading Carrie along the next leg of her "evolution," from the nineteenth century's version of white trash to celebrated cultural icon. Ames's disparagement of Clay's *Dora Thorne* (against which, Pizer tells us, Dreiser himself wrote several polemics) causes us to reflect on the position of *Sister Carrie* in relation to commodities such as Clay's novel or McTeague's calendar. Dreiser intends us to regard his novel as one of a different order than the "melodramatic, sentimental romance" of *Dora Thorne*; he equipped his text for a different "use." The easy separation of his own work from the cultural surroundings for the purposes of critiquing those surroundings suggests an aesthetic autonomy. As his essay "True Art Speaks Plainly," suggests, the service of true art frees the author from implication in the surrounding culture: the truth of an art set down "honestly and reverentially . . . is both moral and artistic whether it offends the conventions or not" (156). The place of the art work vis-à-vis the conventions of its historical moment remains for Dreiser inconsequential,<sup>10</sup> provided the author operates on a system of honesty and reverence (an attitude itself derived from empirical

objectivity); the quality of intent (honesty and reverence) determines a truth that stands irrespective of social milieu. In Dreiser, convention must contend with his novels (though the novels need not contend with convention), which transcend the cultural/political/economic matrix as autonomous objective artefacts of "truth." In other words, Dreiser clearly saw a difference between his own work, which knew the demands of convention and ignored them in favour of truth, and works like *Dora Thorne*, which pandered to convention. In classical naturalism, then, a concern with consumer culture and its commodities dovetails with a program that locates the naturalist text on the outside of the conventions of consumer culture (in order to facilitate a critique of that culture).

The presence of the text and its relationship to society in naturalism constitutes an important debate for the understanding of dirty realism (which rejects any clear divide between art as transcendent value and art as consumer object by articulating a steadfast loyalty to both sides of this polemic). However, as critics such as Michaels and Giles point out, the lack of self-awareness on the part of early naturalists—the absence of an investigation into, or commentary on, the extent to which their works "approved of consumer capitalism" (Michaels 18) and portrayed the "exotic internal colonies" of urban slums "from a privileged position" in order to "establish a sense of identification with the middle-class reader" (Giles 185)—suggests the absence of a Marxist dialectic in the novels, though not necessarily to the claims to social awareness made by their authors. The dialectical process remains embedded unconsciously in Dreiser and Norris insofar as their work, in the words of Michaels, "does not resolve [its] contradictions" (174) (which, broadly-speaking, consist of attacking and appealing to a bourgeois readership, claiming objectivity while working subversively, disparaging pop culture while attempting mass appeal). A true dialectical process of acknowledging the contradictions inherent in their own work remained outside the program of early naturalism. Dreiser and Norris lacked what Fredric Jameson observed of Georg Lukacs's critical realism in *Marxism and Form*: "The peculiarity of the structure of historical materialism lies in its denial of the autonomy of thought

itself, in its insistence, itself a thought, on the way in which pure thought functions as a disguised mode of social behaviour" (161). Evading an interrogation of the extent to which standards of "social behaviour" occasioned their thought, prevents the emergence of the dialectical mode. A polemical stance circumscribes the conscious intent of Dreiser and Norris. But the observations these two authors made on the extent to which consumer culture informed daily life are an enormous contribution to the growth of realism in American literature, and influential precursors to the dialectical process evident in dirty realism's hypocrisy aesthetic. In the end the work of early naturalists, like that of dirty realists, reflect their times. Dreiser and Norris attempted to address social conditions through the tools and perspectives available to them—scientific objectivity, aestheticism and determinism; similarly, dirty realists deploy a narrative and epistemological indeterminacy, dialectical auto-critique and postmodern self-reflexivity derived from the social and cultural conditions of postwar America. The first step towards critiquing the influences working on thought is to determine the extent to which consumer culture provides our information, the extent to which it predicates our actions and thinking. Early naturalism took the first important step by describing Death Valley, even if it had more immediate interests than examining how Death Valley conditioned the cognition underlying its description.

### C. Exotic Poverty

James R. Giles's study, *The Naturalistic Inner-City Novel in America: Encounters with the Fat Man*, states that early naturalists, Dreiser and Norris in particular, represented the poor as an "exotic and erotic subculture" (185). According to Giles, the exoticised version of poverty apparent in such early- or proto-naturalistic texts as Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), Norris's *McTeague*, and Jack London's *People of the Abyss* (1903), evinces a central conflict of the time, namely, between gaining "the sympathy of the middle-class reader" (18) and identifying "the villains who are responsible for the existence of the tenements" (18). Any attempt at reform needed to engage the convictions of the middle-class readership, while carefully treading the line of public morality and good taste. This conflict, according to Giles, characterises these early

naturalist texts. Naturalism, therefore, found itself troubled by a discrepancy between satisfying and changing public opinion; June Howard notes that “reformism and sensationalism are more the rule than the exception in American naturalism” (37), suggesting that the “rule” of contradiction evident in dirty realism already existed in the naturalist texts of the early century. The disparity between reform and sensationalism, particularly in depictions of poverty, proves emblematic of the latent contradictions (among those numerated above) that critics such as Howard and Michaels discern in naturalism.

Developing partially as a response to the rise of the urban ghetto in late nineteenth-century America, naturalism responded to poverty with a portrayal that sensationalised the suffering of the poor, offering middle-class readers what Howard calls the thrill of the fear of “proletarianization” (95). Howard describes this fear as one of “declassing” (96): “But the privileges of autonomy, awareness, control that characters and narrator struggle so desperately to establish and maintain are deeply marked as class privileges, and loss of these privileges is figured as the destruction of intellect, humanity, even civilization itself” (96). In other words, early naturalism allegorised poverty as a loss of class privilege, of the middle class’s “narrow footholds of economic security” (94).<sup>11</sup> As Hurstwood descends the social ladder in *Sister Carrie*, we witness, in his despairing, shabby condition and lack of ideational resources, the “destruction of intellect, humanity and civilization itself.” The urban ghetto in naturalism—embodied in the Bowery flophouses Hurstwood comes to inhabit—therefore appears as the landscape of middle-class apocalypse, as places antithetical, if not entirely foreign, to the middle-class consciousness. The ghetto, as another “land” filled with exotics, emerges as a response to the economic uncertainty of the middle class and an America more ruthlessly capitalistic than ever before. In depicting naturalism as inseparable from “a historical process that saw the movement from a landed to an urban economy, saw the rise of the bourgeoisie and at least the appearance of republican government, and that was ultimately founded upon empirical/scientific assumptions about reality which, coupled with the new technology and money . . . led to the impulse of



nationalism and the rise of empire," (530), Richard Lehan underwrites Giles's argument, insofar as Giles views the urban ghetto as an "enforced residence for these foreign newcomers," a residence for which he borrows June Howard's term, "internal colonies" (80). The urban ghetto offered a constant reminder to the bourgeois populace of the failings inherent to the market economy: a site of danger and disgrace that naturalism "othered" in order to ease the middle-class's fear of the possibility of their own financial dissolution; in its representations of "character" naturalism often disguised poverty as an inborn, biologically-conditioned situation rather than an accident of the economic system. By exoticising the disenfranchised (generally conceived of, at least in Norris, as immigrants), naturalism extended the distance between the middle- and the under-classes, allowing the book-buying bourgeois public an entertainment at the expense of the poor, who usually appeared as caricature, which isolated them at a safe distance from real, middle-class "people."

*McTeague* offers the most infamous stereotype, and sensationalisation, of the poor in the character of the rag-picker, Zerkow. From the "decrepit wagon" to the "miserable horse, with its lamentable swollen joints" to the "dark and damp" junk shop displaying "all the detritus that a great city sloughs off" (292-93), Norris portrays the urban ghetto with a mixture of the "muckraking . . . journalism . . . devoted to exposing economic and political corruption and oppression" (Giles 2) and a high gothic style in keeping with his Romantic affiliation. The realistic banal therefore combines with the gothic exotic to create a representation vacillating between truth effect and entertainment value.<sup>12</sup> When Norris wrote his "Three Essays on Naturalism," he certainly intended that naturalism entertain its readership: "Terrible things must happen to the characters of the naturalistic tale. They must be twisted from the ordinary, wrenched out from the quiet, uneventful round of every-day life, and flung into the throes of a vast and terrible drama that works itself out in unleashed passions, in blood and in sudden death" (168). Norris has no time for "every-day life" or the "ordinary," preferring, instead, a sensationalistic narrative that has all the markings of other works in the gothic genre, such as *The*

*Castle of Otranto* (1764), *Frankenstein* (1818) or, even, *Wuthering Heights* (1847): darkness, extreme passions, violent deeds, uninhabited locales and the abrogation of social codes. Moreover, his essay does not express the political, ethical or philosophical reason for this preference, betraying a latent aestheticism that prizes these literary qualities seemingly for their own sake, merely as a foil to realism. *McTeague*, as in the description of Zerkow's shop, focuses on the grotesque, such as the horse and its "swollen joints" and descriptions that equate junk with the anatomical "sloughing off" of dead skin. In describing Zerkow himself, Norris creates an exaggerated "character" in every way as out of the "ordinary" and the "every-day" as the surroundings:

Zerkow was a Polish Jew—curiously enough his hair was fiery red. He was a dry, shrivelled old man of sixty odd. He had the thin, eager, cat-like lips of the covetous; eyes that had grown keen as those of a lynx from long searching amidst muck and debris; and claw-like, prehensile fingers—the fingers of a man who accumulates, but never disburses. It was impossible to look at Zerkow and not know that greed—inordinate, insatiable greed—was the dominant passion of the man. (293)

The words describing Zerkow betray Norris's aesthetic program. "Odd" and "inordinate" locate the representation outside of the ordinary, offering already a panacea to bourgeoisie fears of proletarianization; we live in the ordinary world, but Zerkow does not, and therefore we need not feel threatened by his presence and what his presence might prophesy about our fate. With his word choices, Norris removes Zerkow from the sphere of bourgeois habitation, creating a distance between the reader and fictional subject that placates fears of contact. Further word choices amplify the reality of Zerkow into a hyper-reality that evokes not so much verisimilitude as allegory: "fiery," "dry, shrivelled," "cat-like," "claw-like." These adjectives serve to further distance Zerkow from the actual, to posit him as a personification of "greed," rather than an actual person the readership should ever fear meeting. The word choice of the description indicates that Zerkow's physical manifestations result more from greed than poverty, overriding any social thrust of the novel with a Christian message on the wages of sin. Social conditions did not create Zerkow; instead, Zerkow's acting-out of a cardinal sin determines his surrounding conditions. Determinism becomes ambiguous—if not outright compromised—in this exotic,

sensationalised portrait of the immigrant (at least to the bourgeois mind unacquainted with the high degree of irony also present in the overblown language, as well as the fact that McTeague, certainly not Jewish, also becomes a monstrous character, of even greater proportions than Zerkow). Zerkow's Jewishness provides the most important aspect of Norris's strategic capitulation to the fantastical displacement of bourgeois fears. By playing on anti-Semitism – portraying the most nakedly (and murderously) greedy character in *McTeague* as a Jew – Norris further extends the distance between the reality of the status quo and the reality of the streets, allaying the fears of his readership by positing a racial superiority that obstructs the possibility of proletarianization.

Early naturalism evinces a disparity between the reformist aspirations of the authors and the form in which they couched their activism. As Giles notes, this disparity presents a strategy for raising public awareness while simultaneously ensuring the viability of a medium in which to transmit that awareness. They knew their audience. The legacy of early naturalism for dirty realism resides in configuring poverty as a site of contestation between reform, activism and subversion and poverty as a representation of consumer fears and desires. Early naturalism exhibited a conflict between the need to depict shocking conditions in order to urge their audience towards reform (Giles 19) and the need to depict shocking conditions in order to keep the readership interested, to sell books and therefore guarantee the dissemination of their work and a livelihood that would permit further fictional treatises. Varying degrees of intent inform the operation of early naturalists within this disparity. Norris and Dreiser did not approach their projects with an equal impulse to reform or to aestheticism, and the conflation of the two authors here serves only to indicate the advent of a fiction in America whose performance confuses reform and entertainment, exploiting poverty as a way of “advertising” their concerns and furthering their own careers, while, at the same time, collaborating, out of necessity, with dominant social systems and categories. By not explicitly addressing this contradiction, the work of early naturalists flirts with self-negation; their attempt at reform bordered on a compromise

that further entrenched the values and modes of a consumer economy; the long-standing opposition to naturalism, conversely, indicates how incompletely naturalism integrated with the market, and that it did engender a certain horrific awareness in the minds of the public.

Courting compromise was as close to open contradiction as the early naturalists could come and still lay claim to a socially engaged literature. Their work remains a site of friction, rather than a writing immersed in the possibilities open to an aesthetic of contradiction. To varying degrees the intent of early naturalists remains conflicted between societal demands and pressures and the desire to escape them in order to establish an objective vantage suitable to providing an antidote to societal ills. This unresolved conflict in early naturalism's depiction of the poor, enacted at varying degrees of intent (depending on which scholar one reads) presaged its far more intentional reappearance in dirty realism as a negative synthesis of opposites that enables a similar subversion of market forces through a seeming capitulation to them. Early naturalists used an exoticised poverty to infiltrate the consciousness of the status quo in order to induce thoughts of reform, while dirty realism uses an exoticised poverty to oppose market forces *by* highlighting the very messages (on poverty, among others) the market sends. Rather than exhibiting the pull in two directions, as early naturalism did, dirty realism inhabits both sides of the conflict. The two types of literature differed in the means through which they enabled subversion, but the notion of subversion through a seeming capitulation to market demands first appeared in naturalism. The difference between the two remains a difference in intent. While early naturalist works such as *McTeague* and *Sister Carrie* struggle against their conflictedness, seeking to reconcile their contradictions under an earnest aesthetic terminology – whose “truth” and “reality” posits the author outside the hypocrisy of present convention – dirty realism dialectically observes the conflict, seeing in it a usable procedure, a valid “practice”; dirty realism regards conflictedness itself as a resource rather than an epistemological problem in need of justification (as Norris and Dreiser attempt to do in their essays). By allowing the disparity between reform and entertainment free play, dirty realism synthesises internal opposition into a

subversive practice derived from the contradictions of capitalism itself. Dreiser and Norris wanted to address and dismantle hypocrisy (even if doing so demanded certain contradictions) while dirty realism desires to amplify it (even if doing so turns contradiction into a system).

#### D. Hypocrisy and Reform

Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, according to Michaels, embodies the contradictions of its age. *McTeague* also displays, as noted above, attitudes incongruous with one another, particularly between reform and entertainment, allegory and verisimilitude, poverty as social and poverty as biological (race-determined), and character as innate and character as conditioned. The recognition and response, on the part of naturalist authors, to the divergence between authorial intent and authorial practice indicates a fear of, and engagement with, the problem of hypocrisy. Lilian Furst and Peter Skriner note, in *Naturalism*, that naturalists, "torn between . . . theory and . . . practice" attempted "to combine high-minded idealism with the sobriety of detached observers. Looking at the world of man, they despaired and hoped at one and the same time" (22). Furst and Skrine highlight the simultaneity ("at the same time") of conflicting tendencies mutually evoked and operational within naturalism. Idealism and objective depiction co-existed as oppositional urges within, and motives for, the texts. These oppositions disturbed early naturalists, who viewed contradiction not as a source of potential subversion but as a problem obstructing the intent of their fictions. In "Three Essays on Naturalism," for example, Norris expresses concern over his "flippant paradox" (170) between Truth and lift, and attempts to justify or explain away the appearance of this paradox, suggesting more than a little discomfort with the contradictions arising from his theoretical rationalisations.

Everywhere in their essays and fiction, naturalists evince a reluctance to admit the potential of hypocrisy as a tactical weapon against increasingly pervasive market forces. Preference for a progressivist notion of social reform occasioned an aversion to the static negations, the passivity to agency, latent in self-contradiction. In the essays of Norris and Dreiser, we witness their flight from contradiction into qualified responses to criticisms levelled

at their fiction. Their unwillingness to entertain contradiction prevents Norris and Dreiser from investigating how deeply the works manifest the tensions and hypocrisies of their age; by refusing to implicate their works in the surrounding social fabric, early naturalists instead constantly foreground their distinctness from the surrounding culture and, in doing so, envision their works as providing an alternative aesthetic, political or ethical model to the dominant system of capital; this view of naturalism as a distinct concept problematises its claim to aesthetic (Norris) or social (Dreiser) reform, since an unwillingness to admit its place in the cultural fabric leaves it open to criticism (especially from contemporary critics) of unconsciously reproducing existing conditions, of operating without cognisance of influence (Michaels, in particular, subscribes to this view of early naturalism). An unwillingness to recognise cultural influence, particularly as it manifests on the level of practice, problematises any proposition of reform. In other words, the way Norris and Dreiser wrote clashes with the reasons why they wrote,<sup>13</sup> implicating them in a desire to have it two ways at once, to find favour with a mass audience yet to reform the very machinery which underlies and serves mass appeal.<sup>14</sup> The pragmatics of the marketplace and reform-minded idealism find themselves at odds within the naturalist text. The sensationalism evoked by much of naturalism undermined the representation of social conditions as they existed (Zerkow's foregrounded Jewishness makes poverty a racial rather than social condition); yet without a certain level of sensationalism they would not have engaged the interests of the middle-class in bringing about reform. Their political idealism therefore encountered a problematic inherent to the restrictions placed upon realistic representation by the demands of a market economy and middle class audience. Their dilemma indicates the degree to which the contradictions and absurdities of any given historical moment pervade even the most high-minded of enterprises, adding further urgency to their project of diagnosing social determinants.

Walter Benn Michaels elaborates the difficulty behind a writing that attempts to faithfully portray the real while also, at the same time, elaborating the ideal that permits the

comparison necessary for the process of reform. Reform cannot take place unless it can acknowledge a difference between what is and what should be. As Michaels says, unless the author can render a program on which reform can model its initiatives, his or her portrait remains static, cynical, and eternal:

where realism imitates life, painting it "as it is," the sentimental novel, presenting itself as model, seduces its readers into lives lived in imitation of art. Realism, defined by its fidelity to things as they are, can never in principle serve as a model, good or bad, since only when art is not like life can life attempt to become like art. The true scandal of sentimentality is thus its inversion of the proper relation of life to art, an inversion made possible only by the introduction of a discrepancy between the two terms. (45)

When Norris and Dreiser spoke of their opposition to the prevalent "sentimental fiction" of their day, both men took exception to sentimentalism's lack of engagement with social issues. According to Michaels, the sentimental novel, rather than offering a social critique, offered a form of escapism, an obfuscation of the surrounding social and political real for a fanciful "forgetting" of facts and a modelling of life upon the anti-real of the sentimental aesthetic. Norris himself, in "Three Essays," deplores the lack of social awareness exhibited by the popular romances: "You will not follow her to the slums, for you believe that Romance should only amuse and entertain you, singing you sweet songs and touching the harp of silver strings with rosy-tipped fingers" (173). The naturalistic "Romance" of Norris intended more than simply to "amuse and entertain," and here Michaels's assertion indicates the difficulties in conscripting the realist aesthetic to the service of social reform. The sentimental novel—presenting its vision of a medieval ideal, a world completely devoid of the "wretchedness, the dirt and despair of the tenements of the East Side of New York" (Norris 173)—by the very "discrepancy" between its ideal world and the real, offered a "model" for transforming unfavourable conditions of existence. Realism, conversely, by depicting "things as they are" (or claiming to) offered no alternative to the harsh realities of the day. But if realism merely sought to reproduce the every day, if it did not offer an ideal or alternative vision, then to what extent could it instigate social reform? If realism presented only the reality which the reader immediately recognised as

belonging to his or her own world, then where could the reader turn for instruction on solving societal ills? If the sentimental novel offered an unrealistic paradigm, but one which readers could, to however limited a degree, act out, or “imitate,” in life, then realism, by not offering an ideal alternative, curtailed the exercise of agency.

The answer to these questions lies in the fact that neither Norris nor Dreiser practised an absolute “fidelity” to “things as they are” – insofar as their portraits of real conditions in urban America remain conditioned by a metacommentary of progressivism which enabled social agency. As illustrated by Giles, both authors constructed their works between representation and sensationalism, and in doing so created as much of a “disparity” or fissure between the real and the imaginary as the sentimental novel. In this fissure dwells a conflict between the world as it is, and the world as it could, or should, be—a necessary polemic for the reform-minded novelist (unless that novelist simply hopes that readers, confronted by the social real, will automatically decide on the proper program for activism). This vacillation between the imaginary and the real occupies the second of Norris’s “Three Essays”:

So that Accuracy is not necessarily Truth, and the novelist who relies upon the accurate presentation of crisis in life, hoping by this means to create the impression of Truth, is leaning upon a broken reed.

For further—Life itself is not necessarily True—not necessarily True to life. I admit that this is much easier to assert than to prove, and the sound of it is that of a flippant paradox. . . .

Suppose Newton had acted and spoken in proportion to the poignancy of his grief, what a noble, heroic strain of tragedy would have been given to the world. But if we all gave expression to our feelings under stress there would be no need nor place for fiction. (170)

Like Dreiser, Norris regards fiction as a vehicle and means for uncovering “Truth.” He objects to the claim that a novel’s value lies in its proximity to what it describes, to the “accuracy” with which it approaches perfect verisimilitude, since, as he points out, accuracy of description, even of event, may only further obscure, by details too particular, issues of larger historical or social import. An anecdote about Newton—in which the scientist, after his pet dog overturns a lamp and thus destroys fifty years of work, exclaims “Ah Flo, Flo, thou little knowest the ruin thou



hast wrought" (170)—furnishes Norris with a parable of the "paradox," where an accurate rendering of incident trivialises and fails to convey the full import of that occurrence. Though Newton's exclamation may have happened in "Life," it fails to measure up to Norris's standard of "Truth." Truth, for Norris, embodies the ideal, a metaphysical order not necessarily overtly or sensually manifested in the quotidian. Accuracy embodies "reality," the trivial, often banal, expressions and activities which obstruct and camouflage Truth, and which the responsible novelist must decipher, translate and evaluate in order to uncover the "most just" (171) representation of humanity. Recording occurrence in a documentary fashion was not enough for naturalists, since such a record only reproduced the banal. Positing a reality beyond the imminent and sensually perceived licensed the authors to employ amplification, romance, the grotesque and sensationalism in the interests of exposing the Truth. To the minds of Dreiser and Norris, the sensationalism of the naturalist did not equate with the sensationalism of the sentimentalist (though, in *practice*, this *theory* had the same effect of appealing to the dominant tastes of the market). Through careful conceptual juggling they couched the contradictions evident in their writing in reform—attempting to reconcile an ambiguous practice under the auspices of idealism (in their case an idealistic enterprise of safeguarding and establishing the Truth of history in order to enlighten a readership). By expounding a theory of "Truth" versus "Accuracy," the naturalists attempted to direct attention away from a practice whose methodology for attaining Truth derived from the market itself, a most non-idealistic determinant. Their sensationalism appealed to the market but it aimed at enlightening that market to the Truth (rather than assisting the readership to escape Truth, as sentimental fiction did). The sensationalism of naturalism is therefore a site of friction between reform and capitulation.

This paradox, between Accurate representation and Truthful representation, locates the dwelling place of twentieth-century realism. Like dirty realism, naturalism finds itself caught in the nexus of various social and aesthetic imperatives, between the way life "really" happens and

the secret life they must illuminate for the edification of the readership (Norris refers to naturalism as “in the middle,” 171), where the very methods of “illumination” actually vacillate between idealism and agency and capitulation to the marketplace. Although naturalism remains firmly convinced of its agency, positing the individual will of the author as the primary operative cultural force (the central idea behind Norris’s “The Responsibilities of the Novelist”), dirty realism, paradoxically, operates by adopting a tactical passivity to the constructions that infiltrate and determine the individual. However, by distracting from ambiguous practice through an appeal to reformist idealism, naturalism actually marked the access point for a critical return to its practice by way of its idealism, since the visible products of that idealism—romance, the grotesque, allegory—trouble naturalism’s visionary claim.

Early naturalism attempted to theorise its way out from under its “flippant paradoxes,” attempted to close the rift between the “doing what I say” and “doing what I do” that characterises hypocrisy. Whatever claim a writer like Dreiser may have made, in “True Art Speaks Plainly,” to write in the interests of punching holes in the “house of refuge [the morality and “mental virtue” of the status quo] to which every form of social injustice hurries for protection” (155), his authorial practice itself presents contrary evidence, indicating the degree to which he occupied a suite in this “house.” Michaels, in “Sister Carrie’s Popular Economy,” argues that Hurstwood’s decline—although offering a scathing critique of the hypocrisy evident in a society servicing its self-interest at all expense (evident in the strike of streetcar workers), yet whose “highest” cultural productions constantly preach sympathy and charity (as in the notorious ending where Carrie, reading *Père Goriot*, expresses lofty sentiments but reacts “absently” 363–64 to the actuality of a man falling down in the street outside her window)—actually reproduces an implicit moral allegory on the inevitable demise of individuals who fail, through an addiction to idleness (Dreiser 267), to continue participating in the “economy” of “desire” (44). (This argument, of course, does not account for the fact that Hurstwood lives in a society where idleness *does* lead to demise; there is no escape, for most, from the necessity of

participating in wage labour; to produce an allegory that illustrates the opposite of this would make Dreiser an *idealist* indeed.) Early naturalism, in Michaels's study, constantly reproduces the given social conditions through an attempt at the subversion of those conditions:

The subject of naturalism . . . is typically unable to keep his beliefs lined up with his interests for more than two or three pages at a time, a failure that stems not from inadequate powers of concentration but from the fact that his identity as a subject consists only in the beliefs and desires made available by the naturalist logic—which is not produced by the naturalist subject but rather is the condition of his existence. (177)

Michaels's point, here, is to render the disparity between the "beliefs" of the naturalist "subject"—which, in the course of his argument, variably refers to protagonists as well as naturalist authors themselves—and his or her extra-literary implication in "political and economic" "interests." *McTeague* and *Sister Carrie* bear out Michaels's contention by intimating the way, especially, that Trina and Carrie extend their personal fortunes through hypocrisy: Trina by claiming to possess herself and yet behaving as if *McTeague* possessed her (the subject of Michaels's "The Phenomenology of Contract") and Carrie by continually deploying passivity, allowing the men to overwrite her with their desires while claiming that they thwart and hinder her. According to Michaels, the representation of the naturalist subject depends not upon their wilful choice in selecting the mode of their representation but that such representational modes pre-exist the moment of choice and as a result configure its options and its limits. Naturalism arose as an unnamed cultural condition which, rather than being elaborated by the authors, in fact elaborated them. Their reformist aspirations—and the methodology underlying their idealism—prove symptomatic rather than diagnostic. Just as Michaels's argument suggests the impact of unconscious cultural forces on the naturalist subject—forces responsible for the rift between their economic interests and their ethical beliefs, as well as their authorial intent and their authorial practice—my argument stresses Dreiser's and Norris's escape into idealism as a strategy for containing the contradictions of the historical moment within their work, where the ideal already reinscribes the dominant ethical and epistemological precepts of their society. As

the age could not abide its own conflictedness (between a practice of avarice and a preaching of charity), preferring, as Carrie does, to look upon it “absently,” so too did Dreiser and Norris attempt to “absent” themselves from the historical moment by crafting a trans-historical space for the artist as the ultimate diagnostician of history (and therefore the author of the prescriptions by which to achieve reform). The means by which they carry out the exemption of the artist, however, prove indicative of the age.

Both Carrie and Trina, to varying degrees, enable their existence and desires through a conflict between theory and practice, word and deed, or plain contrary behaviour (although, obviously, Trina doesn't succeed so well in the long run). In both novels, Dreiser and Norris make us understand the degree to which the society around the two heroines conditions their behaviour. The behaviour of the slum dwellers around McTeague's office insists on connecting miserliness and violence with the poverty and madness endemic to a society that prizes wealth and luxury above co-operation and mutual interest. The hypocrisy of Carrie originates from a society that entertains its self-righteousness through a spectacle of poverty on stage and in novels while ignoring the demands of a reality of poverty outside the window. In both cases, then, the hypocrisy witnessed in the characters hinges upon the hypocrisy of their societies. Norris and Dreiser witness the disparity between economic interests and ethical beliefs that fractures the cultural model of their day; they do express an awareness of the “condition” of “existence” that creates such a disparity. To get ahead in a hypocritical world, one must behave in a similarly hypocritical manner; hypocrisy on the parts of the female characters merely evinces the contradictions necessarily part of the procedure of social advancement. However, alongside the depictions of their heroines' behaviour, Norris and Dreiser offer admonitory editorials, in which, by disparaging the hypocrisy of their heroines, these men try to distance their texts, and themselves, from a similar implication. As *Sister Carrie*, points out, this attempt at exemption from social practice on the parts of these authors seems to concur with their reformist aspirations:

How dimly as yet we see. Here was Carrie, in the beginning poor, unsophisticated, emotional; responding with desire to everything

most lovely in life, yet finding herself turned as by a wall. Laws to say: "Be allured, if you will, by everything lovely, but draw not nigh unless by righteousness." Convention to say: "You shall not better your situation save by honest labour." If honest labour be unenumerative and difficult to endure; if it be the long, long road which never reaches beauty, but wearies the feet and the heart; if the draw to follow beauty be such that one abandons the admired way, taking rather the despised path leading to her dreams quickly, who shall cast the first stone? (368)

Dreiser investigates the disparity between idealistic theory ("laws" and "convention") and practice in the society around him. Alluding to John 8:7, he observes the widespread rerouting of activity from the precepts of "righteousness" and "honest labour" towards the "despised path" that leads more quickly to the objects of desire. But the first sentence of the paragraph "how dimly as yet we see," also suggests that Dreiser himself has transcended the conduct around him to present a vision clarified of the "dimness" that clouds his society. While a contradiction exists between the ideals ("righteousness" and "honest labour") and practice (taking the "despised path") of late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century society, no contradiction exists between Dreiser's reformist ideal and its practice in representing the ills of society, because he has, unlike Carrie, managed to remove himself to an objective distance where "dimness" cannot occur, and where theory and practice unite in the overriding "Truth" of his aesthetic performance. Dreiser condescends to portraying the activities of his heroine as unconscious, describing her "erring ways" as the result of a "feeling" rather than reasoning "mind" (368; and then repeated, to underscore the point, on 369). But the passage displays franticness as well as condescension, since the condescension itself, in its overstatedness and biblical overtones, reveals Dreiser scrambling to put as much distance between himself and his heroine as possible, a distance simulated by rhetorical flourish.

The purple prose of Dreiser's representation—"Oh, Carrie, Carrie!" (369)—works to distance him from the subject of his representation but also commits the story to entertainment, creating a distance between author and subject, and reader and subject, that prevents the historical identification necessary for self-critique. If we read the novel as Carrie watches plays,

then we will also find ourselves in front of the window, lost in aesthetic distraction while the poor man struggles on the street. The ornate writing reinscribes the contradictions of a society whose form of cultural reception hindered the reformist impulse of the works themselves. Distancing himself from Carrie through a patronising aesthetic gesture, Dreiser's "art" seduces us away from our own historical status. Like Ames, Dreiser views Carrie as operating unconsciously, a move which invests him with an all-seeing consciousness; Carrie is a subject of history, but Dreiser is not. Ames's position as a voice of reason bereft of a fully-realised background (i.e. without a personal *history*), mirrors that of the author, Dreiser, himself: an edifying voice whose authority arrives via its exteriority to the historical moment. Just as Carrie takes to the high art Ames prescribes for the monotony of reality, Dreiser's takes to "art" in order to enable a diagnostic vision of the historical moment. Dreiser's strategy in fact reflects the effort necessary to negotiate the contradictory position of a reform-minded author who must cast his critiques, in order for them to prove effective, in a form palatable to the audience that has the greatest power to undertake social change. Subject to a readership that prefers to observe poverty through a text rather than through the window—since text offers an ideal, an escape, and a self-aggrandising distance (exoticization), while the window provides mutual recognition and the fear of implication (proletarianization)—Dreiser reveals, in *Sister Carrie*, the contradictions of his age. Here, the novel itself becomes the "despised path" to beauty, becomes a strategy whereby Dreiser attempts to quickly overcome the tensions of his age in order to illuminate conditions and call for reform. Viewing his diction as irony, the passage suggests an open knowledge, on Dreiser's part, of the effect of his florid writing style, yet an effect he never grapples with except through that irony (certainly a more boldfaced strategy critiquing readerly expectations and tastes would have turned off that very readership); his irony therefore arrives at the cost of capitulation to readerly taste. The avoidance of openly addressing the hypocrisy embodied in this writing style is an avoidance of the threat of stasis that would hinder the effective dissemination of Dreiser's message. *Sister Carrie*, then, attempts to address and counter

the hypocrisies of its age in a form that must, at least partly, pander to those hypocrisies. But, unlike the authors of dirty realism, Dreiser refuses to adopt contradiction *itself* as an aesthetic, since hypocrisy was unpalatable (although intrinsic) to the reformist bent of his idealism. Simply put, dirty realism's open contradictions arose in an age wherein contradiction appeared the order of the day, whereas Dreiser's aestheticism arose during a period where open hypocrisy was unacceptable.

Theory and practice, idealism and objectivism co-existed in early naturalism, sometimes synthesised and sometimes off-setting one another. As seen, the impulse to reform, to objectively portray, to entertain and to instruct clashed in the work of Dreiser and Norris; in response to the conflict of these various impulses, Norris and Dreiser attempted to overcome or rationalise their internal contradictions rather than to acknowledge and accept them. No less immersed in the historical moment, dirty realism displays its immersion through a precisely opposite strategy: exposing contradiction as its cultural impulse. However, *Sister Carrie* and *McTeague* take an admonitory position towards the hypocrisy of their protagonists, and warn against not living up to one's words; hypocrisy, in early naturalism, ultimately leads, in full-out teleological fashion, to casualties and stasis. In either case, the aesthetic ideals of naturalism and dirty realism both implicated the authors in the contradictions of their day. Yet, it must be remembered that dirty realism, as a subsequent literature, learned from the success and failures of earlier naturalist authors. From texts such as *Sister Carrie* and *McTeague*, dirty realism grasped the hazards of a reformist or subversive enterprise that struggles against its implication (especially ironically) in the historical moment. By openly implicating one's self in the contradictions of the day one admits the charge of hypocrisy while at the same time positing the cultural moment in a two-way relation with the author, thereby openly admitting social immersion; recognising the socially contingency of *all* undertakings (including, and especially, the authorial) throws the social real into high relief and shocks the reader into an intensified confrontation with their own role in narrating and reading the social real. Changing political conditions, and the changing face of the

readership, offered dirty realism an opportunity to undertake this confrontation in a way inconceivable by naturalists.<sup>15</sup> Michaels's analysis of how the subject's "production" dovetails with "conditions," how naturalism itself conditioned the naturalists, is itself indicative of a critic immersed in a cultural moment self-aware and self-referential to the point of paralysis. What Michaels sees as naiveté on the part of Dreiser and Norris may in fact simply be an instance of the critic overwriting the past with the dilemmas and intellectual customs posed by his own historical moment. In fact, his criticism illuminates the problems facing dirty realism more than it does the problems faced by early naturalists. Since one can argue that naturalism did provide new vantages on social ills, one wonders how much of a problem its "internal contradictions" really were.

## *II. The Second Generation*

### A. Naturalism and Marxism

Criticism of the next, roughly inter-war, period of realism moved away from direct intent and began to focus less on the claims of naturalist writing and more upon the *effect*, generally social and political, of the work itself. Pizer refers to this period as one marked by its focus on "literary naturalism and above all on Theodore Dreiser" (181).<sup>16</sup> Although Dreiser's major work, *Sister Carrie*, appeared well before the First World War, Dreiser himself continued to write throughout this period and into the 1940s. The period after the First World War saw the rise of younger writers, such as James. T. Farrell and John Steinbeck, inspired by early naturalism to reflect social conditions in their work. Edith Wharton, a writer included among the early naturalists by Michaels and Lori Merish, Amy Kaplan, Mark Seltzer, Wai-Chee Dimock and Pizer himself, also published during the early part of this period.

Criticism during the inter-war years tended now to engage with the social implications of naturalism. Critics such as Stuart P. Sherman, Paul Elmer More and the New Humanists, writes Pizer, felt threatened by the discourse of naturalism, considering it a "foreign incursion capable of undermining the moral fabric of American life" (182). The fallout of the First World War, and



its threat to American isolationism from the rest of the world, the Great Depression and the social dialogue that swirled around it, and the possibility of America's involvement in another world war, all contributed to a xenophobia around the emergence of an American fiction deeply imbued with foreign influence. James T. Farrell, in his essay, "Some Observations on Naturalism, so called, in Fiction," portrayed naturalists not—as in the earlier essays of Frank Norris and Dreiser—as champions of social justice, but as victims of a reactionary and hostile critical and legal establishment:

It is a curious fact that it is the writers of the so-called naturalistic tradition who constantly have had to bear the brunt of the struggle for freedom of literary expression. It is the writers of this tradition who constantly have been hauled into court, who have had to defend their work at law, who have had to face the application of police power. It is the writers of this tradition whose books have been excluded from across the boundaries of democratic countries. (262)

Farrell pictures naturalists not only as voices calling for social reform, but also as voices whose call for reform, or whose fictional indictment of present circumstances, led to brutal repression against them. In the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s naturalists found themselves facing the "law." Clearly, society at large had become far more sensitive to naturalistic writing; no longer satisfied to repress such works by delaying publication (as in the case, earlier, of *Sister Carrie*), legal measures placed prohibitions against the authors themselves. Both critics and authors become further embroiled a debate that no longer viewed naturalism as exterior to American society (whether through aestheticism or its casual dismissal as an inferior, dated imitation of Zola) but, for better or worse, as an intrinsic component of the American cultural scene.

The major change between the earlier work of Howells, Dreiser, Norris and Wharton, and works such as the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy (1932-1935) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), is best expressed by Pizer as "a potent mix of dire economic conditions and Marxist idealism" (182). In the inter-war period a Marxist strain begins to appear explicitly in naturalism. This Marxism, in hindsight, has the quality of a historical inevitability, considering the labour agitation of the period, the Russian Revolution and the rise of Stalinism and the Soviet Union to global

prominence, and the economic downturn of the Depression (an event predicted by Marx himself in *Capital* where he describes the “movement of alternate expansion and contraction” in capital’s need for labourers, 313). Beside the Darwinism, empiricism, Freudian psychology and Zola-ism imported by naturalistic authors such as Dreiser, critics of the form now had to contend with a Marxism whose prophecies seemed everywhere supported by social, economic and political transformations. Farrell, as noted by Jules Chametzky in “James T. Farrell’s Literary Criticism” (1976), owed much to the theorists of Marxism: “Among the strengths is Farrell’s use of Marx, Engels, Plekhanov, and Lenin against vulgar Marxism and vulgar economic determinism” (82). The influx of genuine Marxist thinking complicates the determinism of Farrell. Chametzky argues that Farrell, in his use of Marxism, is “aware of the great variety of life” and that he “espouses the cause of great diversity in the methods, procedure, content of literature against prescriptive cultural commissars at home and abroad” (82). The key words in Chametzky – “great variety” and “great diversity” – begin to describe a more inclusive vision, one by necessity required for the advent of dialectical thought, particularly as that thought eschews the “prescriptive” for the diagnostic. The naturalist writings of the 1930s, as illustrated by Farrell and Steinbeck, evince a further deployment of Marxist dialectics.

#### B. James T. Farrell and Dialectical Materialism

Jameson’s *Marxism and Form* describes the vast program of Marxist dialectics, and the necessary epistemological approach, in words that fulfil Chametzky’s qualifications of Farrell: “For if Marxism as a mental operation is to be characterised as a kind of inner ‘permanent revolution,’ then it is clear that every systematic presentation of it falsifies it in the moment in which it freezes over into a system” (362). Here, Jameson contends that for the work of dialectical thought to remain historical, it must continually stand guard against the urge to ossify into a “systematic body of ideas” (362); the moment dialectical thinking becomes systematic it posits itself a space outside of history, a space unconditioned by the specificity of the time and place wherein it is thought; dialectics must remain radically aware of itself as contingent rather than definite. In

Jameson's view, the failure of systems results from the notion that they can account for all of history and are therefore exempt from its vicissitudes. The "systematic presentation" becomes permanent, prophetic, accounting for all that will come, and therefore in constant denial (if not outright unconsciousness) of its provisional, historical status. If, as Marx argues, all epistemological modes arise from the peculiarities of their moment in (social) history, then all ideas (in order to be fully aware of themselves) must invoke and critique their origin in the social; with this invocation necessarily comes the understanding of the idea's dependent relationship vis-à-vis its historical present; this procedure of delimiting self-awareness is Jameson's dialectical process. Dialectics prevents the removal of an idea from time and hence its ossification. Dialectical thought never settles into a particular system because it knows that all systems inevitably reproduce present conditions, conceiving for themselves a permanent position removed from the reality of history, and therefore in danger of alienation from the moment and its responsibilities. Systems are inadequate to containing history, since their very origins depend upon historical occurrence.

Farrell's objection to "vulgar Marxism" is an objection to systematisation, and his essay, "Some Observations," contends that naturalism, as he understands it, invokes no particular system of thought but rather involves a response to "events in this world" (258). What Pizer recognises as implicit in Dreiser's work—namely, the *strategic* co-opting of various philosophies (which, in the long run, may contradict one another), in order to capture a particular angle on a character or situation—Farrell here states *explicitly*. To a limited degree, then, we see in the transfer of ideas from Dreiser to Farrell a further interrogation of the *systematic*. In considering his naturalism a responsive rather than diagnostic tool, Farrell makes of naturalism a "critical rather than a speculative instrument" (Jameson 364). By "critical," Jameson here means a thinking that insists on a response to manifestations in the historical present (the specifics) rather than an investing of those manifestations with a pre-existing explanatory and corrective ideology. Naturalism now begins to vocally reject the importation of systematic precepts into literature.

Chametsky glimpses an incipient dialectical process at work in Farrell. But Farrell's inclusiveness still fronts an essentially exclusionary position, as he admits in an interview with Flynn and Salzman: "Well, I never completely accepted Marx's theories. I never was quite absolutely sure that the history of man was just the history of class struggles. And, secondly, I never could understand and explain dialectical materialism" (6). Here, Farrell reveals that his suspicion of systems does not imply the presence of a full-blown "dialectical materialism" in his writing, since he admits to not "understanding" or being able to "explain" the practice. The dialectical process, therefore, remains hinted at, partially glimpsed, but not fully authorised. Farrell's writing is not fully engaged with dialectical procedure (though his writing exemplifies it). Secondly, and most importantly, Farrell's words, "I never completely accepted" contrasts with dirty realism's all-accepting tactics. To not "completely accept" means that an exclusionary logic governs Farrell's thinking and corroborates the presence of a negative system, one not articulated by *what it is*, but rather by *what it is not*, by what it rejects. The exclusion of certain ideas from consideration suspends Farrell in judgement over history as a field he selects from, the relevance of whose components he determines, and instils his aesthetic with an ahistorical aspect. The point of dialectical thought is not whether any particular idea is right or wrong but how that idea reflects the given conditions of a moment in time.

Farrell's statement, "I never was quite absolutely sure that the history of man was just the history of class struggles," undercuts Chametsky's contention that Farrell truly understood Marx and had an insight beyond the "vulgar Marxism" of many of his contemporaries, such as Mike Gold and Granville Hicks (82). The statement illustrates the limits of Farrell's understanding and indicates the reasons for his failure to commit to dialectical materialism. Farrell's attack on "vulgar economic determinism" (82) certainly does constitute an attack on vulgar Marxism, but the conflation of economic determinism with Marx's notion of history itself suggests a misunderstanding and vulgarisation on Farrell's part. In Marx, the "history of man" is not "just the history of class struggle." When Marx speaks of the rise of capital, he speaks of an historical

phase arising out of pre-capitalist conditions; furthermore, he posits a history following after the revolution, or a history beyond class struggle. Farrell's Marxism fails to grasp that Marx regards history not as "just class struggle" (this pertains only to Marx's description of a particular moment in history) but history as a social process. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx critiques the Hegelian dialectic, and, in doing so, reveals his notion of history:

The *real, active* orientation of man to himself as a species-being, or his manifestation as a real species-being (i.e., as a human being), is only possible if he really brings out all his species-powers—something which in turn is only possible through the co-operative action of all of mankind, only as the result of history—and treats these powers as objects: and this, to begin with, is again only possible in the form of estrangement. (118)

Here, Marx identifies the "result of history" as "the co-operative action of all mankind." History, therefore "results" not in the specific antagonism of groups but in the larger "orientation of man to himself as a species-being." History means not necessarily struggle but a "manifestation" of the *social* as synonymous with the human, as that which predicates the human, delineates its "being." Marx diverges from Hegel's "abstract" conception of the dialectic in that he locates history in the tangible and the visible, in the objectification of man's "species-powers," in other words, the manifestation of human interaction in the objectification of "powers," in property, goods, currency and, most importantly, the sensually perceptible effects of labour. "Dialectical materialism," therefore, considers the opposition, or "estrangement," between the "powers" made "manifest" and the species-being (humans) in whom originate the manifested powers. History therefore consists of oppositions, but oppositions not of class (though class may constitute one of the oppositions that history generates) but of "man to himself" or between "man" and the visible signs created by "man," whose alienation, or objectification, recalls "man" to himself. The paradox that humanity can only know itself by objectifying its powers, making perceptible its effects, constitutes the very ground of dialectical materialism, which is the thoughtful study of reified (or objectified) thought. This unresolved tension between insensate-being and knowing-being informs the very core of Marxist thinking. Class conflict only

constitutes a particular moment in this unresolved and unresolvable process which hinges on the alienation necessary for self-awareness, *self-awareness as alienation*. Farrell's equating of Marxist history with the finite procedure of class struggle therefore leaves the intent of his fiction interred in polemics rather than the synthesis required by Marx. Class struggle is only part of the greater struggle obviated by history. A misunderstanding of Marxist history necessarily results in Farrell's "incomplete acceptance" of dialectical materialism and therefore a partial, at best, operation of Marxist dialectics in his work.

But Farrell's interrogation of Marxism furnishes another important operation of a semi-dialectical character. After all, a true dialectical interrogation of the historical present must also take into account the current understandings of Marxism; the dialectical novelist must also think (and re-think) Marxism in its current cultural manifestation in order to enable a dynamism within Marxism and to prevent its ossification. This openness to theory, the willingness to pick and choose and not to accept any particular conceptual system wholesale comes down to Farrell from the earliest naturalists. In "Some Observations," Farrell lists the genealogy of naturalism in an attempt to dissuade the reader from too easily accepting a hard and fast definition of naturalism:

Within the framework of the naturalistic tradition there is an extraordinary variety of theme, subject matter, attitude, ideas expressed or implied, types of character. *Madame Bovary* by Flaubert, *Germinal* by Zola, *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane, *Sister Carrie* by Dreiser, *U.S.A.* by Dos Passos, could be cited as naturalistic novels. But what insight do we gain by linking them together in terms of a watered-down generalization? (260-61)

In expressing a hostility towards scholarship that would place naturalism within definite theoretical confines, Farrell both carries on the earlier conceptual open-endedness apparent in Dreiser and Norris,<sup>17</sup> but also presages the complete supermarket-style consumption of epistemological systems inaugurated by dirty realism. Here, Farrell suggests that each author, from Flaubert to Dos Passos, loses much in his or her conflation with other writers of the "so-called" naturalist school. Scholarship eliminates critical differences between such writers in

order to delimit a sphere of competency in which it can place, and handle, novels that borrow from (not necessarily belong in) a certain "tradition." Farrell does willingly make one concession to generalisation in observing that each of these writers attempted to "come to terms with experience" (261), and that their novels "have been written in the spirit of truth" (261). The defining characteristic of naturalism, in Farrell's mind, becomes its adherence to the historical moment, to "experience" rather than concept, and its attempt at truthful recapitulation and presentation of that experience in fiction (a claim almost identical to Dreiser's over four decades earlier). Since historical conditions, in Paul Civello's words, are always "transforming," the writing of the historical present requires a constantly renewed inquiry into its conditions; naturalism re-investigates and critiques the epistemological, political, social and cultural systems in operation, always from a slightly different vantage, as demanded by present contingencies. Naturalism, therefore, embodies not so much a transmission of coherent precepts or dogma from generation to generation (these, by necessity, must change) but rather, in dialectical fashion, *a way of operating*, a procedure. Pizer, in *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (1984) notes the apparent lack of conceptual coherence between the various naturalists: "American naturalism . . . has been largely a movement characterised by similarities in material and method, not by philosophical coherence" (110). Giles agrees with Pizer, going on to broaden Pizer's contention by illustrating the various changes that occurred in naturalists' treatment of determinism through the twentieth century (8). Pizer's word choice reflects the similarity between naturalists as a formal issue, just as Jameson notes that the practice of Marxist dialectics presents primarily a formal challenge, an involvement with "material and method" rather than through the conscription of generalised categories of thought and trans-historical prescriptions for activity. The conceptual open-endedness of naturalism acknowledges its own place in history by enacting societal examinations that in themselves manifest their own historical character; however, the problem of intent still remains, even now, in the relatively informed work of James T. Farrell and John Steinbeck—or in what Giles calls the "distinctly political phase" (185) of 1930s

naturalistic writing—since in Farrell the deployment of Marxist dialectics remains an incipient one, leading us to question the degree to which the appearance of dialectical elements occurred as they must (since all works manifest the tensions of their age) or because of authorial intent.

### C. *Studs Lonigan* and “The Large Historical Statement”

Whatever their procedural limitations, the naturalists of the 1930s did evince a more definite Marxism than their predecessors. Insofar as the dire economic conditions of the 1930s characterised a society in need of immediate social action, the naturalists of this period rallied the novel to the cause of social justice. Their novels not only diagnosed existing conditions but attempted to offer some program of remedy for them. While Giles notes of *McTeague* that “Norris was not concerned with calling for reform” (185),<sup>18</sup> he does refer to much of 1930s writing as novels of “protest” (185). While Norris portrayed the deplorable conditions of his age, his novels do not “protest” them in the sense that they demand change, since it remains probable that novels such as *McTeague* do not admit of the possibility of affirmative change, viewing society as thoroughly determined by external forces; nevertheless, the exposure of the Truth certainly implies at least a demand for social enlightenment. The intent of Norris’s work remains diagnostic, descriptive, perhaps even scientifically “objective” (insofar as it does not presume to influence events), as its determinism remains rooted in “Darwinian theory” rather than the “increasingly more internal” (Pizer 8), or endemic, problems of capitalism. Perhaps the greatest difference between Norris and Dreiser, on one side, and Farrell and Steinbeck, on the other, lies in the distinction between allegory and realism; certainly Norris evinces a strong tendency towards viewing the human as merely a reflection or representation of set principles governed by biology and society, while Farrell and Steinbeck complicate the possibility of what forces the human represents as well as the reverse: how the human can alter conditions.

The *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, as noted by Robert Butler in “Farrell’s Ethnic Neighbourhood and Wright’s Urban Ghetto: Two Visions of Chicago’s South Side” (1993), draws attention to the allegorical sequencing of Studs Lonigan’s life:



Farrell makes it clear at the outset of the trilogy that the year is 1916, a time of apparently great promise for America and his central character. Just as American society is on the eve of electing Woodrow Wilson, a politician committed to preserving American innocence and prosperity by keeping the country out of a European war, Studs is apparently on the verge of a successful life when he graduates from grammar school. The trilogy ends in the early thirties when America is in the throes of a cultural collapse brought on by the Depression, and Studs literally collapses from an assortment of physical and psychological torments. (112)

The condition of Studs's life mirrors the political and social conditions of the America around him. History conditions his existence; but the quality of Studs's existence also conditions our view of the historical moment. The determinism evident in Farrell becomes complex by not functioning uni-directionally: who is the mirror and who the reflection? Historical realities condition the individual, but history itself is constructed by the human mind; therefore, the relationship, in Farrell, between the individual and history becomes one of both cause and effect. Complicating the view of determinism, the disappearance of a linear or teleological causality that powered an earlier naturalism (Studs, within the socio-historical allegory, is simultaneously an emblem and the one who creates the emblem), and the death of the protagonist at the end of the last novel in the series, *Judgement Day*, destroys the allegorical implications and returns the novel to the particular. In other words, allegory appears but does not achieve the last word either on Studs or the America of that time. The Depression did not kill America, though it may have killed Studs. The conclusion of the novel, finally, refuses to resolve the text into a simple, vulgar allegory of determinism. Although the Depression did eventuate the death of Studs, others from an identical social background and from similar financial conditions did not only survive the depression but, to various degrees, prospered.

The character of Danny O'Neill, in the second novel of the trilogy, *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan*, characterises the complex tensions between the individual and his or her social milieu; he represents the possibility, as well as the risks, of a break from one's social conditioning. While Butler's statement on the ethnic neighbourhood—"It can also be the setting for human

liberation for those like Danny O'Neill who use it as a foundation for human development" (103)—seems overly optimistic, given the conclusions reached by Danny, it does indicate the limits Farrell places on effective protest, limits, paradoxically, set by the social milieu even while the material experience of that milieu conditions its own protest and undermining, as well as the eventual transcendence of the individual from that milieu. Rejected by a church official whom he goes to for spiritual guidance, and immersed in reading scholarship while working at a service station, Danny reflects on the world of his youth: "He had been told things, told that the world was good and just, and that the good and just were rewarded, lies completely irrelevant to what he had really experienced; lies covering a world of misery, neuroticism, frustration, impecuniousness, hypocrisy, disease, clap, syphilis, poverty, injustice" (429). This passage indicates Danny's oscillation between ideal abstractions, such as goodness and justice, and a pseudo-sociological taxonomy of the vices exhibited by his society. This oscillation between theory and practice, and its interrogation, occurs not only cognitively on Danny's part, but finds itself reproduced in his mode of thinking as well; later on, Farrell describes Danny's feelings: "He swerved again from disillusionment to elation" (431). As Danny attempts to trade the hypocrisy evident in his upbringing for a clarified social vision, and a grandiose one in which he becomes "a savior of the world" (430) through the implementation of socialist ideology, Farrell's text exhibits a subtle dialectical critique that evinces the Marxist understanding Farrell denies possessing in the interview with Salzman and Flynn. Danny's oscillations provide a juxtaposition of opposites that Farrell synthesises into a portrait of how a particular character reacts to historical conditions.

Danny exchanges one vision of a reified world for another: the belittling hypocrisy of Chicago's South Side for an escapist and nihilistic fantasy of a world emptied of the "lies, [and] frustrations he had known in it" (430). Danny believes in the power of the pen, in erasing the South Side "out of his consciousness with a book" (431). Education becomes both a means of escape as well as an overwriting of consciousness, which can only mean further entrapment

within the past, since Danny's entire reason for becoming educated hinges upon factors solely originating in the old neighbourhood: being ignored by the priest, being called "goof" by the boys, poverty, shame, ignorance. This conjunction of opposite effects, an opposition further enhanced by the oscillations in Danny's mood, characterises the dialectical, described by Jameson as

a coming to consciousness of the way in which our conceptual instruments themselves determine the shape and limits of the results arrived at . . . and, thereafter, in that second and more concrete movement of reflection which is the specifically Marxist form, in a consciousness of ourselves as at once the product and the producer of history, and of the profoundly historical character of our socio-economic situation as it informs both solutions and the problems which gave rise to them equally. (373)

The passage on Danny suggests "the way in which our conceptual instruments themselves determine the shape and limits of the results arrived at" insofar as the conditions of Danny's existence produce the "type" of "form" of his Marxist thinking as a "result." Danny's egomania, his vainglorious fantasy of global importance, represents not so much a subversive strain in one of the characters as it serves to reground Danny in his social background. His desire for acclaim, and his belief in the efficacy of the pen and education, only echoes (although in an ideologically inverted context), the speech made by Father Gilhooley in *Young Lonigan*, where the priest describes education as the means to personal salvation (30-31). Danny merely transfers the transcendent message into another ideological context (since Marxism, finally, has nothing to do with personal glory). Danny, in fact, would seek to deploy Marxism for personal gain, and so his politics remain shot through with a gainful, capitalistic vision. However, this presentation of Danny, for the reader, falls in line with Jameson's definition, since it shows the "profoundly historical character of [Danny's] socio-economic situation as it informs both solutions and the problems which gave rise to them equally." We understand Marxism not necessarily as capitalistic, but capitalistic in Danny's case. We understand how Danny's "solution" to his "socio-economic situation" arises from the socio-economics of that situation itself. Farrell's work remains profoundly grounded, then, in history. He does not despair at finding a solution to the

various problems encountered by his characters, but never allows the “solutions” to transcend the historical moment and thereby become trans-historical ideologies, and this includes his presentation of Marxism itself; Marxism remains procedural, contingent, provisional, always dialectically involved with present imperatives, rather than obfuscating them under cover of an overarching teleology.

Farrell’s determinism, as well, depends not on viewing capitalism, and its effects, in a uniform, universal light. The variations in the fate of each character suggest that the machinery of capitalism does not affect individuals similarly; not everyone reacts to the same conditions the same way. Danny adopts a socialist vision as a way of navigating society, but other characters from the same background and socio-economic possibilities choose other strategies. Speaking of the city environs as offering a both positive and negative influence on Studs, Butler observes: “Studs’s downfall can be traced as much to his own failure to make use of the positive aspects of his environment as it can be traced to the negative pressures of that environment” (106). Farrell’s Chicago, argues Butler, functions less allegorically than Richard Wright’s, holding out to Studs the promise of betterment, a betterment he rejects by choosing a lifestyle whose price arrives too late: “But still, he did wish he hadn’t been such a muttonhead as to pass up the chance to get an education when he had had it. Just now, when he needed help most, an education would put him a long way ahead of many fellows” (740). Studs, sick, weakened, trapped into marriage by his own sexual urges and social convention, wanders the streets of the city looking for employment, realising, along the way, that his vision of himself and his future has proved myopic and arrogant. Unlike Danny, then, Studs considered the possibilities of an education and rejected them in favour of following his father’s business; when the Depression and his own physical ailments render him incapable of assuming a permanent place in his father’s employ, Studs reflects with regret on his bad decision. Yet he continues to make bad decisions, particularly with his investment in the stock market, which he sticks to regardless of the timely advice of father and friends. Though surrounding conditions offer Studs the possibility of

betterment, or, at least, of different choices, he remains, to the end, blindly faithful to his own beliefs. His downfall occurs as a conjunction of bad decisions and environment.<sup>19</sup>

By the end of Studs Lonigan we cannot say that conditions entirely account for the choices of the individual, since we cannot exactly pinpoint all the determinants in play; there are simply too many. Studs's decision to reject formal education, to continue with his failing investment, or to marry Catherine, may correspond to psychological problems themselves social in nature, but the variety of factors impinging on a person simply proves too vast to include, in total, within any novel. Studs himself comments on the impossibility of accounting for every societal factor and their complex interplay: "It struck him how queer it was that he should at this moment be walking along this street, past a block-long prairie, and of how, five or six years ago, he had never thought that his life would turn out this way, and he'd have laughed at anybody who'd have predicted that it would" (616). Studs's confession of mystification negatively mirrors the notion of overdetermination. What appears to Farrell, the author, as a proliferation of determinants too numerous to fully record, appears in Studs's mind as mystery. He cannot account for his present whereabouts through causal prediction. Time does not, finally, offer itself to him in an open fashion. The unexpected, queerness of life, however, comes under a different rubric for Farrell, as he admits in the Flynn and Salzman interview:

I've always thought there's multiple causation. That is, I didn't think that economic causation was always the decisive factor, but that there's multiple causation; and that causation changes, and habits develop and become institutions, and institutions develop, and people's habits develop around institutions. And the genesis doesn't explain the continuation of the institution or the habit. (6)

By calling on overdetermination, or "multiple causation," Farrell attempts to explain those elements in the text which remain a mystery, the minute societal differences that cause Danny O'Neil to choose education and Studs Lonigan to choose his father's business.<sup>20</sup> Farrell, rather than seeking refuge in metaphysics, in irreducible notions of character and nature, to explain why Studs follows the particular path he follows, rather invokes the limits of human cognition in

expressing the fullness of the historical moment and the interconnectedness of all its determinants. In the quoted passage, Farrell suggests causation beyond the economic, possibly referring to what Dennis Flynn, in his essay "Farrell and Dostoevsky" (1993), calls "psychological inevitability" (119), or the Freudian influence that Farrell himself openly admits to (although it remains unclear, in Flynn's paper, though not in Farrell, to what degree the economic and psychological operate autonomously of one another). The "decisive factor" remains unavailable to the author, who can only record the protagonist struggling in multiple webs of influence. Moreover, causation itself remains slippery, since it does not remain a constant source of influence, but changes and evolves over time. The "habits" that people develop in response to certain institutions may outlive or diverge from those institutions in ways not expected or predicted by the "genesis" of either the habit or the institution. Farrell may not posit metaphysical "mystery" as the irreducible factor in human development, but certainly does posit human behaviour as irreducible to any one originary point.

The immensity of Farrell's work, ultimately, collapses on itself, imploding under the strain of its own ambition, so that its very hugeness highlights the particularity of the story it tells. As Jameson indicates, in *Marxism and Form*, "Where all the dimensions of history cohere in synchronic fashion, the simple linear stories of earlier historians are no longer possible; now it is diachrony and continuity which become problematical, mere working hypotheses" (51). The wide variety of elements from which Studs draws his picture of himself and the world—including advertising, political propaganda, film, popular song, religious dogma—for all its breadth, finally pertains to only one story: Studs's; and the other characters in the work, with their divergent fates, suggest that even this lengthy portrait of Chicago's South Side is not comprehensive enough; it does not account for the immensity of the synchronic—all the layers simultaneously acting, singularly and together, as determinants in the lives of the other characters. The attempt at narrating the various levels of determinants, at providing a synchronic framework, resolves itself in the necessary failure of such an endeavour, since a novel can never

fully encapsulate, and therefore exceed, its historical parameters; at best, as in the dialectical criticism propounded by Jameson, one can only continually question the ways in which we select elements from the synchronic and turn them to the ends of a diachronic narrative, to interrogate our hypothetical “continuities” (in this case the linear life-history of Studs) and, by doing so, realise the deterministic complexity of a historical moment beyond our scope. Ultimately, the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy does precisely what Jameson contends: it calls attention to the novel attempting to render history; by calling attention to itself in this way, the novel regrounds itself as historical commodity:

Such antisystematic systematization, with all the deep inner contradictions it involves, reminds me of nothing quite so much as those equally contradictory monuments of modern art and literature which in their attempt to say everything end up saying only that one thing; which in their convulsive effort to present themselves, in almost medieval fashion, as the very book of the world itself, end up being but one book among others in a universe so disparate that no single thought can encompass it. (Jameson 58)

Farrell’s systematic attempt to present the world of Studs Lonigan displays the “deep inner contradictions” Jameson speaks of, insofar as its form casts into doubt its inclusiveness, insofar as its “large historical statement,” in Bill Buford’s words, calls us to question the possibility of ever fully accounting for every determinant influence on character. Magnitude and the specific co-exist, dialectically, in Farrell’s work. Finally, the novel imparts to us a “disparate” universe filled with the contradictory, because unassimilable, elements Walt Whitman attempted to catalogue in *Song of Myself*. This indeterminacy figures as Farrell’s legacy to dirty realism.

Authors such as Farrell developed the notion of an overdetermined world, one oversaturated with systems and counter-systems of influence to the point of an irreducible complexity (a notion further elaborated in dirty realism). This does not mean that Farrell rejected history; quite the contrary, it means that Farrell’s work implies that the self is so innately historical that it can never entirely transcend history, can never stand outside of history’s “stream” by accounting for, and thereby containing, all its variants. The novelist, therefore, needs to approach the text not as a permanent portrait of the world but as a provisional, partial, constantly self-

questioning and self-interrogating account. By radically invalidating the “large historical statement” of his narrative, Farrell paved the way for dirty realists (whom, as Buford notes, distrust immense historical statements) to bring their authorial operations down to the level of particulars, to the level of trivia. If the novel cannot encapsulate history, but only interrogate it and our position vis-à-vis its construction, then the novelist can find everything he needs in the smallest detail; since the specifics themselves can dialectically “speak” of an overarching content, in the way that the specifics of Studs’s life emphasise historical uncertainty, the miniaturisation of scope discovered by Buford in dirty realism regards not a reaction against novelists like Farrell but a response to them. The conjunction of particulars, the deference to solipsism, and the conceptual contrariness of dirty realism all recall the immensity of its historical context, since the specifics of a character or an author allude to the casting of the diachronic from the synchronic. The atomisation—social, personal, conceptual—of dirty realism now indicates the historical moment, one too disparate for a coherent portrait, except on the level of systematic incoherence, or “antisystematic systematization.” As Jameson notes, the dialectical reversal of Marxist thinking allows these authors to “square the circle and to hold the absolute wholly within the utter relativity of the individual consciousness or the individual observer” (373). Since history, above all, depends on relation, the “relative” aspects of the narration carry within them the tension between the individual subject and the society narrated, and to focus on the relativity itself of story will continually reground the intimation of larger historical movements against which the narration defines itself, and back into which it, by necessity, collapses. These tensions prevent the relative narration from becoming an absolute one. The terrain of trivia, of junk, of detritus, of the tiny details dirty realists sort through, appropriately, keeps dirty realism aware of the coherence it cannot manufacture, but whose attempted manufacture keeps dirty realism functioning as a process rather than a solution. In trivia, rather than in large historical accounts, dirty realism will identify its society and the level on which it will dialectically operate.



#### D. The Activism of *The Grapes of Wrath*

If the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, in its vast attempt to enumerate the variety of determinants acting upon its protagonist, displayed, even in its particularity (the focus on Studs), the impossible challenge, even the inevitable defeat, of the novelist when faced with recording history, then John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* poses (and answers) the question: how can a revolutionary, or at least "protest," work exist in the face of such indeterminacy. An inability to determine the exact causes (or perpetrators) of, say, social injustice, leaves the protest author with the impossible task of casting a subversive or revolutionary instruction in the form of fiction while remaining unclear as to what goal or target that instruction should engage. *The Grapes of Wrath* proposes a fiction cognisant of its epistemological failings, yet willing, despite this, to delimit a necessary paradigm for action.

In *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1996), Terry Eagleton denounces the liberal humanist inquiry into the ontological status of the "thing," replacing this essentialist inquiry with the contingency of Marxist praxis: "It is not a matter of starting from certain theoretical or methodological problems: it is a matter of starting from what we want to do, and then seeing which methods and theories will best help us to achieve these ends" (183). Eagleton's strategy, like Jameson's (although from a more pragmatic point of view), stresses the need to envision theory not as an investigative or speculative tool but as a means of achieving an end; the end, in effect, determines the necessary means. In the hands of Eagleton, the disinterested speculation of liberal humanism turns into the goal-oriented selectivity of Marxism, which views its project as the conscription of theory and method into an engagement with the dilemmas of the historical present. This marks a radical shift in epistemology, where concepts become valuable not for the insight they offer into the nature of being, the relation between the human and the spiritual, or even into essentialist notions of political organisation, but rather for their immediate use, to the way they might serve a momentary aim. Granted, Eagleton here speaks of a critical engagement with cultural objects, and explains how criticism should process them, yet his attitude towards

epistemological theory and method—one of contingency on the “practical situation” (183)—marks a break with the notion that absolute and universal laws govern our thoughts and actions for a view that suggests more short-range, tactical operations according to epistemological schema that may shift, following needs and aims, from moment to moment. In a sense, this notion commodifies theory and method, rendering intellectual systems important not for their own sake but as items one can deploy and discard as necessary; epistemology enters into intellectual circulation as a sort of use-value.

In Steinbeck’s case, the historical dilemma in question centres on necessity itself, as *The Grapes of Wrath* traces the starving, humiliated and uprooted masses of Okies migrating from their expropriated ancestral homes to the promised land of California. The immediacy of their needs demands a mobile, malleable system of response, one intimately linked with weather, road conditions, employment status, and reception by the local populace. Throughout the novel, Steinbeck continually reminds us of the contingent nature of morality, politics and action. The character of the Preacher confronts the reader with the subversion of “traditions,” for example, in the form of household roles; when Ma complains that he should not do her work, he replies: “They’s too much of it to split it up to men’s or women’s work. You got stuff to do. Leave me salt the meat” (138). The Preacher character does not indicate the breakdown of familial roles, but that such roles depend upon conducive conditions; should the conditions change, as they do, drastically, during the Depression, then the division of labour within the family must also change. Steinbeck makes clear that when the Joad family leaves its land in Oklahoma, it leaves behind not just a shelter but an entire form of life, a societal organisation predicated upon the demands of a particular mode of living in a particular historical period. The key to successfully surviving this change comes with one’s ability to drop previous conceptions, such as gendered division of labour, and adapt new standards to the requirements of a new mode of living.

Throughout the novel, Steinbeck, like Farrell, addresses the inability of the human mind to encapsulate every factor determining behaviour; shortly after arriving at the government run

camp, Ma makes the following assessment: "They's things you do, an' you don' know why" (416). Ma's statement follows Pa's query on the fate of Noah, the first Joad to voluntarily abandon the protective circle of the family. Noah's fate remains unclear. The lack of clarity in Noah's choice and where that choice leads him, echoed in Ma's speech, suggests that, like Farrell, Steinbeck also considered his novel open-ended, the fates of some of the characters (including Tom) beyond the scope of the novelist. Ma cannot always account for the reasons why Noah, or anyone else, including herself, behave as they do, and what that behaviour might say about the present situation. The failure to respond to the "why" of the situations presented in the novel, however, is offset by the frequent underscoring of "how." Following Eagleton's contention, the Joads provisionally adapt their "method" to changes in social conditions (particularly evident in the burial of the grandfather). The liberal humanist ontology of "why" vanishes beneath a Marxist praxis of "how." If history remains inescapable, if, as the Preacher suggests, no metaphysical explanation adequately covers for events in the real, then the novel, rather than aspiring to replace previous universal systems of "truth" or "God" with aestheticism (as Dreiser and Norris attempted to do), instead includes itself as a dialectical operative in the field of history, as a historically conditioned record of a specific era and occurrence in American history. The famous ending to the novel, with Rosasharn's lips coming together "mysteriously" (581), announces the novel's return not into the metaphysical "mystery" of spirit or God, but into the immensity of the historical moment. Having ceded to us a partial glimpse into the machinery of the moment (including the dialectical interplay between the individual, as represented by the chapters on the Joad family, and the larger society, as represented by the chapters on the workings of auto salesmen, banks, corporate centres and local vigilante militias, to name a few), Steinbeck's novel makes the required consideration of its own propositions and, by doing so, cancels its exemption as "aesthetic" truth from the history it relates; Rosasharn's charity exemplifies a possibility of human conduct that arises from, and pertains to, the history embodied in the narrative, though the narrative itself fails to adequately explain it (as it

adequately explains, for instance, the greed of corporate landowners); again, there is no “why” for Rosasharn’s behaviour, only a “how,” a method necessitated by the moment, although it does not square with traditional maternal practice. Rosasharn’s smile indicates a degree of self-awareness and even a pleasure in realising an act contrary to tradition but not to human need. Throughout the novel, then, practice (including the practice of writing a novel) pivots upon its renovation of “means” according to “needs,” by the mutation of method in relation to milieu.

In Jameson’s discussion of Lukács lies also the key to unravelling Steinbeck’s legacy to dirty realism: “The privileged relationship to reality, the privileged mode of knowledge of the world will no longer be a static, contemplative one, will no longer be one of pure reason or abstract thought, but will be the union of thought and action that the Marxists call *praxis*, will be one of activity conscious of itself” (188). By refusing to nominate aestheticism as the repository of truth—as Dreiser and Norris did—the aesthetic, in Steinbeck’s case, becomes rather a further example of the inextricably historical nature of all undertakings, including writing. The novel, then, in practice, becomes a means of bringing history to light; by embodying the historically contingent in its very form, the novel deflects this recognition onto the subject of its inquiry in a fusion of form and content. The novel’s dialectical interplay between the societal and personal and the disparities this configuration creates (disparities it acknowledges) mirrors the rifts between the Depression and the Joad’s experiences within it. The act of writing the novel becomes a protest against “the reification into which the outside world had frozen for the middle classes” (Jameson 188). The novel illuminates the way in which authors selectively determine diachrony from the synchronic, focussing specifically on the Joads from among the vast profusion of peoples playing a part in the history of the Depression; in this way, the novel never becomes reified, since its alternating chapters alert us to the larger picture that we cannot hope to fully witness. By elaborating the dynamic tensions within the Depression, Steinbeck’s novel admits, structurally, its own dialectical operations within that historical moment, thereby implicating the novel itself in the historical process, as an embattled and conflicted medium of

transmitting information. The “mysteriousness” with which the book closes underscores the specificity, rather than the all-encompassing, quality of its fictional gesture. Steinbeck can only provisionally mark off occurrence and behaviour; in doing so, he exposes the provisionality of all thought, of all aesthetic constructs, which in turn counters and critiques the middle-class “reification” of epistemological values into trans-historical content. The supposedly innate, universal and trans-historically applicable values of capital come under fire as themselves contradictory and changeable means to an end.

As the Joad family comes to justify their actions by predicating them on historical and material necessity, Steinbeck makes us understand that their ethical, moral and political contradictions themselves only echo the contradictions inherent to capital itself. “There in the middle- and Southwest had lived a simple agrarian folk who had not changed with industry, who had not farmed with machines in private hands. They had not grown up in the paradoxes of industry” (363). The alterations in the Joads’s way of living and the necessary moral convolutions it forces upon them—such as Tom equating the murder of a man as nothing more than the murder of a “skunk” (512)—all arise, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, from the machinery of capitalism, and its own inevitable contradictions and absurdities, such as the production of food for the sake of profit rather than for the sake of nourishment (449), an institutionalised police force whose actions on the part of the few speak in direct contrast to their stated aim of protecting the public (492), and the supply of corporate welfare while everywhere denying the efficacy and need for welfare itself (429). Jameson recalls that “capitalism is itself the first thing-in-itself, and the primal contradiction upon which all later, more specialized and abstract dilemmas are founded” (186). The writing of the Joad family not only recalls the plight of individuals adrift in the economically impossible conditions of the Great Depression but the inner logic of capitalism itself.

By immersing itself fully in its historical moment, by not claiming exemption from its place in history through aestheticism or allegiance to metaphysical principles, the novel, in

Steinbeck's hands, works its protest through its immersion, through its recognition of the contingent nature of experience, theory and method. The novel transforms an apparent weakness—its reliance on the historical moment—into a subversive strength, calling us to question the supposed trans-historical “truths” on which capitalism builds its foundation—the innate, natural inclination towards private property, the appropriateness and indispensability of market economy, criminal conduct (or lack thereof) and one's place on the social ladder as a function of congenital disposition (Irr 99) <sup>21</sup>—showing the particularity of those truths, and indicating to what degree those truths themselves change, contradict and finally prove hypocritical given the variance in circumstances. Capitalism's claim, that its foundational truths are “natural” rather than “historical” (Jameson 188), founders under Steinbeck's pointed assertion of the socially contingent nature of human enterprise:

Men of property were terrified for their property. Men who had never been hungry saw the eyes of the hungry. Men who had never wanted anything very much saw the flare of want in the eyes of migrants. And the men of the town and of the soft suburban country gathered to defend themselves; and they reassured themselves that they were good and the invaders bad, as a man must do before he fights. They said, These goddamned Okies are dirty and ignorant. They're degenerate, sexual maniacs. These goddamned Okies are thieves. They'll steal anything. They've got no sense of property rights. (363)

As Steinbeck notes, the conceiving of morality, the division of people into groups of “good” and “bad” comes after social interaction. The concepts, “good” and “bad,” do not precede the arrival of the Okies, but arise in the wake of their arrival. The conflict between the Californians and Okies arises from the intermingling of two different population groups; the morality that arises as a result of this intermingling betrays, throughout the novel, its contingent character. Beforehand, the Californians “had never been hungry,” “had never wanted anything very much.” With the arrival of the Okies, however—an arrival not exacerbated by any previous greed or hunger on the part of the Californians—now, however, takes on the quality of an “invasion” and the local inhabitants react in a suitably martial fashion. The movement of peoples appears as a wilful violation of California rather than a necessary quest after sustenance, and one

which arises from the very principle of ownership that the Californians seek to defend. Behind the conflict lies the notion of "property," as Steinbeck tells us further down (363); property, in Marx's view, is synonymous with capital insofar as it "is based on the antagonism of capital and wage labour" (426). The antagonism between the Californians and the Okies reflects the deeper antagonism embedded within the ownership of private property, namely, that which exists between the owners of the means of production (in this case, mainly the orchards of California) and the labourer (in this case the itinerant Okies, as well as the labouring Californians). The concomitant view of the Okies as innately "dirty and ignorant," "degenerate, sexual maniacs," "thieves," and men and women ignorant of "property rights" only reflects the larger historical movement of capital itself, whose projected, aforementioned values, Steinbeck makes us understand, depend upon changing conditions; the Okies are not, finally, innately "dirty and ignorant" but must be made to appear so in order for the Californians to safeguard a way of life predicated upon the circulation of capital. Also, *The Grapes of Wrath* reminds us that the view of capital as determinant does not posit a new kind of essentialism, one which regards economics as the basis of human society; as Jameson suggests, "for Marxism, the emergence of the economic, the coming into view of the infrastructure itself, is simply the sign of the emergence of the concrete" (322). The "concrete" in this case refers to the "emergence" of the conditions of the Joads's daily existence through the manifest "signs" of capitalist "infrastructure."

*The Grapes of Wrath* plots the intersection of the real and the ideological in a format (the novel) aware of its own ideological parameters and under-girding. The reification of the Okies into evil invaders happens not through the course of nature but in spite of it, by the machinery that everywhere erases individuals and their needs in favour of abstractions such as "private property" "sexual morality" and "human hygiene," and which conscripts the disenfranchised to fight the disenfranchised (363) in the service of maintaining a particular social relation (between owners and wage labourers). The novel's dialectical oscillation between the societal and personal testifies to the intimate connections between text and society, its relative position within the

oppositions that characterise its historical moment. The contradictions that arise in the process of the novel's construction (Steinbeck's synthesis of the large- and small-scale polemic) testifies to the ways in which the novelist—in accord with his choice of middle-class artistic medium—himself reifies history, which necessitates Steinbeck's relapse into the "mysterious" at the end of the novel. The "mysteriousness" evident on Rosasharn's lips as she makes the self-conscious maternal gesture, the final emblem of the contingent relations between people, suggests, as Jameson notes, the necessity for dialectical thought to reflect on its own cognitive limitations, its own inability to completely dredge up everything contained in the historical moment: a "return and reimmersion in the very shaping and unshaping power of mind to which their [fixed concepts'] rigidity as absolute law blinded us" (374). *The Grapes of Wrath* reconstitutes the power of the novel not by invoking for it a position outside history but by implicating it as historical in the particulars of its construction. By stressing the formal limitations of the novel, Steinbeck warns against the freezing of a vision intermingled with history into a document that misrepresents its portrait as an "absolute," rather than provisional and contingent, narrative. The novel, in order to escape reification, to return our attention to history as a fluid, dynamic process, must call attention to its own capacity for "blinding" the reader, which Steinbeck does by ending his novel not summarily or affirmatively, but on a note of mystification. *The Grapes of Wrath* draws a parallel between the ways in which the Joads alter concepts—primarily meaning, in their case, traditions—to accord with their goals, and the way capital itself achieves its aims of accumulation and monopoly by altering its conception of the "natural" and "immutable" to accord with changing historical conditions (conditions capital both instigates and responds to). Maintaining the "natural" and "immutable" appearance of present conditions requires regular qualification and overhaul of the terminology of permanence. In a sense, capitalism plays on both sides of the fence, promoting permanence while at the same time exercising a conceptual mobility by adapting its "absolutes" to present circumstances; this two-facedness will inform the qualification of word to deed evident in the hypocrisy of dirty realism.



By implicating the novel within its historical moment, Steinbeck defines the target of discontent as the imposition of "fixed" concepts (echoing Dreiser's "immutable forms") on what *The Grapes of Wrath* exposes as the anti-telic, "never-ending ideological formation" (Jameson 374) that constitutes history. The subordination of history to a set of fixed philosophical precepts ultimately leads to the championing of abstractions at the expense of human life, as evinced by the contest for "private property" between the Californians and the Okies. The novel critiques the hypocrisy of a capitalism as reliant on conditions as the Joads are, but hiding this reliance behind illusory normative and universal codes which at once justify its action (such as the strategic lowering of wages) and appear to make that action necessary (because of the influx of "invasive" migrant labour). By refusing an absolute rhetoric *The Grapes of Wrath* evades the kind of reification Jameson associates with bourgeois philosophy, and reinstates history as process "towards" rather than "arrival at." Exposing capital's subterfuge of displacing history with static metaphysical abstractions simultaneously attacks capital and approves of the Okies' resourcefulness. Steinbeck's novel protests the subordination of human life to abstraction, calling for praxis, self-aware action which realises and acknowledges its dynamic dependence on conditions. By casting his fictional characters in a historical rather than absolute light, Steinbeck instates a contingent view of social relationships, which necessarily enables change. Steinbeck's advice to succeeding generations of realists arrives in the advice Tom Joad gives the Preacher: "What the hell you want to lead 'em someplace for? Jus' lead 'em" (27). For dirty realism, this advice translates into a fiction that hyper-consciously resists reification, preferring to lead the reader "around and around" (Steinbeck 27) to "noplac" rather than to the definitiveness of the "someplace" posited by the Preacher's former Christian principles. The movement, the process, rather than the putting down of roots or the attainment of definite co-ordinates, will inform dirty realism's tactical manoeuvres within a slippery post-industrial capitalism. Activism, then, or protest, becomes praxis, a dialectical resistance to the trans-historical abstractions that subordinate the fluidity of human history.

### III. *The Third Generation (Dirty Realism)*

#### A. Postmodern Naturalism

As Donald Pizer's history of naturalism enters its third phase, which he dates from 1951 to 1995, the focus shifts exclusively to critics; Pizer excerpts no authors—as he did with Dreiser, Norris and Farrell earlier—for inclusion in this part of the survey. The one-sidedness of the study indicates that, for Pizer, the writing of primary naturalist texts ended sometime prior to the 1950s. *Documents of American Realism and Naturalism* therefore implies an end to naturalism. In his introduction to this section of the work, Pizer suggests that the critical scholarship around realism and naturalism in the 1950s—particularly as embodied in the works of Charles C. Walcott, Everett Carter and Robert Falk—expressed a “belief in periodization as the principal means of writing literary history” (264). Perhaps the periodisation of Pizer's work itself obstructs its effectiveness in viewing naturalism not as a phase or aberration in realism but as part of realism itself, and therefore not a form with fixed temporal limits but a contributive strain running throughout the history of twentieth-century realism.

Many of the writers connected with dirty realism were born before or during the 1950s, and spent many of their formative years immersed in the cultural milieu that Dreiser, Norris, Farrell and Steinbeck examined and critiqued. Richard Ford (b 1944), Raymond Carver (b 1939), Charles Bukowski (b 1920), Mark Anthony Jarman (b 1955), David Adams Richards (b 1950), Helen Potrebenko (b 1940) either lived through, or experienced the aftermath of, the impact of the Great Depression, two world wars, McCarthyism, the Cold War, the youth movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the rapid proliferation of pop culture, the right-wing political conservatism of the 1980s and the collapse of the Iron Curtain; the period known as the postmodern roughly encapsulates their period of writing.

The various social forces contributing to the writing of dirty realism find a corollary in the vast literary influences that also infiltrate the dirty realist text. The influences cited by Richard Ford, in his *Paris Review* interview with Bonnie Lyons, include, among others, William

Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Peter Taylor, Oakley Hall, E.L. Doctorow, John Cheever, Richard Yates, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Anton Chekhov, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, and William Gass (51). Charles Bukowski's *bildungsroman*, *Ham on Rye* (1982), acknowledges its indebtedness to D.H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, G.B. Shaw (168), and Thomas Wolfe (229), while his book of poetry, *You Get So Alone at Times That it Just Makes Sense* (1986), refers to "Pound, Picasso, A. Huxley, Lawrence, Joyce, / F. Scott, Hemingway" (24), and, as already noted, his collection, *Septuagenarian Stew* (1990), comments upon Dreiser, as well as John Fante, Robinson Jeffers, Hemingway, Dos Passos and others. A wide variety of influence—from naturalist, to modernist, to postmodernist—marks the representative dirty realist text, indicating a confluence of various literary strains that would contest periodisation and lend credence to the notion of a transformation and renovation of the naturalist aesthetic in the postmodern. Moreover, many of the authors cited have, in various critical studies, fallen under the naturalist rubric. For example, Paul Civello, in his study, includes a lengthy discussion of Ernest Hemingway as a proponent of naturalism; C. Hugh Holman, in *Windows on The World*, tackles Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe as writers of "social fiction" (although he distinguishes realism from naturalism, his study nevertheless recalls the central issues of naturalism: epistemology, pragmatism, history, and a representation "without reference to either transcendent ideas or underlying laws," 13);<sup>22</sup> and James Giles turns the naturalist lens onto Michael Gold, Richard Wright, Nelson Algren, Hubert Selby, John Rechy and Joyce Carol Oates. The criticism of Civello, Holman and Giles suggests that the naturalist presence in American fiction did not vanish with the second world war. Certainly, similarities abound, in the choice of lower, working, and underclass milieu, the representation of poverty, joblessness and disenfranchisement, the critical appraisal of capitalism and its effect upon the individual, explorations of human sexuality, the concern with commodity culture (especially as it appears in the manifestations of "pop" culture in dirty realism) and, most importantly, an engagement with what Pizer, in discussing the criticism of Lionel Trilling, calls the "essentially dialectic . . . nature" of American literature, as it addresses "a constantly

changing dialogue about the nature of the American experience" (265). In other words, the writing of naturalism (and dirty realism) reflects a concern over engagement with ideological, political and ethical issues of the moment. The variety of influences remarked upon by Ford and Bukowski implicate dirty realism in the debate of modernity (and therefore postmodernity). Rather than indicating an anachronistic attempt at reviving a "school" whose period, as Pizer's study hints, has passed, the convergence of influence indicates a deployment of naturalistic (and other) narrative strategies in tackling the particular issues of postwar North America. In dirty realism, the aesthetic tendencies of naturalism arise in a postmodern context.

### B. Postmodern Epistemology

Paul Civello, in his study, *American Literary Naturalism and its Twentieth Century Transformations*, argues for, and charts, the continuation and transformation of naturalist imperatives in American fiction; his study takes into account the varied historical conditions (particularly intellectual) acting upon the work of Frank Norris, Ernest Hemingway<sup>23</sup> and Don DeLillo. Civello offers a portrait of the postmodern by reviving the connection between naturalism and science, an aspect of the writing generally ignored by critics following the 1920s (critical preference has tended towards addressing the social implications of naturalism). Civello's examination of contemporary scientific thought informs the postmodern world-view, and therefore that of dirty realism as well, particularly as it pertains to indeterminacy, the disappearance of linear, action/reaction conceptual models, and the contemporary mind's recognised inability to designate final, or even primary, determinants for occurrence.

In a chapter entitled "Fields, Systems, and DeLillo's Postmodern Transformation of Literary Naturalism," Civello supplies the background to the postmodern operations of Don DeLillo; since dirty realism itself operates out of a postmodern context, Civello's paradigm of the scientific postmodern illuminates postmodern naturalism in general and therefore assists in characterising dirty realism as well. Civello raises the relevant issue of simultaneity and its

debunking effect on the Newtonian paradigm of cause and effect:

The new physics of the early and middle twentieth century radically altered the classical, Newtonian conception of physical reality, and as a result would alter the form of the naturalistic novel. . . . The most fundamental transformation involves the shift from the Newtonian view of a physical universe composed of parts to one consisting of an all-encompassing field. Everything, in this conception, is connected; nothing operates independently of anything else. . . . Another feature of the field concept that is closely related to the former is the notion of reciprocity. The linear cause-and-effect chain of classical physics does not hold in the new view; there is no one-way, linear movement in which the cause is distinct from the effect. Instead, there is a mutual, reciprocal interaction between events so that each is both a cause and an effect. Physical reactions, then, move in at least two directions simultaneously. (116)

As seen in the discussion of Farrell and Steinbeck—and to some extent in Dreiser and Norris—the naturalistic novel of the 1930s partially anticipated the development of the “field concept.” Both *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Studs Lonigan* contend with an overdetermination, wherein an immensity of contributive causes bars the completion of the historical account. Although their novels did not evince a distrust in the telic logic of an empirically founded science (nor did Hemingway, for that matter), they did suspect the limits of human consciousness in rendering and accounting for reality (as did Hemingway, in Civello’s estimation). Now, however, in the postmodern period, the writers of dirty realism must contend not only with a drastically limited human consciousness (one no longer separable, in Hemingway’s sense of an independent determining principle of reality, from the surrounding universe), but also with a universe itself devoid of logical succession and occurrence. The human mind’s attempt, as in Farrell, to order and account for the temporal progress of an individual now not only runs up against its conceptual limitations but also its procedural absurdity. History is no longer a sequence, but rather an interplay, a construction in which the constructor and the constructed equally participate. The process of historical verification itself represents a historical manoeuvre, in which the study of the effect can alter or impinge upon the cause. History, now, is truly indeterminate, a field of play wherein narrative dominates over recollection, arrangement over

examination, advertising over product. The aspirations of epistemology to a teleological, originary and causal schema seem not only impossible but dangerous. Without the ability to locate an independent space for the mind, a space separate from occurrence, all claims to objectivity (even the idea of objectivity) vanish. The writer who wishes to record events as they are now finds himself or herself immobilised by the impossibility of not influencing events, or, worse, of influencing too many, unforeseen factors and thereby revisioning, rather than recording, history. As the human consciousness shifts from the ordering principle of reality to a contributive force within occurrence, the fear arises that narrative rendering may in fact only serve to create further disorder and interference in the historical "field." Paranoia, wariness, insecurity, vacillation become normative operational attitudes in the postmodern context.

Richard Ford's second novel, *The Ultimate Good Luck* (1981), offers an example of the trepidation dirty realism feels in attempting verisimilitude, in portraying a reality where the portrayal itself already distorts and alters that reality. Ford's novel reminds us that a highly individualised, even solipsistic, perspective represents not *the only possibility, the only condition*, for reading or recording event, but merely *one of the many possibilities*: "Outside what you see, things are not one way, but other ways at once" (106). Solipsism, "what you see," is not denied—individuals do perceive and process according to the peculiarities of their condition—but at the same time the acknowledgement of solipsism requires the affirmation of an unknown, unquantifiable, unperceivable "outside," which contains an immense profusion of "things" that function "other ways at once," or a multitude of conflicting ways of perceiving; the novel acknowledges the availability of contrary evidence and occurrence—an ontological variety. Solipsism's partiality demands this recognition. The "outside" beyond solipsism offers a scene of simultaneous co-habitation of mutually exclusive, contradictory, irreconcilable "other ways" "at once." Consciousness of the tiniest pinhole view necessitates a consciousness of other coexisting "pinhole" views, but this does not broaden the perspective of Ford's narrator into pluralism; instead it leaves him uncertain and isolated in the midst of contradictory absolutes. Solipsism

becomes conscious of itself—falling into the definition of dialectical thinking, in *Marxism and Form*, as “thought about thought” (53). As a result, the solipsistic epistemology recognises that its selective operations take a partial view of the “out there,”<sup>24</sup> and misrepresent it, a misrepresentation that can have unforeseen consequences (which, in the case of *The Ultimate Good Luck*, means the deaths of several innocent and not-so-innocent people).

An extreme suspicion attends any attempt at a consistent, perhaps even “rigorous,” narrative approach to events, since both author and protagonist mistrust the partiality and personal limitations of their own view, of their own inevitable failure to select and associate phenomena; dirty realists continually intercut their texts with contradictions, exceptions, negations as a way of continually undermining the impulse towards attempting, or claiming, consistency, or reifying *their* vision of the narrative into *the* vision. This reluctance to endorse any one metanarrative of causality appears most notably in Ford’s *Wildlife* (1990), where the young Joe Brinson wonders: “if there was some pattern or an order to things . . . not one you knew but that worked on you. . . . Or was everything just happening all the time, in a whirl without anything to stop it or cause it” (96). Even here, Ford can only conceive of an “order” outside what “you knew,” one exterior to human cognition; but even this distant notion of causality ultimately founders on its conceptual opposite: that of a universe of “whirling” non-causality. Rather than choosing one scheme and abandoning the other, rather than reifying history as supra-human agency or chaos, Ford allows the two notions to stand side-by-side, without privileging one over the other. The novel deals with the difficulties of adhering to *both* possibilities, order and chaos.

In the service of continually questioning their own suppositions and to prevent the reification of their narrative (and thus history), dirty realism’s hypocrisy aesthetic, as I shall illustrate with reference to Charles Bukowski’s *Factotum*, folds into Fredric Jameson’s dialectical methodology as an operational response to the postmodern condition. Jameson’s notion of history—meaning, by history, the sum of human experience—correlates with Ford’s “out there,” de Certeau’s “ordinary” and Civallo’s “universe,” insofar as these terms refer to the intersection,

conceptual and physical, of human beings and an ineffable real. In all cases, the human mind proves incapable of conceiving the real (reality) in its totality, and the mind's attempt to account for this reality ultimately obscures or overwrites it, leading, more often than not, to catastrophe. The continual disclaiming of the totalising view (in essence, not claiming to represent all of reality but merely one "pinhole" view upon it) by reference to, and enacting of, the "other ways" constitutes dirty realism's relationship to "the real." While Jameson, Ford, de Certeau and Civello account for different means of apprehending reality, their terminology addresses the dangers and pitfalls of attempting to summarily define the real.

Eric Sundquist, in "The Country of the Blue" (1982), conjoins the provisionality and indeterminacy evident in even the earliest examples of American realism with the immensity or non-containability of the real: "Which is to say again that the life of American realism exists, perhaps, either everywhere or nowhere; like 'the real' itself, it resists containment, and for the very reason that 'the real' in America, like the country itself, has always had a notoriously short life" (6-7). By the "notoriously short life" of the real, Sundquist suggests the continually changing definition of the real in the works of various realists, a definition altered, by necessity, as the conditions that constitute the real vary with transformations in social thought and social conditions. Like Sundquist, Pizer, Howard, Michaels and Civello, who—in their own posture as "postmodern critics"—debate the complex workings of the historical moment on the consciousness and unconsciousness of the writers they discuss, dirty realism also becomes hyper-conscious of its immersion in, and continual bombardment by, the society of post-industrial capital. This sensitivity to one's position in history is itself a salient feature of postmodern thinking; Michaels, in his introduction to *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, concisely summarises the epistemological problematic in recognising one's place as historically inflected and constructed:

Although transcending your origins in order to evaluate them has been the opening move in cultural criticism at least since Jeremiah, it is surely a mistake to take this move at face value: not so much because you can't really transcend your culture but



because, if you could, you wouldn't have any terms of evaluation left—except, perhaps, theological ones. It thus seems wrong to think of the culture you live in as the object of your affections: you don't like or dislike it, you exist in it, and the things you like and dislike exist in it too. (18)

Here, Michaels enacts an auto-critique absent from the early naturalism of Dreiser and Norris and partially theorised in the works of Farrell and Steinbeck. Simply put, one cannot fully emerge from, or “transcend,” one's culture: first, because the terms and ideas by which one interrogates culture arise from that culture itself and, secondly (as a result), because transcending the culture would leave the critic bereft of a vocabulary with which to hypothesise culture (apart from “theological ones,” as Michaels notes; although classical Marxist thinking suggests that even theological debates emerge as a result of societal forces).

In keeping with the extreme wariness of postmodernity, Pizer notes, in *Documents of American Realism and Naturalism*, that Michaels's conclusion on the inextricability of history and the subject leads him not to interrogate, dialectically, the terms and suppositions characteristic of his historical moment, but rather to look into the past, as if his situation, to the future of Dreiser and Norris, permits him an all-encompassing vision unavailable to those two writers; according to Pizer, this empowerment through temporal remove taints Michaels's assessment with a trace of condescension. Pizer regards *The Gold Standard and Logic of Naturalism* as thoroughly marked by “Michaels's . . . air of superiority and even contempt in [his account] of the ways in which such seeming critics of their society as Howells, Dreiser, and Norris were in fact complicit in maintaining the status quo by their expression of the underlying middle-class assumptions of their time” (267-268). Critics such as Michaels (and, Pizer says, Michael Davitt Bell) view Dreiser and Norris as operating in more or less complete unconsciousness, reproducing—whether they intend to or not—the effects and strategies of a market commodity at every turn. Dreiser's and Norris's works capitulate to capitalism despite the authors' best intentions at manufacturing subversive and politically radical texts. In deference to Pizer, nowhere in Michaels's work does he consider his own position as a left-leaning, mid-1980s literary critic. While Michaels addresses

the unconscious undergirding of the intent of his authors, he does not interrogate the factors impinging on his own criticism, and therefore assumes a privilege apart from the historical moment. If, as Trilling suggested, "American literature is essentially dialectic in nature," then the dialectic in the texts of early naturalism remains buried unconsciously in the work, and requires the dialectical probing of the new-historicist critic in order to fathom the contradictions underlying narrative. While the debate remains open on the extent to which Dreiser and Norris capitulated to, or co-opted, elements of a market economy in their renditions of the American society of their time (a controversy over intent), Pizer's critique of Michaels's sensitivity to *their* historical moment, and Michaels's lack of sensitivity to his *own*, indicates the degree to which the postmodern obsesses over its place in history, fearful that its conceptual mobility will lead it to overwrite the present, or to assume an erroneous epistemological privilege. Dirty realism reacts to this danger by calling up the dialectical tradition Trilling associates with realism, a *modus operandi* that results from dirty realism's historical situation and from its simultaneous attempt to represent it.

The dialectical, scientific and socially subversive legacy of naturalism—as witnessed in the historical engagement of Dreiser, Norris, Farrell and Steinbeck—contributes to dirty realism's aesthetic of hypocrisy. Hyper-sensitive to its scientific, social, cultural, historical surround, dirty realism enables its aesthetic not through mobility and activity but through passivity, through not taking a stand, or, by taking a succession of stands that effect a dialectical negation of one another, a tactic whose purpose is to prevent the emergence of another reified epistemology, to critique the historical moment while at the same time preventing the permanence of that critique (which would, in turn, obscure the very thing it meant to uncover). Keeping in tune with the historical present—one of post-industrial capital, a present which authorises anything and everything, as Jameson notes in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), for consumption (48)—dirty realism also authorises everything, in what amounts to a breakdown of logical causation similar to that witnessed by Civello. As evident in Charles Bukowski's novel,

*Factotum*, dirty realism critiques its historical moment by standing aside and allowing the historical moment to infiltrate and manifest within its texts. By positing the text as a receptor or node of cultural signals, dirty realism crafts a cultural artefact that, in revealing the indeterminacy, negation and hypocrisy of its culture, exemplifies and undermines that culture; by marking the text as radically open, as not promising a sustained, unified epistemology, and by ascribing to contradiction and hypocrisy, dirty realism responds to the contradictions of its culture in a form equally contradictory; just as postmodern critics such as Merish and Michaels evince a hyper-consciousness of Dreiser's and Norris's relation to their cultural contexts (illustrating how the texts of these early naturalists reproduce their given cultural circumstances), a dirty realist text such as Bukowski's *Factotum* also proceeds to hyper-consciously critique its cultural surround – and its disposition to that surround – in a form drawn from that culture itself. By marking the text as radically open, as not promising a sustained, unified epistemology, and by ascribing to contradiction and hypocrisy, dirty realism presents *and* undermines its respective society. If Dreiser's project remained an attempt to address and correct the inconsistencies of his society, then Bukowski's remains the reproduction and amplification of those inconsistencies. In the world of *Factotum*, to reproduce is to undo.

### C. The Dialectic of *Factotum*

Easily the most infamous dirty realist, Charles Bukowski represents the zenith (or nadir) of the hypocrisy aesthetic. Underneath Bukowski's mystique, his stature as one of the leading underground or cult figures in postwar American writing, run a series of conflicting charges – misogyny in his treatment of women, opportunism in sensationalising poverty and making it comedic, hypocrisy in amassing a small fortune through manipulating a readership's empathy – as well as a great deal of respect for sympathetically chronicling the underclass of Los Angeles, standing against establishment values, carrying on a tradition of realism derived from Hemingway, and protesting for better working and social conditions. An heir apparent to the naturalist strain in American writing, Charles Bukowski chooses a setting that deals with and

extends the major concerns traced throughout naturalism: pop culture, the working class, history, Marxism, sexual relations, protest and capitulation. His early novel, *Factotum*, perhaps the most accessibly naturalistic of all his works, reflects the transformations naturalism has undergone in the postmodern context. This novel presents the major tactical responses of dirty realism to a society whose lack of boundaries—between representation and reality, politics and advertising, the genuine and the simulated—makes the earlier, more polemical practice of Dreiser and Norris impossible.

Embedded in a society which has seen the death of the author, the fragmentation of the ego, the levelling of cultural hierarchies, Bukowski's naturalism engages with its culture by absorbing and deploying the indeterminacy of post-industrial capitalism. Its practice, like much of naturalism, addresses the system of capital by reproducing it. Unrestricted by traditional conceptions of self, unanchored by a stable unified ego, no longer even needing to posit the author as textual originator, dirty realism celebrates its licence to claim and disown authority and responsibility; *Factotum* prohibits the location of an authorial centre—the essential platform or source from which Bukowski operates—a move which also prohibits our identification of the author along any line, political, ethical or epistemological. The text functions almost despite the author. In *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (1962), Herbert Marcuse offers a useful paradigm for understanding the ethereality behind the economics of capitalism, reflected in the aesthetic of Bukowski's text: "At its peak, the concentration of economic power seems to turn into anonymity: everyone, even at the very top, appears to be powerless before the movements and laws of the apparatus itself" (98). Marcuse's statement finds a corollary in *The Grapes of Wrath*, where the bank employees defend their actions by claiming to be only pawns of a larger bureaucratic system beyond their control (49). While Steinbeck's text criticises this avoidance of responsibility (and its sad reality), dirty realism reproduces the anonymity of the "apparatus," adopting the employee's defence as a means of liberating the author, or protagonist (as the case may be), from accountability to "movements of the apparatus," or the literary work.

The author, or Marcuse's man "at the very top," cannot take responsibility for the replication and administration of a system which conditions him and yet seems unlocatable, everywhere and nowhere, all-pervasive yet, as Jameson notes, lacking definite co-ordinates. The indeterminacy of dirty realism represents the conscription of capital's ethereality into the authorial arsenal, a conscription, as *Marxism and Form* notes, necessitated by the character of the present system itself: "Perhaps the only way to keep faith with the Hegelian spirit of systematization in a fragmented universe is to be resolutely unsystematic" (51). The system deployed by dirty realists is the antithesis of system (or, a logic of continual and consistent contradiction), ensuring their evasion of confinement to definite conceptual co-ordinates; dirty realists observe one rule: namely, that they *must* "resolutely" subvert or oppose rules (including, and especially, their own). Ultimately, this attitude culminates in a pointed hypocrisy that everywhere marks dirty realism with the disparity between the "doing what I say" and the "doing what I do," as well as positing dirty realism as a product of its historical moment.

*Factotum* deals with the work history of Henry Chinaski, the protagonist (a character often conflated—mistakenly—with Bukowski himself). The novel's structure attests to Jameson's systematic fragmentation; divided into numbered sections, the book presents not so much a continuous narrative but rather a list of lightly sketched vignettes on the wide variety of jobs Chinaski undertakes. With the exception of a brief story centred on the purported "millionaire," Wilbur Oxnard (68-86), and occasional references to Chinaski's relationship with Jan (90-196), the novel finds its narrative thrust in the working day. A relentless listing of jobs—rather than a plot centred on human interaction—drives the book. At times it reads like a "how-to" on the process of getting fired. Unlike Bukowski's earlier novel, *Post Office*, wherein a more traditional situation of the lone man against the corporation animated the narrative, *Factotum* dishes up the repetitive dreariness of a man condemned to jobs entirely lacking in substance or character, and for which he feels neither enthusiasm nor hatred. He does not meet with villains such as Stone, nor does he endure the Byzantine training process required of mail sorters in *Post Office*. Mainly, the jobs

require little intelligence and less motivation. Ultimately, *Factotum* catalogues the numbing sameness behind the particularities of each and every occupation; Bukowski's novel erases differences between components: each job is its own job but the quality of the work is as "uniform" as the culture it supports.

The plot of *Factotum* does not "progress"; rather, it repeats, and the last sentence unequivocally indicates the static, uneventful monotony, and lack of agency evident in Chinaski's reality: "And I couldn't get it up" (205). The sexual impotence, and its matter-of-fact acceptance, reflects Chinaski's indifference. Even pay seems inconsequential here, evident in the instance where Chinaski quits one job because management refuses to give him a pay raise from seventeen to nineteen dollars a week, only to turn around and immediately accept work that pays twelve (and not out of necessity) (18). Chinaski's attitude towards money—the material embodiment of labour, as declared by Marx in *Capital* (42)—only reflects the reality of a society where "employment agencies" take "one third" of their customers' wages (100), where, in other words, you pay for the opportunity to work: a complete alienation not only from labour but also from the ultimate expression of the product of labour: money. The completely dispassionate Chinaski resembles an automaton unable to manufacture the requisite "taste" for work required by capital: "That's when I first learned that it wasn't enough to just do your job, you had to have an interest in it, even a passion for it" (17). Yet, Chinaski's reaction to the work seems entirely in keeping with the monotony of the jobs themselves; and the "passion" required of him indicates only the first of many hypocrisies evident in a system which denies the worker meaning yet insists on its necessity. Chinaski continually comes up against the seemingly absurd requirement that he show, in his father's words, "ambition" (32), even as he sees the alienating economy of the workplace reproduced in the family dwelling ("I couldn't afford the rates at home," 35), and the dispirited life of his father, one subsumed entirely by "the job" (13). Everywhere, work serves to efface human relations and quotidian pleasures instead of providing a matrix wherein they can thrive. In *Factotum*, rather than supporting and invigorating society, as it claims, capital colonises

and drains it grey.

Bukowski renders the reality of wage labour with classical Marxist overtones. Just as Marx establishes the surplus value of labour (that part of labour which capital requires to expand itself) in terms of an expenditure of time on the part of the labourer (112), Bukowski also notes: "I've given you my *time*. It's all I've got to give—it's all any man has. And for a pitiful buck and a quarter an hour . . . my time so that you can live in your big house on the hill and have all the things that go with it. If anybody has lost anything on this deal, on this arrangement . . . I've been the loser" (112). In a moment of accord with *Capital*, Bukowski imports Marx's argument into dirty realism. He italicises *time*, identifying it as the primary factor behind the relation (and constant discontent) between employer and employee. He notes that time is "all any man has," equating his caste with Marx's proletariat, described in *Capital* as an individual in a position to "dispose of his labour power as his own commodity" because "he has no other commodity for sale" and no means (raw materials, means of production) by which he can himself transform his labour into exchange value (80); the proletariat, in this case Chinaski, does indeed have nothing but his time to sell. Bukowski notes the inequality between Chinaski's expenditure of time and the financial recompense for that expenditure in the "pitiful buck and a quarter an hour," echoing Marx's own notion that capital stretches the wages of the proletariat over a variable working day, creating surplus value by gaining work in excess of the labourer's pay; if the daily rate of pay depends upon the work time necessary for the subsistence of the labourer, capital stretches six hours worth of pay over twelve (112); what the worker gains in comparison to the time he or she expended is absolutely "pitiful." Bukowski's lament at the worth of his time in contrast to the visible benefits—i.e. the "big house on the hill"—accrued by the boss recognises the inordinate gains made by employers from the labour done over and above the working time required to provide the labourer with the necessaries of life. Identifying himself as the "loser," Chinaski implies the conditions elaborated by Marx: "Hence it is self-evident that the labourer is nothing else . . . but labour power, that . . . all his disposable time is by nature and law labour

time, to be devoted to the self-expansion of capital. . . . It [capital] usurps the time for growth, development, and healthy maintenance of the body" (128). Here, Marx describes the exploitation of workers over and above not only the necessary time to reproduce labour but over and above the time necessary for physical health itself; they do not gain enough pay even to keep themselves in proper nutrition. The "loser" of the "deal" or "arrangement"—the exchange of labour for wages—are the labourers who dispense of their free time to supply themselves with basic necessities while additionally providing masses of surplus value to the owner of the means of production. *Factotum* chronicles the losing side of Marx's "struggle" (113) with a pitch-perfect rendition of the conditions enumerated in *Capital*. Bukowski attests to the nightmarish lengthening of the working day: "Those in control always preferred to overwork a few men continually, instead of hiring more people so that everyone might work less. You gave the boss eight hours, and he always asked for more" (57). Both *Capital* and *Factotum* witness the stripping away of workers' "rights," either to bargain for better hours or to determine their mode of employment. In an overly-obvious manner, *Factotum* addresses the conflict between rich and poor and bosses and labourers, arriving, in the process, at conclusions congruent with classical Marxism. Yet this classical Marxist presentation—insofar as it remains rhetoric in Chinaski's mouth—often serves, in fact, to obscure the reality of working conditions and the concrete realities of the historical moment.

Alongside Bukowski's diagnosis of the working class conditions of his day—conditions predicated on present experience and realities (rather than on an ideological or conceptual position), a testament to his willingness to stand, again as *Marxism and Form* puts it "in the very river of history itself" (50)—*Factotum* betrays an ahistorical bent. "For each Joan of Arc," Bukowski writes, "there is a Hitler perched at the other end of the teeter-totter. The old story of good and evil" (129). Here, he couches his experiences in a metaphysical balance, in an "old [i.e., eternal, therefore not socially contingent] story" of opposition between "good and evil" familiar to most religious conceptions of history; history becomes a record of forces outside the human



rather than of human construction. Here, Bukowski shifts the terrain away from realism, which—echoing Jameson’s dialectics—Alfred Habegger identifies as a type of writing involved with process, with historical particulars, a writing which insists “on the primacy of what ordinary people, living under recognisable pressures, *try to do*” (361). Habegger identifies realism as a refusal of “abstract types” (362) of characters and situations for a close scrutiny of what people, given a particular set of circumstances, “try to do.” Realism views character not as embodiments of universal or trans-historical abstractions (in the black and white theological terms of “good and evil”), but as individuals or groups of individuals manifesting behaviours specific to, and arising in response to, a particular historical moment. Realistic fiction, therefore, if not explicitly prescriptive, then hints—in its preference for a co-dependent, or contingent, view of humanity and history over a view that sets individual behaviour as in-born and consistent no matter what the circumstances—at the possibility of agency; choices, given the limits of circumstance, do exist: realism proposes “a limited but genuine sense of individual power to act in the world” (361). Because characters have (limited) choice, so the readers also have a choice to affect some change in the world. By contrast, allegory “offers a timeless scene, a universe of static types and symbols rather than casual change” (361). Allegory, in Habegger’s definition, expresses “a sense of individual powerlessness” (361) because it configures behaviour as eternal, as independent of historical conditions, as impervious to “causal change.” Realism therefore belongs, however tenuously,<sup>25</sup> to a reformist bent (insofar as it depicts what is susceptible to human agency), while allegory sits most comfortably with “exiles, prisoners, captives, or others who have no room to act in their society” (361). Bukowski’s use of the allegorical mode, both Marxist and metaphysical, stands in contradistinction to portrayals of a labourer protesting existing conditions and attempting to subvert, and thereby change, them.<sup>26</sup> Elsewhere, he is aware that something must be done to alter conditions but, alternately, hasn’t the means or motivation to enact a change; here, he relinquishes the possibility of change entirely, opting instead to portray a “universe of static types and symbols.” Without a view of history as contingent, as a process

(which, by the very meaning of the word, implies change) of alteration and/or evolution, any (non-vulgar, dialectical) Marxist agenda quickly fades from the picture. Yet the main point is that these two impulses, realistic and allegorical, do not develop from one to the other. Bukowski does not forego agency when he realises his powerlessness but, rather, the allegorical mode exists parallel to a more realistic assessment of situation; realism and allegory appear simultaneously – as we watch Bukowski dialectically teeter between moments of subversion (he does occasionally take action, however minor, against the system, 152-54, 157-59) and fatalistic acceptance. The enactment of these contraries itself presents an act of subversion.

Bukowski presents further oppositions throughout *Factotum*. Displacing, at points, the classical Marxist portrayal of labour as a united class—apparent in the scene where the bar patrons, without expecting recompense, assist Bukowski in a task of cleaning blinds made particularly demeaning (51)—in contention with the bosses, *Factotum* offers a portrayal of atomisation that infuses the novel with social Darwinism. “Larabee was the head shipping clerk. Klein was the assistant shipping clerk. Larabee was the boss. Klein was trying to move Larabee out of his job. . . . Klein and Larabee argued and fought all day long and on into the evenings” (56-57). This example, which shifts the focus from labour to management, along with the “Survival of the fittest” training session held by the Taxi cab company (166), offers a more static picture of history than Marx; and Bukowski’s short, terse, matter-of-fact sentences reinforce this static sensibility. In fact, this passage conceives of societal struggle ahistorically, not as class against class, but as an eternal struggle evident within all social strata—managerial and worker—wherein standing results not from class but from inborn ability; those who rise to the top, and those who stay at the bottom, do so because of a biologically-determined surplus or deficiency of talent. True or false, this notion postulates an antithesis to Marx’s socially-constructed history, again in a vulgarised form of social Darwinism. Arguably, Capitalism may pit various workers against one another in order to prevent unified agitation, but social Darwinism implies a more elastic, individualised assessment of class configuration, one out of keeping with classical Marxist

readings. One's social standing is determined by "natural" rather than societal factors; only nature (not class) bars an individual's progress upwards or downwards on the social scale. Social Darwinism enforces a static, universal—rather than historical or cultural—model of human development, and therefore despairs, or exults in (in one of its paradoxes), the impossibility of engineered social progress. With the inclusion of universal and allegorical conceits, Bukowski's novel now begins to confuse its relative position vis-à-vis the Marxist paradigm, and its relative position overall. Once again, the social Darwinism apparent in *Factotum* does not supersede or precede Marxism, but appears alongside it, simultaneously.

Bukowski's dialectical cohabitation of the realistic and allegorical—particularly on the level of character—testifies to the historical reality of the postmodern, of a society inundated with reified, simulated and commodified means of encountering, and overwriting, the real; his generation of conflicting perspectives, however, also protests against, and subverts, the postmodern. Noting the essential dissimilarity between himself and the management types he encounters in the office, Bukowski says: "The only difference was money, and the desire to accumulate it" (63). In Henry Chinaski, Bukowski crafts a mythic hero: a man without true material aspirations, a man who enjoys luxury but not enough to sell his soul for it, a man who enjoys "good steaks" but can subsist on "candy bars" (63) if appetite interferes with endeavour, a man who almost constantly desires beautiful women and sex but who, confronted by the accessible fantasy of Gertrude, inexplicably rejects the offer (59). *Factotum* supports Michaels's contention—that "the economic function of art [in a capitalist economy] is the production of desire" (46)—by presenting a hero who does not fit into the system because he fails to adequately desire (the novel itself co-opts advertising by promoting the effacement of desire). While Michaels's point pertains to Theodore Dreiser, his view of the economy of *Sister Carrie* proves instructive for our understanding of Chinaski. As Michaels notes, capital manufactures not only the object of desire but the desiring subject (20), and nowhere does Chinaski appear less as a real human being and more of a mythic embodiment of a resistance to construction as a desiring

subject than in his hypocrisy. His vacillation between urgent needs and a mythic stoicism that can even disregard hunger proves symptomatic of his historical moment and the last possible means of resistance to present contingencies. As Chinaski himself admits, he is not “real people,” and, in fact, hates “real people” (59-60). Chinaski slips in and out of the “real,” embodying not so much an actual character—subverting realistic verisimilitude—but an inexplicable fantasy of choice not only with regards to the luxuries promised by capitalism but to necessity itself, as well as a spokesperson for conflicting ideologies. Chinaski serves as a contested site between the social realities and pressures of his day, and an idealised stoicism capable of resisting the all-encompassing pressures to conform to the marketplace. By not being “real people,” Bukowski tips his hat to the power of simulation; as Jameson’s *Postmodernism* suggests, capitalism has “colonized” everything, including “Nature and the Unconscious” (in other words: the self) (49); Bukowski responds to this colonisation not by protesting the invasion but by playing the same game, and, in playing it, elevating the stakes. If the individual now figures as nothing more than a site of reception, a node or intersection of tendencies instated by capitalistic systems that engineer desire and control, then Bukowski responds not by reasserting the primacy of fixed biological or psychological quotients (he does not need to eat; he has literally played out the oedipal conflict and overcome the father, 29), and hence intrinsic aspects of the subject, but by radically effacing any determinate relationship between the individual and the (socially-, economically-, scientifically-constructed) real to create a subversive art that sabotages the manufacture of desire. The will, so thoroughly colonised, cannot resist the machinations of capital (as Jameson notes, the individual will has no place from which to resist) and so, instead, dirty realism accelerates and replicates the features of post-industrial capital to its own advantage. Bukowski stands at the crossroads—formerly known as the individual—where the signals of capitalism converge, and purposefully jams, mixes and amplifies them until their confused distortion repulses the effectiveness of a consumer program in a manner that replicates the very distortions and confusions of the source of those signals (the marketplace). It is

impossible to sell to such a conflicted target, whose desires alternate, vanish and vary more quickly and paradoxically than the messages relayed to it. As Stuart Hall points out, in "Encoding, Decoding," "If no 'meaning' is taken, there can be no 'consumption'" (91). Bukowski shakes off advertising by not sticking to a single, particular filter of meaning; he "means" too many things, and advertising arrives to him as a dead letter, addressed incorrectly. Refusing the role of consistent receptor of meaning, Bukowski simulates positions of sincerity just as advertising does. But he does not really want anything. He only momentarily pretends want, and, by time the market has supplied him with the object of his simulated desire, Chinaski has turned up the volume on a different sales pitch. In order to escape the relentless machinery of desire enacted by capital one must desire and not desire simultaneously, one must avoid the fixity of an "either/or" position for a dynamism that refutes and dismantles one's static position on the consumer index. Like the marketplace, Bukowski advertises a variety of positions—Marxist, social Darwinist, alcoholic, social reformist, reactionary—whose sum total negates each part, exposing the empty core behind simulation.

Bukowski's lampooning of the capitalist dream, most notably in the section following the observation on his lack of desire to "accumulate," proves exemplary of the cross-signals typical of dirty realism. Here, Chinaski dreams that he, too, will begin to extend his capital.

I'd do it too! I'd save my pennies. I'd get an idea, I'd spring a loan. I'd hire and fire. I'd keep whiskey in my desk drawer. I'd have a wife with size 40 breasts and an ass that would make the paperboy on the corner come in his pants when he saw it wobble. I'd cheat on her and she'd know it and keep silent in order to live in my house with my wealth. I'd fire men just to see the look of dismay on their faces. I'd fire women who didn't deserve to be fired

That was all a man needed: hope. It was lack of hope that discouraged a man. (63)

Given all that the reader has seen of Chinaski, this paragraph reads less like wishful thinking than straight-out satire, especially with the inclusion, further on, of the declaration, "I'd build an empire upon the broken bodies and lives of helpless men, women and children" (63). The satiric momentum picks up with "pennies," in this case not a truism, since Bukowski's work history

suggests that he, literally, works for the most meagre pay. What follows also neatly balance the truisms of capital against Chinaski's reality. The sentence that begins "I'd get an idea" unveils only the form of capitalism, a form Chinaski cannot fill with content; he knows the procedure for attaining wealth but fails to provide the ingredients; the capitalist dream remains a mantra of empty text that consoles only those who can believe in it. After this, Bukowski merely lists the visible manifestations—as he has perceived them—of wealth. Throughout, we are acutely aware that Chinaski has experienced the cruelty of capitalism strictly from the receiving end. The quotation stresses, through the transparency of Chinaski's fantasy of transposition from worker to boss, what the worker must endure. Chinaski's appropriation of privilege, if only in fantasy, only more strongly evokes his lack of privilege; fantasy underscores history. The beginning of the next paragraph announces yet another truism, also ironic, since Bukowski realises the hopelessness of ever attaining the capitalist dream. Moreover, this sentence ironises the dream by suggesting that capital inculcates a "hope" attainable only at the expense of others, and also that the attractiveness of the fantasy rests not in luxury but in qualifying and enabling one to do harm. Yet, at the same time, the context of the paragraph sidelines much of the irony. We know that Bukowski cheats on his girlfriends Laura (79-81) and Jan (87), and that the latter leaves him because of his destitution (196); this confuses the ironic treatment, since, to some degree, Bukowski demonstrates that he would, given the chance, reproduce the marital situation described above. What seems an ironic vision of bourgeois morality, *in context*, becomes an honest statement of personal aspiration *as well as* a satirical simulation of capitalist ambition and rhetoric, amplified into the grotesque with mention of the paperboy "coming in his pants" at the sight of the wife with "size 40 breasts" and a wobbling "ass." Bukowski would like his women to stay with him, he would like to cheat on them—if only he had the money. The image of men being fired "just to see the look of dismay on their faces" loses all force when we consider that nowhere in *Factotum* does Bukowski ever get fired out of sadism (although sadism does appear in the workplace of *Post Office*). In fact, many bosses, such as Mr. Hansen (93-94) apologise for

firing Bukowski, citing his attitude as the reason for letting him go, a fact that recurs throughout and for which Bukowski makes no excuses. The effect of this reality undermines and lampoons the classical Marxist version of class characteristics, obvious, for example, where *Capital* portrays the bourgeoisie as “Our friend, Moneybags” (79), “vampire-like” (112), and merely a vessel whose “consciousness and will” are “endowed” by “capital” (293). *Factotum* complicates this portrayal of the capitalist. The kind of capitalist Bukowski dreams of becoming approaches nearer to Marx’s almost allegorical presentation than the case-specific realities of bosses and managers portrayed in *Factotum*. Bukowski’s capitalist dream disturbs and distorts both the capitalist myth of proactive industry as well as the Marxist analysis of the bourgeoisie. By presenting and ironising both modes of representation within a single paragraph, Bukowski himself, his desires, seemingly vanish between the lines of text. What does this man stand for? What does he want?

Bukowski does not subvert dialectical materialism (for even in *Factotum*, the kindness of capital only further underscores the hypocrisy evident in a historical moment typified by a “concerned” system of wage labour), but the clichés that surround a stereotypical Marxism. In its classical Marxist overtones, *Factotum* panders to a reified portrait of working conditions, presenting Marx in a hackneyed (or, in Jameson’s parlance, “vulgar”) manner. Bukowski’s importation of Marxism serves notice of the way in which even socialism can become a mere commodity in the “entertainment industry.” The novel shows how Bukowski appropriates elements of classical Marxism and proletarian realities to serve aesthetic rather than political or social aspirations. In *Factotum*, Marxism appears as allegory rather than realism, and, as allegory, largely works in the interest of shock-value and humour. As Jameson suggests, pastiche characterises the late-industrial society of *Postmodernism*, a practice of “mimicry” “devoid of . . . any conviction” (17), and Bukowski’s descent into vulgar Marxism offers a pastiche of Marxist representations, one he neither believes nor disbelieves in, but merely offers up for entertainment. He has absorbed and commodified Marxism in a way that synthesises the

antithetical modes of a particularised realism (history) and the universal mode of allegory, insofar as the allegorical representation hinges upon a pastiche which is, in turn, characteristic of the postmodern cultural context; the allegory that arises from pastiche is, therefore, realistic, since it recalls the historical moment. Furthermore, Chinaski's bourgeois fantasy forces us to continually reformulate our understanding of the sincerity and object of Bukowski's apparently Marxist leanings. It arouses suspicion as to what extent his entertainment masquerades as political aspiration, to what extent his classical Marxist efforts mean to amuse rather than incite or inform us. And if this suspicion proves true, what political practice, if any, can we detect in *Factotum*? This constant interrogation, by the reader, of Marxist (and capitalistic) elements in the novel reinstates a dialectical operation by keeping the readers' perceptions fluid, by allowing them to witness the reification of provisional, historically-governed ideas, including Marxism itself, into ideology. By providing the reader examples of how the ideational and the historical intersect, Bukowski auto-critiques the capitalist and Marxist suppositions behind his novel.

Shortly after the capitalist fantasy, Bukowski offers the most concrete example of the commodification of Marxism and capitalism in *Factotum*. Pages after the brief dream of "empire," Chinaski drops all "subterfuge and juggling tricks" (*Capital* 93) and embarks on a brief stint in management at the Hotel Sans. The very rise of Bukowski to prominence in the hierarchy of the hotel already questions the capitalist assertion that only the desiring subject rises up the social scale, that one must "want" to rise, and that only through the Protestant ethic of hard work and ambition does societal advancement arrive; here favour falls on Bukowski out of the blue, for no apparent reason (192). Suddenly, the unambitious drunk finds himself on top. Very quickly, however, he drops all pretence to Marxist reform and helps re-enact the social Darwinism he earlier disparaged. In need of some dishwashers for the day, Chinaski walks out into the back alley where "forty bums" stand, waiting for work. He announces a list of qualifications that have nothing to do with ability and everything to do with reactionary preference: "No winos, perverts, communists, or child-molesters! And you've got to have a social security card" (193)! Again,



Bukowski begins by satirising the absurd qualifications required simply to find employment washing dishes. Finally, needing only four dishwashers, he tells the “bums:” “I have four pennies here in my hand. I’m going to toss them up. The four men who bring me back a penny get to wash dishes today” (193)! With relish, Bukowski then describes the ensuing melee caused by the scramble for pennies: “Bodies jumped and fell, clothing ripped, there were curses, one man screamed, there were several fistfights. Then the lucky four came forward, one at a time, breathing heavily, each with a penny” (193). The supposedly classical Marxist now stands revealed as nothing more than a hypocrite, willing to complain about the unfairness of capitalism but, given the chance, immediately reproducing the divisiveness and harmful competitiveness in the men working under him. In one sense, Bukowski here re-enacts the worst aspects of capital—and, in doing so, exposes the fundamental kill-or-be-killed competitiveness that informs the spirit of wage labour; in quite another sense, however, his behaviour here—as in his fantasy—simultaneously amplifies the Marxist cliché of the “vampiric” and sadistic capitalist into entertainment. The critique of capitalism turns on itself when we realise that Bukowski displays a face of exploitation not apparent in his own work history, thus problematising the representation of capital, while the deployment of a Marxist cliché calls attention to the reality of Bukowski’s historical moment, one unlike the workplace extremes he himself initiates. By intersecting these two political views, Bukowski reinstates a dialectical view of the historical moment as one of commodification and simulation emptied of either sincerity or feeling. Everything is simulated for maximum effect, including workplaces filled with “kind” bosses who nevertheless prevent labourers from making meaningful use of their time.

Sometime later, still at the Hotel Sans, Chinaski—drinking on the job—“corners” the assistant manager and lectures him on the ethics of running the hotel; Mrs. Farrington reports on what happened (Chinaski can’t remember): “You suggested that prostitutes be registered on the first floor only and that they should be given regular physical examinations. . . . You also told Mr. Pelvington . . . that it would cut down on theft if each employee was given one live lobster to

take home each night" (195). Drunk, Chinaski reverts to social reformer. He tackles the issues of prostitution and theft not through law-enforcement or restriction of individual rights but with a progressiveness that belies his former indifference of, and outright sadism towards, the underclass of labourers that forms his peer group. Chinaski's hypocrisy fully exposed, *Factotum* delights in the twists and turns of its philosophical and political parameters, delights in the process of elaborating these extreme positions rather than in the truthfulness or falsity of the positions themselves. By expressing the worst of capital, and the most banal of Marxism, he distributes pastiche equally over two conceptual horizons in a way that does not erase the political ramifications of either system, but works its entertainment through a myriad of political twists and turns, manoeuvring between messages until the variety of signals undermine one another. The focus on process implicates Bukowski in critique rather than speculation, in exposé, positing his fiction as a node of various forms of "advertising" and thereby as a commentary on the society he inhabits as one of conflicting variety. This is a world of entertainment for entertainment's sake.

Finally, we can glean no consistent model of behaviour, no rigorous ethical or political model from *Factotum*; it remains pure process, an investigation into the current cultural form without displacing analysis with another epistemological schema that would invalidate the dialectic with another permanent, trans-historical system. The name, *Hotel Sans*, proves instructive in this regard, since it translates, from the French, as "without" or "lacking," implying what Bukowski's narrative, in Buford's words, makes explicit: "These [dirty realist] authors are . . . suspicious of heroes, crusades and easy idealism. It is possible to see many of these stories as quietly political, at least in their details, but it is a politics considered from an arm's length: they are stories not of protest but of the occasion for it" (5).<sup>27</sup> Bukowski, and the work of dirty realists, express a politic without a target, a politic only too relevant in Jameson's postmodern age where capital has become too diffuse for the focus necessary for effective "protest." "Occasions" for protest arise in the work of these authors, but they avoid the fallacy of countering the occasion

with a specified political program, choosing (because they have no other choice), instead, to subvert it from within, by using the system's procedures against the system itself through the passivity of self-evident display rather than confrontation. In allowing the system to show itself up, dirty realism observes the last avenue open to subversion.

#### D. Dirty Realism and the Hypocrisy of Capital

Dirty realists such as Bukowski distrust "heroes," "crusades" and "easy idealism," as well as the rhetoric associated with each, knowing, as they do, that capitalism sells on the basis of conviction. Jameson's *Postmodernism* expresses the suspicion of dirty realism where he speaks of the contemporary situation as one

in which we all, in one way or another, dimly feel that not only punctual and local countercultural forms of cultural resistance and guerrilla warfare but also even overtly political interventions like those of *The Clash* are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part. (49)

Just as the punk band, *The Clash*, ultimately translated its "political interventions" into money for the record industry, so, too, Jameson suggests, does any "countercultural" movement of the present day ultimately channel its energies back into the system it seeks to redress. Fans of *The Clash*, with their political wariness, prove an ideal target market for buying a certain kind of CD. Dirty realism, therefore, finds itself in a milieu crying out for some form of political activity and program, but a milieu that feeds on conviction and consistent, rigorous messages and forms. Opposition to such a system will therefore require the abandoning of logical, anchored operative models.

Capitalism, in Jameson's contention, proves so slippery an animal because it lacks the integrity of a conceptual base which would order, differentiate and systematise its program; it aims only at extending itself. To this end it presses into service whatever product assists that aim, whether that product reflects its values or counters them. As Marx points out, *the process of circulation of commodities, rather than the ontological status of the commodities themselves,*

informs capital; and capital's effectiveness arises from its indeterminate position within this process: "His development into a full-grown capitalist must take place, both within the sphere of circulation and without it" (79). Capitalism cannot rise within the sphere of commodity exchange alone; it must, *at the same time*, indulge in two contrary practices: that of the egalitarian exchange of like value for like value and that of the unfair "theft" of surplus value in exchange for a lesser value (the daily pay rate). The process of capitalist accumulation therefore comprises a simultaneity of two contrary operations; it sustains itself by contradiction. This allows it a manoeuvrability unavailable to more rigorous theoretical or conceptual models. Capitalism can pronounce itself as an exercise of the inalienable right to freedom, expressed in mutual agreements between employer and employee to exchange labour for pay, while in the same breath taking from workers surplus value not accounted for in the contract. Capitalism is a function of hypocrisy, but one whose lack of singular conceptual confines makes it difficult to indict. Its right to practice depends not upon philosophical truths intrinsic to itself but upon the permission granted its operations by the supposed free will of the other, the worker. As Michaels points out, this verbal construct, "free will," embodies the very contrariness of capital itself. Speaking of the "freedom of contract," which binds labourers to a particular line of work for a particular period of time under penalty of arrest and confinement (125-126), Michaels, in discussing the work of Richard T. Ely, concludes: "Loving freedom of contract for its own sake . . . you will end by destroying what you love and will find yourself enslaved" (132). The right of the worker to dispose of his or her labour under conditions he or she alone agrees with (a right, incidentally, that, at the time of Ely, c1914, provoked a heated defence by American employers), ultimately ended in "wage slavery" (129). Paradoxically, one's innate, "natural" right to enter into contract enabled the legal defence of contracts that fixed a supposedly willing worker to a term of bondage. The notion of freedom of contract, therefore, in defending the primacy of contract, historically served to curtail freedom (the worker's) rather than champion it. Michaels illustrates the hypocritical "freedoms" of a market economy where a worker may, through the

exercise of innate freedom, put himself into a state of servitude; freedom exists, and is defended, insofar as it permits relinquishing of freedom to the contract. Capitalism, as dirty realism realises, operates on a logic of contradiction.

What Marx identifies in *Capital* as “the contradictions and antagonisms of the capitalist form of production” (248) has also become the governing logic of dirty realism. Capitalism attaches itself to, rather than openly opposes, the “polar” other;<sup>28</sup> in this way, record companies can co-opt and make money by marketing the subversive music of *The Clash*. Capitalism requires the conviction of the market in order for it to sell its goods; it simulates conviction in its advertising as a way of reproducing and manufacturing conviction in the buying public. (The support found for the political aspirations of *The Clash* in lucrative music magazines, such as *Spin* or *Rolling Stone*, supports this view.) This is entertainment for entertainment’s sake: *the particulars of the thing that entertains you, and why you are entertained by it, means nothing to capitalism provided you purchase it*. Dirty realism responds to capitalism, therefore, by remaining unconvinced, by not buying into one particular category that would allow it a place on the marketing index; in other words, dirty realism appropriates for itself the very indeterminacy, the very diffusion and non-positionality, that features in capitalism itself; in order to succeed in mimicking these features, it “authorizes everything” by abandoning discernment, by accepting “other ways at once.”<sup>29</sup>

Dirty realists enact rules they do not live by, inhabiting the extreme limit of personal licence, *when one is not beholden even to one’s own rules*. While Marxist critics, from Marx to Jameson, and non-Marxists such as de Certeau,<sup>30</sup> continually note the contradictions evident in the historical moments of capitalism, dirty realism absorbs and deploys contradiction itself (not necessarily the concrete particulars of any given moment of contradiction). Dirty realism turns receptivity (to signals) itself into a form of writing, taking unlimited pleasure in reproducing, in lyrical and/or hard-boiled pastiche, the epistemological stereotypes of the day. Knowing that the author does not exist, that capitalism manufactures selfhood and belief, these authors combat capital by flaunting their non-existence in the face of the “combines.” They produce text for entertainment,

pleasure—any other motive would subject them to the conviction necessary for belief, and participation, in the various programs of their society, programs which all translate, eventually, into money-making ventures. No longer in the position of Dreiser and Norris, or even Farrell and Steinbeck, who witnessed the increasing primacy of consumer culture with suspicion and defiance, dirty realism does not have the luxury of resistance through recourse to polemical positions. In the postmodern, everything is a “pop” commodity, including the polemical positions relied upon by earlier generations of naturalists. Bukowski’s dialectical meandering—his continual re-thinking and debunking of his own postulates, his conjunction and synthesis of conceptual opposites, and the hypocrisy with which he prevents reification—characterise the engagement of a changing realism with the peculiarities of changing social conditions, evincing, in form, the inner logic of the historical moment.

#### *Conclusion*

The visible features and concerns of naturalism transform under the rubric of a wilful indeterminacy—the epistemological standard, as indicated by Civello, Michaels, Pizer, Jameson and others, of postmodernity—into a postmodern realism. As *Factotum* indicates, American realism, even in the postwar period, continues to address the place of the author in relation to history, society and culture, carrying on the work begun three-quarters of a century earlier by William Dean Howells, Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, Edith Wharton and others. The naturalist “tradition” testifies to a field of interest rather than a continued assertion of dogmatic or aesthetic principles over time. As American society underwent permutations throughout the twentieth century, naturalism, by necessity, also altered the procedures used for transcribing the century’s reality. The record of naturalism indicates the action of history upon writing, rather than the work of authors against history. Commodity culture, science, protest, political and philosophical affiliation inextricably link authors to milieu and testify to their willingness to engage with, rather than escape from, the pressures and realities of, as Farrell describes it,

“events in this world” (257). In texts illustrating the conflict between the ideational and the concrete, naturalism, and by extension dirty realism, actively participate in a Jamesonian dialectic, one that varies, in true dialectical fashion, depending on the circumstances that inform it. A distinctly Cold War and postmodern writing, dirty realism adapts the naturalistic attitude to the issues of the late twentieth century, such as the arms race, Vietnam, the increasingly global predominance of American culture, the advent of non-Newtonian science, the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s and, finally, the disintegration, in the early 1990s, of the Soviet Union. As the transformations of naturalism witness an increased recognition of the inextricable connection between the text and its historical moment, the subversive and protest elements in naturalism necessarily become a function of working within, rather than against, the cultural confines of late capitalism. The tactics delineated by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* offer a theoretical and operational model for studying the effectiveness of dirty realism’s hypocrisy aesthetic in a society dominated by what Jameson calls “the logic of late Capitalism.” If naturalism offers the background from which dirty realism developed, and the tradition in American writing that dirty realism further elaborates, then *Postmodernism, or the Logic of Late Capitalism* and *The Practice of Everyday Life* extend our understanding of dirty realism in the historical present.

## ENDNOTES, CHAPTER TWO

- <sup>1</sup> I do not intend to offer a comprehensive genealogy of realism. Such a project remains outside the stated aim of this dissertation; what I am attempting to do is isolate salient features of pre-existing movements within realism that pertain to the development of dirty realism. This section therefore focuses on specific characteristics within pre-existing twentieth-century literary movements which broaden our understanding of dirty realism's history and development. In confining my view to the white, male, mainstream of naturalistic fiction, this section ignores several concurrent movements and themes in naturalism, such as the proto-feminist concerns of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, the problems of African-American life addressed in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, issues of homosexuality in novels such as Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, as well as recent controversies over the inclusion of writers such as Hemingway, Faulkner and DeLillo in the naturalist canon. I also leave out current debates which view naturalism through the perspective of marginalized cultures, such as First Nations, African-American and Latino writers. Although this section touches upon some of the themes explored by these novels and novelists, the confined scope prevents a fuller exegesis of the works and attendant criticism.
- <sup>2</sup> This work offers a chronology of the debate surrounding the terms naturalism and realism. Sampling from the work of major critics, it divides the history of these terms into three distinct periods—"1874-1914," "1915-1950" and "1951-1995"—offering, in its inclusion of many of the prominent scholars and authors contesting or defending realism and naturalism, a comprehensive portrait of scholarly debate and its historical context.
- <sup>3</sup> Frank Norris, in his "Three Essays on Naturalism," views Romance as antithetical to the realism of Howells, describing its milieu as "the fussy, musty, worm-eaten, moth-riddled, rust-corroded 'Grandes Salles' of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance" and its narratives as "the drama of a bygone age" (172).
- <sup>4</sup> As we shall see, Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, dresses "immutable forms" in the words "discursive systems" to account for epistemological systems that, because they operate in a space conceived as separate from the historical moment, do not account for changes over time, serving only as reified models of thought with the primary aim of addressing and sustaining their own systematic integrity and consistency *over* time.
- <sup>5</sup> The lack of "rigour"—a current buzzword in literary theory—often features in dirty realism as well, whose indiscriminate acceptance of commodities, material and abstract, constitutes one of its subversive tactics.
- <sup>6</sup> This is not to imply my own progressivist model of genealogy. I merely wish to indicate that early naturalist such as Dreiser, and the dirty realists, both wrote from positions deeply embedded within their historical moment. Dreiser's stance of "objectivity" may have its blind-spots, but it certainly also exhibits several strengths: political engagement, a willingness to risk social improvement, an appeal beyond the boundaries of a certain literary coterie. Likewise, dirty realism's dialectical, historically self-aware stance, while it appears more critical of itself, comes with several problems: paralysis, self-doubt, detachment, an inability to propose mass solutions to political dilemmas. In either case, then, there is a trade-off of affirmative aspects for negative ones. By elaborating the connections between naturalism and dirty realism I wish to show the ways in which divergent historical crises give rise to divergent aesthetic responses, not necessarily to a purification and improvement of a certain aesthetic over a period of time.
- <sup>7</sup> Michaels describes the process whereby Trina "pays for her gold with her monthly income . . . refusing to use her gold to pay for food . . . in essence spending it instead on the gold itself" (140-141). Michaels's argument reinforces the idea that Norris saw character as an extension of the market.
- <sup>8</sup> Michaels offers an alternate view of this ending: "But it isn't exactly greed that gets McTeague into Death Valley, and besides, Norris is careful to postpone the fight between him and Marcus



until after they have lost their water—neither of them is fighting to be rich” (150). In a sense, this reading only appears incongruent with my own, since, like Michaels, I do not regard the battle between the two men as arising from “greed,” but as an example of the fear of what happens when an innate, biological “character” is displaced by a notion of character founded on commodity circulation. After all, their presence in the desert arises from economic factors; their rivalry over Trina arises not from biological (sexual) impulses but from money. Marcus chases McTeague into the desert long after the decisive break in their friendship, and not because he necessarily needs the money (Norris announces that Marcus has achieved his dream of becoming a cowboy), but because, in this novel, relationships between characters reflect the irrational, circular antagonism that defines commodity production and circulation. The two men act out an allegory; they serve as props in what James R. Giles calls “perhaps the most thoroughly deterministic of all American naturalistic novels” (9). The loss of the water, then, finalises Norris’s landscape as an allegorical site of human beings acting at the behest of a valueless, purposeless, tautological commodity exchange, in a milieu devoid of the knowledge of true use-value (the basic necessities for survival) and the co-operation necessary for mutual security. In this respect, Michaels and my own argument agree by concluding that the final scene in *McTeague* reinforces an economic reading of the novel.

- <sup>9</sup> The most spectacular example of the irrationality latent in the possession of commodities appears in the form of McTeague’s canary, which everywhere identifies him. At the Big Dipper mine, McTeague awakes in his mining camp and begins to feel the drive of instinct. “‘There was *something*,’ he muttered, looking in a puzzled way at his canary in the cage” (535). Even here, at his most primal, McTeague defers to his canary, seeking from it the truth or falsity of his suspicions. Moreover, on his flight from Big Dipper mine, the posse tracking him uses the canary as the chief means of describing him to witnesses.
- <sup>10</sup> Merish makes a bolder claim than Dreiser. Her essay constitutes a proof for the thesis that “Naturalist authors themselves often cast their project in gendered terms, as a revolt against a feminized and genteel Victorianism” (323). Merish’s choice of words—“cast” and “revolt against”—describe naturalism in terms opposite to the indifference and pure aesthetic interest announced by Dreiser. The “gendered fantasies of surveillance” required by Merish’s thesis construe naturalists—Dreiser and Wharton—as at least partially conscious of their intent, insofar as they knowingly reacted against, or in favour of, the feminine. The position of Merish offers further proof that naturalism did engage with its society, even if only in a polemical way. This polemical position informs the connection between naturalism and dirty realism. As later discussions will show, the polarised positions taken by polemical thinking combine in the “negative dialectic,” as Jameson describes it in *Marxism and Form* (56), of dirty realism. The polemics of Dreiser and Norris take an oppositional stance that will inform our understanding of the radical synthesis of opposites found in dirty realism.
- <sup>11</sup> Howard’s contention remains rooted in the current view of naturalism as a largely unconscious capitulation to the market economy it pretended to critique, a view held to varying degrees by contemporary scholars such as Giles and Michaels.
- <sup>12</sup> In his “Three Essays” Norris does claim a space for naturalism between realism and romance, a paradigmatic straddling of binaries not unknown to dirty realism.
- <sup>13</sup> Dirty realism likewise conflicts theory and practice. The difference between naturalism and dirty realism here is not the presence of hypocrisy among one canon of authors and its absence among another, but rather the way the authors responded to the presence of this hypocrisy. The progressivist notions of social reform in an author such as Dreiser made him recoil from contradiction, whereas the openness to indeterminacy in an author such as Bukowski made him embrace contradiction. In either case, evasion or embrace brought with itself attendant problems. The varied responses to hypocrisy figure as different ways of approaching, appreciating or representing the historical moment. Dreiser’s desire to ignore or postpone examination of contradictions internalised in his work suggests a desire to avoid the stasis

brought on by such an examination; it would have stalled the immediacy of his call to action. Bukowski, on the other hand, does not wish to act, and hence his acceptance of contradictions provides him a means for remaining passive. The difference between Dreiser and Bukowski is largely expressed in the loss of trust in the metanarrative that occurred during the 1960s (Nadel 18). Dreiser's historical viewpoint remains optimistic – despite the stifling oppression in *Sister Carrie* – resulting from an overarching aesthetic vision that allows corrective commentary; Bukowski, having experienced a loss of faith in any unified overarching viewpoint, can no longer evoke prescriptive social corrections.

- <sup>14</sup> Yet, the project of social reform demands an audience with society. Clearly, naturalist ambition had not yet seen the effect of large-scale social movements such as Nazism and Communism (and, later, McCarthyism) that made later authors so distrustful of mass appeal. See chapter three, "Dirty Realism: History."
- <sup>15</sup> Chapter three, "Dirty Realism: History," deals extensively with alterations in the American social landscape during the Cold War and the 1960s.
- <sup>16</sup> Pizer's claim is contentious. For one, the end of the First World War saw an intense questioning and reconstructing of realism, particularly in the hands of Ernest Hemingway. As well, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* had an enormous impact on American Literature. Pizer's history reads more like a personal preference of a scholar who has devoted much of his career to Theodore Dreiser. Paul Civallo's study, *American Literary Naturalism and its Twentieth-Century Transformations*, does not even devote a chapter to Dreiser, preferring to focus on Frank Norris, Ernest Hemingway and Don DeLillo, and how these artists negotiated the transformations of naturalism. Here, the issue of realism versus naturalism becomes complicated. While I agree with Pizer that a debate over naturalism cannot exclude the development of realism, it appears that, for this section of his history, Pizer prefers to confine his focus to naturalism proper and exclude extensive discussions of realism as a greater category.
- <sup>17</sup> See "The Responsibilities of the Novelist" for a the degree to which Norris anticipated dirty realism's focus on "procedure." By viewing the novel not as an ultimate form of cultural expression, but merely the primary form of the moment, Norris expressed an awareness of his historical moment that further complicates the relation between intent, content and form of his fiction.
- <sup>18</sup> Although, as discussed in the previous section, Norris did promote a program for aesthetic reform, and his aestheticism did carry heavy social implications, and include a social critique.
- <sup>19</sup> The naturalist text of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s offers this disparity between character and environment. Like the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) offers, in Willy Loman, a similar example of a man beaten down by social conditions, yet one whose innate pride refuses to allow him to seek assistance from his friend, Charley, either because he considers Charley inferior or because of competitiveness. Willy's attitude conflicts the audience between viewing Willy as a man incapable of making appropriate decisions because of his background and viewing Willy with condescension, as a character infuriatingly unwilling to make appropriate gestures that would reconcile him with his family, friends and vocation. The audience continually feels exasperated by Willy's failure to grasp the obvious while also understanding their own privilege in clearly seeing the choices they, in Willy's place, would make. Miller's play pivots on this ambivalence it creates in the audience, inculcating a mystification vis-à-vis Willy's character in much the same way as *Studs Lonigan* does for the character of Studs.
- <sup>20</sup> Just as Weary Reilly becomes a criminal, Red Kelly a politician, and Phil Rolfe a successful (illegal) casino owner.
- <sup>21</sup> Caren Irr, in *The Suburb of Dissent: Cultural Politics in the United States and Canada during the 1930s* (1998) neatly summarises the "essentializing, ahistorical" discourse enacted by right-wing groups during the Depression, a discourse that offered reified portraits of poverty and

capitalism rather than recognising the social contingencies operating during the Depression: "Major rhetorical trends contemporary with the 30s left included, first, a heightened paranoia focussed on the mob. While President Hoover urged Americans to respond to the Depression with local charity, many middle-class citizens found this a difficult ideal and responded to the crisis with Victorian fears about the immorality of the poor. Parents warned their daughters not to speak to dangerous hoboes; newspaper editorials and chambers of commerce represented the unemployed and underemployed working class as unstable, irresponsible, and violent. . . . A second trend was noblesse oblige toward the deserving weak. Expressed in the paternalism of relief workers toward their clients or the election strategies of Roosevelt and other members of the New Deal elite, this rhetoric replayed the fears of mobocracy in a quieter key. . . . Well-meaning and well-educated, their commitment was to planning and regulating the economy for necessarily disempowered Others. Finally, some social and political leaders employed a third type of rhetoric: divisive scapegoating that allowed members of the working class to locate enemies among the ranks. Famous pseudo-populists such as Father Coughlin represented the working class as the target of foreign conspirators. These efforts to represent class as a traditional and necessary identity were often as effective as representations of the working class as victim or mob. None of these approaches could legitimately be called non-essentialist, since all relied on psychologization of groups in isolation from the institutions which define them" (99-100). Irr's argument accords with my own, since it regards the right-wing rhetoric of the 1930s as an ahistorical "representation" of the working class "in isolation from the "institutions which define them," or, in isolation from the social real and the contingencies of the historical moment. *The Grapes of Wrath* similarly observes this tendency to reify the working class and to invest it with characteristics considered innate rather than arising in response to the present historical crisis. The poor are dangerous, given to violence, susceptible to foreign influence and incapable of helping themselves not because conditions have contributed to their disenfranchisement but rather "necessarily," because the class tends toward impoverishment regardless of historical conditions (a highly tautological view that posits class as a biological rather than social category). This static expression of the working class by the middle-class intelligentsia and media follows from Lukács's argument (discussed by Jameson in *Marxism and Form*) that bourgeois culture tends "to understand our relationship to external objects . . . in static and contemplative fashion" (185). In this case, "static" and "contemplative" substitute for Irr's "essentializing" and "ahistorical," since Steinbeck's Californians viewed the Okies not as fellow victims of historical circumstance but as a horde of non-humans with an entirely different set of inborn proclivities.

<sup>22</sup> In fact, Holman's definition casts naturalism not so much as a separate school from realism but as one of the many streams into which nineteenth-century realism degenerated (6).

<sup>23</sup> Hemingway—often cited as an influence by dirty realists such as Charles Bukowski and Raymond Carver—transformed naturalism, writes Civello, from a Darwinian model to a modernist one; Hemingway's fiction "pointed toward the efficacy of the human consciousness in confronting and ordering an otherwise meaningless universe" (67). The play upon solipsism, most evident in the work of Richard Ford, owes much to the truth or falsity of Hemingway's "response . . . to the naturalistic world of force" (67), by ordering, or disordering, that world through the filter of the narrative intellect. One of the major realists in the background of dirty realism, Hemingway construed the individual consciousness as the determining factor in delimiting the world (dirty realism commodifies and questions this perspective, deploying solipsism in a distinctly ironic fashion).

<sup>24</sup> Michel de Certeau, as we shall see, refers to this "out there" under the term "the ordinary."

<sup>25</sup> This view seems to differ considerably from that elaborated by Michaels on p. 96. While Michaels views the fidelity of realism to things as they are as offering an inadequate model for reform, Habbeger argues that it is precisely realism's fidelity which enables reform, since it indicates a dynamic, contingent view of history rather than a static one, and thus a history open

to human agency. However, a realism of "things as they are" does not necessarily preclude a realism of "things as they are in the historical moment" (since showing things as they are may necessitate their historical context) and therefore realism can imply the possibility of change, or "things as they *could* be," even if it only does so suggestively. The two views on realism are not necessarily incommensurate, except that Michaels is more cynically disposed towards the possibility of a prescriptive, reformist project arising from faithful depiction (for that to occur, he feels that something more needs to be added to the text), while Habegger feels content with stating that realism is the necessary starting point for social action. Michaels's reader will simply passively accept the depiction of things as they are, while Habegger's reader will recognise in that depiction the possibility for change. Michaels is more concerned with readers grasping a definite program for action, with realism supplying a behavioural model, while Habegger merely states that realism alerts readers to contingency, to the effect of human will on history. The two critics, then, differ on the effective reception of realism. However, neither denies that a diagnosis of present troubles (necessary for prescriptive solutions) requires *some* fidelity to a realistic rendering of those troubles, regardless of whether a utopian counterpart will then be applied to that rendition.

<sup>26</sup> Paradoxically, this allegorical impulse may in fact arise from an Adorno-esque pessimism that views capital as invincible, since, as a worker, Chinaski does belong to those with "no room to act in their society." (Habegger 361)

<sup>27</sup> "Sans" also alludes to several other ideas, the French "santé" (meaning "health"), the Latin "*mens sana in corpore sano*" (a sound mind in a sound body), as well as the English word, "Sanitorium." In each case Hotel Sans alludes to a mental condition. In this case the name of the hotel proves emblematic, since the lunacy we witness within the hotel testifies to Bukowski's irrational relation with his surroundings.

<sup>28</sup> Jameson's *Postmodernism* defines this dependence on the other as capital's need to "include the foreign body of alien content" (xiii).

<sup>29</sup> While the recordings of punk rock may have become part of an established sales forecast, this does not mean that the members of a given punk rock band, or their managers (in this case I refer to the Sex Pistols' film, *The Great Rock and Roll Swindle*) cannot use given opportunities and expectations in the economic system to transgress and muddle class lines, in other words to operate tactically; but this kind of operativity differs from the "united front" offered by the slogans of more dogmatic revolutionary poses.

<sup>30</sup> The fourth chapter, "Dirty Realism: Theory," deals extensively with de Certeau, whose model of consumer tactics offers a response to the paralysis of agency encountered in Jameson. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), de Certeau records the process whereby subjugated populations—whether the aboriginal peoples of South America, or workers in western factories and offices—can subvert, however provisionally, the machinery of dominant systems. De Certeau paints a particularly Jamesonian picture of these subjected peoples, those denied an oppositional position by the all-pervasiveness of "an order of things that [seem] immutable" (16). De Certeau offers, then, a handbook for operativity when one has nothing but the system from which to select one's weaponry: "Innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other's game (*jouer/déjouer le jeu de l'autre*), that is, the space instituted by others, characterize the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. People have to make do with what they have" (18). De Certeau, then, solves Jameson's problematic—where can an oppositional desire turn for procedures and devices that would allow it to subvert and attack a dominant cultural matrix so all-encompassing that it includes and exploits all the alternatives to itself? De Certeau says that the "network of already established forces" itself provides the oppositional intent with the "tactics" that enable provisional, momentary, heists of time (especially) in the service of the subject's "own ends" (26). Dirty realism—like the secretary writing a "love letter" on the job, or a cabinetmaker "'borrowing' a lathe to make a piece of

furniture for his living room" (25)—poaches upon the characteristics Marx, Jameson and other left-wing critics have attributed to capitalism—absorption, pastiche, simulation, contradiction, circularity, hypocrisy—and accepts them as its own in a way that frees its authors from conviction and therefore construction as desiring subjects who reinstate a capitalist economy. Their super-passivity to the determinants of post-industrial society enables a resistance based upon indiscriminate acceptance and mutually-cancelling amplifications. In turn, this makes their own fictional presence indeterminate, unlocatable, both within and without the market economy surrounding their works. Rather than necessarily positing themselves as the controllers of text, they relish their position as nodes of (post-industrial) cultural signals, endorsing, accepting and promoting all the material that arrives to them in a way that reveals and appropriates the dominant features of capitalism.

### Three

#### Dirty Realism: History

##### *Introduction*

Roughly forty-five years in duration—1945-1991—the Cold War’s political contortions provide the context from which dirty realism draws the diametrical oppositions, and unified contradictions, that it instates and negotiates. As the Cold War inscribed the globe with contrary discourses (which enabled a range of conflicts, diplomatic and militaristic), dirty realism adopts a paradigm of discursive variance to inscribe its own contrariness on the world. Cultural critics Stephen J. Whitfield, Tom Engelhardt, Alan Nadel and Thomas Hill Schaub describe the Cold War scene as a time of tensions and doubles, not only in the context of the world-wide binary of communism versus capitalism, but “doubling” (Nadel 6) within the American “story” (Engelhardt 9) itself.

By the 1960s literary writers had become aware—an awareness largely owing to the ways in which the Cold War authorised its “norms”—of a new “reality.” No longer did language simply record or “document” the actual; rather, language (especially that used by Cold War policy-makers) supplanted reality with a narrative aimed at guiding, if not controlling, perception. By the 1960s, the language that authorised Cold War security could no longer withstand scrutiny, so that a generation of American authors raised on the ambiguities and inconsistencies of, say, Senator McCarthy’s “story,” brought their suspicion and wariness of language to the form of the novel itself—seeing, in a radical way, an “equation between a novel’s necessarily hegemonic use of narrative and American use of the story of ‘democracy’ to extend global hegemony” (Nadel 7). In *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism and the Atomic Age* (1995), Alan Nadel tells us that the discourse, or “stories,” perpetrated by the so-called Cold Warriors served primarily to insulate America from the threat of Soviet Communism: “From the first atomic bomb test to Vietnam, ‘democracy’ has named stories produced under the rubric of containment” (7-8). Caught between an administration that deployed the “story” of democracy to extend its hegemonic influence world-wide, and a form

that in itself forced its narrative on the reader, authors came to realise their entrapment in language, the necessity of vigilance when it came to discursive formations purportedly mediating the real, and the relation of author, text and reader. Not only did the story of democracy “contain” the spread of communism by empowering U.S. policy-makers to extend their influence in most un-democratic ways, the story of “democracy” also “contained” life in the U.S.—contained it conceptually, artistically and ethically.<sup>1</sup> Trapped in the language of Cold War “democracy,” authors turned their sights on language itself, its ambiguity, its loopholes, but also its sway over consciousness.

Dirty realism found containment its natural habitat, crafting a home out of the linguistic snare described by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984): “there is no way out . . . we are foreigners on the inside [of culture and language]—but there is no outside” (13-14). De Certeau highlights the postmodern concern with the containment effected by language and culture, our entrapment within particular discursive (scientific, religious, philosophical) systems which constantly gesture towards a universal condition codified linguistic practice cannot fully conceive or account for, and which ultimately refutes those systems. Dirty realism revels in the discursive simulation of reality that figured so strategically during the Cold War, simulations which ultimately (by the 1960s) highlighted their own positions as epistemological/linguistic territories mainly concerned with the maintenance of their own boundaries and supremacy within the culture, their own authority and propriety, their own “separateness” from what de Certeau calls the “ordinary.”<sup>2</sup> The canon of dirty realist writing from the 1960s to the 1990s—primarily exemplified, here, by Raymond Carver’s “What do you do in San Francisco?” (1976)—shows an engagement with the dominant *form* of cultural discourse propagated by the Cold War, a confrontation with a culture of hypocrisy and paradox, a distinctly *narrated* culture whose actions and stories rarely converged. The hypocrisy of American policy—whose narrators embodied the country as the home of the free while ignoring such rampant curtailments of freedom as segregation, McCarthyism, military interference in foreign nations, and governmental censure—finds itself reproduced in the dirty realist text.

While few dirty realists make more than a passing mention of international affairs—Helen Potrebenko’s *Taxi* (1975)<sup>3</sup> and Richard Ford’s *The Ultimate Good Luck* (1980)<sup>4</sup> express thoughts on the Iron Curtain and Vietnam,<sup>5</sup> respectively—preferring, in the dirty realist vein, to scrutinise the local and domestic effects of political discourse, they do, in Nadel’s words, very much “conform to the codes of representation” that mark Cold War narrative throughout. Dirty realism traces the effect of the Cold War on domestic reality, internally reproducing a cultural situation where

The values and perceptions, the forms of expression, the symbolic patterns, the beliefs and myths that enabled Americans to make sense of reality . . . were contaminated by an unseemly political interest in their roots and consequences. The struggle against domestic Communism encouraged an interpenetration of the two enterprises of politics and culture. (Nadel 10)

The “culture” examined by dirty realism, even in its most minute manifestations, everywhere evinces its “contamination” by “political interest,” in particular the interests of Cold War policy. Dirty realism charts a way of examining the home front during the Cold War through narrative and conceptual parameters derived from the “forms of expression” of the dominant discourse of the period. The “unseemly political interest” that Nadel regards as the primary characteristic of the Cold War filtered into the consciousness of domestic America, an “interest” whose way of “interpenetrating” the culture—through a hypocritical vigilance—transformed and marked the way the reality of that culture became henceforth perceived. Cultural production, the conceiving of American reality (especially through language), in a disinterested, apolitical manner, was no longer possible; the depiction of reality became a political act, and was duly scrutinised. An undercurrent of political hyper-sensitivity runs throughout the depiction of reality found in dirty realism. The dirty realism of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s—as it charts the domestic life of America—everywhere exhibits the imprint left by the Cold War on American culture.

### *I. Cold War: Introduction*

The political and cultural<sup>6</sup> effects of the Cold War on American and Canadian capitalism



transformed postwar realism. As Thomas Hill Schaub points out, in *American Fiction in the Cold War* (1991), the end of the second world war and the revelations of Stalinist Russia ushered in a crisis of faith among western intellectuals on the left (6-7). The critics and writers of the Cold War came to feel that traditional literary forms such as realism and naturalism—insofar as the terms functioned up until that time—no longer offered tenable vantages on the emerging reality of the Cold War (67), a reality no longer representable by the simplistic, clear-cut (or so postwar critics thought), economic and deterministic aesthetic of naturalists such as Dreiser, Norris and Steinbeck. The shift from policies of isolationism, prior to World War I, to the more Euro-centric, global integration of the inter-war years, to the binaristic, global us/them<sup>7</sup> rhetoric of the late 1940s, 1950s and 1960s proceeded almost too quickly for literary authors to process.

The perceived complexity of the Cold War, according to Schaub, left many authors retreating from the uncertainties and intricacies of depicting societal machinery to what they *felt* they knew: the individual consciousness. The increasing importance of the first-person voice, indicates Schaub, arose from the mistrust of the implicit totalitarianism of the grand novel which sought to encompass and fully elaborate the social real, and a modernist antipathy towards participation in “mass society” (17, 55-56), which postwar American authors saw as a capitulation to the propaganda of a rampant capitalism. Conforming to the tastes of mass society reeked of the anti-individualism so prominent in fascist states both Nazi and Soviet.<sup>8</sup> As Nadel tells us, such conformity also appeared in America: “Conformity to the norms set by the dominant discourse thus became a form of, and a demonstration of, public reassurance” (166)—a need for “reassurance” on the part of the populace that Whitaker and Marcuse also detect as a primary characteristic of the postwar years (22). Although buying into a “dominant discourse” of what being American required may have reassured the “masses,” it deeply shook the assurance, in Schaub’s opinion, of the critics and artists who viewed capitulation to mass culture, to its “order and certainty” and its “comforts of authority” (16), as a move towards dictatorship.<sup>9</sup> The political tenor of the Cold War therefore generated an image of the artist as “a conflicted, morally ambiguous self, at once alienated from society and expressive of its

innermost contradictions" (56). The isolated individual, for Cold War authors, remained the last bastion of political expression, though the politics expressed through such an individual remained shot through with the features of contradiction and ambiguity characteristic of Cold War culture. These characteristics further problematised the political attributes of the Cold War aesthetic. Dirty realism's focus on the individual reflects the atomisation of postwar populations into monads, as well as the retreat of authors from the overwhelming task posed by the social novel in an age when clear-cut political prescriptions seemed a capitulation to malevolent ideologies, on both right and left. A unified, panoramic aesthetic could only originate in, and further the ends of, a monolithic, totalitarian ideology, whereas the democratic principle of diversity lead to an aesthetic of multiplicity, equilibrium and sustained tensions, what Schaub calls "the politics of paralysis" (190). The rhetoric of the new reality became the copyright of a liberal intelligentsia which defined this reality in terms of democracy's "complexity": "complex, difficult, intractable" (21); the reality of the individual human likewise adhered to these characteristics. American democracy was more realistic than Communism insofar as it recognised in its formal elements the ambiguity and contradictions of living in the twentieth century; an American writer became the observer and faithful recorder of reality insofar as he or she presented characters as similarly contradictory.

Cold War culture radically altered novelists' notions and approaches to reality: "Because the irrationality of modern events, though real, seemed 'irreal,' many writers were convinced that a true 'realism' would seek to convey this rupture; but this rupture is a quality not of objective reality, but of its apprehension by consciousness and conscience" (Schaub 67). The Cold War destroyed traditional markers of reality, leaving in their place a disorientation that caused authors to seek reality not in the externals of their society but within their own "consciousness and conscience." The "rupture" between the taken-for-granted inter-war reality and what passed for the real in the postwar period became particularly apparent in the inversion of social roles and a confusion in the dominant societal narratives. Cold War authors had to contend with the disappearance of obvious class distinctions (Schaub 65), the co-optation of labour<sup>10</sup> into the right-wing politics of the Eisenhower regime (Schaub 189), the constant

threat of nuclear annihilation (twinned with the necessity of maintaining a nuclear arsenal in order to preserve the “balance of power”), a McCarthyism that sought to preserve the integrity of the American people by everywhere doubting and attacking that integrity (Nadel 77), anti-Communist propaganda which attacked the Soviet Union for stifling individual freedoms while politicians in the U.S. demonised non-conformity, sluggishly reacted to racial segregation in the South, and actively campaigned for American interference in the affairs of nations such as Korea, Cuba and Vietnam, and the interpenetration of political expedience and cultural production (Whitfield 10). What arose from the confusions and contradictions of the Cold War period was an acute awareness of the constructedness of reality, reality as the politics of “consuming” sanctioned narratives (Nadel 294). American democracy became synonymous with hypocrisy, and narrative strategies a means of covering up the hypocrisy evident in every aspect of Cold War life.

#### A. The “Signature” of Hypocrisy

Stephen J. Whitfield, in *The Culture of the Cold War* (1996), recalls “hypocrisy” as one of the “signatures of the Cold War”:

Such a loss of the sense of proportion, such an eclipse of rationality, was among the signatures of the Cold War.

So too was hypocrisy. When it became necessary to explain to the Russians what made American society so praiseworthy, even rabid anti-Communists were compelled to highlight the civil liberties that they themselves had sought to curtail. The Bill of Rights that Vice-President Nixon claimed abroad was operating in the United States was not a document that he and his allies sought to reinforce when he was at home. (25)

The key word in Whitfield’s analysis is “explain.” Scholars of the Cold War—Whitfield, Nadel, Schaub, Engelhardt, Whitaker and Marcuse—characterise the period as one rife with explanations and counter-explanations, when the national policy (a discourse) failed to accord with actions taken both on domestic and foreign soil. Note that while Whitfield directs his accusation of hypocrisy at the American government during the time of Eisenhower (when Nixon served as vice-president), and the anti-Communist (largely Republican) faction dominating politics, elsewhere Whitfield also criticises Stalinist sympathisers in America for

evoking an equal measure of hypocrisy: "To call them [Communist sympathisers] Stalinists is also a reminder . . . that American communists were enemies of civil liberties, which they disdained as 'bourgeois' but which they invoked in their own behalf when opportune" (3).<sup>11</sup> On either side, then, Whitfield sees a kind of discursive opportunism that flits between the tenets of two mutually exclusive political programs. The hunting down of Communist agitators from within required a conceptual mobility between American-style rights and Soviet-style repression that manifested as hypocrisy. McCarthyism, for example, inaugurated a purge of Hollywood and certain political offices that differed little from the authoritarian forms of censure deployed by the Soviet Union of the time; the proponents of McCarthyism resorted to distinctly undemocratic, anti-free-speech tactics in order to preserve both democracy and free speech. McCarthy's authority rested on his image as defender of American democracy, though the actions taken in this defence contradicted the essentials of this image. Whitfield characterises the Cold War in America as a time during which the "disproportion between rhetoric and action generated a paradox" (9). Simply put, the paradox of the situation rested on the fact that the United States, during the late 1940s, throughout the 1950s and early 1960s had "come to resemble . . . the sort of society to which it wishe[d] to be contrasted" (11). Methods of "contrast" could not hold when the proponents of a contrasting discourse exhibited characteristics of both sides of the polemic. American "reality" was not only contradictory by critical appraisal but by political form as well.

Authors during the Cold War therefore received the message of "practical contradiction" (by which I mean those forms of discourse that, instead of attempting to address their inconsistencies actually utilised inconsistency to achieve political objectives) from all sides, both from the critical establishment and from political communities right and left of centre. The critical reaction to the disillusionment with Stalinism, and the concomitant mistrust of the 1920s and 1930s naturalist writing that presented well-defined and polemical political analyses in favour of leftist initiatives, created a "murkier" contradiction-filled definition of the human that obstructed partisan politics and solutions. Schaub describes Lionel Trilling's (one of the most prominent critical thinkers of the time) definition of the new, Cold War "reality" as "complex,

difficult, intractable" and the human within this reality as "an experience of complexity that has its generative roots in the ineradicable conflicts of the private self" (21). Reality, therefore, was contradictory, full of "intractable" tensions, a complexity that could not, finally, resolve itself into a unified political program. An art that reflected reality needed, in Trilling's "understanding," to reflect "the lived experience of contradiction felt by his generation" (34). It was contradiction itself, rather than particular contradictions, that became an evaluative norm, Schaub argues, for New Critics and the New York school alike:

This formulation [by Trilling] is as complex as it is useful; on the one hand it grounds the literary idea in the emotions produced by history; on the other it establishes the aesthetic, or formal, standard of contradiction and paradox as the central quality of great art. (34)

The "standard" of "great art" depended upon the appearance of "contradiction" and "paradox," which faithfully preserved the postwar American reality. Trilling's "dialectical view of 'reality' in America" (34) valorised art that reflected history as a tension-riddled discourse, complex to the point of a conceptual and political (to borrow from Whitfield) "stalemate" (9). The military paralysis that characterised the Korean War (and the Cold War as a whole), where two sides found themselves locked into binary camps in an unwinnable battle, became part of the scholarly and artistic unconscious during the Cold War. Trilling's depiction of great art as a place of "ineradicable" tensions between opposing, or "contradictory" and "paradoxical" ideas seems, in hindsight, almost an allegorical rendering of the historical moment. Paradox and contradiction came to the forefront of artistic practice as a result of Cold War dilemmas.

Furthermore, Schaub associates Trilling's view of art as a capitulation to American domestic policy, which needed to valorise democracy as the ultimate measure of civilised people everywhere. The emphasis on irony, ambiguity, contradiction and paradox promoted by the critical establishment during the Cold War served to further entrench a particular idea of democracy that actually clashed with the *practice* of domestic policy. In the "confrontation between Stalinist Russia and American democracy" on aesthetic grounds "democracy [was] the more artful of the two systems because it [was] a more adequate political representation (or

response) to the inherent nature of reality itself" (21). Because Soviet culture produced a monolithic, unified, mass-consumed product (features which, incidentally, the New and New York critics attributed to American naturalism of the 1920s and 1930s), it suffered in comparison to the aesthetic product of American democracy, which promoted variance, complexity, paradox and contradiction (and therefore a more accurate representation of what these critics took for reality). Democracy became synonymous with the aesthetics of contradiction. Though policy-makers and critics alike paid lip service to variance as a central component of democracy they both enabled and promoted conformity to a pro-American, politically conservative, nuclear-family model. The promotion of variance as a characteristic of American democracy occurred side-by-side with the enforcing of conformity.

Yet, this movement towards contradiction had a basis in more than the 1940s and 1950s notion of Democratic reality, springing also from the embarrassment over the Soviet associations and advocacy practised by many American authors during the 1920s and 1930s. As the previous chapter pointed out, one could easily argue that authors such as Dreiser, Norris, Farrell and Steinbeck agitated, during the early part of the century, not against an America that seemed too democratic (as the critics of the 1940s and 1950s charged), but rather *not democratic enough*. The poverty and disenfranchisement chronicled by these naturalist authors suggested an America that did not provide wider possibilities for individual enterprise, an America that stifled its citizens by providing too few options for existence. That postwar critics saw a need to distance themselves from these dissenters, and to renovate the liberal aesthetic from an objective, openly political form into a subjective, self-conscious and personal one, testifies more to the pressures facing postwar thinkers than to the ideological narrowness of naturalism. If naturalism was unified then this unity arrived not from advocating Soviet-style politics but rather in critiquing the failure of American democracy *in being democratic*. Whereas early naturalists, as shown, could not abide hypocrisy (either as it manifested in the discourse of democracy or in their own work), postwar thought made hypocrisy its "signature."

Cold war criticism fell into the same behavioural category as the proponents of mass

culture: conformity. The new-fangled aesthetic of contradiction prevented these critics from having to dissent: "For nearly all of them, the virtue of self-division was always double: on the one hand it was a guarantee against ideology; on the other, this guarantee was the mark of its adequacy to the form of reality itself" (Schaub 35). By "self-division"—meaning a sustained, "uneasy equilibrium" (35) of mutually exclusive concepts within the self—these critics managed to avoid the call to formulate an ideology (as naturalists had done), as well as reinforcing the reality of American democracy (however false) as one which invited conceptual, political, economic variety. Through a permanent "ineradicable" tension and conflict these critics hoped to avoid the polemical pitfalls evident in naturalism. This desire to escape ideology (which to the postwar liberal mind primarily meant "propaganda," 34, 39) arose from the demands made upon the critics by the consensus culture of Cold War America: "the postwar derogation of ideology . . . was itself an ideology that served to reinforce the dominant Cold War polarities which privileged American democracy, imagined as a fruitful tension of conflicting groups in contrast with the monolithic repressiveness of the Soviet Union" (23). The invocation of democracy therefore involved a tautology wherein democracy, as defined by these critics, demanded the presence of divisiveness and wherein the presence of divisiveness proved the presence of democracy. America was immune to ideology because its "fruitful tension" prevented the emergence of any one dominant, "monolithic" system of thought.

#### B. Narratives and Nukes

The dominant ideology of Cold War America, Whitfield tells us, "was not a lever with which the politically informed could act; it was more like a lounge chair in which they could repose" (55). According to Whitfield, the primary ideology of America connected more with the notion of "free enterprise" than "freedom of expression" or "freedom of thought." The dominant discourse valorised a conceptual complacency, if not ignorance, and emphasised "pragmatic resolution" to existing social and economic problems (54). In other words, the conceptual indecisiveness of postwar American intellectuals dove-tailed neatly with the anti-intellectualism promoted by official discourse: "American politicians were supposed to arrange deals, not

articulate ideals" (54). Idealism was anathema, and the Cold War thinkers arranged their escape from the responsibility of political idealism by idealising paralysis and stasis (which reflected the global stasis of Soviet Communism versus American capitalism). Although American democracy at the time did not practice the permissiveness apparent in the liberal ideal of democracy as variance (and these liberals were idealists, whether they admitted it or not), the view of America's political organisation as permissive and non-judgemental prevailed. Political inactivity became the norm, and Cold War intellectuals capitulated to this norm, fostering epistemological tension, uncertainty, ambiguity and contradiction as the proper response to the problematics and complexity of modern life.

The "thaw" in Soviet/American relations from the 1960s onward—resulting from America's realisation, as Tom Engelhardt puts it, in *The End of Victory Culture* (1995), that the American "story" of "triumph" had given way to "redistributed" "roles" and "dismantled" "certitudes" (15)—occasioned further uncertainties that fed directly into the aesthetic of dirty realism. A national literature already imbued with contradiction, paradox and hypocrisy now came to grips with what Engelhardt calls "storylessness" (15). Not only had the dominant vision America held of itself—as a nation whose very identity was predicated on its "enemies . . . [and] . . . the story of their slaughter and [American] triumph" (15)—faltering during the war against Vietnam, but the very "reality" of that "story," and hence of stories in general, became increasingly suspect. The Cold War increasingly foregrounded the American politic as rooted in narrative rather than "truth." The confused and contradictory policy-makers of the Cold War did much to bring this fact to light:

**A nightmarish search for enemy-ness became the defining, even obsessive domestic act of the Cold War years, while strategic planning for future victory abroad led "prudent" men, familiar with the triumphant lessons of World War II, toward the charnel house of history. American policy makers soon found themselves writing obsessively, not for public consumption but for each other, about a possible "global war of annihilation". . . . If the story of victory in World War II was for a time endlessly replayed in the movies, in comics, and on television, other cultural vistas were also opening up for the young, ones that led directly into whatever territory terrified grownups. To escape not into the war story but into places where that story was**



dissolving held unexpected pleasures, not the least of which was the visible horror of adults at what you were doing. (7)

Engelhardt's vocabulary—"nightmarish," "defining," "planning," "history," "policy makers," "writing obsessively . . . for each other," "story," "movies," "comics," "television," "other cultural vistas," "territory"—points to an increasingly manipulative cultural scene, one in which the obvious generation of discourse led to a "dissolving" of narrative authority. In effect, the fear of nuclear holocaust, more than any other foreseeable future, raised awareness of "possible" narratives. Because nuclear war, as Nadel points out, means the end of writing, the end of culture, and the end of history, its effects could only be written beforehand (39)<sup>12</sup>; and, so, the American narrative became concerned less with *what was* than with what *could be*. This idea trickled down into the forms of cultural production and became one of the primary logics operating in America from the 1960s onward. The threat of nuclear annihilation shifted the focus from the reality of narrative to the *realities narrative made possible*. Narrative was policy, fantasy, guess-work, and nevertheless the country's top officials guided their day-to-day politics according to this projected discourse. Most importantly, Engelhardt points out that the story of American triumph in World War Two, replayed "endlessly" in popular culture, eventually succumbed to its own internal contradictions. How could a war that spurred on the development of, and terminated in, the exploding of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, possibly contain an unequivocal victory?<sup>13</sup> Since the atomic bomb threatened not just the Soviets but human life globally, the American victory contained (or failed to contain) within itself universal annihilation. The price of victory on the cultural imagination became worse than the price of defeat. In the 1960s the increased scrutiny of mass media renditions of American victory mobilised large portions of the American citizenry to note, and take "pleasure" in, the places where the "story was dissolving." The dominant narrative no longer held, and so America became confronted with its "storylessness," its need to craft new narratives, new forms of discourse to account for the historical moment, while simultaneously aware of the tenuous, fabricated, and unrealistic nature of these narratives. When you spoke of reality you spoke of narrative strategies, and such "speaking" heavily marks such dirty realist texts as Carver's

“What Do You Do in San Francisco?” and Richard Ford’s *Independence Day*.

### C. The 1960s

The 1960s saw a revolution in social discourse, where the narrative “norms” that governed American life unravelled into incompatible fragments of a master narrative. Nadel tells us that the policy of “containment” instigated by George Kennan in his 1947 essay, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,”

**generated numerous, often contradictory or mutually exclusive, stories, each grounding its authority in the claim that it is part of the same story. Without that story, none of the narratives would have the authority to generate the actions committed in its name; at the same time the claim to a common narrative renders the narrative itself incoherent. (18)**

The “stories” generated by Cold War policy-makers such as Kennan included the need to safeguard democracy by supporting foreign anti-democratic (but also anti-Communist) movements and dictators in Cuba, the Middle East and Central America, the “desire to use limitless [atomic] force in the interests of establishing the peaceful limiting of force” (Nadel 166), the ban on Communist speakers at Berkeley in the 1960s in order to safeguard “traditional principles of [American] democracy” (which included, presumably, “freedom of speech,” Nadel 212-213), the drafting of military alliances with Meo tribesmen against Communist insurgents in Laos in return for aiding the Meo to gain “control of the lucrative opium traffic in Southeast Asia’s ‘Golden Triangle’” (Whitfield 207). These examples provide only some of the contradictory and baffling practices advocated by America’s Cold War political administration. In each case, respectively, two “mutually exclusive” stories clashed – anti-communism versus pro-democracy, nuclear brinkmanship versus nuclear deterrence, censorship versus freedom of speech, military alliance versus illegal drug trafficking – as the administration sought to force contradictory aims to inhabit the same space within a singular narrative. Ostensibly, Nadel’s “common narrative” refers to the image of America upheld by Cold War politicians as an anti-ideological, permissive, progressive and democratic nation of free speech, Christian values, and capitalist munificence. In each case mentioned above, policy-makers fell back upon this

“common narrative” (or *metanarrative*) of America’s Cold War image as a way to explain foreign invasion as “looking out for America’s interests (i.e. democracy) abroad,” building up an arsenal of nuclear weaponry in order to keep the “atomic” peace, the censure of political radicals in order to maintain traditional American values, and the forging of alliances in order to help preserve the political integrity and lawful security of countries from Soviet influence. In short, these tactics and methods did safeguard the American way of life but only through methods that undermined it.

By the 1960s it became apparent that the conceptual mobility of the Cold War administration—and the “common narrative” upon which this mobility rested—not only disclosed the contradictions of American policy but in fact relied upon contradiction in order to enforce its mutually exclusive aims. “Incoherence” became the means by which various strategies, domestic and foreign, were implemented; the looseness of the “story” gave those in power the necessary room to have things both ways, to be totalitarian and democratic, advocates of free speech and censorship, lawful and illegal—as the moment required. Contradiction was the logic of the Cold War.

The function of administering the Cold War became increasingly apparent as a function of narrative. By the 1960s American Cold War policy began to reveal the fatal tensions within its form of “authority.” Provided that the Cold War remained discourse rather than actual conflict, as long as it remained part of the cultural imaginary, rather than part of the cultural real (as it became with Vietnam) it permitted Eisenhower’s administration an unlimited jurisdiction; its policy-makers enjoyed the liberty of not living up to their own rules, provided that the limits of the conflict remained primarily linguistic, provided that a buffer of rhetoric remained between the general populace and the face of history. As soon as the war went from “cold” to “hot,” however, as it did in Vietnam, the rhetoric proved insufficient in maintaining the narrative of an enlightened American foreign policy (and, indeed, the very feasibility of a “cold war”). The idea that actions could be explained, and then revisioned and re-explained, that history constituted a shifting narrative whose fluidity could be channelled in the interests of appearing coherent (but whose very fluidity and its channelling proved the inconsistency of the

dominant discourse) deeply informed the dirty realists that came of age in the 1960s. With the advent of the Vietnam War, perhaps the first conflict involving the U.S. which offered no moral guarantees, and whose images became too ambiguous for safe narrative containment, policy faltered on contact with the real:

Certainly, Vietnam marked a definitive exit point in American history and the 1960s, a sharp break with the past. There, the war finally lost its ability to mobilize young people under "freedom's banner" except in opposition to itself, a loss experienced by a generation as both a confusing "liberation" and a wrenching betrayal. There, the war story's codes were jumbled, its roles redistributed, its certitudes dismantled, and new kinds of potential space opened up that proved, finally, less liberating than frightening. (Engelhardt 14-15)

As an "exit point in American history," the Vietnam War ended history as conceived in America; after Vietnam, history became a "potential space," whose inscription depended less upon event than on narrative facility, and so history became suspect, of questionable content, and thus more "frightening" than "liberating." History no longer represented a faithful recording of events, no longer a mimetic exercise, but a hazardous art fraught with an impossible responsibility. The legacy of Vietnam became, for a generation, a narrative "jumbled" and without "certitudes." Some authors responded to the dismantling of history by producing texts that foregrounded the artifice of all discursive constructions, the so-called metafictionalists; other authors responded to it by recalling the writing of reality as an act of "liberation" shot-through with frightening implications. This fright arose from the unstable nature of historical discourse; if history was not self-evident, if it did not simply present itself for textual inscription, then who was writing history, why were they writing it and what effect was it having? History became a question of indoctrination, and tactics of both writing and reading developed as a means to counter or evade it. The discursive underpinnings of society presented a source of fear and the primary zone of political conflict. In either case, language became the new focus of writing, whether the metalanguage<sup>14</sup> critiqued by metafiction, or the language of reality interrogated and evaded by dirty realism.

#### D. Language, History, Dirt

If the sanctioned narrative called history served to cover up the contradictions of official discourse, then the writing of the Cold War, from the 1960s onward, increasingly reflected the status of language in the republic: "Modern and contemporary writing exposed the illusionist character of documentary, reflective realism and made the reader attend to the linguistic reality or medium of the fiction itself" (Schaub 57). Authors turned from finding a language to accurately describe events to a way of describing how language is made to describe events. Nadel regards the re-definition of the role of writing that occurred during the Cold War (especially in the 1960s) as the definitive break between modernism and postmodernism. In particular, Nadel regards the shifting authorial relations with history as the fulcrum on which twentieth-century writing pivoted: "In postmodernist writing, on the other hand, history is not the enemy but the accomplice of the artist, who sees writing not as recording or recollecting history but as creating it. Postmodern writers, in other words, realise they have complete control over history and no control whatsoever over events" (39). The Cold War produced an entirely new regard for history. In the modernist ethos, writes Nadel, time as history proved an enemy of art because "it rendered 'reality' unstable" (39) and an unstable reality prevented the emergence of a universal, generally-applicable artistic or political platform; history doomed modernists to ruins, to viewing the degradation of western-culture into fragments that only art, if at all, could hope to present coherently.

During the Cold War, this "art" of coherent presentation came under exceeding scrutiny, so that by the end of the 1950s (which Schaub identifies as the moment of "high modernism" in American literature), history exchanged its synonymous relation with time for a relation with "art." History, as seen in the politically charged rhetoric of the 1950s, *was* an art. The loss of the "story" that Engelhardt sees as the result of the political turbulence of the 1960s was the loss of a consensually agreed-upon language for reality, or history; out of the "fear" that came with this loss rose a type of writing paranoid of the ways in which official discourse manipulated, through language, mass apprehension of events. Though authors could not

exercise control over events (and Richard Ford's *Independence Day*, 1995, offers a paradigmatic examination of this idea), as master wordsmiths they could deploy language to encode alternative renditions to official narratives. In the *writing* of history, authors were at an advantage. Authors wrested the privilege of history from the bureaucrats.

As Alan Nadel, discussing de Certeau, points out, the efficacy of any discursive system—particularly those of the Cold War—depends upon the institution of *discursive space*, a delimited zone of authority separate from the “out there,” which can enact critiques of selected issues, and a containment or pointed ignoring of others:

Drawing . . . on . . . de Certeau . . . I will discuss the ways in which all discourses depend upon their closeted Other, the thing they necessarily exclude and yet upon which they rely for their respective authority. In the case of history, the “thing” is a composite of unrecorded activity for which historical records substitute. This substitution claims to capture or represent events but instead replaces them with language. (38)

Authority, as the Cold War so clearly taught, came about as a result of “exclusion,” the exclusion of ideas, politics and even forms of entertainment antithetical to “the American way of life,” as that way of life was conceived at the time (a conception that similarly necessitated the exclusion of certain events—the civil rights movement, for example, and what it said about the “democracy” of racial status—in order to appear coherent). De Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984),<sup>15</sup> specifies the “unrecorded activity” that remains outside the purview of history as the “banality” that “speaks” in “*everyman*” (6), meaning those minute arrangements, activities and tasks flowing in and around the cultural matrix of social and political life yet which remain too inconsequential in their singularity (though not in their plurality) to bother the recorders of history. Dirty realism, therefore, finds its own voice in the “banality” that “speaks” in exclusion from official historical records, in the “ordinary” against and over which official discourse rigidifies its conceptual parameters, in relation to which it develops and specifies its discourse. By foregrounding the banal dirty realism works against the official discourse which kept so much of America disoriented and enthralled during the “high modernist” period of the Cold War.

If men like McCarthy and Vice-President Nixon offered their own “substitute” language to explain and overwrite events, then dirty realists, as writers coming out of the American 1960s, wrest the technique of substitution from the politicians and deploy it in the service of exposing discursive coherence for what it is: “a national narrative whose singular authority depended on uncontrollable doubling, a gendered narrative whose couplings depended on unstable distinctions, a historical narrative that functioned independently of events, a form of writing that undermined the authority of its referents” (Nadel 6). Dirty realism borrowed the paradigmatic hypocrisy, the logic of contradiction, and the conceptual mobility and liberty offered by a history conceived as rhetoric in order to remind us of a reality of poverty, alcoholism, war continually subverted and substituted for under the narrative of American democracy, thereby returning us to the naturalist notion of a country not democratic enough, not extensive enough in its inclusiveness; furthermore, what appears in a strategic sense on the part of government officials appears in a tactical sense in these writers, authors willing to adopt hypocrisy as a method of obtaining a limited autonomy and indeterminacy within the matrix of a myopic national narrative.

As the politicians of the 1950s guaranteed their freedom to act in opposition to principles, yet brought up those principles to defend their actions, so dirty realism also constructs its hypocrisy aesthetic in order to guarantee its own freedom at the same time as it serves up a reminder of the divorce between history and event, theory and practice. By working in the margins—focussing on the ordinary and the everyday—dirty realism responds to the Cold War call for “conformity” by illustrating the extreme variance within the so-called “normalcy” of the American lower and middle classes. Dirty realism narrates those portions of American life “left out” of the primary cultural model fostered largely by political debates in the 1950s. Absorbing the formal strategies of Cold War discourse—contradiction, hypocrisy, alternating sub- and master narratives—dirty realism re-deploys these practices on a tactical (and, occasionally, strategic) level. Informed throughout by Cold War discursive strategies, and first appearing in print during the mid-1960s, dirty realism arose as a literary practice at a time when the intellectual framework of the Cold War became fully exposed as an ethos empowered

and liberated by its “dual,” or simultaneous, configuration as both democratic and authoritarian, an event Nadel calls its “publicly visible . . . forms of duplicity” (6). The “form” of Cold War discourse deeply conditioned the “form” of dirty realism. The “clutter” that resulted from the unravelling of Cold War discourse—a “singular” authority fractured by its “doubling,” a loss of gender-specific distinctions, historical uncertainty, and the destabilising of “referents”—forms the cultural and conceptual landscape of dirty realism. In recalling the “clutter” whose all-pervasiveness, and indeterminate “doubling,” invalidates privileged epistemological positions, by constantly deferring to elements marginalised by official discourse, (Nadel 18), dirty realism presents the legacy of the Cold War: a nation swamped in identical and undifferentiated options, a nation foundered on the loss, and mistrust, of consistency.

## II. “What Do You Do in San Francisco?”

### A. The Surveillance of Arcadia

Raymond Carver (1938-1988), in the words of his critical-biographer, William L. Stull, in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, spent the 1960s in literary “apprenticeship” (206). The tenor of the Cold War of the 1960s heavily influences Carver’s first major collection of short stories, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976), which includes numerous samples of Carver’s efforts throughout the preceding decade. Echoing Nadel, Stull regards Carver astigmatically, saying: “Through it all [Carver’s life], a certain doubleness persisted. . . . The doubleness appeared . . . in the faces Carver showed the world. In [one] jacket photo . . . he sports a shiny suit and looks every inch the famous writer . . . [in another] he hunches in a well-worn leather jacket, his only ornament a black onyx ring” (203). From such “persistent self-divisions,” writes Stull, “Carver wrought an art of haunting ambiguity” (203). The “uncontrollable” doubling that Nadel regards as the inevitable side-effect of the Cold War policy of containment features prominently in Carver’s work as well, wherein the narratives, the fact of writing, and the aesthetic claims all necessitate an assumption of contrary positions, just as Kennan’s policy of containment necessitated dual discourses, at once democratic and undemocratic, at once normative and ambiguous, at once discursively fixed and indeterminately mobile. In a similar mode, Carver’s



artistic “discourse” required of him a duality, that of voice for the working class (whom he regarded as his own people, McCaffery 110) and prestigious, award-winning, best-selling author deeply involved with the manufacture of a “voice,” a vociferous opponent of 1960s experimental writing (*Fires* 14), yet allied to the point of interchangeability with the aesthetic of editor Gordon Lish, a promoter of the minimalist “avant-garde” (Max 56),<sup>16</sup> and a man who, having survived a near-fatal alcoholism, proclaimed a belief in the blessedness of his life, yet who, in his writing, retained a “sense of pessimism” (McCaffery 100). Carver’s success largely depended upon his successful manoeuvring between a master narrative (the straight-ahead, no-nonsense, working-class realist) and the sub-stories (wealth, fame, aesthetic obsessions, authorial uncertainty) that did not accord with it.

Carver’s story, “What Do You Do in San Francisco?,” included in the aforementioned collection, offers a case-study of Cold War doubling. The story apparently focuses on “a young couple with three children” (111), who move, from San Francisco to Arcata, a town in Northern California. Told entirely from the point of view of a mailman, Henry Robinson, whose route brings him across the house these people have moved into, the story enacts an allegory of political surveillance, as we read Henry’s speculations and suppositions that at first mingle his own life story with that of the male tenant, Marston, and finally overwrite it altogether. We therefore witness the tale through Robinson’s eyes, voyeuristically passing judgement on events that of themselves provide ambiguity as well as conclusive narrative. Although we witness the activities of the “Beatniks” (111) (albeit only during those moments that coincide with Robinson’s mail delivery)—their spurning of work (114), their “coolness” to Robinson’s overtures (114), their unwillingness to assume an identity on their mailbox (115), the rumours that pin them as parolees (116), their playful and unruly children (115), domestic untidiness (117), the disappearance of the woman and the disconsolateness of Marston (118-119), and finally his disappearance as well (121)—“What Do You Do in San Francisco?” really tells us nothing about the Marstons, and the “gaze” of the story doubles back on the engine of surveillance, Robinson.

In fact, the town of Arcata inverts the paradisaical promise of its allusion to “Arcadia,” as

the system of Cold War surveillance inverted the paradisaical promise of a democratic America. The town seems to extend the pastoral promise associated with the literary tradition of Arcadia: escape from the “trouble” (117) of San Francisco’s city-life, the offer of gainful employment (114), the friendliness of the local “Welcome Wagon” (116), and cosy intimacy and permanence of a postman who has worked the “route” since 1947 (111) and who knows where everyone has lived and for how long (112). On the surface, then, Arcata lives up to its name, reproducing the dominant image of small-town America as imagined by the 1950s, one of prosperity, material wealth, social ease and unrestricted access to various ways of life (Whitfield 72-74). However, underneath the surface (as the surface of the story paradoxically informs us), Arcata is anything but an Arcadia. In fact, the story illustrates how “large, multifarious, national policies became part of the cultural agenda of a citizenry” (Nadel 8), and how the American “federal civil servant,” the postman—the governmentally sanctioned transmitter of information—effects, through narrative, a policy of containment that reproduces, in the words of Engelhardt, “a domestic iron curtain” (91). Although Engelhardt’s phrase refers to the social containment of African-Americans, specifically Malcolm X, during the 1950s and 1960s, Carver’s story illustrates this containment as indeed a “cultural agenda” of the U.S. “citizenry.”<sup>17</sup>

For every superficial “plus” of small-town America there is a deeper “minus” attached. The gainful employment does not arrive with the scenery; Robinson says: “I can tell you who to see at Simpson Redwood. A friend of mine’s a foreman there. He’d probably have something” (114). In other words, the getting of work involves neither readiness, nor experience; nor is it an open field welcoming the best applicant. Work at Arcata depends upon nepotism. The lack of available jobs becomes foregrounded when Robinson admits that the previous owners of the home “just moved out. . . . He was going to work in Eureka” (115). Arcata is not a place to find work, nor is it a ground for setting down “roots,” for finding permanence; in fact, Arcata suggests that small-town America has become populated with itinerants sent wandering by changes in the availability of jobs. In fact, the only “permanent” job in this story of Arcata is the job of the “federal civil servant,” whose route, whose numbered addresses, seems the last element of permanence in an America on the move. Thus, the official discourse conceives of

permanence through its own signifier (the zip code), reaffirming its own sense of permanence at the expense of the day-to-day real "out there." In this way, Robinson's position recalls de Certeau's contention that scientific discourse constructs a discursive system "based on rules ensuring the system's production, reproduction, repetition and verification" (24). The federal arm of the American government can present America as a place where people settle, put down roots and live in permanent established modes of life because its discourse uses a form of language itself already developed from, and part of, the idea of permanence: the statistical equation of a populace with addresses. The populace of America becomes, as it does for Robinson, a bunch of houses along a "route," while between the house wend the shiftless, roving masses of the American working class. Thus the national image fostered by federal policy-makers functions "independent of speakers and circumstances" (de Certeau 24). The "discourse" of small-town Cold War America overwrites rather than substantiates the American reality; Arcata is no Eden.<sup>18</sup>

As the story further suggests, Arcata does not offer a haven for escapees from "trouble." Clearly, whatever brought Marston and his family to Arcata follows them there. Marston tells Robinson that they "don't expect to get any mail for a while, yet" (114) as an excuse for not changing the "name on the [post] box" (114). The name on the box never does get changed (115), suggesting that Marston and company do not want to be located, and the arrival of letters coincides with the departure of "the woman." Trouble follows the Marstons to Arcata and eventuates their flight from it. Again, the federal post service assumes the role of villain, as Marston appears more of a fugitive from mail than from the people sending the mail. When a letter arrives from Jerry (118), it causes delight, although the letter bears no stamp. The woman who receives the mail says that she doesn't mind paying for the postage as the letter comes from a friend (118). The arrival of such a letter signifies Marston's position outside the dominant social order, his membership in a discourse that subverts the approved means of communication. The lack of a stamp necessitates the postman's intrusion on his home with the demand that Marston pay the five cent postage fee; meanwhile, the intrusion occasions the postman's view into Marston's home and the subsequent summary verdict on the manner in

which he and his family conduct their lives: "I . . . wish I'd paid the nickel myself," says Robinson (118). Government surveillance becomes the "trouble" that the Marston family cannot escape, cannot live in freedom from, and which continually reminds them of its watchful eye on their activities.

The infiltration of Marston's family proceeds to a greater and greater extent in the story, following the shift in the *type* of mail that they receive. First, Robinson tells us, only "circulars" arrive (117)—the notion of circularity suggesting the rebuff of Robinson's prying eyes, an enclosed narrative immune to intrusion, or the return of the gaze to its starting point, coming full circle (itself suggestive of whom this story *really* pertains to); then, Marston begins receiving a "few" letters, "maybe one or two a week," —suggesting the gradual infiltration of the Marston household and the gleaning of genuine information; then, the letter arrives from Jerry (118), which eventuates Robinson's view into the home and the subsequent dissolution of Marston and his "wife's" relationship (there is nothing in the story to suggest marriage between Marston and the woman character, except Robinson's projection of nuclear family values); then, the letters stop altogether and Marston begins to pace back and forth in front of the mailbox waiting for mail (119), suggesting the extent to which he becomes beholden to, and powerless before, the state-run information network; then, once again, another "circular" arrives, one qualified this time by Robinson as addressed only to "occupant" (119), indicating that Marston has now truly been put in his place, has had his individuality stripped away in conformity with statistical nomenclature, a situation that testifies to his exposure and containment within the system (just as the HUAC hearings focussed primarily on exposure rather than redress for specific offences). The final letter that arrives, and Robinson's reaction to it, suggests the extent to which the system uses "everyman" (de Certeau 2) "as a disguise for a metalanguage about itself"; Marston becomes the "anonymous" (2) figure upon whom a Cold War discourse inscribes its terms, terms which ultimately feed back into, and undergird, the system, rather than revealing anything about the subject.

When Robinson finally hands over the last letter to Marston, he says: "This time I had a

hunch I had what it was he'd been looking for. I'd looked at it [the letter] down at the station this morning when I was arranging the mail into packets" (120). Robinson has figured Marston out; the postman's suspicions culminate in the arrival of this letter with the "woman's curlicue" (120) handwriting. The use of the word "hunch" describes the entirety of the story as well as the general mood of the Cold War, where citizens were "guilty by suspicion," and where HUAC rarely needed proof to make its accusations (Whitfield 188), where the standard logic of American justice—"a man is innocent until proven guilty"—became inverted to the necessity of proving innocence (Whitfield 24). Marston's "guilt" becomes evident, in Robinson's mind, "not by evidence but by association and failure to confess" (Nadel 84). The silence with which Marston and the woman greet Robinson's overtures facilitate Robinson's narrative; as in the case of those men and women who pleaded the fifth amendment before HUAC, and who failed to take the required loyalty oath, silence proved the most incriminating behaviour of all. Those who remained silent had something to hide, and what they hid was the confession of guilt to the accusations of HUAC. Marston's access to the letters, and his arrangement of them into "packets" provides an example of the way the silence of the blank envelope, its only claim to authority being the "association" (the name of the addresser alongside that of the addressee) written in the top left hand corner. Finally, the "curlicue" script of the "woman" suggests the gendered narrative of the Cold War that Nadel discusses. Robinson cannot know that the writing belongs to a "woman," yet he figures that it does because it accords with the narrative of female infidelity that he blurts out to Marston near the end of the story (120); the circular penmanship suggests the decorative, which Robinson automatically associates with the feminine. Also, the "curlicue"<sup>19</sup> again suggests circularity and containment, as the story wraps around to Robinson's initial suppositions. In the course of the letters we see the gradual interrogation of Marston's situation and its containment within the parameters of Robinson's discourse. Marston goes from anonymous citizen—a recipient of circulars—to a suspect of the inquisition, a man guilty by association, and, guilt determined, returned to the anonymity he started with. In the course of this epistolary inquisition we have actually not heard anything of Marston's story from Marston himself.

The "Welcome Wagon," emblematic of America's "welcoming" communities serves the purpose of surveillance second only to Robinson himself. If Robinson figures in the story as the agent embodying the federal government, then the Welcome Wagon of Sallie Wilson figures as the homefront in the battle against the subversion of the American way of life; Sallie serves as the representative of Nadel's "citizenry" willing to adopt the "agenda" of national policy. She provides the "evidence" (116) that the "woman" with Marston is "a dope addict," a narrative which Robinson calls the "most horrible" (116), a narrative possibility even worse than Marston being pegged a "criminal" (116). Taking, or addiction to, "dope" runs even more contrary to the ethos of Arcata than conventional criminal activity: "The story most folks seemed to believe, at least the one that got around most, was the most horrible" (116). Carver's sentence encapsulates the public mood during the Cold War, where one could only "seem" to believe in, and adhere to, the American way of life (as Nadel points out, loyalty could not be reliably tested, 77), and where the "story" that got around "was" usually "the most horrible." The charge of Communist conspiracy proved the most horrible indictment during the Cold War, and generally the truth of this charge became the "belief" of those people doing the prosecuting. In Arcata, Sallie Wilson "has been snooping and prying for years under cover of the Welcome Wagon" (116), and her judgement on the woman seems as arbitrary, as "belief" driven, as dependant on "seeming," as the HUAC hearings.

Clearly, Robinson decides to include Sallie's testimony because it gels with his own: "there was something funny about them—the woman, particular" (116). Like Robinson, who, by his own admission, turned against the woman "from the first" (113), Sallie pinpoints the anonymous female co-occupant of Marston's household as the particularly "funny" person in the rented house. Sallie's criticism of the woman hinges on the fact that the woman ignores Sallie, treating her "as if Sallie wasn't there" (116). The primary reason for mistrust becomes a superficial physiological feature: "Well, just the way her eyes looked if you came up close to her, Sallie said" (116). Finally, Sallie's "snooping" and "prying" results in no information at all, perhaps the most damning fact. Similarly, Robinson's judgement of the woman follows from a superficial trait: "But put me down for saying she wasn't a good wife and mother. She was a

painter" (112). Robinson deems the woman's artistic calling as proof enough of her failure as both wife and mother, two areas in which he has no evidence to question her competence.

Arcata finally proves an inversion of the pastoral eden suggested by its name; instead, the town delimits a site of mistrust, suspicion, quick judgements, moral rectitude and a dominant narrative so exacting, offering so little room for difference, that the superficial feature, the set of one's eyes, provides enough evidence for a damning verdict. Here, even a marginally subversive couple such as Marston and the woman cannot pursue their "happiness" in peace, precisely because the maintenance of traditional, home-grown, American values (which supposedly ensure the freedom necessary for the "pursuit of happiness") necessitates their containment in a narrative which smothers the free exercise of those values it purports to protect. The principle of doubling—the double-sidedness, the two-facedness of Arcata—informs the *modus operandi* of federal agents and the nation's citizenry.

## B. Mr. Robinson's Republic

### i. Reading Democracy

Robinson the post-man serves as the poet-laureate of this Arcata. His means of narration, entirely through surveillance, and the license this gives him resembles the discursive methods seen so often during the Cold War. In Robinson, Carver gives us a character responding to the indeterminacy of reality with a determinate fiction, one that seeks to contain Marston in a way that leaves Robinson himself intact, yet one that, at the same time, indicates the degree to which Robinson's own reality (ethical, moral, political) depends upon the way he processes Marston's story. As Jürgen Pieters says, in *A Shred of Platinum: The Aesthetics of Raymond Carver's Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? and What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1992),<sup>20</sup> in Carver "voyeurism is not so much linked up with the limitation of the narrator's (and the reader's) viewpoint as with the isolation and the alienation of the spying character" (87). If Robinson engages in espionage, he does so not because he feels epistemologically insecure, but because he wishes to confirm the difference between his way of life and that of Marston. Marston represents a way of life that Robinson would like to seal himself away from; in

remaining "isolated" from Marston and family, Robinson proceeds to alienate and befriend the newcomer, to view the younger man, in the words of Nadel, as "other" and "same" (20) in order to maintain his own mobility while strictly confining Marston. Like the voyeur, Robinson's pleasure rests in obsessively viewing a mode of living that he would never want to participate in, yet whose very activity reinstates and reinscribes the moral superiority of Robinson's lifestyle. He *needs* Marston to live a certain way in order to negatively define himself, in order to produce his difference, his separateness. The act of voyeurism serves to guarantee isolation.

Pieters connects reading to voyeurism where he states that "Meaning is not situated within the text, but it appears in the interaction of the text with the reader, a reader understood both as formal principle and as 'concretizer' of forms and meanings" (74). "What Do You Do in San Francisco?" draws attention to "reading," not only Robinson's reading of Marston (who remains more or less mute, a blank text, throughout), but our reading of Robinson and our reading of Carver. Carver foregrounds, through Robinson's narrative, our own methods of surveillance, and the way that surveillance subverts or supports the social codes and norms in operation around us.

Like Pieters, Nadel suggests that the Cold War witnessed a renovation in the relation between author and reader, a relation wherein the author began to realise his or her subordination to the reader's power. Robinson figures as Carver's warning that our readings may constitute the overwriting of another's life with a master narrative, and hence the favouring of a particular type of democracy, a warning echoed by Nadel:

The boundaries between narratives of personal policy and national policy are in fact hard to maintain, because if our history contains both the "free world" and the Communist world, it also contains the readers who consumed this narrative, making them participants in the historical performance by virtue merely of the fact that they had consumed it. At the same time, it also protects them by containing them within that narrative in the privileged position of readers, implicated only vicariously in the narratives with which they identified. (289)

Nadel therefore points out that "democracy," so-called, allowed for a particularly readerly positioning, permitting a consumer's approach to text, a privileged vantage which



simultaneously permitted direct intervention in the narrative while at the same time maintaining a distance from it, just as American foreign policy during the Cold War allowed it to critique (and thereby penetrate) the fundamentals of communism, or Soviet policy, while at the same time putting itself at a complete remove from it. In this way, American policy could recognise the connection between itself and the Communists (most apparent in Cold War conflicts where the two opposing sides actually “met,” such as Vietnam, where American methods of oppression differed little, in form, from those deployed by the Soviets in Eastern Europe or the Chinese in Asia), and thus engender a narrative of conflict and opposition, while at the same time as America advertised itself as a free “democratic” hands-off political practice. Robinson similarly invades Marston’s life to critique and subject it to scrutiny, while at the same time allowing himself a position as a bastion of non-interference, of old-fashioned, democratic values, a man who seeks only to allow everyone his or her own say in matters. Robinson’s non-committal attitude to the content of his story, allows him to identify the tenant as “same” and “other,” empowering his consumption of the other as reified object. At Robinson’s convenience, he pictures the other as similar and wholly alien, just as the Soviet Union, in Cold War discourse, became a distorted, perverted image of “sameness” that might, with the right example and the right foreign policy, be wooed to the path of righteous capitalism, and as an entirely foreign body of antithetical discourse against which the west defined itself.

“What Do You Do in San Francisco?” becomes Robinson’s story<sup>21</sup> by virtue of the way that his supposed act of objective narration becomes instead an act of reading in consumer fashion. As Pieters tells us, “reading,” in postmodern fiction, more often than not regards the “production” rather than the “reception” of meaning (74). Robinson’s narration, in this case, does not give us a story to read, but reads the story *for* us. The first sentence of the story attempts to cede narrative authority to the reader by foregrounding what the story is not about: “This has nothing to do with me” (111). Robinson tells us that the story does not concern him, but does not tell us what or who it does concern. In this way, he makes a democratic pretence of allowing the reader to make up his or her own mind about the story’s content at the same time as he “classifies” one particular reading, removing it from the field of possible options (that

the story he tells addresses him). In this way, Marston's supposedly "democratic" narration—in which a record of plain, objective facts appear at our interpretative disposal—curtails our own perceptions through a red herring. The open-endedness, the indeterminacy, of the reality Robinson projects (with one small caveat) presents a ruse of complexity he expects us to buy into. Robinson's "democracy" becomes a consumer option, something we pay for (with our complicity and conformity), rather than a living, breathing, political practice open to the participation of one and all; it becomes his "story," and ours as well:

As an object of consumption, "democracy" has had extensive currency in post-World War II America, becoming perhaps the most conspicuous of our political and social consumables. We have defined ourselves and created our personal narratives by participating in its codes even more completely than we have by purchasing cars or watching movies. In our consumer-oriented society, "democracy" has been the narrative of consumer preference. (Nadel 294)

As Carver shows us, the "democracy" of Arcata constitutes simply a "narrative of consumer preference." The disarming introduction of Robinson's story invites us to "buy into" the "democracy" of the narrative, and to quietly ignore the totalitarian impulse hiding just below the surface. The opening sentence is a "code" which invites us to consume the story as a democratic one (however, the story Robinson is selling is most decidedly undemocratic). Hidden in Robinson's strategy is the Cold War tautology that says America is democratic because what goes on in America is democracy (two phrases which, while only appearing symmetrical, allow the selling of America as democratic despite all evidence to the contrary, two phrases which combine to suggest that democracy is purchased at the cost of relinquishing one's difference from America); in Robinson's case his story provides the tautology that says this story is democratic because what goes on in the story is democracy. Do we consume this "democracy" or not? Do we become like Robinson? Nadel's comment illustrates the ways in which our "privileged position" as both "reader" and "author" (294) no longer offers the tenable security of upholders of democracy. In other words, our "reading" of Cold War "democracy," by consuming, and thereby "participating" in, its codes has in fact "authored" a kind of democracy that bears no relation to its actual practice, a democracy that is "one more signifier

divorced completely from its signified" (294). Robinson's "story" thereby asks us to "consume" its premise of detachment and its apparent willingness to let us formulate our own opinion. He is, after all, just a postman, just a messenger. Except that, by the time Carver had written this story, the consensual apparatus whereby democracy functioned as a self-evident, neutral form of political organisation became deeply mired in its context. No longer did democracy appear as a "universal" system based upon the idea of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but rather a political system, like any other, prey to its historical moment; this means that McCarthy's democracy, Eisenhower's democracy, could differ widely (or not so widely) from that of President Kennedy. Similarly, the "message" of Robinson's democracy is not all-inclusive.

As Nadel points out, democracy, during the Cold War, and especially in the 1960s, became "code" behind which various political programs sought out their aims, a code which the buying public was asked, or forced, to "consume." Whitfield writes that during the Cold War, "A word like 'democracy' ceased to be, as in the texts of the 1930s, a 'call to social action'; it became instead a synonym for the status quo and 'the opposite of Fascism and Communism'" (57).<sup>22</sup> Democracy, the American way of life, became, as Robinson amply illustrates, indefinable except by what they were not; hence, at the beginning of "What Do You Do in San Francisco," he can tell us what the story is *not* about, but not what it *is* about (he tells us what he *is* like by illustrating how he *is not like* the Marstons). Marston and "Mrs. Marston" become targets because they do not conform to the Puritan work ethic and marital configuration Robinson sees as proper (while at the same time, Robinson does not do his job—preferring to pry into other peoples' lives rather than keep his mind on the work—nor does he live with, or even visit, his own wife and children, 111). Throughout "What Do You Do In San Francisco?" Carver asks the reader to look long and hard at the type of "democracy" American politics offered, and to interrogate the way in which reading, by participating in the "codes" of narrative, endorses it.

Dirty realism's "democratic" practice of allowing the readers to make up their own minds on the nature of the text (elaborated in chapter one, "Introduction: The Hypocrisy

Aesthetic") recognises the power-in-ambiguity of consumption. Nadel further elaborates the nature of this consumption:

For the author directs and controls the scope of observation, the boundaries, the outcome. In doing so, however, the author also reifies a process. The narrative that appears—by contractual agreement—to be unfolding achieves this appearance by virtue of having been fixed and hence insulated from the vicissitudes of change, from the possibilities of intervention, from the effects of criticism and scrutiny. The author's involvement is thus everywhere and nowhere, functioning with absolute power and absolute impunity, the two conditions that militate against democratic activity . . . the reader shares responsibility for these violations by implicitly participating in a hierarchical relationship, wherein the referents of a text are subordinate to narrative, the narrative subordinate to the author's control, and the author's control subordinate to the reader's scrutiny. The conditions that surround the text and the author and the reader remain safely out of bounds. (291-292)

According to Nadel, Robinson's reading (or "scrutiny") of Marston's life becomes so effective because it ignores the extent to which Robinson himself is "read" by his surroundings, is constituted as "subject" by his historical conditions. Robinson believes that he can keep his own "story" at bay, hidden behind the narrative he projects on Marston (which happens to be his own); by appealing to the reader's democratic sensibility he authorises every interpretation except the one which actually conforms to the reality of the story. He grants any symbioses between reality and the readers' interpretations except the one which indicts him. Yet this very manoeuvre cancels out any possibility of a "democratic" reading, since it attempts to make the reader complicit in a narrative—like that of Cold War America—defined by exclusion, by containment. Robinson's life, and the way it informs and usurps the narrative he projects on reality, or the way the narrative of Cold War democracy authorised its exclusionary discourse for consumption, remain the "conditions" that "remain safely out of bounds" in "What Do You Do in San Francisco?" If the narrative "authored" by Cold War society denigrated the lifestyle of the hippie or "beatnik" as intrinsically harmful because it ignored core values, then it did so by fostering a narrative that co-opted the reader into a codified system of response wherein democracy meant any interpretation that did not coincide with "fascist" or "Communist beliefs," wherein the defence of democratic freedoms, and traditional American values, required

censure, surveillance and bias, as well as a conscientious ignorance of the hidden stories and agendas which would invalidate the apparent “democracy” of such a narrative.

However, Carver’s foregrounding of Robinson’s narrative through the enigma of Marston effectively breaches the consensus<sup>23</sup> between “author” and “reader”; Robinson’s misreading of Marston’s life challenges our own consumption of discourse. The patterns of consumption laid bare, Carver suggests that we consume narrative in ways already predetermined by the master narrative of western, capitalist democracy, which functions by an “other/same” dichotomy, which gives it both a boundary and relieves it of one. Hence the Soviet Union becomes the necessary demarcation, the point at which capital can mobilise its discourse. Robinson needs Marston to be both like and unlike him in order to play off sympathy against self-righteousness, in order to indicate how Marston could improve yet to view the younger man as irremediably other—all the while never having to talk about himself, never having to definitively state his own position one way or the other. By presenting Robinson as a case specific Cold War example of the ways in which authors cede authority to readers, and the ways readers consume that authority, Carver alerts readers to their own ability to exercise power and how that exercise becomes a discourse of inclusion and exclusion, in which dominance masquerades as passivity, inscription as reception and mobility as stasis. In this exercise of readerly privilege, Robinson’s strategy (as it reflects the strategic political discourse of the time) resembles, in part, that of de Certeau’s “reader.”

## ii. Other Stories

### a. De Certeau’s

“What Do You Do In San Francisco?” hinges on the passivity of the reader conceived as voyeur. The idea of “reading” in Carver alerts us to our passivity in the face of the dominant discourse, the codes through which we apprehend and negotiate phenomena, and the way reading itself can serve as both participation and non-participation, implication and non-implication, in the surrounding cultural milieu. Reading becomes linked to the politics of consumption. De Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* offers a theory of reading which illuminates the interplay

of passivity and activity in the practice of reading. He opposes the standard image of readerly passivity: "Reading (an image or a text), moreover, seems to constitute the maximal development of the passivity assumed to characterize the consumer, who is conceived of as a voyeur (whether troglodytic or itinerant) in a 'show biz society'" (xxi). De Certeau's depiction of voyeuristic passivity—with words such as "seems" and "conceived of"—belies his belief in the agency, however extemporaneous, of the consumer of text. In a society predicated on "show biz" on the effecting of spectacle for passive, instant consumption, de Certeau detects a more intricate practice underlying voyeuristic passivity:

In reality, the activity of reading has on the contrary all the characteristics of a silent production: the drift across the page, the metamorphosis of the text effected by the wandering eyes of the reader, the improvisation and expectation of meanings inferred from a few words, leaps over written spaces in an ephemeral dance. (xxi)

In "reality," the reader's passivity actually disguises operations upon the body of that text, a customising of the text according to his or her needs. The voyeur brings to the activity of voyeurism, to the object of the gaze, a set of tactics that disassemble, reconstruct and modify the given visual and personalise it during the "time" of its availability. The "ephemeral dance" "produced" by the reader, however, in the case of "What Do You Do in San Francisco?" becomes an entirely solipsistic one; Robinson "reads" the "story" of Myers with all the omissions, improvisations and inferences particular to his own condition, a condition predicated by Cold War logic.

Applying Pieters's formulation of the relationship between voyeurism, the reader and the author to de Certeau's theory illuminates the form of power exercised by Robinson in "What Do You Do In San Francisco?"—reveals the extent to which passivity enacts a complex inhabitation of another's "text." As Pieters points out (86), critics David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips stress the "strong bond" in Carver between "voyeurism and alienation, disconnectedness rather than connectedness" (78). While de Certeau sees the act of reading, the act of inhabiting another's text, as a subversion of the dominant discourse, Robinson's reading presents, instead, the "disconnectedness" of the dominant discourse itself, the constitution of a

“space” of the “proper,” which ignores, overwrites and offsets the evidence, or “clutter,” external to it. Just as the postal service envisions permanence on the basis of the postal address, Robinson envisions work as redemption by instituting a narrative that ignores contrary evidence (including evidence in his own life) in order to constitute its “properness” (de Certeau 24). According to de Certeau, science mobilises itself at the expense of the particularities and specificities of the everyday, reading them according to a predetermined methodology. The “operational discourse” (24) of science depends upon the institution of a particular way of addressing the world, a “proper” language which, in addressing the world, reads its language back from that world, instituting a type of study ignorant of elements external to its own mode of perception.

Robinson’s “proper” reading of Marston cannot take into account exceptions in his own background without collapsing the dichotomy upon which the “proper” discourse rests. The efficacy of Robinson’s voyeurism therefore depends upon his disconnectedness, his “alienation” (Pieters 87), not only from Marston but from himself. Robinson’s power as a “reader” stems from alienation, from his ability to ignore or override the particulars of the story in order to impose a discourse of the “proper.” Through this alienation, however, Carver foregrounds the necessity of personalised readings: “Traditional reader-expectations—that a literary text has some truth to yield—consequently force the reader in a co-creative position, from whence the reader feels sure to find some answers to the questions he has on the basis of a first reading of the text” (Pieters 92). Robinson’s bland, generic description of Marston tells us nothing about either character or the situation, reinforcing, instead, a sanctioned stereotype. Carver’s text therefore forces us into a “co-creative position,” exhuming from the text more personalised and incisive nuances. This co-optation of the reader into the position of alienated voyeur (alienated because the story is not present to us in good faith, but requires us to view its ruses and our participation in them) dovetails with de Certeau’s own view of the “voyeur” (whom he also refers to as a “reader”) in front of the television: “Carver wants to render precisely what impressions he had about this life, a life that degrades a person to the status of a voyeur, unwittingly staring at the non-interpretable surface of life in the backwaters of late 20<sup>th</sup> century

America" (Pieters 92). The "surfaces," which Pieters regards as characteristic of the postmodern fixation, become intrinsically linked in Carver's storytelling to the idea of interpretation; Carver's surfaces—the repetitious, stereotypical discourse enacted by Robinson—remind us of our constant alienation from the world, remind us of the obstructions to interpretation proliferating around us, and therefore the increased necessity to take note, as de Certeau does, of the way our "use" of these surfaces can constitute subversive acts. As Marx suggests in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, through alienation we come into cognisance of our role in history (118).<sup>24</sup>

Robinson's "reading" of Marston therefore functions in two directions: on one hand it reinstates a "proper" discourse and, on the other, reminds us of the power of "reading." The postman, a "seemingly" neutral transmitter of information from one centre to another, becomes a messenger and an interpreter by illustrating how the process of transference remains riddled with ways of using the information. The question mark in the title keys us into an inquisitive, prying story, as well the questions and answers that the voyeurs—or readers—bring to the text. The title suggests that all story invites intrusion and impingement, that despite the story's agenda, its discursive mode, it remains susceptible to the "ruses, displacements, ellipses" (de Certeau 24) of reading, the way readerly desire overflows the matrix of propriety imposed upon it. The postman, Henry Robinson, says: "The feeling was so strong, I had to turn around and look for myself in the same direction he was. But, as you might guess, I didn't see anything except the same old timber, mountains, sky" (121). Robinson believes that following the gaze of Marston will allow him to apprehend the object of the younger man's gaze; but vision takes him nowhere into what *we think he should see*; as a result, Carver also brings our act of voyeurism face to face with what we *expect to see*. What Robinson envisions, that "same old," not only indicates his inability to penetrate Marston's narrative, but the constant urge to *overwrite* it with his own experiential perspective, with *his* "same old." Although Robinson desires to read the "prose of the world" (de Certeau 11) in the same manner as Marston, he cannot, finally, escape his allegiance to the "old," the pre-existing, traditional discursive modes; nor can we, the reader,



escape from our own expectations. Robinson's distinctly Cold War solipsism simultaneously limits and empowers him, barring him from Marston's story, but, in doing so, allowing him to reorganise it in a way that justifies his own mode of living.

Robinson is a strategist: his own language, his own discourse, reinforces and renews itself constantly at the expense of what it excludes, the "remainder" of the other outside the discourse itself, the exteriority where Marston's actual story resides. As Nadel points out, one dominant feature of the postmodern involves the recognition of the "excess" that proliferates seemingly without limits when the "straight" metanarratives that dominant society come under scrutiny: "The power of excess is also an informing principle of the postmodern condition" (50). The 1960s (as Carver's story demonstrates) increasingly witnessed the "power" of the "marginalized supplement" (50) vis-à-vis the "central" narrative. The 1960s' focus on groups marginal or exterior to the narrative of the "nuclear family"—African-Americans, Women, Homosexuals, and those, such as "hippies" or "beatniks" who chose lifestyles alternative to the mainstream—illustrates an increasing acknowledgement of those excluded from, or peripheral to, the "national character," as well as a willingness to interrogate the power of this "supplement," which, taken together, proved more the majority than the minority (which in turn reflected negatively on the narrowness of the dominant discourse, and how much it excluded in order to keep itself "straight," Engelhardt 100). Carver critiques the dominant discourse most heavily in this story where Robinson not only ignores the relationship between narrative and its marginalia, but where he ignores his own marginal status. Like Marston, Robinson—with his divorce, lack of communication with his children, poor work ethic, parasitic and vicarious existence—also represents an unacknowledged reality of 1960s America, a reality he ignores, preferring, instead, to project his anxieties on another. Carver's story illustrates how everyone is marginalised from the metanarrative, how individual peculiarities and particularities went ignored during the Cold War in order to conceive of democracy as a unified discourse. In "What Do You Do in San Francisco?" Carver exposes us to the power of "reading," both Robinson's and our own, and how this reading engages or does not engage those elements of the narrative "left out," in this case, the story of the Marstons (and, to some

degree, the Robinsons).

#### b. Marston's

The postman superimposes a set of values on Marston and then reads those signs back to himself to confirm what he already knows about youth, love, marriage and women. The situation reveals the extent to which the questions we ask of stories recall our constant need for answers we already contain. The story affirms de Certeau's and Stuart Hall's contention that a truly "passive" viewing or reading does not exist, that the act of viewing or reading itself redigests, recycles and "decodes" presented material: "Before this message can have an 'effect' (however defined), satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use', it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded" (Hall 93). In order for a message to achieve its desired "effect" (in this case the reinforcing of Cold War values) it must reach an audience (Robinson) who recognises the codes of that discourse and translates them into a practice congruent with the will of the message's source. If the 1950s valued hard work, job loyalty, unquestioning patriotism, and the willingness to subvert all of the above, plus Democracy, in overseeing and therefore maintaining the state of the nation, then its message finds a perfect recipient in Robinson. However, as Hall further elaborates (and as Whitfield has already shown) these "messages" not only came from the leaders of the military-industrial complex, but to some extent originated in the "mainstream"<sup>25</sup> citizenry itself: "the audience is both the 'source' and 'receiver' of the television message" (92). Receiving the letter and passing it on itself constitutes a entire circuit of narrative capital beginning and ending with the self. Robinson not only "decodes" the "messages" emanating from society but himself instates them; he is both "source" and "receiver." If Robinson the postman serves as a figure for discourse—as a means of conveyance or transmission of information—then discourse figures as contradiction: as a practice of interpreting, overwriting and evading "signals" while at the same time evincing a usage and practice that reveals the designs beneath that practice; in other words, American Legionnaires and the Catholic War Veterans could interpret the Fifth Amendment and deploy it as a means of stifling the free speech of others, but their doing so exposed a particular bias

within Cold War logic.

In the 1960s, as Engelhardt tells us, the dominant discourse could no longer hide its dualistic character:

Neither approach [the right-wing idea of “purging” the nation of subversives, or the liberal idea of “inclusion” of peoples, at home and abroad, previously considered “enemies” in the fight against Communism], however, could long staunch the story’s losses. While the right-wing response threatened to turn too many of “us” into the enemy, the vital center’s raised the possibility of that someday we might have to look at “our” story through other eyes. At home, containment proved a slapdash affair. (100)

The process of transmitting the “story” became disordered and confused to the point where mixed signals prevented proper reception; in the absence of the “proper,” America’s self-image fragmented until the marginalised “excess” invaded the centre, and the centre became marginalised. As Engelhardt points out, the right-wing of the 1950s attempted to root out culprits at home—eventually casting suspicion on everyone (in effect fracturing the idea of a mainstream)—and the liberal front sought allies in places formerly antagonistic to, or in contention with, American-style democracy (such as the list of marginalized groups enumerated above)—an “inclusion” which threatened to give these groups, by putting them in the spotlight, access to means of “broadcasting” their own “story,” or of interpreting *the* story their own way. Engelhardt’s study suggests the degree of confusion that attended the variance in the signals sent out by American politicians, until the chain of encoding and decoding the messages shattered; out of this sonic disarray arose new signals, hybrids, voices. “What Do You Do in San Francisco?” does give Marston a voice in Robinson’s already fractured discourse, predicting the speaking of Marston’s own subsequent “story.” America’s narrative was a hypocrisy that, trapped in its own solipsism, could not finally sustain the illusion of consistency, because it did not speak of or for the nation as a community. Instead, the discourse that characterises the 1950s speaks more of isolated, individual policy-makers attempting to guarantee their own mobility at the expense of the nation.

Robinson depicts the world as he wants and forces others to submit to his standards,

while not living up to either his narrative or his standards himself. Conversely, Marston allows the older man his story without interference, and thereby opens Robinson's perspective to interpretation. By not interfering in the story, by retaining a subject position, Marston "seizes" (xix)—to use another of de Certeau's verbs—moments from Robinson that reveal Marston's predicament on the margin's of Robinson's discourse (which, by offsetting a margin against the centre, also indicates Robinson's own marginalisation: they become co-equal narrators). Marston's predicament does not depend on Robinson's telling, but makes its presence known in an unstated, intuited version within the postman's discourse. Though Robinson remains the writer and reader (producer and recipient) of the story, and capitalises on the younger man's situation to reproduce and extend his narrative capital, Marston nevertheless remains a phantom protagonist, the "other" available for the writer's inscription, but whose presence undoes that inscription:

The language produced by a certain social category has the power to extend its conquest into vast areas surrounding it, "deserts" where nothing equally articulated seemed to exist, but in doing so it is caught in the trap of its assimilation by a jungle of procedures rendered invisible to the conqueror by the very victories he seems to have won. However, spectacular it may be, his privilege is likely to be only apparent if it merely serves as a framework for the stubborn, guileful, everyday practices that make use of it. (32)

The "language," as de Certeau points out, "produced" by a certain "social category" (in this case the categorical notion of what constituted the Cold War norm, its codes of conformity), finally blinds itself to the "jungle of procedures" enacted upon its "framework." The postal system serves as a convenient metaphor for de Certeau's observations, since it creates the conditions that enable its discourse (fixed address equals a fixed America), but at the same time as those "conditions" conceal the work of a largely itinerant population. In fact, the "codes" whereby a discourse of permanence functions become apparent, as de Certeau points out, only where we see men like Marston using their anonymity and silence to defy expectations that posit him either as a subversive (an enemy needing elimination) or misguided (an enemy needing rehabilitation); instead, Marston serves as the marginalized supplement that neither defies nor

supports the dominant discourse but who enables his existence through a symbiosis with it.<sup>26</sup> His reality and the discursive system co-exist in an interaction that provides Marston with a limited means of carving out his own niche. While he may not escape surveillance, he can cast a glance toward the horizon knowing that Robinson's "same old" will supplant, and therefore obscure, what he sees; his program remains covert within the strategic presence of the postman. The postman's intrusiveness remains proof of Robinson's incapacity, his partial realisation of himself, while it permits Marston a series of incessant questions and answers which in turn permit him freedom from ever articulating his position, as evinced by his reply to Robinson's query on the mailbox name-painting: "Marston? Yes, that's for us, Marston. . . . I'll have to change the name on that box one of these days" (115). One is never sure if "Marston" is even the protagonist's name, or simply a designation he makes do with in order to postpone definitiveness ("one of these days"). While Robinson refuses to fully look at himself, Marston fully perceives his situation, though refuses to reveal it by opposition.

*Voyeuristic passivity* is one of the many stories addressed by "What Do You Do In San Francisco?" By superimposing the panoramic view of an absolute discourse, as Robinson does, the postman blinds himself to, or renders "invisible," the myriad of interpretations and uses hidden in the supposed "silence" of Marston; his "victory" of superimposition provides Marston with the goods to elude and customise the postman's discourse. Robinson's calling out to Marston at the end of the story (120) signifies his enframing of Marston as well as the self-referentiality of discourse that enables Marston's procedural slipperiness. The "inarticulateness" (124) that Kathleen Westfall Shute sees in Carver's early work, and the voyeurism of those who "sit back and watch" (Hashimoto 15) indicates the general mood of the generation coming out of the 1960s, as illustrated by G.P. Lainsbury:

The Carver chronotope makes artistically visible a discrete historical moment in the ongoing project that the world knows as America . . . the Carver chronotope embodies the downbeat mood of America in the 1970s: post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, post-energy crisis. The seventies were a time of widespread cultural malaise in America, a moment when the great collective promise of the New World appeared to be failing. It is a time of disenchantment, when those who had profited from the

unprecedented expansion of the American economy after the second world war started to see the possibility of declining expectations. (87)

The passivity of Marston, and even that of Robinson (his intrusion on the family remains almost totally discursive throughout) typifies, according to Lainsbury<sup>27</sup> the "mood" of a "discrete historical moment," when activism (and action) gave way to disenchantment, "malaise," when a generation began to stand by and "see the possibility of declining expectations," rather than to act in response to the reality of the situation. The static posture wherein characters obsess over the "possibilities" of "seeing" informs Carver's first two collections of stories throughout, as Carver delves into the strategies and tactics of passivity, reception and imagination. Language therefore becomes a central element in Carver's project, since language at once describes what is seen, but also conditions seeing by the forms of descriptions seeing selects.

Robinson, as the veteran of the second world war and the spokesperson for Arcata, a town certainly experiencing the "declining expectations" suffered by the "American economy" after the postwar boom, becomes the passive-aggressive narrator of an America amidst dwindling illusions, between a generation which saw its promises fulfilled and one whose promise failed. Moreover, as an employee of the federal government, Robinson also testifies to a policy that sought to freeze America in a vision of opportunity, democracy and liberty. Robinson represents those with a vested interest in a mythic vision of America, those whose power rests upon such illusions, whose sense of self (and self-worth) requires the maintenance of a traditional discourse. Carver's view of language, and its use reflects this struggle to maintain discursive dominance: "This language is the active site of the struggle between its users and the technocratic-business elite, the very field of ideological contention" (Lainsbury 86). In reflecting its historical moment, then, "What Do You Do In San Francisco?," in inscribing Robinson's discourse, tells of an America, in Engelhardt's words, "without the story" (15), and America on the "outside" of the "story," the marginalized generation represented by Marston, whose passivity reflects an America grappling with a disintegrated narrative. Marston's need for a "language," his "inarticulateness" appears in "What Do You Do In San Francisco?" as the condition of "users" of a language supplied by the "technocratic-business elite," but whose use

of that language, as de Certeau indicates, takes place on a “field of ideological contention.” That “field,” what de Certeau calls the “vast area” conquered by “a certain social category,” forms the terrain, the “jungle,” where a myriad of “invisible,” silent operatives articulate themselves (as Marston does) in the shadow of the “victory” of the dominant discourse. Deprived of language, unable to articulate themselves, these procedures speak mutely through the dominant discourse.

### c. Everybody’s

The delivery of letters sets up the postal network, the social matrix, against which Marston’s reaction (to each letter) provides insight into the “jungle” of tactical responses. In this story, with its two narrators, Carver illustrates the “proper” in a way that allows the static of the marginalised to crackle between the lines. The first sentence of the story tunes us into this white noise. “This has nothing to do with me” (111). The opening statement detracts from the question posed by the title. The story shifts from the question “what” to the question “who.” Whom is the story about? It draws attention, by negative reference, to the act of narration. If the narrator is not important to our knowledge of the story then why is he there? Moreover why is he telling us this? Finally, it draws attention to acts of evasion, until evasiveness begins to propel the story. Quickly, the importance of the objects of Robinson’s gaze—the newly arrived couple—and what they did in San Francisco fade into the background, along with the relevance of their current occupations. Instead, the narrator’s consciousness becomes paramount. The story pivots neither on questions nor on answers, but on the *particular forms or ways of answering*: not on a “why” but on a “how.” The content of the story opposes both the question in the title and the possibility of certain answer, inhabiting this powerful indeterminacy:

I’m not a frivolous man, nor am I, in my opinion, a serious man. It’s my belief a man has to be a little of both these days. I believe, too, in the value of work—the harder the better. A man who isn’t working has got too much time on his hands, too much time to dwell on himself and his problems. (111)

Here, again, the working class protagonist revels in the circuit of solipsism and hypocrisy permitted by the form of his story. Robinson would like Marston to work, yet Marston's apparent indolence fuels Robinson's self-image and moral rectitude; he needs Marston *not to work*. Not having "time" to dwell on himself proves exactly Robinson's problem, because through work he places his own unease into the context of another person's existence, transferring his particular troubles onto another through a generalised, and abstracted, world view, through what de Certeau calls a "strategy" ( a discursive space created "in conformity with abstract models," 29).<sup>28</sup> The narrator's conservatism, his belief in work as moral force, his valorising of behavioural norms (being neither serious nor frivolous, the opposite poles of a binary he claims to straddle) provide convenient cover for the narrator's excess of time, violating inquisitiveness and self-centredness.

Later, we learn that Robinson sublimates personal trauma into work, and, through work, projects that trauma onto the people on his mail route: "It was work, day and night, work that gave me oblivion when I was in your shoes and there was a war on where I was" (120). Morality screens Robinson's overwriting (morality allows him to impinge on Marston). The very enforcing of moral rectitude (working) absolves him from living by it himself. The "story" of the citizenry on Robinson's mail route becomes the reception and return transmission of Robinson's story. Robinson becomes a "subject of will and power" (de Certeau xix), by turning his "subject" status, as a mere postman, or transmitter of communication, into the all-powerful position of "author." His hypocrisy isolates him from the community around him, allowing him to apply a set of normative rules that he feels no compunction to live up to himself. And he feels content within his self-generating and self-fulfilling circuit of judgement and evasion. Robinson determines, or "generates," his relation with Marston, with that "exterior" whose "distinctness" (de Certeau xix) he simultaneously appropriates and alienates. He regards Marston as "distinct" in that the younger man has failed to grasp the moral lessons life has taught Robinson, while at the same time this regard originates in identification with Marston (experiencing a similar "war"). Robinson illustrates the way in which power arrives through



passivity, through a refusal to enter actively into another's story. Robinson sticks with what he knows rather than expend the effort necessary to broaden his perception.

Robinson becomes the author of his respective tale while people like Marston remain "common people," whose alienation from text, de Certeau tells us, leaves them recourse only to

a calculus which cannot count on a "proper" (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. . . . A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. (xix)

Though "common people" have a limited agency in the extra-textual realm of gesture, action and silence, their power remains affixed to the openings discourse allows them; they cannot, finally, avoid inscription into the body of text that overwrites their separate concerns; they infuse the text with a glimmer, the vague suggestion of other possibilities, while at the same time working in service of the primary discourse. De Certeau's notion of "distance" becomes relevant for our discussion of Carver, because strategic discourse itself allows Robinson a distance from others, the distance necessary for the distinctness of a "proper" discursive space; by viewing his relationships through the filter of the "proper," Robinson remains a locus of power, an "enterprise" that capitalises by forcing others to produce and reproduce his discourse. In order to function as objective spectator and subjective agent, Robinson occupies both the discursive periphery and its centre—like a scientist making objective "notes" from a distance, yet whose method and form of note-taking already determine the type of information he records—must place one foot inside and one outside the stories. Robinson's discursive success occurs in that he both tells the story and misses out on it. He can gaze in the same direction as Marston and yet still fill up the gap with "the same old."

In "What Do You Do In San Francisco?" we never really apprehend Marston's story *exactly*, or the story of the other "common"<sup>29</sup> people; instead, we realise the degree to which institutionalised "stories" must, by necessity, *exclude*. The point of Carver's narrative becomes not getting to the real story but the multitude of possible stories that impinge and co-exist with

the master narrative, that in effect destroy any notion of a master (or meta) narrative in the way that Robinson's narration exposes *both* his and Marston's marginalisation (leading us to wonder who, if anyone, lives at centre). In the 1960s the discrepancy between the facts of existence and the laws governing that existence became insurmountable. No longer did the "statutory fact of an order presenting itself as natural" (de Certeau 16) serve to placate public fears, which increasingly understood the way a government could "permit itself different options concerning the relation between facts and laws" because it could "escape from that dependence" (de Certeau 16). The "order" of America, the matrix of "natural" "laws" responding to "natural" "facts" pressed upon the citizenry, as exemplified by Carver's postal route, increasingly manifested itself as an illusion precisely because the government failed to maintain, in its own actions, the crucial dependency between the two. Facts changed, laws were ignored, while the rest of the country remained in thrall to the narrative that held apparently immutable facts and laws in an unbreakable relation. As Engelhardt tells us, events such as the HUAC hearings illustrated<sup>30</sup> how loosely the government played with the tensions between facts and laws:

In its 1950s origins as a McCarthyite term, the 'invisible government' referred to a small group of highly placed traitors and dupes supposedly secreted within the government to assist a future Communist takeover. Wise and Ross's invisible government, however, was a creation of Americans, not the enemy (even if in response to the enemy's Cold War challenge), and it held out the frightening prospect of turning the government into something akin to an enemy entity. (181)

McCarthy's narrative depended on the fact of an "invisible government" running America from behind the scenes, thus enabling him to enforce certain laws to retain the "traditional," "natural" character of American life (by conflation these laws thus became "natural" in themselves). However, by the 1960s, the dependence between such a fact and its subsequent laws dissolved to the point where governmental mobility, guaranteed by such tenuous (almost arbitrary) connections, became in fact scrutinised for its own character of "invisibility." The government's power was everywhere and nowhere, visibly manifest as a narrative that called for American loyalty, yet invisible for the way its own contradictions and evasiveness prevented it from being

pinpointed. By the 1960s the term “invisible government” came to mean—in the book of the same name published in 1964 by journalists David Wise and Thomas B. Ross—the “secret world of intelligence and national security” (Engelhardt 181). In other words, the machinery that supported men like McCarthy became labelled as “invisible”; the notion of subversives working within the American political system shifted from communists and other “foreign” conspirators to the invisibility of anti-communist, anti-“foreign” reactionaries who guided policy under which the “common people” lived, while they themselves living in hypocritical immunity from the standards they imposed. As a result, the loyalty of the “common people” to narratives such as Robinson’s wavered and disintegrated, and the “story” unravelled without a new “story” stepping in to replace it.

According to Engelhardt the loss of belief in one definite narrative and the entry into postmodern indeterminacy chose the Kennedy assassination as its signal moment:

No wonder, in the confusion of the moment, the natural yearning for a story led many to wonder whether there wasn’t more to the murder than a plotless, pointless mess. Perhaps the story was simply being withheld from the public. There was nothing illogical in this thought. After all, Americans were now living in a society in which it was almost a given that the more important the event, the less likely the public would have access to the necessary information on which to judge it. (183)

The government’s discursive strategy became revealed not as an “open” tale of America, with the details in plain sight and the narrative therefore a shared one, but rather as a selective release of information and therefore an engineered rather than self-evident story. Just as Robinson hides aspects of his past, the American government—or so public opinion thought—hid the most “important” elements of events such as the Kennedy assassination. The “story” expressed in Robinson’s narration becomes the “yearning for a story” on the part of the “common people” such as Marston, a story they can claim as representative of their own experience (as much as Robinson himself secretly yearns to reveal to the younger man his own tragedy).

“What Do You Do In San Francisco?”—as the question in the title implies—interrogates precisely the increasing gap between “official” sources of information on America as place,

practice and narrative and the private individual's experiences along the same lines. Simply put, the official information no longer accords with private experience, and the gap expresses itself in a question that "yearns" for a story to heal the fissure. Only, "everybody's" story is not forthcoming. Instead, the author's position keys us into the possibilities available to a life unsupported by a unified discourse.

#### d. Carver's

Cynthia J. Hallett, in "Minimalism and the Short Story" (1996), elaborates a central tenet for understanding Carver's fiction in its Cold War context. Describing Carver as the "quintessential referent for minimalism" (488) (however much Carver may have disliked the term), Hallett argues that the literary minimalism of the 1970s and 1980s "creates not only the illusion of a 'storyless story' in its commitment to apparently disjointed fragments, but also of an 'authorless story,' in its extraordinary power to articulate a different voice" (491). The identifying features of the type of short fiction exemplified by Carver's work illustrate some of the dominant cultural issues of the post-1960s Cold War: the loss of both "story" as well as an identifiable author. Hallett's choice of words—"illusion," "commitment to . . . disjointed fragments," "articulate a different voice"—refers to a lack of authenticity, accord or unity, a realism that reflects the loss of the real. Hallett's descriptions prove as paradoxical as the fiction itself, with "commitment" to the "disjointed" most prominently addressing the contradictions upon which dirty realism mounts its fictions, and the hypocrisy which it takes as its patrimony from the "invisible" governments (left- and right-wing) of the Cold War.<sup>31</sup> Carver's "story" is not traditional realistic verisimilitude, but the fragmentation and invasive marginalisation evident during the 1960s Cold War era; Carver's aesthetic practice derives from the dominant discourse and also turns against it.

Although Hallett confirms what other critics have said about the open-ended minimalist text calling for reader "participation" (490), she suggests that the need for this interpretation originates in estrangement rather than association: the stories often suggest "an artificial camaraderie between two strangers—the narrator and reader; [they] also [imitate] the highly

stylized behaviour of denial that often occurs when someone is acting as if there is nothing wrong when, in fact, something is dreadfully wrong" (489). The "artifice" of the stories, their "stylistic" sheen, produces an artificial "camaraderie" that masks, in the ease of its surfaces, a "dreadful" wrongness. In other words, alienation and camaraderie co-exist, mutually-exclusive but mutually-contingent, within the stories. Carver's predilection for surfaces, simplicity and objective unity disguises a view of America as an inversion of the old adage, so that it *now* reads "divided we stand, together we fall."<sup>32</sup> As Robinson's story illustrates the cordoning-off of individual experience by a master narrative that obliterates the discursive enactment of the experiences of a generation and class, Carver the author likewise negotiates his exemption from living up to the "story": first, because a definitive "story" does not exist, secondly, because the story in existence so far has failed to speak for people like him. Rather than attempting to counter the Cold War discursive strategy, Carver exploits its loopholes to craft narratives that deploy the loss of authenticity, the new reality of "unreality," to recover and exploit the marginalised voices of the American underclass, fragmented into monads yet excluded as a group.

As de Certeau points out, text can obscure and overwrite as well as indicate, destabilise and reinforce: "the speech act is at the same time a use of language and an operation performed on it" (33). Carver's text, then, partakes of the "particular" (33) instance of utterance, a usage circumscribed and transformed by its "context," as well as suggesting the way language functions as alienated commodity, a general structure informing everything, which we have no choice but to use; speech is "of" language but operates "on" it. Robinson therefore encodes his relationship with Marston in a language derived from official sources, yet the context of that encoding reminds us of the myriad uses underlying any particular utterance (in this case to avoid facing up to a painful, personal past). Context becomes primary in delimiting usage of language, and context depends on vantage, vantage on position, and position on a relational, subjective understanding wherein a myriad of options become available. The use of colloquial, often monosyllabic, syntax—what de Certeau calls "the common language" (8)—both

camouflages Carver's discursive authority as well as narrowing the range of difference between author and milieu; language marks belonging, telling the story of a common, ordinary people just like him. However, Hashimoto points out that Carver's language-use highlights his own unique powers (which in turn debunks the idea of him speaking "for" others): "Carver did not originally reject communication and empathy. Yet he desired self-expression as a writer. It was difficult to pursue original self-expression without being experimental. Communication or self-expression" (Hashimoto 14)? The notion of Carver as spokesperson for Carver (as the "master" of the minimalist style), as Hashimoto points out, conflicted with the notion of Carver as the spokesperson for the disenfranchised, since the development of a unique, specialised literary style demanded a departure from already standardised, accepted and hence "common" forms of expression. In de Certeau's terminology, the development of a unique style necessitated that Carver craft for himself an aesthetic space at odds with the authenticity of speaking "from" a particular, shared, communal experience. Use and context again become relevant, since "What Do You in San Francisco?" deploys a language both indicative of a discourse that claims normative rules for the way a certain group of people speak and yet a language that also attempts to break new ground in depicting the *real* way they speak. Yet, at the same time, Carver, as an author who rose out of the underclass, necessarily needed to grasp a "literary" mode, to make a self-consciously literary style conform to his context, in order to effectively tell a story.

Carver's minimalism therefore problematises its claim to expressing the voice of a certain "class" by developing a unique aesthetic, which, as Madison Bell points out, proved highly marketable because of its status as "new" (68).<sup>33</sup> Therefore a "contradiction" occurs, to borrow from de Certeau, between Carver's so-called "specific assignment" – his designation as the mediator of the underclass – and the "social law that requires circulation" (de Certeau 7) – his eminence as the leading short story stylist of the 1980s. Carver dwells on both sides of the discursive coin. While, as de Certeau points out, specialisation in a particular field of knowledge (the underclass) grants the specialist an "authority" to "translate" a particular discursive ethos into "common language" (thereby exchanging competence in a particular field

for authority in another, since specialised fields have their own discursive formations that do not function outside that field). In effect, Carver takes his knowledge of poverty, disenfranchisement, marital trauma, alcoholism, joblessness and “translates” the experiences into an acceptable literary discourse judged suitable for the readers of the *New Yorker* or the *Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*. The contradiction between what Carver writes about—his “specific assignment”—and the arena he translates it into and its “social laws”—mainly the world of American literary fiction—empowers Carver to be both the spokesperson “of” the underclass and a spokesperson “for” them, giving him an authority both vested within a particular social class and in the class exterior to and above it. As a bridge between these two classes, Carver’s speciality operates both within and without the “common people”; his is a “strategy” of “tactics.” Carver sprawls over the contradictions, occupies them, to remain continually fugitive from the definitive. Carver’s discursive mobility rests upon his “use” of language as both reinforcing and destabilising component of the literary act. By playing upon authenticity, offsetting experience against artifice, intent and result, Carver’s fiction reproduces the “invisibility” of the Cold War government through a series of feints and dodges that render his agenda elusive, questionable and ultimately refers us back to language as a source of self-regulating, self-sustaining authority, which in turn empowers our own perception of the discourse impinging upon, and rendering itself vulnerable to, us (we cede authority to the linguistic speciality which overwrites our meanderings; but our acknowledgement of those meanderings can debunk speciality). Like Robinson, Carver speaks for others; unlike Robinson, his way of speaking carries implicitly within it the “doubling” through which Carver can avoid containment while he himself works to contain the subject. In speaking for the masses which cannot “articulate” their own story, Carver surrenders democracy to authority, election to totalitarianism, all the while indicating that this vacillation between language as “use”—appropriation—and “performance on”—subversion—remains the condition of discursive liberty.

Carver’s invitation to readers—that they recognise the authority behind the supposedly

“objective” fictional renderings—restores readerly democracy. For if Carver can appropriate and “use” the language of the underclass, and he can “perform on” that language (make it his own in a way that alienates it from the realities of underclass expression), then we too can accept or dismiss the apparent neutrality of his stories as we like. In other words, his text, or any text, remains subject to our “use” of it. Carver’s fiction, in the words of Josephine Hendin, announces the ways in which we can empower our own mobility by seizing upon the language provided us by the dominant system (including that of the canon) and making it “our own.” Language no longer describes reality, but rather lends itself to a pragmatics of power, to the inculcation of beliefs. However, the invisibility of the author depends upon the audience’s lack of awareness of the divorce of language from that which it describes, and the author’s willingness to pose as a documentary recorder for inarticulate voices. Carver’s obvious contradictions on this field heighten awareness and cede articulation back to the “common people” by so obviously producing signs of the demarcation between the “common” and the “proper,” and the way the two can be made to play off one another, providing the author the comfort of belonging along with the distance of alienation.

In Carver’s dirty realism, realism writes about realism. Hendin notes how the work of 1980s minimalists reflects and addresses literary tradition: “Yet all these ‘radical’ voices do not so much signal what has changed as serve the traditional end of extending our fiction’s longstanding concern with the drama of marginal man beating at the doors of society. The literary revolution of the 1980s has erupted in a fiction of those who have already gained entry” (217). As Hendin points out, Carver’s own entry into the highest literary echelons of America suggests an invasion of the margin into the centre. If de Certeau points out the way specialists communicate their speciality by translating it into common language, Carver has inverted this trajectory to illustrate the way in which the “common” overflows into speciality (and vice versa: the special status as author grants him authority in the ordinary world), the usurpation of literary “centres” by a formerly marginalised and banal discourse. In a sense, however, the centre becomes not so much usurped as destroyed. With the proliferation of “those who have gained entry” the “isolatos” (Hendin 230) of dirty realism reflect a world in which everyone



does, to some extent, take possession of a language provided by dominant categories of discourse, a possession that, as Engelhardt points out, increasingly reflects the detachment of language, of discourse, from any central “story”; in this event community becomes increasingly difficult to determine and sustain except as a body, or “jungle,” of isolated discursive practices. If the invisibility and hypocrisy of Cold War politics, particularly in the 1950s, rendered democracy an empty signifier, then the ceding of invisibility to the reader of the text, granting them mobility, renders democracy too perfectly, where the multiplicity of voices and practices leaves little in the way of joint enterprise beyond the common link of the untrustworthiness of generalised discourse.

Carver’s story turns every reader into an author, begging the question, does anyone have time to read? Marc Chénétier’s “Living On/Off the ‘Reserve’: Performance, Interrogation, and Negativity in the Works of Raymond Carver” discusses the impossibility of a unadulterated, “straight” reading, of the type regarded as so important by Nadel’s Cold War theorists and spin doctors:

The ‘selves’ depicted in his [Carver’s] pages have so little sense of attachment, belonging, and identity that the very plurality of the main protagonist in ‘Fat’ forces him to refer to himself in the first person plural. . . . Loose, at large, and often utterly lost, their existence depends, for the duration of each story, on the concentrated exploration of the potential meanings attached to a single incident, whether minor or traumatically unsettling. Thus, for a minute, can a provisional sense of identity be chosen from among the variety of open-ended experiences which constitute their patchy lives. (167)

Chénétier argues for the end of reading, since the stability required for extended perusal of text no longer exists; everyone is too busy “exploring” the “potential meanings attached to a single incident.” “The duration of each story,” suggests the temporariness and provisionality of each reading (meaning: authoring according to context). The stability required for a “relational” apprehension of text (apprehending text in relation to a sanctioned metanarrative) disappears as both ends of the circuit of communication—reader as well as text—become radically indeterminate, too full of “variety” for the necessary fixing of form and content; reading

metamorphoses from reception and experience into overwriting and replication (of the dominant discourse on and over the body of the particular text): passivity before the text turns into engagement with the making of text. Reading, properly understood as reception, turns into reading as a radical form of editing. As identity remains “provisional,” of the moment, and always seen in relation to the “open-endedness” of “experience,” the position of objective, neutral observer, in these supposedly objective, neutral accounts, becomes constantly undermined by the “patchy” constitution of our perceptions; a selectivity, albeit one of selecting through undifferentiated options, destroys objectivity. Without a metanarrative a stable readable text becomes continually deferred from incident to incident. The end of authenticity<sup>34</sup> (on the level of the transmission of narrative) heralds the assumption of the reader to narrative primacy, a primacy that replicates “invisibility” insofar as the reader “creates” the text without announcing his or her authorship of (by putting his or her name to) it.<sup>35</sup> Because no stable, central authority exists for the creation of story, each story (and hence authority) becomes radically diffused among the reading body, which at once grants the readers power over each text in question but not necessarily a position from which to themselves create separate narratives (we have to make do with what, fragmentary and aleatory, is provided). Witnessing Robinson taking control of Marston’s “text”—and the way Marston actually escapes scrutiny, escapes disclosure, by remaining passive to Robinson’s reading (his own story remains up for grabs in that he refuses to “author” one)—Carver invites us to interrogate our own “invisibility,” our passivity, in endorsing his text.

“What Do You Do In San Francisco?” demonstrates the deracination of narrative—the end of the metanarrative—and the various openings and renovations that accompanied the idea of authorship during a time when the Cold War illustrated only too clearly the concealed operations and the receptive passivity that discursive authority depended upon. In attempting, to render the narrator invisible, minimalism brought the reader into the light, from which the reader could also pierce the darkness hiding discursive authority.

### iii. An Apocalyptic Mobility

Robinson's mobility relies upon the unstable relationship between reality and fiction. As Pieters points out, "the dividing borderline between them is of lesser importance than their symbiosis" (54), meaning that Carver's fiction interrogates the way in which reality and fiction co-operate in the creation of meaning. If Nadel sees the American policy of "containment" as a mobile fiction, which could account for the various "realities" of politics in practice, Carver's notion of fiction, according to Pieters, likewise exercises a mobility between ethos and act. According to Pieters, Carver's fiction illustrates the "passing of truth" (76) (equally meaning, as the word "passing" implies, "truth's" transmission, transformation and disappearance), which brings to mind the "departure" of fiction, that which it "passes from," the reality which can, and does, intermesh with the fictions we create in order to speak about it. However, alongside this trajectory exists an opposite motion, that of the return from fiction to reality, meaning that Robinson can not only craft fiction from reality but also use reality to debunk a disagreeable fiction (including his own, should his discourse prove confining). This vacillation between the projection of reality, and a reality that overruns and destroys its projection arises most prominently in Nadel's discussion of nuclear war and nuclear waste, ever present threats during the Cold War (and after). The symbiosis, founded in mutual negation, between the projected narrative of nuclear holocaust (which often effaced its reality) and that of nuclear holocaust on the possibility of narrative (effectively cancelling it) appears internally within Carver's narrative.

Robinson requires external emblems, physical evidence, of Marston's identity—most notably in the name Marston fails, or refuses, to paint on the mailbox—in order to accept the "beatnik" into the social fold; at the same time, Marston's refusal to comply with a name, his refusal to endorse, physically, one of the markers whereby Robinson's discourse functions, becomes evidence of Marston's exteriority to Robinson's enterprise. Whether Marston paints his name on the post-box or not, Robinson's discourse still dominates, as it prepares for both contingencies: the appearance or non-appearance of the name. "What Do You Do in San Francisco?" bears up to Pieters's statement on the symbioses between the external referent and the narrative discourse that co-operates with it. Robinson's discourse gains its mobility from its

ability to account for the varied significance of the material real and, yet, to divorce the “signifier” from its “signified” (Nadel 294) if necessary. Marston’s unwillingness to provide a signifier only allows him to be “signified” that much more easily by Robinson.

The word “beatnik,” through which Robinson designates and denigrates the couple functions in a variably attached and detached manner. “Beatniks, I guess you’d have called them if you’d seen them” (111). In this first use of the term, “Beatniks,” Robinson identifies a group of people by associating them with a certain look; you’d only need to “see” Marston and family to immediately apply the term to them. In this case, the word becomes self-evident, an association applicable to recognisable characteristics. In this case the signifier, “Beatniks,” and the signified, the Marstons, behave symbiotically, as the external reality intermeshes with the general application of terminology. However, the salient characteristic of the beatnik, Marston’s “pointed brown beard” (112), soon gives way to a generalisation not so self-evident, and one which reveals more about Robinson than the younger man, whom the mailman describes as looking “like he needed to sit down to a good dinner and a cigar afterwards” (112). The beatnik life (and hence Marston) lacks the emblems that traditionalists such as Robinson regard as the central “needs” of a person; a “good dinner” suggests a lack of sustenance in the beatnik diet, while the “cigar” implies the satisfaction and reward that presumably follows a decent meal, a luxury that belongs to the hard-working (“his not working,” 111, provides Robinson his initial disclaimer against the Marstons, though the sub-text suggests that the Marstons do work, albeit as visual artists, an occupation clearly not falling under “work” in Robinson’s lexicon). Almost from the very beginning of the story, then, the term Beatnik becomes divorced from the Marstons. Though Robinson may know what Marston “looks like,” he can have no idea about either his eating habits or the rewards of his life. Beatnik, therefore, embodies a set of values against which Robinson defines himself, a word representative of an entire set of characteristics which may or may not apply to Marston, though a superficial glance seems enough to include Marston in this social category. The term functions both as an attached and detached signifier, since the physical appearance of the “signified” (Marston)—sensually verifiable, or materially real—allows application of the term, and application of the term allows the levying of

judgement which erases the particular reality of Marston and overwrites it with a generalised, clichéd stereotype of what Whitfield calls the “enemy” of capitalism (14). Robinson’s ethos does indeed depend on a verifiable reality, but only as a narrative depends upon an opening sentence. From this point onward, all manner of allegations interfere with our, and his, apprehension of Marston.

Robinson’s discursive manoeuvring reflects the strategic shimmying between sub- and master narrative outlined by Nadel, wherein the individual stories (Korea, HUAC, Vietnam) did not align with the master narrative (America as bastion of democracy)—or, more appropriately, the discrepancy between the arms build-up and the stated policy to prevent nuclear war. The beginning of the story, as Runyon tells us, involves exactly this bewildering demarcation between the master narrative and the individual story: “Henry Robinson is prompted to tell the story of Marston and his wife because of a picture he saw in the newspaper” (38). The newspaper article about the man who murders his wife gets Robinson “thinking” about Marston (111). The merest resemblance between Marston and the murderer (Robinson describes them as “close enough”) causes the postman to divulge the story of the beatnik. However, as the story unwinds, the reader comes to understand that Robinson ultimately sympathises with the murderer. Throughout “What Do You Do In San Francisco?” Robinson’s antipathy towards “Mrs. Marston” increases—from the first mention of her as the one responsible for Marston’s indolence (111), to his questioning her role as “good” wife and mother (112), to his turning against her (113)—until his final outburst reveals the source of his animosity:

She’s no good, boy. I could tell that the minute I saw her. Why don’t you forget her? Why don’t you go to work and forget her? What have you got against work? It was work, day and night, work that gave me oblivion when I was in your shoes and there was a war on where I was. (120)

Revealed at last as a misogynist, Robinson’s master narrative of hard work, constancy, community values collapses under the obvious contradictions to this narrative provided by the “other” stories glimpsed through his actions. Robinson believes that his experiences with his wife provide the basis for his work ethic, whereas his work ethic stands in contradistinction to

the values his family life lacked (though he clearly still subscribes to the mythic portrait of family relationships and configurations). He believes that his work ethic substitutes for the absence of family values, yet the way he works proves as absent of those values as his marital history. Work does not, as he says at the beginning of the story, provide "value" (111); rather it produces "oblivion." It provides a much-needed "forgetting." Simply put, Robinson's "story" and his "master narrative" do not gel.

As in the narrative forecasting of nuclear holocaust, Robinson's "oblivion" foregrounds the strategic discourse of a man operating from a post (nuclear) war paradigm. As he says, there "*was* a war on where [he] *was*"; Robinson came through the war to nothing, to the end of marriage, the end of history, the end of value—to *oblivion*. Only narrative remains to Robinson, the ability to impose any discourse he chooses on the void terrain of a post-holocaust situation. Here we witness the degree to which the notion of apocalypse influenced the maintenance of certain "values" meant to sustain a nation facing annihilation. Robinson stands as a cipher for the valuelessness of a discourse grounded upon the end of human reality, the ignoring of actual, human specifics for a discourse whose "values" cannot stand upon the threat of "oblivion" from which they derive. Robinson's powers as narrator stem from a reaction to the fear of destruction; yet his powers themselves enact the destruction of those very values he means to safeguard (life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness). Robinson counters the threat to American values by acting in opposition to those values themselves. His mobility therefore arises in its indeterminacy, in its radical lack of fixity to value; without knowable, definite, graspable values, he can impose his will on the subject, even to the point of contradiction; and the words that name his values, such as 'freedom,' indeed become deracinated, floating signifiers he deploys according to the impulse of the moment. Robinson occupies a landscape of waste, a place whose elements lack inherent differentiating significance: empty homes, contradictory values, isolated, undifferentiated suburban and rural communities; in every way his situation resembles a post-holocaust landscape.

William Chaloupka, in *Knowing Nukes: The Politics of and Culture of the Atom* (1993),

addresses the type of strategy deployed by Robinson and its effectiveness in guaranteeing him a place within and without the system he champions: "Nuclear managers justify widespread surveillance and disciplinary measures by their observation that the world is so very dangerous, but they then argue that deterrence has stabilized the world under their leadership, and that this action somehow relates to 'freedom'" (16). Like the "nuclear managers" who crafted a rhetoric of "freedom" to cover for their duplicity, Robinson uses the word "work" to cover for his double gesture of value/oblivion. According to Nadel, the fictions of "deterrence" propagated by "nuclear managers" framed their narratives with "progress" or "principles" in order to contain a reality testifying to a proliferation of nuclear "waste" (51) (a decidedly un-progressive outcome of the arms race), to contain and offset the threat of "oblivion" which had replaced the progressivist discourse of natural selection: "The product and the producer [of nuclear war] will indeed merge in a reciprocity of power and waste. The human condition, understood through a play of differences, will be subsumed by a universal sameness" (51). Nuclear waste, as the product of both arms build-up and a projected outcome of nuclear war, in Nadel's view, supplanted the notion of a "selective" differentiating "nature" in the cultural imaginary; for the first time, what human beings did – in particular, what they did with the bomb – overrode and supplanted the metanarrative of nature. The discourse of containment attempted to confine this idea within the narrative of deterrence, a formal, discursive operation reproduced by Robinson, whose work ethic serves to contain the oblivion beneath it. Since nuclear war represented the destruction of crucial "them/us" distinctions, yet the arms race ostensibly maintained the "balance" necessary for (Soviet/American) duality and thus distinction, the idea of waste, or that which signified the levelling of definitive difference, which the master narrative attempted to codify and contain, became central to the authors of postmodernity.<sup>36</sup>

The discursive containment affected by Cold War policy-makers came as a reaction to a cultural reality in which the proliferation of nuclear power threatened to upset notions of the "human condition," to reduce all peoples to "sameness," to destroy the stratified "play of differences" that constitute history, character, personality. In reaction, official discourse reinforced distinctions between the norm and the outside in a way that accelerated the

perception of exceptions to the norm, until the norm collapsed into the oblivion of waste, or the mass of exceptions. We see in Robinson, then, a reaction to “oblivion” by the strict framing of cultural codes. Recognising, in the void underlying his narrative, an essential sameness between himself and Marston, Robinson attempts to constitute a narrative that comprises him as the place of “power” (the regulator of norms) and Marston as the site of “waste” (that which lies “outside” the traditional order, created and construed by it as detritus); when Robinson confesses to his reality of oblivion he debunks the narrative with which he initially frames the story, with which he sets himself apart from the other man. Work is not a facing up to responsibility but an escape from it, a form of putting off responsibility rather than taking it on. This confession enacts the “reciprocity,” the similarity between them, that ultimately destroys distinctions. As the naming of the mailbox suggests, Robinson fears the loss of distinctions as much as he needs to enact the loss of such distinctions (beatniks are all the same) for his narrative to work. The contradictions of nuclear policy, its complex of paradoxes, reappear in Robinson’s discursive strategy. His story therefore shows up the fatal contradictions underlying the narrative of the arms race: “Repeatedly, the sign of the paradox presents itself as the characteristic sign of an era that strains to ignore those signs and to present a politics of value in response” (Chaloupka 16). Robinson’s “politics of value” serve to obstruct our and, most importantly, his grappling with the “paradox” of his position; he “strains” to ignore the “signs” of his paradox until the pressure of containment, as in the shielding around the radioactive element in the atomic bomb, causes him to explode. By letting the paradox stand he endorses a set of values he need not himself live up to. If Robinson, the veteran of World War Two and the spokesperson for “oblivion” stands as a product of the Cold War cultural imaginary—a period originating in the end of World War Two and ostensibly ending in global destruction—then Carver’s text shows that, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, authors had begun to extensively interrogate the discursive mobility enjoyed by nuclear managers, at the expense of those enthralled by (or *in thrall to*) their narrative framing, those cast outside of it, emblems of the waste they feared and yet sped towards. Nuclear proliferation showed how everyone was in the same boat, and that distinctions were largely simulated by a discursive “centre,” or status



quo, maintained by a precious few, whose tiny number made them as marginal as the varied individuals they construed as external to that centre. In Carver's fiction, everyone becomes waste in a nuclear world that threatens to bring about a "nature" without selectivity or progress.

"War" serves as a convenient metaphor for Robinson's strategy, the way it, as a word, illustrates and contains a sense of opposition; like "global conflict" in Cold War terminology, "war" unites a sense of opposing sides in a single term. Like the concept, "balance of power," which justified the arms race, Robinson finds the peace of "oblivion" by abstracting actual tension (events in his background) into discourse (his story of Marston). Inhabiting and deploying a discursive strategy that offsets and equalises his theory (moral rectitude) against his practice (immoral intrusiveness), and practice against theory, Robinson can operate on both sides of the binary, ethical correctness and indecent violation. The very enforcing of moral rectitude absolves him from living by it himself. Work does not end Robinson's war, it only offers him the means of transferring it to another level; his peace depends on a constant state of aggression and invasion, just as the American economy, during the Cold War, profited from its constant preparedness for war and its financing of foreign invasions. The postman assumes both a moral and amoral position, a negation of both terms, a paralysis. Unlike the endings of standard psychological realism, which demand catharsis or enlightenment either for the reader or protagonist, Carver finishes on stasis: "And I don't mind. It's all work, one way or the other, and I'm always glad to have it" (121). Like Myers, Robinson finds pleasure or humour in the stasis of his "work," and all the paradoxical sleights of hand that the concept of "work" implies. There are seemingly no lasting consequences to Robinson assuming this static posture; *it appears interminable*. Robinson's discursive mobility partakes of the dominant traits of the Cold War "story" traits that, by the 1960s, when Carver first began to write, became increasingly questionable, and yet which dirty realist authors absorbed and deployed throughout their texts.

#### *Conclusion*

As "What Do You Do in San Francisco?" illustrates, dirty realism is the fiction of the Cold War. The issue of the consciousness of Robinson's practice remains, finally, ambiguous, though its

delineation for the reader leaves little room to doubt Carver's intentions in examining and interrogating the dominant features of his moment in American culture. Like the naturalists before him, Carver confronted the issues of his day with procedures drawn from the culture he critiqued, and so his fiction evinces the dialectical interplay between the articulation of history and the simultaneous critique of that articulation. *Robinson* serves as a site wherein we see dominant categories of Cold War thought enacted—surveillance, hypocrisy, conformity, narrative dissonance, contradiction, invisibility, nuclear waste—and also undone by an authorial scrutiny that finds its own mobility through a reflection and recreation of the Cold War politic.

While Carver's story, like Ford's *The Ultimate Good Luck*, makes only passing reference to the large-scale historical events that chronologically identify the Cold War, that give it its global narrative, the form of the fiction, and its concerns, nevertheless mark it as a product of the effect of those signal events. Dirty realism marks the history of a Cold War epistemology and the effect of that epistemology on the level of domestic practice and domestic "reality." Carver's story represents a thinking-through of the ways in which Cold War power operated, the way it utilised the fissure between narrative and action, between "realism" and reality. The foregrounding of narrative in dirty realism does not mean that the authors had abandoned realism but that the understanding of reality had changed. No longer would text "mediate" reality in a straightforward transparent, objective manner (as in the Zola's notion of the author viewing his characters in situation with the detachment of a scientist in a laboratory); the relation between the creation of a narrative—a site of the authorial "proper"—and the reality it supposedly described could no longer be taken for granted, and the operation of mediating reality hid innumerable ploys, expectations and indoctrinations that enabled the power of the author in the same manner as the reception of the text enabled the tactical aims of the reader.

The notion of reality transformed from that of a self-evident terrain of manners and events to a nuanced debate between author and reader, a debate susceptible to manipulation, style, and simulation. If traditional realism sold the illusion of an unmediated recollection of experience, then the postmodern realism of Carver vacillates between linguistic transparency

and opacity until attention shifts from the reality described to the description of reality. Reality become an experience—manufactured and actual, conditioned and discovered—of equivocal properties and characteristics manipulated, played upon and invented by the masters (authorial and political) of Cold War simulation. Realism naturally became involved with the reality of simulation, where the boundary between the actual and the discursive dissipated or turned porous, where the divide between experience as contact with the actual and experience as defined lapsed into indeterminacy. Dirty realism chose to highlight the disruption of easy transactions between the discourse of reality and its intended audience. The issues emerging from the Cold War called the writers of dirty realism to negotiate the layers of simulation, to uncover their function and to turn or subvert it toward their own use; out of McCarthy's policies developed the "theory" of dirty realism.

### ENDNOTES, CHAPTER THREE

- <sup>1</sup> In Canada, as Reg Whitaker's and Gary Marcuse's *Cold War Canada: The Making of a National Insecurity State 1945-1957* (1994) points out, the Cold War produced an even more culturally restrictive situation, subordinating cultural autonomy to a conception of global and national prerogatives dictated from abroad (x-xi). The Canada of the Cold War, according to these authors, "was not one with a strong identity" (18). Whitaker and Marcuse depict the steady influx of American culture during the 1940s and 1950s, particularly with the appearance of the television. The import of U.S. productions into Canada effectively drove Canadian "high art" underground, if not eclipsed it entirely; moreover, these imports dove-tailed with the primary American concerns of the time: "it was a safe, conservative, red-white-and-blue anti-Communist and pro-American Hollywood that Canadians were left to watch, a Hollywood that produced openly propagandistic Cold War epics" (19). The exemplary documentaries produced by John Grierson's National Film Board during the war, for example, were sidelined because they aroused the "hostility of the private producers, the American theatre chains and Hollywood itself" (19). While American writers could at least search the conscience of their country, Canadian writers found themselves largely deprived of a definite place to begin such a search.
- <sup>2</sup> De Certeau designates the "ordinary" as the unnameable, ungraspable, unsignifiable sum of occurrence, practice, event against which discursive practices erect their schema. Such schema, de Certeau feels, ultimately contain themselves from the ordinary through the development of a specialised language intended to study the ordinary, but which in fact only serves to undergird the hypotheses and postulates from which that specialised language develops, in effect maintaining the borders between speciality and the "place" speciality addresses, represents but cannot make speak for itself. In other words, such discursive systems ultimately serve to reground the authority of their own language *within* the frameworks through which that language develops and functions. Language, finally, proves as tautological as the premises put forth during the Cold War, for instance, that American culture was superior to that of the Soviets because of its inherent democracy, while democracy (so-called) *was* the American way of life. De Certeau offers statistical analysis as the tautological corollary for such linguistic containment: "Statistical inquiry, in breaking down these 'efficacious meanderings' [the "unforeseeable sentences, partly unreadable paths across a space" in which "consumers move" across "the technocratically constructed, written and functionalized space[s]" of contemporary culture] into units that it defines itself, in reorganizing the results of its analyses according to its own codes, 'finds' only the homogenous. The power of its calculations lies in its ability to divide, but it is precisely through this ana-lytic fragmentation that it loses sight of what it claims to seek and to represent" (xviii). De Certeau questions the reductions of statistics. The "language" used by statistics, such as the line graph, for instance "is substituted for an operation; a line which can be reversed (i.e. read in both directions) does duty for an irreversible temporal series, a tracing for acts" (xviii-xix). The language of inside/outside, centre/margin, containment/leakage, runs throughout American and Canadian cultural production—artistic, theoretical, literary—from the 1960s onward; this fixation forms a response or interrogation of the concept of "containment," which entered the cultural imaginary from the 1947 article by George Kennan, entitled "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," an article that outlined the diplomatic, military, foreign and domestic strategies that would characterise the Cold War. Oddly enough, for Canadians, the American notion of containment "crossed national boundaries" (Whitaker and Marcuse 114) to become the leading western, international strategy vis-à-vis the Soviets and to also "contain" the development of a distinctly Canadian culture. De Certeau proves an effective theorist in understanding the ways in which the language of dirty realism reflects and critiques the concept of containment that permeated Cold War rhetoric.

<sup>3</sup> *Taxi!* follows the life of Shannon, a cab driver in Vancouver. Potrebenco creates a political picaresque that fits with several of dirty realism's characteristics—most prominently in its focus on the underclass and the disenfranchised, its rootlessness and “drift” through a consumer society—although its overt political statements seems to suggest a tenuous relationship with other texts involved in this study. Nevertheless, the novel's open and large-scale political concerns may read ironically, insofar as they remain observations of an embittered protagonist whose political savvy and concerns conflict against an extreme naivete and complete passivity and cynicism in the face of political injustice. The confluence of sagacity and passivity observed in Shannon evinces that aim of American propaganda described by Tom Engelhardt in *The End of Victory Culture* (1995): “the public's most important act of support was simply to remain inert. It was to be mobilized to do exactly nothing. Its task was not to act, because action, in the context of Vietnam, meant opposing the president's war” (13). I do not mean to suggest that the protests that *did* occur against American involvement in Vietnam did not have an effect, but merely that Shannon's opinion that they did not eventuate America's withdrawal from the war (6) indicates a cynicism rooted in a passivity reinforced by propaganda. Her “not acting” partakes of the dirty realist passivity in which lack of physical action camouflages the operation of discursive tactics (Shannon dispenses political wisdom to her fares) that subvert or counter forms of dominant discourse. Throughout, Potrebenco balances the particularity of Shannon's existence against a larger backdrop of neo-Marxist rhetoric addressing global issues, such as the state of the working class and women, the degradation of Soviet Marxism into imperialism, the disintegration of the ideals of the 1960s, and the tough economic and working conditions experienced by the North American underclass. Like Richards's work, Potrebenco's also interrupts the narrative flow with the authorial intrusion noted by Donna Pennee in her critique of Richards's *Nights Below Station Street*, entitled “Still More Social Realism: Richards's Miramichi” (1990). These intrusions—such as when the narrative voice comments on the limits of Shannon's cognition (23)—add a third remove to the narrative, so that it vacillates between description, Shannon's observations and authorial presence in a way that continually dislocates the reader from any narrative centre. Like *The Road to the Stilt House*, *Taxi!* subverts the expectations and assumptions behind narrative authority, showing the way in which characters and events remain trapped and accounted for in a particular discourse. Potrebenco's narrative “levels” foster an indeterminacy at odds with the politically prescriptive epithets enunciated by its protagonist, alienating and attracting us simultaneously (Pennee 43).

*Taxi!* also suggests the disintegration, or non-existence, of a U.S./Canadian border, as Shannon flips between events in the two countries as if they presented one unified socio-political entity. As it happened in the U.S., so it happened in Canada, her novel suggests. Thus, Potrebenco equates descriptions of repressive measures effected against anti-war protestors in the United States with Canadian strife such as the War Measures Act (11), as well as equating occurrences in Vietnam with those in Czechoslovakia (6). Shannon's conflating of such events regards her belief in the reemergence of fascism world-wide. Viewing the rise of capital as fascist, Potrebenco presages the advent of economic imperialism and the effacement of borders by corporate interests.

<sup>4</sup> For the plot of this novel, please see chapter one, endnote eleven. In depicting the war veteran, Harry Quinn, *The Ultimate Good Luck* delves into the aftermath of the Vietnam War on a generation of Americans. The Vietnam War serves as a trope for the fragmentation and narrative indeterminacy that Engelhardt describes: “There was no American narrative form that could long have contained the story of a slow-motion defeat inflicted by a nonwhite people in a frontier war in which the statistics of American victory seemed everywhere evident. Instead, the forms that might once have contained such a war dematerialized as well. . . . Can there be a new story Americans will tell about and to themselves, no less to the world, that might sustain them as citizens and selves? So far only warring fragments of race, gender, religion, and ethnicity have risen to fill the space emptied of victory culture” (14-15). Engelhardt's “fragments” remarks upon the loss of wholeness experienced by Quinn, and

presages the discussion of postmodern culture in chapter four, "Dirty Realism: Theory." In Engelhardt's study, the Vietnam War destroyed the age-old image of a victorious America, debunking the primary vision of the nation and leaving its citizens to cope with the disappearance of a narrative which sustained American beliefs and ideals. Quinn makes a remark on the war that very closely resembles Engelhardt's diagnosis; in speaking of his experience in Vietnam, Quinn captures the disorientation of ordinary Americans: "But that patterned feel had gotten disrupted somehow, as though everything whole had separated a little inch, and he had dropped back in between things, to being on the periphery without a peripheral perspective" (36). The Vietnam War functions throughout as a particular reference for Quinn, an experience that has led him to adopt isolation, keeping a "distance," as the only means of staying "alive" (44); it also serves as a trope for the experience of a generation, as Quinn encounters the fragmentation of Vietnam everywhere, not just in the foreign locale of Mexico but in American cities themselves, such as L.A. (15). Vietnam has become a way of thinking for an entire segment of the population. Lost in a maze of "trivial abundance" (15) a consumer culture cluttered with identical options, distance, impersonality and isolation become the norm. The inability of individuals to determine their standing and status, their "coordinate" – knowing that they stand outside, on the "periphery," of the system, without the actual "perspective" necessary to see the inside of the system they are excluded from – presents to us that disappearance of a central unified national narrative observed by Engelhardt, its disintegration into "warring fragments" seeking a place in the fabric of American life where such a fabric no longer exists, in other words, on the periphery without a peripheral perspective, since a centre no longer exists. Like America, Mexico and Vietnam become, for Quinn, similarly "consoling" sites of meaninglessness: "And since you couldn't remember the particulars from one day to the next, you couldn't remember what to avoid and control. And the only consolation finally was that you didn't have any stake in it, and Quinn didn't figure to be around long enough to earn one" (15). Without referents, without "particulars," every locale becomes disorienting, filled with options that Quinn cannot systematise. Moreover, the lack of a "stake" in Vietnam, the lack of anything to fight for, creates a profound detachment from a collective memory, as each soldier's "fight" becomes defined by personal rather than national contexts; as Quinn tells us, luck dominated over memory in Vietnam (4), "cowardice" and, by extension, bravery disappeared from history. Chance, isolation, distance, all contributed to the disappearance of a communal historical or cultural narrative. Ford's novel also raises the issue of borders from an American perspective. If Canadian writers such as Richards and Potrebenco grappled with determining where Canada *was*, then Americans such as Ford, lost in the "trivial abundance" of Cold War geography could not determine where America *wasn't*, since its hegemony seemed everywhere and nowhere, visible and invisible, rife with and empty of meaning.

<sup>5</sup> Potrebenco illustrates the problems experienced by western writers with the "either/or" dichotomy of Cold War policy: "The war in Vietnam had been going on for many years by then, and the protests all over the world had no visible effect so that they diminished and all but disappeared in the next few years. In 1968, the Russian army marched into Czechoslovakia, destroying finally whatever illusions people still had about the other empire being better" (6). Whether correct or not regarding the "effect" of the demonstrations and protests staged in America and throughout much of the world during the 1960s and early 1970s, *Taxi!* illustrates the notion of twinning or doubling evident during the Cold War years, as authors careened between a callous, unresponsive regime on the right and its counterpart on the left. Differing in ideology, the practices of the Soviets and the U.S. implicated them both in strategies of undemocratic repression and control. The actions of capitalistic and communistic states invariably contradicted many of their stated political platforms and agendas; in Potrebenco's Canada, the War Measures Act fulfilled her criticism of the limits to Canadian "democracy."

<sup>6</sup> The cultural character of Cold War America also undergoes examination in chapter four, "Dirty Realism: Theory."

- <sup>7</sup> Alan Nadel's spin on this dichotomy follows an "other/same" schema, which I will elaborate further on; for now, I simply want to address the more superficial (albeit officially promoted) policy which cast Soviet Communism as the polar antagonist of western capitalism.
- <sup>8</sup> Schaub writes that "liberal discourse in the United States throughout the 1940s tended to conflate fascism and communism as similar totalitarian systems, that took root in the anxious passivity of the masses" (16). The ideological structures of both communism and fascism relied upon the passive conformity of the general populace, which, as de Certeau and dirty realism discovered, disguised a variety of subversive operations.
- <sup>9</sup> In Canada, the move towards the western anti-Communist alliance raised different problems, since membership and participation in such an alliance demanded capitulation to the American conception of the west: "It is one of the tragedies of the Cold War in Canada that an indigenous, progressive politics was rendered so difficult by the false choices apparently imposed by the rigidities of the Cold War" (xi). As Whitaker and Marcuse tell us, the American-lead "us or them" mentality of the Cold War demanded that American allies either accept an American-centric definition of western democracy, or, in rejecting this, undergo classification and ostracisation as countries sympathetic to the Soviets. These "false choices," between two foreign ideologies, in the opinion of Whitaker and Marcuse, obstructed the evolution of an "indigenous" politics and hence an indigenous culture. Just as Nadel sees the expression of Cold War culture as an expression of Cold War politics, Whitaker and Marcuse view the importation of American culture as the importation of American policy: "The new metropolitan centre [America] had shallower roots in Canadian loyalties than the old, but Cold War conservatism as transmitted through the largely American organs of mass culture played an important part in smoothing the transition" (19). Mass culture, problematic for American Cold War authors because it enabled fascism became proof of American "conservatism" in Canada; Canadian cultural producers did not need to suspect the influence of mass culture, or distrust it, since its effects on Canadian identity were visibly manifested rather than conjectured. The Cold War debate fostered by American policy-makers therefore not only hindered the full expression of life within America but also the self-expression of such foreign and allied countries as Canada. The "us or them" choice became problematic for a Canadian author writing in relation to an alien cultural authority; while American writers grappled with the "American" and the "Un-American" system, the choice of "Canadian" for writers living North of the U.S. presented an even more complex aspiration during the Cold War, since the "us" of the equation was actually a "you."

The "us or them" mentality engendered an increasingly claustrophobic cultural expression, wherein many authors, American and Canadian, felt themselves trapped between two systems of identical oppression, on one hand Soviet systems which denied individuality and on the other an American system whose economy offered so many choices that it swamped the individual in a sea of detached referents (in effect erasing any grounds upon which to erect individuality, since these options proved, as Ford and Jarman demonstrate, simply more of the same). Either system, late capitalism or Soviet Marxism, assaulted individualism, the former turning it into a saleable illusion, a cog in the wheel of consumer "choice," the latter into a faceless unit in the mass of the post-revolutionary proletariat. In either case the idea of "individualism" becomes a node for social programming, a generic designation (positive or negative) for citizens beholden to a system. If the "high modernists" of the 1950s, described by Schaub, regarded the individual as the locus of meaning in the early days of the Cold War, then, by the 1960s, even this notion became improbable, since, in Jameson's terms, the individual had become "colonized" by capital (49) and therefore increasingly suspect.

In Canada this colonisation manifested itself not only on the personal, but on the national level as well. In effect, a writer such as David Adams Richards continually struggles against designation, objecting to the labelling of his work as social realist, Marxist, minimalist, or regionalist. Reluctant to endorse any proposed designation, but neither proposing his own, Richards becomes emblematic of a resistance to notions of centrality or definition. Margo Wheaton, in "Hunting Richards' Novels Down," reflects upon the inefficacy of labelling upon

a body of work written almost purposefully against critical frameworks: "As I had painfully discovered . . . highlighting single aspects of Richards' work leaves out so much. . . . Richards' characters are relentlessly complex . . . witness[ing] the depths of vast and complicated souls in all their dimensions. . . . he continually sees in his characters what is essential, sees them outside of fixed, rigidly-defined frameworks of social and narrative thought" (27). Elsewhere, with descriptive words such as "immense" and "contradictory," (27), Wheaton draws attention to her own confusions and misalignments when grappling with Richards's work, seeing within it an "essentialism" outside of the "rigidly-defined," which seems an improbable, if not impossible, combination. As Richards himself writes in "Remembering My Evaluators While Packing to Leave Home," he regards the writer's life as a constant reiteration of not belonging, of refusing to endorse or participate in, among other things, the "academic position," "union," "unemployment insurance," "workgroup," "political party." (15). If the choice is "us/them," "either/or," "this/that," Richards often replies with "neither." The "hero" (though not the protagonist) of *Road to the Stilt House* (1985), Norman, responds to questions in a fashion typical of the valorous in Richards: "I nod neither one way nor the other for them" (144, repeated again on 158). Not nodding "one way nor the other" affirms the right of the individual in freedom from relation to the other, whether the centre, the interlocutor or the antagonist.

Richards's first novel, *The Coming of Winter* (1974) received an enthusiastic welcome in the Soviet Union upon its translation into Russian in 1979, a translation motivated, in the words of Susan Lever, by the work "appear[ing] to conform to the model of socialist realism" (83). From its inception, Richards's writing evoked a critical response equally hostile to his apparent conservatism (Armstrong and Wylie 5, Davey 25, Mathews 74), and supportive of what it regards as Richards's "socialistic" support of the underclass: "No writer more clearly delineates the terrible consequences that follow when people are deprived of power, economic power essentially, but quickly followed by political and personal power. Few writers understand so well the comic/tragic postures of the people who inhabit the disenfranchised frontiers of the country" (Currie 74). Since, as Currie points out, Richards's writing investigates the "consequences" of deprivation—economic, political, personal—his eschewal of designative terminology reflects the context of his writing. Instead of affirming either the values of a socialist realism or of what Mathews calls a "small-c" conservatism (74), Richards evades labels such as regionalist, social realist, even conservative, preferring, instead, to focus on the problems of articulation experienced by characters who, as he admits to Susan Lever, confront the disorientation between "change" and "tradition" (96-97). In other words, his fiction speaks of those deprived of a reliable "centre," a power base from which to enact a master narrative. Rather than writing in reaction to such a centre, necessarily, Richards's fictions, particularly *The Road to the Stilt-House*, address the absence of a central narrative vantage, the lack of Whitaker's and Marcuse's "indigenous."

As he indicates to Craig Proctor, Richards interrogates the indefiniteness of a "centre" by evoking the definite as regionalism: "I think at times the central powerbase of our country has no idea where our country begins and ends" (44). If the "country" neither "begins" nor "ends" according to any "central" idea, then the lack of a definite cultural imaginary precludes the definitiveness of region which makes for traditional notions of regionalism (which explains Richards own ambivalence towards the term and Armstrong and Wylie's feeling that Richards's "contradictions," "universalism" and lack of "actuality" 14, prevent his designative containment by the term "regionalist"). For Richards, the "central" power cannot conceive of margins since it cannot conceive its own place; margins neither "begin" nor "end" in Canada in relation to the centre. For Richards, power and the political/geographical constitution of Canada are mutually-exclusive elements in the national discourse. His writing therefore contests the power of the centre by evoking its invisibility, its absence, which in turn reflects the invisibility of the nation even within the discourse of that central powerbase. The centre cannot conceive of the indigenous since it operates from a space removed from the "ordinary" life Richards's fiction depicts. Because it recognises no centre, Richards tinges his



realism with a national universal; in the absence of national identity to assert the region is to assert the missing national. Therefore, within Richards's "regionalism" lies an identifying similarity concerning all Canadians during the Cold War, during a time when "as Canadians we were angry at the way in which the Cold War was used to justify the subordination of our country's goals to an agenda set by a giant neighbour to the south" (Whitaker and Marcuse x). The presence of America looms unstated in the absence of a national centre for Richards. Throughout *A Road to the Stilt House*, Richards identifies the government by what it does not do, but its failure to appear, in the broken promise of rural development (9), the unused, "blocked off" sewer pipe put in by the "government" (19), and the refrain of "this is Canada" spoken by Sadie and Harry as a way of sarcastically contrasting the promise of social legislation with the reality of those who live with it (44-45) (an idea given a further ironic twist where Richards highlights the indefiniteness of such blame: "Sometimes there is nothing to do but to blame someone for something" 10, a sentence which balances one "nothing" doing against another; viewed in relation to the "this is Canada" refrain it becomes clear that the blame attributed to the social system by Sadie and Harry merely evokes the indeterminacy of their own situation, its own nothingness out of which such blame arises, and the indeterminacy of the central power base, here identified with the none-to-precise locators of "sometimes," "someone" and "something").

Like his American counterparts, Richards distrusts the articulation that accompanies power-dominant discourse—since articulation, as Armstrong and Wyile (and de Certeau) point out, always involves the effacing, or "leaving out," of so-called extraneous elements of the story. In the case of the articulation of the West in Cold War discourse, Canada remained extraneous. In the articulation of Canada within Canada, regions remained left out; yet rather than asserting the region, as Armstrong and Wyile point out, Richards mistrusts the articulation of identity on any level: "The characters receiving the most sympathetic treatment are those least able or least inclined to articulate their identities, their desires, their sense of what is right" (8). The lack of articulation—like the passivity displayed by Marston in the face of Robinson discourse in Carver's "What Do You Do in San Francisco?"—becomes an emblem of affirmative power in Richards, again revealed by the novel's hard man, Norman: "Our most poignant conversations being nothing but a word or two—not much more than that" (148). The minimalism of Richards's later works testifies to an inverse relation between poignancy and verbosity. He valorises silence in the face of articulation out of a deep fear of misrepresentation and its effects: "Meddling has killed them—legislation has destroyed their house—how can anyone be legislated to have honour, to love or hope for goodness—when there is triumph in the social worker's face and pride in the scoutmaster's eyes" (158). Father Billy's dialogue marks the dangers of attempting to find centrist solutions, legislation, for abstract universal virtues. Legislation's inability to effect "honour," "hope" and "love" arises in its inapt representation of the people to whom such social legislation applies. Talk, in other words, fails to achieve consequence. The multiple voices in *The Road to the Stilt-House* (1985)—split between Arnold, the author and Norman—indicate Richards's vacillation and caution in the enacting of discourse, in an interrogation of positions taken or assumed. *The Road to the Stilt House* sounds out not from the position of one lied to but rather from the position of one who is not even addressed.

If the values and character of a region exist in Richards, they exist in a silence that impacts the reader in the form of questions of place and purpose: "*Nights Below Station Street*, in its best moments, exhibits the moving stasis of documentary, forcing the question, 'why am I continuing to read/view this/'—while simultaneously drawing our attention" (Pennee 43). The randomness and sameness Pennee witnesses in Richards reflects the lack of an indigenous sensibility and calls upon the reader to contemplate their own attentiveness to the narrative. "Moving stasis" indicates the contradictory simultaneities of Richards's dirty realism. The fiction gestures towards the silent, roving, undifferentiated, undesignated human operatives of de Certeau's ordinary, those powerless in the face of, and empowered by, a discourse that cannot account for them. Richards's "regionalism" therefore rests exactly on the non-assertion

of identity that Whitaker and Marcuse find at the centre of their study of Cold War Canada, a place somewhere between "tradition" and "change," articulated on the basis of an invisibility, on a site lacking parameters.

Donna Pennee, in "Still More Social Realism" (1990), describes Richards's writing as one involved with a lack of selectivity similar to what Nadel regards as the new reality of nature as nuclear waste: "The narrative moves at random, describing the situations of many of the town's inhabitants, and creating a sense of static movement by its shifts from one portrait to a similar portrait, to others of the same" (42). In Richards's opinion, the country outside, or ringing the power base occupies the position of "remainder," or "excess," which Nadel regards as the "informing principle" of postmodernity (50). In speaking of Derrida, Nadel makes an observation equally attributable to Richards, particularly in light of Wheaton's view on the indeterminate essence of Richards's characterisations, namely, "the definitive dependency of that which is central—that which passes for essential—on that which occupies the rhetorical position of its marginalised supplement" (50). In Richards the "supplement" becomes rhetorically marked as the "essential," as the "centre" vanishes into the ungroundedness of its articulation. Without selectivity, without difference, with shifting portraits of "sameness," the distance from the indigenous, from traditions, and the monotony of "change" configures Richards's regionalism not as an attempt to augment a national canon with marginalised voices, but as an eruption of voices whose disconcerting sameness, randomness, fragmentation demonstrates the lack of a sustainable metanarrative, canonical, national or international, which would act as an overarching mosaic into which authors could set the tessera of region.

If American authors debated the frameworks by which the Cold War defined their politics, society and culture, Canadian authors such as Richards addressed the lack of any such framework altogether.

<sup>10</sup> Potrebenco notes the co-optation of labour into the corporate structures of capitalism in *Taxi!*: "B.C. Tel employees were on strike and one morning set up a picket at the bottom of the SFU hill. Bradley didn't cross it and was fired for not coming to work. He didn't worry, thinking that the union would see he was re-hired, but they only laughed and said they hadn't expected anyone to honour that picket line. So then Bradley went to talk to the students but they were too busy talking about workers to cater to the problems of a mere worker. After several weeks of talking, Bradley realized he wasn't going to get his job back" (7). Bradley loses his job because no one "talks" for him. "The problems of a mere worker" fall between the cracks of the discourse sustained by employer, union and student radicals. In Potrebenco's work these three systems co-exist in a stalemate of self-interest that creates victims or marginalises those it purportedly supports. Potrebenco's critique reinforces the impression fostered by Schaub and Jameson, that Cold War capitalism infiltrated and absorbed traditional Marxist enclaves, such as the labour movement and its representative unions. In Potrebenco's world, socialism endeavours mainly to maintain its discourse, a socialism for the sake of socialism—exemplifying the circularity that Marx abhors in *Capital* (354).

<sup>11</sup> Whitfield's take on *actual* communists (as distinct from those men and women *accused* of Communism by the House Un-American Activities Committee) relegates as little sympathy to these so-called "progressives" as it does to HUAC, stating: "Though the Communists [in America] generally called themselves 'progressives,' this book refers to them as Stalinists—not because I am oblivious to the harshness of the term, but because that is precisely what they were. They habitually offered alibis for mass murder and denounced as 'slander' the effort to expose Soviet crimes" (3). This dissertation deals with the effect of Cold War discourse, much of which was illusion, upon the literary culture, and so deeper investigations into the allegations of Whitfield remain beyond the range of this chapter. Whitfield contends that Stalin's Gulag Archipelago and "deliberate famine" in the Ukraine during the 1930s "may have cost almost as many lives as the Nazi murder of European Jewry" (2) and his accusation that Communist sympathisers in America fully realised the effects of Stalinism is supported

and amplified by discussions of Paul Robeson (193, 195) and, to a slightly lesser degree, Woody Guthrie (210).

- <sup>12</sup> Earlier in his text, Nadel points out that “knowing the unknowable of nuclear destruction has become an informing narrative in some postmodern fiction” (36). This attempting to account for what cannot be accounted for stems directly from the assault of nuclear holocaust, in all its epistemological uncertainty, on the cultural imagination. Though few texts of dirty realism deal directly with the issue of nuclear holocaust, this foregrounding of the “unknowable” and attempting to address it, is indeed an “informing narrative” in many of its texts.
- <sup>13</sup> In *Thank God For The Atom Bomb* (1988), Paul Fussell argues for a more “complex moral” (44) perspective on the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In short, his essay takes a “soldier’s view” (44) of the bombings, saying that the common foot-soldier felt relief at hearing that the A-bomb had effectively ended the war and that he and his fellows had escaped inclusion among the “million” American dead predicted by the planners of the invasion of Japan (not to mention the millions of Japanese soldiers and armed civilians that would have perished) (15, 20, 28-29). Also, he notes (contentiously) that American war planners could not have fully realised the effect of the atom bomb on the civilian populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (23). Responding to an intellectual critical of both the deployment of the atomic bomb and the World War Two politicians who ignored the implications of such a deployment, Fussell indicates how the dropping of the bomb presaged victory rather than catastrophe: “and as to being thoughtful when ‘opening up the age of nuclear warfare,’ of course no one was focussing on anything as portentous as that, which reflects a historian’s tidy hindsight. The U.S. government was engaged not in that sort of momentous thing but in ending the war conclusively. . . . It didn’t know then what everyone knows now about leukemia and various kinds of carcinoma and birth defects” (23). Fussell’s argument (right or wrong) suggests that the end of the “victory” narrative did not arrive with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; indeed, the bombing, as he notes, caused celebration, since it meant an end to the war. Only later, in the context of the Cold War, with revelations on the destructive power of the atom bomb (gleaned largely from its long-term effects in Hiroshima and Nagasaki), did the victory in Japan seem, *retroactively*, to portend disaster (this loss of the victory narrative undoubtedly heightened by the fact that, by the 1950s, there existed the possibility of the bomb’s deployment *against America* by the Soviets). The effect of the atom bomb on cultural discourse therefore happened gradually; but, by the mid-1950s and 1960s little doubt remained in regards to the threat of apocalypse implied by the stockpiling of nuclear weapons.
- <sup>14</sup> Jean Fran ois Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984), defines the postmodern as a period without faith in a “metanarrative,” i.e. in a stable “grand narrative” which mediates and contextualizes experience (Nadel 4; Lyotard xxiii).
- <sup>15</sup> De Certeau’s theory of tactics and strategies, the ordinary and the proper, and banality and speciality, provide a particularly fruitful frame of reference for studying the Cold War, particularly the Cold War as a rhetorical strategy promulgated by policy-makers. Speaking of de Certeau, Nadel exposes a key awareness in the way authors came to understand the dominance of narrative over the real: “The idea of the real is crucial to justifying a discipline. It constitutes the object of study without which the study would be meaningless, but as de Certeau points out, it is always an object that exists outside of discourse, for which the discourse must substitute itself in order to make the real intelligible” (42). While Nadel speaks specifically of cultural discourse during the Cold War, my argument brings de Certeau’s “substitution” to bear on dirty realism’s attitude towards the language of realism. Cold War politics occasioned a shift in the apprehension of the mimetic capabilities of language, a shift in the perception of language itself. Formerly grounded on the principle, fostered largely by such nineteenth-century authors as Flaubert, that the “le mot juste” (the right word) somehow permitted the author to access and reproduce the real with “verisimilitude,” realism, during the Cold War, could no longer permit itself such assumptions—at a time when the right word no longer meant the nearest possible interface

between signifier and referent but rather the word that would most closely convey the *type* of reality intended by its author. In the case of Eisenhower's, Kennedy's, Johnson's, Nixon's political policy, authors became very suspicious of the "intelligibility" of the real promoted by the rhetoric of their governments. Foregrounding the "substitution" of language for the real, dirty realism began to investigate other possible substitutions.

- <sup>16</sup> Max's article addresses the growing controversy surrounding the influence of Gordon Lish on the development of Carver's first two collections, *While You Please Be Quiet Please?* and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981). Carver's subsequent collections, *Cathedral* (1983) and *Where I'm Calling From* (1988), were not edited by Lish, and the change, as Stull notes, involved a moving away from the "'minimalist' style" (208). Ironically, a writer who demanded authenticity left a legacy wherein the earlier writings evoke an uncertainty around this very idea (Max 57). See also endnote 32.
- <sup>17</sup> Ralph Ellison, in "Beating that Boy" (1945), directly addresses the race issue in the context of the American narrative of "democracy," illustrating a central paradox, or working hypocrisy, in postwar America: "For since 1876 the race issue has been like a stave driven into the American system of values, a stave so deeply imbedded in the American ethos as to render America a nation of ethical schizophrenics. Believing truly in Democracy on one side of their minds, they act on the other in violation of its most sacred principles; holding that all men are created equal, they treat thirteen million Americans as though they were not" (99). Ellison's statement illustrates the simultaneous function of "two sides" within a single "mind" or "set of principles"; yet, as Ellison notes, this "stave" does not hinder the function of American democracy—at least its function as a self-image, as a *discourse*—but in fact characterises the way American democracy "acted." Hypocrisy, as Ellison notes, served as the model of American policy.
- <sup>18</sup> Relevantly, the sections of William L. Stull and Maureen P. Carroll's biography of Carver, *Remembering Ray: A Composite Biography of Raymond Carver* (1993) that deal with Carver's own life in Arcata range under titles that reflect the dystopian character of Cold War America: "Weedy Logic," "The Most Unhappy Man," "Bad News," "Secret Places," "All-American Nightmares," and "A Nothing Generation." The one exception to the rule is "Tell Me More About Salmon Fishing" which suggests pleasures found in escaping the town.
- <sup>19</sup> Circularity appears throughout the story, not only in the delivered "circulars," or the woman's "curlicue" handwriting, but also in the "curly-headed girls" (114), presumably Marston's daughters.
- <sup>20</sup> Pieters argues, as I do, for inclusion of Raymond Carver's writing—and that of "neo-realism" or "minimalism" in general—among the postmodern canon. Pieters regards the chief characteristics of Carver's fiction, including "indeterminacy" (54), "disintegration of . . . character" (55), "its fragmented, discontinuous conception of reality (7), "general attention to surfaces" (7) and "problematics of epistemology" (79), as "typical, though not exclusive, postmodern devices and beliefs" (7). He agrees with Larry McCaffery that minimalism represents "one of the various roads open to American fiction after the heyday of postmodernism" (7, McCaffery 1162). If the Cold War, as Nadel proposes, gave way to the "heyday" of 1960s postmodernism, then its discourse continues to exert an influence on those writers following quickly on the heels of that heyday, such as Carver.
- <sup>21</sup> In *Reading Raymond Carver* (1992), Randolph Paul Runyon glosses over this point altogether, preferring to see "What Do You Do in San Francisco?" from every perspective except Robinson's narration, attempting, instead, to uncover, from the scant evidence provided by the story, what previous event in San Francisco Marston ran from. Runyon alleges that the title of the story has little to do with the exchange between "Mrs. Marston" (he, like Robinson, assumes that Marston and the woman are a conventionally married couple) and the postman (113); "The story merits its title not," Runyon says, "surely, because of what the *mailman* may have done there" (41). Yet, I think, what the mailman did or did not do in San Francisco forms the central point of the story: namely, Mrs. Marston's lack of interest in the mailman's life, her refusal to *hear* his narrative, seals her fate *within* that narrative. By not expressing

interest in Robinson's "story," "Mrs. Marston" effectively sets herself against it, whether she intends to or not; by not participating in its recounting—as the witnesses called by HUAC pleaded the fifth and therefore neither confirmed nor denied the hearings—she becomes its antagonist. The story, then, very much hinges upon what the mailman did or didn't do in San Francisco, and Carver's title elaborates the question desired of others by an isolated Robinson.

- <sup>22</sup> Further on, Whitfield, in recounting the CIA's covert cash subsidies for various intellectual journals, and its *lack* of subsidies for other journals, declares: "With such techniques, government agencies ensured that some ideas were more equal than others" (184). The allusion to Orwell's *Animal Farm* cannot help but make us consider the symmetry between much of the political culture on both the left and right during the Cold War.
- <sup>23</sup> Whitfield suggests that a political consensus did exist in America during the 1950s: "And though the state was intimately involved in restricting liberty, it acted with popular approval and acquiescence; the will of the majority was not thwarted. In effect, Americans imposed a starchy repression upon themselves, and without denying rights to minorities—certain political factions on the right, for example. Indeed, American Legionnaires and the Catholic War Veterans were exercising their First Amendment rights in seeking to prevent other Americans from attending particular films and plays" (12). The "rights" of "minorities" on the right, such as American Legionnaires and "Catholic War Veterans" functions ironically here, since the viewpoints of these minorities, Whitfield demonstrates, happened to conform with the Eisenhower program. Certainly the "rights" of such minorities as the segregated African-Americans in the South did not receive equal sympathy. Whitfield's study considers Cold War containment not only as a governmental policy but part of the cultural atmosphere of the 1950s as a whole.
- <sup>24</sup> For a more thorough analysis of this idea, see chapter two, "Dirty Realism: Genealogy," p. 110.
- <sup>25</sup> I put this word in quotations since Carver's story interrogates the extent to which any citizen truly fits into the category of the "proper" or "mainstream."
- <sup>26</sup> The notion of a subversive network within the official network appears prominently in Thomas Pynchon's novel, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), where the protagonist, Oedipa Maas, discovers an alternative mail system, named W.A.S.T.E (itself recalling the undifferentiated, discursive "excess" Nadel regards as the condition of the Cold War), operating alongside the American postal service, and utilising civic installations, such as public garbage cans, to disseminate its letters. W.A.S.T.E., like Marston, presents another example of de Certeau's "everyday practices," which figure as a "jungle of procedures" invisible to the dominant social system.
- <sup>27</sup> Lainsbury cites Christopher Lasch's *The Minimal Self* (1984), as well as Carver associate Morton Marcus in defending the thesis. According to Lainsbury's citation of Lasch (132), and the conclusions drawn from it, the minimalism of Carver's 1960s and 1970s fictions originated in a disenchantment with the lost material promise of America (87). Marcus—in an essay entitled "All-American Nightmares," included in *Remembering Ray: A Composite Biography of Raymond Carver*—supports Lainsbury's argument by recalling the "unemployment," "fear of homelessness," "the terror of being poor and disenfranchised" that Carver's fiction recalls (58). Though viewing the 1970s as a decade of spiritual emptiness seems clichéd, Lainsbury's article, in examining Carver's fiction, at least indicates the degree to which such clichés developed from cultural products such as *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. Carver's early fiction provides one possible way of historicising the 1970s.
- <sup>28</sup> A bit later, de Certeau further elaborates: "I call a strategy the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated. It [the subject] postulates a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and strategies of research, etc.) can be managed" (35-36). A

strategy therefore becomes a way of imagining relations between a site of fixed idea and those malleable, fluid elements external (and beholden) to it. Robinson's story becomes an abstracted ideal, a fixed view of value and ethic, against which he tests Marston's conformity (or lack thereof); in doing so, however, he "divides" (de Certeau 35) Marston's story into select elements—joblessness, adultery, itinerancy, drug usage—whose sum confirms his discourse, without taking into account the way these elements may interact in "new stories" (de Certeau 35) unaccounted for in his version of America.

- <sup>29</sup> In de Certeau, the use of "common" implies less a value judgement than a status, a position exterior to the power relations exercised by centres of discursive strategy. The "common" becomes a body of operatives who cannot institute a space of their own and who must "make do" (29) with elements provided them by the dominant institutions and discourse. In the 1960s this lack of a "space" became evident in the growing youth sub-culture. Tom Engelhardt points out the way in which this sub-culture poached elements from the dominant "story" to enable its resistance to it: "The young began to dismantle the war story and re-deploy its elements, as mechanics might strip an old car for its parts. Without ever straying far from the confines of that story, they transformed each symbol of triumph into a triumphantly possessed symbol of defeat. Take World War II's two-fingered V-for-victory (in which triumph and peace had been indissoluble). When a war protestor now greeted a government official's arrival, it was with the sundered 'V' of peace, a mocking 'V' that proclaimed we-want-out" (244). Engelhardt goes on to enumerate the ways in which youth movements foiled the narrative strategy of American propagandists during the Vietnam war by taking upon themselves war "paraphernalia" and using the means of propaganda, the "media" (245), to their own ends. By appropriating elements and symbols from the dominant discourse, the counter-culture movement, if not creating its own "space," infiltrated and debunked the space instituted by Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. Engelhardt's thesis holds that this movement did not necessarily institute a new "story" but rather questioned the efficacy any possibility of any "story," of any master narrative.
- <sup>30</sup> Although the majority of HUAC hearings happened in the 1950s (with some extension into the 1960s), I use them here, to illustrate a point about the 1960s because only in that decade did such past events as HUAC generate widespread scrutiny and condemnation.
- <sup>31</sup> The disappearance of authorial authority features heavily in chapter four, "Dirty Realism: Theory."
- <sup>32</sup> Whitaker and Marcuse witness precisely this individual isolation and group exclusion in the developing suburbs of Cold War Canada: "Despite the conformist face of pioneer suburbia, it was a world with little sense of the collective community that had characterized earlier pioneer settlements. It tended instead to be a world of separate, privatized families with absent commuting fathers, isolated and often bored wives, and children with few organized activities to occupy their time and nowhere to go" (17); drawing on the works of sociologist S.D. Clark, *The Suburban Society* (1966) and *Urbanism and the Changing Canadian Society* (1961), the two authors illustrate how the Cold War suburb served more as a site where families could live detached from any network of community obligations, complete unto themselves as a familial unit (18).

*Crestwood Heights* (1956), a sociological examination of the Canadian suburb, offers an exemplary perspective on the suburb of Cold War Canada, and one that dovetails with Whitaker's and Marcuse's argument. Authors John R. Seeley, R. Alexander Sim and Elizabeth W. Loosley conceived this study "in the period following upon the Second World War" (13), at a time when Cold War tensions rose to their height. *Crestwood Heights* describes not the archetypal Canadian suburb, "far less what the world is like," but rather "what men say it should be like, or hope it will be like, if they share at all deeply in the dominant aspirations of the North American continent" (12). The description of the suburb is not only diagnostic but also speculative, a projection of the ideals of the Cold War moment. The vocabulary chosen to express this ideal continually refers to isolation and individuation: "they [the inhabitants of Crestwood Heights] are in a position to buy privacy" (6), "real estate companies vie with each

other to offer him a selection of houses, complete with . . . privacy" (8), "a Crestwood Heights address . . . symbolizes the screening out of the unpleasant features of urban existence" (11), "the small family is . . . lone" (160). The ideal community of postwar Canada, therefore, offered, as a primary inducement to purchasers of real estate, privacy, isolation and the "screening out" of unwanted scenes, which lends credence to Whitaker's and Marcuse's depiction of the Cold War suburb as a non-community of isolated familial units.

*Crestwood Heights* extends the argument of suburban isolation even further than *Cold War Canada* by describing the sociological underpinnings of such suburban developments. In speaking of the family, Seeley and the other authors continually use the word "unit" to describe the "containment" of citizens in the smallest of groups, whose enforced separation from other such groups prevents the emergence of community sensibility: "the family is a separate unit, rather than an integral part of a larger family system as it would be in another culture or another era" (88). Cold War society is an "era" of disintegration among various families, not only among families unrelated by blood who happen to share the same neighbourhood, but also the various generations of a single family:

Finally, this ideal Crestwood family operates as a separate unit—it must not share living quarters or dependencies with other families; even the apartment building with its many divisions is not considered the proper material environment for family life. The detached house, which the family owns and inhabits in its entirety, is the only fully approved physical basis for a healthy, happy family. To share this house with kin is considered undesirable and, in many cases, a genuine hardship, since the presence of grandparents or other close relatives is viewed as inimical to smooth family functioning. (167)

Operating as a "separate" unit, the Crestwood family ultimately aims to install itself in the "only fully approved physical basis" for happy familial life: "the detached house." Each family must function in detachment from other families, including those families comprising "kin." The standards of the Cold War suburb reinforce isolation and serve to disintegrate communal and biological attachments.

An enforced isolation appears from the outset, as even mothers become separated from their newborn infants as part of the normal procedure at medical institutions:

Since independence is essential for the achievement-in-isolation which is highly valued by the culture, the significance of the hospital delivery for the later character of the adult can scarcely be over-emphasized. . . . The infant is separated from his mother for most of the hours of his first days of life; his physical contacts are alternated between his mother and the efficient, crisply starched nurses. In the cluster of practices surrounding birth, the Crestwood mother and child would seem thus to be impressed immediately and deeply with the cultural concept that each has a separate and isolated identity. (87-88)

The isolation experienced by the child results from the demand that he or she develop into an "isolated" achiever, underscoring the dominance of a system which focuses on the accomplishments and capabilities of the individual in contrast with those of other individuals. "Identity" becomes a function of isolation, of contrast, rather than association. As *Crestwood Heights* points out, individuation also follows from the practices of schools in the suburban community, which offer their greatest rewards on the basis of outstanding performance rather than co-operation (279). Competition in sports and academics further entrenches

individuation at the expense of peer association/affiliation. In effect, the emphasis on the individual results in the break-up of familial integration as, even from a young age, children begin to divide their loyalties between the family and their peers (183). When the child finally leaves home, marries, he or she founds "a new marital unit" largely removed, either by locale or interest, from the nurturing family, a unit "entirely isolated from the original base which launched him on his solitary voyage" (183). Monadism, therefore, becomes not only the rule in postwar society, but its aspiration, with each new citizen set on the road of "his solitary voyage" from the moment he or she exits the womb.

Finally, the design of urban and suburban space in Cold War society contributes to the loss of communal interests: "community participation is largely denied to the men who play their major role well beyond their home community and who have, in consequence, little time or energy to devote to purely local affairs" (279). The necessity of commuting to work, and the layout of the suburban community itself into various "zones" of activity, prevent full integration between individual and community. The organic relation between the home, workplace and store has been replaced, in Crestwood Heights, by an arrangement of various zones, resulting in commuting-procedures that stymie intimate associations with the communal space. No longer aware of their community as a shared space, or even as a space necessarily used by all, the men of Crestwood Heights shuttle from their homes to their workplaces and shopping malls by car, quite possibly never setting foot in the community outside their private properties. With the loss of a sense of communal space comes the loss of participation in the regulation and maintenance of that space: "Although responsibility to the community is a value strongly stressed by home and school alike, there does not seem to be widespread participation in local affairs, particularly in the case of men. General apathy prevails towards municipal politics" (222). Politics, in the Cold War suburb, further retreat into the personal sphere, as social responsibility becomes a private truism rather than the cooperative function of municipal groups. All in all, then, the suburbs of the Cold War further testify to an entrenched isolation, containment and myopic individualism.

<sup>33</sup> Bell also critiques the notion that Carver spoke "for," or "in the voice of," a certain segment of American society, saying, "Carver's characters speak an impoverished language distinctly less expressive than that of their real-life counterparts" (67). As Bell indicates, there remains much room for dissension on whether Carver's writings mediate the reality of America's underclass or whether they overwrite that reality with a certain aesthetic, a special language, that guarantees the author's "expertise" at the expense of the subjects he writes about (de Certeau 7-8). In a similar vein, Marc Chénétier disagrees with Carver's designation as a realist, suggesting that Carver's works deal more with "presentation" than the "representation" of mimetic realism; his stories focus on "presentation," i.e. the various modes and ways of presentation itself rather than on presenting a reality. Chénétier describes the "chief activity" of Carver's work as a "linguistically deprived attempt at making minimal sense," and a recognition of the "irresolutive nature of the text" (188-189), which suggests, again, that his concern remains very much rooted in stylistics and narrative strategy rather than social awareness.

<sup>34</sup> Recent criticism and controversy questions Carver's own authorial authenticity, particularly in relation to the two early books, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981). Increased scrutiny of the Carver manuscripts reveals the inordinate degree to which editor, Gordon Lish, tampered with and rewrote large sections of Carver's manuscripts, in effect performing more the role of co-author than editor. This controversy raises questions about the need for authenticity (a single author) and the ways in which the publishing industry manipulates our expectations, expectations which we produce and which become commodities in the hands of the industry. Author Don DeLillo, commenting upon the Carver/Lish controversy, suggests that the illusion of authenticity matters more than the quality of the text itself, that lack of narrative authenticity devalues the artistic artefact, which in turn indicates the degree to which authority and textual value depend upon a metanarrative (authorial biography) completely extrinsic to it (Max 40).



Without a singular author for the first two Carver collections the reading of the stories becomes, in Delillo's words, "an ambiguous thing at best" (Max 40); no longer can we view the stories as generated out of Carver's working-class background, and thereby authentic representations of it, but rather as products of artifice, of a collaboration between two dissimilar individuals and therefore ambiguous in the face of the experience they purportedly speak of. Construction rather than faithful rendition emerges as the aesthetic lynch-pin of the two collections. The heightening of their artificiality reflects upon us as readers, and our participation in the production of canonical value and our dependence on preconceived metanarratives which determine esteem (at the same time as we realise the falsity of such metanarratives). Readers become the necessary component in the authorising of the belief-system necessary for the "proper" context for reading the stories. The system depends on our participation for its replication. However, this contract between canon and reader breaks down with the revelation of inauthenticity. The loss of such a belief—destroyed by the Lish/Carver controversy—foregrounds the contract between author and reader as simulated, a contract in which the work itself becomes incidental. The cultural artefact becomes not only de-valued but released from its unique political significance: Carver's stories no longer represent the working class voice, but also that of the subscribers to *Esquire* and *New Yorker* magazines and that of 1980s literary fashion; but mostly they represent a literary style, a self-conscious, artificial artistic gesture compounded equally from a politically muddled (or, at best, hybridised) aesthetic as well as from working-class experience. The controversy exposes how the reading public's belief forms an essential component in the valuation and dissemination of textual artefacts, the assumptions undergirding the author's "invisibility," how we contribute to the reification of text, and how our power masquerades as (and derives from) passivity; as readers of another's text we endorse and further empower the context (and therefore valuations) such works present, in effect creating the metanarrative which becomes recycled and returned to our use. Disquietingly, the attention drawn to Carver's essential invisibility (the secret machinations behind his texts) draws attention to our own, to the ways we ourselves participate in and make use of the fissure between the authentic and the inauthentic, and the narratives we endorse to bridge and obscure this distance, narratives which in fact *become this distance* between two unachievable positions, signifier and referent, history and event, democracy and variance. We, too, are a secret government. Publishers and critics regard Carver's texts as the voice of poverty, and our belief in them as such may override and obscure, or at least make "ambiguous," the reality of poverty itself. The dismay expressed by reviewers such as D.T. Max, at learning that Carver co-wrote some of his texts, contains within it the fracture between reader and author, and the fear that accompanies the transfer of responsibility from former to latter. The texts are ours; what do we do we make of them?

As Roland Sadowsky points out in "The Minimalist Short Story: Its definition, Writers, and (Small) Heyday" (1996), the critics of minimalism in fact highlight the fear of this transference as the central "problem" of minimalism; quoting negative statements lifted from criticism, Sadowsky illustrates the way minimalism exposes and, by doing so, ruptures the author/reader economy (529). Recalling the various critics that described minimalism as a "holding pattern" (Dunn 53), as a fiction through which "nothing else could get . . . into the light," a "grimly logical demonstration . . . of literature's pretensions to meaning and range" (Iannone 61), its degradation into "limitations and defects" (Newman 25), its narrative voice that doesn't "come from anywhere" (Koch 47), the critics raised by Sadowsky demonstrate the way in which the minimalist aesthetic defines story by the containment and curtailment of possibility and thereby reflects a world awakened to the author's (and hence reader's) role in the "limits" and "range" given experience recounted as text, their role in the symbioses between the material world and its recapitulation in poem, novel and short story. The highlighting of artifice renews attention to this symbioses, to a world which conditions this sort of narrative and to how this sort of narrative in turn conditions the world. Authenticity, like "democracy," becomes a narrative of consumer choice rather than signifying a definite

concrete accord between content, form and biography; authenticity becomes a project of the status quo. If Carver's emergence, as an author, from the underclass required this kind of aesthetic (because his life conditioned him to write this way and because publishing interests demanded it), and if this kind of aesthetic then defined the underclass experience, the stories carefully, and subtly, position us to examine our place amidst the bi-directional trajectory between the material real and its literary representation.

<sup>35</sup> De Certeau provides an allegory for this kind of invisible operation in the "Walking in the City Section" of *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In this chapter, de Certeau observes the difference between the bird's-eye, strategic, view of the city, and the operations performed by those within the city who do not have the all-seeing, top-down vantage, "whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it" (93). The apparent totality of the city spread out before the eyes of the bird's-eye beholder, he or she fails to take account of the invisible and daily changing trajectories of the pedestrians down below, whose movements make use of "spaces that cannot be seen" (93). The pedestrians authorise, in their wanderings, uses of the city that do not conform to its visualised, reified image, just as readers of a text manipulate it in ways too multifarious for containment by the text's canonical "character."

<sup>36</sup> Charles Bukowski's story, "Camus" (1990), riffs upon the notion of sameness in a way similar to that of David Adams Richards. Issues of conformity, difference and cultural narrative inform Bukowski's treatment of the American educational system. In this story, Larry, a high-school teacher, describes a typical day in his classroom, overtly reflecting the Cold War stasis that informs dirty realism.

Commenting on his students, Bukowski says: "The Atomic Generation had bred a strange gang, and Larry had decided long ago that to judge them was only a protective shield raised to hide his own shortcomings" (162). Larry recognises an indeterminacy—sexual, and psychological—in this atomic generation, as well as a capacity for simulation, a "seeming" characteristic of Cold War diplomacy and discourse. The rhetoric of nuclear war appears in the words "atomic," "generation," "protective shield," as if Bukowski realises that "judgement," the creation of moral value for his "generation" serves only to contain the facts of their own "shortcomings," their similarity with the "other side." Judgement assists in deterring the inevitable outcome of conflict (sameness). The "Atomic Generation" christens a particular generation whom Larry views as an undifferentiated mass (precisely the fear generated by arms build up), as androgynous, kindly and apparently lacking in courage (162).

"Camus" reproduces the "us/them" rhetoric of the Cold War, which demanded reified portraits of Russians and Americans as two opposing but undifferentiated groups. Larry is both attracted and repelled by the uniformity he witnesses, just as Richards's reader becomes both fascinated and put off by the static movement of his text. The urge to recognise one's self within the group and the facelessness of its constituent members illustrates the authorial problematic of Cold War literature, wherein writers teetered between identification and alienation, which also reflects the same/different ambivalence Nadel witnesses in the American rhetoric that feared its ultimate demise in post-nuclear waste.

In Larry, Bukowski posits the writer in the midst of waste (equally the undifferentiated outcome of nuclear war, the "more of the same" postulated by Cold War discourse, and the spill-over of the doctrine of conformity in a country renowned for tolerance of difference), and illustrates the way the writer adapts to a system of feints, simulation and indeterminacy. The balancing act that Larry must maintain in order to instate his power as teacher and yet avoid living up to its responsibilities, valuable to the institution and yet retaining the position of power, presents another state of static equilibrium.

The story provides additional instances of a "balance of power," for example, where Bukowski describes his fight with the "fat boy": "They kept circling. Some of the students returned to the classroom for their belongings. Others left for somewhere else. . . . 'We aren't going to fight,' said Larry, 'we are afraid of each other'" (163). Neither the student nor the teacher can overcome the other, can definitively triumph. Power remains so carefully

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interdependent that to risk confrontation would reduce both sides to nothing, to the same. In order to maintain distinctness and separateness, the two sides must remain locked in a "cold" war of hostile equilibrium, in the circularity also seen in "What Do You Do in San Francisco?" Larry realises that any definitive move against the fat boy (who, through family connections, can influence the fate of Larry's career) would end in mutual destruction: "One thing he knew, though, he was going to flunk that fat son of a bitch in the yellow jumpsuit. And wasn't that something? Arthur Koestler and his wife in a double suicide" (165). The reference to Arthur Koestler (1905-1983), author of, among others, *Darkness At Noon* (1940), a novel delving into the nightmare of Soviet captivity and ideology, draws further attention to dissidence, east/west doubling, and highlights political programming as a central thematic of the story. Not accidentally, the literary allusions in the text—both to Koestler and Camus—reflects the ideological, discursive difference between Larry and the fat boy. Their stalemate is contingent upon institutional codes and the place granted to them within the discursive framework. The boy can deprive Larry of status and Larry can deprive him of a diploma, removing them from the field of signification, again positing them as "same." While their relationship and their identities remain mediated and circumscribed by the metanarrative of institutional regulation, Larry realises that this metanarrative does not function independently of the student and teacher, but rather that they enforce it through a willingness to sustain equilibrium; metanarrative becomes a choice and therefore not a metanarrative at all. Within this discursive world, Larry's discursive tactics, his static operativity, enables him to subsist within battle lines, lines that guarantee (provided they remain untested) the indefinite postponement of the collapse of metanarrative and eventuating the "fall-out" of sameness that results from the possibility of nuclear war. The proximity of nuclear devastation, held ever before the public eye, made it increasingly difficult to maintain an institutionalised metanarrative of difference; it continually threatened to expose the *lack of difference* between the two super-powers.

## Four

### Dirty Realism: Theory

#### *Introduction*

Both naturalism and the Cold War played a large role in setting the background for the development of dirty realism, offering realistic writers in the latter half of the twentieth century new understandings of history, commodity circulation, metanarrative, hypocrisy and simulation. With this conceptual and aesthetic arsenal, dirty realism confronted the so-called postmodern societies of American and Canada, societies characterised by both Marxists such as Fredric Jameson and non-Marxists such as Michel de Certeau, as fixated on discourse (and, in particular, text), overpowered by the sheer mass of capitalistic commodification, and trapped within an epistemologically deracinated world of simulacra and linguistic codes. As naturalism offered a portrait of the reality of its time, the postmodern realists of dirty realism responded to their society by adapting realistic technique to portraying a world dominated by an artificially-produced sense of "reality," thereby highlighting the discursive artifice that went into creating that reality. Dirty realism remains radically conflicted between realism's claim of verisimilitude and an epistemological awareness of the impossibility of properly undertaking such representations.

Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) remains a key text in conceptualising the contemporary notion of reality as a set of events, phenomena and conditions ungoverned by language. This text theorises the methods used to offset rational modes of discourse (scientific, political, religious) from the "everyday," crafting for them a space in which such discourses can continually reground their postulates and from which the "specialists" in a specific types of discourse (scientists, incumbents, priests) may trade discursive competence (knowing the lingo) for social authority (translating the codes and methodologies of a specific discipline for those "common people" uninitiated into, or unaware of, those codes and methodologies). De Certeau designates these discursive sites with the term "proper," meaning that these sites are concerned with maintaining and elaborating specialised and formal (hence

“proper”) modes of discursive conduct through specific referents and epistemological strategies (a certain set of terms for conceiving and portraying the world, various formulas for ascertaining and depicting reality); conversely, he uses the term “the ordinary” to designate the phenomena and events unaccounted for by “proper” epistemological modes—the “reality” which specialised discourse attempts to convey and confine within language. His project, throughout *The Practice of Everyday Life*, remains the means by which the ordinary bears (and is brought to bear) upon discourse: “I shall try to describe the erosion that lays bare the ordinary in a body of analytical techniques, to reveal the openings that mark its trace on the borders where a science is mobilized, to indicate the displacements that lead toward the *common place* where ‘anyone’ is finally silent, except for repeating (but in a different way) banalities” (5). De Certeau’s project, then, regards the simulation of reality (and its attempted control) by discursive means, the “mobilisation” of a science in the interest of creating “borders,” cordoning off access to the ordinary by means of specific, socially-sanctioned narratives. At this point, De Certeau’s study dovetails—at least for the purposes of this discussion of dirty realism—with Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or the Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), wherein the theorist describes simulacra as “the identical copy for which no original exists” (18).<sup>1</sup> De Certeau’s writing proves useful for plumbing the notion of reality in contemporary, postmodern, society, precisely because the proper conceives a discursive “copy” of a reality which is not “original,” insofar as the reality its language substitutes for cannot be represented in any originary sense (though this does not mean that the ordinary cannot invade and upset discourse, or that humans beings never encounter the ordinary in an unmediated fashion). De Certeau’s ordinary, therefore, becomes a working term for the intersection of an ineffable reality and discursive authority.

As Alan Nadel mentions in *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism and the Atomic Age* (1995), De Certeau’s writings prove emblematic of an age bereft of faith in discourse. As shown, the 1960s experienced a complete loss of faith in the notion of “metanarratives,” discourses which claimed to represent the totality of the real. Dirty realism,

as the literature of post-1960s reality, grapples with the ordinary and the proper, tracing the way in which the loss of faith in the latter also marks a despair at attaining the former. Against those institutions still upholding the authority of the “proper” – particularly the state – dirty realism crafts a hypocrisy aesthetic that shimmies between a “pastiche” (Jameson 18) of discursive authority, solipsism, and the levelling effect of the ordinary to arrive at, or orbit, the “common place, where ‘anyone’ is finally silent, except for repeating (but in a different way) banalities” (5). Dirty realism plays upon discursive authority to reveal the banal behind language, to expose society as a community beholden to “silence” (a populace beholden to the ineffable workings of a reality language arises out of and falls back into, by necessity and contingency). In other words, language becomes important, in the words of Richard Ford, “in and of itself” (Guagliardo 614); language becomes historical insofar as it illustrates the character of reality as a *socially constructed* discourse at any given historical moment, the language of any given time reflecting the fusion of need and circumstance. Discourse is not, finally, fixed, but changes and alters as the pressures of a varying external reality affect society. One main project of dirty realism, then, regards the way that metanarratives become fixed beliefs, become ahistorical, and the falsity, the simulatedness, of the methods behind such “permanence.”<sup>2</sup> The nihilistic comedy found in much of dirty realism, its black humour, surfaces in relation to lampooning attempts to constitute a transparent metanarrative. De Certeau therefore enlightens us to the way dirty realism itself conceives the writing of reality, and the way the language of a particular historical moment lends itself to appropriation and subversion. Dirty realism, for its part, investigates the possibilities open to discursive appropriation and its effects.

Dirty realists remain divided upon the hypocrisy aesthetic as a means of appropriating and critiquing the proper. Indeed, the works of Charles Bukowski, such as the stories in *Septuagenarian Stew* (1990), and the early works of Raymond Carver,<sup>3</sup> especially the story “Put Yourself in My Shoes” (1976), revel in the hypocrisy aesthetic, neither conceiving, nor wanting to conceive, a way out of the isolation that results from the interplay of discursive simulation and the communal effects of the ordinary; conversely, Richard Ford, in *The Sportswriter* (1986) and

*Independence Day* (1995), and Mark Anthony Jarman, in *Salvage King Ya!* (1997), seek an end to the impasse imposed on them by dirty realism's hypocrisy aesthetic. In any case, each of these works variously reference the ordinary (broached through "death"), irrationality (as the means of thwarting the "rationalist" scientific discourses addressed by de Certeau, as well as the social result of such discourses), what Horkheimer and Adorno call "monadism" (the social atomisation characteristic of late capital, which, both in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1944, and in the context of this study, is a term that broadly characterises postwar America),<sup>4</sup> and the artistic and epistemological appropriation and pastiche characteristic of Jameson's late capital. The two sets of works—Bukowski and Carver's versus Ford and Jarman's—differ largely in the *attitude* they take towards the effect of the hypocrisy aesthetic on the surrounding community; to either side these works disclose the operation of dirty realism within postmodernity according to two differing dispositions towards the social collective.

The hypocrisy aesthetic preserves individual absolutes at the expense of a collective plurality. It is symptomatic of Jameson's contention that, in postmodernity, "for political groups which seek actively to intervene in history and to modify its otherwise passive momentum . . . there cannot but be much that is deplorable and reprehensible in a cultural form of image addiction which . . . effectively abolishes any practical sense of the future and of the collective project." (46). The demise of history, the loss of the real to the simulacrum, and the abolition of diachronic for synchronic time prevents, in Jameson's view, the emergence of the necessary components for "the collective project." In depicting the death of history, the emergence of simulacra and the loss of causality with the loss of diachronic time, dirty realism responds to the crises of late capitalism by deploying its hypocrisy aesthetic towards a dialectical appreciation of the historical moment; dirty realism follows Jameson's prescription, attempting

to achieve . . . a type of thinking that would be capable of grasping the demonstrably baleful features of capitalism along with its extraordinary and liberating dynamism simultaneously within a single thought, and without attenuating any of the force of either judgment. . . . to lift [the mind] to a point at which it is possible to understand that capitalism is at one and the same time the best thing that has ever happened to the human race, and the worst . . . to think the cultural evolution of

late capitalism dialectically, as catastrophe and progress all together. (47)

Jameson calls for a fusion of opposites—“best” with “worst,” “catastrophe” with “progress”—in a moment of simultaneity, or “at one and the same time.” The texts of dirty realism erect and sustain the Hegelian contradiction Jameson speaks of by (in the words of Richard Ford’s *Paris Review* interview) “authorizing everything” (69), producing objective morality in the same place as subjective authority. This “grasping” of opposites occurs within a writing that permits itself the freedom of thinking, and endorsing, a simultaneity of contradictions, of not living up to standards that others accept (though the dirty realist may temporarily endorse such standards). Dirty realism’s texts adapt the unlimited expansiveness and absorption of late capitalism into an contradiction-riddled epistemology—an absolutism of opposites which does not “attenuate” the “force of either judgement”—whose practical extension appears as a form of hypocrisy. Dirty realism mimics the characteristics Jameson attributes to late capitalism to liberate itself. An acute awareness of the strength and weaknesses of the textual paradigm established by theorists such as de Certeau enables dirty realism to carry out its hypocrisy aesthetic. Through text, dirty realism establishes an aesthetic of individual liberation at the expense of “the collective project.” The various writers of dirty realism, then, differ in regard to this “expense,” whether they feel comfortable paying the price, or whether they find it too high.

### *I. Texts About and Of Entrapment*

Post-1960s realism grew up on claustrophobia. Late capitalism gave it entrapment *within* a system, while, on a global scale, the Cold War offered captivity *between* a vapid, ungraspable consumer society and a stale, authoritarian one. Dirty realism reflects the North American reality of the post-1960s, a representation no longer working under the illusion of objective syntactical mediation. Since the 1960s, simulation, self-conscious discursive formations and rampant appropriation of subversive artistic efforts have characterised American culture. Dirty realism depends upon linguistic ambiguity to guarantee its liberty-within-hypocrisy. Rather



than directly opposing late capitalist practice, dirty realism appropriates the *form* of that practice to its own ends.

Dirty Realism chooses entrapment as its natural habitat, feeling completely at home in Michel de Certeau's contention, that "there is no way out . . . we are foreigners on the inside [of culture and language]—but there is no outside" (13-14). De Certeau suggests the impossibility of transgressing language and culture, that we remain embedded within particular discursive systems that constantly gesture towards a universal condition language cannot fully conceive; dirty realism revels in discursive simulation of reality. Its mobility depends upon the inability of linguistic constructs to fully determine reality, as well as the relational, contingent and social condition of such constructs. Language forms the terrain from which dirty realism mines its currency.

Richard Ford's *Independence Day*, Raymond Carver's "Put Yourself in My Shoes," Mark Anthony Jarman's *Salvage King Ya!*, and Charles Bukowski's *Septuagenarian Stew*, all deal, either openly or implicitly, with the craft of writing. Characters such as the former author, Ford's Frank Bascombe, or Carver's author, Myers (from the story "Put Yourself in My Shoes"), or Bukowski's purportedly autobiographical protagonists, or Jarman's hyper-eloquent Drinkwater, address the power of the narrator to mediate, control, and escape from reality, while forcing others into observing his version, his representation, of the world. These works of dirty realism interrogate and critique the ways in which the usurpation of narrative primacy permits an almost unlimited license as the same time that it divides communities and isolates individuals; this interest, rather than distinguishing dirty realism from the aesthetic of "metafiction," implicates it in the same concerns and the same historical moment.

Critics such as Kristiaan Versluys<sup>5</sup> argue that the neorealism of the 1970s and 1980s, offered an alternative field of literary production to the then dominant postmodern fiction, or "metafiction," of the 1960s. Versluys, in her "Introduction" to *Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction* (1992), supports the view that neorealism derives from a tradition parallel to, but distinct from, the postmodern: "it has often been forgotten that next to the postmodernist

novel there has always been an important (neo)realist tendency in post-war American fiction" (10). Versluys words, "next to," distinguish and offset neorealism (a group of authors in which she includes Carver) from postmodernity. In fairness, Versluys does recognise neorealism as possessing, "within the strict and difficult ground rules of 'verisimilitude . . . the complexity and unpredictability critics of the genre unfairly accuse them of lacking" (9). Nevertheless, the "unfair" critical persecution of neorealism that she identifies posits neorealism in an antagonism to postmodernity; and, by limiting her reaction to this antagonism to a defence of neorealism's "sophistication" (8), Versluys confines the scope and context of dirty realism.

Versluys's defence pre-empted an investigation into contemporary realism as arising *from* contemporary conditions, rather than simply reacting to a dominant aesthetic. While Versluys recognises that "in (neo-) realism sophistication is manifest in simplicity. Or better, simplicity is but the mask for underlying sophistication" (8), she does not realise that this strategy of "simplicity," by reacting in opposition to postmodern fiction, owes its character as much to the program of its aesthetic "opponent," as to previous forms of realism; this "simplicity" simply marks, as Cynthia J. Hallett points out, in her essay "Minimalism and the Short Story" (1996), a different way of coping with similar concerns: "As neo-realists, minimalist writers seem to share with postmodernists the conviction that the world is random and contingent rather than defined and governed by some stable set of rules, truths and laws; they view language with much the same conviction" (491-92). According to Hallett, dirty realism exhibits the themes of "desensitization," "dislocation," as well as the stylistic characteristics of "condensed structure" and "detached narrative" (492) indicative of all postmodern fiction, whether metafictional or realistic. Versluys, it seems, misses dirty realism's historical context by concentrating too closely on superficial dissimilarities between "neorealism" and "metafiction." Her study additionally fails to observe that, by reacting to metafiction, dirty realism also reacted to the cultural conditions informing metafiction.<sup>6</sup> An account of neorealistic fiction must therefore undertake a more sophisticated examination of its relationship to the conditions of postmodernity, one which largely featured the problem of discursive entrapment.

By “metafiction,” Versluys means fictions engendered by the 1960s, born from popular protest against existing societal norms and political agendas, as well as the radical reconsideration of “traditional narrative structure” (10)—and the way it supported existing power structures—precipitated by “structuralism” and “deconstruction” (9).<sup>7</sup> According to Versluys, the writing engendered by these theories’ break with “an identifiable, psychologically and socially delineated ego” (10) proved “self-reflexive” (8), constantly interrogating platforms on which narrative rested. Metafiction questioned the latent authority behind its own *modus operandi*; it suspected the “objectivity” and omnipotence formerly taken for granted in the authorial voice. No longer could fiction depend upon the same notions of the stable, integrated ego that powered nineteenth-century realism; the twentieth-century individual, according to de Certeau, “is a locus in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of such relational determinations [such as sociology, economics, anthropology and psychoanalysis] interact” (xi). “Contradiction”<sup>8</sup> and “incoherence” became characteristic norms of the human. No longer could authors conceive of a self-motivated, objective, bias-free version of “reality,” since the organ for apprehending that reality, the individual human, did not function in an unequivocal manner; if the first-person narrator wasn’t victimised by indoctrination, then the “real” author already was. Writing became a mediation of the inescapable condition of the individual, which appears in dirty realism as a fixation on solipsism,<sup>9</sup> on individual perceptions of the world that do not necessarily accord with the sum of general conditions.

Versluys sees neorealism as opposing “the ‘meaning of meaning’ and related philosophical conundrums” typical of postmodern fiction; according to her, neorealism rejected the postmodern recursiveness apparent in the work of Coover, Pynchon and Barthelme, a recursiveness springing not only from theoretical debates of the 1960s, but also from its political scene (9)—a recursiveness that had at its core a need to constantly question the source of authority, political, social, scientific. I would argue that many of the neorealist writers Versluys mentions—such as Raymond Carver—produced (or are producing) a body of work as interrogative and radical, as much a product of the 1960s (though maybe without the “pyrotechnics,” 10), as their “postmodern” peers. Recursiveness fascinates dirty realists as

much as their metafictional peers.<sup>10</sup> Dirty realism contends with the same limited options and aesthetic difficulties of postmodern fiction—using different formal strategies—in which “recursiveness” plays as important a role. As aware as metafiction of its entrapment within discourse, within language systems, dirty realism addresses the epistemological boundaries of postmodernism with a writing dissimilar from metafiction on a technical level. Like metafiction, dirty realism probes the limits of individual efficacy (and the social pressures facing the individual) in ordering the world through language.<sup>11</sup>

As seen in chapter two, “Dirty Realism: Genealogy,” solipsism proves a naturalistic legacy transmitted to dirty realism through Hemingway. Paul Civello addresses the naturalistic legacy of Hemingway as one concerned with the individual consciousness and its perception of the world: “Hemingway . . . would transform the naturalistic novel by depicting a distinctly modern response—one in which the self creates its own order and meaning—to the naturalistic world of force” (67). The “world of force” finds itself “transformed” into “order and meaning” by the governing “self.” While the 1960s modified the individual to such an extent that the “self,” properly speaking, no longer existed, dirty realism nevertheless adapts Hemingway’s legacy and degrades it to the level of pastiche. Since the individual—in Hemingway’s sense of a self-motivated, discerning, non-indoctrinated entity—no longer exists, solipsism appears in a highly self-conscious manner in dirty realism. Solipsism is not a fact, as Civello says it was for Hemingway, but rather *an option*, a simulated way of viewing the individual’s relation with the real. While metafiction attempts to highlight solipsism (and thereby debunk it) in literary production by writing from and with multiple viewpoints or voices (as in Coover’s “The Babysitter” or Gaddis’s *JR*), dirty realism simulates an ironic solipsism, illustrating how an individually-mediated reality lends itself to narrative control and, through that control, liberty; for dirty realism, a pretence of solipsism defines the first strategy for liberation. One can defy social, contractual obligations and responsibilities by placing oneself as (to borrow from *Septuagenarian Stew*) “the conductor of verisimilitude” (222).

Dirty realism continually contests the narratives—literary, scientific, philosophical or religious—that render or mediate our experience of the ordinary. The opacity of the language of discourse—which oftentimes obscures or, at best, partly omits the reality it speaks for—accounts for the sense of isolation or alienation found in dirty realism. Conversely, this inability of discourse to bind or ground individuals or groups in a *definitive* relation to reality can also enable a narrator with infinite opportunities for syntactical attack, doubling-back, and passivity (allowing imposed discourse to undo itself in his or her favour); and if one receives reality as an inescapable legacy of social conditioning through discursive norms, then tampering with discursive expectations may result in an alteration of reality, or at least an individual mobility within the existing socio-economic structure. As language prevents the capture of reality it therefore releases dirty realists from linguistic obligations (accountability); if language cannot fully account for my presence in reality, then one can detach it from the insistence for credibility vis-à-vis that reality. One can utilise ambiguity to enable a kind of free-floating signification. Freedom, or at least a partial freedom, from the colonisation of the individual by the discourse of capital arrives not through a boldface resistance to the dominant order (as all facets of the individual arise out of the dominant order, such resistance is not only futile, but conceptually impossible) but through a play upon the dominant features of monadism, discursive authority and the intersection of contradictory signals that characterise late industrial life.

### *II. Colonised by Capital*

Capitalism's infiltration of all aspects of North American life during the Cold War left few opportunities for a truly subversive or avant-garde literature. Authors could no longer outrun the accelerated pace of commodification; literature, including experimental literature, became an exchange- rather than use-value, a component part of the West's intellectual machinery itself contaminated by competitiveness. Horkheimer and Adorno, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, first witnessed the colonisation of everyday life (a notion that serves as an embarkation point for both Jameson and De Certeau) by the discourse of capital:

Everything down to the last detail is shaped accordingly [to the dictates imposed by capital]. Like its counterpart, avant-garde art, the entertainment industry determines its own language, down to its very syntax and vocabulary, by the use of anathema. The constant pressure to produce new effects (which must conform to the old pattern) serves merely as another rule to increase the power of the conventions when any single effect threatens to slip through the net. Every detail is so firmly stamped with sameness [by the culture industry] that nothing can appear which is not marked at birth, or does not meet with approval at first sight. (128)

Horkheimer and Adorno depict a society whose cultural program, whose mainstream, feeds on the innovative and radical; in fact, constant change, constant turnover, guarantees continued notice and acceptance.<sup>12</sup> With alteration and variance as cultural norms, the literary market offers few possibilities for maintaining an oppositional or offensive art.<sup>13</sup> Irony, recursiveness, even the scatological, no longer conduct a culturally transformative current. Capitalism has co-opted the subversive, confounding the would-be avant-garde by paradoxically requiring a radical art to sustain mainstream tastes. This situation, or dilemma, occupies dirty realism as much as those writers habitually considered experimental; since they work by “anathema” against the dominant forms of cultural expression, these writers continue to further a debate that sustains capitalist expansion. The “threat” offered by a revolutionary art actually serves to “increase the power” of a “convention” that demands constant “new effects.” Revolutionary art assists the occasional “turnover” needed for the cycles of consumer fashion to keep spinning; “anathema” becomes a component part of the system by revivifying consumer trends grown stale or hackneyed. When the convention is to constantly produce something “new,” artistic revolution becomes a welcome fact, whether it momentarily “threatens” to “slip through the net” (before its absorption) of the established system or not. Therefore, an oppositional art proves more of an assistance to capital’s need for “constant revolution” (as Engels and Marx write in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* 421)<sup>14</sup> than an art that works from within capital (at any rate, Horkheimer and Adorno’s point is that there is no “without” capital, since even oppositional art forms end up advancing capitalist production); the age of late industrial capital requires subversive writers to conceive a form of subversion founded *within* the matrix of the

established socio-economic order, and, here, both Jameson and De Certeau illuminate both the situation of dirty realism and its aesthetic response to that situation.

Fredric Jameson, in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, builds his thesis upon the conclusions of Horkheimer and Adorno. Post-1960s capitalism, or “late capitalism,” as Jameson terms it, figures as a stage in the evolution of market economy characterised by an unlimited cultural absorption and recycling. “Postmodernism,” Jameson writes, “is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process” (x). The dominant aesthetic of late capitalism, postmodernism, commodifies culture, turning and *re*-turning cultural artefacts into consumer objects. The “process” of commodification, not the commodity, occupies the postmodern: the artwork itself is almost irrelevant besides the act of purchasing it; an artwork retains power to the extent that it lends itself, again and again, to making the sale. Its success depends on its ability to stay in fashion, to retain the gaze of successive waves of consumers, to satisfy various desires, to function on several registers of need, becoming a treasured object through successive trends.

Postmodernism thrives on the “constant becoming” of the artefact, a characteristic of consumer society that Marx critiqued in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848): “The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society” (421). Marx cements his abhorrence of “constant revolution” a little further on in the text, suggesting that this notion of “constant becoming” proves one of the self-sustaining elements in capitalist economy: “Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch.” (421). Jameson acts as the evangelist for Marx’s prophecy on the ultimate direction of capital towards “constant revolution,” “uninterrupted disturbance” and “everlasting uncertainty,” the traits of a consumer society that consistently discredits then recycles its trends and directions in order to sell more of the same merchandise to more of the same populace. The artefact “constantly becomes” fashionable and hence desirable, then non-fashionable and hence disposable, then

fashionable again, in a pattern that renews the circuit of capital. The built-in instability of postmodern society provides the flux necessary for the invigoration of late capital.

Jameson's societal model for postmodernity conveys the end-point of accumulation as depicted in *Capital* (1867-95):

Moreover, the development of capitalist production makes it constantly necessary to keep increasing the amount of the capital laid out in a given industrial undertaking, and competition makes the immanent laws of capitalist production to be felt by each individual capitalist as external coercive laws. It compels him to keep constantly extending his capital, in order to preserve it. (293)

The preservation of capital, according to Marx, demands the extension of capital. In order to remain capital, capital must accumulate; it must be constantly becoming. However, changes in the nature of population growth, commodity circulation—as well as the replacement of use-value by recursive fashion—since Marx's nineteenth century, while not changing the essence of Marx's thesis—that capital must continually expand itself—have changed strategies necessary for this expansion. Jameson tackles the job of tracing the route capital travels to “preserve” itself when the market no longer bears room for expansion in Marx's numerical sense. Capital, expanded to its furthest limits, must now recycle in order to maintain itself; it becomes recursive. Retro fashion, for instance, allows for the re-acquisition and re-production of items discarded during the previous fashion “trend.” Constant revolution prevents consumer items from returning to mere use-value (which would slow the rate of expenditure and appropriation, stalling the necessary reproduction and increase of capital). At this stage in capitalist production, everything lends itself for sale; Capital extends itself into, and colonises, those areas which previously sought to oppose the market. Revolutionary programs serve the needs of the enterprise of “constant revolution.”

Jameson meditates on the options for artistic dissent in a system which not only enthusiastically welcomes and subsumes, but requires, products of an oppositional or revolutionary nature (the “anathemas” of Horkheimer and Adorno):

It has already been observed how the . . . expansion of multinational capital ends up penetrating and colonizing those



very precapitalist enclaves . . . which offered . . . footholds for critical effectivity. The shorthand language of co-optation is for this reason omnipresent on the left, but would now seem to offer a most inadequate theoretical basis for understanding a situation in which we all . . . dimly feel that not only punctual and local countercultural forms of cultural resistance and guerrilla warfare but also even overtly political interventions . . . are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it. (49)

With the penetration of capital into (and its “co-optation” of) the leftist aesthetic, Jameson despairs at the re-emergence of viable “footholds” from which to mount a Marxist counter-attack on an artistic basis. He diagnoses a society bereft of any connection to history, a society drowning in “simulacra,” in the loss of actuality as the discourse of capital grows large enough to include and re-sell the rhetoric of rebellion. Classical overt “political interventions”—as embodied by the punk band The Clash (49), with their revolt against the “establishment” and “traditional values”<sup>15</sup>—serve as a “revolutionary” trend useful for the renewal of capital. The values championed by The Clash reinstate a consumer desire and are easily co-opted by industry (in this case, the recording industry) for profit. Counter-culture movements supply consumer fetish objects (in this case recordings), in an alliance with the “enemy,” that guarantee further sales. Such a cultural apparatus offers no space from which to conceive resistance.

If Jameson offers us a view into the symptoms of a late capitalist society, then de Certeau offers a means of operating subversively within it. Extending the metaphor of colonisation, de Certeau finds his example of operativity in the colonial context:

Submissive, and even consenting to their subjection, the Indians nevertheless often made of the rituals, representations, and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors [the Spanish] had in mind; they subverted them not by rejecting or altering them, but by using them with respect to ends and references foreign to the system which they had no choice but to accept. (xiii)

In the situation of the South and Central American “Indians,” de Certeau describes the possibilities for subversion within the context of a system so overpowering that it does not leave an alternative space from which to mount political opposition. What remains to hand for

rebellious elements in the Indian population also remains to hand for dirty realist authors of the contemporary period, namely, the very “rituals, representations and laws” imposed upon them by the system of late capital. In other words, they can take the dominant features of capital—pastiche, simulacra, absorption, discursive variance—and deploy them in the interests of “ends and references foreign to the system,” or to escape commodification, consumption and recycling. If Jameson describes the “postmodern” reality of late capital, then de Certeau offers a means for navigating and addressing that reality. Dirty realism, like de Certeau’s Indians, finds itself faced with a reality whose very description requires surrendering to the means by which capital is colonising the real.

Both Terry Eagleton, in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1996), (117-18), and Jameson (drawing from Ernest Mandel), view realism as the dominant aesthetic of a certain “epoch” in capitalist production, an “epoch” Jameson calls “market capitalism” (35-36); realism promoted the representative aesthetic of a certain stage in the evolution of capital. Eagleton speaks of realism as a transaction—it “interfere[s] with what it mediates as little as possible” (117)—as a purportedly pure linguistic exchange of equal values (which Eagleton condemns as illusory, since language itself impedes any unequivocal or “natural” communication, 117). Both Eagleton and Jameson, though they differ in their leanings (Eagleton adhering to more classical Marxist lines, Jameson to a more post-structuralist strain), both express, here, the notion that realism was the artistic accompaniment to a certain stage in the growth of capitalism. For Jameson, realism invokes a certain stage in the “systematic modification of capitalism” no less than postmodernism identifies “not the cultural dominant of a wholly new social order” but rather a characteristic aesthetic of late capitalism (xii). In other words, realism is a dated aesthetic affixed to a historical period (though Jameson does hedge his bets by noting that “shreds of . . . older avatars,” including realism, “live on,” “rewrapped in the luxurious trappings” of postmodernism, xii). What remains of interest here is the notion of realism as a tradition past, rather than one ongoing. A pastiche of tradition characterises dirty realism’s mutation of realism in accordance with the demands of postmodernity.

Dirty realism, aware of tradition, plays upon notions of empiricism and the objective, upon realist conventions, to disrupt transactions. If traditional realism “sold” the illusion of an unmediated recollection of experience, or direct representation of reality, to its readership, then postmodern realism vacillates between myths of linguistic transparency and opacity until our attention shifts from the “reality” described to “reality” as description, reality as a thing “colonised” by discourse—as illustrated by the protagonist of *Independence Day*, Frank Bascombe, who relies upon the way language allows him to “make things seem” (255). In Raymond Carver’s second collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), the constrictedness of the language works against the evocation of experience. Charles Bukowski in *Septuagenarian Stew* plays off the disparity between language as subjective epistemology (solipsism) and as the graspable presence of a stable, empirically dependable external order. Mark Jarman in *Salvage King Ya!* illustrates the way lyricism alleviates Drinkwater from ceding to the contractual obligations of language. The self-consciousness of language-use in dirty realism often abrogates the realist contract between writer and reader (and at other times reaffirms it). The failure to distil certifiable meaning in the linguistic economy, the inability of language to present phenomena in an unmediated fashion, becomes dirty realism’s power source. Its shifting between the ordinary and the proper counters the rationalistic logic of consumer society which requires adherence to consistent discursive norms. In a letter to Gerard Melanga, Charles Bukowski opines, “sometimes I think that the greatest creators have been the greatest liars” (168); he valorises lies as aesthetically prime. Frank Bascombe says he is “armed only with words” (217). Dirty realism locates its arsenal in linguistic unreliability. It deploys simulacra.

In keeping with the Jamesonian postmodern, dirty realism recycles and mutates the conventions of realism to market an old product in a radically different form. As Carver, Bukowski, Ford and Jarman will illustrate, the relation between reality and discourse becomes unstable; these authors offer the “realism” of an untenable reality, in which elements of traditional realism often function as red herrings, unsound conventions and discursive traps

that enable an extension of an author's capital. While Hemingway depended upon the "right word" to convey reality, dirty realists such as Charles Bukowski depend upon the "right word" not only to recall reality but, just as often, to lift themselves free of it. If late capitalism<sup>16</sup> implies the furthest extension of multinational capital, and with it a necessary return to re-colonise the consumers it has already bought and sold, postmodern realism returns to recast the practices and conventions of the realist tradition it arose from, thereby unveiling its participation in the postmodern process. By adopting the modes of late capital in its representations of reality, dirty realism at once reproduces that reality, but in such a self-conscious manner that it illustrates the agenda underscoring that reality. As the titles of Raymond Carver's stories illustrate, dirty realism represents the manner in which a capitalistic discourse has colonised the ordinary, and the discursive norms that have "colonised" our apprehension of reality; yet, at the same time, dirty realism adopts capitalism's discursive modes to enable its own resistance to such colonisation.

#### A. Carver's Miscues

Raymond Carver deploys various techniques to subvert the "economy" of realism; for example, the titles of his stories prevent easy, metonymical transactions of meaning between reader and text. Roman Jakobson, in his essay, "The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles" (1956), locates realism in a practice of "contiguity": "Following the path of contiguous relationships, the realistic author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time. He is fond of synechdochic details" (78). Jakobson's "intimate ties of realism with metonymy" (81) delimits an earlier strategy of realism; he proposes that realistic conventions of "plot," "atmosphere" and "character" conspire not symbolically or metaphorically (as in the case of lyric poetry, 77) to create parallels between independent concepts, but associatively, or "contiguously," digressing "from" *something* "to" *something else*. While metaphors bring two disparate images, things, or ideas into contact, the comparison is static, one of similarity and equilibrium, whereas the "contact" provided by contiguity provides trajectory, the movement from particular to particular rather than

contrast/similarity. Contiguity offers a diachronic, rather than synchronic, paradigm; and the destabilisation of contiguity (and hence the diachronic) occupies dirty realism. Realism, according to Jakobson, moves sequentially, mirroring the process of rationalist logic, where an argument progresses by acceptable connection to an axiom.

Jakobson's model conceives of a kind of literary capitalism, where "wealth" accrues naturally from an initial investment in "plot," where the logic of the title or first sentence engenders acceptable further sentences. Abrogation of this "contiguity" frequently occurs in Carver's misuse of titles as indicators of content; titles serve not to placate readerly expectation but to antagonise it, not to aid the reception of message but to confound it and, by confounding it, to expose the discursive matrix which regulates reception and resistance. Title offsets the reader from his or her position of narrative "decoder." According to Stuart Hall's argument in "Encoding, Decoding" (1990), advertising, like the nineteenth-century realism Jakobson studies, works on the basis of contiguity (91). Carver's realism, aware of the symbioses between consumption and convention, mixes the signal; his stories offer an anti-consumption, an anti-practice, *by way of* the conventions at hand, their tactics drawn from the system of consumption which they subvert. Carver then recalls, and by recalling props up, the system he works for *and* against. Unable to exit what de Certeau calls the "consumer grid" (xvii), or systems of expectation, contract, and exchange, Carver uses materials ready to hand to oppose the accumulation of capital from *within*—by utilising expectations of contiguity to break the "circuit" of readerly purchase.

Dirty realism absorbs and recycles to offset the absorption and recycling of late capitalism; in this way it simultaneously exemplifies and protests societal conditions. The story, "What's in Alaska?"—included in the collection *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976)—leaves readers anticipating the aptness of the title to its respective narrative. However, Carver's title tricks expectation by addressing the irrelevant, in effect drawing our attention to the "act" of titling, a manoeuvre every bit as self-conscious as metafiction. "What's in Alaska?" nods towards an epistemological inquiry, a verification we expect the story to enact. According to

Jakobson's theory, the premise the story begins with (in this case a quest for knowledge) should inform narrative progress; however, in Carver's story the question of Alaska proves incidental, as the story probes not the limits of the unknown but the limits of the known: the definite, inescapable boundaries of the narrator's life, the limitations of his marriage and material possibilities.

"What's In Alaska?" follows an evening in the life of a married couple, Carl and Mary, following an invite to try out a new "water pipe" at the home of another couple, Helen and Jack. The couples proceed to smoke marijuana through the hookah and indulge in seemingly random conversational topics, through which we understand that Carl and Mary are preparing for a change in their lives, though the nature of that change remains uncertain (84-86). During the evening, Carl thinks he spies Mary's intimacy with Jack, though, again, the situation provides too scant evidence for Carl to draw conclusions. Shortly thereafter, the couples observe with horror as Jack and Helen's cat drags a mouse into the room, signifying the intrusion of inexplicable forces on their plans and lives. The story ends with Carl, who has returned home, in bed holding his shoe in preparation for hurling it against a pair of presumably rodent "eyes" (93) he believes to have seen in the dark.

Ewing Campbell, in *Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction* (1992), applies the adjectives "uncomprehending" and "befuddled" (125) to the ending of "What's In Alaska?" suggesting Carl's inability to conceive an epistemological horizon beyond the limits of his perception (or even to import those perceptions into a more meaningful context). The last sentence draws razor-sharp parameters: "He waited for it to move once more, to make the slightest noise" (93). The narrative narrows to isolation not only physical but mental, a solipsistic awareness of the "rat," whose presence Carl's conjecture, rather than knowledge, confirms. Answers exist without questions; questions cannot be answered. The epistemological register in the story seems more the result of habit than a genuine knowledge of surrounding actualities. The titular question prepares us for what *does not* come, mirroring the coincidental and non-sequential conditions of Carl's life, the randomness he must either overwrite with a

through-line (history), or accept. Only intuition informs him: being in the right place at the right time to observe his wife's relations with Jack. The story follows a non-contiguous and non-causal sequence; it favours incidental accretion (more closely resembling Jakobson's notion of the metaphor, which combines/contrasts discrete elements that may or may not necessarily seem immediate corollaries for one another) rather than logical, rational continuity (or Jakobson's "contiguity"). The stories work against Jakobson's rationalistic, metonymical schema to illustrate that a diachronic history arises not from certain knowledge but in spite of its absence. The story illustrates the tenuous character of historical "stories," how much they leave out and how much they expect us to accept on the basis of trust (a commodity in short supply during the conspiratorially-minded and paranoid 1960s) rather than solid evidence. By calling so much attention to Carl's solipsism, the story negatively refers us to other possible "answers" to Carl's epistemological conundrums, or the "other" possible readings for each event, in other words, towards a "synchronic" notion of history.

Carver's table of contents in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* displays a high degree of self-reflexivity; readers scanning the titles of the collection could as easily mistake "What Do You Do in San Francisco?" for "What's in Alaska?" Carver's use of terse, monosyllabic titles verges on self-parody, simulating an interchangeability, a generic blandness to the affixed narratives. The titles stymie our voyeuristic impulse by turning the gaze back on itself; we experience the failure of voyeurism, of a transparent unmediated view into the other, since the titles fail to violate anything except the sense of an omnipotent and all-seeing gaze. Concerned with how expectation directs the reading experience, how it enlightens or occludes awareness of self and community, of the various possible interpretative levels made available by a single narrative, Carver redresses the traditional strategies of realism to expose the limits of the verifiable, of the real, given the discursive expectations of traditional realism. Realism is no longer a text that mediates reality transparently, but a set of expectations derived from such formulaic techniques as metonymy. Realism is the fulfilment of expectation, the "proper" decoding of an expected signal; reality, on the other hand, sits somewhere outside the discursive traditions of realism. By citing and subverting traditional techniques, Carver calls upon us to

question our own indoctrination into the discourse of reality, into the narrative lines realism has taught us to force upon reality. The question marks in his titles suggest an involvement in, though not necessarily a resolution to, interrogation; the open-endedness left by the unanswered question draws us into the ordinary, into a space beyond the artifice of the short story or realism, calling upon the reader to examine the ways in which discourse cordons off and directs our apprehension of "reality."

### III. "Making Do"<sup>17</sup> in *Someone Else's Shoes*

#### A. Appropriating the Discourse

Raymond Carver's story, "Put Yourself in My Shoes" – from *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* – follows a looping structure typical of metafiction; the story finishes on the sentence: "He was at the very end of the story" (152). Rather than using this looping structure to expose the narrative as only one possibility among many, or to demonstrate the dangers of textual enclosure, Carver uses it to demonstrate the license permitted to discursive authority.

Taking place at Christmastime, "Put Yourself in My Shoes" recounts a visit made by Myers and his wife, Paula, to the home of an older couple, a university professor, Edgar Morgan and his wife, Hilda. Here, the two couples become involved in an argument regarding the Myers's tenure as house-sitters for the Morgans. It seems, though the story never clarifies this, that the Myers abused their privileges in the Morgans's home, taking advantage of their position and destroying or damaging many of the elderly couple's possessions. The story follows as insinuation leads to insult and finally to open hostility, where the Morgans demand the Myerses acknowledge their culpability and make appropriate amends. The Myerses refuse to endorse this view and the story ends without reconciliation.

The protagonist, Myers, appropriates the narrative to liberate himself from the responsibility of violating the Morgans's home. Through storytelling, Myers evades participation in communal issues while still exacting that participation from others. He simultaneously plays victim and criminal. The closing sentence describes Myers's co-optation of the conflict between himself and the Morgans, subsuming the variant versions of the house-



sitting “story” (with its overtones of class conflict between the low-income Myerses and the upper middle-class Morgans) into a single narrative that suspends two contradictory viewpoints, and conceivably profits Myers by elevating his “name” to “the best-seller list” (132). Myers capitalises on the rift between the two couples’ stories; rather than using fiction to heal this rift, or, in the service of pluralism, to show how both stories arise from equally valid experiences, thereby gesturing towards a mutual, comprehensive understanding, Myers discloses both stories as contending absolutes and passively inhabits this binary. In the words of Kirk Nessel, in *The Stories of Raymond Carver: A Critical Study* (1995), Myers is a “plunderer of experience” (64); the violation and “plundering” of the Morgans’s home serves as a metaphor for the *real* plundering in the story: Myers’s exploiting and appropriation of the narrative staunchly put forward by Morgan himself. He exploits the problematics of Morgan’s history to evade responsibility, and effectively stall communal agency. The lack of a unified story is the story, Myers’s story.

“Put Yourself in My Shoes” offers an allegory of the aesthetics of late capitalism. The story finds Myers depressed, mentally and physically on edge with his lack of literary production; it finds him “between”: “He was between stories, and he felt despicable” (134). As we shall see with Bukowski’s protagonists, Bascombe and Drinkwater, the state of being “in between” (de Certeau 30) proves an essential component in the “art” of “drawing unexpected results from [the oppressive] situation” (de Certeau 30). In the end an in-between state will inform the very story that liberates Myers, that allows him to “laugh” (148) and “giggle” (149), and to appropriate Morgan’s discourse “unexpectedly,” to make it his own without actually claiming ownership. At the end, Myers responds to the accusations couched in Morgan’s narrative with exhilaration: he speaks “merrily” (151) and answers Morgan’s demand to “put that [Morgan’s accusatory narrative] into words and not pussyfoot around with it, either,” by “just laugh[ing]” (151). Paradoxically, the telling of Morgan’s story, rather than engendering guilt or bothering Myers’s conscience, instead releases him from a “despicable” feeling into one of joy. Myers allows Morgan to rant—about how the Myerses violated his home during their

tenure as house-sitters—without elaborating his own side of the story. Carver establishes a singular voice—Morgan’s dominant discourse, which absorbs or exterminates counter-discourses; instead of ceding space to counter-discourse, Carver allows Morgan’s ranting to exclusively inform the narrative.

Morgan’s absolutism undermines itself. Throughout the story, Morgan pontificates on the pre-eminence of his own aesthetic mode; after telling the story of the adulterous professor, and the various viewpoints to consider in writing the story, he binds it to a dominant aesthetic: “It would take a Tolstoy to tell it and tell it right. . . . No less than a Tolstoy” (142). He considers a nineteenth-century realist mode as the one and only format for recounting his story. Hypocritically, Morgan extends and withholds the story-as-gift from Myers, first saying Myers might consider writing it and then insulting his talent through comparison to a purportedly more talented author (to an author whose standing is *socially sanctioned*). Morgan controls the perception and appreciation of artistry, setting Myers’s literary endeavours within a greater narrative context (the literary canon). (Myers, through a similar tactic of embedding narrative—retained in Morgan’s words, no less—within the greater narrative formed by the entire text of “Put Yourself in My Shoes,” usurps overall narrative primacy.) Morgan holds Myers and Paula (and, his wife, Hilda) hostage to his own discourse, which overwrites the scene with the dog (145), the carollers (144) or the fate of the “Jazz at the Philharmonic” record set (151); the Morgans do not allow the other couple to leave (138, 142, 144, 145): “‘I want you to hear this story,’ Morgan said, raising his voice. ‘You will insult Mrs. Morgan, you will insult us both, if you don’t listen to this story.’ Morgan clenched his pipe” (146). By prescribing action for the Myers on the basis of how their leaving will supposedly affect Hilda, Morgan manipulates the scene through “contiguity”; he even directs Hilda’s retelling of the “Mrs. Attenborough” story; “‘Come to the point, dear’” (147) he says. By controlling discourse, Morgan masters the situation.

Myers can only retaliate to discursive domination by repeating sentences from Hilda’s narrative (which Morgan approves): “Myers began to laugh. ‘Fate . . . sent her . . . to . . . die . . . in

... your ... living ... room? he said between gasps" (148). Not getting the expected response from Myers, Morgan explodes and, in a rage, proclaims Morgan "no writer" (149), effectively appropriating the writer's role for himself, as the story that follows indicates; after this narrative, his own in the guise of writer, Morgan hypocritically rescinds his own previous aesthetic demands by commenting: "That's the real story that is waiting to be written. . . . It doesn't need a Tolstoy" (151). (Ironically, a non-Tolstoy, Myers, *will* tell the story). Here, Morgan insists that Myers endorse the validity of his narrative, accede to his version, his discourse; he demands that Myers repeat the story of "Mr. and Mrs. Y" and "Mr. and Mrs. Z" (149) and by doing so affirm Morgan's discourse as the only credible one. Myers of course does so, repeating Morgan's story using Morgan's diction; but, in the process, he dethrones Morgan.

"Put Yourself in My Shoes" traces the production of simulacra, since the story itself suggests that all discourse falsifies original events, subordinating the event in question to discursive agendas or, simply, bad memory; the enormous rift between the narrative aesthetic and the events it manipulates effectively negates the existence of the original. The story hints that Morgan's narrative is a version of events, not an actual recreation of them—it is not the *original*—and also that we *cannot know* what really happened. By granting Morgan a monopoly on discourse, Myers bankrupts him, exposing his story as a simulacrum, a false totality. He uses the tools of capital against capital itself; by reproducing narrative capital, for Morgan, he transfers it into his own account. "Put Yourself in My Shoes" indicates *positional* transference, but not (as the title leads us to expect) transfer of empathy.

Myers feels no need to escape the "loop" of Morgan's monopoly through a discursive offensive; instead, he allows Morgan's narrative to undo itself, and in doing so reconditions the loop to serve rather than oppress him. By not opposing Morgan's attempt at reproducing his narrative capital, Myers extends his own fund of narrative. Rather than attempting to break out of the circuit of capital, Carver's dirty realism exploits it; in doing so it becomes a form of capitalism. "Put Yourself in My Shoes" recounts a conflict between thieves. In finally assuming Morgan's position (by presumably writing the final draft of "Put Yourself in My Shoes"), Myers

excludes other “voices,” leaving in his wake the same casualties as the older man. Myers may come across to us as a more sympathetic character because of class difference, because of an underdog status, but his appropriation of Morgan’s narrative only reverses, rather than equalises, their social relation. Just as Hilda’s “voice” becomes an instrument of Morgan, Morgan’s voice becomes an instrument of Myers. The dominant discourse subjects everyone to its reproduction. “Put Yourself in My Shoes” provides a corollary for Jameson’s consumption for the sake of consumption.<sup>18</sup> The result of this tautological circuit of narrative capital, a result congruent with the tenets of classical Marxism, is the alienation of those characters on the margins of, or beholden to, the owner of the story’s “means of production.”

Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s chapter (from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*), “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” outlines the means by which the cultural apparatus reproduces a dominant discourse (in much the same way as Carver’s story does through the device of storytelling), at the expense of collective empathy, the circuit of cultural capital fracturing the populace into monads. Throughout “Put Yourself in My Shoes,” Carver hints at Morgan’s rejection of the co-operation necessary for community. He extends drinks to the Myers not out of generosity but in order to capture them within social convention. He refuses to allow the dog into the house, just as he refuses to allow Hilda herself to keep a pet (137). He takes command of the discourse within the home by appealing to unbreakable social conventions; yet, through the illusory gestures of hospitality embodied in such conventions he means only to subjugate the other characters to his discursive machinery. His discourse aims at retaining his primacy at any expense, including his wife’s mental well-being.

Carver offers a window into the results of Morgan’s selfish monopoly during the scene involving the carollers. Hilda “knows” the carollers will not “come” to visit the Morgans, and when they bypass the house she begins “to weep” (144). Morgan denies her right to a separate explanation for this snubbing by “insist[ing]” (152) on her participation in his enterprise, which means disregarding the issue (*her* issues) altogether (144), by leaving them out, part of the “ordinary” which his “proper” discourse cannot assimilate. Horkheimer and Adorno point out

the effect of the cultural "circuit" of capital on individuality: "In the culture industry the individual is an illusion not merely because of the standardization of the means of production. He is tolerated only so long as his complete identification with the generality is unquestioned" (154). Morgan permits, or "tolerates," Hilda insofar as she participates in his discourse. When she finally contradicts him (151), he only uses her disagreement to more firmly cement his version of narrative facts, in other words, to override her claims: "But I am sure of it now . . . I am positive I saw those records just before we left" (151). The "now" of Morgan's sentence carries a conviction directly resulting from Myers's and Hilda's disagreement; verbal resistance only strengthens Morgan's position. His assertion of primacy occurs at the expense of the others, by cancelling out their counter-discourses, reflecting Horkheimer and Adorno's view of individuality as something tolerated only insofar as it contributes to the "unquestioned" "generality," or Morgan's absolutist discourse, his convictions (again reflecting the tautological character of late capital as it manifests in discourse): "every advance in individuation of this kind took place at the expense of the individuality in whose name it occurred, so that nothing was left but the resolve to pursue one's own particular purpose" (155). Morgan's stubborn "resolve" to pursue only his "own particular purpose" undermines the individual voices of Linda, Myers and Hilda, and effectively seals off Morgan from the mutuality represented by the carollers. The individuality presented here reproduces Horkheimer's and Adorno's definition as the pursuit of aims that stymie collective perceptions, that subordinate collective accounts to the dominant discourse of a solipsism simulating a reality in spite of contrary evidence it clearly apprehends; with such "individuation" as the norm, the political and social structure no longer permit the formulation of overriding "popular" ideologies.<sup>19</sup> Within his sphere of production and self-promotion Morgan either subsumes by absorbing, or rejects by explaining away, by "levelling," those elements that do not contribute to his social vision (a vision very much indicative of the dominant system, since Morgan functions as a middle-class, mature male, primary breadwinner, a man enshrined his is la-z-boy throne in the living room of his own house while speaking down to the marginalised members of the population: two wives and a

failing writer). The other characters remain isolated, unable to discursively unite with the other characters or to fully participate in Morgan's version.

Myers's "silence" at the end of the story signifies not only the effectiveness of Morgan's appropriation but also the means whereby Myers takes control: out of Morgan's inscription over the silence of the other three characters comes "Put Yourself in My Shoes," a story about the failure or unwillingness to credit another's experience, a story *not* about putting one's self in another's "shoes." Through silence, Myers achieves his own individual program, or "purpose." Permitting Morgan's inscription, Myers tells the story of a cheap, egotistical, insensitive man. Morgan's discourse, by means of its circularity, its self-centredness, allows for the conditions of its own subversion; it discredits itself most emphatically where it inscribes itself most emphatically.

#### B. The Tactics and Casualties of Silence

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau infiltrates the "closed circuit" of a capitalist economy to determine the options remaining available for subversion and resistance: "The panorama-city is a 'theoretical' (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices" (93). De Certeau stands upon the World Trade Centre (a suitable metaphor for Jameson's late capitalist society) and beholds, at a glance, the "panoramic layout of Manhattan." The "condition of possibility" for this totalising view arises in an "oblivion" or misunderstanding of "practices" making deviant use of the space beneath the gaze. The bird's-eye voyeur misses those elements, those particularities, beneath his totalising view: the "microbe-like, singular and plural practices" (96) "below the thresholds at which visibility begins" (93). Morgan's simulated discourse elides or blinds itself to the contentious voices and actions constituted by the other characters; his panoramic view of the situation overwrites those "murky intertwining daily behaviours" "alien" to it (93). Similarly, Myers's writing of the story reproduces the conditions necessary for a view from the World Trade Centre; only this time it is *his* view. The circularity of the story encloses and diminishes Morgan within Myers's own panorama. Besides Morgan's insistence on "knowing" (152) the

“whereabouts” (151) of his possessions (which would infuse his narrative vision with credibility), stand the invisible, the “opaque and blind” “operations” (93), of Paula and Hilda that Myers utilises to destabilise Morgan’s role as primary story teller.

While Morgan and Myers battle for supremacy using aggression and passivity, respectively, Paula and Hilda remain the “daily and indefinitely other” within narrative. Carver gives occasional glimmerings of extra-textual operations: physical gestures occupy the shadows cast by the words. While Myers remains content to do “nothing” (132) and thereby experience and reproduce the story (appropriately, at the start he answers Paula’s query on what he did that day by saying, “Nothing. . . . I vacuumed,” 135, equating his “nothing” with absorption and gathering, the filling of the void with material “vacuumed,” or plundered, from Morgan), Paula and Hilda slip in and out of discourse through gesture and action. Paula starts events rolling by placing a “call” to Myers (132); throughout the story she continually makes, and accepts, physical contact with her husband (135, 152), physically repels the attacking dog (136), and follows Myers’s lead in not endorsing Morgan’s discourse (144), which causes the older man to “frown” (144). Her physical actions stand as emblems of the ordinary, phenomena which mingle with, and alter discourse, but which cannot *be* spoken and hence displace one discourse with another. The alignment of physical agency with Paula gestures towards the commonality of all characters in a social real, a social real, however, continually overwritten by Morgan’s and, later, Myers’s discourses.

Hilda’s act of weeping haunts the narrative. She enhances the subtext of loneliness and isolation by humming (143), smiling “faintly” (145), and, finally, after her husband’s violent outburst, waving at the departing couple from the porch (152). Here, within Carver’s text, sit faint traces of activity “insinuated . . . into the networks of surveillance” (96). Paula and Hilda represent the constant “other,” those who cannot access the trade centre and thereby gain a totalising vision.

These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen. . . .  
The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a  
manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out  
of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation  
to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other. . . . A

*migrational, or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city. (93)*

Paula's and Hilda's motions and reactions disturb and distort the frequency of the transmitted story; they subsist as background static. Their actions (many of them performed in service of someone else, as in Paula protecting Myers from the dog, or to visibly effect another, such as where Paula causes Morgan to frown) serve as invitations rather than exclusions, signs that invite the consummation of a mutually participatory discourse, one open to all persons. While Paula in many instances reinforces Myers's passivity she also alludes to a house-sitting story of another couple, a story untold and unseen, a story that "slips" into the planned and "readable" text to displace the primacy of the dominant version. Though Morgan's story becomes Myers's story, the two men remain estranged from one another; and while Myers shows how Linda and Hilda remain buried in text, he does nothing to disinter them, he does not even provide them a relational space<sup>20</sup> from which to articulate their disposition towards the house-sitting story. Myers appropriates Paula and Hilda's gestures into metaphors within his own field of production. The two women remain subordinate to the contest between husbands. Nowhere in the story does direct opposition or confrontation occur between the women and men.

Morgan (and, by extension, Myers) becomes a "subject of will and power" (xix) by turning his "subject" status into the all-powerful position of "author." Morgan's hypocrisy isolates him from the community around him, allowing him to apply a set of normative rules he feels no compunction to live up to himself: criminalising the violation of his home while not taking heed of his own violation of the cognitive "homes" inhabited by others; and both Morgan and Myers feel content within their self-generating and self-fulfilling circuit of judgement and evasion. The two men become authors of their respective tales while people like Hilda and Paula remain "common people" whose alienation from text leaves them recourse only to

a calculus which cannot count on a "proper" (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. . . . A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. (xix)



Though Hilda and Paula have a limited agency in the extra-textual realm of gesture, action and silence, their power remains affixed to the openings discourse allows them; they cannot, finally, avoid inscription into the body of text that overwrites their separate concerns; they infuse the text with a glimmer, the vague suggestion of other possibilities, while at the same time working within its confines.

Like most dirty realists, Myers has his cake and eats it too, telling a story without having to stand behind one, playing victim and victimiser, proletariat and capitalist. De Certeau points out the way in which tactical operations such as dirty realism liberate themselves at the expense of the roving community buried in their texts. By not having access to text, by not superimposing an aesthetic "vision" over events, Paula and Hilda have recourse only to a "calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus" (37); in other words, by not crafting, or being unable to craft, a discursive place for themselves, they must operate on and within a discourse that speaks *for* them. Not enabled to speak for themselves—excluded from textual operativity—their actions speak of the reality Morgan and Myers overwrite, the reality outside the simulacrum, a place of pure action, a dynamism not reducible to discursive configurations, though whose ascertainable existence *should* demand the recognition of discursive partiality and, through that recognition, at least the attempt at a more fully-rounded accounting. "Put Yourself in My Shoes" thus avoids a complete fall into solipsism while at the same time illustrating how Myers uses his subjectivity, his mode of apprehending reality (writing stories), to liberate himself from the narrative imposed upon him by Morgan.

While Carver's text does recall the ordinary, and the invisible "other" in Paula and Hilda, it only does so to effect its separateness from it and them. *The Practice of Everyday Life* defines the relation between the "common people" and the "system" as contingent: "They [the indigenous populace conquered by the Spanish] were *other* within the very colonization that outwardly assimilated them; their use of the dominant social order deflected its power, which they lacked the means to challenge; they escaped it without leaving it" (xiii). Assuming command of Morgan's discourse, and appropriating, as metaphors (for Morgan's selfishness),

the gestures of Paula and Hilda, Myers in effect “others” them exactly as Morgan’s narrative “othered” him. As de Certeau points out, indigenous peoples, unable to “challenge” the system, used the power of the “dominant social order” against itself; such power structures, as “Put Yourself in My Shoes” attests, insofar as they function as text (as long as they remain discourse), offer “cross-cuts, fragments and lucky hits in [their] framework” (38); but, although these loopholes empower Myers, they do not actually let him quit the field of power relations; the structure itself remains. De Certeau can speak only of a collective-in-diversity, of various and miscellaneous patterns established by the “actions” of the “common people”; he cannot speak of a united front against the dominant order. The conflict between indigenous peoples and the Spanish conquerors, and between Morgan and Myers, remains relational; Myers’s subversion necessitates, and relies on, the presence of a dominant order, itself offset from the body of the ordinary, which would demand recognitions beyond the scope of the two men’s agendas.

Myers becomes Marx’s dreaded constant revolutionary; his method (passivity) requires an entrenched, dominant discourse from which to draw an arsenal. He finds pleasure (laughter) in not having to do anything but recycle and appropriate, in not having to assume, or even attempt to come up with, a definite position against the system. Myers deploys the system against the system without sighting an exit from it, his “poaching” (xii) on Morgan’s narrative “property” (xii), empowers him without offering a communal alternative. The refusal to commit to, or even engage in an attempt to produce, a communal or shared discourse emancipates Myers from dependency on another; it isolates him. Confined to a system of constant and continual “othering,” he laughs in the solitary confinement of liberty-in-indeterminacy. In appropriating, and alienating Morgan from Morgan’s own narrative, Myers endorses an economy of consumption and capital, profiting from poaching on the other man’s story. Moreover, Myers draws his power from inactivity, from remaining in one position with a view over the city (or page); unlike Bascombe or Drinkwater, he never relinquishes narrative pre-eminence, knowing that to do so would oust him from his strategic position; it would make him a player within another’s text: he would cede authorship (and therefore authority) for operativity (and therefore operating someone else’s discursive machinery). In order to maintain

his "text," he needs the equilibrium, the stasis of a linguistic economy. Silence becomes Myers's primary tactic in overthrowing Morgan; however, his "silence," his unwillingness to fully articulate Paula and Hilda as more than physical presences, also indicates the "borders" of his discourse, where his discourse offsets itself from the ordinary, and the community it ignores.

From Bukowski's fistfights, to Carver's gestures, to Richard Ford's baseball machines, the authors bring language to bear on the ordinary (and the ordinary to bear on language). Language offers escape hatches and deflections, a capacity to overwrite the ordinary with a codified history grounded in systematic dominance *or* communal agreement, at the same time as its instability and indeterminacy allows for it to dissolve in contact with reality.

#### *IV. Snarled in Text/Ordinary Escapes*

Dirty realism's hypocrisy aesthetic functions by slipping in and out of the social discourse sanctioned by the "readers."<sup>21</sup> This slipperiness appears in Myers's sanctioning of, and withholding sanction from, Morgan. Myers's paradoxical position as victim *and* victimiser, his hypocritical playing of contradictory self-representations, can only occur if he permits Morgan a socially authoritative space, and does not openly appropriate that authority. By remaining a subject of the other man's discourse he avoids taking an active stand which would lead to his own openness to tactical subversion. By reproducing Morgan's discursive "signal" he can distort it without necessarily providing a signal of his own. As a "transcriber" rather than producer of the story he in effect reproduces Morgan's "story" in order to operate in the older man's space without providing a similar "space" wherein the older man might subvert him. Conversely, Morgan's continual call for an answer to his charges goes unheeded; in this regard, he receives no sanction from Myers, no communal support for his narrative. Myers therefore derives his power from the ambiguities latent in the other man's language, in the linguistic economy of the dominant (or merely "domineering") "story." By sanctioning and not sanctioning the older man's discourse, Myers exposes the way reality does not appear as self-evident within discourse but requires consensual agreement. De Certeau's "whole society made into a book" (xxii) suggests the discursive character of the "social," suggests the importance of

the reader in undersigning the "book" of society. Without the consensus of his "readers," Morgan cannot properly mediate the "story."

In recognising that discourse does not transparently render reality, dirty realism betrays a latent empirical and materialistic strain; because it views reality as exterior to text (though not to human experience), it laughs at language. Dirty Realism realises that a culture fixated on words (particularly the divide between signifier and referent) is a culture susceptible to manipulation by the wordsmith. Here dirty realism differs from Hemingway in refusing to take on the responsibility of keeping the word-mirror clean; instead, they exploit the "muddiness" of the linguistic economy. The inability of language to fully disclose the "ordinary" only further entrenches reality as a challenge to be met. Reality certainly exists, as a corpus of material objects and sensual experience comprising a human knowledge impervious to discourse, an entirety which confuses and destabilises language use by not lending its substance to it (this divide offers dirty realists another "between" state to disappear into or elide, as the mood strikes). You cannot speak of the ordinary (de Certeau 5). A consciousness of the actual absolves dirty realists from having to assume definitive accountability for their linguistic (mis)use.

In *Capital*, Marx responds ironically to the subordination of reality to language: "Does society desire to eliminate all the inconveniences which trouble it, it has only to eliminate all the ill-sounding terms. Let it change the language, and for that it has only to address itself to the Academy and ask it for a new edition of its dictionary" (265). In this sarcastic comment, Marxism and dirty realism mingle, since Marx betrays much the same apprehension of the relation between reality and language as dirty realism does. While the theft of Morgan's story may release Myers from the responsibility of accounting for, or replying to, the accusations, it does not erase material differences between the two men (unless, of course, the story he writes lands Myers, as it did Carver, on the best-seller list, which still suggests an attainment of material comforts Myers hitherto lacked), and to act with physical decisiveness against Morgan would bring down on Myers's head a host of legal and social difficulties. Myers can only triumph in text, and his textual triumph does not necessarily permit him a greater store of

material resources. He can “eliminate” the “ill-sounding terms” spoken by Morgan, but he cannot, at the same time, eliminate material “inconveniences.” Myers therefore remains both victim and victimiser, both heroic and villainous, a master of discourse yet a social underdog, an overwriter of the ordinary and a slave to it. His liberty depends upon how successfully he manipulates this in-between status, his straddling of binaries, in the eyes of the other characters and the reader. Since both the discursive and ordinary remain fully-functioning options in his self-representation, a variety of “escape routes” from discursive fixity offer themselves to him. He is both the downtrodden working-class hack we sympathise with and the manipulative wordsmith who can refer us to his material disadvantage when his power-play turns too rapacious for our comfort. The facts of the ordinary (poverty) can conveniently mediate and dismantle Myers’s discursive authority (no matter how he manipulates Morgan’s story, he is still a *starving* artist).

The gestures, touches and visual signals in “Put Yourself in My Shoes” play around, and hint at, a commonality in the concrete. Morgan can leave the carollers out of the story, explain away their bypassing the home, but only *after the fact*. Other interpretations remain possible. Carver’s text therefore suggests that the ordinary remains always *outside* discourse, ready to influence, and in turn be influenced by, words. Hilda’s weeping and waving, Paula’s touches, serve to strengthen Myers’s *account* of Morgan’s selfishness, while also gesturing towards the exterior of all accounting *from within it*. Hilda and Paula remain within the field of “everyday practices” that de Certeau calls “tactics:” which “produce without capitalizing, that is, without taking control over time.” (xx). “Tactics” imply manoeuvres within “the space of the other,” a “play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power”; it (a tactic) “takes advantage of ‘opportunities’ and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position and plan raids” (37). Tactics, then, presents the ordinary in its indefinability, its circumstantiality, its particularity. A tactic cannot speak *for* itself; it does not have a language; its actions forever remain *of* itself, regarding no deviation or separateness between itself and the ordinary, no interior/exterior divide as with text and the ordinary; tactics are a procedural testimony to a non-textual reality.

Carver's story recognises this exterior, this unreadable body of experience, but Myers and Morgan refuse its implications. Rather than apologise to Hilda and thereby extend friendship to her, or fully endorse Paula's shock, Myers revels in suspended opposition. His strategy subsumes the tactical operations of the women, overwriting their meanderings with his agenda (showing up Morgan). Myers takes pleasure in what Marx calls the "sphere . . . whose boundaries [are] sale and purchase" (83); Paula and Hilda—examples of de Certeau's "common people"—serve Myers's economy. He capitalises on the situation, "takes control of time" preferring isolation in history, the silence of passivity, and the exploitation of "betweenness" to the commonality-in-the-ordinary referenced by the women's gestures: "By an art of being in between, he draws unexpected results from his situation" (30). He "draws" those "results" as letters on the page, transforming the tactics of action into a strategy of discourse (just as de Certeau incorporates the meanderings of his "examples" into a discursive and metaphoric projection).

Dirty realists differ in the degree to which they recognise and remain open to the ordinary. Their allegiance to community, their willingness to participate in communal discourse, depends upon their reaction to the glimmering of actualities on the margins or vanishing point of language. This irresolvable tension between specialised discourse and the ordinary characterises an important binary occupied by dirty realism. To understand the ordinary as a common body, as an exploitation of contingencies or "opportunities" that relate to, yet exist independently of, dominant discursive formations, requires an understanding of the way in which de Certeau's "ordinary" disrupts strategic operations, those "calculus of force-relationships," or discursive modes, which "[assume] a place that can be described as proper and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it" (xix). Throughout the texts of Carver, Bukowski, Ford and Jarman, the ordinary often intervenes on the establishment of a discourse, disrupting its efficacy and finally exposing it as the linguistic simulacrum of an ungraspable reality.

Bodies of strategic discourse include "political, economic and rational" models (xix). According to de Certeau, strategic models exist within the "ordinary," which, for its part,

remains the “whole” or “remainder” (6) excluded from specialised focus: those elements of experience that the particular discourse—political, social, or economic—does not specifically account for; de Certeau describes the scene of the proper—systematic discourse—as “scientific and dominant islands set off against the background of practical ‘resistances’ and symbolizations that cannot be reduced to thought” (6). As Carver has already shown, dirty realism has one foot in a strategy, albeit a hypocritical one, and one foot in the voiceless operations of the ordinary. These practices may include everything from conceptual exercises, such as reading, to physical endeavours on the assembly line or construction site. Dirty realism’s strength arises in its recourse to the “ordinary,” its ability to slip outside of, and undo, its own discourses in order to evade entrapment from within by the various systems that impinge on it and which it reproduces.

De Certeau’s notion of “distance” (xix) remains relevant for our discussion of Carver, because strategic discourse itself allows Myers and Morgan a distance from the ordinary; by embedding their relations in text, in narrative metaphors and moral platitudes, they create a distinctness separate from commonality; they remain a locus of power, an “island,” an “enterprise” that capitalises on the silence of others to further entrench its own agenda. In order to function as objective spectator and subjective agent, Myers must occupy both the periphery of the text and its centre, must place one foot inside and one outside the story, illustrating his limitations alongside his ultimate agency. Myers’s discursive success occurs in that he both tells his story and let’s it be told. The two men differ in that Morgan assumes the role of discursive prime, thereby setting himself up as a target for discontent, and for “poaching,” whereas Myers takes a more elusive position, remaining peripheral to Morgan’s story, while central to the authoring of “Put Yourself in My Shoes” (Robinson practices much the same tactic in “What Do You Do in San Francisco?”). Never adopting a fixed co-ordinate, Myers makes the most of his in-between state. While Morgan remains snarled in his own text, and Paula and Hilda excluded because they cannot access the proper discursive modes, Myers relishes an ultimate liberty by setting up a foot in both camps.

### A. Inside/Outside Realism

The simultaneity necessary for dirty realism's hypocrisy *requires* the ambiguous process of discourse. Myers retains the privileged position of existing within and without his text insofar as he retains a discursive role. Myers depends upon seeing the world as a text, supplanting agency (particularly that of the women) with textual metaphor, with limiting the view to what de Certeau, borrowing from Merleau-Ponty, calls the "prose of the world" (12). In this regard, dirty realists express an acute awareness of Raymond Williams's definition of realism:

it [realism] is often also a term for blame or limitation . . . that the medium in which this representation occurs, whether language or stone or paint or film, is radically different from the objects represented in it, so that the effect of "lifelike representation," the "reproduction of reality," is at best a particular artistic convention, at worst a falsification making us take the forms of representation as real. (219)

The writing of realism itself involves a contradiction, a conjunction of representation as "real" and representation as "falsification." Realists express the real in a medium that cannot. Dirty realism realises that the mediation of words offers innumerable loopholes and rifts for evasion; it also knows that utterance can have a non-linguistic influence, whether in the actual or by short-circuiting and/or buttressing the referential reliability that community needs in order to function. Moreover—as *Independence Day* illustrates—the ordinary itself can shatter the facade of words. Reality remains susceptible to the authorial consciousness and elusively outside of it.

Dirty realism manipulates the rift between realism as artifice (which dirty realists can and do occasionally debunk) and realism as unmediated reality (a concept they often use to defend the claims of their fictions); they depend on the reader believing the truth of their discourse and then relinquishing responsibility for their words, should those words chain them down in any way. The use of "ordinary" language and everyday narrators disguises and exposes the strategy of dirty realism:

But when "elitist" language uses the "vulgar" speaker as a disguise for a metalanguage about itself, it also allows us to see what dislodges it from its privilege and draws it outside of itself: an Other who is no longer God or the Muse, but the anonymous. The straying of writing outside of its own place is traced by this ordinary man, the metaphor and drift of the doubt which haunts



writing, the phantom of its "vanity," the enigmatic figure of the relation that writing entertains with all people, with the loss of its exemption, and with its death. (de Certeau 2)

By resorting to common speech and everyday characters, dirty realism espouses an adherence to the ordinary. Yet this usage precisely implicates it in a convention, the realist one, of claiming to minimise the gap between the actual and mediation and by refusing an elitist sensibility through sticking to the status quo (itself a conventional notion that conflates the dissimilar practices of the individual members of the "status quo" into a single rhetorical figure). The plain, laconic utterance of dirty realism constitutes a "metalanguage about itself," simulating a speaking "of" out of a speaking "for." The style of dirty realism appears to lend it authenticity (hence serving as a metalanguage for its own truth-value), when in fact it constitutes a form of discourse separate from the reality it addresses, a form that appears congruent with reality but which actually draws borders between itself and its subject matter, as pointed out by Madison Bell: "Carver's characters speak an impoverished language distinctly less expressive than that of their real-life counterparts" (67). As Bell, and elsewhere Richard Ford himself,<sup>22</sup> point out, Carver's dialogue, indeed his whole mode of writing, represents a style often at odds with lived experience, with everyday occurrences and realities. Dirty realism's use of the style of the common man creates and sustains a "metalanguage" about itself (the lack of divide between the "speaking" of the author and the "speaking" of the common man serves as proof of authenticity), but a metalanguage differing from Lyotard's notion of metanarrative insofar as dirty realism's metalanguage of working class truth remains susceptible to a scrutiny from within (a scrutiny called for by the very self-consciousness of the aesthetic through which it expresses the common), a scrutiny at odds with its claim to representing reality (conflictedness in dirty realism remains the norm). Dirty realism, then, displays so visibly its own stylistics that it frustrates the formation of a transparent metanarrative. Visibly inauthentic characters and voices show the limited range of dirty realism's mediation at the same time as those characters support the contention of authenticity.<sup>23</sup> The common man both includes and exempts dirty realism from the ordinary; it allows them to play on either side of the fence. Representation and simulation arise simultaneously in the single figure of style. However, the issue of mediation

finds dirty realists divided, since Ford seems aware of the superficiality and irrealism of many of his constructs, while (early) Carver and Bukowski often claim to present their characters as they *are* in real life. Ford and Jarman show an unease at the isolation resulting from the conflictedness and unreliability of this aesthetic, while Bukowski and Carver revel in it.

By introducing characters such as Myers, Carver attempts to rescind his exemption, to show how he is not operating outside of the ordinary, not specially competent.<sup>24</sup> Rather than transferring a specialised vocabulary into ordinary language, he is already within ordinary language, operating his claims from within a tactical rather than strategic linguistic space; yet, this, in effect, elevates his tactics to the level of strategy by demanding a recognition of the stories as “of the ordinary” at the same time as his linguistic speciality (style) becomes the simulation of ordinary language. As Lilian R. Furst points out, in *All is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction* (1995), we can no longer take language at face value: “No longer is its [realism’s] language regarded as merely aimed at the communication of meaning; its figuration is now given close scrutiny. The alleged simplicity or naivete of realist writing can indeed be seen as yet another component of its pretense” (146). As Furst suggests, simplicity of diction now figures more as a ruse than as a genuine, open-faced, unpretentious gesture. Linguistic simplicity or naivete marks one of realism’s pretences. Dirty realists such as Carver and Bukowski want us to accept that they’ve done the impossible, that they’ve articulated the ordinary (while others, such as Jarman and Ford, warn against that acceptance). They have become, in the words of Bukowski, the “conductors of [our] verisimilitude” (SS 222). Through ordinary language dirty realism can arbitrate reality while leaving those same purportedly “ordinary” texts open to the return of a reality that exposes aesthetic simulation, that exposes the dirty realist “style” as a site of the proper<sup>25</sup> – in this fashion indefinitely delaying their own reification. Dirty realist texts carefully straddle the divide between the proper and the ordinary to offset their own aesthetic reification. Bukowski, more than any other realist, probes the effect of dirty realism’s insistence on reader participation in the crafting of a definite discourse that he then subverts. (“Are you speaking of me or for me?” the reader wants to ask; “Depends,”

Bukowski might respond, “on what I want to attain at any one moment. Just follow my lead.” Bukowski, even more explicitly than Carver, celebrates the personal advantages accrued to him through the hypocrisy aesthetic.

#### V. Bukowski's *Stew*

In the short stories “Camus,” “Bring Me Your Love,” and “Action”—all included in the collection of stories and poems, *Septuagenarian Stew*—Charles Bukowski illustrates how dirty realism negotiates and exploits language and expectation to occupy and defy its placement on societal “grids,” institutional or marital. This negotiation always requires a set of expectations and norms on the part of society, requires that the dirty realist author grasp and subvert contractual, communal discursive expectations, especially as those expectations arrive from a dominant system of late industrial capital and serve to re-ground a society based on commodity circulation. In the words of Russell Harrison in *Against the American Dream: Essays on Charles Bukowski* (1994), Bukowski becomes a “‘post-modern proletarian’ writer, a critic of post-industrial capitalism” (18), but only by aping and reproducing the dominant discursive traits of capital, in a way that ultimately lifts him from class-representative status.<sup>26</sup>

#### A. Delivery

Charles Bukowski's short story, “Bring Me Your Love” (1990), included in his collection *Septuagenarian Stew*, depicts a manipulator of language and realism even more self-conscious and hypocritical than Myers or Morgan. The story begins with the visit of a husband, Harry, to his wife, Gloria, in a mental institution. Through the visit, we learn that Gloria blames Harry for her incarceration and for the failure of their marriage. Gloria makes a series of accusations that Harry refutes, and which the story suggests result from Gloria's deluded state. Harry's visit ends in recrimination. In the second half of the story, however, we witness Gloria's vindication, as Harry returns to the hotel room he shares with his lover, Nan. Slowly, each of Gloria's accusations comes true, until the reader begins to doubt the justice and validity of Gloria's

incarceration. We also come to understand the extent of Harry's manipulation, and his discursive authority over the two women.

When Harry enters the lunatic asylum housing his mentally-damaged wife, she asks him, "Are you . . . the conductor of verisimilitude" (222)? According to Holman and Harmon's definition of "verisimilitude" – "The semblance of truth. . . . The degree to which a work creates the appearance of the truth" (494) – the story, then, revolves around Harry as a "conductor" or transmitter of "truth," combined with the notion that verisimilitude allows only a "semblance" or "appearance" of truth. Harry takes possession of the production of simulacra.

Harry's proprietorship of discourse co-opts the "institution," the rigid rules and codes of a psychiatric facility, to curtail his wife's agency. Gloria's ability to see through Harry's simulation, his pretence of fidelity, threatens his freedom; without her incarceration, she would greatly impede Harry's affairs. In the character of Gloria, Bukowski presents to us the attendant dangers of a practice that directly opposes an institution, rather than, through "deception" (37), offering opposition from within the institution itself. Harry succeeds in his double life through artifice: a play "on" the societal and institutional codes "of" verisimilitude, largely by absorbing and simulating the expectations of those codes in his discourse. He knows that getting others to "buy into" his reality depends upon how successfully he manipulates and flogs the "codes" of realism.<sup>27</sup> He regulates himself and manipulates those around him by fitting into sanctioned patterns of behaviour; he invokes the appearance of truth as the truth. He simulates the faithful husband to Gloria, and pretends care for her; and when Nan threatens to expose him to his wife he again invokes a clichéd, sentimental code of conduct that he himself does not practice: "Like Hell you will! That's a sick woman" (226). He plays upon Nan's sympathy with the "sick" woman to prevent her from exposing him, as if the same humanistic sympathies informed his own conduct. The italicising of the word suggests how much of Harry's power rests upon the codes and conventions surrounding a form of discourse. The "truth" of the word he uses to describe Gloria, "sick," must be respected; it necessitates a type of conduct. When Nan also accuses him of sleeping, or wanting to sleep, with "whores," he responds: "there's *that* word

again" (226). The italicising of "that" here conveys the opposite tactic apparent in the previous quote: now Harry recalls how words do not mediate "truth"; now they offer simulation as opaque tools of accusation unfixed from any verifiable reality.

Whenever Nan or Gloria attempts to wrest "conductorship" of verisimilitude from him, Harry destabilises their language, enforcing his will by demanding that they play according to his rules: "You knew the situation as well as I did. *You* were the one who wanted to come along" (226)! The threat of his inconsistency (not only to his wife but also to his mistress)—his own refusal to play according to the rules—frightens Nan into compliance. His hypocritical postures of consistent care and truthfulness towards Gloria, and inconsistency towards, and lying to, Nan, superimpose "grids" of dominance over the two women, limiting and determining the range of their agency.

Meanwhile, Gloria remains incarcerated because she only partly understands that "conducting" verisimilitude requires the player not to openly revel in contradiction, to deploy it tactically. Gloria's nakedness and open contradictions prevent her from enjoying the social freedom of Harry, who hides his dissembling by temporarily adjusting to or appropriating various institutional and social codes. Her vacillation over whether she likes chocolates (223-224), her need for "love" as an action rather than verbal construct (something "brought" rather than proclaimed, 223), her aping of sanity before Dr. Jensen (223-224), and, finally, her self-diagnosis (224) culminate in her most telling line: "Fishhead, my paranoia has often been the forerunner of an approaching truth" (225). Gloria's open opposition to Harry's simulated consistency suggests paranoia; her paranoia, insofar as it suspects everything Harry says, insofar as it knows of the disparity between what he says and what he does, insofar as it fears putting trust in Harry, is not a pathological condition but one in tune with reality (hence irrationality becomes the most valid form of behaviour). Harry has made Gloria *appear* paranoid, out of touch with the "truth," by simulating a normative discursive consistency (which is anything but) that clashes with her own open contradictions. In "Bring Me Your Love," Gloria begins to understand that only acting (simulation)—a careful acceptance that masks its subversion of

normative discursive modes—will allow her freedom from the institution. By valorising truth, demanding that words truly mediate reality (or at least assure a mutually agreed-upon discourse for reality, a fixed relation between word and deed), Gloria only further empowers Harry and confirms her “insanity.” By abandoning these demands and appropriating a set of behavioural and verbal co-ordinates, she might become “a conductor of verisimilitude” herself; and, yet, and problematically, Gloria views her recognition of this possibility as a signal of her progressively “retrograded” mental state (224), her lapsing into irrationality (Harry succeeds in his freedom by destabilising the women’s rational responses).

To get out of the asylum, Gloria must be irrational. By basing the estimation of her sanity on reliable, logical discursive and ideological constructs, Gloria enables the Harrys of the world to have their cake and eat it too. If she did not expect Harry to live up to his words, *or his words to live up to him*, Gloria would effectively dethrone Harry from his role as “conductor,” as arbiter between actuality and text. But at the end of the story she still expects him to conform to a stable, verifiable linguistic order, an expectation he exploits to maintain his desires. Gloria does not need truth—she knows the truth—but rather Harry’s willingness to accord with the truths she has chosen to stand by; she wants from him an act that salvages their communal discourse, their contingent history and relationship. But in this “act” of co-ordination and agreement, in this confirmation of rules and expectations, Harry becomes conscious of his “key” role, his position as “conductor” before the orchestra (or orchestrations) of contingency.

The hypocrisy aesthetic requires consistent norms of operativity to play upon. It mimics and proceeds along lines of contingency, regarding them as susceptible to manipulation and contradiction, but the “lines” must remain in place; otherwise, as in *Independence Day*, dirty realism finds itself as stymied as those it manipulates. Were Gloria to suddenly begin simulating reality, she would deprive Harry of access points through which to manipulate her expectations. If she did not stand by any expectation he could not successfully manipulate her. Similarly, if Nan stopped adhering to convention and told the “sick woman” the truth, she

would usurp Harry's power; but her act of standing by convention cedes him dominance. Dirty realism needs a target, a believer to deceive, a dominant power to appropriate and disown.

### B. Exploitation and Stasis

In the short story, "Camus," Bukowski presents an entirely different perspective on the deployment of hypocrisy. This story follows an average day in the life of Larry, a high-school teacher, follows him from his early morning depression to the classroom, where he elicits various favours and bribes from the students on the basis of his authority, where he becomes involved in brief fistfight with a student, and finally ends on his accepting sexual favours from a female student in return for good grades. "Camus," as the title suggests, allegorises a vulgar existentialism, where Larry lives exclusively for momentary pleasures, without regard for institutional or societal narratives of the rightness of traditional student/teacher relations, myths of educational reward, or of a society that rewards on the basis of merit rather than nepotism and class affiliation. Rather than hiding within normative behavioural modes, Larry<sup>28</sup> shows how speaking "the plain truth" can entrench one's position in the institution (in this case a school).

Asked if he ever thinks about God, Larry answers that he "especially" does not (164); when a student poses the paradox, "If you especially don't . . . that means that you especially do," Larry answers: "You mean . . . that if I don't fuck it means that I do" (164). Larry exults in the slippage between the abstract and pragmatic levels of language. Here, "not thinking" is the same as "not fucking." Rather than endorsing the student's valid point—namely, that to "especially" disregard someone or something means a constant vigilance against, or singling out of, that someone or something in question, that linguistic concepts recall their opposites by exclusion, which highlights the *relational* exchange negatively reinforcing the status of the excluded concept—Larry resorts to empiricism, a discourse that levels abstraction in favour of describing phenomena that either happen or do not, and which views words as transparent mediators of reality without internal contradictions or ambiguity. Varying between

epistemological and descriptive linguistic registers allows Larry a manoeuvrability unavailable to his students.

Bukowski illustrates how a deployment of language opposite to Harry's in "Bring Me Your Love" can produce discursive supremacy. Larry's place as the "most popular" (164) teacher on campus hinges on an unambiguous discourse that allows him to subvert the codes and norms of the institution. Larry's power resides in honesty and literalness: "All right," he says, when the students, as a whole, rise to challenge him, "sit down or I'm going to flunk this whole class" (164). Larry betrays his ultimate authority not by manipulating the rifts in convention—as in "Bring Me Your Love"—but rather by letting the class know exactly where he and they stand; he says: "Power destroys . . . and the lack of it creates a world of misfits. But I'll let you off the hook. I won't flunk you [the entire class] if one of you can name a fairly good writer for me. His name spelled backwards is 's-u-m-a-c'" (164). Again, ironically, Larry reveals his "misfit" position in the institutional system by unequivocally exercising the power that system cedes him, by stripping off the camouflage behind which that authority hides. Exposing the educational system as a series of arbitrary and subjective rewards and favours, based on a particular instructor's disposition (as illustrated by the "fat boy" incident), avoiding abstraction and ambiguity to instead "talk about [the straight] shit" (163), Larry becomes the most sought-out teacher.

At the same time as he behaves as a straight-talker, Larry adapts to a system of feints, seeming and indeterminacy. The balancing act he must maintain—in order for the students to find him interesting, and therefore valuable to the institution, while at the same time maintaining himself behind the desk, that "symbol of power" (162)—presents another "in-between" state, one of static equilibrium. This equilibrium appears where Bukowski describes his fight with the "fat boy": "They kept circling. Some of the students returned to the classroom for their belongings. Others left for somewhere else. . . . 'We aren't going to fight,' said Larry, 'we are afraid of each other'" (163). Neither the student nor the teacher can overcome the other; the two sides remain locked in mutual enmity (the equilibrium dirty realists maintain in the face of societal structures they appropriate and oppose, define and are defined by). Larry realises



that any decisive move on his part against the fat boy (who, through family connections, can influence the fate of Larry's career) would end in mutual destruction: "One thing he knew, though, he was going to flunk that fat son of a bitch in the yellow jumpsuit. And wasn't that something? Arthur Koestler and his wife in a double suicide" (165)?<sup>29</sup> Larry knows that flunking the boy, obstructing his educational path, will eventuate a "double suicide," prove the demise of them both. Not accidentally, Bukowski couches this relationship in a literary allusion; their stalemate is more ideological than physical, contingent upon their places in the institution: the boy can deprive Larry of status and Larry can deprive him of a diploma; these two developments would have repercussions on both men's lives but, for the moment, their relationship remains mediated and circumscribed by institutional regulations. Their relationship remains a function of discourse. Within this discursive world, Larry's tactics, his static operativity, enables him to exploit both institutional codes and the student expectations that do not necessarily coincide with those codes. He can use language as a means of remaining valuable to the institution (popular) and inflict punitive measures on its other favoured sons (flunk the class). Larry remains in power through a tactical exploitation of the codes and expectations of the institutional "grid."

### C. A Man of Action

#### i. Text, Motion and Autobiography

In the short story, "Action," Bukowski presents events from the vantage of a non-writer, a man deprived of discursive operativity. Bukowski tropes on the horse track as a place of defeat and disempowerment, as a metaphor for class structures and divisions. Like Larry and Harry, the protagonist of "Action," Henry, straddles binaries: his life of poverty and misery and his life as a successful (though washed-up) writer, his allegiance to the poor and his welcome and notoriety among the rich. Henry is—as the names of the racehorses that give him his biggest "thrill" (128) indicate—between "Hell and Highwater" (127). But, unlike the previous protagonists, he cannot form "an art of being in between," and thereby draw "unexpected results from his situation."

Unlike Larry and Harry, Henry fails to carve a space for himself within the discursive “grid” of the dominant order.

Henry finds his possibilities entirely determined by the material world, whose impoverishment—artistic and financial—deprives him of an ability to absorb and exploit discourse in a way that would enable him to overwrite the situation: “I need the typewriter, thought Henry. That way I can make things come out the way I want them to” (127). Because of a long-standing writer’s block, Henry lacks the power to renegotiate the ordinary. He finds himself condemned to the “hell” (132) of poverty. As the title of the story, “Action,” implies, Henry exists in a world entirely of action, of physicality, those “events,” as Michael Trussler says, that “we experience” with “no certain knowledge as to what its future implications may be” (35). Without the means to inscribe occurrence with an overarching narrative—with a *metanarrative*—a teleological history that reconciles past to present and provides a scope for the future, Henry can only experience phenomena passively; unlike the passivity of other Bukowski narrators—whose passivity conceals an amplification, distortion and mixing of discourse—Henry can resort only to provisional action, the meagre tactics of the “ordinary man” (5), and not the hypocrisy aesthetic of Harry or Larry.

Bukowski locates his narrator, the one whose “ticket joined all the others” (131)—who merges with the “common” populace—on the other side of the fence from Larry and Harry, part of the anonymous mass, the crowd whose salvation resides in “miracle” (130). In fact, the story almost records a miracle the masses hope for in the actions of a horse. The one subversive act in the story involves Red Window, a racehorse whose name—conjoining “red” and “window”—and behaviour, invoke the Marxist solution of violent revolution, an agency founded on “action” rather than discourse, for overcoming oppression. Red Window’s refusal to finish a race he could have easily won, and his absurd burst of speed *after* the race, presents one tactic for obtaining “a free ride” (131). Red Window refuses to participate in, and therefore endorse, the race, instead expending his energy in a way that mocks, and therefore subverts, the process. Like Harry and Larry’s endeavours, Red Window’s behaviour ultimately endorses *and* thwarts

the system it preys upon: Red Window's actions, in effect, "shit on the crowd" (131) of betters relying on him to come in. He exemplifies no miracle. The horse also illustrates the futility inherent to the capitalist spectacle—which will not allow an instance of mass salvation—anointing individual "action," a kind of secular martyrdom, as the only means of opposing the system.<sup>30</sup> The only recourse, for a man incapable of taking "action" similar to Red Window, such as Henry, lies in intoxication, going for a "vodka-7" (132) along with the rest of his representative social class.

Nowhere does Bukowski more explicitly present the Jamesonian impossibility of getting "outside the system" of late capital; speaking *for* the poor, he says:

All that shit they were fed about democracy and opportunity was just to keep them from burning down the palace. Sure, once in a while a guy climbed out of the rubble and made it. But for each one of them there were hundreds of thousands down on skid row or in jail or in the madhouses, or suicided or drugged or drunk. And many more working pitiful low-paying jobs, throwing away their years for the merest subsistence. (126)

Yet, despite deploring capitalism's rabid "expansion" (126) into every facet of life, and the contradictions that "making it" forces upon Henry (by earning money from his success as a writer he only puts himself more in debt to the IRS, 119), Bukowski, as an example of the "guy" who "climbed out of the rubble and made it," also celebrates his ability to transcend the statistical doom enumerated above. In lampooning the circulation, and symbolic value, of money (he considers it irrelevant whether he owes the IRS "\$440,000 or \$940,000," 119), pointing out how accumulation leads only to further accumulation (a purchase for the sake of purchase exemplified in the case of the "filly," which satirises the static, meaningless circularity of life in the "winner's circle," 125), and confessing how he himself relied upon the antagonism of the system in order to initially clear a space for himself (he does, after all, drive a BMW), Larry reveals his dependence on the social elites who buy his work and the misery of the white trash and other marginalised groups he has spoken *for*:

One thing about the white male, though, he was wonderful material for the writer. You could write anything you wanted to about the white American male and nobody ever protested. Not even the white American male. But if you wrote anything

disagreeable about any other race or class or gender the critics and the public became furious and your hate mail stacked up, although book sales didn't seem to drop off. When they hated you, they had to read you. They were aching to see what you would say next about their world. (124)

The "white male," along with the "other race or class," provides the source of Henry's income. The maintenance of an active hatred—another of the "actions" investigated by this story—requires fuel, which Henry gleefully provides. A direct relation exists between the amount of "hate mail" Henry receives and sales figures for his book. Though he deplores the social system, Henry plugs into it, exploiting marginalised social groups (including his own) for the benefit of a middle-class readership. But this gleefulness in exploitation ultimately rings as hollow as the "false bravado" (129) of the boys in the stands. The bravado rings "false" beside the accomplishment of jockeys like Pincay, whose victory speaks so loudly he has no need of "swagger" (127). In the end, Henry's statement proves wishful, since, having lost the ability to write, he knows the formula for success but cannot reproduce it.

Unable to transform the ordinary, the material conditions of the underclass and marginalised social groups, (as Bukowski does) into a literary construct—unable to present it as "the prose of the world"—Henry faces the ordinary itself, in all its unmediated directness; the ordinary swamps him in the moment. Alienated from the product of his literary endeavours, Henry can no longer envision a space for himself apart from the "white American male" underclass whose condition once propelled his career and thereby informed his self-worth; at the same time, this alienation makes him acutely aware of his monad status (and the monad status of those in the stands). The one field of action wherein Henry excelled, writing, has become inaccessible; this loss results from bad luck, nothing else. In order to return to writing, Henry will need luck at the track: "It makes the typer run," he tells his wife, "I've got to have the action" (119). He does not get any "action" in the euphemistic sense of "luck"; but he does experience "action" in the literal sense: the material world he can no longer efface under language. Deprived of luck, Henry finds himself in the same situation as everyone else, unable to *act upon society*, except in futile gestures of rage and despair; having lost the privilege of a

"speciality," he realises: "I'm like everyone else" (de Certeau 4). Henry can no longer speak *for* the poor, but his actions speak *of* them. The distinctness of his voice melts into the communal discourse of poverty and entrapment.

From an autobiographical angle, "Action" offers a further commentary on dirty realism. Throughout "Action," readers remain acutely aware of the disparity between Henry Baroyan, the washed-up writer, and Charles Bukowski, the successful writer who earned a good living by recounting his days among the "white trash." Andrew J. Madigan takes careful note of the confluence between purported autobiography and the resultant success that ensued for Bukowski in "What Fame Is: Bukowski's Exploration of Self" (1996): "Charles Bukowski never became a household name but, by the time of his death in March of 1994, had attained a recognizable measure of success. . . . Bukowski enjoyed a comfortable income from the sale of books and t-shirts, public readings, video tapes of his readings, films adapted from his works . . . and the screenplay for *Barfly*" (449). Madigan notes that Bukowski's fame largely emanated from his writing "the small truths of the poor, lonely, wretched and angry" (449), those people who, like Henry in "Action," formed the societal matrix which Bukowski rose from and transcended (448-449). Because Bukowski's writing always plays on the edges of autobiography, it invites a critique of its self-referentiality, of what it says about the position of Bukowski the cultural icon, of the Bukowski industry, Bukowski as an institution. From this view, Henry's failure and fall into the actual contrast sharply with the success of Bukowski. Bukowski has, like Red Window, defied a system of production and reward by growing rich upon the writing of poverty, by exploiting the conditions of capitalism to create capital. Like Red Window, Bukowski obtained a "free ride," by standing as the possibility, the dark horse, the outside chance, the combination of luck and talent, that transcended "the rubble"; also like Red Window, he fulfils a function within the system, namely, offering the masses a visible manifestation of the "miracle" which stalls them from "burning down the palace," as well as providing a scapegoat for the guilt of the middle-class (they can transform guilt into hate for an obvious manipulator and antagonist such as Henry); however, as Julian Smith writes, in

"Charles Bukowski and the Avant-Garde" (1985), "Bukowski's artifice disguised as autobiography" also calls us to guard against the feints of discourse: "The intrusions of the author/narrator into the text are integral to many Bukowski stories, not merely winking to the reader but point up the text's artificial, fictive status" (58). Throughout action, one remains acutely aware of the power of discourse to advance the individual program, whether in the form of Henry getting invited into a private seat or Bukowski writing stories about the middle class and thereby, through fictions, enabling his own rise to prominence on the backs of a readership alternately delighted and disgusted by the textual spectacles he enacts. As Smith points out, Bukowski's gesture towards "artifice" always recalls the "essential hero" of Bukowski's writing: "the irreverent writer struggling with both the world and the word" (59). The conjunction of, and similarity between, "world" and "word" suggests that for Bukowski the "world" is the "word," that social mastery depends upon an engagement with, and exploitation of, reality as discourse. In "Action," Bukowski presents the division between himself and his class as a difference of discursive strategy, of an empowered monadism. Calling attention to the power of the wordsmith, Bukowski's story renders an instruction on the feasibility and methods of subversion.

#### ii. That Dirty "Strategy" of "Tactics"

Like "the movies," Bukowski the cultural figure provides, for the poor, "that tiny boost that kept them going" (128). "Action" affirms and celebrates Bukowski's consciousness of his hypocrisy; it presents his attempt to renew his liberty within the system. Though Henry likes the "space" and "solace" in the private box seats, "far from the madding crowd," he ultimately rejects it to return to the grandstand; Bukowski does not. Henry Baroyan cannot practice Bukowski's liberating hypocrisy; deprived of his ability to "act" as an author, he is *acted upon* by the "reality" that follows on "the dream" (122). Trapped in the circular lottery of the race track, in its limiting and confined fields of motion and choice, without the imagination and skill to subvert them to his profit, his former success remains the one sure bet: he responds to the question posed by Edwards, the wealthy horse owner and breeder, regarding the date of his next book release

with: "Any time now" (126). This meagre tactic, this limited capacity for lies, still represents an enormous advantage Henry has over his fellow gamblers in the grandstands: if anything, it gains him brief entry to the private seats and a tip on the winning horse (which, unfortunately, he ignores).

If Bukowski's hypocrisy maintains a *strategy based upon tactics*, a sustained exploitation of indeterminacy, contingency and momentary opportunity, Henry has only tactics left to him. Bukowski remains a thorn in the system, both as subject and as agent, while Henry occupies a position entirely subject. As *The Practice of Everyday Life* points out, the key to a mastery of tactics depends upon on a person's ability to grasp—as de Certeau does—the ordinary in a textual sense; this demands not only a consciousness of modes of operativity but also the ability to write them, to write not an alternative to the system (an impossibility), but to write upon the space or page provided by dominant systems, to "take something from the order of knowledge in order to inscribe 'artistic achievements' on it and to carve on [it]. . . graffiti" (28). While the actions of the poor naturally represent an activity of this sort, they do not grasp their actions as part of a generalised schema or pattern of particular resistances; to do so would mean writing them out as such, creating a discourse based on tactical procedures, as both de Certeau and Bukowski do.

By dealing with men like Henry and his social strata, and the small ways in which they can divert and destabilise determinant patterns of action, Bukowski makes "a kind of *perruque* of writing itself" (28). De Certeau calls "*perruque*," "the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer" (25). Bukowski and de Certeau practice an art of *perruque* by inscribing their work for institutions (publishing houses, academia) with the practices and graffiti of oppressed peoples. But they themselves *are not* the oppressed peoples. While Henry's activities remain provisional, momentary, unpremeditated, Bukowski and de Certeau's do not; by depending on hypocrisy and indeterminacy, they create a shifting field of ins and outs, movements and counter-movements, a self-undermining discourse that is nevertheless biased towards non-patterned behaviour (meaning that it is, even if only partially, systematic). The text, in the case

of dirty realism evinces an aesthetic preoccupied with reinforcing its own slipperiness and hypocrisies. Moreover, though neither de Certeau nor Bukowski return central agency (in the sense of "free will") to the individual, both nevertheless centre their inquiry on the individual who becomes a locus of chance, determinism and temporal particulars irreducible to generalised models or sciences of behaviour; if the collective action of individuals represents separate and unique instances of subversion that proceed to account for the unspeakable ordinary, then we can begin to totalise on the basis of the theoretical "sum" of these movements; "Action," to some degree, does this.

To speak truly of and through the ordinary one should not speak of anything at all, only repeat "banalities" (5) and *act* (though this is not to say that society cannot agree upon a discourse for experience, but this would take the form of a dialectical process outside the aim and subject of de Certeau's project). De Certeau and Bukowski both labour under the knowledge that their writing is, to a degree, hypocritical. They call on the individual as social atom but then deny that their works reinstate individuality. They gesture towards totalising but profess to operate against totalities. Bukowski and de Certeau's consciousness of a body of tactics verges on a strategic discourse; the "common man," aware only of the moments and opportunities provided by the system for the satisfaction of his immediate desires, functions quite differently, in a truly provisional sense, in a way that, unaware of his actions as anything but taking advantage of an opportunity (and certainly not as a type of operativity called "tactics"), never quite transcends the moment or conditions surrounding the said action; the situation of the "common man" remains intimately *his* situation, not seen in a larger context nor reduced to simply a component part. For those unable to enact the process of text, the world remains an unabridged set of material conditions they can rightly "poach" on but never envision any privilege for themselves within. Their "inscribing" is anything but inscription; it consists of theft, or insult, or lying, or breaking the law, the innumerable particularities whose articulated sum already effaces them. The gamblers in Bukowski's grandstands do not have the privilege of metaphor; their situation is real, unmediated and "unmediatable." The ability to write—to



conceptualise the real into the semiotics of text—is everything for dirty realism. Both de Certeau and Bukowski know this. That they choose not to act, not to commit to revolutionary activity (except on the page), indicates a kind of complacency with their position as authors (as well as their abhorrence of firing squads and political rehabilitation).

Irrationality and laughter constitute the options left to Bukowski's poor. In a world governed neither by individual nor collective will (as the Red Window race demonstrates) but by "luck" (119), and where even the attempt to cash in on the randomness of occurrence translates into "adding more links to [the] chains" (124) of poverty, hope for betterment springs "eternal like the poison mushroom" (124). Hope—the only choice left to the poor—in a hopeless world conceives the "poison mushroom" of irrationality to further distort and sicken the general condition of "white trash" and immigrants both, offering a tantalising glimpse of a possibility so rare it verges on the impossible. Moreover, this hope still serves the dominant discourse, since it arises in the context of a condition determined by that discourse. Just as Red Window acts within the confines of the race-track, within (albeit against) the paradigmatic course, so the "hope" of the racetrack crowd only conceives of betterment through the institutional symbol of capitalism: money.

The story "Action" exemplifies what Horkheimer and Adorno, in another context, call "the ritual of tantalus" (140). Henry's futile yearning for the return of his authorial prowess colours his world black. The racetrack entices the grandstands to buy into the "miracle" of the individual who transcends his or her social category. This hoping for a "miracle" approximates the role Marx sees for religion in a world under the dominance of capital; disempowered by the state, class and educational systems, and tossed about by the arbitrariness of luck, the spectators in the grandstands madly purchase tickets, hoping for the big win. Hope for personal transcendence distracts them from the associations that precede community recognition and community action; this hope creates a sense of individual, rather than collective, loss with each bad bet.

Henry recognises the effect of a dependence on this mass irrationality: "The road to hell had plenty of company but it was still so very lonely" (132). The irrationality of hope leads to

loneliness, depriving the poor of their one consolation: at least we're in this together. Loneliness plagues dirty realism. Whether empowered by the view from the top of the World Trade Centre or disempowered by relegation to sidewalks and grandstands, dirty realism either places itself *in relation* to society as a collective (and in doing so isolates itself from it) or takes a place within a collective denied group identifications (no view of itself as a collective) because of its addiction to, and dependence upon, a luck-based system dedicated to the fabrication of a "winner" who rises above his or her peers to the loneliness of the panoramic vantage. Personal fulfilment, as Horkheimer and Adorno note, comes at the price of communal attachments, and as a result of a society which prohibits and prevents such attachments through its division of communities into monads.<sup>31</sup> By suggesting that people do exercise operational agency within the matrix of social forces in ways those forces cannot anticipate (xiii),<sup>32</sup> a deployment of what is at hand in ways statistics and probability cannot fully account for (xviii), de Certeau invokes a vision of individuals isolated in particular responses to the greater system, rather than individuals who realise that the social fabric comprises systems and the individual responses to those systems (whose combined effort ultimately cause the reformation/evolution of social discourse, which in turn recalls the dialectical nature of history as a social phenomena). Because de Certeau admits of no exit from the system, he necessarily arrives at isolated instances of subversion and resistance that cannot create a unified alternative not somehow already anticipated by the system itself (except in recognising the system as such). Since articulation depends on linguistic instruction, any articulation will, to some degree, reproduce its own conditions (unless, as in *Independence Day*, the real intervenes and modifies, though not totally transforms, that articulation). The moment agency coalesces to form a system it renders itself open to tactical operativity.

The instances of subversion presented by Carver and Bukowski, agency—momentary and provisional—never emerges from within the field of options provided by a particular discursive system, or, if it does, as in Myers's case, the instance of subversion reinscribes the system it subverts (and will continue to subvert). Since tactics necessarily prove symptomatic of

systematisation, the creation of new or alternative systems only inevitably creates a side effect of further tactics. Bukowski and Carver do regard and speak for groups, but groups comprised of individuals, with an awareness that the moment these individuals discursively corroborate they create the conditions for further isolation, as in the story, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," whose last paragraph suggests the effect of togetherness: "I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone's heart. I could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark" (154). The characters at the end of this story come together not out of mutual understanding but out of solipsism; trapped within their own discursive modes, their own understandings of what "love" means, and the various narratives they employ to undergird their epistemology, the characters constitute a mutuality-in-isolation. The telling of the story, in this way, returns us to the ordinary, to the uncertainty that finally overflows into all discourse and reunites speakers in the banal; it traces "the way in which banality overflows speciality and brings knowledge back to its general presupposition: I don't have solid knowledge of anything. I'm like everyone else" (4). The silence and darkness at the end of Carver's story recognise a community in epistemological unknowing; as long as this silence remains in place the narrator will continue to hear "the human noise"; as long as they do not move they will remain united. But as soon as any character begins to reiterate a position or attempt to customise a discursive space (define "love" according to his or her own ethos) he or she will once again experience the isolation of the panoramic vantage. Like Richard Ford in *Independence Day*, Carver understands that the preservation of the ordinary demands that he stop telling the story as if it were *his* and *his alone*, since text on the page itself represents a strategic discursive formation susceptible to readerly tactics (xxi); unlike Ford, however, Carver's story does not probe the formation of discourse as intrinsically social, meaning that the changing requirements of social needs themselves form and re-form discourse in response to events in the real, a view that still preserves the possibility of communal authorship while preventing the ossification of this "contingent" enterprise into an ahistorical discourse that attempts to cordon itself off from the workings of reality.

Fulfilment within dirty realism's systematic "hypocrisy aesthetic" depends on the extent to which individuals can live with the isolation resulting from their subversion of given options—through the process of authoring—and their consciousness of how this strands them in a strictly oppositional paradigm. The situation of "Action" reminds us how words (such as the metanarrative of "luck") conceal the actual. As Horkheimer and Adorno state: "The peculiarity of the self is a monopoly commodity determined by society" (154). "Action" represents Bukowski's recognition that his "autobiographical" story—the "peculiarity" of his "self"—forms one of the legends of the marketplace, and how it allows for the displacement of the reality of "poverty," itself a convenient handle or term deployed by other self-affirming, self-sustaining salvationist paradigms. But "Action" never probes, or refuses to probe, the way actuality affects discourse, or how the effects of the real necessitate, as a response, a continual reforming of social discourse; Bukowski's stories only trace the way some characters can, and others cannot, overwrite the real through their competence at authorship. Bukowski regards the people in the stands as reacting to Red Window's subversion with clichéd expressions of disgust and outrage—in a manner typical of how they *should* react, given the social engineering behind the spectacle of the racetrack—and so he remains grounded in Horkheimer and Adorno's pessimism on the possibility that anyone (apart from Bukowski the author himself) may recognise, in the defeat of their hope, the contingent nature between the sanction of proceedings at the racetrack and their willing participation in that sanction. The people in the stands, so thoroughly colonised by capital, remain blind to the options of this discursive contingency. When hope fails, nobody questions what they had hoped for or who put that hope into place or why they participate in the spectacle in the first place; to pose such questions would reveal the extent to which they collaborate in and enable given social conditions.

Bukowski's "Action" probes the limited options available to people like Henry, those denied the discursive competence to envision tactical operations in a strategic sense, at the same time as the story makes us aware that Bukowski, on the other hand, can, and does live by a strategy of tactics. Transcending the masses, and performing in isolation from them, allows Bukowski to reify his persona, to be the one and only Charles Bukowski, a "monopoly

commodity" up for sale. Ernest Fontana indicates the absurd tautology behind Bukowski's persona where he says that isolation "is the only available and honorable option" (8) for Bukowski, which paradoxically valorises as "honorable" a condition one has no choice but to accept (it is the "only" one). Since discourse necessitates isolation, and camouflages the ordinary, isolation can simultaneously appear the "only available" (because he speaks) and "honorable" (in speaking out of isolation he appears honourable) option. It represents a choice that is no choice at all. Through "availing" himself of this "option," Bukowski can make himself iconic: honourable for his unwillingness to accept social norms, but at the same time participating in them (selling himself as an icon). But, in order to remain liberated from fixity, he *must* choose this path. Those without discursive mobility find themselves isolated with even less available options.

What emerges from "Action," then, is the difference between the discursive subject as author and discursive subject as subject. Bukowski, realising the author's power within the dominant discursive formation, refuses to relinquish authorship, even though the exercise of such power separates him from the surrounding community, even further entrenching his monadic state. Bukowski's discursive agenda remains the occasion of working tactically within the discursive system adhered to by the other, be that "other" the state or the underclass. Since Bukowski never looks beyond solipsism, beyond the options allowed the authorial self within the discursive formation of late industrial capitalism, he never addresses what will appear in Ford and Jarman as the contingent aspect of the social real. In Bukowski, history and actuality remain a discourse enacted by the individual consciousness operating with and upon the all-pervasive effects of his or her society; unwilling to risk participation in history as a narrative of social contingency, Bukowski's characters remain outsiders, isolatos, cut off from the dialectical intersection of event, discourse and social necessity from which communal authorship springs. Resolutely "independent," Bukowski gains his limited liberty within the system but at the expense of never interrogating, and taking "action" against, the way his hypocrisy aesthetic reinscribes that system. His pessimism on the efficacy, or possibility, of collective enterprise keeps him resolutely detached. If history is dialectical, only Bukowski himself appreciates that

dialectic and, alone, he can only affect history in a limited fashion; to the impossibility of this situation he responds with bitter laughter rather than efficacious concern.

#### *VI. Contemporary Laughter*

Carver and Bukowski respond to isolation and inevitability with laughter. The tautological circularity of the system incites an irrational entertainment. Horkheimer and Adorno describe the type of humour they find in late capital in terms that presage the quality of laughter found in dirty realism:

the *Schadenfreude* that every successful deprivation calls forth. There is laughter because there is nothing to laugh at. Laughter, whether conciliatory or terrible, always occurs when some fear passes. It indicates liberation either from physical danger or from the grip of logic. Conciliatory laughter is heard as the echo of an escape from power; the wrong kind overcomes fear by capitulating to the forces which are to be feared. It is the echo of power as something inescapable. . . . In the false society laughter is a disease which has attacked happiness and is drawing it into its worthless totality. To laugh at something is always to deride it, and the life which, according to Bergson, in laughter breaks through the barrier, is actually an invading barbaric life, self-assertion prepared to parade its liberation from any scruple when the social occasion arises. Such a laughing audience is a parody of humanity. Its members are monads, all dedicated to the pleasure of being ready for anything at the expense of everyone else. (140-41)

In dirty realism, laughter—whether directed at Larry’s blatant exploitation of the system in “Camus,” at the puking, swearing and cavalier attitude towards money in “Action,” or at the unexpected rightness of Gloria’s prophecy in “Bring Me Your Love”—testifies to the inevitability of power relations; laughter is “the echo of power as something inescapable” or a “capitulation” insofar as it remembers that Bukowski’s text offers no solution to the system and, moreover, requires it as the arrow requires its target. The laughter disappears in the all-pervasive “totality” Horkheimer and Adorno regard as the “barbaric life” of the culture of late capitalism. However, while Horkheimer and Adorno’s examination of contemporary laughter remains anatomical and therefore prescriptive in the sense of identifying the malady, dirty realism, on the other hand, partakes of the monadic laughter without the distance and detachment of the two theorists. “The Culture Industry” remains a detached observation from

without the system; but Bukowski, aware of how intricately embedded he is in the culture, no longer has the option of such distance, and his laughter recognises this loss of exemption. Paradoxically, by recalling the exemption, he also points the laughter to a place outside of the system.

The jettisoning of scruples in “Camus” provokes humour, as it does in “Bring Me Your Love,” proving symptomatic of prevalent power structures *as well as* an act of resistance. The laughter in these stories continually remind us that Bukowski’s Larry dares to behave in a way almost inconceivable to the average person. This laughter recognises that societal and institutional “power [is] something inescapable,” and, in effect, not only offers an emotional release of dangerous or subversive energy that returns us, through catharsis, to our appointed positions, but also derides this return in recognising the character of the system. If the laughter of late capitalism testifies to monadic atomisation, to the loss of community values, Bukowski recognises *and* mocks the context of contemporary laughter. In effect, he rehumanizes the audience by allowing it a perspective on the forms of entertainment they pander to. The laughter capitulates but recognises what it capitulates to and, by making this recognition, recovers some of the distance enjoyed by Horkheimer and Adorno.

If, as Jameson and de Certeau point out, the only “universal” is that of capitalism’s total and complete infiltration of everything from the market to the individual, then laughter may constitute the final platform for a collective, although passive, “action,” a recognition in release. The laughter of Bukowski’s white trash horse-track devotees pivots on their participation in, and rejection of, the system. The laughter that greets their absurd situation—“robbed of everything but a determination to go on without hope . . . or even the slightest expectation of victory” (122)—salvages irrationality as a motive force; to perform the irrational, to laugh at what is not funny, counters the humanistic construction that forms the core of capitalism’s rationalist system of rewards and hopes, attempts and achievements—it brings into relief the unfunny of the joke, the horror of the situation. To laugh at those who attempt to transcend the grandstands exempts the person laughing from participation in the futile, mass orgy of want.

Laughter remains the final pleasure of a social strata denied rational means of liberation. It constitutes a wilful hypocrisy: enjoyment in and of the spectacle it derides, disclaiming the activity at the same time as it acts it out. The hilarious account, in "Action," of Marsden getting fired because "he had somehow fornicated with his machine in an illegal way" (122) at once despairs at the displacement of biological or need-based (in the sense of use-value) imperatives by the pointless reproduction-for-the-sake-of-reproduction fostered by the machine age, while at the same time noting that this displacement merely regards an exchange of terms for an inexplicable behaviour or impulse (thereby recognising that the discourse surrounding human behaviour changes with history). Moreover, the word "illegal" in the sentence suggests that there exists a "legal" way of "fornicating" with the "machine," offering a metaphor of sanctioned and non-sanctioned methods of mechanical reproduction (an absurdity itself predicated on social utility). In either case, the laughter sabotages the devotion capital requests vis-à-vis its forms and procedures, a devotion it attempts to instate in the monads by defining the human in absolute, trans-historical terms ("biological," "mechanistic"). Bukowski's comedy highlights the absurd methods remaining open for subversion in a society that subordinates the human to the machine. The laughter therefore takes a twofold direction, observing both the complete colonisation of the notion of the human and the options remaining for playing upon and exposing that colonisation. In either case, the comedy illustrates the narrow spaces permitted for acts of defiance.

Isolation accounts for the laughter apparent in dirty realism. As Horkheimer and Adorno posit, the laughing audience no longer presents a human face: "such a laughing audience is a parody of humanity," humanity engaged in a laughter that simulates actual pleasure, that apes true laughter; the audience "parodies" humanity, suggesting that the laughter reproduces Jameson's famous "simulation" as well, where humanity masquerades as humanity. Laughter characterises a humanity alienated from the human, for whom the human has become a reified concept impossible to believe in, live up to, or endure; in the alienated laughter the audience recognises the human as a social construction, as a quantity determined by social (capitalistic) forces. The laughter in Bukowski constantly gestures towards, and



reminds us of, the simulation of originary, "natural" moments by the machinery of late capitalism. Laughing at Marsden acknowledges the constructedness of capital's "natural," "originary" terms for activity, the way a mechanistic definition currently determines the human.

Horkheimer and Adorno note that those who laugh are "monads," or isolated persons "dedicated to the pleasure of being ready for anything at the expense of everyone else" (141). The laughter comes at an expense, but the "expense" itself presupposes the laughter, since the monadic, atomised state prefigures the type of laughter expressed in the midst of the culture industry. The loss of a communal habitus necessitates this irrational pleasure, which seems to capitulate to humanistic relief; in reality, the laughter frees the monads from humanism. The laughing monad sees in the subject or target of its laughter an absurd character, an idiot, while recognising in itself a similar idiot manipulated in laughter by the forces of simulation that inform every facet of his or her existence. This laughter exposes the system of late capital as a set of tautological gestures that reproduce themselves for the sake of themselves in a manner divorced from the everyday. The humour of dirty realism arises from the continual reminder of how the capitalistic system has effaced the ordinary, has produced a trans-historical "parody" of humanity, obscuring the temporal and social contingencies that contrive the malleable definition of the human. The release from humanism accompanies a reawakening to the social, relational character of the human. The behaviour of Marsden, so thoroughly colonised by the codes and conventions of capital, leads to a laughter that reawakens the reader to the conditions which define the human, to the human as defined by conditions (even if capital so thoroughly controls these conditions as to make escape from the context that leads to monadism impossible).

#### A. The Comedian Called Death

Dirty realism carries with it the implicit recognition of a reality outside words, a reality of extinction that Bukowski relishes. The laughter that breaks through systems overwriting the real condones an irrationality, an unwillingness to accede to any discursive point with earnestness, destabilising expectation of behavioural patterns, upsetting logical systems of prediction (de Certeau's "calculus") and leading to nihilistic gestures such as Larry's wilful

“double suicide” in “Camus.” As everything is suspect of capitalist colonisation, nothing is worth taking seriously: neither history, nor politics nor even art. Bukowski’s narrative persona, his narrators, and the situations described in his stories indicated his membership in the school of “black humour” that, according to Max F. Schulz’s *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties: A Pluralistic Definition of Man and His World* (1973) and Patrick O’Neill’s *The Comedy of Entropy: Humour/Narrative/Reading* (1990), developed from the radical critique of historical and societal discourse begun during the 1960s, as well as the advent of non-causal views of the universe forwarded by scientists during the 1950s and 1960s.

In *Septuagenarian Stew*, death provides the primary source for Bukowski’s comedy, proving the final arbiter of irrelevance: “the problem with the History of Man is that it doesn’t lead anywhere except towards certain death for the individual, and that was drab and ugly, garbage disposal stuff” (162). The “History of Man” eats up the “individual”; ordinary folk, like Larry the instructor, vanish, become non-entities, in the discourse of kings and presidents, philosophers and priests, whose names history reproduces. The “History of Man” is the death of the “individual.” Without recourse to historical self-affirmation, Larry and the other members of his class stare straight into annihilation. Alienated from the panoramic view of time (history), they encounter history’s impertinence, history as just another lottery (and doing so indicate that history represents more than a canon of names and dates, but rather a construction dependant upon time and place, as well as social needs and practices). Western historical design excludes de Certeau’s “absent figure” (v), those individuals who form the ineffable matrix, the “culture” from which historical discourse develops. Barred from full participation in the “triumph of place over time” (36)—meaning the suspension of a specialised discourse over temporal flow—Bukowski finds solace in the ultimate victory of the temporal, the overflowing of the “ordinary” onto “the institutional frameworks that it in fact gradually erodes and displaces” (34). In Bukowski, the discourse of history (as opposed to the process of history) highlights the one certainty of death, which, in turn, rises to discredit monumental simulations; death reinstates a commonality, though one outside of time and text.

Certain extinction provides Bukowski's Larry the energy for exploiting his situation on the outside of historical discourse. His inhuman laughter scoffs at discursive attempts to elide extinction. The "History of Man" instigates isolation; instead of trying to craft an alternative history that accounts for de Certeau's "anonymous" heroes (v), recognising in that crafting another evasion of certain death, Bukowski prefers to frolic in namelessness, in poverty's muteness, deploying its passivity to appropriate the various discursive formations inscribed upon it, always to destabilise, to bring the talk around to the funniest topic: "that neither person nor house can speak . . . that no one can find another in the darkness through which each is condemned to travel a long way by himself alone" (Shulz 8). If discourse always reduces and excludes, never conforming to the actual it addresses—if language, and therefore knowledge, rests, as Derrida says, upon a "void" (327)—then one might as well laugh at and play upon its claims.

Finally, death serves as an antidote to the contradictions, ambiguities and unreliability of language. Its void swallows and reconciles discourse into silence. As long as dirty realism has death it needn't take its (or anyone's) discursive claims seriously. Death negatively reconciles dirty realists; it draws them into a "unity" outside of totalising discursive formations, cancelling language with ineffable experience; it draws them into the "whole" or "remainder" which discourse operates on. The recurring oblivion of death erases totalities in the particularity of its experience. Death calls dirty realism's "nothingmen" to indolence and passivity. By simply being, death is a non-being, instigating a paradox that forms the locus of dirty realism.

In *The Sportswriter* (1986), Richard Ford addresses the notion of closure: "Life will always be without a natural, convincing closure. Except one. Walter was buried in Coschocton, Ohio, on the very day I sounded the horns of my thirty-ninth birthday" (367). As Ford points out, death resolves all texts; it demarcates the "border" which text can co-opt but not render as a totality. You can never speak "of" death, only "for" it. The title of Ford's novel proves symptomatic of dirty realism's passivity, as its narrator, Frank Bascombe, presents a man who prefers to write about action rather than instigate it, since writing allows an ambiguity not available to those involved in action, such as athletes:

Athletes, by and large, are people who are happy to let their actions speak for them, happy to be what they do. As a result, when you talk to an athlete . . . he's never likely to feel the least bit divided, or alienated, or one ounce of existential dread. . . . In fact, athletes at the height of their powers make literalness into a mystery all its own simply by becoming absorbed in what they're doing. (62-63)

Ford valorises the athlete precisely because he or she stands outside the ambiguity of "speech," who posses a mysterious "literalness" because they connect with the world and speak of their place in the world without the mediation of language (just as the jockey, Pincay, in "Action" need not speak to account for himself). Ford intimately connects the literal (and literalness forms a dominant theme of both this novel and its successor, *Independence Day*) world of sports with that of death, which proceeds from the same unambiguous, unmediated, direct reality that words continually set themselves apart from. Death in dirty realism, despite serving as an emissary for the ordinary, does not shed light upon reality; it serves only as a continual reminder of the limitations of discourse, and thereby permits the dirty realist a mobility vis-à-vis discourse. Through a continuous summoning of the "real," through the presence of death (as well as jockeys and other athletes), dirty realism cross-examines discourse. Death continually reinstates the matrix of the ordinary upon which discourse feeds, and within which the anonymous heroes evade and interpenetrate dominant institutions; it remains resolutely outside text and accounting while at the same time "affecting" the "drama." The ability to poke fun at discourse, to create comedy from fornications with the machine (ineffable impulses conflicting the machinery of capitalist discourse), arise from the intrusion of death and its rendering of discourse null and void.

Schulz, while dealing mainly with writers commonly identified as postmodern, suggests critical strategies for reading black humour that open possibilities for understanding the passivity and ambivalence of dirty realism. As in Bukowski and Ford, Schulz cites death as the one certainty in the world of black comedy: "Like Bardamu's restless movements from France to Africa to America back to France, life describes a pointless journey with death as the only true destination. It is this disjunctive world that moves the Black Humorist, in part, to arrest the traditional comic reconciliation of individual and society" (9). Discussing Bardamu—the

protagonist of Louis-Ferdinand Céline's<sup>33</sup> *Journey to the End of the Night* (1934)—Shulz echoes Bukowski's (and Horkheimer and Adorno's) sentiments on the lack of societal reconciliation in black humour. He points out that the comedy of black humour differs from traditional, pastoral comedies in that it exhibits a laughing response to a world which offers no chance for a return to a utopian Arcadia,<sup>34</sup> of a union between people and nature: "Black Humor . . . enacts no individual release or social reconciliation . . . never envisions . . . the possibilities of human escape from an aberrant environment into a forest milieu, as a ritual of the triumph of the green world over the wasteland" (8). In a world verging on nuclear war, dominated by a slippery, ungraspable commodity circulation both visible and maddeningly invisible, and which has seen its narratives of beneficent governmental and societal mores shredded, dirty realism finds in black humour a response appropriate to the dangers, paralysis and stasis everywhere around it. Dirty realism's laughter arises in contexts that continually negate affirmative visions of individual response to societal conditions, regarding with a hopeless mirth the monadism of the contemporary scene as an inescapable reality, and the interpenetration of all "enclaves" by the tautologies of late capital.

Bukowski regards all activity in the face of death, particularly writing, as a means of "feeding a / closing / space" (375); action occupies, as Schulz points out, the vacancies of temporal flow. Yet, as Shulz posits, unlike existentialism, black humour discredits any notion of implicit heroism in human action. Bukowski pre-empts even the idea of writing as a "serious" activity: "the typewriter is like another head / with a lucky brain / inside: / I hit the keys and things come out. / the machine does all the / dirty work" (241). Again, Bukowski produces a "fornication" with the "machine," where even the writer becomes beholden to the "means" of production, where he facilitates the technology rather than the technology facilitating him; even art comes from the machine. Action, to a dirty realist, comprises an occupation in the purest sense: an inevitable filling of temporal "space," a dismantling of discourse that only enables the rise of a new discourse; the type of action engaged in is undifferentiated, irrelevant: suicide and eating take an equal value. Schulz warns us that black humour constantly refuses "to take its implied moral position seriously" (13). Unlike existentialism, which views individual agency—

“the negation” through definite action “of many possibilities in favor of one choice”—as a “heroic primal assent to life” (6), dirty realism would say “whatever” to any course of action. As Bukowski’s story asserts, “action” (especially Pincay’s, or especially the writer Bukowski’s) cannot be assigned value since any such assignation elides the ordinary with the proper, in effect cancelling out action. Moreover, movement becomes pointless in that it fails to take the narrator “out of” the situation; it only confirms a series of programmed and permitted activities determining “choice.” At best, action, as in that undertaken by Red Window, calls attention to the systems confining and governing the individual.

Laughter informs an attitude, a determination not to take any one particular option more seriously than any other: “Black Humor [is] a somewhat limited vision capable of the specific aberrations of comedy, rather than the universal condition of tragedy” (11). No longer inhabiting a society governed by a sustainable metanarrative, a master discourse that unites and makes sense of the disparate experiences of individuals, dirty realism invokes black humour as a way of presenting the lack of universal norms, the rule of disparity *as the norm*. Since no discourse can totally encapsulate the “universal condition,” no “proper” behaviour (that would work in accordance with such a condition) exists. Dirty realism’s hypocrisy aesthetic, its endorsing of simultaneity, offers a form of rendering the loss of a metanarrative alternative to that deployed by writers of metafiction.

No . . . [definitive] . . . principles are available in the pluralistic world. The conventionally coherent literary structure becomes patently impossible, the traditional form a defective ordering of alien complexities, its configuration disassociated from its content. . . . [The Black Humorist] can write incredibly omnibus parodies of knowledge, which attempt to master the labyrinth of an illogical world by exhausting every twist and turn and blind alley in it. . . . A workable alternative for the Black Humorist is to hold a limited number of viewpoints in equipoise, as literary counterparts of a world devoid of a discursive value system. (43)

Here, Schulz depicts the two strategies open to an aesthetic of black humour. Writers such as Pynchon, Coover, Gaddis chose to go the “omnibus” and “exhaustive” route to the myriad options of the “pluralistic world”—what Patrick O’Neill, in *The Comedy of Entropy*:

*Humour/Narrative/Reading* (1990), calls “opposing” but “equal” truths (11); these works constitute the canon of metafiction. Dirty realism, conversely, takes the “workable alternative” to the problem of plurality by presenting works which “hold a limited number of viewpoints in equipoise”; dirty realism’s aesthetic strategy relies upon exactly this: deploying a series of “equal” and “opposing” particularities, the objective “truths” of context which, when harnessed, fuel a liberating hypocrisy allowing the authors to slip free of any one particular discursive system, to regulate the ordinary (as does Harry in “Bring Me Your Love”) and use the ordinary (whose ultimate action is death, the end of all stories, as Ford’s *The Sportswriter* indicates) to dissolve their narratives when convenient. Dirty realism realises omnipotence in the isolation and sole arbitration of the subject: in solipsism.

According to Shulz, information “implicit” (13) in black humour delimits the contradictory position available to protagonists, such as Bukowski’s Hank, at once anonymous *and* resolutely individual, at once within society and outside of it:

The Black Humor protagonist is not . . . an authorial lense for analyzing the real. . . . Nor does detachment mean for him withdrawal from the world. . . . He is at once observer of, and participant in, the drama of dissidence, detached from and yet affected by what happens around him. . . . His prison-house loneliness, forced upon him by existence, becomes a Célinesque journey to the end of the night. (12)

Bukowski continues to laugh because he continues to operate in a multiple discursive space; not seeing any possibility of escape in action, only capitulation to dominant discourses, Bukowski opts for isolation, for a “prison-house” loneliness that comes from his unreliability, his unreachableness, as narrative authority. He recognises no “mystery” or unexpectedness in an existence of sheer activity; every move he makes, verbal or physical, remains premeditated, strategic, including the passivity with which he allows systems to constantly reinscribe him (making available a system he can operate on and foil). Dirty realism responds to the reality of death with no response in particular, enacting and revelling in a series of mutually contesting discursive particularities or absolutes. This attitude itself reflects the epistemological quandaries evident in the postwar sciences.

### B. Day-To-Day Science, Amusement and Art

O'Neill begins his discussion of the background to black humour by describing an epistemological situation in the sciences<sup>35</sup> analogous to that seen in dirty realism; O'Neill's discussion dovetails with that of de Certeau by describing scientific discourse as a linguistic practice dedicated to upholding its own postulates, of carving out a space separate from the ordinary in which, suspended above the void, its paradigms prove self-affirming, but which often clashed against contrary discursive practices instituted by different "logical frameworks":

Mathematical statements, in other words, might well be unassailably "true" within the bounds of the particular logical framework adopted by a particular school or approach, but opposing statements might be equally 'true' within the terms of reference of a different school or approach—and there was no way to decide finally which of the opposing truths constituted the "real" truth, even assuming there might be such a thing any longer. (11)

The work of mathematicians—Gauss, Hamilton and Gödel—demonstrated how mathematics embodied a concept (or a set of concepts) verifying its own principles rather than objectively embodying reality. Their works discredited mathematics as an arbiter of truth in the same way that Copernicus's revisioning of the Earth's relation to the cosmos collapsed humanistic notions of centrality and hierarchy (5). O'Neill's discussion alludes to de Certeau's notion that discourse, first and foremost, acts to preserve the efficacy of its language, creating, mapping, sustaining a set of terms that mark its boundaries with the outside world, undergirding a set of "truths" unassailable within those terms and configurations but often ineffective outside of it; de Certeau's theory of discourse summarises the epistemological conundrum that preoccupies black humour, and, by extension, dirty realism: the continual displacement of discourse by the real (most evident in the phenomenon of death). The dawning awareness of competing "truths" appeared not only on the Cold War political scene; as various "stories" attempted to account for American democracy—stories of censorship and freedom, laissez faire foreign policy and military intrusion, political enfranchisement and racial discrimination—so, also, did various contradictory discourses attempt to account for events in the sciences. The realism of authors



such as Bukowski and Ford portrays a vertiginous world-view dominated by competing "stories," whose sum total showed the inefficacy of rationalistic models.

The authors of dirty realism inherited a world of paradox, one abounding in mutually-exclusive, but individually supreme certainties, whose presence, together, merely confirmed the collapse of the pre-existing metanarratives that held to certain absolute and universal laws of truth. There was no longer a single dominant truth, but many, contradictory truths that individually supported the various "stories" competing for mastery over reality. Societal reconciliation cannot occur, as the Cold War pointed out by the 1960s, in a society wherein no dominant epistemological or societal code exists, wherein we cannot agree on the main story. As O'Neill points out, the twentieth century no longer holds to "impregnable" epistemological foundations (12-13). Conceptual systems now seem to offer "ludicrous" propositions in defiance of rationality and epistemological norms. Rather than conforming to reality, such systems only reinforce their own inner logic:

The history of science is a history of the abandonment of positions once judged impregnable for new positions previously held to be ludicrously mistaken. In the last half-century the adoption of ludicrous positions and their abandonment for even more ludicrous ones has become so rapid and so commonplace that rather than feeling the awe that primitive peoples must once have felt for the power of their shamans, or even the astonishment that people could still experience in the fifties when the first earth-satellite was successfully launched, our reaction nowadays to the latest miracle of space exploration or medicine or computer technology tends increasingly to be a mixture of *déjà vu* and something like incredulous *laughter*. Science, in fact, has long since passed beyond the bounds of the reasonable into domains that can no longer be taken *seriously*. (13)

In a world of unhindered capitalist expansion, which posits little or no avenues for escape and resistance, where language unpacks itself to reveal arbitrary discursive constructions with no reliable connection to the referent, dirty realists like Bukowski no longer feel it necessary to take *anything* seriously. Like the fast-paced, constantly recycling commodity circulation that Jameson regards as characteristic of late capitalism, science enacts a dizzying multiplication and recycling of epistemological commodities whose "rapid" turn-over engenders not wonder but a sense of the "commonplace." Constant variance and turnaround, on all levels of society, describe the

“everyday” ambience of postmodernity; this ambience attracts derisive laughter throughout Bukowski’s fiction. Smith connects Bukowski’s usage of the racetrack with a “flippant treatment” of “existential states—exaltation and despair, hysteria and boredom” (58). What occurs in “Action” “parodies” feeling, since authentic motivation no longer exists. The depiction of the anger, resentment and despair of the people in the stands problematises authenticity since Bukowski’s sympathies so often appear inconsistent or short-lived. Even in recycling Hemingway, Bukowski proves slippery: “Hemingway’s regard for the authenticity of words and feelings seeps through onto the Bukowski page. But Bukowski’s humour makes the page more divided, fecund, ambiguous, and harder to pin down ideologically than other writers (say, Mailer) who recycle Hemingway’s male mythology” (58). Bukowski does not so much reproduce Hemingway as offer a pastiche of him, a pastiche with sizeable enough holes that we discover as much mockery as worship of Hemingway in Bukowski’s writing; simply put, Bukowski’s writing recognises that, in the postmodern world of discursive indeterminacy and the disintegration of self, Hemingway’s solipsistic reading of the world proves untenable. In Bukowski, ideology, including that of his artistic forebears, becomes an excuse for lampooning, for poking fun; and Bukowski’s machismo, which Smith regards as an inheritance from Hemingway, always comes with a built-in detonator of comedy: “At his best, Bukowski animates his stereotypes with great panache, investing ‘ideological unsoundness’ with a liberating humor” (58). Bukowski’s humour, finally, enables his liberation from ideology, from having to stand by any one particular social consciousness, though this also prevents him from fully investing in the “social.” The laughter in Bukowski arises in a context of continual abandonment of reverence, either social, political or even artistic, as nothing, not even his literary idol, Hemingway,<sup>36</sup> proves important enough to take seriously. The “abandonment of positions” for new and formerly unthinkable ones becomes an operating logic “ludicrous” in its variance; the transgression of the “reasonable,” the emergence of “domains” of a very short shelf-life leads, finally to an attitude which takes nothing “seriously.”

As O’Neill points out, even the region of the “commonplace” has become suspect, a source for comedy, since the commonplace (particularly the epistemology of “common sense”)

now designates a world of variance and irrationality, two forces responsible for, and resulting from, the stasis of the racetrack in Bukowski's story "Action"; the "action" of unpredictability paradoxically unfolds into "inaction" on the part of the bystanders. As Raymond Carver admitted in an interview: "My world was one that seemed to change gears and directions, along with its rules, every day" (F 26). The new, postmodern realism no longer approximates a stable accountable "reality." Reality "changes" every day; it no longer follows a particular "direction." Dirty realism depicts the shifting, mobile discursive units that jockey for position over a reality apprehended as the discursive fashion of the moment; in the wake of such rapid shifting the individual becomes inert, either transfixed on the bewildering speed of change or despairing at how to choose from among the discursive options a set of precepts to guide action.

With reality a product of discourse, and with the function of multiple, mutually-exclusive realities, confidence in and loyalty to a particular "truth" vanishes, replaced by an interest in "play," the offsetting of various truths against one for the purposes of amusement and entertainment rather than epistemological or ontological inquiry; as this kind of inquiry inevitably leads to more specialised verbiage, realists like Bukowski make "play" out of the discursive enterprise, utilising it to enable freedom from adherence to the oppressive regulations imposed by words. In this way, art itself partakes of simulation, since the artistry of Bukowski plays upon reified notions of what art is, or should be, rather than pertaining to, or advancing, an essence of artistry. The lack of a cultural or artistic metanarrative prevents allegiance to a particular artistic standard, or even a particular artistic purpose or, even, particularly, to art.

The loss of an originary, prime aesthetic leaves writers such as Bukowski revelling in artistic irreverence; his poem "yeah" screams of this irreverence:

just heard a commercial  
which told me  
Farmer John smokes his own  
bacon.  
now, there's a tough  
son of a  
bitch. (227)

This poem (quoted in its entirety), plays upon variable linguistic meaning to poke fun at "poetic" license and metaphor, as well as self-consciously addressing the cultural status of the

“poem.” Taking “bacon” as a literal part of Farmer John’s own anatomy, Bukowski “reads” the commercial as a measure of the farmer’s ability to withstand pain, or to perform an act (auto-fellatio?) of extreme agility (itself as traditionally “perverse” as the instance of fornication with the machine in “Action”), to make a value-judgement not worth the effort. Bukowski deploys poetry in the service of trivia. The colloquial diction, the missing noun in the first sentence, the use of “son of a bitch” and the limited sentiment demote poetry from an act of lofty sublime to a sound-bite or quip, and artistic process from an agonising adherence to craft to an effortless scribble. Smith addresses the apparent artlessness of Bukowski’s formal methodology:

The satiric critique of capitalism, bourgeois morality and conventional culture is accompanied by a deliberately disordered syntax, a “spontaneous” type-writerese that creates its effect by a radical difference from smoother, more literary writing. . . . The tools in his [Bukowski’s] craftsman’s bag are used to create an impression of artless spontaneity. (57)

The “disordered syntax” and uncrafted elements of Bukowski’s writing effect a “satiric” critique of “capitalism” not by opposing the proliferation of interchangeable consumer options but by aping them, by creating a poetry as instantly readable and disposable as the Hollywood films Bukowski satirises in *Hollywood*; “Yeah,” dislodged from its position as transmitter of transcendental or “deep” truths, becomes as instantly disposable and forgettable as the commercial it records. The poem enacts a commonplace in a form from which we expect the extraordinary. The close parallel between the poem and advertisement self-consciously address the poem’s place as a node for discursive signals, as a template ready for social inscription, rather than as a trans-historical beacon of permanent values transparently apprehended in language. “Yeah” records a new historical understanding of art as a product of social contingency.

Aware of its ludicrousness, its obvious misreading of the literal and metaphoric, the poem addresses how language lends itself to readings both ambiguous and unequivocal. What is common sense, asks the reader, except a state of mind, a way of “decoding” the message in a way prepared by the societal machinery that crafted the message (machinery itself dependent upon the complicity of the society receiving the message); shifting the advertisement to a context

outside the proper format (the poem) disarms and distorts the transmitted intelligence. In effect, this poem returns to the commercial to question why, in the first place, Farmer John's act of smoking his own bacon *should* impress us. Why does that action commend a certain product to our use? And should we take that verdict any more seriously than a value-judgement based on a farmer literally "smoking" his own flesh? The poem feeds upon consumer discourse, ascribing to it a ludicrousness that reduces its relevance to zero, at the same time as it raises our awareness of how poetry hides similar social ciphers behind a veil of artistic loftiness. By turning bacon into a "metaphor" while retaining the literal sense of "smoking" the poem's language-use alerts us to the arbitrariness of interpretation, the way we access and translate the body of useless information, or white noise, that surrounds us. If communication results from white noise transformed into meaning, Bukowski demonstrates that what "we experience as the real world is our own attempts to organize a meaning in what is essentially, in itself, as meaningless as a rorschach blot" (O'Neill 15). The poem therefore questions and confirms our entrapment within the language of advertising and art, in forms of presentation which attempt to control and determine inference. His poem remains both deeply embedded in the culture and verged on escaping it.

Art, like O'Neill's science, in Bukowski's hands becomes a laughable instrument of subversion and reification. Bukowski knows that his writings may subvert consumer advertising, but that it, at the same time, also advertises Charles Bukowski himself. His art responds to and confirms a deeply ambivalent relationship to his own endeavours and our appreciation of them. When asked, in the autobiographical novel *Hollywood* (1990), how he feels his readers will react to his new-found fame, Bukowski replies: "As always those fuckers will have to judge me on how well I write" (89). The word "fuckers," used to signify his readership, suggests the irreverence which fuelled Bukowski's personal myth and popularity. Madigan illustrates how Bukowski continually "taunts" the reader to measure his "arrogant dimension," his proclamations of greatness, against the work itself in a way that constantly requires a questioning of the "worth" of that work (459). Bukowski's self-opinion seems simultaneously

“fixed,” “near-parodic” and “best interpreted with irony” (460); with the same rapid variance that O’Neill witnesses in science, Bukowski’s art alternates between declaiming supreme artistic worth and lampooning his creations until we respond with incredulity, suspicion and, finally, laughter. Bukowski reminds us of a subjective art; the “yeah” of the title itself contests and ironises the view of poetry as an “affirmative” or “affirming” force. He regards his product, his “art,” with dead earnestness and complete irrelevance; nor does what Bukowski says about writing always synch-up with the *way* that he writes, and so his writings become emblematic of a vacillation between theory and practice completely in keeping with the contradictory discourse of his historical moment.

Black humour occupies much of dirty realism, proving a comedic form representative of its age insofar as its humour responds to the variance, turnaround and continual recycling of discourse, epistemology and commodities that informs late capitalism. It proves an ideal vehicle for Bukowski to exploit, since its isolation, passivity, vacillation and inaction serve to reground his “ambivalence,” his “both acquiescence and disdain for his fate” (Madigan 452). Unwilling to attempt a regrounding of discourse in the social, Bukowski’s writing, in the words of Smith, infuses “Hemingway with postmodern laughter, forming an utterly distinctive writing—allusive, anarchic and miraculously entertaining” (56). Bukowski crafts an art out of “acquiescence,” “disdain,” “postmodern laughter,” an art “allusive,” “anarchic and “miraculously entertaining”—all salient descriptions for the “alienation (psychological, ethical, economic) of the artist from society” (Smith 56). His chosen arsenal indicates a reluctance to cede any of his personal liberty to a larger discourse, apart from that of “entertainment,” which, finally, proves the sole reason for his humour: to foreground his monadism and to facilitate a delight in its non-delightfulness. Laughter is the default mode for one who takes nothing seriously (which is not to say that, contrarily, he never takes anything seriously). As Smith writes near the end of his article, “for Bukowski, the pleasure of the text is always laughter” (59), indicating that his strategy culminates in the void which confronts discourse with its own inefficacy at ascending to and sustaining metanarrative, at establishing trans-historical value, always, as a result of this attempt, offering itself up to its subversion by tactics and the workings

of the ordinary (revolution leads to dominance leads to revolution leads to dominance leads to revolution, never culminating in any actual change or betterment in the socio-political real). Never once does he stop laughing to probe whether contingency itself might not offer a decidedly dialectical alternative to the development of metanarrative; the comedic form of his monadic “pleasure” prevents the risky investigation into “text” as communal property, into a pliable narrative of social need. Despairing at variance and sameness, Bukowski exults in them. In effect, Bukowski’s laughter proves another reified, trans-historical response, writing off all discourse regardless of context, for the purpose of a paralysed entertainment.

#### *VII. Other Takes: Jarman and Ford*

While Carver and Bukowski revel in the liberating power of paradox, Mark Anthony Jarman and Richard Ford confront isolation, passivity and paradox as problematic. Carver (in the early works) and Bukowski draw power from isolation, from the Cold War dilemma that no action, either to the right or left, offers a more viable, less totalitarian, choice, and from the discrepancy between their codes of conduct (discourse) and their actual conduct itself. The discursive indeterminacy that guarantees their disconnectedness from societal machinery fuels their gleeful subversion; but isolation sits less comfortably with Jarman and Ford. They seek to end the impasse of the hypocrisy aesthetic, or to at least come to grips with it; through an openness and vulnerability to the ordinary they come to understand the contingent, socially-constructed nature of history. If Bukowski, in the words of William Joyce, “is an order unto himself” (59) and “the calm eye in the centre of the hurricane,” (64), and Carver (in his two early collections) offers “a study in voyeurism” (2), then Ford and Jarman critique the stasis and passivity that result from a policy of discursive indeterminacy and determined isolation.

Ford and Jarman contend with, rather than celebrate, the limitations of hypocrisy. Both authors admit to the current epistemological crises described by O’Neill: “The idea of non-significance has become a commonplace of entropic thinking: the world is neither meaningful nor meaningless, neither tragic, nor in the grimmest sense of the existentialists, absurd—it simply is” (22). No explanation accounts for the “why” of existence; it simply “is.” So many

factors over-determine behaviour that no behavioural model can posit an acceptable foundation for behavioural inquiry. We cannot know “why” anything happens the way it does. Denied of this “why,” then, “how” (to proceed, to live, to affect the world), then, remains the only question worth asking. While Bukowski responds to this dilemma by totally abandoning all consistency, rubbing his hands together in eager freedom from reason – taking the devastatingly fragmented conceptual horizon, the entropic condition that points to certain death and the dissolution of all discourse, as a license to indulge in hypocrisy – Ford and Jarman question the implications of this attitude, and the effect of a text-centric world-view, on the community around them. If Bukowski writes the eye of the “hurricane” then Jarman and Ford write the hurricane itself; if Bukowski “eschew[s] any kind of orthodoxy, not because [he is a rebel] but because [he] is so busy being [himself]” (62), then Jarman and Ford consider the possibilities open for the implementation of a communal orthodoxy, of an abandonment of a simulated solipsism.

As O’Neill points out, the postmodern views the world’s essence as irreducible to scientific or philosophical terminology (in de Certeau this notion translates into the impossibility of discourse to fully account for the ordinary). It simply “is.” Recognising this, Bukowski drops all attempts at reducing his behaviour to analytic terms; he simply lets his behaviour “be,” in all its incongruity, making no attempt whatsoever to address or overcome his inconsistency. Bukowski’s disjunctures, conflicts and impasses prevent the emergence, from his work, of a unified discursive model (though not necessarily of a discursive model of “disunity”); through the hypocrisy aesthetic, he avoids the regrounding of a cultural or societal metanarrative. He can say anything at all about himself, knowing that he will ultimately slip out of, and refute, all definitions. Bukowski always speaks *for*, rather than *of*, himself, unless one views the entirety of his work as a conglomerate of the various, contradictory discourses “for” that, in their irreconcilability, posit a discourse “of,” insofar as his body of work presents a “world” neither “meaningful nor meaningless,” neither “tragic” nor “absurd,” but all of these, and more, in various, particular, temporarily absolute positions.



In *Independence Day* and *Salvage King Ya!*, Ford and Jarman, respectively, cede—almost altruistically—their authoritative positions to a discourse they do not own; *they stop writing*. By relinquishing textual explanations and hypotheses for sheer activity they begin to speak “of” rather than “for” themselves, insofar as action (illustrated in Ford’s *The Sportswriter*) offers no explanations, only an effect. Regretting the isolation imposed on them by a strategy of tactics—by the hypocrisy aesthetic—they relinquish their hold on discourse and willingly sink into the ordinary. As Jeffrey J. Folks suggests in “The Risks of Membership: Richard Ford’s *The Sportswriter*” (1998), Ford’s *The Sportswriter* (and, I would argue, to a greater extent, in its sequel, *Independence Day*) interrogates the problematic of the atomised, monadic society: “Indeed, Ford’s writing expresses an urgency concerning the collective future of American society, and, though his continual process of humorous satiric deflation, he suggests the absurdity of a privatized solution to the malaise of contemporary middle-class existence” (73). Ford’s realism (like that of Jarman) confronts the “absurdity” of the “privatized solution,” or, precisely that shelter in solipsism that Bukowski and Carver exploit. Instead, Ford’s project, in these two novels, reaffirms the necessity of locating or delimiting the parameters of “the collective future,” rather than of societal interests sacrificed to the predisposition and liberty of the individual authorial consciousness (though his investigation takes him deeply into the efforts and effects of that consciousness).

While dirty realism’s entropic wild card, death, as the presence of a reality always outside conceptual inscription, excuses Bukowski from guaranteeing his discourse, Ford and Jarman grapple with the nihilism implicit in dirty realism’s hypocrisy; an “outside” empirical reality unapproachable by language excuses Bukowski’s indeterminacy within language (by exposing language as limited and ineffective), while in Jarman and Ford it problematises the application of discourse; the difference is one of *approach* to discourse. Jarman and Ford show how stepping out of the conceptual realm into definitive action disturbs the discursive equilibrium necessary for the maintenance of hypocrisy; by being definitive, action foils the strategy of indeterminacy whereby dirty realism overwrites its deeds; it creates effects, or

“facts,” at least temporarily impervious to overwriting (before a sufficient passage of time causes historical discourse to displace and obscure experience). If the American government depended upon the public buying its “stories” during the Cold War, then Bukowski likewise depends upon characters such as Nan and Gloria, in “Bring Me Your Love,” buying into the codes which overwrite his actions (which illustrates the way Bukowski appropriated and implemented the discursive strategy of the postwar state); Jarman and Ford, however, regard the inapplicability of such mendaciousness to the maintenance of communal, democratic projects (discursive unreliability thwarts consensual practice). The “facts” created by action, insofar as they affect groups of people, bring to the forefront the need for a language to express a *shared* experience; they recognise the need for a language pragmatics that would enable a group response to crises. Reflecting the protest movements of the 1960s, which insisted that the government adopt a discourse that accounted, as well, for the experience of youth in America (not just the will and agenda of the government), Ford and Jarman consider their responsibility to similar protests launched against their own variance between word and deed. Sooner or later, occurrences in the ordinary (such the experiences of a population segment in Vietnam) multiply to the point where they “flood” the discourse that fails to address them, in effect sinking that discourse back into the ordinary (there are too many exceptions to the rule), from which it must reconstitute itself. While one can take this, cynically, as an opportunity to reform a discursive dominance, one can also take this as a call to vigilance and a ceding of discursive dominance to democracy.

#### A. “Occidental” Eras

Ford’s collection of novellas, *Women with Men* (1997) grapples with the individual defining consciousness. Speaking to Huey Guagliardo, Ford admits to the central issue explored by the volume: “They [the three novellas] are . . . about varying degrees, varying sorts of human solipsism. The thing that defeats affection in each of these stories is one person’s inability really to look outside him- or herself, so much so that the needs, the preferences, the well-being, the

sanctity of others are, in effect, completely ignored or misunderstood, causing calamity" (610). In a move opposite Bukowski, Ford explores the consequences of those who (like many of Bukowski's narrators) refuse to "look outside" themselves, those who wilfully subordinate communal relations to their particular, solipsistic "take" on reality, and the ensuing harm this causes to those around them.

The final story in the volume, "Occidentals," follows the travails of Charley Matthews and Helen Carmichael, two lovers who come to Paris to oversee the translation of Charley's novel, *The Predicament*, into French. Through the course of the vacation we learn of Matthews' life, his divorce, his teaching position as an instructor in "African-American" literature; we also learn of Helen's terminal cancer. The story ends with Helen's suicide and Matthews's thoughts on its implications:

But he had learned something. He had commenced a new era in his life. There *were* eras. That much was unquestionable. In two days it would be Christmas. They, he and Helen, had failed to make up a song. And yet, oddly, this would all be over by Christmas. He hadn't even written a letter to his parents. But in the time that remained here, he would. A long letter. And in his letter he would try as best he could, and with the many complications that would need detailing, to explain to them all that had happened to him here and what new ideas he had for the future. (255)

Helen's suicide returns Matthews to a discursive beginning, to a "border" (de Certeau 5) between one "story" and its modified version. It has "taught" him that the ordinary (death) forms the source of all discourse, and that "event" *can* mark off the end of one discursive mode and beginning of a new one (a "border"): "There *were* eras." Matthews accepts a contingency, a genuine causal connection, between language and actuality. Where Bukowski would use such an event to signify the failure of language concepts to render the totality of experience, and therefore justify his own misuse and appropriation of language to further his own ends, Ford uses it to show how language can service, however imperfectly, communal understanding. Ford does not suggest that anyone can mediate the actual transparently, but Matthews feels enough of a responsibility to events, and his role in them, to attempt—as rigorously as possible, to write "as best" as he can—to "detail" the "many complications," in order to propose a future his

parents can comprehend and share, a language that will condition subsequent memory of the event in a manner effective to all parties concerned.

Matthews will attempt, as faithfully as possible, to inform the kind of message his parents take, or “decode” from his letter. He recognises his and Helen’s solipsism, their entrapment within their ways of seeing the world, as a “failure” of community: they “had failed to make up a song.” Ford finds that—unlike Bukowski in his reaction to Betty’s death in *Post Office* (67-68)<sup>37</sup>—that the actual can implicate the self in discourse; if one can overwrite phenomena to erase or avoid it, then one can also overwrite it with communal possibility, although this means bearing responsibility for that particular discursive formation. We cannot escape mediation, but we can agree on the form of that mediation.

A desire to bear responsibility flavours the texts of Ford and Jarman. Like a post Cold War America deprived of the oppositional adversary by which it defined itself, these protagonists investigate alternatives to playing opposing options against one another; they examine the effect of an *active*, singular stand, of the “permanent” choice, not because any one choice has any greater or more relevant basis than another (or that permanence can be indefinitely sustained), but because it provides them with something they desire, most often a release from isolation, simulation, and solipsism.

The indeterminacy of dirty realists such as Carver and Bukowski represents a non-participation in social discourse, while at the same time requiring that discourse; this vacillating attitude eliminates the possibility of societal change or interpersonal connection, as it proceeds too unreliably for communal co-operation; conversely, Jarman and Ford’s dirty realism attempts to convey a social real (by which I mean the contractual underpinnings of social groups, not an unmediated condition). Bukowski subverts the interplay between material forces and discursive practices, which overwrite those forces, to guarantee his liberty; Ford and Jarman face the possibility of accepting and participating in a normative discourse. Their entry into history occurs not at the expense of, but as a compromise offered to, the other. For Bukowski, history does not exist, except as a “story” (Harry the faithful husband) in turn displaced by another

"story" (Harry the adulterer). To Ford and Jarman history implies events which constitute commonly recognised touchstones for a variety of interpenetrating discourses.

Jarman and Ford do not admit to one supreme history but rather to a field, an unstable mass, of past occurrences that societal discourse orbits; while they do not outright reject history, as Bukowski does (because it means "death" for the "individual"), they nevertheless remain tentative about its implications. As the basis for this "unstable mass," Jarman and Ford nominate the event, that occurrence of a particular place, a particular time, from which stories and counter-stories, explanations and counter-explanations devolve, where one "era," or story, ends and another begins (as the ordinary "overflows" discourse and demands its reconstitution). The dirty realism of Ford and Jarman conceives a non-utopian history, one concentrated in the specifics of occurrence that determine history (36) and the way those occurrences translate in the various narratives that account for them at any given moment in time. Their historical sensibility remains markedly dialectical, history as a discourse suited to, and arising from, the social demands at the time of the discursive formation in question. In regards to history their texts supply that "thought about thought" (53) which *Marxism and Form* (1971) describes as the central feature in dialectical thinking; in other words, history in Jarman and Ford is thought from the inside out, as an "era" determined by an event conceptualised in language acutely aware of its construction by the contingencies of the history moment, a methodology described by Jameson as "concrete thought . . . which at the same time remains aware of its own intellectual operations in the very act of thinking" (53). While Bukowski and the early Carver also present such self-awareness, they ultimately use it to highlight the conditioning behind discourse and thus to elude accountability to that discourse, to escape into linguistic deracination, while Jarman and Ford use their self-awareness to, in the words of *Marxism and Form*, "link together in a single figure two incommensurable realities . . . spirit and matter, the data of individual experience and the vaster forms of institutional society, the language of existence and that of history" (6-7). The project becomes not liberation from causal history but a search (however futile) for connections, a willingness to risk the definition of eras

and to confront the social real as a manifestation not only of state-sanctioned discourse but “individual experience” and “the language of existence,” of a confluence not only of various discourses but of discourse and “matter,” the material conditions witnessed in the world. Rather than offsetting “two incommensurable realities,” Ford and Jarman attempt to “link” them “together.” Their project remains optimistic; they trust in the efficacy of communal response in crafting and re-crafting the dominant discourse (as anti-war protests, to some degree, helped alter the American “story” of the war in Vietnam).

In *Post Office*, Betty dies because of a system of capital that creates impossible living conditions for the underclass, or because a purportedly Christian society refuses charity to a person incapable of taking care of herself. The ideology, the explanatory discourse, precedes her death; in dirty realism, her death occurs; her death “is,” and in this indeterminate occurrence originate the various ideologies that account for and “predate” it. In the utopian vision of history promulgated by Christianity and vulgar Marxism, the conditions that history comprises will disappear with the Second Coming or the overthrow of the bourgeoisie by the working class; after these events, history will cease to exist; it will have passed from its final era. Ford’s dirty realism does not conceive of an end to “eras,” only a succession of them. As O’Neill points out, History, for postmodernity, “is” and “is not” essentially economic or metaphysical. Historicity exists, first of all, as an occurrence, not discursive manifestation, secondly, as an act of narrative imposition arising from the various effects of the occurrence, and, thirdly, as a social construction that remembers and records the occurrence according to material necessity and conditions (occurrence and discourse are therefore linked but not interchangeable). O’Neill states the complexity underlying this rendition of historical formation:

Life is what you make of it, indeed, but since of itself it means nothing, anything we can “make” of it will overtly be a form of fiction, and its production a form of play, however earnest and non-comic our intentions may be. These substitute worlds that we conjure up will be seen by those of an idealist turn of mind as demonstrating the triumphant victory of form over the void; for those of a more existential turn of mind the inevitable final triumph of the void over all form will still remain the primary consideration. (23)

As indicated in chapter three, "Dirty Realism: History," the 1960s ushered in the notion of reality as a "story," or, in O'Neill's words, "fiction." For dirty realism, history constitutes a discourse enacted and maintained through an authorial disposition towards a certain kind of "play," towards the fabricated "story" of choice (stories provided by dominant social institutions). Bukowski and Carver *decide* to deploy indeterminacy against a series of discursive codes they adopt, overturn and rupture with every moment and whim; the "void" shines through with every instance of narrative double-dealing. They set up rules to purposefully break them. But one could as easily decide upon a set of rules one decides to *adhere* to, and here Ford and Jarman step up. Idealist *and* cynical, dirty realism rests, finally, not on scientific or philosophical precepts, but on *attitude*.

Jarman and Ford thoroughly critique the position of wilful indeterminacy represented in Bukowski and Carver's early fictions (it is a position) to *choose differently*.<sup>38</sup> The less solipsistic, far more communally perceptive fictions of Jarman and Ford affirm O'Neill's dialectical paradox: "The evaluating subject . . . is wholly a product of that reality it presumes to evaluate. This paradox—life is what you make of it, as long as it allows you do so—seen as inherent in modern hermeneutic theory, is a very large part of the reason why so much of modern theoretical discourse seems poised on the edge of comedy" (19). Ford refers to this devil's loop by the name of "contingency," allowing that "reality" and language begin and end in one another. Yes, conditions determine the subject, but certain conditions allow the subject to alter or overcome such determination (Bascombe relinquishes his detachment, a result of the death of his eldest child and subsequent divorce, after witnessing the baseball hit Paul). When Ford and Jarman experience actuality they return to the established discursive mode, societal norms, to re-establish discursive relations rather than debunk them. In other words, Ford and Jarman work towards furnishing the necessary verbiage that will invite contractual participation in the textual "era," in determining the referents by which we vision and re-vision history. Nowhere does the notion of "eras" as a contractual vision of time, history as communal property, occur more explicitly than in Ford's bookend novels *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*, where the

protagonist Frank Bascombe deliberates between leaving the “Existence Period,” a time of instability, mutability and social deracination for the “Permanent Period,” a time of societal reconciliation, community values and an agreed-upon contractual commitment to history and reality.

### B. Bascombe’s Independence

Richard Ford’s two novels, *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*, follow the exploits of Frank Bascombe, former short-story writer, teacher, husband, as he follows, in the former novel, a vocation in sportswriting and, in the latter, in selling real estate. Both novels deal with Frank’s rootlessness, his desire for, and mistrust of, societal integration, and particularly the problems encountered by solipsism as it tries to define reality strictly according to individual terms. As Folks writes, in these two novels<sup>39</sup> in particular Ford probed the isolation and problems that resulted from the narrative pre-eminence celebrated by Bukowski and Carver; unlike Bukowski’s Harry, or Carver’s Myers, Bascombe explores the possibility of agreement with society rather than the potential for exploiting, and maximising, his position within it. According to Folks these novels by Ford illustrate the “complicated relationships of family, intimacy, and labor” (76), Bascombe’s “striving . . . toward an understanding of social reality” (77) and the “coherence [or lack thereof] of social existence” (84). If Bukowski and Carver show how the hypocrisy aesthetic can serve to liberate the individual from a subject position in society, then Ford’s and Jarman’s works probe the problems encountered by the exercise of such liberty. If the hypocrisy aesthetic defines a strategy of tactics, then Ford’s two novels probe the limitations evident in the monadic response to the society evident in both Horkheimer and Adorno as well as de Certeau.

*The Sportswriter* takes place over an Easter weekend, opening on Good Friday, with the protagonist, Frank Bascombe, visiting the grave of his son, Ralph, with his ex-wife, called (in this novel) only “X.” Ralph died of Reye’s syndrome just over two years before the beginning of the narration. A week short of his thirty-ninth birthday, Frank—a former author who published one collection of short stories before quitting literature—now writes for a “glossy New York sports



magazine" (3) and continues to live in the house his family formerly inhabited. The novel contemplates Frank's past, as well as his immediate future. He attends meetings of the Divorced Men's Club and travels to Detroit with his girlfriend, Vicki Arsenault, to interview former athlete Herb Wallagher. Though Bascombe attempts to make the best of things, events often test the limits of his optimism. Vicki ends up breaking off their relationship and assaulting him. Walter Lockett, one of the members of the Divorced Men's Club, after having his homosexual advance rebuffed by Bascombe, commits suicide shortly before Frank's birthday. The meeting with Herb Wallagher ends in misery and madness. By the end of the book, Bascombe has quit writing sports, entered into a relationship with Catherine Flaherty—a young medical student—and relocated to Florida on the pretence of locating a daughter Walter Lockett claimed to have had, but who, finally, does not exist. The novel ends with the undoing of all the referents by which we have come to know Bascombe: his departure (temporary, as it turns out) from Haddam, his quitting the sports magazine, the end of his relationship with Vicki, and his exit from the solace of the Divorced Men's Club. *The Sportswriter*, therefore, witnesses a process of divestiture, as Frank moves from a member of society to a virtual non-entity, reduced to a non-character by the loss of those societal elements that gave form and shape to his life: "And I thought that one natural effect of life is to cover you in a thin layer of . . . what? A film? A residue or skin of all the things you've done and been and said and erred at? I'm not sure" (374). Temporarily divested of the "effect of life," Bascombe glories in the "magical instant" of societal detachment, of a temporary escape from personal and social history, knowing all the while that the "residue" he has thrown off will soon resume its hold over him. As Folks notes, then, existence in Ford represents a social rather than philosophical condition (81), an acceptance of one's place in the accretion of history, though by the end of *The Sportswriter* Bascombe desires only a simulated and ephemeral release from this fact. *The Sportswriter* represents Bascombe's dawning awareness of his hypocrisy—his deployment of indeterminacy, contradiction and narrative primacy in much the same vein as Myers or Harry—while his refusal to cede to accountability for his past and his place remains the focus of *Independence Day*.

*Independence Day* picks up five years after *The Sportswriter*. Frank Bascombe has changed professions from sportswriting to real estate. Poised on the eve of the Bush/Dukakis presidential elections, the novel charts Bascombe's activities during the July weekend of 1998 and culminates in the July fourth celebrations. If *The Sportswriter* recalled the personal advantages of an unrestricted individualism, *Independence Day* turns around and critiques the very indeterminacy that enabled Bascombe's earlier individualism, expanding upon Ford's frame of reference to include a more comprehensive vision of contemporary America.<sup>40</sup> Unlike *The Sportswriter*, *Independence Day* opens with a description not of Bascombe, but of Haddam, a town suffering the loss of communal values and the recent economic downturn and its fallout: joblessness, destabilisation of accepted values and, most importantly, heightened criminal activity; the opening recounts Bascombe's recent mugging one street over from where he lives; Clair Devane, Bascombe's former co-worker and love interest, was raped and murdered while attending a routine showing of real estate to a client.

Like the earlier novel, *Independence Day* deals with Bascombe's day-to-day existence. While following Bascombe around as he tries to find a suitable dwelling for his clients, Phyllis and Joe Markham, Ford introduces Bascombe's vision of real estate as a pragmatic rather than idealist solution to the disparity between desire and reality: "The premise [of real estate] is that you're presented with what you might've thought you didn't want, but what's available, whereupon you give in and start finding ways to feel good about it and yourself." Real estate offers an allegory for acclimatising to a world that does not coincide with one's dreams. In the course of the novel, we learn that Bascombe currently resides in a house formerly owned by his ex-wife—no longer the shadowy, inscrutable X of *The Sportswriter*, but now christened Ann Dykstra. Ann has remarried, to an architect, Charley O'Dell, and relocated from Haddam to Deep River, Connecticut, with her and Frank's children, Paul and Clarissa. Frank is now romantically involved with Sally Caldwell, a divorcée whose husband inexplicably disappeared several years ago, walking out on the marriage, never to return. In addition, the novel finds Bascombe taking on the role of small entrepreneur. As an owner of a root-beer stand (run by

Karl Bemish, staunch Republican), and two houses in a predominantly African-American neighbourhood, Bascombe must contend with economic matters not only in his chosen vocation but as a businessman himself.

*Independence Day* derives its dramatic impetus from events surrounding Bascombe's son, Paul, recently arrested for shoplifting condoms and assaulting a security guard. The latter half of the novel focuses on the relationship between father and son. Intending to teach Paul a few valuable lessons about self-hood, Bascombe devises a trip for the two of them, a tour that will take them to baseball and basketball halls of fame over the July long weekend, with the ultimate destination being the Cooperstown Baseball Hall of Fame. However, the trip proves as much of a learning experience for Bascombe as it does for Paul and almost ends disastrously when the teenager purposefully steps in front of a batting machine and nearly loses an eye. Through the relationship with his son, Bascombe comes to realise the weakness of adopting a position that straddles the "fissures between the literal and the imagined" (343). Because Paul so equally matches his father at wordplay, free association and the strategically deployed evasions and ambiguities of narrative, Bascombe's educational attempt fails. The tour reveals to Bascombe the isolationism and ineffectuality of his narrative indeterminacy when the other (unlike Gloria or Nan) refuses to buy into the "story." At the Hall of Fame an errant baseball deprives Frank of his ability to overwrite reality. In the end, Bascombe trades personal license for mutual agreement. The family, like society, is predicated on a *shared* language. The novel, then, concerns itself not so much with Bascombe as individual but with the societal context Bascombe attempts to navigate.

#### i. Factualists Versus the Everyday

Throughout *The Sportswriter*, Bascombe valorises the mysterious, the inexplicable, the contradictory, making, in dirty realist fashion, a coherence on the basis of the indeterminate, making lack of essence the essence of his ontology, making the unsayability of reality the excuse for his own discursive indeterminacy. Bascombe derides "factualists" throughout:

X . . . is not taking Paul and Clarissa to church, a fact which worries me—not because they will turn out godless (I couldn't care less) but because she is bringing them up to be perfect little factualists and information accumulators with no particular reverence or speculative interest for what's not known. (204)

Bascombe finds religion relevant not for its deism but for its openness to mystification, for its reverence of a partial or incomplete epistemology, for “what's not known.” He appreciates irrationality not for mystical purposes but precisely because irrationality allows for flexibility in a world dominated, on one hand, by regulatory bodies, and, on the other, by unexpected, accidental occurrences; factualism and “information” accumulation—something Ford comments on in the comical figure of Karl Bemish in *Independence Day*—only serve an authority that fixes its parameters, its syntactical frontiers, by excluding, or setting itself apart from, those elements in the everyday—or “banality,” as de Certeau calls it (4)—exterior to its “artificial languages [which articulate] the procedures of a specific kind of knowledge” (6). Bascombe would like his children to remain open to occurrences which defy factuality, that offer phenomena that resist factual representation in a generalised discursive schema (as the movement of particular bodies at particular times lend credence to the mechanical laws of Newtonian physics). He would lend his children a scepticism on the accountability of discourse to the real (an ironic position, since religion in fact purports to offer a metanarrative accounting for *every* occurrence).

Throughout the two novels, factualism represents a fixed world-view incapable of sustaining the dynamic tensions necessary for “unprogrammed” human interaction, for the dialectical process. Factualism prevents the emergence of contingency as the basis of social interaction. In *Independence Day*, Bascombe describes Karl Bemish, his partner in a hot-dog stand business, as the perfect representative of those systems continually attempting to set themselves apart from, and to displace, the provisional nature of everyday existence:

His [Karl Bemish's] idea of a worthwhile give-and-take is to confront you with something you've never dreamed of, an obscure koan of history, a rash of irrefutable statistics such as that New Jersey has the highest effective property-tax rate in the nation, or that one of every three Latin Americans lives in Los Angeles, something that explains nothing but makes any except the most banal response inescapable, and then to look to you for a reply—which can only ever amount to: ‘Well, what d'you

know,' or 'Well, I'll be goddamned.' Actual, speculative, unprogrammed dialogue between human beings is unappetizing to him, his ergonomic training notwithstanding." (138)

Bemish's statistics operate on and elicit the "banal." As Bascombe notes, Bemish's "factualism" creates facts, "irrefutable statistics" and "obscure koans," which serve only as such, and "explain nothing." Bemish's statistics create a discourse that supplants "dialogue between human beings," and prevent "speculation." Bemish's facts isolate him from others. Excluded from the other man's specialised knowledge, Bascombe responds for the "banal," the residual "remainder" exterior to Bemish's "facts," meaning by this the "common verisimilitude" (de Certeau 8) from which specialised discourses—such as Bemish's—take their raw material, and which, because of speciality and specialised discourse, they penetrate with authority; Ford shows that this kind of specialisation always creates subjects of discourse, posits an exterior that it operates on, an exterior "we call culture" (de Certeau 6), from which it draws examples to furnish its own position, which remains, only, a position. Bemish's facts ultimately "know nothing" because they recall only their position as "facts"; they contribute nothing outside of themselves, creating little or no contact with life as an interactive, or *social*, reality, a condition de Certeau describes with the word "banality," suggesting not so much "boredom" as the "average" or "most common" (supported by Bascombe himself seeking solace in the lifestyle of suburbia and the consumer culture of strip malls). If reality in Ford, as Folks suggests, is essentially a social discourse, then statistics stymie social interaction and hence reality. Bemish can exercise an "irrefutable" authority by deploying a language that determines the "frontiers" of its own operativity, that determines what it sees by its chosen means of looking, but this process does not enable communication "between human beings"; rather, his statistics continually short-circuit communication, subordinating the contractual, provisional, contingent "life" of language to a discursive authority Bascombe cannot respond to except in the pre-prepared terms of that discourse.

Ford, then, critiques discursive formations (including that of dirty realism). Like the scene between Bemish and Bascombe, *Independence Day* reveals "the displacements that lead

toward the common place," the field of the "banal" which recognises no speciality, which comprises a place of commonality, the *shared* condition. Ford investigates how to avoid simulation, how not to isolate the self. Bascombe is the normative subject upon whom specialised knowledge, such as statistics, imposes its competence, and whose response to such competence, since he lacks the power of a specialised discourse (Bascombe does not know statistics), must remain "common" or "banal," subordinate. Bascombe at once accepts Bemish's propositions and at the same time remains rooted in a banality independent or unconfined by them; he remains the other which Bemish's statistics need in order to operate. But since the banal escapes totalising articulation, Bascombe knows that Bemish's project must ultimately fail to gain a purchase upon him: "cultural specialists . . . no longer designate the object of discourse, but rather its place" (5). Bemish crafts a space offset from the mutuality Bascombe regards as living "dialogue," as the fluid, mutable awareness of language continually renegotiating its contract with reality to create a text played upon and subverted by the "common" people as the occasion demands, language used and re-used rather than produced and then reinforced. While Bascombe cannot refute Bemish's discourse, he finds himself independent of it, not its "object" but merely, and only for the moment, in its "space."

Bascombe would prefer an "unprogrammed" dialogue, an "actual" and "speculative" one, in other words a dialogue outside the predictable self-reinforcing codes of statistics and factualism:

The strength of these [statistical] computations lies in their ability to divide, but this analytical ability eliminates the possibility of representing the tactical trajectories which, according to their own criteria, select fragments taken from the vast ensembles of production in order to compose new stories with them. (de Certeau 35)

As de Certeau notes, Bemish's use of statistics to examine and enclose the American "culture" of his moment results in a stale and one-dimensional view of the dynamic forces operating within the "banal"; his responses elicit not the dynamism of true "play" but rather the stale epithets or clichés of Bascombe's temporary defeat, which only further entrenches Bemish's purpose of inquiry: to prove himself correct; but grasping or articulating a culture's "efficacious

meanderings" remains outside Bemish's ability. It remains the "mystery" of "everydayness" (5), neither a "state" nor a "flaw" nor "grace," something that "cannot be spoken." "Everydayness," to de Certeau, is "something which *comes into being*" (5), an occurrence whose ultimate unspeakability specialised fields of inquiry attempt to draft into their discourse; the "everyday," however, ultimately eludes the stability of a totalising vocabulary, remaining the "culture" that specialised inquiry speaks *about* or *in relation to*, but cannot encompass. Everydayness arises as a series of particular practices and occurrences, a "productive experience of text" (5)—meaning an *experience of a text* rather than the *production of a text*; everydayness comprises the "particular" (4). The everyday, then, recalls contingency, the development of "text" from the occurrences and actualities that constitute human "experience," rather than a "text" that precedes and overwrites those experiences. To "experience" the "text" of the everyday is to facilitate a dialectical historicism. This "experience of a text" rather than a "production of a text" remains the lesson Bascombe will learn in the process of *Independence Day*.

#### ii. Hypocrisy as Speciality

By rejecting "factualism," fearing that his children will become "factualists," Bascombe means for them to remain aware of, and open to, the "mystery" bordering all discursive modes, the "everydayness" that discursive speciality attempts to transcend and fix; he wants the possibility for "new stories" to remain viable to his children, as it remains viable to him. The "actual, speculative, unprogrammed" dialogue Frank refers to, a dialogue outside that of "programmed codes" of "industrial or administrative production" (34), most closely resembles the "prose of the world," a disjunctive and surprising movement that ambushes rational processes. Throughout, Bascombe's project remains similar to that articulate by de Certeau:

Far from arbitrarily assuming the privilege of speaking in the name of the ordinary (it cannot be spoken), or claiming to be in that general place (that would be a false 'mysticism'), or, worse, offering up a hagiographic everydayness for its edifying value, it is a matter of restoring historicity to the movement which leads analytical procedures back to their frontiers, to the point where they are changed, indeed disturbed, by the ironic and mad banality that speaks in 'Everyman.' (5)

Bascombe's banal responses indicate the impossibility of statistics to encapsulate the totality of Bascombe's experience, hence leading Bemish's specialised knowledge back to its "frontiers" or its limitations in a way that changes and disturbs its program. History, then, becomes, as de Certeau puts it, an "overflowing" (5) of the everyday into specialised fields that returns them to time, that marks the social occasions and events in the real (an apple falling on Newton's head) from which they emerged; in Ford's novel, this "overflowing" is synonymous with unprogrammed dialogue between people, meaning, in other words, that history is interaction, is *social* and continually returns to regard itself as a *context*. This overflowing "restores historicity" to specialised practice, i.e. reveals to practice that discourse cannot account for *everything*, that discourse remains contingent upon occurrence, upon speaker and upon the time spoken, i.e. upon the history of its articulation.

In *The Sportswriter*, college teaching serves as a trope for the invention of a specialised discourse:

the place [school] was all anti-mystery types right to the core—men and women both—all expert in the arts of explaining, explicating and dissecting, and by these means promoting permanence. . . . Everything about the place was meant to be lasting—life no less than the bricks in the library and books of literature, especially when seen through the keyhole of their incumbent themes: eternal returns, the domination of man by machine, the continuing saga of choosing middling life over zesty death, on and on to wormy stupor. Real mystery—the very reason to read (and certainly write) any book—was to them a thing to dismantle, distill and mine out into rubble they could tyrannize into sorry but more permanent explanations; monuments to themselves in other words. (222-223)

Here, Ford exposes in practice what de Certeau speaks of in theory. Bascombe's experience in college teaching comments on the institutional attempt to elude time, to create a "space" delimited by "incumbent themes" and "permanent explanations" or a codified linguistic practice dedicated to monumentalising itself, to creating a "permanence" at the expense of "mystery." This exactly reproduces the process examined by de Certeau: "the 'proper' is a triumph of place over time" (36). For Ford, history intrudes upon speciality and causes it to shift and alter, to "reexamine" its "frontiers." Mystery ultimately "disturbs" the equilibrium necessary for the



“promoting” of permanence: “Some things can’t be explained. They just are. And after a while they disappear, usually forever, or become interesting in another way” (223). Again, Ford echoes O’Neill’s statement that reality simply “is,” and any attempt at permanently defining it remains an affront to its unsayability, as well as the obstructing of egalitarian relations, of the shared or common experience: “Explaining is where we all get into trouble” (223). Ford doesn’t even go so far as to properly define what he means by mystery, simply referring to it as “a thing,” by which he not so much *encapsulates* but rather *affords an opening into* the variety of happenings that we grasp always in the particular, in a fragment or moment, rather than as a general totality. Explaining, however, also refers to Bascombe’s evasiveness in proposing a discourse, and “explanation,” that he may have to live up to later. Like Bukowski and Jarman, he finds death “zesty” because, here, it figures as the intrusion of the ordinary into totalising projects, into permanence promotion, and the way such projects stifle communal experience. Again, death serves as the reminder of the reality that specialised discourse attempts to master, but which ultimately “overflows” and modifies discourse.

The “reason” to read or to write remains deeply rooted in the inexplicable, in “real mystery.” Literature embodies a “temporary” (223) experience, one susceptible to variance by the very process of “life” that surrounds it; fixed systems of interpretation collapse and re-form from contact with the everyday. But even at this point in *The Sportswriter*, Bascombe only partly takes his own advice.

Consequently, when these same people are suddenly faced with a real ambiguity or a real regret, say something as simple as telling a sensitive young colleague they probably like . . . to go and seek employment elsewhere; or as complicated as a full-bore, rollicking infidelity right in their own homes . . . they couldn’t be more bungling, less ready, or more willing to fall to pieces because they can’t explain it to themselves, or wanting to, won’t; or worse yet, willing to deny the whole beeswax. (223)

Unable to accept the permanence of his son’s death, Bascombe gives up on permanence altogether. Although he claims to have “faced down regret” (4) early on in the novel, Bascombe has instead taken refuge in precisely the “ambiguity” that he regards the faculty of Berkshire College as unable to accept. Bascombe chooses “bungling” and “unwillingness” as his excuses,

as the way he “explains to himself” his failings in life. Perceiving in monumentalisation a weakness, the subjugating of self to discourse, Bascombe becomes impermanent in every respect, in effect *choosing impermanence as his discourse*, rendering his self with the hypocrisy aesthetic that deprives him of the means of crafting explanations and discourse to overcome loss. Bascombe’s love of mystery and impermanence becomes another strategy of tactics. Rather than participate in the “dialogue” *between* people, he isolates himself in a discursive ambiguity of failure and acceptance that keeps the ordinary, and its lessons, at bay. He admits of no ultimate arbiter of reality and begins to simulate solipsism, to use words in an entirely self-regulated, self-enforced manner.

### iii. Realty Versus Reality

In *Independence Day* real estate serves to delimit the range of community, to reinforce the social contingencies undergirding history as social phenomena. Throughout *Independence Day*, Ford tropes on real estate to discuss the grounding of his world-view on “mystery” and “hidden assets,” crafting, in effect, the ungrounded grounding in contradiction and particularities that characterises dirty realism. The job of realty serves Bascombe’s initial agenda as a trope for the indeterminacy that empowers his shifting, discursive strategy; speaking of real estate, he says, “It has mystery and the unexpected as its hidden assets” (66-67). Both “mystery” and “the unexpected” precisely characterise Bascombe’s operativity, since he continually subverts communal accountability by excusing his behaviour as ineffably mysterious and by taking “unexpected” advantage from the ambiguity of words to subvert contractual expectations. Realty, as Barbara Ehrenreich notes in “Realty Bites” (1995), also allows Bascombe to remain superficial, to simulate an interest in life without actually participating in it: “Realty beats reality. It lets you enter deeply into the lives of people like the would-be homebuyers from Vermont, but in a relationship mediated entirely by issues of square-footage and adequacy-of-wiring” (49). The maintenance of the monadic state (and its exploitation) depends upon a “mediation” through the discursive standards of the prevailing culture, which fractures community and keeps its members isolated, fragmented, cut off from one another: “What Frank

craves, what he requires, is the ordinary itself. He's a settler all right but in a landscape so sparsely populated that the nonhuman details—the billboards and the turnpike exit signs and the strip malls—almost take over. If he can't focus on the humans in his life, it's partly because he's dazzled by the suburban detritus all around" (50). Bascombe's interest in commodity culture features as a resistance to the affirmation of community. In the midst of the very commodities and specialised language ("issues of square-footage") of the late industrial society that creates and sustains the monadic, Bascombe clings tenaciously to real estate as a means of retaining his powers of simulation. Rather than resist the effects of monadism, he uses them to guarantee his freedom from accountability to his fellow citizens.

The novel traces Bascombe's dawning awareness of the dangerous power exercised by those—such as Bukowski—who subvert language, particularly the language of advertising, to facilitate their own social mobility. The play of signification appears most notably in his relationship with Paul, but also in realty, where Phyllis and Joe Markham examine the house for sale in Penns Neck. Joe admires the house for its *actual* characteristics: "You're sure leaving a goddamned good house . . . I had a look at the floor joists and the sills. They don't cut 'em that wide anymore, except in Vermont" (72). He goes on to praise the electrical wiring and the fittings. Joe responds to the *actual* assurances of the home, connections and assurances that language can displace, as his wife's reaction illustrates; Phyllis concentrates on what the house signifies, what it portends, choosing and adhering to one interpretation against all others: "I thought that meant something else," she says, after Frank reads to her from a "listing sheet" (71). Phyllis's alarm signifies one possible interpretation for the situation of a house adjoining a state penitentiary; it suggests one possible "reading," as her "reading" of the "listing sheet" accords more with her desire, her expectation, than it does with the conditions of the home as mutually understood by realtor and seller. Inscribing "danger" over the offerings of the property, she remains closed to other interpretations, particularly Houlihan's and Bascombe's assurances of community values. In this instance, then, real estate reinforces the monadic

experience, in which Phyllis uses the language of advertising to overwrite the actual assurances otherwise offered by the home and community.

However, Ford regards real estate and commodity culture not so unequivocally as Ehrenreich suggests, and *Independence Day* highlights the positive elements in real estate. Fred Hobson, in "Richard Ford and Josephine Humphreys: Walker Percy in New Jersey and Charleston" (1991), addresses Ford's sincerity in dealing with the redemptive aspects of an America glutted with consumer culture:

Ford is indeed a discriminating writer, but he is also a writer who would object less to the excesses of popular culture than to a particular view—call it elitist or privileged—that would pass judgment on culture. It is precisely this resistance to easy irony, a resisting the temptation to be ironic in dealing with popular culture, that distinguishes Ford from numerous other contemporary writers; for if an ironic vision is generally assumed to be a literary virtue, such a transcendence of accessible irony—or, perhaps, a deeper irony that turns on itself, ironizing the ironists—may be even more desirable. (46–47)

*The Sportswriter* does not treat popular culture with condescension; rather it addresses the way in which one man uses the reality of contemporary society to elude the expectations placed upon him. Hobson valorises Ford's discovery of transcendent values within the Arsenaults's religious bric-a-brac and the mail-order catalogues Bascombe loves to peruse (47); he also considers Ford's "ironizing the ironists"—discouraging the clichéd view of consumer culture as the repository of all that is meaningless and illusory about American life—as a higher, "more desirable," calling, a more committed scrutiny of American culture. In the catalogues used to while away the hours during his tenure at Berkshire College, Bascombe finds not advertising's continually withheld promise of enrichment through material possessions, but rather a mystery that leads to "solace," an instruction on stoicism and hope:

In me it [the images in catalogues] fostered an odd assurance that some things outside my life were okay still. . . . Things were knowable, safe-and-sound. Everybody with exactly what they need or could get. A perfect illustration of how the literal can become the mildly mysterious. (196)

In the "abundance of the purely ordinary and pseudo-exotic" goods offered by catalogues, Bascombe finds an "assurance," not that his life will somehow become more interesting,

exciting, or glamorous through acquisition, but how the literal straightforwardness of consumer advertising—not purchase itself—can temporarily overturn the terrible factuality of Bascombe’s life with the mystery of possibility, appealing to a belief in an “outside” or exterior world where things are “safe-and-sound.” For Bascombe, catalogues render a narrative that staves off the very feeling of want that advertising panders to by stripping away the certainties promised by material acquisition and replacing them with quite the opposite: *a uifferent way of construing life as it already stands*. By offering variant possibilities beyond Bascombe’s current conceptual awareness, catalogues provide the relief that the world is not entirely comprised of, and defined by, his discourse; a greater plenitude exists “out there” for revisioning what is “right here.” Through this vantage outward, advertising calls Bascombe to question his own perspectival framework, the limits of his self-perception, thereby widening and dissolving the boundaries, the specifications, within which Bascombe views his experience. The passage simultaneously rebels against the emptiness of advertising and “receives” the utopian narrative it fosters (though receiving it in a way that distorts the intended effect of the advertising signal). Advertising, and real estate, therefore perform a dual function in these novels, serving as buffers against communal contacts, as a way for Bascombe to prevent his enclosure in the communal, and of allowing him, through a recognition of the other desires, dreams and possible readings of his time and place—and the limits of his own conceiving of reality—to grasp the social, contingent, dialectical nature of the ordinary. Advertising facilitates his “thought about thought,” to contextualize his epistemological parameters.

Throughout the novel, Bascombe continually sorts various strategies for apprehending experience in the best possible way, and more often than not finds it in ordinary living. At the beginning of the novel he reads to X “a poem about letting the everyday make you happy” (19). As in this poem, the narratives promoted by consumer culture allow Bascombe a partial recovery—or at least a reconciliation to—the life lost to him through Ralph’s untimely death. Normalcy and the ordinary, then, as promoted by advertising, television and the “slick magazines,” rather than carrying an oppressive connotation, instead offer consolation against

the irrevocable. Ford further evinces a non-ironic approach to normative modes of living in his article "My Mother, in Memory" (1987), where he praises his parents for encouraging him to "seek the normal in life" as a response to adversity, for portraying "a world, a private existence, that *could be* that way" (47). Normalcy becomes an aspiration in *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*, a possible condition, a way of life that "could be," a beneficent way "to see things" – a particular position whose rewards differ markedly from the isolation and simulation of the hypocrisy aesthetic. Rather than inciting a need for material acquisition, advertising reconciles Bascombe to existing material conditions; it also provides him access to the "ordinary" by allowing him to take a consolation in advertising – advertising *itself*, rather than the acquisition of the thing advertised – that advertising was never meant to convey. As in de Certeau's description, the ordinary "overflows" the parameters of the dominant discourse in a way that enables recognitions, actions and responses outside of the institutionalised program. Through advertising, Bascombe can grasp the social underpinnings of reality, and his participation in them.

#### iv. Bascombe the Author

Though Bascombe may have given up writing as an occupation within the narratives of *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*, he nevertheless remains – as the above quotation on college teaching attests – fixated on "reasons" to "read and write," an aesthetic theoretician who has transferred his writerly activities from the page to life; throughout the novels Ford depicts Bascombe as a conductor of verisimilitude. Having stopped crafting narratives on the page, Bascombe applies a discursive strategy, aesthetics, to life itself.

As mentioned in chapter three, "Dirty Realism: History," the notion of passively regarding the world as a "reader" – a passivity that, as de Certeau points, out, effectively selects and re-orders the "text of the world" (Dupuy 98), becoming a "writing the world" – proves Frank's essential tactic: "Frank is a man who sees the world as a text to be read" (Dupuy 98). As Edward Dupuy, in "The Confessions of an Ex-Suicide: Relenting and Recovery in Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter*" (1990), points out, Frank's reading of the world, and his willingness to "claim

no system – no myth – to order his reading” (98), permits Bascombe to luxuriate in “the wonder of text itself” (98) without ever needing to attempt an explanation: “Frank does not feel compelled to figure out the text, to get a firm grasp on it. He does not feel the ‘rage to explain’” (98).<sup>41</sup> While Dupuy sees Frank’s “relenting” to the “text of the world” and its inherent mysteriousness as a necessary step towards accepting the inevitability of change, the unexpected, his easy acceptance of the way things simply “are” provides him an excuse from *having to explain*, from undertaking the necessary gesture of reliability so necessary for community action. In Frank’s situation, Ford expresses his awareness of a view that sees the world fractured into an infinite array of individualised “texts” – as in the case of Horkheimer and Adorno’s monads – and through Bascombe’s actions critiques the way in which such a fracturing occludes the social, contingent nature of reality. If everyone were to speak according to a customised discourse there would be no grounds on which to enact a social, communal set of codes. While this attitude of “relenting” does give Bascombe access to means of slipping between social expectations (explanations for conduct), its instability, its passivity, its subjectivity prevents exactly the kind of communal enterprise that Marxist theorists such as Horkheimer, Adorno and Jameson regard as utterly lacking in late capital.

The novel’s lyricism exemplifies Bascombe’s wilful transformation of pain into an affirming aesthetic display. Yet, this transformation is also strategic, a means by which Bascombe removes himself from the demands of a consensual verbal reality. Frank avoids “self-pity” by subordinating reality to an ambiguous exhibition of language, thereby avoiding a commitment to anything but the free play of rendering. By continually sorting through the means of representing experience, Bascombe remains essentially passive, an observer rather than an agent.

The notion of Bascombe as writer-figure occurs throughout Ford criticism. D. G. Myers points out in *Commentary*<sup>42</sup> that Frank “talks about writing itself just as much as he ever did, and still regards himself as the author” (131); Barbara Ehrenreich in the *New Republic* views Bascombe as a man intent on “writing his life instead of living it” (51); Fred Hobson, in “Richard

Ford and Josephine Humphreys: Walker Percy in New Jersey and Charleston" (1991), calls *The Sportswriter*, "a novel about writing for writers, a work of literature which is among other things, a rejection of 'literature,' which, as Frank Bascombe tells us, teaches us 'lies'" (54). Dupuy illustrates the problematic of Bascombe's authorship: "Although no longer a writer of fiction, he [Bascombe] nevertheless narrates the events of his own life. This 'double reflex' of the novel—a man who says he has given up fiction, yet who tells us, in a work of fiction, that he has given it up and who nevertheless recounts his story—points to the importance of telling for Ford. Ford sees writing as telling" (94). The "double reflex" observed by Dupuy indicates the way in which Bascombe, like other protagonists of dirty realism, deploys the hypocrisy aesthetic for purposes of ambiguity. Bascombe abounds in doubleness—no longer a writer, he writes; disdainful of teaching, he instructs the reader; wary of duplicity and favouring common sense, he distorts and revises his narrative. Dupuy's final statement, in which he invokes "writing as telling," suggests that, for Ford, the person who tells a story authors the story. By telling us his story, Bascombe becomes its writer, and, as the writer of his tale, serves to conduct (or misconduct) verisimilitude, as it pleases him.

As Hobson reminds us, Bascombe has "little regard for the past" (46), and Frank himself corroborates this, saying, "I cannot say that we all need a past in full literary fashion, or that one is much useful in the end" (371); in referring to the past as a "literary" creation, Bascombe suggests the degree to which narrative infuses every aspect of his existence, the degree to which history renders itself susceptible to his "literary" refashioning. Throughout the two novels, Bascombe writes and rewrites his present, viewing the distant and not-so-distant past as irrelevant stories that he can alter at will, relying on the ambiguity of language to free him from accountability to time. Bascombe's unwillingness "to say . . . that anything is ever the sole cause of anything else" (10), his reluctance to adopt a clear-cut deterministic view of occurrence, permeates *The Sportswriter*. As long as there is another way of saying, another way of representing experience, Frank will never have to struggle with accountability; he can offer a wide variety of explanations for his actions, picking from among them the one that suits him



best at any given time. Ambiguity permits him to ascribe different meanings to what he has said, as required by the moment. He adopts the word “mystery” as a catchall for his behaviour, without realising that he alone decides when mystery invades and overturns discourse, which “institutions” shall collapse under the weight of their own verbiage. He becomes like Bukowski’s Harry, a conductor of verisimilitude, an orchestrator of constant discursive shifts and variations. In this way he takes command over the “realness” of “ambiguity” and “regret”; he decides what is real.

Despite Bascombe’s penchant for action, Alice Hoffman and Dupuy, respectively, note Bascombe’s unwillingness to depart from discursive abstraction into the “action” that speaks differently, less ambiguously, of existence: “He never trades theorizing for action”(14); “Relenting demands personal involvement on the part of the reader, not detached analysis” (Dupuy 98). Bascombe isolates himself from community and lives a simulated existence filled with what Folks, in “Richard Ford: Postmodern Cowboys” (1997), calls “the illusory myths of individualist society” (224). Hoffman, Dupuy and Folks, in their own ways, recognise Bascombe’s reluctance to leave the abstract plane of speculation—where the ambiguity of words permits him to simulate reality to his liking—and descend through “involvement” and “action” into “participation” with society; moreover, Folks’s statement suggests that Ford’s critique of Bascombe is also a critique of American society as a whole, a society increasingly marked by a radical individualism. When Sally, in *Independence Day*, responds to Bascombe’s disclosure that “Everything’s up front for a change” (311) with laughter, he cannot join her: “And then I try to laugh but can’t and have to fake laughing” (311). Every utterance, every claim he makes, exercises simulation, including his response to Sally’s obvious (though sarcastic) response to just how simulated an existence Bascombe lives. He engineers the other’s space, pretending to join them in it, all in full consciousness of his fakery. “Writers . . . survive . . . better than anyone, since they understand that almost everything—e-v-e-r-y-t-h-i-n-g—is not really made up of ‘views’ but words, which, should you not like them, you can change” (248). Bascombe’s

continued activity as a producer of text, or former producer/present evaluator of literature will ultimately catalyse the crisis point of *Independence Day*.

Near the end of *Independence Day*, Bascombe begins to understand the problematic of perceiving the world as text: "Or possibly he should take up words, pen some stories of his own to fling out into the void. But as for me on that score—I've been there. The air's too thin" (449). Ford equates writing with "flinging . . . into the void" and low atmospheric pressure, precisely the suspension over the vacuum of ineffability that Derrida posits in his essay "The Principle of Reason: the University in the Eyes of its Pupils" (1994), where, in attempting to explain the "reason of reason," or to locate the "ground" on which concepts like reason can take "root," can derive from, he states: "This very grounding, then, like the university, would have to hold itself suspended above a most peculiar void" (327). Derrida questions the possibility of "the principle of reason" accounting for itself, to give a "reason" for its own insistence, for its primacy in guiding scientific and philosophical inquiry. This conundrum applies equally to Bascombe's project—rendering the total available options underpinning his and Paul's situations, to, in short, strip away linguistic speciality or authority, and present Paul with the gift of the ordinary whose groundless "mystery," whose nearly infinite "hidden assets," will empower the boy with new vantages on his daily practices; instead of accomplishing this project, however, Bascombe is left with questions, and suspended above a "peculiar void."

Bascombe wants to teach his son not to totalise, not to speak *for* the present situation—to abandon the problems, witnessed by Derrida and de Certeau both, inherent to metanarrative—but to recognise that epistemology arises in dialectical relation to conditions in the real, that epistemology is predicated on material rather than metaphysical values: "He [Paul] has likewise told me about what he refers to as 'thinking he's thinking,' by which he tries to maintain continuous monitorship of all his thoughts as a way of 'understanding' himself and being under control and therefore making life better (though by doing so, of course, he threatens to drive himself nuts" (14). Paul's 'thinking he's thinking' threatens him with the lapse into solipsism, into viewing his own consciousness as the sole arbiter of reality, instead of recognising in that

consciousness the dialectical “play” of history; one cannot, finally, step outside the parameters of one’s historical indoctrination and conditioning (at best one can recognise this contingent aspect of thought and rigorously interrogate or remain vigilant of it) and Paul’s attempt to do so—to render and account for the totality of his thought processes—threatens to drive him insane. Rather than seek a (non-existent) ultimate vantage from which to maintain a corrective “monitorship” over one’s thinking, Bascombe wants to impart to Paul the untenability of such a vantage; instead, he wants his son to reflect upon his actions through the discernible markers of the social real—friends, family and other societal representatives (security guards, psychiatrists, step-fathers)—and to think through the effect of his actions within a social context, to become aware of thought not as thought itself, but as thought conditioned by circumstance.

Bascombe wants his son to quit this attempt at transcendence, in favour of recognising the social constructedness of thought, as suggested by Jameson in *Marxism and Form* (372-73), and echoed by Bascombe in *Independence Day*: “I don’t after all, know what’s wrong with him, am not even certain anything is, or that *wrong* isn’t just a metaphor for something else, which may itself already be a metaphor” (289). The italicising of the word “wrong” suggests the impossibility of seeking an ontological basis for the verdicts we deliver, verdicts which always serve as metaphors for specific social phenomena (in Paul’s case the trauma of losing his older brother and witnessing his parents’ divorce, which in themselves, as Ford indicates, stand as metaphors for something else, a need, perhaps, for security and love). Instead of attempting to find the “uncaused cause” of what is “wrong” with him, instead of asserting the ontological, Bascombe wants Paul to trade transcendence for acceptance, and, through acceptance, a recognition of his place in the social “stream”: “he has become compelled to figure out life and how to live it far too early, long before he’s seen a sufficient number of unfixable crises cruise past him like damaged boats and realised that fixing one in six is a damn good average and the rest you have to let go” (14). Bascombe wants Paul to recognise the contingent in life. In effect, Bascombe wants to give his son access to the power base of dirty realism: the linguistic unreliability that empowers his own hypocrisy, the indiscriminate acceptance of unfixable crises

that enables black humour and passivity both. Yet, there is a social responsibility missing from Bascombe's lesson.

Bascombe's understanding of real estate follows Derrida's own concept of the "peculiar void":

We want to *feel* our community as a fixed, continuous entity . . . as being anchored into the rock of permanence; but we know it's not, that in fact beneath the surface (or rankly all over the surface) it's anything but. We and it are anchored only to contingency like a bottle on a wave, seeking a quiet eddy. The very effort of maintenance can pull you under. (439)

If real estate tropes Derrida's notion of linguistic uncertainty and serves as the basic model of community, then social organisation becomes malleable, unfixed, without definite "ground." We want not only linguistic assurances of permanence but also to actually "feel" them (Ford's italics emphasise this notion); we want our place guaranteed by more than language, a desire forever unsatisfied. Ford employs a water metaphor to suggest the unanchordness of modern society, just as de Certeau uses a water metaphor to depict "the oceanic rumble of the ordinary" (5), which continually debunks the "permanence" of metanarrative or dominant discursive systems. Ford meets Derrida and de Certeau in recognising the constant striving to account for and totalise experience, and the way in which the "ordinary" continually "reorganize[s] the place from which discourse is produced" (de Certeau 5), resulting in a constant mutation of discourse, something Bascombe initially revels in (before, finally, as he does here, admitting to a communal "want" or need, something outside his own self-centred body of desires). Ford recognises that any "effort" to "maintain" a fixed point or stance will, in fact, result in a drowning, in the "overflow" of the ordinary; you cannot juggle and account for every contingency alone; you cannot, for long, be sole arbiter of tidal motion, except as a hypocrite, in which case you must face the threat of isolation. Ford does not deny here what Marxism calls a *social real*.

Throughout the novel Bascombe comes to understand de Certeau's comment on ordinary language: "It encompasses every discourse, even if human experiences cannot be reduced to what it says about them" (11). As in de Certeau, Ford's text remains vigilant against

the view that language can offer an index for all human experience.<sup>43</sup> *Independence Day* continually acknowledges that language always finds itself trapped within its own discursive body, unlike other forms of mediation with the world, such as the skin or the nerves or the circulatory system, which interface with the world “porously” (as in the experience of pain)—without any clear demarcation between world and body, between environment and individual—and form another type of “communication” with the real that conditions community. If words stray too far from an acceptable pragmatic relationship with social experience, the ordinary will intrude to forcibly dismantle the dominant discourse, supporting Marx’s sarcastic contention on the inability of language usage to erase social conditions (*Capital* 265). By recognising “mystery” Ford in fact endorses a social real, an entire body of experience outside language, in “the momentum of [the] shared physical act” (353). Ford draws power from the “grounding” of community in the “shared” character of the experience of living, in its contingencies; neither he nor Paul outright “owns” the effect of the baseball; their mutual history of it (should they take responsibility for such a history) *depends upon* the other’s experience, the way the two of them co-operate in acknowledging occurrence.

In *Independence Day*, Ford locates a social real both within and without language, in a field of operations language can or cannot conform to, depending entirely upon the prerogatives of the author, hence his constant references to Jefferson, “the practical idealist *qua* grammarian,” who plumbed the “mysteries of the status quo” in order to more “firmly” grasp “the future” (352). Jefferson desired to understand the text of the “other,” recognising in the ordinary the triumph of time over place, thus providing access to “the future.” If an awareness of the ordinary constitutes an awareness of the limitations of language as superimposed on experience, and the means by which experience can rekindle social sensibility through a redrawing of discursive liminality, then Ford’s novel, like de Certeau’s study, recognises its hinging on the particularity of experience (and, in the case of Bascombe’s hypocrisy, its wilful, conscious divorce from it). Bascombe exposes authorship (authority) as a simulation of reality, as a conducting of verisimilitude, whose power arrives from our belief, our willingness to cede our

experience to his discourse. He returns to the commonality of occurrence. The novel starts from an authoritative discursive mode that slowly unravels into the hands of readers, inviting them to re-knit the novel according to the way they sit in relation to experience. The novel invites an "idealist" frame of mind, O'Neill's triumph of form over the void; it shows that communal narrative can arise in relation to the "mysteries" of the status quo, ourselves, in other words—our experiences in the unsavable ordinary and our willingness to participate in and develop the discourse that arises from them. Ford exposes the "prose of the world," a language aware of its inadmissibility into the ordinary, yet, because of this inadmissibility, in constant contention with it. Ford knows that his novels remains open to the "efficacious meandering" of the reader's eye: "I think the telling of stories is in and of itself a way of persuading the reader away from whatever is plaguing her or him, and of asking the reader to believe that another and more felicitous order can be put on experience" (Guagliardo 614). For Ford, storytelling extends an invitation to the reader to participate, or not, to accept, or not, the possibility of communion between the storyteller's "order" and the reader's willingness to adapt that order to "her or his" experiences. However, *Independence Day* also shows that the real of socially shared experience can and will overflow any storytelling "order" that strays too far afield; there *will be* violent revolution. With this acknowledged, the novel surrenders itself to readerly scrutiny, becoming a "gift" rather than putting the work of reading "at the service of the machine" (de Certeau 28), i.e. its own discursive mechanisms. Ford traces Bascombe's reconciliation to the giving and obtaining of such gifts and his relinquishing of discursive machinery.

Choice and attitude remain paramount in the two novels. *The Sportswriter* uses the "concept" of team sports as a way of talking about the position of the individual vis-à-vis dominant discursive mechanisms:

Only the way these guys use team concept is too much like a machine to me. . . . It leaves out the player's part—to play or not play; to play well or not so well. To give his all. What all these guys mean by team concept is just cogs in the machine. It forgets a guy has to decide to do it again every day, and that men don't work like machines. . . . If everybody decides [to work together as a team, and win] that's what they want, it is [the result]. If they can perform well enough and long enough.

It's just the *if* I'm concerned about. . . . I worry about the *decide* part, too. . . . We take too much for granted. (280)

This speech, delivered at the dinner table in the Arsenaults's home, raises the central concerns that Bascombe negotiates throughout the two novels: the primacy of discourse, of "concept," its failure to account for individual attitude, the mistaken notion that concept rather than human interaction explains and accounts for historical phenomena (winning or losing the game), and the service individuals render to the discursive "machine." Bascombe, here, returns to social contingency (the italicised "*if*" and "*decide*," taken for granted by the discourse of "team concept"), regrounding it as the indispensable component in effecting and maintaining the dominance of a certain discourse. The efficacy of the "team concept" in describing and occasioning the historical moment depends upon "everybody [deciding] to work together," or endorse, to become "cogs" in, its machinery. The machinery of discourse does not finally create history, but rather the decision of community to live by, and sustain, a particular discourse, which depends entirely upon the needs and dispositions of that community as necessitated by circumstance. The two novels chart Bascombe's changing disposition in regards to participating in this notion of a contingent, socially-founded discourse.

#### v. Solipsism and Resolve

Frank Bascombe's trials in *Independence Day* dialectically examine the relation of the actual to the discursive, their interplay and mutual undoing. His transition from the "Existence Period" into the "Permanent Period" will depend upon his relation to the "mystery" of the ordinary that words interpenetrate but cannot resolve. He will find that this duality, this binaristic play, will grow increasingly mechanical. Unlike Bukowski, who allows binaries and dualities to co-exist in an unresolved tension so as to continually play, in a strategy of tactics, opposing sides against one another, Bascombe rejects the isolation of "simulation" (434). While Bukowski continues to "play," continues to deploy trickery within the discursive space both society and he endorse (and whose maintenance depends on the participation of the other), Ford does not deride and lampoon society as completely.

While Bukowski revels in his outsider status, Ford finds himself attracted, with some reservation, to the securities and assurances of the human community; in *Independence Day*, Bascombe says to Sally: "I said I had a tidal attraction to you. . . . It's hard to put into words. It's just strong and persistent. I'm sure of that" (306). His attraction to others cannot find words. It remains fluid, unfixable, "tidal," in the same way that de Certeau describes the action of the ordinary in metaphors connoting water, flow and formlessness. *Independence Day* marks the collapse of dirty realism, a sober critique of its hypocritical practice; Bascombe will relinquish the freedom of hypocrisy in favour of negotiating a less isolated, more communal project. The novel moves towards resolutions.

Early in *Independence Day*, Bascombe sets the limitations of narrative: "My belief had always been with the ancient Greeks, that the most important events in life are physical events" (97), a sentiment he echoes near the end of the novel, saying to his friend Carter, "Most important ideas still probably start with physical acts" (449). Yet, despite this insistence on the primacy of physical expression, throughout *The Sportswriter*, and for the most part of *Independence Day*, as critics Schroth, Ehrenreich and Hoffman have pointed out, Bascombe fails to act, preferring to stand back in the passive posture of dirty realist protagonists. As Dupuy argues, reading the "text of the world" depends upon more than textual interpretation: "Reading to satisfy a system or to justify an abstraction is not real reading; it is antithetical to relenting. Relenting demands personal involvement on the part of the reader, not detached analysis" (98). The reading demanded of Bascombe, then, will become one of "involvement" rather than the "detachment" which he has hitherto practised. Like Robinson the postman in Carver's "What Do You Do In San Francisco?"<sup>44</sup> Bascombe turns "reading" into inscription by remaining distant, by becoming involved in another's life while remaining unstable and inscrutable himself; by stalling mutual identification (which as Ford himself points out, is necessary for "unprogrammed" discourse) Bascombe, like Robinson, renders the other susceptible to his discursive "system," which he "satisfies" by refusing to cede authorial control, refusing to locate his own position, and by emblematising the other's gestures and actions. In



order to “relent” to the text of the world, Bascombe will need to involve himself personally in the society around him. However, the event that ultimately signals Bascombe’s relenting occurs in spite of Bascombe’s best attempts to remain aloof from his surroundings.

Events in the novel themselves stress the primacy of the ordinary, as it overflows discursive formations and renders them inoperable, demanding new “stories” to account for happening. Ford flirts here with determinism, the openings and revelations offered by actual events and the way they change the “trajectory” (de Certeau 5) of a strategic movement. For example, when Bascombe, near the opening of *Independence Day*, realises that he “jumped behind” (96) Ann when a man threatened them with a gun at the sports stadium, he finds the self-concept he operates from drastically shaken: “it bothered me that in . . . the last opportunity I might’ve had to throw myself in front of my dearest loved one, it appeared I’d pushed my dearest loved one in front of myself as cravenly as a slinking cur” (97). Here, Bascombe reaches the “end point” (de Certeau 5) of discourse, where his knowledge of himself, through contact with the actual, enters “the realm of fiction” (5). Through this incident, Bascombe apprehends his self-concept as a “localization,” a “fictive detachment” of his character as an “object” in “the very space where . . . mastering history is produced” (10). In other words, his self-concept, until that point, operated in a monumental space supposedly free from temporal, causal alteration; he “mastered” his place in history by positing himself as a brave selfless man. After the event, however, to again quote Alan Nadel, Bascombe realises that, as an author, he has “complete control over history and no control whatsoever over events” (39).<sup>45</sup> Event remains outside of history, accounted for by historical discourse but only *after the fact*, and therefore not subordinate to it; moreover, event often returns to correct or alter a historical discourse that has strayed too far from actuality. Solipsism, in Bascombe’s case, is always a simulated condition aware of its limitations.

In Ford, actual occurrence, instead of releasing the author (as death does Bukowski) from maintaining any one pose or vantage, antagonises Bascombe’s solid, stable history of his self—limiting his ability to make pronouncements based on example—and resolves rather than

releases him from his definite place in relationships (Ann can always cite this example to counter his claims of bravery); contingency irritates Bascombe's discursive formations. The manifestation of the ordinary obliterates solipsism; events in the world make and remake Frank Bascombe, who continually overwrites them with "fictions," which become undone in turn by the counter-examples offered by event. The relation between the ordinary and discourse provides both the dilemma of and solution to the "Existence Period," a stage in Bascombe's life characterised by that subversion of the definitive typical of dirty realism.

In the first three quarters of *Independence Day* Bascombe happily inhabits the circuit of the hypocrisy aesthetic. Speaking of Paul's wordplay, he says: "He, like me, is drawn to the fissures between the literal and the imagined" (434). The play between the literal, or socially constructed, meaning of words and the imaginative or metaphorical exercise of wordplay describes the strategy that Bascombe uses to explode the normative systems that would curtail his freedom. By existing in the "fissure" he can play societal expectation against his own ability to manipulate the language of that expectation:

This may be the only way an as-needed parent can in good faith make contact with his son's life problems; which is to say sidereally, by raising a canopy of useful postulates above him like stars and hoping he'll connect them up to his own sightings and views like an astronomer. . . . I don't, after all, know what's wrong with him, am not even certain anything is, or that wrong isn't just a metaphor for something else, which may itself already be a metaphor. (289)

Initially, Frank evades direct agency in his son's dilemma by resorting to solipsism, the inability of a private vocabulary to enable the reality of another. Bascombe defines his (and all) verdicts as "metaphoric," as an obscuring of his son's reality, as already occluding the condition it prescribes remedy for or judges; this in mind, he considers his son's upbringing—and the only way he can make "contact" with him—dependent upon an elaboration of all existing possibilities, in other words, presenting the very unlimited field of options made available by linguistic indeterminacy itself (embodied in his metaphor of "astronomy" and his view of himself as not an equal "agent" but as a "facilitator," 249), allowing Paul to see the myriad options and, in doing so, as he tells Ann, to choose from these the qualities necessary for a more

productive self. However, Frank fails to see that this exercise or interplay of available, sometimes mutually exclusive, options, empowers Paul with exactly the same hypocrisy aesthetic that Bascombe himself opts for, and therefore the ability to evade representation as a definable other and to remain isolated from communal responsibility. Like Bukowski's characters, Bascombe depends upon the fixity of the other, his or her willingness to strive for consistency, his or her acceptance of systematic codes and norms—a role Paul refuses to play. Paul eludes history, setting it free of contingent codes by subjugating it to his own shifting verbal co-ordinates, his own simulated solipsism; he ignores the presence of the actual in history, while at the same time allowing the ordinary to enter and redefine the “frontiers” of his discourse when that discourse oppresses him (such as when he purposefully steps in front of the oncoming baseball to shatter the discursive impasse between himself and his father). Son confronts father with the ramifications of dirty realism; face to face, for a change, with another hypocrite, Bascombe acutely feels their mutual isolation.

Frank's initial approach to Paul's problems only further entrench those problems. In discussing the limitations of parental language, Frank addresses the limited options available to two people determined to maintain mutual isolation:

The worst of being a parent is my fate, then: being an adult.  
Not owning the right language; not dreading the same dreads  
and contingencies and missed chances; the fate of knowing  
much yet having to stand like a lamppost with its lamp lit,  
hoping my child will see the glow and venture closer for the  
illumination and warmth it mutely offers. (17)

The avoidance of “illumination” and “warmth” characterises Bascombe as much as it does Paul. Bascombe realises that his linguistic indeterminacy might guarantee him liberty from responsibility or definite choice (especially in relation to Ann and Sally) but it also hampers the transference of his own “knowing” to Paul. Yet, he still avoids drafting a communal expression, the right “language” will permit him to penetrate his son's reserve, that will allow for better cross-generational reception (he views the purchase of this language as an impossibility). He continues to take the passive pose of dirty realism, opting to “stand like a lamppost” in the hope that his son will “venture closer” out of attraction. He still chooses to remain “mute” (enclosed

within the silence generated by his private, shifting discursive codes). Through this procedure he intends to maintain his distinct vocabulary, his “own” knowledge, which Paul can approach but not overwrite. (Here Bascombe displays exactly the sort of evasiveness that Sally describes.) He resists giving up “ownership” of his “adult” language to create a communal discourse (in much the same way as Paul remains passive to his father’s diatribes, thwarting communication through non-involvement and non-resistance). The events of the novel will teach Frank that if linguistic deracination lends itself to a discursive multiplicity undone and reformed under the influence of the ordinary, then that deracination can also adapt itself to a contingent or contractual discourse, to the needs of a group; linguistic deracination can facilitate a mutually enforced, mutually desired order under adverse circumstances. Though Frank and Paul exploit the indeterminacy of language for themselves, they have yet to do so for *each other*. In “The Risks of Membership,” Folks envisions the pilgrimage enacted in *Independence Day* as precisely this journey out of solipsism and indeterminacy and into a dialectical recognition of the *social*:

it is a pilgrimage of a postmodern and not a medieval kind, conducted by a pair of tight-lipped, street-wise, cynical detectives bent on unmasking the contradictions and myths of American culture at century’s end. Within this culture, purportedly the land of opportunity and universal happiness, father and son encounter their own images in the mirror of American society. . . . Most important, they encounter their own grief and despair (metonymically focused on the loss of Ralph and the divorce of Frank and X [Ann] but expanding to embrace a much larger society). . . . They are faced with the need to divest themselves of their security and contentment within a deadening suburban environment, and to take on risk, involvement, and pain—the attributes of true responsibility and membership. (86)

The pilgrimage effected by *Independence Day* charts the metonym of divorce as it serves to illuminate an entire society divorced from “membership,” a society fractured into monads determined to maintain isolation at all costs.<sup>46</sup> Both Bascombe and Paul avoid “risk,” “involvement” and “pain” by sustaining a defensive, “cynical,” discursive detachment from their surroundings, unaware that their detached observation of the “contradictions and myths” of their society itself constitutes one of the characteristics of the times. The unwillingness to do

anything but “observe,” to do anything except passively “read” (and thereby “write”) their society, in fact accounts for much of the atomisation they witness.

Initially, language serves as a mechanical (Paul speaks in a “mechanistic monotone,” 256, and Sally accuses Frank of living in a “mechanical isolation,” 434) contrivance—an apparatus functioning to maintain its own operativity and subject those around it to itself, to put “work at the service of the machine” (28), to make those around it accept and adhere to its literal claims and codes of conduct, in the same sense as Marx sees the work/machine relationship in the 19th Century: “it is not the workman that employs the instruments of labor, but the instruments of labor that employ the workman” (207). In this case, Marx’s economic view serves as an appropriate metaphor for the subjection of characters to discursive machinery. Bascombe’s language demands that Ann and Sally not merely accept its literalness, its “truthfulness” — much as Morgan’s discourse in “Put Yourself in My Shoes” demands that Myers, Paula and Hilda accede to and assist its production—but actively work to maintain its self-fulfilling operativity; meanwhile, Bascombe, should he feel in any way imprisoned by his words, can open the doors to the ordinary, to actions and experiences which collapse that specific discourse, allowing him to bring about a new or different one (Bukowski does much the same with death, in a discourse whose machinery likewise exacts obeisance from others). However, confronted with an unstable other, Paul, (and, to some extent, Sally), who refuses to assist in the production of fixed coordinates against and within which Bascombe can “play,” an other who maintains the same invisibility and isolation he does, Ford’s protagonist makes a descent into the ordinary from which he will not return; instead of overhauling his “machine,” he willingly loses himself in the social organism, in the non-mechanistic, irreconcilable and unsayable activities of the other.

Frank begins to realise the shortcomings of a simulated solipsism when Sally resists his discursive strategy: “‘Everything isn’t just about how you say it,’ Sally says, very formally. ‘And I wouldn’t know what to say anyway. I don’t think we mean the same things when we say the same things.’ (As predicted)” (311). This passage highlights the linguistic paradox that Bascombe relies upon. First, Sally makes a statement suggesting that language does not solely

arbitrate “everything.” Yet, she announces this “very formally,” implying that her notion, her saying itself, constitutes a “form” or common practice, a banality, an intellectual cliché—a voicing of “silence.” This banality destabilises Bascombe’s careful poise between the literal (what the declaration of love means in a pragmatic, accepted sense) and the imagined (the many things it can *also* mean), suggesting to him “the *common place* where ‘anyone’ is finally silent, except for repeating (but in a different way) banalities” (de Certeau 5). Sally’s discourse threatens to pierce Bascombe’s isolation by interrogating his imagination, by rudely reminding him of the banalities he himself repeats and the linguistic ambiguities in language, the solipsism—(Oh, you thought I meant *that*? Well, what I really meant was *this*)—that he undermines these banalities with; she threatens his privilege as first-person narrator telling *his* story at the expense of those who surround him. She exposes the hypocrisy aesthetic earlier, when she says: “I don’t think that’s exactly what you said last fall,” to which Bascombe replies, “But it’s pretty close . . . and it’s what I meant and what I mean now” (310); the emphasis falls on the end of the phrase on what Bascombe means “now,” disconnected from any previous context, any pragmatic accountability. He is not responsible to time, to “yesterday’s truth.” Sally dismantles Bascombe’s simulation with the ordinary; she, like Paul, finally refuses to accept his claims, rendering his game inoperable. Bascombe depends on Sally accepting his declaration of “love” (307) as a reality, not an exercise in the “silence” of clichéd repetition. In effect, Sally counters his indeterminacy with one of her own. Her next statement suggests that an unattainable knowledge impedes the effectiveness of language as a tool towards some end or aim, towards transmitting “feeling” between listeners. Here, Sally appropriates Frank’s solipsism to deny him a definite response.

In a backhanded manner, Sally lays bare de Certeau’s claim that language use indicates “a social historicity in which systems of representations or processes of fabrication no longer appear only as normative frameworks but also as *tools manipulated by users*” (21). She appropriates Bascombe’s “systems or representation” and “processes of fabrication” and “manipulates” them to expose Frank to himself. She resists Bascombe’s narrative demands,

resists “normalization” in his discourse, by deploying the language of his demand against him. She will not become the “normative” other who accepts his avowals as gospel, as something literal; knowing that he can resort to indeterminacy to confound his gesture of emotional appeasement, her discourse, her reaction, mirrors rather than accepts his. Her “response” creates an inoperativity: he cannot cope with someone who will not accept the literal; she finally fixes Bascombe’s indeterminacy by enumerating the modes he operates within and against. Finally, in a *coup de grace*, she says that “meaning” cannot exist between individuals, that meaning resides outside of intent; Ford supports this contention with the irony of “(As predicted),” indicating that linguistic predictability effaces the real, that language-use uncovers only the *formality* of its own practice. Using a cliché, Sally uncovers Frank’s dependence on cliché. By no longer buying into Frank’s words, by not reproducing and increasing his linguistic capital, she renders him silent, deprived of the social assurances, in language, that he appropriates, destabilises, manipulates and betrays with the ordinary. She repeats a “banality” in order to suggest how much Bascombe relies on an unconscious use of commonplaces in those around him (versus his conscious use of it). Here, Sally consciously deploys a banality against the master of the banal himself. Sally exposes what Folks, in “The Risks of Membership,” calls Bascombe’s “fierce detachment and instability” (86) from and in meaning what he says, and in doing so inaugurates the beginning of a new “era” for Bascombe. If he wants to reach Sally, he will have to think of a way to “mean” the “same things” she does.

Sally demands action, not words. From this point on, Ford charts a transformation in Bascombe, his return to the ordinary not as a tool for undermining language but as a means for constantly purging and clarifying it. When Sally accuses him of not being “very easy to fix on” (311), he responds not ironically or evasively but definitively: “Though surely I’m not as elusive as Wally! The Wally who’s been gone for damn near twenty years” (311). Here, he relies upon the “literal” rather than the “imagined,” covering for his own emotional and psychic elusiveness by conjuring up the memory of Sally’s ex-husband Wally, who one day simply walked out of her life and vanished. Rather than subsisting in the “fissure” and exploiting its options to write his

own narrative, Bascombe begins to accept a “contingent” narrative, one wherein language *responds* to occurrences in the ordinary, rather than overwrites it. Bringing up Wally’s disappearance, he subjects himself to a discourse of loss and disappointment emerging out of Sally’s experience; he willingly puts himself into her frame of reference. She will now decide if his acts embody the guarantees he speaks; before Bascombe fully cedes to “membership,” however, he will face the resolution of his relationship with Paul.

Shortly after father and son check into the Deerslayer Inn, Bascombe reveals the primary component of his discursive strategy: “I rely on how I make things seem” (255). His attempt to pick up the waitress, Char, after having just testified to “loving” Sally over the telephone, further emphasises the mechanistic and simulated condition of his life, a subjugating of the other to the production of his “seeming”: “I live for . . . the froth of a moment’s pseudo-intimacy” (169). The “Mr. Standard Pleasure Unit” dildo ad he spots on the back page of the magazine confronts Frank with his personal themes of interchangeability, anonymity and passivity—his monotonous lack of fixity to person, place or concept—as explicated earlier in the novel: “And yet, it is one of the themes of the Existence Period that interest can mingle successfully with uninterest in this way, intimacy with transience, caring with the obdurate uncaring” (76). Nowhere does he more clearly articulate the hypocrisy of dirty realism. An aesthetic grounded on hypocrisy can make anything “seem,” can enact a contradictory discourse or “law” (de Certeau 16), conflating “interest” with “uninterest,” “intimacy” with “transience,” and “caring” with “obdurate uncaring,” profess love and act in opposition to it, all in full knowledge of its strategy. By using language to destabilise and implement a contractual reality, Bascombe moulds his world as he likes, freeing himself from accountability. He endorses verbal contracts in order to fix the other and he breaks those contracts to unfix himself, from this wreckage he forges new contracts, new laws, new absolutes that, by their very nature, remain ungrounded, susceptible to subversion. He places the other in a strategic position in order to work tactically against him or her. But events in the Deerslayer confront him with the fallout from this hypocrisy.



The impermanence and isolation of Bascombe's discursive practice come home to him when he discovers his book on the shelf of the Deerslayer Inn lounge; this "unexpected" discovery precipitates his fall into historicity, a fall completed by Paul's accident. His reaction to finding "Blue Autumn" in the Inn, and reading the pain-filled scrawl on the flyleaf, confronts Frank with the temporal as actual rather than constructed, as invader rather than something he has definitively triumphed over: "what I feel, dizzily, is not wry, bittersweet, ain't-life-strange amusement . . . but a totally unexpected, sickening void opening right in my stomach—right where I said it wouldn't two minutes ago" (322). The act of "saying," this time, rather than obscuring "the void," enhances it, makes it all the more apparent; the "void" that Derrida sees as the foundation over which language hovers reveals itself to Bascombe in the textual artefact of his book. "Blue Autumn" illustrates that text can function an interpreter rather than an arbiter of reality. Rather than retreating from this awareness, Bascombe shuts the book and flings it across the room in his first definite rejection of his position as primary narrator. That Bascombe identifies the book as unread (321) testifies further to the actual: the book is not a text for interpretation, but rather a physical object, a set of marks upon the page which may "say" different things to different readers, but still represent a sequentiality and physical mark that all reading begins from: the void upon which language constructs its "reason." Text becomes property. Perhaps for the first time, the mechanism by which he appropriates and overwrites the ordinary no longer consoles Bascombe; the ordinary has returned dirty realism to its "frontiers," its basis in indeterminacy, its playing of one side against the other. He has realised how much of a "writer" he still is, how much of his life depends upon putting the "fact buildup" into "somebody's mouth who doesn't exist" (157), into another whose factuality he can subvert and manipulate to effect his release. The ordinary explodes the intent behind a discourse of contradiction, uncertainty, indeterminacy. Whatever else dirty realism allows, it does not allow community, nor participation in communal reality. Floating free of all attachments, dirty realism, as an aesthetic, as a discursive practice, enables an isolated liberty within the communal but not of it.

Bascombe feels his equilibrium in simultaneity shattered by contact with time and actuality. The encounter with narrative not as an indeterminate text but as a series of signs contingent upon manifestations results primarily in an awareness of his distance from family and the illusions and simulations whereby he tried to overwrite that distance. Time, the ordinary, has returned to overcome space, the site of the proper. Death returns to bore holes in Bascombe's discourse:

That chasm (and what else is it?) between our long-ago time and this very moment suddenly makes yawningly clear that all is now done and done for; as though she was never *that* she, me never that me, as though the two of us had never embarked on a life that would lead to this queer librarial moment (though we did). And rather than being against all odds, it's in precise accordance with the odds: that life would lead to here or someplace just as lonely and spiritless. . . . (Though if it weren't that tears had just sprung stinging to my eyes, I'd accept my loss with dignity. Since after all I'm the man who counsels abandonment of those precious things you remember but can no longer make hopeful use of.) (322)

Frank faces up to yesterday's truth. The book reminds him of his illusory and abstract attempts to bridge and continue his marriage to Ann, to create a selective history rather than an actual one, and his "spiritless" and "lonely" habitation of the linguistic "fissure" between the literal and the imagined. What assaults him is not memory; it is the ordinary. His "counsel" has not prevented the recurrence of evidence from without his discursive field. He begins to feel the lure of a permanent, definite position, which will lead him to abandon exclusive narrative proprietorship.

The latter sections of *Independence Day* clarify the consequences of this actual/discursive exploitation. After having unsuccessfully attempted to forge a bond between himself and Paul—with the very tool that allows him to evade responsibility and interpersonal ties in the first place, namely, language (the father and son constantly negotiate their journey through textual markers, from Emerson's "Self Reliance," to Paul's copy of the liberally-inclined *New Yorker*)—Bascombe resorts to physical violence, an event that marks his return to historicity or "the frontiers" of his father/son narrative; he has returned to "the *common place* where 'anyone' is finally silent" (5). Bascombe's discursive procedures fail upon encountering another expert in

discursive indeterminacy (Paul); the two characters refuse to endorse a mutual narrative until the decisive moment that leads their “procedures back to their frontiers” (5), namely, the artificial borders erected between their discursive procedures and the actual. Ford points out that if the individual will not take steps towards acknowledging the ordinary, the ordinary will eventually take steps into the individual—recalling to him or her the “fictional” detachment necessary for procedural and analytic effectivity. Bascombe suddenly finds himself deprived of capital. Meeting with an identical strategy of linguistic indeterminacy and absorption on Paul’s part renders Bascombe’s words worthless. The two characters constantly outmanoeuvre one another, not allowing the other to seize them as subjects in a linguistic economy. In order for a breakthrough to occur, both characters will need to resolve their place in a communally sanctioned discourse and forego their simulated solipsism.

When the baseball hits Paul, Bascombe fully relinquishes his indeterminacy: “I basically stay silent, thinking sorrowfully of my son and of this day, both of which seem bitter and bottomless losses with absolutely no hope of recovery. There is no *seeming* now. All is *is*” (369). The accident stuns Bascombe into silence (foreshadowed by his earlier prophecy: “Maybe some truths don’t even have words,” 254). The moment overflows every imagined construction that might contain it. Bascombe faces O’Neill’s “is” with “silence,” without, for the first time, overwriting and offsetting it with discourse—without falling back on dirty realism’s strategy. The alignment of the two verb forms, “is,” in the final sentence at once highlight the metaphoric—a displacement of the actual by the one-remove of a mediating language—and literal. The second “is” counteracts the displacement offered by the first to expose this dual nature of language from *within*. All is simulation, which refers to the thing which simulation acts upon: reality. Ford’s discourse exposes its frontiers not by referring to an exteriority but by pointing at it from the interior. Simulation reveals its simulatedness (it is self-made, self-sustained) and contractualness (binding two people in a mutual discourse: Bascombe and Paul) in a moment (the baseball accident) that peers beyond the linguistic frontier into the ordinary. From now on, their language will have to contend with the shared experience of the accident.

Irv will extend this idea further: "Nothing seems as interesting as simulation when you're in it. Everything seems simulatable. Except . . . the people who do it best are the people who leave their work at the office. Maybe they're not always the geniuses, but they see simulation as one thing and life another" (370). Nowhere does Ford distance himself from theory more than at this juncture. He instils the idea of an extra-theoretical pragmatics into his text and discards the ideational. Paul's accident calls on Bascombe to not remember life, or to historicise it, or to overwrite it, but to *live* it. The "silence" it afflicts him with portends an end of *the narrative of Frank*. The failure of simulation to create bridges between isolated individuals causes Bascombe to communicate with his son physically rather than verbally, to grab him and push him towards the batting cage, which ultimately results in a mutual experience that relieves Bascombe of words. Here Bascombe realises that simulation only proves effective when those around him adhere to the reliability of the thing simulated, when they entertain the ritual of a language pragmatics (which he then uses against them): two people playing the simulation game leads to an anarchy of "seeming."

Frank learns the lesson of de Certeau's "restoring historicity to the movement which leads analytical procedures back to their frontiers" (5); rather than authoring another "analytical procedure" to account for Paul's accident, his role in it, and the reason this does not change his relationship with Ann, Bascombe cedes authorship to the ordinary, to chance, as illustrated when, relating events to Ann on the phone, he has "the feeling that Ann is writing everything down now: *Henry Burris. Oneonta. Detachment, retina, batting cage? Paul, Frank*" (378). He does not object to her becoming the author of this crisis; he accepts her words. Historical reportage arises from the actual (further illustrated by the differing opinions of "specialists" on Paul's eye, i.e. the "transfer" of the "object" into "analysis," 20). Frank becomes firmly aware of history not only as textual transfer and absorption of objects useful to the affirmation of a "specialised" way of viewing the world, but also as an "overflow," an actuality that invades and reinscribes all systems, including his and Ann's way of viewing the world and their roles in it. This ordinary is not universal, it cannot be articulated, yet it forms the condition of articulation and comes

temporarily to view in the *accidental*. What Frank chooses to do with this knowledge offsets *Independence Day* from the corpus of dirty realism.

*Independence Day* illustrates the ramifications of solipsism. While linguistic unfixity allows for a near limitless play on “rendering” a story, on speaking “for” what happened—the simultaneities of possible interpretations that allow one to inhabit both sides of ambiguity—this strategy ultimately results in a “mechanical isolation” (434). Meeting with Irv, Frank relinquishes dirty realism’s “simulated” reality and accepts a reality of contingency: “I might not agree with you about everything, Irv, but I—” (392). Bascombe’s inability to articulate the “but” that effects some kind of “agreement” between the two men indicates that this agreement exists outside articulation: the ordinary “cannot be spoken” (de Certeau 5). Their commonality exists in the specificity of acts they mutually engage in, such as the act of speaking to one another. “We have passed in daylight; we have interfaced, given each other good and earnest feedback. But ours is not life coterminus, though I like him fine” (392). No “continuity” presents itself, perhaps not even a bridging of private syntax; instead the two men meet in the banal, in the trivial, in the exercise of walking and the “silence” (de Certeau 5) of cliché: “When in doubt,” Franks says, “fall back on the old Sigma Chi formula: Ornstein = Great Guy” (392). Bascombe processes their connection in the ordinary, again, through a function of real estate: “I’d done wrong by taking this Dairy Queen walk and letting myself be hoodwinked just like Paul, by cozy, small-town plenitude, lured to think I can float free again against all evidence of real gravity” (392). Paul’s accident and the walk with Irv make Bascombe appreciate the disparity between “plenitude” and “evidence of [the] real.” He does not deny the possibility, the “lure” of “floating free” into the “plenitude” of simultaneous options offered him by linguistic indeterminacy, by the self-made world of solipsism, but *prefers* to resist this for an engagement in the consensual ordinary, rather than exclusivist “ideas,” such as Irv’s “continuity” narrative (a selective and therefore exclusionary chain of events). “I feel the push, pull, the weave and sway of others” (451). Ford gives the senses and community the final “say,” ceding the discourse of history to the social real.

## VI. Bascombe's Historicity

Michael Trussler, in "Famous Times': Historicity in the Short Fiction of Richard Ford and Raymond Carver" (1994), approaches the historical—as moment *and* discourse—in the short stories of the two writers in the same fashion Ford himself approaches it in *Independence Day*. In reference to authorial work, Trussler says: "Once an event passes, what once had been provisional in a given temporal horizon is reconfigured, rewritten as it were, by what actually took place subsequent to the original event" (35-36). Trussler views history as an event reconfigured into characteristic terminology by a discourse that precedes the historical development; in other words, social conditioning and discursive agendas attempt to absorb future occurrence into their epistemological system. This definition of history conflates occurrence with discourse (events eventually merge with, and then disappear into, recounting). History in Ford<sup>47</sup> remains partly an expectation, a readiness for the unexpected,<sup>48</sup> a readiness to negotiate accident with ever-reforming narrative strategies; as Trussler points out, Ford's realism understands how discourse prepares for accident by attempting to allow as many exceptions as possible to its reality-governing system, accounting for occurrence before it actually happens. But dirty realism only simulates discursive systems rather than adhering to them wholesale, knowing all along that the "accidental" will free them from accountability.

Dirty realists never scramble to reconcile the ordinary with the systematic, since the overflow of the ordinary into the system, this instability, forms the core of their strategy. The hypocrisy aesthetic is an openness to accident, to the collapse of epistemology, or, what G.P. Lainsbury, in "A Critical Context for the Carver Chronotope" (1997), calls "incomprehension" (84). Ford would perhaps disagree with Lainsbury's term but not the mystification it signifies: Frank Bascombe uses indeterminacy itself as a shelter from the accidental, or, uses "accident" as part of his system. His notion of historicity embraces accident. Ford's dirty realism highlights the manufacture of discourse from event in a way that suggests the limitations of the narratives we bring to bear on the actual, in particular the limitations of the solipsistic account propounded by many of his narrators: "we fabricate a narrative that, in explicating an event, restricts its

parameters; what [Ford] . . . attempts to do is suggest the reductive limitations of the stories we tell ourselves in the process of shaping time" (Trussler 38); the "stories" Ford's narrators construct use "temporality" to "[disperse] whatever frail sense of meaning they can create" (39). In other words, Ford's narrators, such as Bascombe, use events for the purpose of dispersing meaning, of exposing the "reductive limits" of discourse, to constantly explode history as fabrication. In rendering event, Bascombe exploits the indeterminacy "at the core of experience" (36) to prevent being pinned down to any one "story." As Trussler writes,<sup>49</sup> "to exist in time, for Ford, is to be severed from both self and community" (39). Bascombe neither forwards, or accedes to, a guaranteed self<sup>50</sup> nor accedes to any notion of humanity because he remains profoundly unfaithful to rendition. In this way, Ford's novels call attention to how much remains left out of historical accounting, and how event remains independent of the particular form of its historical expression (suggesting, by contrast, the multiple forms of expression that may account for event, and thereby reminding us of the relation between event and the social necessities and forms that condition its historical inscription). *Independence Day* illustrates the degree to which the hypocrisy aesthetic depends upon the "absenting" of the "other's" (Trussler 51) experience, and therefore the vaster social context of event as experienced by a community (rather than singularity). Bascombe's historicity silences other voices; his shifting and manoeuvring refuse to allow the other a platform from which to demonstrate a social (rather than proper) articulation. Without his participation, discourse cannot become social. By returning us to sheer event, in the form of a baseball—a "detail . . . meant to shatter the illusion of verisimilitude by emphasizing the sharp disparity of the actual" (Trussler 50)—and Bascombe's willingness to allow another, Ann, primacy over its historicising, Ford charts his protagonist's willingness to disclose and acknowledge the other voices of historical recounting, or verisimilitude.

Bascombe obscures historicity, the merging of occurrence and discourse in a provisional, contingent, pragmatic (rather than contiguous) sense, by resorting to indeterminacy, as witnessed by his theories on writing, and by being "unwilling to say that . . . anything is ever the sole cause of anything else" (10). Ford explicitly connects Bascombe's indeterminacy—his

"unwillingness" to speak of "sole" causes—with the death of his first son. Ralph's death occasions Bascombe's simulation and isolation. His relationship with Sally Caldwell opens him to the emptiness of "unanchored" discourse, discourse that does not operate within a contractual field, within communal contingency, but only the contingencies the self deploys to elude definitive, accountable positioning. Since history, by and large, constitutes an agreed-upon discourse between participants, or at least an agreed-upon referent that becomes overwritten in different ways by different individuals and groups (according to desires and needs), Frank's hypocrisy prevents him from indulging in history as anything other than solipsistic simulation: "Sally and I sometimes act as if we have a long, bittersweet history together of love lost and fate reconciled – which we don't" (146). Pretending to have a history is not the same as actually having one. Agreement upon a historical referent remains integral:

Ann . . . still superintends everything about me just by being alive and sharing ineluctable history. . . . And whereas in marriage there's the gnashing, cold but also cozy fear that after a while there'll be no *me* left, only *me* chemically amalgamated with another, the proposition with Sally is that there's just *me*. Forever. I alone would go on being responsible for everything that had *me* in it; no cushiony chemistry or heady synchronicity to fall back on, no other, only *me* and my acts, her and hers, somehow together – which of course is much more fearsome. (177)

The conjunction of "just being alive" with "sharing ineluctable history" suggests that the act of living, physical existence itself, creates the first basis for "superintending," for discursive amalgamation and interpenetration; the second phrase indicates that the ordinary prevents pure solipsism by its "shared" condition, "ineluctable" (in the sense of unavoidable) contingency. The fact that Bascombe recognises the ineluctability of the ordinary yet tries to evade it highlights his hypocrisy, his acting in defiance of the rule he has articulated. The latter half of the quotation exhibits Frank's paradoxical fears. In marriage he fears the loss of identity through "amalgamation" with the "other," of a vanishing in the process of biological reproduction; with Sally, Frank fears the exact opposite, that their relationship offers him no other into which he can disappear, no "other" to "superintend," to account for his acts in a context other than his self (in other words, to offer an alternative history, another vantage, or discourse, on the "act"), but, "only me and my acts"; with Sally he will have no discourse upon



which to practice tactics, everything, as Sally says earlier, will be “up front.” He will have to cooperate, to participate in a communal dialogue around the “act” or event. Frank fears the prospect of facing up to the actual without the possibility of dispersal. He wants freedom both from the bonds children impose and also the “responsibility” of an unmediated, act-based, relationship. Like most dirty realists, he vacillates between options; in this way he can indulge in the contingencies of family as well as play self-determining with Sally.

Ford’s “Existence Period” celebrates the liberating simultaneity and simulation of dirty realism. As long as Frank refuses to apply himself fully to any particular set of contingencies he can continue to be particular in his social choices. But his power remains reliant on non-participation, in not “acting,” by remaining peripheral to either situation. His greatest fear remains the accountability that “acts” entail, the occurrences that upset his careful discursive manoeuvres and simulations, and which the “other,” such as Sally, should he cede an authorial partnership to her, can use to discredit his history. Frank spends most of *Independence Day* avoiding the responsibility of co-operative history in favour of a personalised history mediated through, and obfuscated by, concepts such as biology, chemistry and synchronicity. Rather than expose a reality that simply “is” and then examine the way social forces arise in response to that reality, Bascombe, and the other dirty realists, prefer the masks and cloaks of various discursive formations they do not truly endorse, only resorting to the ordinary in order to debunk those discourses, should they threaten to trap them.

Ford’s novel, however, finally rejects simulation for a history grounded not in the vagaries of the self but in one that “[admits] its dynamic dependence on the absent Other” (Trussler 51); the novel’s title, *Independence Day*, functions ironically, since Bascombe’s independence arrives in recognising not his separateness from humanity but his inclusion in it. At the end of the novel he strips away the camouflage, admitting, like Drinkwater, to the “something” of a reality that simply “is” and which provokes social constructions of history, and so enters the “Permanent Period”:

The Permanent Period, this would be, that long, stretching-out time when my dreams would have mystery like any ordinary

person's; when whatever I do or say, who I marry, how my kids turn out, becomes what the world—if it makes note at all—knows of me, how I'm seen, understood, even how I think of myself before whatever there is that's wild and unassuageable rises and cheerlessly hauls me off to oblivion. (450)

No longer will Bascombe speak for his own acts. He will remain silent, preferring that the actions he undertakes find a context not in his own generalisations but in those of "the world." Even his self-conception—"even how I think of myself"—will arise in the context of community affiliation. Bascombe, in effect, relinquishes authorship, sinking into silence and the "mystery" of the ordinary, into a purely tactical position, a return to the "trivial." Bascombe observes that to truly cede to "mystery" demands a new type of narration, not the logo-centric, first-person manufacture of a text, not the creation of a space apart from the other, founded on a proprietary right taken over the ordinary, but the silence of anonymity: "the trivial is no longer the other (which is supposed to ground the exemption of the one who dramatizes it); it is the productive experience of the text. The approach to culture begins when the ordinary man becomes the narrator, when it is he who defines the (common) place of discourse and the (anonymous) space of its development" (de Certeau 5). De Certeau's adjectives, "common," and "anonymous" suggest that the "approach to culture" requires the founding of discourse on a "shared" and "non-proprietary" space. Only by becoming like "everyone else," by losing the proprietary exemption of authorship can Bascombe truly "approach . . . culture." He relinquishes his strategic position and the liberty it permits in order to embrace community and to thereby participate in a reality that acknowledges rather than overwrites the other. History becomes a dialectical process, one aware of itself as arising from social formations and responding to the necessities of the real that occasion such formations.<sup>51</sup>

As Trussler understands, the texts of Ford "openly investigate the tension that exists between the experience of an event and its subsequent repetition through narrative," and that they "imply that historical understanding needs to embody the manners in which temporality places indeterminacy at the core of experience, both lived and recounted" (36). "Indeterminacy" remains the "core" of dirty realism, indeterminacy in the sense of the accidental within the temporal (diachronic time)—that which alters the direction of history—and accidental as

recounted (the synchronic)—those layers of discourse that reconcile events with particular agendas, each according to its prerogatives. *Independence Day* retains its attachment both to the diachronic and synchronic movement of the temporal. History can be, and is, totally deracinated and also “ineluctable.” The meeting with Irv after Paul’s hospitalisation provides Bascombe an opportunity to linguistically “embody” his experience in the batting cage. Nevertheless, Ford never lets us forget that Bascombe must develop a narrative *because of* an event. The event forces discourse, and, as Trussler notes about Carver’s “Blackbird Pie,” event is not subject to authorial supervision: “For the narrator, ‘facts’ imply phenomena that exceed subjective recreation; ‘facts’ are those aspects of an event that take place in the public domain and, as such, they are a collusion of variables which escape the narrator’s control” (50).<sup>52</sup> In the case of Bascombe, the fact exceeding “subjective recreation” is Paul’s injury. The recognition that this injury involved “a collusion of variables which escape [Frank’s] control,” leads him to reject Irv’s theory of continuity. Frank finally realises the danger that a customised discourse poses to *others*. He willingly falls into the “public domain.” Trussler concludes on much the same note as Ford, witnessing the dynamism of community:

Strictly speaking, we cannot engage a phenomenological inquiry into the past, since separate temporal horizons cannot, finally, be merged together; however, opposed to those narratives which emphasize continuity, neorealist . . . [fiction] . . . suggests that historical narrative (and literary narrative) needs to admit its dynamic dependency on the absent Other.” (50-51)

Trussler reveals postmodern realism’s dirty secret: its “dynamic” dependence on the “absent other,” on the other whose voice it cannot permit to speak, except to voice banalities. It opposes “continuity” as a totalising discourse in the hands of the other (Irv) while allowing itself to play its own version of “continuity” against the empirical when such a version becomes prerequisite to maintaining its own unhindered liberty. Dirty realism destabilises continuity, within the narrative and vis-à-vis the reader, by inserting the “particular,” events of the actual, at critical junctures in the narrative’s self-fulfilment to create an indeterminate “core” that isolates author and protagonist from critics and readers; they demand that the “other” confirm the story they tell in order to pin him or her down to a position they can tactically infiltrate.

Dirty realism adopts a “strategy” of “tactics,” using the ordinary to plasticise the walls of the current system before they ossify in such a way that the return of the ordinary might shatter them, and leave the dirty realist exposed (as Frank remains exposed before Ann in regards to his intrinsic “bravery”). But, in order to maintain its passivity and reluctance, dirty realism must posit itself against a definite other, against a rigid discourse, whose operative consistency allows them a “space” to manipulate, without having to take one of their own. Bascombe, in recognising an “anchor” in “contingency,” brings the “other” into presence. By recognising his “dependence” he steps fully into the ordinary, immerses himself in it, and lets go of narrative altogether. The maintenance of individuality arrives at the cost of complete alienation; according to Ford, the pitfall in dirty realism’s aesthetic is the fact that no communal system can arise in the unreliability of hypocrisy, the fact that dirty realism’s contradictory ground depends on the other’s immobilisation and erasure. It cancels bonds of corroboration necessary to maintaining communal enterprise. Unanchored, not answering to anyone (including the self—they do not need to worry about being “true to themselves,” since, properly speaking, “self” no longer exists), dirty realism makes congress impossible. The lesson of history that Frank intends to teach Paul, that it is “selective,” falters on Trussler’s “historicity.” The exposure of both men to “the manners in which [they place] indeterminacy at the core of experience” reveals the extent to which hypocrisy can nullify relationships and cause *harm*. Their own “manners” of accounting for indeterminacy—the chosen form of their “temporality” or historicity—has left them no means of constructing a mutual form of accounting for “experience.” They have both “used” or “placed” “indeterminacy” to elude co-operative responsibilities, to obscure contingency.

While “continuity” may present a “fiction” used to selectively construct “history,” to employ the vantage of the discursive monad as a spotlight, “contingency” does not. Continuity functions with such complexity in the case of Frank Bascombe—who teeters between, and inhabits, the space bounded by, the conceptual, abstract and the physical—that only disaster gives him the opportunity to lose “the singularity of a competence and [find] himself, anyone or

no one, in the common history" (4). Bascombe apprehends that he may have stopped writing fiction but he has not stopped being "a writer," and has been guilty, throughout, of forming and reforming his own "continuous" history. In the end, he has to stop simulating solipsism, realise his strategic mastery of discourse, and recognise the social character of the discourse he preys upon. He must stop writing the novel and become active, like Sally or Ann, in a contractual discourse, rather than strategically enabling the inscription of various discursive modes for his own subversion and play. Ford's novel achieves what de Certeau calls "the approach to culture" in the role of narrative: "They are deployed, like games, in a space outside of and isolated from daily competition, that of the past, the marvelous, the original. In that space can thus be revealed, dressed as gods or heroes, the models of good or bad ruses that can be used every day" (23). Dirty realism can work to increase the liberty of a particular protagonist or author at the expense of the "common," or to reveal the remaining tactics, linguistic and actual—the "models of good or bad ruses"—that work in service of a community "voice," thereby making the "other" present at the point where the narrative disappears as customised artefact and merges with common parlance, becoming appropriated by, and poached upon, by de Certeau's "ordinary man." Bascombe must assist in the creation of a narrative that opens its "space" not only to him but the other as well. As long as individual authors remain authors, the product of their labours distinguish them from "daily competition," as de Certeau's vocabulary—"outside" and "isolated"—points out; the question, however, remains, whether the space their products institute allow for revelations on the strategies remaining to the common person. *Independence Day* ends not on Bascombe reasserting his position as an indeterminate narrative authority, as in *The Sportswriter*, but on his recognition of the social and the power of ordinary tactics. It returns to a sense of community, provisional, haphazard, chancy, utopian only in its recognition that its actions culminate in the offsetting of the dominant discourse by the eventualities of the ordinary, a re-crafting of societal codes and norms according to contingency rather than the dominance and mastery of continuity and its centrist narrators.

### C. Drinkwater's Action

Jarman takes more tentative, uncertain, steps towards a common history. His narrator, Drinkwater, subsists for a time on the binaristic paradigm, between contradictory, mutually exclusive categories (Waitress X and the Intended); but his desire for a reliable discursive contract prompts him to abandon the safe-haven of paradox and textual stasis. It takes a novel's worth of lyrical meandering before Drinkwater adopts a stance.

*Salvage King Ya!* tells the story of a minor-league hockey player nearing the end of his career. For the most part the novel recounts Drinkwater's "picaresque" journey through Canada and the United States as he shuttles from one farm team to another. The supporting cast include Neon, a hapless Renaissance man who through the novel tries his hand at everything from sculpture to playing backup for an Elvis impersonator; Shirt is Blue, a First Nations wild-man who eventually flies off in an aeroplane bound for the Gulf Islands; the Intended, Drinkwater's live-in fiancée; Waitress X, his sideline girlfriend; and Cathy, his ex-wife who lives down the road from the junkyard Drinkwater inherited in Alberta (and where he nominally resides). Plot-wise, only Drinkwater's vacillation between marrying the Intended or leaving her for Waitress X provides continuity. Aware of his fading career as a professional athlete, the novel's lyrical meandering charts Drinkwater's growing awareness of a need to forge communal connections.

At the beginning of *Salvage King Ya!* Drinkwater refuses to validate any singular position: "Something basic in me demands mystery, milltowns, low population, haunted bedrooms, stupidity, to bounce off walls and crash my semi-new old car" (17). While the Frank Bascombe of *Independence Day* over-analyses and over-rationalises his situation (often to rationalise away any logical explanation in favour of mystery), Drinkwater favours the irrational altogether, the abandonment of certitude (or even the quest for certitude) in favour of "mystery," for quipping, image juxtaposition and poetic license devoid of any attempt at analysis. Initially, at least, Drinkwater likes an unresolved life, enjoys inhabiting the

unregulated “paradoxes” O’Neill iterates. Like Bukowski’s and Carver’s narrators, Drinkwater celebrates the circuit of dirty realism. The list of items or experiences his essentialism demands reads like a set of ingredients for dirty realist narrative. The “basic” or fundamental “demand” is for “mystery.” Mystery forms the *sine qua non* of Drinkwater’s world, a desire for the unknown and unresolvable.

This rejection of epistemology follows the pattern witnessed in Carver and Bukowski. The novel’s “basic” impulse does not challenge or reinvent knowing but abandons it; Drinkwater refrains from taking even the first step in the direction of inquiry: “Little use asking questions. Better yet, let’s pretend to ask questions” (212). By choice, Jarman inhabits a landscape in which language, or “asking,” hovers free of attachment to “use,” where every linguistic or epistemological endeavour disguises pretence, a world of simulation. The journey through the desired “milltowns,” “bedrooms,” and “stupidity” traces no progress, rather an acceptance of a certain state of mind, of a *particular, chosen position*, within a landscape defined by “names” (Jarman loves the list). This “herky-jerky picaresque” journeys through regions of unanchored language, utterance without application. Jarman refuses to enter into the contract of a language pragmatics. He abandons any investigation into “why” to concentrate, instead, on mystery, on the rift between the word and reality.

The structure of *Salvage King Ya!* approximates a condition similar to the “eye of the hurricane” metaphor Joyce uses to describe Bukowski. In Jarman’s text, Drinkwater whirls outward from his hub, the junkyard and the Intended, into the maelstrom of farm teams and affairs over North America and Europe. The novel’s discourse unspools from his relationship with the Intended, dancing or juggling options as a means of distraction from taking a definitive position regarding the binding and enforced contract of marriage. However, near the novel’s close, Drinkwater suddenly stops vacillating. Whereas Bascombe’s exit from the Existence Period into the Permanent Period seems inevitable or expected, Jarman’s decision to put down roots happens almost arbitrarily: “Ed McMahon writes me from his lucky niche in that Lolita republic, says, You May Already Be a Winner. But you must act now. And he’s right: I must

*act*" (273). As in Ford, junk mail, the detritus of a consumer culture, does not push Jarman further into the economic circuit of purchase and expenditure, but in fact reminds him of settling for a determinate quantity, of stepping outside the circuit of constantly delayed satisfaction (the premise of advertising), making a definite sustainable choice. The mention of "Lolita" recalls another protagonist, Humbert Humbert, who likewise hides his refusal to abide by necessary social contracts behind a scintillating lyricism (that Jarman refers to America as a "Lolita republic" further regrounds the monadic, socially atomised reality of late capital, wherein individuals act out their whims at the expense of the other). Jarman's italicising of the word "act" emphasises the sudden importance of making a definitive step, one that falls outside of his lyrical discourse. The act of the headlock is less a demonstration of effective and affirmative "action" against the system (the context indicates that no reconciliation will come about as the result of Drinkwater's violence) as it is a "reminder," to the reader as much as to the agent, that words do not constitute the sum total of reality.

Whether Drinkwater's resolution springs from an ironic recognition of the need to end the novel, or a sudden urge motivated by the capriciousness of junk mail delivery, Jarman's return to the actual radically alters our relation to the novel. The discursive strategy of the novel—showing the possibilities for endless recounting and various versions inscribed on, and appropriated from, the surrounding body of the ordinary—provides Drinkwater the means of returning to the ordinary by shutting up, by printing "End" (285) after the last sentence. We will not hear from him anymore. His story never truly existed; it was all simulation, a fiction of print, life reduced to the play of ink upon a page. "The end" recalls the book's presence as a book, a commodity, a physical object we can rip pages out of or alter; its arbitrariness undermines its pre-eminence. The novel becomes, in the process, a different document, a finite discourse susceptible to, and determined by, *action* (we glean as much from Bascombe's own reflections on "Blue Autumn"), the "event" which marks the starting point of historical discourse. In exposing the novel as a personalised discourse upon event, Jarman highlights the necessity of the reader's participation in undersigning the contractual relationship required by



narrative (whereas Bukowski, as noted, in *Hollywood*, appears unconcerned about the reader's affections, referring them back to a metanarrative of talent or "good writing" which sets him apart from the untalented masses).

The junk mail in the novel lends itself to misuse as easily as the novel itself. Ed McMahon's false promise, the simulation of his message, becomes a means of returning to the actual, just as the novel's obvious artifice becomes our means of using it as a door stop or brick. Jarman effectively illustrates how systems of advertising and literature can themselves reveal "cracks" in the systems of belief and interpretation that they endorse. Jarman's novel undercuts discursive and linguistic indeterminacy with the solidity of an empirical object, which in turn references the necessary conjunction between narrative and act. Through the backhanded ironising of the open-endedness of text—embodied in the novel's arbitrary halting at "the end"—we become aware of the finiteness and fragility of the fictional artefact. Rather than controlling time through a "fictive" strategy (36), Jarman's "end" returns Drinkwater and us to the temporal flow, to a tactical positionality. The joy that Drinkwater evinces at the end of the novel turns O'Neill's paradigm of black humour on its head, since Drinkwater's laughter finds community solace in the loss of metanarrative, in the recognition that discourse arises from social contingency.

*Salvage King Ya!*, more than any other work so far discussed, supports Buford's contention that dirty realism involves, "drifters in a world cluttered with junk food and the oppressive details of modern consumerism" (4). Buford's use of "oppressive" to describe dirty realism proves deadly accurate in Drinkwater's case; though his choices seem arbitrary, overdetermined by an interplay of biological, societal, political factors, paradoxically (to return to O'Neill's evaluator/evaluatee problematic) motivated by will *and* environment, a feeling of "oppression" certainly informs his catalogue of problems: "my inarticulate tongue would not let me breathe, I was choking on my tongue" (271). A motorcycle accident renders Drinkwater aware of how ineffective, how "inarticulate" his tongue proves in coping with the actual; the writing of the accident, in swirls of imagery and streams-of-consciousness, suggests a form of

choking *apart* from the physical: the glut of discourse that Drinkwater has erected around himself and which, as a result of the accident's "reality," now threatens to strangle him with its varied, mutually-exclusive and contradictory demands for accountability. Just as Bukowski's poem on "Farmer John" distorts the advertising signal through enacting variant readings on "smoking" one's own "bacon," Drinkwater also "smokes his own bacon" throughout *Salvage King Ya!*, glorying in discursive variety. The way out of the impasse of this ambiguity comes with the overflowing of the ordinary, which subsumes Drinkwater's various strategic positions and returns him to ground zero, to an understanding of how his discourse does not exempt him from contact with reality. This moment arrives when Drinkwater realises that the senses "communicate" with the world in an extra-linguistic fashion; as Drinkwater approaches the demise of his hockey career and relationship with Waitress X, as well as the "beginning" (272) of his fatherhood, he says: "My vocabulary cannot keep up with what I'm sensing. I start laughing on the glittering sidewalk, I feel fine. What a riot" (273). The inescapable reality of impending fatherhood facilitates the return of the ordinary and its dissolving of Drinkwater's discursive strategy (much as the baseball hitting Paul dissolves Bascombe's "story").

As opposed to Carver's Myers, the fall out of narrative into the physicality of sensory cognition exhilarates Jarman's Drinkwater. Whereas previously he "rioted" in the excesses of lyricism he now riots in the senses. The word "riot" also signals "chaos," the protean flood of the ordinary which discursive "order" sets itself apart from. He uses language here not to overwrite reality—to simulate reality—but to turn on language itself, to provoke its own insolvency, to recognise its limitations, to undo his structure of simulations and evasions. The most explicit moment of Drinkwater's recognition of a world overwritten by language occurs in the final meeting with his "agent": "DAYTIME; in a *faux* Polynesian lounge I grip my ex-agent in an amazingly effective headlock, simply wishing to demonstrate to him that it's real, it's not all on paper, that he has stolen money from me in a physical world" (279). In this last chapter, entitled "The Last Chapter (Nothing Up My Sleeve)," Drinkwater abandons his linguistic indeterminacy, rolls up his sleeve to reveal his intentions. His "agent"—the mouthpiece of

legalese, "paper" contracts and false promises—finally provokes Drinkwater to step out of the discursive arena and "demonstrate" the "real." The fact that this demonstration occurs in "a *faux* Polynesian lounge" suggests Jarman's optimism in still finding avenues for approaching the real in world almost entirely made up of simulation. His brutalising of the agent, or "ex-agent," arises from an exasperation with "representation," with the very forms of appropriation and exploitation that enabled him for so long to elude and divert the demands of expectation (especially the expectations of the Intended); by entering the real he becomes aware of contingency, of a common basis for language, where a fist meeting a nose or an arm gripping a neck does, finally, connect two people in an ascertainable way. Though language offers him the power of reification and dispersion, he knows he cannot sacrifice one and not the other; the very ability of language to become opaque, non-representative, unfixed is the same aspect that allows him to pursue his desires unhampered.

The "ex-agent" is language itself, and Jarman's response to "him" begins his fall from the pages of the novel, from the first-person narration of the individual ego into "the prose of the world," into language as pragmatic, a communal property affixed to the actual according to agreed-upon rules, into a circumstantial, social historicity. He notes at the end of the novel: "I'll join the club, I'll admit something" (282). The words "admit" and "join" connect Drinkwater to Bascombe in the realisation that words assume a definitive proportion only when they serve as the basis of a "club," only when used to "join" the "restless populace" (282). However, unlike Ford, who goes no further than language as contingent, as anchored not to reality but to communal necessity, Jarman goes one step further, by "ending" his monologue: "I think I see the start of something beautiful: the start of an end" (279). Unlike Bukowski, who views the certainty of death cynically, as an excuse for irrelevance and indeterminacy, Jarman views death optimistically, as the reconciliation of the self to an actuality approachable through the periphery of language, an approach enabled by the very insolvency of language itself and by its communal basis, by the fact that language is a manifestation of historical necessity, as determined by the living conditions and needs of the "restless populace." By writing "the end" below the final sentence of his novel, Jarman recognises that nothing stands outside of text and that indeed

everything stands outside of it, that language originates in an instant of actuality that it forever fails to re-attain, that language provides, at best, a contractual basis whose "start" or beginning arises in the "end" of the supremacy of a dominant discourse and, at worst, an indeterminacy whose liberty ends in isolation. The novel charts Drinkwater's willingness to accept a discourse he can participate in but not rule. Jarman realises that to step outside of dirty realism's hypocrisy, its juggling of absolutes, he must enact his death within text; in other words, he must stop talking about himself as a distinct, isolated individual.

### *Conclusion*

Dirty realism rejects and accepts participation in both the "masses" of consumers and in the machinery of late capitalism. Exploiting the entrapment described by post-structuralist theory, multinationalism, the negative options of the Cold War, dirty realists recognise and celebrate their inability to offer up their own essential, epistemological "space," and their "poaching" on the space provided by dominant discursive systems. Continually involved with acts of resistance and manufacture, positioning of the other and inscriptional passivity, dirty realism inhabits monadism, turning isolation into subversion. Unable to conceive of a definitive position, dirty realists accept all positions as definitive and tenable; their indeterminacy results from a continual displacement, within the temporal, of a series of absolute options whose contrariness makes them, as authors, unreliable. Without reliability they cannot undersign any kind of communal contract; they operate most effectively in their removal from community.

Charles Bukowski revels in his isolation, in his ability to use the consistent (or consistency-centric) discourse of the other against itself to forever evade fixity himself. Knowing that the ordinary eludes linguistic representation but that epistemological systems must construe it as text, dirty realism profits from the constant simulation of the real by discursive strategy (including the simulation of solipsism), invoking death (the ordinary) when simulation becomes cumbersome. If hypocrisy represents a state wherein actions do not match discourse, and if dirty realism enacts tactics against their own (or others') strategy, they set up rules (as Harry does in "Bring Me Your Love") purposefully to act in contention with them.

Trapped in a reality that simply “is,” that no explanation can adhere to, dirty realism trades epistemological investigation for ways of operating.

In the Cold War absence of a metanarrative that would explain “event,” dirty realism provides *one* response to the absence of an integrated societal metanarrative, and the dominance of commodity culture. Yet, even within dirty realism, various modes of discourse assert themselves, various attitudes towards the hypocrisy aesthetic. Bukowski and the early Carver implement strategic positions for themselves and others in order to operate tactically against them, either with actions or with de Certeau’s “sophistry”: opportunistically subverting the “established rights and property” of a discursive “rationality” (38), as Bascombe does when he restates and redefines his past promises and meanings to satisfy his behaviour or desires in the “now” (though he later comes to understand and to reject the implications of this operativity). Deprived of a definite “why” to adequately explain the historical moment, to provide a metanarrative with which to explicate context, dirty realists instead concentrate on a “how” determined by momentary moods and wants. (To answer the question “why” would only further entrench a discourse escapable only by further contradiction). Jarman and Ford, on the other hand, probe the risks inherent to a simulated and isolated existence and the wider impact of the hypocrisy aesthetic on society at large. If the isolation of dirty realism becomes unbearable (it does not for Bukowski), as Ford and Jarman illustrate, dirty realism must stop avoiding the definitive, countering passivity with accountability; in other words, they must decide to stop authoring, stop positioning themselves as “conductors of verisimilitude” and accept the contexts and contingencies of operating within a language pragmatics; with this language pragmatics comes the recognition of the social character of all discourse as the language of the historical moment meets with, and becomes changed by, inescapable events.

Bukowski uses the irrationality of the “white trash” against the discursive “rationality” of the “great ‘strategic’ system” (38) to create unexpected results—such as the fallout from Larry’s teaching methods—and in order to slip in and out of authoritarian frameworks, including the framework of self-centredness (the end of “Camus” suggests that Larry’s behaviour will undermine his own cushy position). Instead of continuing to pose questions,

Ford and Jarman act; they fall silent and in doing so experience rather than overwrite or elide the ordinary, joining the crowds (as Bascombe does during the Fourth of July celebrations) to “feel the push, pull, the weave and sway of others” (451); in “the end” they join a body of common tactics that elude the grasp of discursive systems. They accept the true “mystery” of community as a continual, democratic recrafting of the discourse of reality, as necessitated by social demand. Both Bascombe and Drinkwater let go of hypocrisy in favour of what *Independence Day* calls a “tidal attraction . . . hard to put into words” (306), that “open sea of common experience that surrounds, penetrates, and finally carries away all discourse” (de Certeau 15). Sensing an extra-discursive power in the elusive, mysterious, fragmentary and particular operations of ordinary people, Ford and Jarman put their money on the eventual victory of the ordinary over the proprietary system of late industrial capital.

## ENDNOTES, CHAPTER FOUR

- <sup>1</sup> Jameson himself arrives at this notion of simulacra via Baudrillard.
- <sup>2</sup> This notion forms the core of Richard Ford's novel, *Independence Day* (1995), in which he argues for a different kind of "permanence," one based not upon discursive speciality, metanarrative, but upon social contingency.
- <sup>3</sup> Carver remains more problematical than Bukowski, since many of his early works, particularly the story, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," in fact acknowledge and cede to community, at least longing for a release from, or solution to, the monadism apparent in late industrial capital; and his later works, such as "Blackbird Pie," even more aggressively confront the problems of the hypocrisy aesthetic. For the purposes of this chapter, I have chosen stories that illustrate the stasis brought about by an adherence to hypocrisy.
- <sup>4</sup> Postwar America, as an example of late capital, is further divided into periods, roughly following the decades, from the 1940s, to the 1950s, to the 1960s in chapter three, "Dirty Realism: History." While a thirty-year gap does divide the writings of Horkheimer and Adorno from those of Jameson and de Certeau, the earlier theorists' prognostications prove valuable not only as a starting-off point for Jameson, but for elaborating the impetuses from which sprung the society de Certeau critiques.
- <sup>5</sup> I use Versluys to exemplify the critics—including, Buford (4), Wilson (90), Shelton (149) and Sodowsky (538)—who regard the texts of dirty realism as an alternative to the metafictional, experimental and postmodern texts (an opposition reinforced by famous statements made against metafictional "trickery," 14, by Carver in *Fires*, 1984) that dominated American literary production in the 1960s; Versluys's comments merely reference a wider debate on whether dirty realism constitutes an alternative or adjunct to so-called "postmodern" fiction, which has notable proponents to either side (with Cynthia J. Hallett, Michael Trussler, Jeffrey J. Folks and Jürgen Pieters on the side identifying dirty realism with postmodernity).
- <sup>6</sup> David Foster Wallace (an American short story writer, novelist and essayist who came to prominence in the 1990s), in an interview published in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (1993), reveals how the antagonism between minimalism and metafiction actually connects the two literary movements: "Minimalism's just the other side of metafictional recursion. . . . Minimalism's . . . a fraud: it eschews not only self-reference but any narrative personality at all, tries to pretend there is no narrative consciousness in its text" (144). Minimalism (by which Wallace designates those writers grouped under Versluys's neorealism), like metafiction, derives from a debate around "narrative consciousness"; in Wallace's opinion, a reactionary impetus determined minimalism's trajectory away from the self-referentiality of metafiction, but not from self-consciousness. In fact, critics as diverse as Wilson (89), John Barth (2) and Roland Sodowsky (538-39) all construe minimalism as highly conscious of itself as writing, though, as Sodowsky writes (and in agreement with Wallace), exhibiting this consciousness through effacement rather than exposition: "The minimalist writer's concern with effacement, the opposite of some highly self-conscious postmodern fiction writing, extends to a reluctance to use any form . . . that reminds the reader that the story has a writer, that someone shaped it" (538). Minimalism, then, regards a writing conspicuous for its obsessive effacement of discursive markers; rather than lampooning or addressing the primacy of the author, and the constructedness of the text, dirty realism takes refuge in solipsism, but such a self-conscious refuge that the notion of the protagonist's or characters' solipsism becomes glaringly obvious and subject to readerly interrogation (where solipsism means a defining consciousness unaware, or pretending to be unaware, of its primacy in determining meaning and context). Wallace condemns minimalism as a "recursive" writing: its attempt to elide the presence, and therefore authority, of the *author* only brings its subterfuge, its *authorial stylistics*, more glaringly into focus. Why is there so little authorial consciousness in these texts? Straining for the zero of mediation, minimalism highlights how heavily fiction depends on *how* and *by whom* it is told. By "recursive," Foster refers to an historical instance, in the early 1960s, when "Fiction became conscious of itself in a way it never had been" (134), when fiction began taking

"itself" as its primary subject (134). Minimalist fiction, with its stripped-down syntax, anti- or false epiphanies, and jettisoning of overt editorialising or commentary, displays a high degree of self-consciousness, of language, form and theme—a self-consciousness remarkable not for the extent of self-referral but for its lack of it. Wallace outlines the difficulties accompanying a critical position that differentiates between minimalism and metafiction on the basis of "self-consciousness." Neorealism (or minimalism or dirty realism) expresses a strain of postmodernism, one aping earlier traditions of realism and infused everywhere with the preoccupations, political and aesthetic, of post-1960s North America, particularly that of discursive authority and authenticity.

<sup>7</sup> I do not intend to suggest that works which exhibited "popular protest" and reconsideration of "narrative structure" began with the 1960s, since precedents to this sort of fiction—in the form of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959), to name just two novels—already existed by the beginning of the 1960s. Moreover, one might argue that "popular protest" has always been a central feature of the novel. In fact, no clear demarcation exists between the so-called "high modernist" texts such as Ellison's and the work of Pynchon, Coover and other writers who came to print in the 1960s. Thomas Hill Schaub, in *American Fiction in the Cold War*, discusses both the fictions of the 1950s and 1960s as emerging from the various cultural conditions of the period, and their common link in the global crisis that dominated mid-twentieth-century American consciousness. Versluys's dichotomy therefore proves tenuous at best, but nevertheless emblematic of criticism which would seek to pitch neorealism in polemical contrast to metafiction (a position I disagree with, in particular, because neorealism and metafiction portray similar concerns arising from the historical moment); in Versluys's (and Carver's) case, metafiction distinctly refers to works openly self-conscious and self-referential in content and form, whose central concern is the elucidation and critique of literary form itself. While Ellison and Burroughs both experimented with form, one might argue that their experiments were in search of an appropriate form in which to embody, respectively, the African-American and narcotic experience, whereas an author such as Coover critiques literary form *per se*. In either case, Versluys's critique arises here as a way of addressing the ahistoricism and critical limitations eventuated by a polemical discussion of neorealism.

<sup>8</sup> See chapter three, "Dirty Realism: History," for the historical and cultural conditions which brought the notion of contradiction to the forefront of American literary thought.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Ford, perhaps more than any dirty realist, realises the implications of solipsism upon community: "The thing that defeats affection . . . is one person's inability really to look outside him- or herself, so much so that the needs, the preferences, the well-being, the sanctity of others are, in effect, completely ignored or misunderstood, causing calamity" (Guagliardo 610). The "calamity" of solipsism occupies much of *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*. Ford's two novels chart the dawning awareness of the effects of solipsism in the mind of its protagonist, Frank Bascombe.

<sup>10</sup> David Foster Wallace, remarking upon postmodern realism, testifies to the dangers of literary recursiveness, exposing the paradigms of entrapment that occupy much of dirty realism:

It [recursiveness] helps reveal fiction as a mediated experience. . . . This was important, because language's self-consciousness had always been there, but neither writers nor critics nor readers wanted to be reminded of it. But we ended up seeing why recursion's dangerous, and maybe why everybody wanted to keep linguistic self-consciousness out of the show. It gets empty and solipsistic real fast. It spirals in on itself. (142)

This spiralling "in on itself" manifested the threat of isolation, either that of solipsism—of reducing reality to one defining consciousness—or the isolation of social groups relegated to the margins of a dominant culture. The self-consciousness of dirty realism, as Frank Bascombe



and Drinkwater learn, does indeed “[get] empty and solipsistic real fast.” These two narrators grapple with precisely the problems of isolation and contractual realities that Wallace describes.

- <sup>11</sup> Dirty realism shares the concerns of metafiction. Authors in both camps examine means of defying postmodern paradigms of entrapment. The fiction of Thomas Pynchon attempts to give voice to plurality, skirting solipsism by announcing the wide variety of discursive formations in operation at any one specific time, a fictional rendering of a synchronic rather than diachronic history; dirty realism plunges into solipsism, advocating a radical absolutism. Either way, these aesthetics reflect an attempt, as Don DeLillo says in a *Paris Review* interview (1993), to “absorb and incorporate” the culture of late capitalism:

Everything in the culture argues against the novel, particularly the novel that tries to be equal to the complexities and excesses of the culture. This is why books such as *JR* and *Harlot's Ghost* and *Gravity's Rainbow* and *The Public Burning* are important—to name just four. They offer many pleasures without making concessions to the middle-range reader, and they absorb and incorporate the culture instead of catering to it. (290)

The novels DeLillo lists—*JR*, *Harlot's Ghost*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *The Public Burning*—serve as examples of an encyclopaedic impulse in postmodernism, an attempt “to be equal to,” or to capture, the entirety of a culture. By including everything, “absorbing” and “incorporating” the culture, to the point of exhaustion, these novels attempt to offset themselves against the system; by portraying everything inside society the authors of encyclopaedic narratives attempt to stand outside of it. Through sheer bulk they defy easy reading and therefore consumption, making no “concessions to the middle-range reader.” Their fractured, convoluted, and often circular plotlines testify to the self-sustaining, self-propagating, self-containing reality that Marxists such as Jameson and non-Marxists such as de Certeau locate as the primary feature of contemporary capitalistic society. By showing the system in the form of the system, DeLillo's novels avoid catering to its various specificities, its engineered consumer desires; they satisfy none of its wants.

In *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), Thomas Pynchon recreates the paradigm of late capitalism in an allegory about Mauritius's dodos. The Dutch colonists occupy the same position as many dirty realist protagonists, a space *between* systems: “all these men were caught in the spectrum between, trapped among frequencies of their own voices and words” (110). A particular discursive frequency—the “spectrum” of a Christian salvationist ideology and capitalist utility (111)—constitutes the field of options and possibilities available to the colonists. This indoctrination leaves the men trapped, deprived of individual agency, “motionless” (109) in the “cycle” (109) of teleological, *diachronic* time. The birds' lack of use-value—“what were they good for?” (108)—renders them extraneous, disposable; what resists colonisation and co-optation need not exist: “No language meant no chance of co-opting them into what their round and flaxen invaders were calling salvation” (110). The absorption of the dodos into the dominant discourse would save them from extermination. But even inclusion would demand a sacrifice of the dodos to an overriding “Word” (that of scripture), it would mean their erasure, the loss of a unique other, of an alternative to the dominant discourse. Whether the dodos assimilate or not, ignore the colonial system or cooperate with it, will result in their loss of identity and life. “Frans can look at both versions, the miracle [of the dodos' conversion] and the hunt of more years than he can remember now, as real, equal possibilities. In both, eventually, the dodos die” (111). The dodos can chose between two versions of extinction: resistance or assimilation.

However, Pynchon's text itself provides an alternative form of resistance to the inside/outside threat, namely, to give voice to alternative discursive formations, and to sustain them in an encyclopaedic text, as it does with the dodos' struggle. *Gravity's Rainbow*, and the

related works mentioned by DeLillo, offer a radical plurality, an encyclopaedic preservation of discourses. Text affirms a pyrrhic victory. The relational aspect of the word allows the dodos to remain preserved by the very discourse that extinguished them, but only through an account of their destruction. In the process, Pynchon's text becomes a museum or graveyard of extinct or dying communities kept alive as discourse, in the hopes that they might generate future alternatives in the real. The encyclopaedic impulse of such fiction proves a means of preserving variant discourses, of giving range to the multiplicity of discourses existing alongside the dominant one; dirty realism, on the other hand, debunks the prime discourse not by giving "voice" (even if only in text) to alternative discursive modes, but by cutting them out entirely and exposing the workings of the dominant discourse itself. In either case the project remains similar: the infiltration of the dominant discourse and its subversion, though through different techniques.

- <sup>12</sup> Wallace, writing decades later, still regards the culture industry in light of Horkheimer and Adorno: "Academia and commercial culture have somehow become these gigantic mechanisms of commodification that drain the weight and color out of the even the most radical new advances. It's a surreal inversion of the death-by-neglect that used to kill off prescient art. Now prescient art suffers death-by-acceptance. We love things to death now" (135). What Horkheimer and Adorno revealed earlier in the century has become a basic problem of literary production for contemporary writers such as Wallace.
- <sup>13</sup> Don DeLillo, in the *Paris Review* interview, elaborates the novel's decline as a cultural determiner: "Today, the world has become a book—more precisely a news story or television show or piece of film footage. And the world narrative is being written by men who orchestrate disastrous events, by military leaders, totalitarian leaders, terrorists, men dazed by power. World news is the novel people want to read. It carries the tragic narrative that used to belong to the novel" (296).
- <sup>14</sup> The bourgeois economy demands "agitation" and "uncertainty" as means for allowing it to manipulate the social order, of keeping the order pliable to capital's needs. "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify" (421). A subversive art supplies the necessary means for preventing the "ossification" of particular social or ethical relations. Nowhere is the rapid chain of variance and social instability more apparent than in postmodernity, where nothing, particularly received ideas, can be taken for granted. In order for capital to continue operating, it requires a continual shifting of content, of intellectual fashion, which aids and abets the shifting of retail "units." Dirty realism adopts this mode of "constant revolution," but in order to escape the demands placed upon it by capital, to flout contractual, consumer obligations. For a more in-depth look at the way dirty realism accomplishes this, see the discussion of Charles Bukowski's *Factotum* in chapter two, "Dirty Realism: Genealogy."
- <sup>15</sup> Such revolt generally characterises Rock 'n Roll throughout its history, though this does not stop successive generations of musicians from "dissing" their immediate predecessors, as Punk Rock did the hippies, thereby offering a poignant example of "constant revolution" within an already established revolutionary movement—one which helps to usher out the old record collection and usher in the new.
- <sup>16</sup> In using the term "late capital," I side with Horkheimer, Adorno and Jameson in regarding the postmodern as a designation for a society in advance of early capitalism.
- <sup>17</sup> I borrow this title from de Certeau, who sees the art of poaching on the dominant system, of selecting from it one's means of subversion, as "making do": "Without leaving the place where he [the subject] has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of plurality and creativity. By an art of being in between, he draws unexpected results from his situation" (30). "Making do," then, corresponds to the subversive subject's ability to "draw unexpected results" from a set of living or working conditions imposed on him or her by a dominant discourse. Carver's "Put Yourself in My Shoes" provides a narrative of just such a "making do," especially as it charts the tactical manoeuvres of a man well versed in the "art of being in between": "He [Myers] was between stories, and he

felt despicable" (134). Myers's dilemma, being *in between* narratives, situates him as one of de Certeau's common people.

<sup>18</sup> In *Capital*, Marx characterises capitalist production as a circular process, driven by a tautology of accumulation because, and for the sake, of accumulation:

Therefore, the final result of every separate circuit [circulation of money], in which a purchase and consequent sale are completed, forms of itself the starting point of a new circuit. . . . The circulation of money as capital is, on the contrary, an end in itself, for the expansion of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. (72)

The circulation of Morgan's oppressive discourse "renews" itself in Myers's hands; each man takes control of the fund of text and narrative to further their own ends. They battle for a monopoly on the circulation of narrative. Moreover, the narrative has no "end" except to instigate further narrative, since it neither alleviates Hilda's isolation nor creates mutuality between the two couples. The narrative accrues for itself. Marx refers to the appearance of capitalist circulation as "tautological," "purposeless" and "absurd" (71). The accumulation of capital resulting from circulation becomes the "starting point" for further circulation; in it, Marx finds no end, no solution, only a "constantly renewed movement" for its own sake. Narrative, in "Put Yourself in My Shoes" similarly accumulates for the sake of its accumulation, for the sake of an abstracted power relation itself desired for its own sake.

<sup>19</sup> At this point, de Certeau's ideas link up with the ideas of Horkheimer and Adorno's Marxism, since de Certeau himself acknowledges that society no longer offers the means to conceive of combining individual tactics into mass strategies against the dominant system: "And indeed, the advent of this anthill society began with the masses, who were the first to be subject to the framework of levelling rationalities. The tide rose. Next it reached the managers who were in charge of the apparatus, managers and technicians absorbed into the system they administered; and finally it invaded the liberal professions that thought themselves protected against it, including even men of letters and artists. The tide tumbles and disperses in its waters works formerly isolated but today transformed into drops of water in the sea, or into metaphors of a linguistic dissemination which no longer has an author but becomes the discourse or indefinite citation of the other" (1). The "levelling rationalities" that arrived with the advent of the industrial revolution ultimately lead to the massive absorption of all "works" into a "discourse" of "indefinite citation," meaning a citation that does not define the other and which has no limits (it can absorb all into its machinery, into its set of citations), a discourse which no longer recognises the distinctness of "author" or "other," a discourse interested only in "levelling" all to its own indifferent "rationality," imposing on the social real, from an authorless power base that is everywhere and nowhere, discursive conditions that do not permit deviation, that reduce all subjects to the same quantities within the "rationalist" framework. Distinctions are abrogated. Words such as "apparatus" suggest that de Certeau, while certainly not a Marxist, sees contemporary society in much the same light as his Marxist predecessors, Horkheimer and Adorno, and peer, Jameson. What concerns de Certeau here also concerns Horkheimer and Adorno: the "levelling" of individuality, its appropriation into the rationality of capital, which sees all objects in terms of their commonly-held market value. Even works of art now fully participate in the consumer enterprise, making instructive or prescriptive forms extremely difficult and leaving the possibilities for resistance isolated, individual, and of the moment. While Horkheimer and Adorno view this "levelling" process cynically, de Certeau responds by enumerating the possible tactics remaining open to use, and therein the two views of contemporary society differ. Nevertheless, the fact that de Certeau can only conceive acts of provisional, of-the-moment, individual character suggests that he too despairs at the crafting of a "popular," i.e. communal, counter-discourse.

<sup>20</sup> As Pynchon does for the dodos.

- <sup>21</sup> As seen in chapter three, "Dirty Realism: History," readers exercise an inordinate amount of control over the reception and authority of discourse. "Put Yourself in My Shoes" illustrates how a passive reading of text can effect subversion, at the same time as the story shows how the passivity of reading can obscure communal relations. Although Myers's consumption of Morgan's discourse dismantles the older man's dominance, it does so only by reinstating a similar form of dominance in favour of Myers.
- <sup>22</sup> Writing about the first time he heard Carver read, Ford, in "Good Raymond" (1998), says: "There were barely the rudiments of realism. This was highly stylized, artistic writing with life, not art, as its subject" (72). Ford's appreciation of Carver rests upon an admiration of craft, one which renders "life" with "style." Ford himself receives criticism for his handling of dialogue: "One criticism the stories [of *Rock Springs*] have been prey to is that Ford gives his uneducated, unambitious characters too much credit, that he endows them with his own prosaic thoughtfulness" (Weber 65). Criticism of dirty realism, then, frequently addresses its stylistic incongruities, its "unrealism."
- <sup>23</sup> As Ford indicates in conversation with Guagliardo, his writings attempt, as much as possible, to minimise their claim to representing truth for an attempt at assisting in the way truth is constructed: "Reliability is for the reader to decide. I mean, I regard [Bascombe] as the thing that all narrators, indeed all fictional characters are: they're provocateurs. . . . They may say things that are useful . . . but their obligation isn't to tell the truth. The book may tell a truth by comprising all these other gestures" (616). Truth becomes a matter of "comprising . . . other gestures," an illustration of variance, rather than "reliable" presentation. Moreover, Ford's novels, as we shall see, extend an invitation to the reader to arbitrate reliability. Truth becomes a matter of "reliability," a communal project over the body of text, a contractual agreement, as *Independence Day* itself points out.
- <sup>24</sup> Bukowski himself conflates his fiction with life-writing to achieve an air of authenticity.
- <sup>25</sup> Madison Bell's critique of minimalism shows just how extensively the "voices" of authors such as Carver have become an established, normative discursive mode: "It is hard to tell the characters apart; it is hard to tell the stories in which they appear apart; and it is getting increasingly hard to tell the books apart" (68). Bell critiques the unvarying sameness found amongst the various minimalist authors. Bell's observations suggest how clearly the sameness he finds in dirty realism reflects its historical moment: "We actually do live in a world where the identical apartment and department store can be found from Seattle to Miami. In the face of such fearsome homogeneity, our individuality is hard to preserve" (68). In effect, the mass-produced minimalism that Bell wades through exemplifies the numbing "sameness" and loss of individuality Horkheimer and Adorno describe as a feature of late industrial capital. Exemplary of a society that needs a certain amount of homogeneity in order to effectively market a certain type of product (Bell 68-69), dirty realism does conform to market expectations, does become a component part of capitalism and, only as a component part, manages its successful balancing act. Authors such as Bukowski and Carver did indeed grow wealthy from their sympathetic portrayals of poverty, though this hypocrisy does not seem to overtly bother them. The "dreary sameness" (69) that Bell finds in minimalism is "sad to say . . . a tendency of our times" (69); but dirty realists differ from Bell in that they do not feel his moral compunction to resist this "tendency," knowing that such resistance offers just as viable a source of income. The resistance of dirty realism is instead inscribed into the hypocrisy aesthetic itself. In a sense, also, the "sameness" that Bell regards as characteristic of dirty realism is an expose of late capitalism, wherein products offer a simulated "variety" whose purpose is in fact "all the same": to continue the circulation of capital, to assist consumption for consumption's sake; by doing away with variety, the "sameness" of minimalism exposes the "sameness" of the agenda underlying cultural production today. Minimalism exposes the unchanging agenda of late industrial capital, its masquerade of variety for the purposes of profit.
- <sup>26</sup> Harrison discusses Bukowski's reputation in Europe to strengthen his argument of Bukowski as a sort of working-class hero: "With class a more acknowledged phenomenon in Europe, the realities of Bukowski's representations are in no way seen as distorting reality, as evidence of a

warped subjective perception, and hence denied out of hand. The more general critique of the status quo implicit in such a representation of work has, over the years, again especially in Germany, made Bukowski popular with the left and with social alternativists, an acceptance more difficult to achieve in American society, whose legitimacy is based on a broad, shallow consensus and an extremely narrow band of acceptable political opinion" (16). Unfortunately, this statement only regards the apprehension of Bukowski, and the appropriation and reification of his writing by various groups, and does not account for the oftentimes resolute apolitical stance adopted by Bukowski, which suggests a far more complex political undertaking than a position either to the right or left on the political spectrum. Bukowski, finally, takes no ultimate, consistent stance in terms of his social class, always eluding classification. His writings do critique "post-industrial capitalism" but in ways that dialectically suggest how deeply enmeshed he is in the society he critiques, one which renders such terms as proletarian problematical at best; in fact, Bukowski's writings more accurately reflect the fear of the type of reification embodied by Harrison's statement, the kind of co-optation by "social alternativists" that the critic describes (though this does not stop him from committing his own acts of reification—or Harrison's "representation"—against women, bosses, consumers, the middle class and the "status quo" in order to erect a strategy upon which he might tactically operate).

- <sup>27</sup> Robinson, in "What Do You Do in San Francisco?," similarly attempts to sell the "codes" of democracy to his audience. See chapter three, "Dirty Realism: History."
- <sup>28</sup> A similarity in the names of protagonists rarely happens accidentally in Bukowski, as they invariably develop from, and display, the same characteristics—to the point of interchangeability. The "sameness" of narrators again illustrates dirty realism's commodity status in late industrial capital, as Bukowski meets the demands of the market—see the discussion of the story "Action"—by writing the same character over and over.
- <sup>29</sup> For a reading of the way this story illustrates paradigms of Cold War "balance," see Chapter Three, "Dirty Realism: History."
- <sup>30</sup> Red Window represent Bukowski's cynicism towards the possibility of a mass revolutionary movement, since the monadic subjectivity of late capitalism offers only near-futile, individual instances of opposition. Even here, the horse (which further signifies the "beast of burden," like the working class, trained to run in circles for the amusement and profit of capitalist spectators, and speculators) operates only oppositionally, against, and therefore from "within," the framework of capitalism. The very notion of the "miracle," that the horse will come in and pay off its betters, is part of the system of the racetrack itself, the longshot onto which the crowds in the stands fasten their hope, and which keeps them transfixed on the spectacle.
- <sup>31</sup> For a discussion of the monadic in the Cold War, note the discussion of suburbia in Chapter Three, "Dirty Realism: History," endnote 32.
- <sup>32</sup> Something de Certeau calls "*bricolage*," meaning a "making do," a "re-use of marketing structures" (xv). The reader, or pedestrian, or gambler, combines elements made available by market forces in individual ways that stymie, thwart or run counter to the endorsed and expected uses of those structures. Red Window's decision when to run and when not to run exemplifies an exploitation of possibilities provided by the race-track forum, exploitation in ways not acceptable to the authorities who run the show, and one which exposes the absurdity of the racetrack as a social formation.
- <sup>33</sup> Thomas Hill Schaub, in *American Fiction in the Cold War*, cites Céline, along with other late nineteenth-century/early twentieth-century European authors such as "Kierkegaard, Dostoevski" and "Kafka" (69), as important influences on a postwar generation of authors who utilised the "subversive aura" of the "first person voice of the alienated hero" to contest the postwar discourse of "'mass society,' 'conformity,' and 'totalitarianism' which governed thinking about society" (69). Céline, and his infamous black humour, served as a medium for piercing the logics of late capitalism and issuing forth a laughter that rendered the absurdity of isolated individuals trapped in and conditioned by the repetitious loop of commodity

circulation. Bukowski's poems, "nowhere," 160, and "company," 243, included in *Septuagenarian Stew*, attest to an admiration of Céline.

- <sup>34</sup> For a discussion of the notion of an edenic "Arcadia," see chapter three, "Dirty Realism: History."
- <sup>35</sup> The notion of sciences increasingly concerned with the unattainability of knowledge, with the particularity and indiscernability of phenomena appears earlier in this study as well; see chapter two, "Dirty Realism: Genealogy." In that case, I wished to foreground the changing relation between the naturalist author and his or her reproduction and appropriation of scientific discourse on the world, the way in which science plays a crucial role in naturalistic presentation of society and the individual, and the way changes in science effect changes in the naturalist medium. Here, I wish to investigate more fully the nature of scientific influence on the literary production of dirty realism, particularly to illuminate the way science dovetails with the type of comedy evident in such authors as Bukowski.
- <sup>36</sup> The constant allusion to writers, such as Hemingway and Céline, in Bukowski itself signifies a resistance to the notion of art as repository of sacrosanct values: "Surface indications to the contrary, Bukowski's fiction addresses itself to literate readers capable of appreciating the enormous number of irreverent references to writers, composers, painters and philosophers, and its slangy departures from polite literary expression. Which is why his [Bukowski's] writing goes down so well with university audiences, even though his humor subverts their education values" (Smith 57). The mention of canon occurs in Bukowski as a discourse enacted for the sake of enabling a tactical operation that finally subverts "educational values" through the irreverence of black "humor."
- <sup>37</sup> For an extended discussion of this scene, refer to chapter one, "Dirty Realism: Introduction," p. 40.
- <sup>38</sup> As de Certeau points out, the inconstancy of human reaction and the varied opportunities offered to reactivity create fields of variance that systems cannot always prepare for:

In reality, a rationalized, expansionist, centralized, spectacular and clamorous production is confronted by an entirely different kind of production, called 'consumption' and characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation (the result of the circumstances), its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its own products (where would it place them?) but in an art of using those imposed on it. (31)

De Certeau repeats O'Neill in different words, but the meaning remains the same: systems supply the information or means of altering or poaching on themselves, just as "evaluation" offers a large enough range of evaluative means to allow for a personalised, non-standard deployment of those means, ways of observing reality differing from the expected and "proper" procedures. Therefore, the wilful or accidental appropriation, or unexpected combination, of evaluative means in a way unexpected by the system of evaluation renders that system, if only for a second, inoperative or subverted, and a "different" reality breaks to the surface, which the system scrambles to account for, creating a new means of accounting in turn susceptible to accident and combination. An example of the intrusion of reality that subverts a system occurs in Bukowski's story, "Action," in which the horse, Red Window, refuses to speed up at the appropriate time in the race, instead displaying an incredible burst of speed *after* the race; as the jockeys and grooms "scramble" to calm the horse, Bukowski provides an instance of the "system's" defeat: the horse track's absurd circular ritual becomes momentarily shown up as an artificial, simulated spectacle of social enfranchisement and mobility; Red Window is quickly lead off and a new race initiated to return calmness to the outraged stands.

De Certeau finds in consumption the “art” of making do (*bricolage*), a counter-production that employs what it finds at hand in “ruses” and “fragmentation” that mismanage and misuse the objects of systematic intent; the consumers’ use of consumer objects often works against the *intended* use of such objects. Likewise, dirty realism realises that imposed conditions and conditioning themselves furnish chances and “opportunities” (37) to enable “a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves in any given moment” (37). Conditioning, such as the physical abuse and humiliation Bukowski suffered as a child—and which he details in *Ham on Rye* (1982)—supplies the opportunities for his piecemeal victory over the values embodied in 1920s and 1930s America; Bukowski’s abuse engenders an abusive figure who derides, attacks and degrades the representatives of the system that created him (the system, rather than re-establishing itself, provides its unravelling). A different attitude, in dirty realism, accounts for a different “activity” or “art” of reaction to imposition.

- <sup>39</sup> While Folks’s essay focuses mainly upon *The Sportswriter*, he makes frequent mention of the later novel *Independence Day* throughout, and his description of Bascombe’s “fierce detachment and instability” (86) in the latter novel suggests that the two books form a continuous exposé on the theme of societal integration. *Independence Day* critiques what Raymond A. Schroth, in *Commonweal*, denigrates as “the American virus of excessive individualism” (28), an individuality that allows Frank to tell Sally he “loves” her and at the same time flirt with the cook at the Deerslayer Inn, that allows Frank to “care” for his children yet make only a minimum of commitment to their welfare. Thomas Bonner’s statement in the magazine *America*, that “Bascombe is too much an individual whose particulars and accidentals obscure the universals” (26) appropriately fits the character if, by the statement, we understand that through Bascombe’s individual story, Ford expresses the “universal” condition of “contingency,” which, in its very accidents and specific dependencies, constitutes, at the same time, a reality in which general rules (e.g. a “universal” discourse) do not apply.
- <sup>40</sup> Ford admitted the extent of his scope in an interview with the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*: “I was trying to address the country in as large a way as I can imagine—intellectually as well as spiritually” (D1). Moreover, critics such as Barbara Ehrenreich, in the *New Republic*, Thomas Bonner Jr., in *America*, and Nick Gillespie, in *Current*, all viewed *Independence Day* as addressing, in Ehrenreich’s words, “American themes” (49); Bonner considered Haddam a microcosm of America (26); Gillespie saw the novel as perpetuating the myth of a “declinist” (37) United States. Critics generally agree, then, that the novel deals with America at large, representing in Bascombe the trials and tribulations of the ordinary American at the end of the twentieth century.
- <sup>41</sup> Ford says as much in *The Sportswriter*, where Bascombe muses: “Explaining is where we all get into trouble” (223). This statement provides another window into Bascombe’s refusal to become a discursive guarantor, his unwillingness to provide an answer to another’s query, which would force him to partake in the other’s discursive mode.
- <sup>42</sup> Myers’s article further elaborates the primacy of storytelling in *Independence Day*: “Ford’s book is sustained not by a plot or even by a story but by one man’s ‘voice’” (135). Again, the notion of “one man’s,” or individual, “voice” sustains Bascombe’s narrative; a consistent, stable “plot” founders against the individuality of the telling, so that we, as readers (and like the people around Bascombe) find ourselves without identifiable markers of narrative progress, and entranced, instead, by the one-way virtuosity of Bascombe’s communication. The voice actually prevents our entering and grasping the history of the narrative.
- <sup>43</sup> In *The Sportswriter*, Bascombe discusses “intentions” with Wade Arsenaault, the father of his girlfriend, Vicki. Speaking of depicting or determining human motivation, Bascombe says, “It’s a lot easier in books. I know that” (269). Text permits a simulation of “intent” not always so apparent in day-to-day living. Throughout, Bascombe chooses the “easy” means of evincing intent: by fictionalising it.
- <sup>44</sup> For an explication of this story, see chapter three, “Dirty Realism: History.”

- <sup>45</sup> Michael Trussler, in speaking of the short stories of Ford and Carver, eerily echoes Nadel's statement: "The narrator maintains power over his narrative, but he cannot alter the events that form the basis of the story which he tells" (51).
- <sup>46</sup> Chapter three, "Dirty Realism: History," illustrates how suburbia served to further entrench social isolation, rather than to ground a new Cold War community. Ford's own view of suburban monadism occurs most prominently in the section of *Independence Day* dealing with Frank as a landlord; his attitude towards tenants reflects exactly the atomisation of the contemporary American suburbs: "What I thought I had to offer was a deep appreciation for the sense of belonging and permanence the citizens of these streets might totally lack in Haddam (through no fault of their own), yet might long for the way the rest of us long for paradise" (27). A lack of "belonging and permanence" characterise the area that Frank invests in, as well as a genuine mistrust between tenant and landlord: "suspicion and ill will, which are now unhappily the status quo" (129). Ford's novel conforms to the view of contemporary suburbia as a place of isolated families kept distinct from community "membership" through various forms of conceptual, racial, religious and marital segregation. In fact, his "problem" tenants, the MacLeods, as an interracial couple, confirm that American communities still remain deeply divided on issues of race and gender.
- <sup>47</sup> Trussler's essay also deals with Raymond Carver, but mainly with a later short story, "Blackbird Pie," whose metafictional overtones distinguish it markedly from Carver's earlier work. The examination of discourse within this story varies from that of "Put Yourself in My Shoes." Like *Independence Day*, this story deals with an author coming to grips with the way discourse has exempted him from social bonds, and the price of such an exemption: "Perhaps one could describe 'Blackbird Pie' as a story about having to tell a story; but it is apparent that the narrator wishes to break out of a solipsistic, circular narrative that speaks only to itself, about itself. Bereft of community, the narrator wishes to communicate" (Trussler 43). Like Bascombe, Carver's narrator comes to grips with, and to regret, his discursive "exemption" from community.
- <sup>48</sup> G.P. Lainsbury calls this readiness for the unexpected, "the possibilities of pure contingency" (82), echoing Kasia Boddy's depiction of Carver's work as "the experience of sheer accident that dominates the lives of their protagonists" (108). The notion of preparedness for the accidental leads one to question the degree to which anything is *truly* accidental. Arguably, Bascombe's struggle with Paul just previous to the boy stepping into the batting cage and getting hit by the ball paves the way for the accident that occurs. In other words, *the accident is no accident*, but an event engineered, perhaps unconsciously, by Bascombe himself. In this case, then, Bascombe's realisation that his discourse failed to reach his son causes him to abandon the linguistic for the physical, in effect teaching himself a lesson he already knows (the several instances, already mentioned, in which Bascombe praises the immediacy of action, foreshadow this): that the hypocrisy aesthetic of simulation ultimately effaces the communal ordinary.
- <sup>49</sup> While Trussler's essay speaks of historicity only in relation to Ford's collection of stories, *Rock Springs*, and connects its thesis tightly to the form of the short story, it nevertheless makes important remarks about history that apply equally to a discussion of Ford's longer works of fiction.
- <sup>50</sup> The self, in fact, is simply a node for various discourses amplified and dampened as necessary, without vigilant administration of the social impact, or lack thereof, of such discursive fluctuations.
- <sup>51</sup> Bascombe's realisation reflects *Independence Day's* time frame. Verging on the collapse of the Cold War, the novel examines an America that will no longer have its counterpart in the Soviet Union (as Ford has Ann), an America that will soon have no "other" to superintend its discursive position, an America that will soon have only itself and its "acts," an accountability no longer deflected by the binarism of the Cold War and its simulated differences. The "other/same" vacillation that Nadel regards as characterising much of Cold War discourse is already faltering by the time of the Bush/Dukakis electoral race.



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<sup>52</sup> This statement again echoes Nadel's similar contention that Cold War writers grew up at a time when history was seen as discursive, and hence the domain of the writer, while event remained resolutely outside of authorial control.

## Five

### Dirty Realism: Conclusion

At the end of *The Sportswriter* (1986), Richard Ford dispenses with the notion of all but one final conclusion, "Life will always be without a natural, convincing closure. Except one" (360). In a similar vein, a "conclusion" may seem a profoundly "unconvincing" or "unnatural" attempt to bring closure upon a subject that I have spent the previous four chapters describing as a form of authorship that defies containment or unequivocal definition. The indeterminacy of dirty realism prevents me from undertaking more than a nominal "conclusion" in this decidedly inconclusive study "towards a definition," since its conceptual and aesthetic sleight-of-hand works precisely to frustrate any scholarly codification or singular narrative trajectory. Arguably, my attempts at coming to grips with the texts of dirty realism were doomed from the start, fallen victim to a methodology of argument and evidence itself antithetical to the work of authors such as Bukowski, Jarman, Ford or Carver, who felt little need to countenance constraints such as conceptual justification, consistent representation, or historicity. To write of dirty realism in the spirit of dirty realism would, to my mind, require a study over several volumes, in which each successive volume took a completely contrary, but no less absolute, route to the presentation of dirty realism; ideally, this would result in a set of works that contradicted one another at every turn, and which offered further explanations and excuses for this contrariness rather than admitting hypocrisy, and would last as long as the scholar's life, ending upon his or her death, the only authentic "closure" dirty realism permits.

However, the writing of dirty realism in the spirit of dirty realism has not been my aim. While dirty realism's attention to contradiction is neither revolutionary or new (precedents abound in the work of Rabelais, Blake, Whitman, Emerson, Wilde, among others), my project has aimed to show how the intentional deployment of the liberating contradiction seen in dirty realism relates to, and derives from, broader social, literary and historical categories. This study touches upon the way the "hypocrisy aesthetic" arose out of adjustments made to the naturalist

project (insofar as that project deals with poverty, commodity culture, scientific discourse, mass appeal, social reform and determinism), adapting it to the demands of the Cold War, epistemological indeterminacy and the breakdown of metanarrative. Under the conditions of postmodernity, contradiction became a strategy well suited to portraying and protesting the construction of the social real. This much I have hoped to have shown.

Rather than revelling in the hypocrisy aesthetic myself, I have attempted—like Ford's Bascombe in *Independence Day* (1995)—to break the circuit of solipsism and to put forward a study which makes an attempt at contributing an object of usefulness rather than tactically operating in defiance and constant evasion. This contribution has naturally involved some degree of reification in itself, if only in attaching a scholarly vocabulary across the spectrum of dirty realist texts. Paradoxically, this act of reification may constitute the most openly “dirty realist” aspect of my work, since the delimitation of the other according to a set of criteria (hypocrisy, contradiction) that I personally refuse to endorse or practice is exactly the sort of hypocrisy evident in a character such as Harry in Bukowski's “Bring Me Your Love” (1990); and so my own gesture “towards a definition” instead forms at least an attempt at arriving at some definitive points, crafting exactly the type of “system” dirty realism required in order to put into play its relational subversions. In owning up to this exploitation of dirty realism for scholarly purposes—reifying an aesthetic primarily aimed at escaping reification—this dissertation attempts, to borrow from Mark Anthony Jarman's *Salvage King Ya!* (1997), to “admit something” (282).

The “something” I have here attempted to articulate is the bond between dirty realism and its historical moment, the ways and means by which the authors under study—as did the naturalist authors who preceded them—applied, in their peculiar way, the conventions of realism to cope with, illuminate and even avoid confrontation with the social machinery surrounding and interpenetrating their lives and texts. I have attempted to portray realism as a dialectical procedure, as a provocative force rather than a relic from the nineteenth century, or an atavistic

reaction against postmodernism, to portray it, in the words of *Marxism and Form* (1974), as “an idea in time” (50), as a form of writing that conveys a reality determined not by permanent, and therefore ahistorical, aesthetic standards but by contingencies between author and milieu, event and discursive custom, and tradition and transformation—all of which determine the forms of contradiction presented in the work. Dirty realism, whether by reaction or corroboration, participates in the literary dialogue of postmodernity. Jarman’s work, then, is a realism of ordinary lives filtered through lyrical deracination, epistemological uncertainty and consumer logic, through social conditions described by critics such as Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991).

In locating specific dirty realist authors within fields of historical contingency, I compounded a homogenous canon out of a set of writers often involved with heterogeneous concerns. Certainly, Bukowski, Carver, Ford and Jarman do not share identical attitudes towards poverty, disenfranchisement, prostitution or political affiliation, nor do they deploy the hypocrisy aesthetic in identical ways or with identical attitudes. In fact, Ford’s *Independence Day* and Jarman’s *Salvage King Ya!* ultimately critique the hypocrisy aesthetic as an obstruction to communal co-operation. Their critique of hypocrisy runs congruent with Jameson’s own critique of the postmodern condition in *Postmodernism*:

If, indeed, the subject has lost its capacity actively to extend its pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold and to organize its past and future into coherent experience, it becomes difficult enough to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but ‘heaps of fragments’ and in a practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory. (25)

The inability of the postmodern subject to produce a seamless “organisation” of “past and future” into a “coherent experience” appears throughout the works of authors such as Bukowski and the early Carver in the lack of adherence to consistent narrative or epistemological frameworks. The fragmented condition of postmodernity itself already presupposes the discursive strategy that enables Bukowski and Carver freedom from accountability, while, at the

same time, influencing Jarman and Ford to strive for a new basis for accountability. Bascombe longs for the “mystery” of the “ordinary” (450) and Jarman for the disclosures that will allow him to “join the restless populace” (282). Appropriately, both of these authors’ works end with scenes of crowds—Ford’s with the July Fourth celebrations, Jarman’s at a carnival—scenes of community momentarily suspended above the social atomisation witnessed elsewhere in their novels. However, these two writers glance not so much into homogeneity but into the notion that the “heterogeneous,” “fragmentary” and “the aleatory” experience of postmodern society is a shared condition: contingency rather than intrinsic unity binds the social matrix. Ford and Jarman, then, to some degree, profess a dialectical historicity, one based not on a unifying master narrative but rather on the interplay among social forces at any given moment, no matter that those forces may be graspable only as random, fragmented or aleatory.

Contrasting the work of a non-conformist such as Bukowski with that of Ford and Jarman portrays postmodern reality as both a condition and a performative discourse (a way of narrating the contemporary condition), a notion which echoes Jameson’s call to his reader to regard late capital as both “baleful” and offering a “liberating dynamism” (47). The different takes offered by Bukowski, Carver, Ford and Jarman on the “cluttered” (Buford 4) realism of postmodernity largely depend on the given author’s disposition towards what Michael Trussler, in “Famous Times’: Historicity in the Short Fiction of Richard Ford and Raymond Carver” (1994), calls “the absent Other” (51). The absence of a verifiable individual, in the guise either of self or other (Jameson 15), allows Bukowski to posit the author as a site of contesting information flow, both amplified and muted, at the same time as it leaves Ford feeling marooned, optimistically grasping at the consumer catalogues and other detritus of postmodern culture as a means of engaging with the body politic. Dirty realism conveys a reality that evokes responses both enthusiastic and negative. While Bukowski may recoil from a society which offers the Sears catalogue as its bible, wanting to have no part in that society at all, Ford turns to the catalogue, happy to at least have an artefact through which to measure and imagine the hopes and fears of

the absent "other," through which to conceive the site where he might situate an absent national narrative. Catalogues for Ford permit access to an American political unconscious that Bukowski derides and, ultimately, flees.

The omission of the "other" characterises this study as well, the "other" of gender, race and ethnicity, nationality and the non-canonical producers of pop culture. Absent from critical address, Ellen Gilchrist, Diane Schoemperlen, Jayne Anne Phillips, Mary Robison and Jean Thompson, among others, haunt this text with the lack of attention paid to a distinctively feminist version (or versions) of dirty realism, a version briefly touched upon only in my discussion of Lorna Jackson and Bobbie Ann Mason in chapter one, "Dirty Realism: Introduction." If de Certeau's theories of "making do," "strategy and tactics," and "the ordinary and discourse" indicate methods used by dirty realists to appropriate and subvert the discursive hypocrisy of American and Canadian policy-makers during the Cold War, then these theories may also apply to addressing the hypocrisy of a patriarchal discourse, as well as supplying instances of its appropriation and subversion in the way that Norma Jean dialectically confronts history as social custom at the end of "Shiloh" and, through this confrontation, realises personal liberty; while Leroy and Mabel remain immobilised by a social discourse intent upon maintaining traditional roles, Norma Jean's realisation about the contingent nature of that discourse, upon the way changing historical conditions alter social possibilities, allows her to spread her wings in preparation for flight. Norma Jean has witnessed the commodification of history at Shiloh, as well as the similar commodification of the female (as her name implies) by organs of commodity production (Hollywood), and, in witnessing this, grasped something of the way strategic discourse cuts itself off from historical contingency, creating a "monumental" space that imprisons and immobilises those (such as Mabel and Leroy) unable to access the "ordinary" that strategic discourse marks itself off from, the forces of contingency at the heart of the historical process. Meanwhile, Leroy must passively sit and watch, unable to comprehend why Norma Jean does not fit into the patterns that bind his perceptions of self and other and that

obstruct his mobility. While Mason's view remains emblematic of one feminist angle into dirty realism, the disparity between the attitudes of Bukowski, Carver, Ford and Jarman suggests that at least as many differences of attitude should exist within the canon of female authors—providing further “definitions” this study might move “towards.”

Authors such as Louise Erdrich and Enrique Medina further widen the scope of the “other” fields into which dirty realism extends. If the term dirty realism can apply to Erdrich and Medina (Buford included the former author in *Granta* nineteen, and critic David W. Foster used the term in reference to Medina's writing), then a relevant critical task remains the investigation of the term through theories of the subaltern. To what degree does the hypocrisy aesthetic facilitate the subaltern voice? To what degree does it silence or reify it? The opening sentence of Louise Erdrich's novel, *Tracks* (1988), suggests the ways in which the variant discursiveness of dirty realism lends itself to an empowered ethnic discourse: “We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall” (1). This sentence introduces the reader to the mass death of the Anishinabe from “spotted sickness,” “treaties,” “government papers” and seasonal conditions (1). However, the last phrase of the sentence, “continued to fall,” lifts the notion of dying from mere physicality and transfers it to a metaphorical level, since an “interminable” falling into death suggests a continual production of those who “fall” as well as the act of falling itself. The final extinction of death conflicts here with the concept of the interminable. Erdrich overwrites the death of her people (genocide) with a sustained discourse. Moreover, the types of death enumerated after the sentence suggest that “treaties” and “papers”—discourse both as legislation and as a determiner of the physical conditions that cause mass death for the Anishinabe—form part of the threat addressed by Erdrich's novel. The treaties enacted for the purposes of co-existence and peace in fact served to continue war and legislate genocide. Erdrich, then, conflates conflicting messages to create a text that will not only describe the way in which the Anishinabe “fell” like snow but will preserve the moment of that fall interminably. Erdrich's text proves both a testament to the death of the Anishinabe and its

denial. Discursive variance as the form of governmental legislation reappears in the writing of *Tracks* itself, appropriated from the dominant order to serve an aim that contests that order's false promises of peace and goodwill. The task of studying subaltern writers such as Erdrich in light of dirty realism requires an examination of the intersection of her position as singular authorial voice (published, among other places, in such middle-class organs as *Granta* and *The New Yorker*), spokesperson for and member of a marginalised community, and the larger backdrop of postmodern simulacra. Her efficacy in deploying the hypocrisy aesthetic to inscribe herself into the canon of established authors, while at the same time protesting and subverting the treatment of the Anishinabe, remains, like the feminist perspective, one of the directions this study's delayed definition gestures towards.

The issue of class likewise needs a more intricate examination. Noting differences, for instance, in Bukowski's and Ford's attitudes has only scratched the surface of class difference. To what degree does Bukowski's celebration of dirty realism depend on his chosen portrayals of members of a social class two or three degrees downscale from that of Frank Bascombe? While Bukowski's own social success receives attention, the relation between Bukowski's class sympathies (in particular towards that of the lower class he eventually transcended) and his more celebratory, cynical posture of hypocrisy (most openly proclaimed in the success story, *Hollywood*, 1990) offers an opening for further discussion of class. While Ford's Bascombe appears a generally contented man determined to remain optimistic in the face of incalculable loss (the death of his son, the dissolution of his marriage), to what degree, and why, does Ford modulate this optimism when dealing with the less socially-integrated, or privileged, individuals in *A Piece of My Heart* (1976), *The Ultimate Good Luck* (1981), or *Rock Springs* (1987)? A character such as Earl, the criminal and ex-con from "Rock Springs" (1987), displaces himself into the third person at the end of the story to ask, "And I wondered, because it seemed funny, what would you think a man was doing if you saw him in the middle of the night looking in the windows of cars in the parking lot of the Ramada Inn? . . . Would you think he was anybody like you?" (27).



While Bascombe can take the possibility of his voluntary entry into the “ordinary” of community for granted, a character like Earl cannot realise the same agency; Earl must alienate himself from his own narrative and offer himself to our sympathy before he can even consider such an option, a tactic which points to the limits of his agency and his passivity in the face of a society unwilling to recognise a commonality between Earl and itself. Earl’s economic limitations result in questions, while Bascombe’s economic certainties result in conclusions. The chance to move beyond solipsism, into a more stable sense of community offers itself to Bascombe, while Earl’s call for recognition (is “he . . . anybody like you?”) from the readerships suggests an inability (much as Bukowski’s story of Henry does in “Action”) to overcome monadism. The hypocrisy aesthetic is less a choice for lower class characters than an inevitability, while middle class characters such as Bascombe can conceive choices beyond isolation. The need for a cross-section of the canon on class lines also postpones the arrival of a definition for dirty realism.

The issues of nation, race and ethnicity, already touched on in the discussion of Erdrich, also provide another forum for scholarship on dirty realism. If ethnicity and race, as the passage from *Tracks* suggests, distinguish another field of postmodern reality, one enmeshed in its own discursive problematics, then the hypocrisy aesthetic can work as a targeted tactic against specific sites of discursive production, such as “peace treaties” with the Anishinabe. Accordingly, how does dirty realism perform vis-à-vis various national discourses? Although this study has touched upon some of the salient differences in Canadian/American examples of dirty realism—for example, between David Adams Richards’s and Helen Potrebenko’s view of the union as representative of the individual worker, and the more divisive view between individual and union presented in Richard Ford’s “Winterkill”—the relation between Canadian and American dirty realisms needs further elaboration. Purdy’s and Bukowski’s correspondence in *The Bukowski/Purdy Letters* (1983) maps out the relationship of two writers elaborating congruent aesthetics—an interest in modernism, Robinson Jeffers, tough-minded cynicism, a writing of biography—shaped, respectively, by experiences in the Canadian north and downtown Los

Angeles. How the Canadian element in a book such as Purdy's *Poems for all the Annettes* (1962), a book Bukowski frequently praised, affected Bukowski's own production in post-1962 works, such as *It Catches My Heart in Its Hands* (1963) or *Crucifix in a Deathhand* (1965), involves a study of the writer-to-writer genesis of dirty realism in a national context.

As the discussions of Jameson and de Certeau indicate, late capital's "filled and suffused volumes" (Jameson 48) and "dominant economic order" (de Certeau xiii) prevent the emergence of a *positive* counter-discourse; rather, the all-pervasiveness of the dominant system permits only *negative* acts of subversion that make use of pre-existing elements made available by capital itself. Since dirty realism's hypocrisy aesthetic reacts to and against dominant discursive systems, the political, economic and cultural conditions of the author's home country will necessarily infuse that author's deployment of the hypocrisy aesthetic. To fully elaborate the dialectical operations involved in dirty realism, then, requires an attention to national history similar to the critique developed vis-à-vis naturalism, in which the emergence of a particular instance of form (in this case a form of realism) occurs in conjunction with historical developments. As Theodore Dreiser critiqued the conditions of his age with vocabulary drawn from the age—a vocabulary involving evolutionary theory, empirical science, Zola's aesthetics, consumer advertising, journalistic and sentimental prose stylistics—so do Purdy, Bukowski, Richards, and other dirty realists author a dirty realism that critiques society through a discourse engaged with simulacra, pop culture, Cold War hypocrisy, national/regional divisions, and with notions of the real as discourse. Richards illustrates the debate of region and centre, poor and rich, and local and official discourse. Ford's writings further problematise the conjunction between discourse and region, since, in the words of Fred Hobson, in "Richard Ford and Josephine Humphreys: Walker Percy in New Jersey and Charleston," Ford's writing does not "demonstrate any particular allegiance to geographical place" (42). Unlike Richards's, then, Ford's work eschews geographical relevance, evincing, instead, "nearly a postmodern definition of place" (42), by which Hobson, referring to a remark made by Ford himself, means that Ford's project prefers to interrogate how we

acclimatise to “place” through discursive acts, how our discourse alters geography, rather than geography behaving as an intrinsic influence on linguistic custom; Ford’s writing of place prefers to interrogate discursive practise rather than mount a defence of regional values or qualities, which itself reveals the loss of intrinsic referents between persona and place in postmodernity, and Ford’s own decidedly humanistic project,<sup>1</sup> which concerns social process more than physical terrain.<sup>2</sup> Nation, region and setting remains an important aspect in the movement towards defining dirty realism; while my study has discussed some of the relevant differences between dirty realists in Canada and America – particularly in chapter three, “Dirty Realism: History” – the various authors’ relations with the state remain open to further elucidation.

This study only marginally addresses authorial biography. While I borrow heavily from interviews and cite important dates in the lives of the authors (births, education, apprenticeships), I do not include much biographical information. The absence of biographical data results largely from my focus on dirty realism within larger cultural occurrences, on sketching in broad strokes the historical developments that interpenetrate the dirty realist aesthetic. The application of biography – particularly in the case of a writer such as Bukowski, whose fictions so often toy with, dismantle, or purposefully confuse the boundary between biography and fiction, or a writer such as Carver, so vocal in defending the necessary skill required to transform autobiographical detail into art (*Fires* 200-01) – to literary production would enable an analysis of the way dirty realists rallied fiction to the maintenance of authorial status. Recent biographical studies of Bukowski – *Charles Bukowski a Sure Bet*, by Gerald Locklin (1995), *Bukowski: A Life* by Neeli Cherkovski (1997), *The Buk Book: Musings on Charles Bukowski*, by Jim Christy (1997), *Charles Bukowski: Locked in the Arms of a Crazy Life*, by Howard Sounes (1999) – indicate a widespread interest in, and insistence on, the authorial personality; such studies enlighten us to the place of the author within the publishing industry, and to the way that author manipulated industry standards and expectations to guarantee himself or herself a mode of living teetering between the contradictory claims of authenticity and market demands. The

transformation of biographical detail into fiction demands discussion of a set of contingencies influencing the development of dirty realism from particular experiences growing up in North America.

Finally, I have dealt strictly with literary examples of dirty realism; however, as mentioned in the introduction, the term dirty realism appears in scholarship on architecture and visual art. In addition, the characteristics of dirty realism—a working class focus; a “cluttered” milieu of hotels, bars, downtown strips, rural poverty; narrative ambiguity and variance, discursive uncertainty, hypocrisy—appear in more “popular” media, such as film and pop music. The director John Cassavettes—particularly in his early films, *Shadows* (1960), *Faces* (1968), *Husbands* (1970), *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1973), and *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974)—explores the underside of working class life, treating, respectively, jazz musicians, suburban housewives, middle-class husbands, the strippers’ circuit and the mental breakdown that results from a housewife’s stifled existence. Other relevant films include Barbet Schroeder’s *Barfly* (1987), Michael Field’s *Bright Angel* (1991), and Steve Buscemi’s *Trees Lounge* (1996), the first and second of these written by Charles Bukowski and Richard Ford, respectively. These films all witness a convergence of the familiar concerns of dirty realism—labour, narrative and commodity culture. Schroeder’s film, for example, follows Henry Chinaski through Los Angeles bars and bar-fights, an affair, as well as his encounter with wealth and the possibility of a rich lifestyle he rejects. *Barfly* examines class as narrative, as narrative determinant, with Chinaski equating social mobility not with wealth but with imaginative adventure and discursive capacity; in other words, class affiliation provides values impervious to the lure of wealth, thereby determining the choices made by Chinaski. In popular music, Bruce Springsteen’s *Nebraska* (1982) offers a portrait of bleak conditions in the American mid-west, with lyric narratives reminiscent of Richard Ford’s stories in *Rock Springs*.<sup>3</sup> Recent music classified as “alternative country” also lyrically probes the lives of down-and-out characters, such as cuckolded husbands,

firemen, hobos living in "dead men's clothes," among these, the albums of Richard Buckner, Lucinda Williams and Son Volt.

Tom Waits's discography prominently features the aesthetics of dirty realism. Punctuating his often ethnically-nuanced music with noises such as a fist banging on a door, or a block of wood hammering against a grate, Waits sings of hobos ("Anywhere I Lay My Head," 1985), sailors on shore leave ("Shore Leave," 1983), aspiring musicians ("Straight to the Top," 1987) and hellfire preachers ("Way Down in the Hole," 1987). His music drifts through the consumer clutter of white trash America, as the song/monologue "Frank's Wild Years" (1983) illustrates:

Well Frank settled down in the Valley  
and he hung his wild years  
on a nail that he drove through  
his wife's forehead  
he sold used office furniture  
out there on San Fernando Road  
and assumed a \$30,000 loan  
at 15%% and put a down payment  
on a little two bedroom place  
his wife was a spent piece of used jet trash  
made good bloody marys  
kept her mouth shut most of the time  
had a little Chihuahua named Carlos  
that had some kind of skin disease  
and was totally blind. They had a  
thoroughly modern kitchen  
self-cleaning oven (the whole bit)  
Frank drove a little sedan  
they were so happy.

While the written text neither conveys the musical backdrop of lounge-style jazz, nor Waits's hilarious, off-hand, cut-rate comedian delivery, it embodies some of the conceits elaborated elsewhere in Waits's catalogue. The clichéd presentation, with its "used office furniture," "\$30,000 loan / at 15%%," "used jet trash" and "little sedan" generates a pastiche of contemporary suburban life; *Postmodernism of the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* describes such pastiche as the characteristic artistic mode of postmodernity: "Pastiche is . . . the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead

language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that . . . healthy linguistic normality still exists" (17). Waits's clichéd image of Frank the used office furniture salesman and his wife is not a protest against such reification but a delight in it; it springs from pastiche rather than satire. Waits's stereotypical delivery presents a showman pretending to be a showman, a chronicler of small lives pretending to be a chronicler of small lives—an involution of roles which effectively obscures authenticity of motive. Entertainment rather than satire—or, if satiric, then a satire divested of any politically corrective or prescriptive aim—characterises "Frank's Wild Years." The ending of the piece, in which Frank returns home, douses his house in gasoline and "park[s] across the street, laughing," then puts on "a top forty station" and "head[s] north" "on the Hollywood freeway," suggests that Frank's violence creates no radical rupture with the archetypal suburban lifestyle, since the name of the freeway indicates that Hollywood spans the country, while the top forty station reminds us that no matter where Frank goes he will remain a site of reception for the products, services and message of consumer society. Frank's act of violence against his home carries no implicit "conviction" of a "normality" that might offset the dead air of Waits's pure performance; the act of violence against the suburban home springs from the same simulated conditions that determine the inauthenticity of that home. The description of the wife as a submissive female, with her adept cocktail mixing, requisite quiet and the blind "Chihuahua named Carlos," cannot even rightfully warrant condemnation as misogynistic—projecting the values of masculine superiority or fantasy—since it conveys such a reified image that it continually reinstates itself as a surface without "ulterior motives," as a "play" upon portraiture for the exhibition of an idiosyncratic style (Waits's). Finally, Waits's delivery itself, his "idiosyncratic" style, his placement of "mask" upon "mask," arises from no allegiance to any "conviction" except to that of style itself, to manner of delivery as self-justifying commodity; its "use" remains that of delimiting an artistic persona, of specifying an entertainment, without protesting or subverting the historicity of the subject matter or the

conditions underlying the vapid spectacle. Frank is a vehicle for Waits's "act," rather than an authentically attempted rendering of an historical subject. The rendering itself, however, proves indicative of dirty realism's simulation, its appropriation of imagery to furnish a commodity of "style," in Waits's case an "antique" speech, "dead," for its total focus on artifice. Lost in a world cluttered with simulacra, wandering a world "transformed into sheer images of itself and for pseudo-events and 'spectacles'" (Jameson 18), Waits's music, like the writing of Bukowski (an author Waits has cited as an influence), acts as a node of amplification of various messages in order to enable an evasiveness on Waits's part. Notoriously elusive in interviews, Waits's project may be termed the projection of a style or persona that revels in constant performance, revealing nothing of the performer underneath, a veritable piling of mask upon mask. Pop music therefore offers yet another area in which to further elaborate the aesthetics of dirty realism.

While areas such as gender, race, nationality, biography and pop culture offer further avenues for discussing and conceptualising dirty realism as a postmodern writing, my study aims at providing critical terminology from which such studies might develop. In discussing the genealogy, history and theory behind much dirty realist writing, certain common elements continue to resurface in the works of various authors: the disappearance of a stable, believable metanarrative that would explain and justify the actions taken by American administration at home and abroad; the emergence of the notion of discourse as a malleable, variable "story" used to justify and re-justify actions that do not fit into a consistent stable pattern; the appearance of "clutter" as a consequence of the radical shift away from the dominance of nature ushered in by the awakening of American society to its potential for world-wide nuclear catastrophe and the continual necessity of commodity production and recycling; the rapid rise of consumption, particularly commodity consumption, as the primary cultural impetus during postwar America; the realities of pastiche, simulation, loss of historicity and entrapment that resulted from the rapid descent into image and unverifiable narrative; the loss of verifiable epistemological narratives of cause and effect ushered in by quantum physics and field theory. These historical

conditions all contribute to the development of dirty realism as the realism of postmodernity, and to its hypocrisy aesthetic as both the exemplary practice of its age as well as a tactical protest against it.

Most importantly this study has aimed at suggesting that the realism of contemporary America and Canada is not—as Marxist critics Jameson and Eagleton, or scholars such as Kristiaan Versluys and Bill Buford define it—an aesthetic object exemplifying an earlier stage of capitalism or a stable tradition preceding, though now occurring alongside, postmodern fiction, but rather a dynamic literary aesthetic that responds to changes in the historical landscape with its own formal adjustments. As naturalism adjusted the pre-existing realism of William Dean Howells to respond to changes in the American scene—to the increase of immigration, industrialism, commodity production, worker agitation, the rise of positivist, empirical scientific methodology and theories of determinism—dirty realism adjusted naturalism to developments in America during the Cold War; I have used the term “hypocrisy” to designate a method of portraying society based upon discursive, biographical and epistemological vacillation only because hypocrisy, as Whitfield points out (25), was the order of the day, a time when vice-president Nixon’s proclamations of American liberties abroad did not accord with the political witch-hunts at home. The theories chosen for illuminating the study of dirty realism similarly reveal a concern with the conceptual and social constraints implied by postmodernity, against and within which dirty realism operates.

My insistence on reading dirty realism through Jameson’s *Marxism and Form* and *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, and de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (with brief asides into Adorno and Horkheimer, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall) is selective rather than an adulteration of various strains of Marxism or postmodern theory. The sometimes scattershot selection and usage of these critics itself speaks for dirty realism’s theoretical variance (and the insufficiency of a single theory, including the various Marxist strains, to an explication of the movement). From *Marxism and Form* I draw Jameson’s definition of dialectics as thought



about thought, as a hyper-conscious examination of one's place in history, and one's definition as a subject by historical conditions, as well as praxis as self-critical action. Jameson's dialectic affects the study of dirty realism twofold; first, it points out the degree to which postmodern Marxism renders itself up to its own scrutiny, a constant addressing and re-addressing of its conceptual horizons in a way that continually dissolves and reforms suppositions regarding the historical moment; secondly, this Jamesonian version of the Marxist dialectic also indicates the degree to which uncertainty, indeterminacy and a process of continual self-interrogation characterises the American postmodern, and therefore informs the reality that dirty realism conveys. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* and *The Practice of Everyday Life* in combination address the entrapment of the subject within a discourse so all-encompassing that it immediately absorbs and recycles forms of counter-discourse, leaving, in the words of Jameson, no "footholds for critical effectivity" (49), a thesis developed from Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; if Jameson's discussion diagnoses the postmodern condition as one lacking sites from which to launch an effective counter-criticism, then de Certeau's theoretical model offers a means of operating subversively from within a system that proves too fluid and unfixable for a "overtly political interventions" (Jameson 49). *The Practice of Everyday Life* outlines precisely the limited avenues for agency provided by a society overwhelmed by commodity production; de Certeau's thesis fastens onto modes of production and consumption in contemporary society to illustrate the means by which the subject may tactically operate from within the system, when that system permits no position "without" itself. The shorthand of this embeddedness within late industrial capital appears throughout dirty realism: in Ford's *The Ultimate Good Luck*, where Quinn conflates both Vietnam and Mexico with America; in Jarman's *Salvage King Ya!*, whose hyper-referential language continually stirs up the "clutter" Drinkwater cannot transcend; in Bukowski's "Camus," where Larry remains locked in a "double suicide" between institutional demands and his desire to subvert them; and in Carver's "Put Yourself in My Shoes," where Myers cannot contrive narrative except in the vocabulary provided

by Morgan. Dirty realism therefore witnesses the entrapment described by Jameson as well as the “making do” of materials and occasions provided by that entrapment, as described by de Certeau. Dirty realism joins the stream of postmodern fictions in addressing an acutely postmodern condition of hyper-consciousness regarding contemporary social conditions. Its dialectic remains critically postmodern, focussed on discourse, indeterminacy and conceptual manoeuvrability. The application of Jameson’s and de Certeau’s theories on the postmodern subject illuminates the extent to which dirty realism engages its cultural moment.

If realism is a form moving in time, mutating as social conditions mutate, from a genteel Howellsian realism, to the confrontational and progressivist naturalism of Dreiser, Norris, Farrell and Steinbeck, to the “dirty” clutter of dirty realism, then this study proposes an almost metafictional awareness for dirty realists, as authors both paralysed and empowered by a hyper-consciousness of their capacity for mutation. As metafiction presents an awareness and interrogation of narrative limits and efficacy, so also does dirty realism present a similar awareness and interrogation of realism as an aesthetic. Raymond Carver’s later story, “Blackbird Pie” (1986), included in the collection *Where I’m Calling From* (1989), most clearly addresses this hyper-consciousness, where its narrator writes his story of a writer whose writing of the world cannot keep up with the changes happening around him: a story about the way temporality causes the obsolescence of narrative form, demanding alterations to the way in which narrative makes reality perceptible. In this story, a husband, the first-person narrator, experiences a sudden shift in “autobiographical” terrain after he receives a letter from his wife explaining her sudden decision to divorce him. Incapable of even recognising his wife’s handwriting, the husband vacillates between half-heartedly examining the letter and approaching her. By the time he decides to confront her she has already packed and is standing outside their home, where two lost horses have appeared out of the fog. The wife gets a ride into town by the owner of the horses, leaving the husband to ponder his inability to reconcile his narrative of the marriage with hers. Speaking of the incident in retrospect, the narrator says: “It could be said, for instance, that

to take a wife is to take a history. And if that's so, then I understand that I'm outside history now – like horses and fog" (510). Incapable of asserting a new narrative to explain the loss of his wife, the narrator falls outside of "history," becomes as lost in a "fog" of unanchored speculation as the horses. Without definite referents, or more appropriately, a way of accounting for his relation to changing referents in the world around him, the husband's form of narration proves insufficient to maintaining reality, rendering him incapable of approaching and accounting for history. A more fluid sense of narrative is needed.

Carver's story, then, acts as a node for the conflicting questions and answers, conflicting expectations and conventions, that we bring to the term *reality* (and, by extension, *realism*), since the author's solipsistic account of his marital "reality" cannot survive the intrusion of a variant history and alternative discourse written in the form of a letter by his wife (appropriately, the husband's failure to properly "read" the letter also prevents him from "writing" adjustments into his narrative). As Carver's story illustrates, the notion of realism itself comes under scrutiny, as a term not fixed to definite aesthetic aims, but as one labouring under a variety of apprehensions, including that of the protagonist, author and reader, apprehensions that it does not necessarily reconcile, but often merely juxtaposes. Realism changes with reality. In this case, Carver juxtaposes two different narrative versions of what reality is to illustrate how a particular reality has its particular mode of realism, its particular way of confronting the world. In other words, Carver's story exposes realism as a site of conflicting strategies, as depicted by Lillian R. Furst in *All is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction* (1995):

[realism's] strength lies precisely in the readiness to use contradiction as its pivot instead of denying and bypassing it, as critics have tended to do by envisaging the realist novel *either* as a fanciful portrayal of a social situation at a particular time in a particular place *or* as a textual web of discourse. Both these conceptions are valid, but each is partial in more than one sense, not least because of its exclusion of the other. . . . [Realism] offer[s] a basis for a binary reading that does not eliminate or minimize the dissonance in favor of one or the other alternative. (2)

Furst's view of realism as an aesthetic claiming to found truth in illusion (2) neatly summarises my own point about dirty realism, namely, that realism involves an interrogation and playing upon the elements of contradiction and simulation that are inevitable side-effects of conceptualising the real, from Dreiser to Norris to Farrell to Steinbeck and on to Bukowski, Ford, Jarman and Carver. Moreover, Furst's observation, that contradiction itself—rather than either “social portrayal” or noting the “textual web”—provides realism its primary “pivot,” does not necessarily mean that all realists handled or deployed contradiction similarly. Instead, different realists from different periods manifested contradiction in pursuit of various strategies. Dreiser, I argue, exposed the contradictions of his day in order to facilitate social improvement; his display of contradiction serves the aims of critique. By contrast, the contradictions manifested in the work of, say, Richard Ford, while equally responsive to the social context, instead outline a strategy for resisting the “colonising” (*Postmodernism* 49) effect of capital; in Ford's case contradiction is often (though not always) valorised.

By self-consciously exposing its “dissonance,” its refusal to give more weight to “one or the other alternative,” dirty realists deploy realism as a political praxis, as a way of contesting both the “textual web of discourse” enacted by Cold War policy-makers and the “social situation at a particular time in a particular place,” as described by Jameson and de Certeau. Aware of hypocrisy as a cultural trait and as a means of liberation, dirty realism practises an aesthetic aware of its participation in the social conventions of its day. By not “excluding” any “conception,” by—as Richard Ford puts it—“authorising everything,” dirty realism makes contradiction itself (rather than the contradictory elements, whether “social” or “discursive” in character) the focus of its writerly efforts. Responding to the inauthenticity around them, to a world cluttered with simulacra, dirty realism offers an instruction on hypocrisy as an operating principle, as a way of foiling any attempt to systematically situate the subject, a principle derived from the very narrative variance witnessed on the part of the American state during the 1950s and 1960s. Dirty realism is then an adaptation of Furst's “dualistic” tradition of realism to the

discursive *and* social crisis of postmodernity. In a society cluttered with simulacra, illusion is the truth of the day (this is not to imply that dirty realism doesn't validate the real, but rather that its discourse continually reminds us that it bears no responsibility towards upholding a consistent regard of occurrence, that its stances and verdicts can shift without notice, *despite* the presence of fact), and dirty realism serves not so much to cast truth in the form of illusion but to continually explode one illusion with another, particularly the illusion of a centred, anchored, universal "realism." If naturalism illustrated the contradictions permitted by society, then dirty realism permitted contradiction in society, and in this way it offers another permutation of the contradiction Furst sees as the essence of realism. If this study has attempted any contribution to the ongoing debate surrounding realism, then it is the situating of realism's contradiction within a postmodern context.

The Cold War eventuated a crisis in the awareness of the real, casting doubt on the metanarrative of American democracy, which in turn destabilised the possibility of any fixed discourse. In fact, my notion of realism as a mutable form moving in time may simply prove another manifestation of the historical moment, in which the writing of this dissertation proves as hazardous, contradictory, reifying and uncertain an enterprise as the writing of dirty realism; this does not mean that I have set out to write "dirty realism," merely that my study exhibits many of the characteristics common to postmodern writing—whether realistic or metafictional or even theoretical. While Furst seems fairly convinced of her thesis of contradiction, I remain wary, since, as Schaub has already pointed out, the notion of contradiction as a moral force came about as part of the shift away from a rigorous Marxist ideology in the opening phases of the Cold War, as a rejection of ideology altogether (190). In other words, my current emphasis on contradiction and hypocrisy may in fact arise as much from historical conditions as from any decisive critical or scholarly breakthrough on the subject of realism. While this sort of study demands, to a certain extent, the establishment of a basic terminology through which we may begin to speak of dirty realism—an activity that inevitably reifies its subject matter—I hope that further discussions of

dirty realism might expand, if not openly contradict, some of the points I have made, if only to encourage a body of scholarship as irreducibly filled with variance as the canon of dirty realist authors themselves, and not because I long for a “dirty realist” scholarship but because scholarship needs to tailor its work to pertinent but changing historical conditions.

After all, even within the parameters set forth by this study, much work remains, not only with expanding the discussion of dirty realism into the areas of feminism, cultural and ethnic studies and pop culture, but in further investigating the cultural background of dirty realism itself. Mainly, I have dealt with works of prose fiction, but a sizeable body of poetry, by Purdy, Bukowski, Jarman, and others, as well as drama and screenplays, by playwrights such as David Mamet and Sam Shepard, offers areas for further study. Dirty realism’s debt to modernism needs scrutiny as well, since Carver, Ford, Bukowski and Jarman all cite early modernist authors as major influences on their work; the relation between Eliot’s poetry and Bukowski’s verse, Faulkner’s works of southern gothic and Ford’s *A Piece of My Heart* or even, as Fred Hobson argues, *The Sportswriter*, require analysis.

The adverb “towards” qualifies not only this definition of dirty realism, but my own critical certainties as well. Originally intended as a negative critique of Marxism, the course of preparation, study and then writing of this study has brought me far from my original, polemical position, into the complexity of a body of authors whose operations prevent the emergence of any permanent polemical values. Nor does the boundary between the anti-ideological traits of dirty realism seem as unmuddied as at the outset of writing; in fact, the anti-ideological contortions of dirty realism’s hypocrisy are deeply grounded in Cold War ideology, even if only in their function as a posture of indeterminacy that apes and amplifies the discursive instability of Cold War policy-makers. The formulation of a purportedly non-ideological, anti-intellectual stance demanded a full investment in comprehending and portraying the intellectual, political and ethical currents of the time, and so the dirty realists operated in a conceptual loop of appropriation and rejection. More often than not, texts such as *Independence Day* come full circle,

initially rejecting complicity in the contingencies of their given historical moment, in the mass ideology, only to rejoin it with an awareness of the importance of confronting these contingencies and taking part in the debate circulating around them. My own confrontation with the debate on dirty realism has also come full circle, engaging those very sources I formerly sought to reject, absorbing them into the conversation of this study.

Undoubtedly, a pronounced anti-academic author such as Bukowski would object to many of the categories—dialectics, hypocrisy, pop culture—through which I have read dirty realism, yet it somehow seems fitting that a writer who spent so much of his career exploiting his status as former “street-bum,” womaniser, alcoholic, and whose novels, such as *Post Office* and *Factotum*, continually illustrate means of subverting institutions to one’s own ends, should in turn furnish material for a doctoral thesis that he would regard as doing violence to his work. If I have appropriated Buk to serve the ends of my own scholarship, I have done so in full knowledge of the irony behind such an appropriation, and with perhaps an equal measure of irreverence. And, so, it seems that this study has come full circle after all, into hypocrisy itself; it seems I have been writing in the spirit of dirty realism all along.

## ENDNOTES, CONCLUSION

<sup>1</sup> Ford states his humanism most explicitly in the interview with Huey Guagliardo

For me—and I mean for me insofar as I write characters—facing apocalypse, facing the end of life for which there is no redemption about which I feel confident, what we are charged to do as human beings is to make our lives and the lives of others as livable, as important, as charged as we possibly can. And so what I'd call secular redemption aims to make us, through the agency of affection, intimacy, closeness, complicity, feel like our time on earth is not wasted. (613)

Elsewhere in the interview, Ford lauds the works of critics and scholars, Cleanth Brooks, R.P. Blackmur and Harry Levin: "So I have never found that, as a rule, the true literary criticism [of the type written by Brooks, Blackmur and Levin], which is broad-based and humanistic in character, eviscerates or denatures literature at all. It's only small minds that denature and eviscerate literature" (619). Ford's authorial projects, then, retain implicit sympathy with the "broad-based" humanism of modernist critics, and exhibit this sympathy while coping with postmodernity, though "evisceration" continues to threaten the stability of the individual upon which humanism rests. The forms of evisceration include commodity fetishism, the loss of a verifiable ego, discursive deracination and opacity, all dangers investigated in *The Sportswriter* and *Independence day*.

<sup>2</sup> Carver himself echoes Hobson's contention of Ford:

It was important for me to be a writer from the West. But that's not true any longer, for better or worse. I think I've moved around too much, lived in too many places, felt dislocated and displaced, to now have any firmly-rooted sense of 'place'. . . . But the majority of my stories are not set in any specific locale. I mean they could take place in just about any city or urban area. (*Fires* 213-14)

Carver himself locates his writing outside of traditional spatial-geographical linkages, gesturing towards a sense of contemporary "dislocation" applicable to any region.

<sup>3</sup> Ford has, in fact, written an essay on Springsteen, "The Boss Observed," in *Esquire* 104 (December 1985): 326-29. The cross-currents between the popular culture of Springsteen's music and Ford's writing further emphasises the necessity of undertaking a study of popular culture in reference to dirty realism.



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